Season of Light and Shadow

by EldritchMage

Summary

It's the week before Thanksgiving. In an apartment building somewhere in the middle of New York City, the mood is far from festive.

Upstairs in Apartment 5B, an injured ballet dancer is having a rotten day. He's lost his job, he's had to walk home in the snow and rain, getting thoroughly soaked and frozen in the process, and the radiators in his rooms are as cold as the New York City streets. He limps downstairs to vent his fury on the night super who didn't fix the heat.

Downstairs in Apartment 2A, the night super is also having a rotten day. No money, three overtired and cranky children, a slapdash boss, and not nearly enough sleep. And now someone is pounding on the door like a SWAT team.
When an angel knocks on the door of a saint, neither finds what he expects. But with a little luck, the upcoming holiday season might give them both something to treasure.

Notes

Every holiday season needs some unapologetic romance, and a little reminder that the best gifts are not bought with money. I hope you enjoy this one.

Thanks to scythe_lyfe for encouraging me to try a slow-burn gay romance. I hope all of you reading along fall as hopelessly in love with both of my protagonists as I have. They are both wonderful souls.
“We’ll see about a new contract once you’ve healed, Thran. Take this time to do some thinking, too. We’ll all be in a better position to renegotiate once the holidays are over.”

He hadn’t even dignified that with a response. What they meant was that they didn’t think his injury would heal. They’d tell him to rest, then use that as an excuse to say he wasn’t working, had lost his physical edge, was no longer worthy to be principal in the troupe. Maybe they’d offer him a second tier position, or maybe they’d try to ditch him altogether. None of those alternatives was worth so much as a sniff or a curse, much less a thank you, and a very Happy Thanksgiving and Christmas to you, too.

He’d turned on his heel – the uninjured one – and swept out of the director’s office, out of the elevator, out of the lobby, out of the entire repulsive building, out onto the street.

Snow fell in thick, inelegant, wet gobs, like slushy, sloppy snowballs. Perfect. Even the sky wanted to dump on him. Not a cab in sight, either. There wouldn’t be, not this late. It was long past rush hour, less than a week before this strange American holiday called the Day of Giving Thanks, and all the cabs would be stalking the good fares uptown in the business and shopping district, not here, half a mile away, in front of a darkened ballet house. He turned his collar up and pulled it close. Why hadn’t he worn his heavy coat and a hat? His leather jacket cut the wind well enough, but he was all long torso and even longer legs, and he was far from warm. He set out slowly towards his apartment a mile away. If he were slow and careful, he wouldn’t aggravate his sprained ligaments any more than they already were.

He refused to think about how walking home that night two months ago had resulted in those sprained ligaments. Why he’d forgone a warmer, more cumbersome coat and scarf for clothing that didn’t hinder his mobility. Or the snow, either, which was rapidly turning to sleet. It’d be steady rain before he got home. Or ice, which would slow him even more. He couldn’t risk another injury on the slick concrete.

Shivering, Thran tucked his braid of long, white hair into his jacket. He’d have to wait to get warm until he reached his apartment. He’d alerted the building super this morning that the radiators needed fixing again. The last time it had gone cold, the super had fixed them while Thran was at work, not that dancing had ever been work. No matter how wet he got out here; he’d soon be warm and dry again. Gods, he hated New York weather! The damp cold stabbed right through Thran’s jacket and sweater as if they were made of tissue paper. He’d left his gloves in the studio, but nothing could make him go back for them. He slogged along as fast as the slippery sidewalk allowed.

By the time he reached his apartment building, Thran was shivering so badly that his teeth chattered, and swearing at the icy water that soaked his hair and ran down his neck. His hands were so numb and stiff that he fumbled the entry key, long enough that he scanned the street nervously, hoping he hadn’t attracted the wrong kind of attention. But on such a miserable night, the sleet had chased everyone off the streets but him. When he finally got the key into the lock and pushed the heavy door open, he shouldered his way inside and leaned back against the door, relieved to be under cover. Even the entry hall felt warm compared to outside. He flexed his foot a time or two to ease it. Only the stairs remained.

This building was old, one of many such in the city, and small. There was nothing about its architecture or its provenance worth mentioning. It had no elevator. In fact, its only asset was its location. It was a ten-minute walk to the ballet studio in one direction, and another ten-minute walk to a fresh foods market in another, so he didn’t need a car or a bicycle to get around. He had little
free time for shopping or sightseeing, so it didn’t bother him to be so far away from the museums or theatre district. He went from his rooms – comfortable, but too Spartan to be called a home – to studio to market and back again. That was his life.

Until now. Half of his life – no, more than half of it – and all of his heart had just been ripped away.

He pushed himself away from the door, and started up the stairs. Most days, Thran would bound up the five flights of stairs, reveling in the springiness of his legs. Not today. Not with sprained ligaments. Never had five flights seemed so long.

The super’s apartment was on two. There was a din and a roar coming from the place; some domestic row, he supposed, snorting in distaste – a snort that quickly ended in a cough. Gods, gods, how fitting would it be to come down with a cold or worse, the flu, after everything else? He shivered again, this time painfully so. He pushed his ankle gingerly just to get up the last flight of stairs, so desperate was he to get warm and dry again. He had his door key ready. At least he got this lock open faster.

At last! He shut the door behind him, so relieved was he to shut out the cold, frozen outside world. Sniffling, he pulled off his coat, and draped it on the back of the lone chair in the living room. Oh, to be warm again, he exhaled –

His breath gusted out in a visible cloud.

It was freezing. He was freezing.

With a curse, Thran crossed the room and put a hand on the large radiator that hulked under the window. Colder than Siberia.

How perfect. How utterly, utterly perfect. Even his rooms were cold and indifferent.

He stood, shaking with cold and fury, until he wanted to throw something. But there wasn’t much to throw, and he wouldn’t risk bashing his barre through the window to vent his frustration. That would only make him colder, and risk his lifeline. He snatched a towel from the bathroom to swipe the water from his face, then limped back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Why hadn’t the damned super fixed his heating? Or at least texted him that he couldn’t? Thran fished his mobile from his jacket pocket to make sure he hadn’t missed a message. No, no message. He put the mobile down before he threw it – that wouldn’t get him warmer, either. Why couldn’t someone have left a message? If he’d known the heat was off, he’d have holed up in a hotel rather than risked the weather and frigid rooms for the night.

The only thing to do was to march down to the damned super’s apartment, interrupt whatever drivel still raged behind the door, and demand that he fix the broken radiator gods-damned now!

Thran grabbed his apartment key and stormed downstairs.

The racket still radiated from the super’s apartment at levels that made Thran’s head throb. He pounded on the door furiously, as if the anger inside had met his and jacked it higher. How dare that bastard super indulge in screaming at his wife/woman/girlfriend/female harpy/whore/bitch instead of doing his fucking job –

The door opened while Thran still pounded on it. His next blow smacked it open wider, almost hitting the face of the man who opened it. The man jumped backwards and caught it in his hand before it banged into the wall. Thran pulled his next blow, managing not to hit the door again, flustered at the sudden appearance of the man facing him.
He wasn’t as tall as Thran, but he was much more powerfully built. Dark, messy hair curled over his shoulders. The light brown eyes that met his were tired, yet patient. That powerfully built body was dressed in a rumpled work shirt and heavy jeans, with black, steel-toed work boots that were well scuffed. The rolled-up sleeves of his shirt showed muscled forearms, and his hands were grimed with ground-in dirt. The vee at the neck of his shirt revealed the suggestion of dark hair, and he had a shadow of the same thing on his cheeks.

“Why has my heat not been repaired?” Thran snarled. “I called this morning, I just got home, the suka blyad radiator is ice cold, and so am I! It is a refrigerator!”

The man didn’t change expression. In fact, he wasn’t even angry, merely resigned. Behind him, a small figure stomped, then a taller one. In one blinding moment, Thran realized that the screaming wasn’t a domestic argument, but outraged howling of a small girl and unimpressed, snarky retorts from her older brother, spiced with irritated attempts of the oldest sibling, a girl, to moderate the dispute. All three children were dark haired like their father, perhaps nine, twelve, and fifteen. All were fair faced, even when angry.

“Which apartment, please?”

Thran’s gaze flitted back to the man at the door. He was... handsome. It was a quiet, subtle beauty, but arresting enough that Thran felt even more flustered.

“Five B. Thran Oropherson.”

The man sighed. “Come in. I’ll check the log.”

The man held the door open, so Thran edged inside. The man snared the little girl who still wailed, kneeling beside her and shushing her softly.

“Til, take a deep breath. Bain didn’t know you wanted the last orange, little doll. I’ll bring you another one home tomorrow and you can have it then.”

“But it was MINE!” the girl howled, inconsolable. “He knew it was MINE, and he ate it on purpose.”

“Yes, you did,” the older girl shot back as she passed from one room to the next.

“Shut up, Sig!” the boy snapped. “You don’t know –”

“Yes, I do,” she snarked back.

The man looked up at Thran apologetically, then back at his children. “All of you, quiet down. Mr. Oropherson is our guest, and he doesn’t want to hear you shouting. Sigrid, you and Bain get back to making supper, and I’ll be right there. Tilda, why don’t you get Mr. Bun and read him the next part of your story?”

“I don’t want to! I want my orange!”

Tilda dissolved into tears, tired and inconsolable. The man gathered her into a hug and rubbed her back soothingly. In a few seconds, he turned the little girl’s face to his, and brushed the hair out of her face. “I know you do, little doll, but we can’t help that until tomorrow. Now, help your Da and read your book for a few minutes. Supper will be on soon, and we’ll all feel better after that.”
Tilda nodded reluctantly. He gave her a small smile and a squeeze, and she went into the next room. Thran saw her climb into an old chair by the window with a well-worn stuffed rabbit and a book, and quiet descended.

“Sorry about that,” the man said, standing and meeting Thran’s eyes. “She’s not the most patient little one this close to suppertime. Now, let me check the list. Be right back.”

When he picked up a sheaf of papers from a table under the window and glanced at them, Thran looked around. This apartment hadn’t been modernized the way his had, and the floors were scuffed linoleum and battered carpet instead of smooth, polished wood. The kitchen, just visible through the door, was industrial green walls, dingy steel cabinets, and more cracked linoleum, and the small gas stove looked to be thirty years old. It was probably a two-bedroom unit, but that wasn’t much room for three children and at least one adult. The place was crowded with mismatched furniture and littered with the accouterments of children – backpacks, books, jackets, an odd shoe – and an orderly collection of tools was nested in a battered bookcase by the door. There was a small television and a game console sitting on a chest, the controllers strung across the old sofa. Nothing in this apartment was new.

The man turned back slowly, shaking his head. Apparently he didn’t find what he wanted, for he reread the couple of pages a second time.

“You said you called this morning?”

Thran’s aggravation returned. “I did call,” he snapped.

“Did the person you talked to give you a name?”

“No. It was a man. I thought it was you. He said he would put me on the list.”

The man’s face didn’t change from his tired regard. “I didn’t get the message. I’m sorry.”

“What in hell am I supposed to do, then?” Thran spat. “It freezes, and it is too late for me to get a hotel room!”

The man nodded. “I sympathize, Mr. Oropherson. Let me get my children’s supper, and I’ll be up. Half an hour.”

Thran’s fury died in the face of that calm, that faint, measured accent. Welsh, he thought. The man had the face of a saint, albeit a weary one, that somehow remained serene regardless of the upset. “That will be fine. Thank you.”

The man walked Thran to the door, and shut it quietly after him.

Thran walked back up the steps. Despite how cold he was, he felt ashamed. Clearly, he wasn’t the only man struggling to get through a difficult day.

He thought about how gently the man had comforted his youngest child.

He missed his son.

He missed more than that.

* * *
It was one of those days where nothing had gone right. Bard’s day job had run an hour longer, and he’d had to scramble to get to Tilda’s school in time to pick her up before the place added late charges to his account, charges he couldn’t afford. He’d scraped in just as Mattie had been about to add the note to his account, but she’d reluctantly let him off. She was scraping by on fumes just as he was, and while she hadn’t liked staying late, she knew the realities of construction jobs and sketchy paychecks as well as he did.

He’d brought Tilda home, chewing his lip when he saw how low the truck’s gas gauge read. Did he have enough to fill the tank tomorrow, or would he have to go with half a tank so he could pay for another week of Bain’s soccer league? The high-rise complex where he currently worked was close enough that he might be able to get through the week on just half a tank.

He got Tilda started on her homework while he ran through the list of repairs slated for him to fix around the building. This was his second shift, the night super, which kept a roof over his head, crummy roof that it was. It was the only apartment in the building that hadn’t been renovated, and parts of it were grotty, but at least there were no rats or roaches, and chicken stew tasted just the same whether it was made on an ancient gas stove or an Aga. There was the master bedroom for Sigrid and Tilda, the second bedroom for Bain, and an alcove – misleadingly called “the den” in the apartment literature, but it was really a closet without a door off the living room – for him to put a bed for himself. The remaining space was enough to hold what was left from the house, barely, if everyone remembered to put things away.

He’d gotten through two leaky faucets, a jammed sink disposal, a running toilet, and four broken light bulbs before the disaster in 7A. The damned fool had pulled an entire electrical outlet out of the wall, which had taken the floor off the grid. It hadn’t been the easiest thing to rig a trouble light from another floor so he could see to replace the outlet. But he’d managed it, collected his tools, and flipped the breakers back on, then retreated to his apartment in peace.

Except he hadn’t found peace. He found three overtired, hungry, frustrated children sniping at each other fit to beat the band, even the normally calm Sigrid. She’d snapped at Bain, who’d swiped Tilda’s orange to throw at Sigrid, which had splatted on the wall, which Bain had eaten to cover up his theft, which had caused Tilda’s flood of tears and howls of fury, which had started all three of them shrieking and shouting and crying, which had halted the supper prep, which had delayed the food that would calm everyone down. And if all that wasn’t enough, someone started to pound on the door like an avenging repo man –

He opened the door on an angel of ice and snow. Sodden, bedraggled, furious, and wingless, but an angel nevertheless, so luminescent and electric that he took Bard’s breath away. Tall and elegantly lean, with piercing grey eyes and a heartbreakingly stunning mane of silky white hair that draped over his shoulder and traced down his chest like a caress. A silver grey sweater of soft, silky something clung to his torso, and form-fitting black pants and soft black boots accentuated long legs and narrow hips. He was so incredibly pale, yet so incredibly alive.

The angel’s radiators were cold. He’d called it in this morning, and Steffen had either blown him off, or forgotten to tell Bard, or who the hell knew what had happened. Steffen was the landlord, and more than a little slapdash. Bard didn’t dare push him too hard about anything, or he’d be out of his apartment in a heartbeat. It wasn’t easy finding a place in the city so close to his construction jobs in a neighborhood with good schools for his children, and at such a reduced rate. Steffen knew it, too. Bard was the one who kept the building running, but Steffen wasn’t about to cut him any more slack than he already did. A building super with three children was always pulled in five directions at once, and as long as Bard got things fixed as fast as he could, Steffen was happy to put stuff off from
his day shift onto Bard’s night shift. So what if Bard missed a few nights’ sleep?

Bard didn’t remember the last time he’d had a full night’s sleep.

So here he stood gaping at the soaking wet, infuriated angel for longer than he should. He'd fixed the angel’s heat before, though he’d never seen him in person before now. The radiators probably needed to be bled again. The pipes really needed replacing, but Steffen wasn’t willing to spring for that yet, so Bard would have to keep the ancient radiators working as best he could. So he told the angel he’d get his children’s supper on the table, then come up to bleed the pipes.

He got the supper on the table, settled the children, parcelled out the food, made sure that everyone knew what to do to clean up the dishes and start homework, chased a few mouthfuls of chicken and vegetable stir fry down his throat with a gulp of milk that Tilda had left, then got his tools and headed up to the fifth floor.

He was too tired to face an angel with the dispassion he should. He’d just keep his eyes on the radiators and hope the angel left him to do his work in peace.

He knocked on the door. The angel answered so quickly that he must have been standing beside the door waiting for Bard to knock. He looked a little drier, and he had a heavier sweater clutched tightly around his lithe body. He let Bard in silently, who murmured a brief hello and went right to the radiator under the window. The first time he’d come here, he’d been incredulous at how little was in the apartment – the living room held little more than a sofa, a chair, a couple of small tables holding lamps, a white, fluffy rug, and a ballet barre by the window. No books, no TV, no music system. The kitchen looked as if it had never been used. The two bedrooms appeared almost as stark. He hadn’t seen the master closet, but imagined it held only a few garments, but all of them as fine as what the angel had on now. There was very little color in the apartment, mostly shades of grey and white with touches of black. Everything was beautifully made and very expensive.

Mr. Oropherson must be a very well-paid ballet dancer.

“It’ll take me a few minutes to bleed the air out,” Bard explained as he stooped by the living room radiator.

The bedraggled angel shivered so much that Bard winced, wishing he’d brought a blanket to wrap around him. That pale skin and those long, elegant fingers didn’t help, for they made the angel look even more ethereal. Bard focused on the radiator, sticking his screwdriver into the vent until the hiss of escaping air turned into the bubbling of hot water. He closed the valve again, and was rewarded with the first twinge of warmth seeping through the metal radiator. He stood up.

“I’ll need to check the bedroom radiators,” he said apologetically. Gods, he didn’t want to go into the bedrooms. It’d be such an intrusion.

The angel sniffed, but not like a snot. He sounded like he was getting a cold. Someone so lean had very little body fat, and would feel the damp cold much more than Bard would. The angel’s boots were wet, so he’d clearly had to walk some distance to reach his apartment. It was no wonder he was so chilled.

“Fine,” the angel agreed, waving his hand at the bedroom doors. He wasn’t so angry now; he looked very subdued. Bard went into the first bedroom quietly, turning on the light and stepping in tentatively. Everything was tidy and put away, almost military in its neatness, so Bard carefully skirted the soft rug at the end of the bed, not wanting his work boots to leave dirt on the white fibers. The bed itself was huge, likely because the angel was so tall. The mattress was thick and well padded, the finest quality, and clothed in grey silk sheets and cashmere blankets. It was a far cry from
Bard’s narrow bed in his living room alcove with its patched cotton sheets and thrift store quilt. The thought of the angel’s pale body contrasted against the darker silk sheets... better not to think about it.

This radiator took less time to bleed, for it was not quite as old as the one in the living room. Bard was glad to leave, because it was easier to put aside his imaginings once he left. He bled the radiator of the other bedroom - a guest room, given how Spartan it was - and came back into the living room. He met the eyes of the angel without revealing how entranced he was.

“The radiators are getting hot now. I’m sorry this didn’t get fixed before you got home, Mr. Oropherson. Next time, call me directly, and I’ll make sure it gets on the schedule.” Bard handed the angel a small business card with his name and mobile number on it.

The angel took the card, read the name on it, and swallowed. “I appreciate that, Mr. Bowman. I am... I am sorry I yelled at you. I... lost my job today, and I was upset. I was wrong to take it out on you.”

Bard hummed sympathetically. “Understandable. I’m sorry that happened. It’s not easy out there.”

The angel shook his head slowly. “No. It is not.”

He turned away, disappearing into the kitchen. Bard sighed. Artists weren’t the most socially adept creatures, so he assumed he’d been dismissed. He hefted his bag and opened the door.

“Wait. Please.”

Bard looked around. The angel held out a box – expensive chocolates, he thought. Unopened.

“This was a gift, but...” he waved a hand up and down his body, drawing Bard’s eyes to follow that graceful hand. Bard swallowed, trying not to think about the gesture, or the body behind it. “I cannot eat it, of course. I am sorry I interrupted your children’s meal. I would like them to have it in apology. I hope they enjoy it.”

Bard took the box, though the present made him uncomfortable. Still, the angel looked as if he’d be even more uncomfortable if Bard turned down the gift, so he nodded.

“That’s very kind of you. I know they’ll enjoy it very much.”

The angel ventured a tentative smile. “I hope so, Mister...” he checked the small card again, “Bowman.”

“Let me know if the heat acts up again, Mr. Oropherson. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The door closed behind Bard, and he headed downstairs.

He stopped on the third floor landing, remembering to breathe again, before he went back to his children.

Much later, when the dishes were done, the next day’s lunches were made, the homework was finished, the baths were taken, and the bedtime goodnight rituals were observed, Bard lay down on the old sofa and listened to the rare quiet. The angel’s box of chocolates – Belgian – sat half eaten on the cluttered fruit crate that served as the living room catchall. The sweets were rich and dense, and Bard had had a job holding each of his children to just two pieces to keep the usual frantic bedtime routine from soaring on a sugar high. He took one for himself, a rich cream that was vanilla with a subtle hint of something, perhaps coffee. He savored it, and tried not to think about the evanescent
creature who had given it to him.

* * *

Three floors above Bard, Thran got out of a volcanically hot shower, dried his hair, and ate his usual boiled chicken breast and steamed broccoli. He brushed his teeth and crawled into bed. The apartment was warm now, but he still shivered as the silk sheets warmed around him. It took a long time before he was warm enough to relax.

He refused to think about the aching ligaments in his left ankle. Or how he’d hurt them. Or how they’d cost him his job.

Instead, he thought about the man three floors below with three overwrought children, the gentle patience of a saint, and a powerful body that made him tremble with something other than the cold.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Both the angel and the saint woke up with something other than their troubles on their mind this morning. Which of them will do something about it first?

Morning came too early. Bard woke on the sofa, the taste of expensive Belgian chocolate tainted with morning breath and dry mouth. Sigrid’s alarm went off, so he got up to start the children’s breakfasts, set out the lunches, round up the backpacks, spot the leftover homework that needed to get into the backpacks before anyone ran out of the door. Sigrid left first, a piece of peanut butter toast in her hand and a smile for him on her face. She’d catch the bus to her high school a block down. Bain was next, wolfing down oatmeal and raisins, finishing the math worksheet he’d forgotten with frantic scribbles, then clattering to collect backpack and soccer cleats and a signed permission slip for next month’s field trip to the MOMA for eighth grade English class. Little Tilda was last, her stolen orange forgotten as she busily mixed pieces of apple and a sprinkle of cinnamon into her oatmeal. Her assignments were already done and neatly tucked into their folders, and Bard walked out into the rain to hold the umbrella over her as they waited for her bus. She went off with a wave and a reminder to get more oranges.

His mobile rang. His welding job was held up until the rain stopped. That was always a mixed blessing. He needed the money that welding brought, but having the day free meant he could work on the building repairs all day and maybe get an evening off, barring emergency calls. Since he was already out, he walked to the market, got Tilda’s oranges and enough ground beef and onions for tonight’s meatloaf, and came home. He put the food in the fridge, got a quick shower, and made himself a cup of tea while he reviewed the repair list for the day.

As soon as he picked up the list, he thought about the angel who had pounded on his door last night. He walked down to the electrical room to turn off the circuit to the building laundry room so he could repair one of the dryers again. It was old, but a huge industrial model that was better than any newer replacement. The door circuit just needed a bit of solder now and again.

He got through the list by lunchtime. So he thought about the angel again. He’d looked so bedraggled and pale last night that Bard hoped he’d recovered by now.

He walked up to the fifth floor and knocked on the door to 5B.

There was no answer, so Bard turned and headed down the stairs –

“Yes?”

Bard paused on the third stair, and looked back at 5B. The angel stood there, bundled in the same thick grey sweater he’d worn last night, but the boots and fitted trousers were gone. Instead, thick tights, ragged leg warmers, and those strange little dancing shoes replaced them. The angel’s feet were long and elegant like the rest of him, and the close-fitting tights revealed muscled curves that were as sensuous as anything Bard had seen. His white hair was beautifully braided, too, in an exotic fishtail braid.

“Good morning,” Bard said politely. “I wanted to check that your radiators were working again, and
that you were warm enough.”

The angel blinked in surprise. “They are. I appreciate that you fixed them last night, and checked this morning.”

“You’re welcome,” Bard shrugged. “My children enjoyed the chocolates, by the way. You earned yourself a trio of fans.”

A pale but pleased smile crossed the angel’s face. “Did I? I am glad that they liked the treat. I hope they left you some.”

Bard grinned. “I managed to get one before I fell asleep. Maybe I’ll manage another before they get home.”

The angel hesitated. “Would you... like to come in for a cup of tea? It is the least I could do to make up because I yelled at you last night.”

Bard swallowed. He had four or five hours before the Sigrid came home, and he’d done all of the day’s repairs. It wouldn’t hurt to have a cup of tea.

“Sure. I’d appreciate that. Haven’t had any since breakfast, and it’d taste good.”

The angel smiled. “Good. I have Earl Grey, oolong with mint, Darjeeling...”

* * *

Mr. Bowman stood just inside the door as Thran shut it behind him. He looked around the room, his gaze lingering on the ballet barre under the windows.

“I... think I’d better leave my boots by the door. They’d make a mess of your rug.”

They were the same heavy, steel-toed things, well scuffed and worn, that he’d had on last night. The rugs would withstand their assault better than the wood floors would. Thran was careful to keep the floors, especially under the barre, well swept, and not just because of the wear and tear on the finish. Grit under his thin ballet slippers was hard on his feet as well as his shoes.

“Thank you.” He indicated his boots and shoes lined up neatly by the door. “This is where I practice when I am not at the studio, and I keep the floor as clean as possible. What kind of tea would you like?”

The super bent to untie his bootlaces. “I’m not picky. You said you had Earl Grey?”

“I do. I will make us a pot.”

Thran went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. He ran warm water into the teapot, and set out a pair of cups and their saucers.

“Milk or sugar?”

“Just plain for me, thanks.”

When Thran came back into the living room, Mr. Bowman had shrugged off his jacket and laid it
carefully on top of his boots. He stood easily, looking about the spare room. It was certain that this man had never seen the inside of a ballet studio, but he had his own unstudied, natural grace, as spare and as balanced as his nature. Despite his rough attire, he wasn’t uneasy or awkward in the incongruent setting, merely observant. His eyes strayed to the barre again.

“Please, sit,” Thran invited. Mr. Bowman chose the edge of the grey velvet sofa. His fingers touched the pile gently, considering the touch. Thran swallowed at the slow, gentle trace of the man’s fingers across the pile. He sat on the chair to wait for the kettle to boil.

“So you’re a dancer,” the super said, waving at the barre.

“I am.” Thran winced, remembering yesterday’s disaster. “Was. I lost my job yesterday.”

“You’re still a dancer,” Mr. Bowman said. “Just between gigs, that’s all.”

Thran shrugged. “That is a good way to look at it. I am just not... often between gigs.”

“What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The kettle started to whistle.

“I will get that.”

Thran made the tea, and carried the teapot into the living room. He fetched the pair of cups, and sat them on the glass-topped table. He glanced at Mr. Bowman, but looked back at the teapot. The man was... so self contained? No, self-confident? No, nothing so blatant. Self-assured? No, even that was too strong a name for it. He was centered, but not aggressively so; quietly so. There was likely little that flustered him. Thran lowered his eyes, not wanting to stare. That air of quiet, coupled with those dark, tousled curls, and those calm, light brown eyes... Thran had to look away.

“I sprained the ligaments in my left ankle a few weeks ago. They have been slow to heal. I was the principal male dancer, so... the corps manager decided that I should... and they’d get someone to replace me for the foreseeable future.”

Mr. Bowman hummed and nodded, smiling bitterly. “Right out of ‘Animal Farm.’”

Thran looked up in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“‘Animal Farm.’ The book by George Orwell.”

Thran shook his head. “I have not read it.”

“It’s an allegory. A fable. Some farm animals set themselves up as a communist collective, and it goes about as you’d expect. Boxer is the horse who gives it his all, and once he’s worked himself nearly to death, the pigs in charge send him off to the knackers as a reward.”

Thran smirked. “They did not quite send me to the knackers, but close. They say I can audition again once I heal, but that is merely another way of saying they do not expect me to heal.”

“Will you?”

Thran poured tea into the cups. “I should. It has taken longer because of this suka blyad New York weather. Cold, frozen...”

“It’s not even winter yet,” Mr. Bowman shook his head ruefully. “Still another month to go.”
Thran snorted in a most inelegant fashion, drawing Mr. Bowman to chuckle.

“It’s no fun, I grant you. Kept me out of work today – too rainy to weld. At least it lets me get through the job list here early. Maybe I’ll have the evening off.”

“I hope my radiators cooperate,” Thran returned.

He wasn’t prepared for the eyes that met his. “If they don’t, call me. It won’t help your ligaments to freeze.”

Thran swallowed. “That is kind of you, Mr. Bowman. It must not be easy, to have two jobs and your children.”

Mr. Bowman rubbed his hand through his hair. It made Thran’s mouth water when he thought about doing that himself. “Um, call me Bard. Everyone does. Mr. Bowman was my father, and he’s been gone a long time.”

“I am Thran.”

Mr. Bowman – Bard – nodded. “Thran. Um, my children... they’re a handful, but I wouldn’t be without them for anything. Even when they’re snarky, like they were last night. I’m sorry for the racket.”

“Treasure their racket,” Thran said without thinking. “Be glad you have it. I have a son I do not get to see very often. I miss him every day.”

“With his mother, then?”

Thran shook his head. “His mother died. A bomb in a train station. In Saint Petersburg. My son was with her, but was unhurt. We left the country soon after to come here. It was a great opportunity for me, to dance with such a good company, but the travel, the hours of practice... Legolas is in a boarding school outside the city.”

Bard winced painfully. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blundered into that.”

Thran shrugged. “It was good to tell someone. You have children. You understand what it is like to miss them.”

“I do,” Bard nodded. “It’s not easy, because I have to pick up Tilda at school every day, and my construction jobs have to accommodate that. Not a lot of them do, so work is piecemeal. The super job is a big help – it cuts the apartment rent by seventy-five percent, and I’m here if something goes wrong with the children, so we get by.”

“No mother, either?”

Bard shook his head. “Car crash. Drunk driver. Tilda was just a year old. She doesn’t remember her mother.”

It was Thran’s turn to murmur sympathetically. “So you had three young children to care for, and no chance to grieve.”

Bard rubbed his forehead. “I had to keep working if I wanted to take care of them. Day care’s expensive. Not as much as boarding school, I guess, but it all adds up. Sigrid, my oldest, is past that, finally, and Bain more or less is, depending on whether you consider his soccer league to be day care. Tilda’s in an afternoon program that gives me a little more leeway in the afternoon.”
“Soccer, not American football?”

Bard laughed. “No American football. My family came from Wales when I was fourteen. Soccer for me, and a spot of rugby.”

“I played soccer as a boy in Latvia. I was very small. Soon after, I had progressed with the dance to the point that I was sent to Russia, to one of the youth schools. No more soccer from then on. Only the dance.”

“You must be very good,”

Thran shrugged and belatedly sipped his tea. “I have done well. Then the bomb, then here, and now...”

“You’ll dance again,” Bard offered. “Take it easy on your leg, and I’ll make sure your radiators are up to snuff, and you’ll ace your next audition.”

“Thank you,” Thran nodded. He coughed a little, more out of nervousness than anything else. “You are kind to say so.”

Bard swallowed the last of his tea and put his teacup down. “Thanks for the tea. The chance to sit for a minute, even more. I’d better get back to it.”

“I am glad you came in. I enjoyed it. I hope you would like to come back.”

Those calm eyes warmed a little, and the smile beneath them was pleased. “I would. Eh, stay warm, now. Make yourself a big pot of chicken noodle soup to make sure you don’t catch a cold after getting soaked last night.”

Thran shrugged. “I do not know how to make chicken soup. My diet is very restricted. Weight on a dancer is never good.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “A good chicken noodle soup wouldn’t hurt you. You could leave out the noodles, and then it’s just chicken, vegetables, and broth. Nothing to add to the rib cage.”

“It comes in a can, yes?”

“Ugh. The canned stuff’s too salty and too fatty, and everything in it’s mushy. It’s better to make it. You can let it simmer while you...” Bard pointed to the barre, “do dancer things.”

Thran nodded. Maybe since he wouldn’t be going to the studio for a while, he could learn to make a few simple things. “I should get a cookbook, then.”

“Sure.”

“What would I need? Chicken I have, but what vegetables? Broccoli?”

Bard grimaced. “Um, that’d go pretty soggy. An onion, a couple of big carrots, some celery, maybe a little ginger if you like Asian style. The ginger would be good to stave off a cold, too.”

Thran cocked his head. “That sounds easy enough. I would like to try it. It is very tiresome to eat boiled chicken breast and steamed broccoli every day.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up again. “Every day? That’s what you eat every day?”

“Not for breakfast, of course. Congee, or porridge, with fruit and milk. Salad for lunch. Chicken and
broccoli for dinner.”

“That must get old.”

Thran draped his braid over his shoulder. “I live to dance, not to eat.”

Bard shook his head. “It... sounds like you haven’t gotten to do much except dance.”

“That is what is required to dance well.”

“But boiled chicken breast and steamed broccoli, every day? Look, I was going to make meatloaf for the children tonight, but I’ll make chicken soup instead. I’ll bring you a bowl.”

The offer surprised Thran. That Bard would do this for a near stranger was more than a kindness. That he’d offer a meal out of what were likely sparse commodities was even more so. “You would do this?”

Bard dropped his eyes and shrugged. For the first time, he seemed awkward. “Why not? The children need the protection from catching a cold, too. Might as well offer a dancer the same medicine, if you’d like some.”

“That is a very generous thing you offer. I would like to have some of your soup. But I know how much children eat. I have lots of chicken. Let me give you some for the soup. And for your kindness to a wet dancer.”

Bard hesitated. It was likely important to him that he was able to care for his children without charity, but he nodded. “All right. Um, you want to come downstairs? I can show you how to make it for yourself. Might let you vary your meals from now on.”

Thran swallowed. He couldn’t remember the last time he spent time with anyone. Likely not since Vileria had died. For once, his apartment seemed stifling despite its elegant sparseness.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Bard was saying. “Our place is a mess, so...”

“No,” Thran said quickly. “No, I would like to come, if it is not an intrusion.”

“It’s not,” Bard shook his head. “Come on.”

Thran got up quickly and went into the kitchen to open the freezer. “The chicken is frozen. Is that a problem?”

Bard got up, too, went to the door, pulled on his boots. “Not at all. We’ll just throw it in the pot as is, and it’ll be fine.”

“How much? Three pounds?”

“More than enough. You’ll have enough for a couple of days, plus supper.”

Thran held the wrapped package of chicken out to Bard. “I will change into something warmer, and come down.”

Bard took the chicken. “Just come on in. Door will be open.”

The super let himself out, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Thran shut his eyes and let out a long breath. He was going downstairs to Bard’s apartment, and he
was going to learn to make chicken soup from a saint. The thought made his stomach flutter, and his hands shake so badly that it was all he could do to peel off his leggings and slippers, find soft black pants and a long sweater of pale grey heather, and fumble them on. The neck of the sweater was wide, so he found a deep red cashmere scarf to wind around his neck. His favorite soft suede boots were by the door. His hair –

He ran back to the bedroom to unbraid his hair and run a brush through it. Should he braid it again? Or leave it loose? Probably a braid, since Bard was going to show him how to cook. His fingers were still fumbly, so he had to do it over before it was smooth. He remembered to stuff his key into his pants pocket before he shut the door behind him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The saint moved first, but it's the angel who will take the bigger risk.

Bard tramped down the stairs to his apartment, feeling distinctly strange. There was a flutter in his stomach, and three pounds of frozen chicken breasts in his hand. Did he just invite the angel from the classy fifth floor apartment down to make chicken soup in his dingy, cluttered, wreck of an apartment? Why had he been so stupid? That long, elegant, pale, creature of the air had no place in the dregs of the building. The sink was full of dirty dishes, his bed was probably still unmade, and there wasn’t a clear place to sit in the place. Maybe the angel wouldn’t come. Maybe he’d just said he wanted to change to get Bard out of his apartment –

The door opened above him. Oh, hell, Thran was on his way down.

Bard fled into his apartment, dumped the chicken on the counter, ran back into the living room to sweep Tilda’s toys and the game controllers off the sofa, kicked Bain’s shoes down the hall and into his room, yanked the quilt on his bed straight –

“Hello?” Thran’s head – gods, that beautiful white hair was like silk – appeared around the door.

“Come on in, Thran,” Bard said awkwardly. “I hope you can stand the mess. It’s a disaster, plain and simple, but it’s home.”

Thran came in, looking around. The deep berry red of his scarf was beautiful all on its own, but the warmth it cast on Thran’s cheeks was radiant. “It is a home. Well lived in.”

Bard laughed. “That’s putting it mildly. Give me a minute, and I’ll clean off a chair in the kitchen.”

He led the way in, Thran trailing behind him slowly. There seemed nothing that didn’t draw Thran’s eyes – Tilda’s construction paper mosaic on the fridge, Bard’s soccer schedule pinned to the wall over the table, Sigrid’s schedule for the days she stayed late at school to tutor other children in math. A pear lay on its side on the counter, evidence that Bain had forgotten to put it in his lunch. And yes, the sink was full of the morning’s breakfast dishes. The whole place was such a stark contrast to Thran’s nearly empty apartment that Bard almost couldn’t look at the dancer. Why had he done something so stupid as to invite this elegant man into so much chaos?

“There is so much life here,” Thran said thoughtfully.

Bard forgot to breathe when he heard that soft voice. He glanced at the angel, and ventured a rueful smile. “I appreciate the kind words. It’s hard to keep three children and all their stuff straight. Even on a good day, this place won’t come close to being tidy. It must be a shock, coming from your place.”

Thran was still looking around. “My place, as you call it, is just rooms where I sleep and practice when I do not work. It is not really a home, as this is.”

Bard pulled out the big soup pot and put it on the stove. “Too busy to make it a home, then?”
Thran finally met his eyes. They were thoughtful, but not sad. “I went to live in a state-run dormitory when I was six. I did not have a lot of things. But I did not miss them, as I was completely focused on the dance. I was rarely alone, and free time was even rarer, so any bed was as good as another, as long as it let me get the sleep I needed. Little of that has changed.”

Bard paused. “What about when you and your wife were together? You didn’t live in a dormitory then, did you?”

For the first time, Thran’s face turned cynical. “No, we did not live in a dormitory. We had a small flat. But... it... was a lie.”

“The state... owned it, then?”

“Of course.” Thran offered Bard a smile. “So... this chicken soup. How do you start it?”

“You want to pass me your chicken? Let’s see if it’ll fit in the pot as is.”

Thran duly passed the package to Bard. He unwrapped it, and it fit in the pot with room to spare, so Bard hefted the pot to the sink, ran water in it to cover the block of frozen chicken, then set it on the stove. “You can use broth instead of water, but water’s just as good. You put in enough water to cover the chicken, then you turn the gas on high until it boils. We can get the veg ready while the pot heats.”

Bard ducked into the fridge for the carrots and celery, then into one of the bottom cabinets for the onions. He set them on the cutting board and dug the big chef’s knife out of the drawer. “Do you want to wash or chop? Uh... maybe I should chop? You shouldn’t mess up your hands.”

When Thran laughed, the sound stirred the flutter in Bard’s stomach again. “My hands will survive. I am quite familiar with knives. So, you wash, and I will chop.”

Bard handed over the knife. “Good enough. Here’re the carrots. Rounds about a quarter inch thick are good.”

Thran pushed up his sweater sleeves and set to slicing carrots quite deftly. Bard set out a bowl to hold the pieces, and it was soon full of sliced carrots, celery, and onions. While Thran chopped, Bard washed the breakfast things and set them to dry in the dish rack. The pot soon boiled. Bard shoveled in the vegetables, and set the heat to simmer.

“Give it an hour, and we can put in the seasonings,” Bard explained. “We can relax in the living room, once I shovel off the sofa.”

Thran helped him gather up Bard’s collection of soccer trading cards and set them on the coffee table, and Bard stowed Mr. Bun on Tilda’s bed.

“I can make some more tea,” he offered, to forestall having to sit on the sofa next to the angel. “No Earl Grey, I’m afraid, but there’s straight black tea, or green.”

“Either would be fine,” Thran replied. He seemed almost shy.

“Black, then?” Bard asked, and at Thran’s nod he put the kettle on, washed a couple of mugs, and got the tea caddy. But all too soon the water was hot, the tea was in the pot, and he carried it and the mugs into the living room. He sat down in his usual spot.

“So... what was it like in all those dance academies?” he asked, just to get Thran to talk. He was a thoughtful conversationalist, soon picking up on the things that most interested Bard, and elaborating.
Before he knew it, he was telling Thran about what he remembered of Wales, then the emigration to Canada, and then to the States for school, and working construction. When the oven timer beeped, it hadn’t seemed like an hour had passed.

“Time for the seasonings,” Bard said, and they went back into the kitchen. Bard was very aware of the tall, lithe body leaning behind him to peer at the pot, but Bard kept his eyes on the soup.

“Just needs a little ginger, some pepper, some parsley, and some chives.” He tossed a small plastic container to Thran. “You’re the ace with the knife, so dice a couple of pieces of this while I get the other stuff.”

Thran reduced the candied ginger to crumbs. “Fine enough?”

Bard nodded. “Throw it in the pot.”

Thran did so.

“Here’s the rest.” Bard added a good dash of red pepper flakes, a couple of shakes of black pepper, a good dollop of parsley flakes, and just as many chives.

“How much did you put in?”

Bard shrugged. “I’m not the most exact cook. Daphne was a lot more precise than I am. I put in this and that, and it usually tastes okay. Less of the red pepper, because it’s hot. More of the parsley because I like parsley.”

“How long before it is ready?”

“A few minutes, that’s all. It’ll be done by the time I make the biscuits.”

“Biscuits?”

“Yes, the children and I like biscuits with the soup. They’re fast.”

He turned on the oven, then grabbed the flour bin, the shortening, the salt and milk, and quickly mixed them in the bowl that had held the vegetables. Fascinated, Thran leaned at the end of the counter to watch him.

“This is the fun part,” Bard grinned, putting a hand in the bowl to squash the mixture together. He didn’t overwork the dough, only kneading it gently until it came together.

“There’s a cookie sheet in the drawer under the stove. Would you hand it to me?”

Thran leaned over with unstudied grace to retrieve the cookie sheet. He was all leg, impossibly flexible and supple. Bard’s hands paused as he watched surreptitiously, and when Thran’s hip brushed his, he had to swallow.

“This one?” Thran asked softly.

Bard managed to nod. “That’s it. Now. Just have to pat this into a round, and slice it so...” He made two rounds of the dough, cut each into six sections, and separated them a little on the sheet. “Ten minutes, then we eat.”

He put the pan in the oven, careful not to bump Thran who was watching closely. “I’ll clear off the table so we can sit down.”
By the time they got the table cleared, and bowl, spoons, and water glasses arranged, the biscuits were done. Bard fished butter out of the fridge, turned off the stove, and ladled out the soup. They sat down to eat.

“If you don’t want the biscuits, I’ve got some crackers.”

Thran shook his head. “Thank you, but no. The diet, again.”

“Do you have food allergies, or is it just to keep your weight down?”

“Always the weight,” Thran admitted. “Dancers are supposed to look like they are chiseled out of marble, yes? As much training as is required, this is not as much of a problem for some as others. But it is true that many dancers practice unhealthy things to keep their slender bodies.”

Bard refused to look at the slender body sitting at his kitchen table. It would have made his mouth water for more than chicken soup. “Anorexia, you mean? Bulimia?”

“Both. Other things, too. None are wise. They ruin the body in only a few months or years. I am careful about what I eat, but I do eat. Mostly chicken —”

“And broccoli,” Bard supplied, offering Thran a wry grin.

“And broccoli,” Thran chuckled. “And I think now chicken soup. This is much better than boiled chicken breast.”

“Thanks. You make a great sous chef.”

“Does that mean I have the honor to wash the dishes?”

“I’ll spare you that. We’ll leave them for the children. They do the supper dishes most nights. Another couple of bowls won’t hurt them.”

Thran hummed and sipped his soup in silence for several mouthfuls. He glanced at Bard. “I think I would like one of the biscuits after all. They smell wonderful.”

“Have at. There’s grape jelly in the fridge if you’d rather have that than the butter. Or if you’d really like to tempt the devil, you can have both.”

Thran nibbled a corner of the biscuit. “Mmm. Tastes as wonderful as it smells. Perhaps just a little butter.”

Bard passed the dish. “Enjoy.”

Bard watched those beautiful, pale fingers wield the knife to slice the biscuit open, then the butter, then slip the pat inside the biscuit. How did Thran make such a mundane gesture look so... divine?

“Daphne was your wife? The one who was the more exact cook?”

Bard nodded. “She was. I met her at... art school. She was a painter. Very good, but she had a better head for the business end, so... we did all right. She had this fire, you know? She was always open to new things, to different things...”

“You miss her still?”

Bard thought about shrugging and merely answering with the expected response. But something made that seem worse than lying. He wasn’t sure whether temptation or his conscience goaded him
more.

“I... don’t think about it anymore. It’s been almost ten years. The children... Sometimes. It’s... complicated.”

Thran nibbled his biscuit, and considered it as if it were something profound, or perhaps dangerous. He took a breath as if marshaling something. Courage, perhaps?

“I do not miss my wife.”

Bard paused in his chewing. “You didn’t get along?”

Thran’s face wore that uncharacteristic cynical smile again. “In many ways, yes. In the most obvious of ways, no. That was the lie, you see. Not the flat. Us.”

Bard didn’t know whether to ask or not, so he merely waited, offering an ear to listen if Thran wanted it. Pale grey eyes met his, so deep that Bard wanted to drown in them. But he kept a tight rein on himself and sat still.

“The state was very... particular about the image of the company, of their dancers. You know, of course, the old cliché about the nature of all male ballet dancers, yes?”

Bard knew. “That they’re all gay, you mean?”

Thran nodded serenely. “They are not, of course. But the state was homophobic, and so it could not abide even a single dancer of either sex who preferred something other than a straight relationship. It often chose to arrange marriages between dancers to give the illusion of their approved preferences. This happened even for dancers who were not gay or lesbian.”

Thran paused, eyeing Bard to see his reaction to his words. Bard nodded, then tried to defuse his tension by taking another spoonful of his soup.

“So... you had an arranged marriage?” Bard ventured, when Thran didn’t resume his explanation.

The dancer nodded. “Vileria and I were good friends, you understand. Both of us were in the ballet. We understood what was happening. In a way, it was a compliment to both of us, if the state thought we were good enough to attract enough attention that our... preferences might be a concern. Vileria was very tall, very elegant. Very dark hair and eyes. Fiery, perhaps like your Daphne. We made a striking couple – she so dark, and I so pale. But the lie of our marriage... we both laughed about it, even as we went along with it. At least we would share this lie as friends, yes? Vileria, you see, preferred her own kind. And...” Thran met Bard’s eyes directly, “so do I.”

Bard swallowed. He felt his face flaming. He froze, willing his heart to stop racing, his body from moving. “Oh,” he managed. He swallowed again. “That... that’s enough material for a film, right there.”

Thran grinned, and dropped his eyes to his soup bowl. “So it was. It made us both laugh, especially when we managed to conceive Legolas. We used to tease each other about it. We were of a type, our bodies, so it was not so hard. We did care about each other. I do not miss Vileria as my wife, though. I miss her as my dear friend. My best friend.”

Bard glanced at that pale mane, those grey eyes, that lithe body, and had to shut his eyes. When he went to spoon up more soup, his hand trembled.

“That’s the way I miss Daphne. That complication. We did love each other, very much. She was a
great mother, and the best partner in so many ways. I was lucky to have her, because she was so open to everything. She had to be. I mean... I’m... Oh, hell, Thran. You’re a lot braver about it than I am. It’s more complicated for me. I’m not straight, but I’m not gay, either. I’m...”

“Bi?” Thran said, as casually as if he were talking about the weather.

Bard nodded.

With a shrug, Thran finished the last of his biscuit. “There is as much to be said for women as men. Vileria and I used to talk about what attracted us to our own kind. Those were funny, funny conversations. She would tease me that men were too bony and angular, where women were more softly rounded, more voluptuous. I would tease her that men were beautifully muscular and taut, where women were too rounded and short. We spent many hours laughing about it.”

“She sounds like a great friend.”

“She was. I miss her very much, if not sexually.” Thran took another bite of soup. “Vileria would get so angry at the state sometimes. A good portion of the government bureaucracy then did not follow the state’s prescribed ideal, yet this insistence on unreality was rigorously enforced. Vileria would say that because there was so much hatred and violence in the world, we should embrace what love there was, no matter its form. She was very wise, I thought.”

“Daphne said almost the same thing. She was wise, too. I miss her as a companion, a wife, the mother of my children.”

Bard’s mobile chimed softly. He grabbed it, startled at how late it was. “I have to go, Thran. I have to pick up Tilda at school. Here, let me put a lot of the soup in a bin for you.”

Thran shook his head. “Save it for your children’s supper. If there is any left after they are through, I will come and get it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. I have plenty to eat for supper, so perhaps you can call me tomorrow and I can come get it whenever it’s convenient. I will give you my mobile number.”

“That’d work,” Bard said, getting up to find a piece of paper and a pencil for Thran to write down his number. He had to make do with one of Tilda’s crayons, which Thran took with a chuckle. “I can’t predict when that’ll be. If the weather improves, I’ll be on site welding.”

“I will be at the barre – oh, that is the worst ballet cliché. I will be at the B-A-R-R-E, not the B-A-R. Whatever time is convenient for you will be fine.”

“That’s great.” Bard took the paper with Thran’s number on it. “Look... Oh, about your ankle – you walk to the market, I’m guessing.”

Thran nodded.

“If you want to ride along sometime, give me a call. It’s on the way to Tilda’s school, so I can stop there most days.”

“I would like that.” Thran got up and carried his empty bowl and utensils to the sink. He found the dish sponge, the liquid soap, cleaned his things neatly, and set them in the rack to dry. “There. Less for your children to do tonight.”
He went to the door with Bard. “I thank you for the soup. It was delicious. And I enjoyed the time with you. I hope we can do so again.”

Bard nodded. Should he offer to shake hands? No. If he touched that long, pale, elegant hand, he might want more.

“We will. Thanks for coming down. I’ll see you soon.”

Thran let himself out. After Bard shut the door quietly, he leaned on it heavily, his eyes closed, and his fist clenched.

He already wanted more.

* * *

Thran held his composure all the way up to the fifth floor. He opened his door. He shut his door. Quietly. Then he stuffed his red cashmere scarf in his mouth so that no one would hear him moan. The afternoon had been nothing but an intimate pas de deux with a saint, albeit in a cramped kitchen rather than on an expansive dance floor. How he had moved, how he had sounded, how he had smelled, and those calm, weary brown eyes...

He pressed the scarf harder over his mouth.

How long did he stand in the middle of his Spartan, sterile living room, savoring the taste of Bard’s chicken soup and biscuits, and the way those muscles had moved under his worn work shirt, flexing and extending and beckoning? After so many years of ballet, Thran knew the human body so intimately that he had no trouble visualizing what Bard’s muscles looked like under his clothes. To imagine that powerful body, velveted only in dark hair, beside his, those strong hands on him, was unbearable. Thran’s body trembled in response as it hadn’t in years. Not since long before Vileria’s death. In some ways, his reaction was terrifying—he was such a master of his body, but not now. Now it burned and froze and trembled despite anything he told himself.

He almost thought about masturbating just to reduce the ache to a dull roar. But he didn’t want to ease this ache, this fire. He wanted to savor it for as long as he could. He wouldn’t wish for more, not yet. To think of what might be possible, then never to see it come about, would be torture. But there had to be something he could do other than try to burn out his want at the barre...

He got his laptop out of the nightside table. Against his better judgment, he typed in B-A-R-D-B-O-W-M-A-N. That was dumb—all he’d get from that would be the usual social media entries posting silly pictures of kittens, or business networking entries. Still, it was the obvious place to start.

The search engine rolled. Thran blinked in surprise. Then he began to read.

* * *

Bard picked up Tilda, got the children through supper—they liked the soup and biscuits—supervised homework for Bain and Tilda, and left Sigrid at the table to work on her homework while he
jockeyed Tilda and Bain through their baths. He even got a shower for himself while the two younger children played a video game. He shooed the two younger ones to bed, and settled on the sofa. Sigrid still worked on her homework, so Bard didn’t turn on the TV. He settled Bain’s laptop on his lap, noodling through the soccer websites to check on the progress of the MLS cup finals, but given that the Welsh Dragons weren’t in it, Bard’s interest was only cursory, and he read little of any of the articles.

T-H-R-A-N--O-R-O-P-H-E-R-S-O-N, he typed without realizing it. Before he could shut down the browser, the search results displayed. Bard blinked in surprise. Then he began to read.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

When the saint dares to ask the angel to visit, the angel's answer is easy to predict. But the saint faces a battery of questions before the big day. Once again, children prove that some of them are more perceptive than others.

The next couple of days passed calmly. Thran took cabs to his physical therapy appointments and the market. He carefully watched his diet. He practiced his yoga. He did his usual ballet workouts that didn’t require him to use his left ankle.

The next couple of nights passed far from calmly. Thran thought so often about Bard’s strong hands kneading biscuit dough that his body hated him for driving it to such a fever pitch. He wondered if Bard was as distracted. Likely not, not with three children, two jobs, and not enough time to breathe, much less eat or sleep. The weather had improved, so Thran hadn’t heard from Bard. He was surely at his construction job during the day, and toiling through the building repairs all evening, if not later.

Thran tried to imagine what his life would be like if he were reduced to a different kind of manual labor, without the time or the wherewithal to dance. He would not be nearly so patient as Bard was. If that uncomplaining acceptance didn’t speak to the love Bard held so deeply for his children, nothing did. That understanding helped to keep him from ringing the mobile number on Bard’s card, or knocking on Bard’s door. The man was working to see to his children. Thran had the upmost respect for that; there had been nights when he had danced with a fever or a niggling injury, keeping to his contract for Legolas’s sake. Children deserved that from their parents.

His mobile rang. Bard’s number appeared. His heart thumped.

“How’s the ankle?”

“Thran? It’s Bard.”

“Hello!” Thran gulped, then cursed silently. He sounded like a giddy chorus boy. “Hello, Bard. I hope you are well.”

“I am. How’s the ankle?”

“It does well. I have been to the physical therapist twice, and it is not nearly as sore today.”

“That’s great. Look, I’m sorry about the soup. I didn’t get it to you because of one thing or another, and the children finished it off last night. I’m sorry.”

Thran smiled, thinking about Bain gulping down his chicken soup like any other ravenous teenaged boy. “That is okay. I am glad they enjoyed it.”

“So I owe you a meal or two.”

“It is well, Bard. I do not mind. I was well paid for my cooking lesson.”

A second or two of silence, then, “I enjoyed it, too. But I still owe you a couple of meals, okay? So...
it’s Thanksgiving this Thursday. I don’t know if you celebrate it, or if you have plans, but if you don’t, I wondered if you’d like to have dinner with us? It'll be loud and chaotic with the children, but if you’re feeling brave, it’d be nice if you could come.”

A wide smile spread across Thran’s face. “I do not have any plans. It is very gracious for you to ask me. I would be delighted to accept. Should I bring more chicken?”

Bard laughed. “We’ve got plenty of turkey. That’s the traditional dish for the holiday, in case you didn’t know. It’s poultry, so you can eat that, I hope.”

“I can eat turkey.”

“Good. If you want, you can come early and watch the parade on TV with us. There’s a dog show on after that, too, which Tilda loves. We’ll eat about two or so.”

“I would like to bring something to your feast.”

“I know you’ve got broccoli, right? Broccoli’s good.”

From the sound of Bard’s voice, he was smiling. Thran smiled thinking of what that expression must look like. “You are a funny welder, Mr. Bard Bowman. But if you want broccoli, I will bring broccoli.”

“Great. I’m glad you can come.”

“I am glad you asked me. So... if I want to see this parade, what time should I come down?”

“It runs from ten to twelve. The dog show’s on after it. But if you come early, I might put you to work cutting up... broccoli.”

Bard was laughing this time, drawing Thran to join in. “I think I might like to come early. But not just to see the parade or cut up broccoli.”

Bard went quiet, and Thran wondered if he’d gone too far. But after a second, Bard’s voice came back, softly.

“I’d like that.”

“Until Thursday, then.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Thran thumbed off his mobile, let his hand fall onto the sofa, and leaned his head back against it. He shut his eyes, exhaled, and savored the smile twitching at his lips.

He’d just been asked to meet the family.

* * *

The next two days went by in a blur – welding both Tuesday and Wednesday, and Steffen with a list
two miles long of things people wanted fixed before the holiday. Some of those Steffen actually had to do himself when tenants were out, rather than at three in the morning when Bard had rewired the lobby chandelier. Pick Tilda up at school. Run to the market. He managed to get a small turkey in the fridge and a couple loaves of stale bread for stuffing, and a bag of yams. Cranberry sauce, the canned kind, but fresh cranberries were too expensive this year, and Bard didn’t have time to make the relish, anyway. At least he’d have a long weekend to recover – Thursday through Sunday. He could work Friday for double pay, which was very tempting. But his children needed time with him, and...

And he wanted time with Thran.

Gods, how could he say that? Not after what he’d read on the Internet. Why an artist like Thran would...

Better not to think about it.

If it were better not to think about it, then why in all the hells had Bard called the angel and invited him to Thanksgiving dinner?

Because if the angel had said no, Bard would have an easier time forgetting everything other than his children, his jobs, and the money – or lack thereof, if he were honest. He’d close his eyes, grit his teeth, and find the strength to keep going for Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.

But Thran had said yes. Not reluctantly, either. As if he were as preoccupied as Bard was.

Oh, gods. This was a mistake. Such a huge mistake.

His shift ended Wednesday, he picked up Tilda from school, and he came home to another round of niggling jobs that Steffen had been too lazy to see to himself. He mixed up meatloaf, stuck it in the oven, asked Sigrid to keep an eye on it, and dashed out to replace the burned out light bulbs, fix the sticky door, replace the closet door knob.

He got through the list and came back into the apartment just as Sigrid was taking the meatloaf out of the oven.

“Thanks, Sig,” Bard smiled tiredly at his daughter, dropping a kiss on her hair. “What else needs doing? I’ll wash my hands and make the salad.”

“I made it, Da.” Sigrid took a bowl full of greens and carrots and florets of broccoli – a jolt went up Bard’s spine when he saw those – out of the fridge. “I opened a can of pineapple, too. And mashed some potatoes.”

“You are a gem, sweetness.” Bard enveloped her in a grateful hug. “Even set the table, too.”

“Tilda did that,” Sigrid smiled at her sister reading with Mr. Bun on the sofa. “Didn’t you, Til?”

The little girl looked up with a proud smile. “Sigrid was making the potatoes, so I got the utensils and put them around. And the napkins.”

“All that’s left are the glasses, then. Milk for you, little doll?”

“Me, too,” Bain called from his room.

“Wash your hands, then, Bain,” Bard called back. “Til, we’re ready.”

Tilda set aside her book and Mr. Bun and came to the table with her brother. Once everyone was
seated, the bowls went around and everyone set to hungrily.

“So,” Sigrid said after a while. When Bard looked up from his plate, his eldest daughter had folded her arms on the table and leaned towards him. “Tell us about this guy you asked to lunch tomorrow.”

“He’s that guy from 5B,” Bain said, still shoveling in mashed potatoes. “The guy who banged on the door the other night.”

“He has pretty hair,” Tilda said to no one in particular.

“He’s that dancer guy,” Bain went on.

“Dancer?” Tilda looked up brightly. “Like on the TV? With the plum fairy?”

Tilda had watched the Nutcracker Suite last night on TV.


“I liked the mice. And the cookie children who hid under the dress,” Tilda confided.

Sigrid grinned at her sister before skewering her father with a sharp eye. “I like how you’re not saying anything, Da.”

Bard winked. “The three of you seem to be saying quite a lot. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Hmm,” Sigrid narrowed her eyes. “So he’s a ballet dancer? What’s he coming to our house of chaos for?”

“Dinner,” Bain intoned helpfully, but he was too pleased with his quip to hold his deadpan delivery for long. A lopsided grin ruined the effect, making Bard chuckle.

“Maybe he’s coming to dance for us? Can he tell us about the mice?” Tilda asked.

“Maybe he could. You can ask him. He’s not dancing right now, though, little doll. He hurt his leg and has to rest it so it’ll get better. He doesn’t have any family with him, and I thought he’d like to spend the holiday with some people.”

“Some crazy people,” Bain inserted, dishing up more potatoes. “We ought to cure him of wanting to be around ‘some people’ in about an hour. Want to bet, Sig?”

“Be nice,” Bard glowered at his son. “He has a son of his own, but he’s away at school. Thran misses his son a lot. So after supper, I want you all to clean up your stuff so there’s room for him to sit down somewhere.”

Most of the groans came from Bain, but Tilda mewed a little as well. Sigrid, however, remained impassive, considering Bard with disconcerting maturity. He ignored her as he quelled Bain’s groans with a look.

“You don’t have any homework tonight, so you can take fifteen minutes to put your stuff away.”

“Just fifteen?” Bain pounced, always the first one to negotiate the difference between the spirit and the letter of the law.

“No,” Bard shot back just as fast, grinning. “As long as it takes to put your stuff away. If you don’t need that long, great. But if you need more, you’ll take more. And when I say put away, I don’t mean thrown in the closet, stuffed under the furniture, or crammed behind the bookcases. I mean
hung up, on the shelf, in the hamper, in the dishwasher, in the box, and so forth and so on. I’ll be
inspecting. So do it right the first time, or you’ll do it over.”

Bain groaned, but it didn’t stop him from shoveling in more mashed potatoes. “We don’t have to
vacuum, do we?”

Bard put an exaggerated look of surprise on his face. “Great idea, Bain! Good thing you thought of
it. You can do the honors once everyone’s tidied up.”

“Da!” Bain screeched. “Not vacuuming! I hate to vacuum!”

Bard and Sigrid laughed, but Tilda wrinkled her nose. “It smells funny.”

“The bag needs changing,” was Sigrid’s diagnosis.

“We don’t have any other bags,” Bain said.

“I’ll clean out the old one again, and it’ll work fine,” Bard said. “So finish your suppers, and then
we’ll get to it.”

“Are you going to clean up your stuff, too?” Bain challenged. “I’ve stepped over your sleep pants six
times this afternoon alone, Da.”

“Ew, Da!” Sigrid made a face.

“My stuff, too,” Bard said mildly. “So hop to it. Bain, you’re on dish duty. Your sisters took care of
the supper and the table – ”

“Da!”

“Now, Bain,” Bard said quietly, with a long look at his son. “Now.”

Bain subsided with a resigned nod. “Yes, Da.”

Tilda handed her plate over the table to Sigrid, who put it in the sink. The two girls went into the
living room to start on their tidying while Bain and Bard stacked the rest of the dishes. While Bain
scraped the plates off and loaded the dishwasher, Bard straightened the kitchen, wiped off counters
and the stove, stacked the pots by the sink, and put away the spices he’d used in the meatloaf. Bain
got the dishwasher going with the little jiggle it needed, and took the scrub sponge to the pots. Once
Bard neatened the kitchen, he found the dishtowel and dried the pots for Bain. His son scrubbed out
the sink, and rinsed out the sponge. The kitchen garbage can went in the living room for the girls to
add all the detritus from their cleaning, and Bain moved around his father to collect his things. Bard
straightened his tools in the bookcase, picked up the sleep pants Bain had complained about,
straightened the quilt on his bed, and cleaned out the old vacuum cleaner bag. In less than twenty
minutes, the place looked good. It’d never rate a photography spread in a fancy magazine, but it
looked better than it had in weeks.

“Good job, you three,” Bard nodded. “There’s the vacuum, Bain.”

“Do I have to, Da?” Bain whined.

“No,” Bard said, straight-faced. “You can scrub the bathroom instead.”


“Thought so,” Bard grinned, nodding at the vacuum. “Have at.”
With the sound of Bain and the vacuum in his ears, he went into the bathroom to chisel the dirt back to the realm of decency. To his surprise, Sigrid was there, and the tub was already scrubbed back to its original weird aqua. She looked up from scrubbing the toilet.

“You owe me for this, Da,” she grinned, shaking the toilet brush at him.

He grinned. “Why do I have the feeling that I won't like paying that debt?”

“Just tell me about the guy coming to dinner tomorrow. Mr. Oropherson.”

Bard shook baking powder into the sink and attacked the soap scum. “What’s to tell? You know his name and what he looks like and why I asked him to join us.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Gods, Da! Just answer the question. Or I’ll make up my own story to explain why you’re being so evasive.”

“You’ll come up with a better story than I would,” Bard grinned.

“Probably. Or maybe I’ll ask Mr. Oropherson why you asked him, and why he thought it was a good idea to spend Thanksgiving Day with a load of loonies.”

Bard swallowed. “You won’t do any such thing –”

“Oh, so this isn’t just my Da being the kind soul he usually is.”

Bard sighed. His daughter didn’t just look like her mother. She had Daphne’s persistence, too. “He misses his son. I know how that feels. He lost his job. I know how that feels. He can’t do what he loves. I know how that feels, too. So if spending a couple of hours with our load of loonies helps him feel better, I can offer him that.”

Sigrid’s laughing exasperation faded into a fond smile. “You’re so predictable, Da. And I love you for it.”

Bard smiled, crookedly. “Nice of you to say so, Sig.”

“If there’s any other reason you invited him, that’s okay, too. Now get out of here so I can scrub the floor. Should I put out guest towels, too?”

“Do we have any?” Bard teased.

“There’s a Christmas one somewhere. Or maybe it’s for Halloween. Which holiday does Mr. Oropherson celebrate?”

“I’ve no idea. You’ve got all your stuff in the hamper? I’m putting in a load of laundry.”

“All in the hamper.”

“Hold down the fort while I commandeer the washer.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Bard,” Sigrid winked, waving the toilet brush.

Laughing, Bard checked on Tilda – straightening her books in her room – and Bain – slumped on
the sofa playing a video game. He shooed Bain off the game system and into his room with the vacuum, then took the clothes hamper and the garbage bag down to the basement. Whatever gods there were granted him the rare favor of two idle washers, so he threw darks in one and lights in the other, tossed the garbage in the disposal, and settled down to wait for the clothes to cycle through. The big industrial machines were done in half an hour. Everything went into the dryers, and before long Bard piled the clothes back into the hamper and hauled it back upstairs. The children were quiet when he returned, though Bain had abandoned the vacuum in the middle of the living room floor. He was sorting his soccer cards in his room, and Sigrid was reading a story to Tilda and Mr. Bun in their room.

“All vacuumed?” he asked, carrying the laundry hamper in to dump it on the floor. “Bain, come get your clothes.”

“All vacuumed,” Tilda nodded, hopping down from the chair. “All washed, too.”

“All but me,” Sigrid amended. “Bain and Til are done. The bathroom’s still clean, too.”

“Miracles never cease,” Bard feigned surprise, as Bain came in to help sort through the clean clothes. “Let’s tempt fate with another miracle – put all the clean stuff away.”

“Geez, Da,” Bain snorted. “I’ll break out in a rash any second now from all this clean.”

“Better not,” Bard tossed a clean soccer jersey at him. “The wait at the ER will be hours, and we’ll be too tired to make turkey tomorrow, much less eat it.”

“Eh, I guess I won’t break out in a rash, after all.” Bain piled his clothes into his arms and went into his room to put it all away. The girls were already working on theirs, leaving just a pile of Bard’s work pants and shirts and underwear – “Gross, Da!” was Sigrid’s announcement, tossing a pair of underpants at her father – on the rug.

“Gross, Sig,” Bard riposted, tossing a pair of panties at his daughter, laughing when she stuck her tongue out at him. He carted his stuff into his alcove, folded it, and stowed it in the underbed storage drawers.

When he’d put the last bit away, he looked around at the unfamiliar tidiness. At least they wouldn’t die of ptomaine or rug fuzz for the next few days.

While Sigrid took her shower, Bard settled on the sofa, and found a nature documentary on the TV to watch. Tilda came in to settle in his lap, then Bain to his left, and Sigrid to his right. They laughed at the antics of the meerkats running to and fro, though Tilda was yawning before it was over. When the program was over, Bard settled her in bed with Mr. Bun, and she was soon asleep. Bain went next to read himself to sleep. Sigrid stayed up with him to watch the next documentary about UK castles, chortling when Beaumaris Castle in Wales appeared on the screen. Soon after that, Sigrid kissed his cheek.

“I’m for bed, Da. See you in the morning.”

“With turkey pan in hand,” he smiled, kissing her hair. “Sleep well, sweetness.”

“You, too, Da.”

Bard turned off the TV. He got into the shower, impressed at how nice it was to wash in a clean bathroom, and scrubbed until he was just as clean. It was good to dry off with a clean towel, put on the sleep pants that had so outraged his son, and sit for a moment on the sofa before he lay down to sleep.
The apartment was clean, quiet, and ready for tomorrow. Then, and only then, did Bard let himself think about the angel who would descend from on high tomorrow. That pale hair, that pale skin, those pale grey eyes...

Bard shut his eyes. He was such a fool.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

It's Thanksgiving Day, and time for the angel to descend to earth. The saint will be more than tempted.

So will the angel.

Today was Thursday. Thanksgiving Day. Today Thran would walk down three flights of stairs and enter another world. A world with a home in it, and three children, and a saint with tired, gentle eyes, and a body that was an unstudied yet divine work of art.

First, however, there was still yoga to do, basic barre, breakfast, shower. Even if such things had not been ingrained so long ago that he’d forgotten when they weren’t ingrained, Thran would still do them. The yoga would help him focus, and the barre exercises would force him to carefully stretch his injured ligaments. They would keep him from thinking so much about things he wanted more than the dance.

Nothing had ever drawn him as much as the dance. That something had finally done so was a terrifying development.

Sun salutations modified not to stress his ankle. Headstands, arm balances, backbends, splits, seated asanas, and on and on and on...

All à terre – pliés, battements, arabesques, tendus, développées; then ronds de jambe, and on and on and on...

Two hours later, Thran’s body was well stretched and refined, but his mind was focused only on the saint residing three floors below his ballet barre and yoga mat.

He made his porridge, chopped his fruit, poured his milk, brewed his tea. Ate quietly. Showered. Checked the clock on his nightside table.

Good. Ten-thirty at last.

Thran put on his favorite black velvet jeans; black silk tee; long, plushy, shawl-collared tunic in his favorite heathery silver grey knit. Combed his hair smooth. Pocketed his apartment key. Slipped on his favorite suede boots. Gathered up the huge plastic bag of broccoli and the box of chocolates.

He leaned against his door and took a deep breath. He held himself there for a long moment, savoring just how badly he wanted to see Bard again. Enough to taste it. Enough for his body to tense, just as it had every night since they’d made soup.

*Remember to breathe*, he told himself, as he pushed away from the door and opened it.

He locked his door behind him and paced slowly down the stairs, teasing himself with his anticipation.

Fourth floor.
Third floor.

Second floor. Apartment 2A.

He knocked.

A flurry of muffled voices rumbled behind the door, then footsteps pounded near. The door opened. There stood Sigrid, and beside her, Tilda.

“He’s here, Da,” Tilda called towards the kitchen, then turned back to Thran.

“Hi, Mr. Oropherson,” Sigrid nodded, a welcoming smile on her face as she stood aside to beckon Thran inside. “Welcome to the house of chaos.”

“I am glad to be here,” Thran smiled as he offered a little bow to the older girl, then the younger. “You are Sigrid. I am pleased to meet you. And you are Tilda. I am pleased to meet you, too.”

“Are you really a ballet dancer?” Tilda looked up at him consideringly. “You have pretty hair.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. Both the gesture and Tilda’s question drew a chuckle from Thran. “I am a ballet dancer, yes. And thank you for such a nice compliment.”

“Can you tell me about the mice?” Tilda asked.

At Thran’s confused expression, Sigrid explained, “Tilda saw the Nutcracker on TV a few days ago. She liked the mice.”

“I can tell you about the mice,” Thran said to the little girl, as she led him to the sofa. He sat down on the corner so that he could look at her eye to eye. “What would you like to know?”

A head appeared in the kitchen door – Bard. Thran met his eyes calmly, trying not to tense, but he saw the same tension in Bard’s posture, and smiled in commiseration. Bard’s lips curved up in a half smile, and they shared a private look about the absurdity of it all.

“Hi, Thran. Be right with you. Bain and I are just getting the turkey in the oven.”

Thran held up the bag of vegetables. “I have the broccoli,” he said in a deadpan voice, drawing Bard’s snicker.

“We’ll deal with that in a minute, you. First, the turkey. Sig, grab the broccoli from the funny dancer.”

Relieved of his vegetables, Thran looked back at Tilda. “I will tell you about the mice, and then perhaps you will tell me about this parade.”

“It’s for Thanksgiving,” Tilda explained, sitting next to Thran. She pointed to the TV, where several clowns cavorted down the street in front of Macy’s. “See, it’s floats and bands and clowns. There are some dancers, too. The people on the TV talk about a lot of nothing, so we turn off the sound so we can see the pictures without all the blather.”

Sigrid came back into the living room. “Da says we can make up our own stories about the floats and things that are a lot more interesting than what the TV heads say.”

“Your Da is a wise man.”

“Will you tell me about the mice, now?” Tilda asked.
“Of course. What would you like to know?”

“What’re those heads made of?” Bain stuck his head out of the kitchen.

“Hello, Bain. I am pleased to see you again. So, the heads – I have seen several kinds. Some are merely cleverly sewn cloth hoods. Others are more cumbersome papier mâché. Some productions use headdresses that make the ears, and then use long false noses for the snout and whiskers.”

“Were you ever a mouse?” Tilda asked.

Thran nodded. “A long time ago, when I was a small boy, I was one of the mice. Never the Mouse King, though.”

“Did you have to wear the papier mâché head, or the cloth hood?” Sigrid asked, smiling.

“I had the ears and the nose. It was much easier to see during the fight that way, without a bag over my head.”

“How did they make the Christmas tree grow so large?” was Tilda’s next question.

“Oh, you must have seen the Nutcracker with the great Baryshnikov, yes? Mikhail Baryshnikov?”

“That’s the one,” Sigrid nodded. “It’s my favorite version.”

“The wonderful Gelsey Kirkland is in that one, too. They were both superb dancers. But to answer your question, little Tilda, the stage has a very large lift on it, and the back of the tree is fastened to it. It begins folded up small, like a concertina, and then unfolds when the lift goes up.”

“That sounds cool,” Bain allowed, coming into the living room. His face was flushed from the heat of the oven. “I’d like to see that from the other side, to see the how the lift worked.”

“Bain is a bigger fan of those ‘Making Of’ features than of the films they’re about,” Bard said, following his son.

Thran nearly gasped when he looked up. Bard had on worn jeans and a faded blue cotton tee, but the jeans were form fitting, and the tee left his arms bare and caressed his broad chest as closely as Thran wanted to. The work boots had been replaced with a pair of marled ragg socks, which let Bard move easily and quietly around the crowded apartment. The soft, faded blues suited Bard very well. Thran couldn’t meet Bard’s eyes without revealing... well, never mind what Thran didn’t want to reveal. He looked back at Bain instead.

“It is one of my interests to see such things, too,” Thran said. “A dancer’s career is never but so long on the stage, so one must prepare for what comes after that. The traditional path for many is to choreograph, to create the steps that the dancers dance. I enjoy that. But to design a set is to make a puzzle, how to get all of the scenery to fit. That is a satisfying challenge, also.”

“Make sure you let Thran see some of the parade, little doll,” Bard cautioned his smallest daughter. “Maybe he’s never seen it before.”

“Have you?” Tilda turned her face up to Thran’s.

“I have seen parades. I was even in one once. But no, I have not seen this one before.”

"I'll tell you all about it," Tilda said confidently, drawing Bain to roll his eyes and Sigrid to chuckle. Bard chuckled, too, as he sat down on the chair beside Thran’s end of the sofa, facing the TV. Sigrid
“Before you tell me, I would like to give you this,” Thran held out his box of chocolates to Bard. “For after the turkey. To bring only broccoli did not seem to be very festive.”

“That wasn’t necessary,” Bard said, taking the box. “But thank you. The children don’t like chocolate very much, but —”

“Da!” all three children chorused in various stages of outrage, making both their father and Thran laugh. “Can we open it now?”

“After the turkey, just as Thran said —”

“It’s three hours until the turkey’s done, Da!” Bain protested.

“Only two.”

“Still, that’s two hours! Come on, Da.”

“One each, then, but that’s all. We’ve got a big lunch coming,” Bard relented. He opened the box carefully, perused the grid, and turned the box around to the three children who crowded around him. “The round ones are the creams. The square ones are the caramels.”

“Mmm, caramel for me,” Bain pounced on his piece. Sigrid took a peanut chew. Tilda considered for some seconds before choosing a raspberry cream.

“Thran?” Bard offered, holding out the box.

Thran’s initial reaction was to demur, but it struck him that he wanted to be part of the Bowman family’s festivities, so he took a small piece of chocolate toffee. Bard took an orange cream, then put the top back on the box and set it aside for later. Thran considered the rare taste of the sweet on his tongue, and then settled to hear Tilda’s commentary about the parade.

On the other end of the sofa, Bain sorted through his soccer cards, looking up only now and again as some of the floats went by the cameras, and then more to speculate about how they worked than what the floats depicted. The procession of similar-looking pop singers and cartoon balloons was impressive.

“How do you tell them apart? They all look alike,” Thran confessed, when Sigrid commented about one of the boy bands.

“They all sound alike, too,” Bard agreed, grinning when Sigrid poked her tongue out at him. “I have no idea who any of them are, anyway. But then Sig claims that Alexander Calder and Joan Miro’s art look the same, too. I think she says it just to get a rise out of me.”

“Nothing does that,” Bain muttered, drawing Sigrid’s sniff. “Well, it doesn’t, Sig, so you should just stop trying.”

“I know how to get a rise out of him,” Sigrid declared, eying her father with an evil smile. She cut her eyes to Thran. “All I have to do is to ask Mr. Oropherson —”

“No,” Bard said quietly, with emphasis, giving his daughter a stern look. Thran’s eyebrows went up in surprise, for Bard looked very uncomfortable.

“Ah,” Thran said into the silence, smiling perversely. “The young lady wants to ask me something
horrible, such as the color of my underwear or whether my hair is dyed.”

“Is it?” Tilda looked up with alarm.

Thran laughed. “No, Tilda. It turned white when I was about your brother’s age, all but my eyebrows, for some mysterious reason. I like it, so I leave it alone. As for the color of my underwear —”

“I don’t think we need to ask Thran that,” Bard jumped in, giving Thran an incredulous look.

“Good, because I don’t want to know,” Bain muttered again, giving his sister a disgusted look. “Gods, Sig.”

Thran offered Bard a small smile, but as fast as those light brown eyes warmed, he knew that Bard sensed his genuine amusement.

“On that note,” Bard said, smiling back, “I have more prep to do in the kitchen.”

“May I help?” Thran offered politely.

“You like that stuff?” Bain asked incredulously.

“I know very little about cooking, and to help is a good way to learn.”

“All help cheerfully accepted,” Bard said, rising. “You’re so good with knives that we’ll be done with the sweet potatoes in record time.”

“Knives?” Bain looked up from his cards, eyes wide with interest. Tilda looked no less fascinated. “You’re good with knives? What does that mean? Like... fighting?”

Thran laughed at the expectant eyes glued to his. “There was a dance I learned once that called for knives. Many of the ethnic traditions throughout Asia have such dances. So I learned it at a young age. One of the choreographers who specialized in ethnic influences for the classical ballet made an intricate dance with knives. I enjoyed learning it very much. It was a popular ballet, so I danced it for many years in Russia.”

“Cool!” Bain pronounced it. “Real knives, with sharp edges?”

“Real knives, yes, but not very sharp edges. But one still had to be very careful. Even the thin edge of a common butter knife, or a single sheet of paper, can cut. Any thin edge, even an unsharpened one, requires care.”

“So let our local knife expert see to the sweet potatoes,” Bard said. “Or lunch will be late.”

“Should I take off my boots?” Thran asked, as he got up. “I promise that there are no holes in my socks.”

Bard gulped down laughter. “As long as doing so is okay for your ankle. Don’t want to undo all that PT you’ve had in the past week.”

“It will be fine. It is already much better with the week off.”

Bard snorted as he disappeared into the kitchen. “I bet you didn’t take a single day off.”

Thran put his boots with the collection by the door. After consideration, he took off his sweater and put it with his boots; between all the people and the cooking, the apartment was quite warm. “I
worked every day, yes, but nothing that strained the ankle ligaments. My doctor says it comes along well.”

When he turned back to the kitchen, he found three sets of eyes regarding his feet. He looked down at the plain black socks. They were thick, soft, and made of very fine wool, but the children didn’t know that. He lifted his hands in an exaggerated shrug and mimed apology.

“Only black. No stripes or polka dots.”

Sigrid giggled, and Bain rolled his eyes and went back to the parade, but Tilda gave him a big smile. Chuckling, he slipped into the kitchen. Bard had the big cutting board set out for him, and a pile of peeled sweet potatoes waiting next to it. He had his back to Thran, running water into a small saucepan.

“Slices?”

“Half inch thick is –” Bard turned around, registered Thran in his black tee, and gulped. Oh, did the saint with the tousled hair and the soft brown eyes quail inside as badly as Thran did? “Gods – good, I mean. Half an inch is good. You... you don’t have to be neat. They’ll end up mashed.”

It took every crumb of Thran’s will to keep his face serene as he hooked the single stool under the end of the countertop with a foot. He drew it out and perched on it while he chopped. He worked in silence for a minute or two, glancing at Bard a few times just to watch him work. He’d recovered his composure, and was dumping the turkey neck, heart, and liver into the small saucepan, then setting it on the stove. He moved economically, without wasted effort – a ballet of his own that was well worth watching.

“What do you make?”

“Stuffing for the turkey,” Bard replied, stooping to get another pan out. He studiously did not look at Thran. “Here, you can put the potatoes in this. Um, the stuffing. Some people actually stuff the bird with it, but that makes a mess, so I cook it separately. Make sure you get some before it gets to Bain. He loves it, so it doesn’t last.”

“What is in the stuffing?”

“Mostly bread, then onions, celery, and the turkey liver and heart. Seasonings. Especially a lot of parsley.”

“Ah, parsley. That is not a surprise.”

Bard gave him a sharp glance to catch him chuckling, so his lips curved in a crooked smile in response. “Was there too much in the soup, then?”

“Not at all,” Thran said, eying him as he chopped. “I enjoyed the soup very much. As I enjoy to tease you now.”

Bard’s expression didn’t know whether to reveal disbelief, hilarity, or embarrassment, so all three appeared in short order, and he looked away. Then he put his elbows on the counter and leaned towards Thran. “Should I tease you about the color of your underwear, funny dancer?” he murmured softly.

Thran leaned forward over his elbows to whisper his reply. “You do not have to. I will tell you. They are –”
“Stop,” Bard gulped, straightening. “Just... stop. Gods.”

Thran grinned at Bard’s discomfiture, but took pity on him. “Then tell me what seasonings go in the stuffing. Besides parsley.”

“Um, sage, mostly. That’s sort of the traditional one. Pepper, too. Not much else.” Bard gave Thran a more composed look. “I use a lot of them. I don’t have the leeway to use a lot of prepared things –” Thran translated that to mean that Bard didn’t have the money, “– so seasonings keep things from getting boring. I can cook chicken the same way six times, but it’ll be different every time because of the seasonings. A few might let you vary your boiled chicken, too.”

“That would be good. Which seasonings are good ones to start with?”

Bard described some of his favorites as they chopped and stirred. Once the potatoes were on the stove, Thran chopped the onion and celery for Bard’s stuffing, and then watched while Bard sautéed everything together in a big skillet. That would finish in the oven once the turkey had finished cooking. Once Thran cut up the broccoli for the steamer, they went back out to the living room.

“The dog show is coming on,” Tilda announced excitedly from the sofa. “You’re just in time.”

“Did you see Santa at the end of the parade?” Bard ruffled Tilda’s hair affectionately. What Thran would have done to have Bard run fingers through his hair like that bore no considering.

“And the reindeer.” Tilda nodded. She looked at Thran. “Are there reindeer in Russia where you lived, Mr. Oropherson?”

“If it is all right with your Da, it is all right with me if you want to call me Thran.”

Tilda looked at her father, who shrugged and nodded agreement. “That’s very nice of Thran, Tilda. So say thank you, please.”

“Thank you, Thran. The reindeer?”

“There were none where I lived, no, either in Latvia or Russia. But there are a lot of reindeer in the coldest part of Russia, and in Finland, too. Canada, also.”

Tilda pushed the remote button to restore the sound for the dog show, and everyone watched in silence as the announcer said a little about each breed. Thran couldn’t keep from glancing at Bard now and then, just to savor the jolt that went down his spine with each glance. Bard had an easier time of it, for he had only to move his eyes from the TV to Thran to indulge himself. Thran liked the faint half smile that kept appearing on Bard’s lips.

“Oh! Look!” Tilda pointed at the TV. “The man said that one is an Imperial Russian Wolfhound!”

“A Borzoi.” Thran leaned forward towards the TV. “That is right, Tilda. They used to be called the Imperial Russian Wolfhound. They are very beautiful.”

“Did you ever have one, Thran?” Sigrid asked.

Thran shook his head. “I travel far too much to have a pet. And those are very special dogs. They need a very large, safe place to run. They are very gentle, though. Very beautiful.”

Tilda giggled. “That one looks like you, Thran. With long brown hair instead of white.”

“That one’s an Afghan hound,” Bain supplied, as said dog trotted elegantly across the ring with long,
Thran chuckled. “They are very sweet, and very beautiful, but not very smart. I do not mind to look like one, but I hope I am smarter than one.”

Bain sighed. “You must be pretty smart. You spoke Russian in Russia, right?” Thran nodded. “And now you speak English. I’m taking French in school, and it’s a pain. I don’t think I’ll ever get it right. All this masculine and feminine. I mean, it’s just a table, or a knife. Who decided a table is feminine, and a knife is masculine?”

“Better than German,” Bard said, smiling. “It’s got masculine, feminine, and neuter.”

Bain dissolved into groans.

“English is easier in that sense,” Thran said. “But all the idioms and the words from other languages... it is not easy to learn.”

“Will you ever have to go back to Russia?” Tilda asked.

Thran shook his head. “I am an American citizen now. I am very proud of that. So here I will stay.”


Laughing, Thran obediently got up and followed Bard to the kitchen. Once Bard got the roasting pan out of the oven and onto the counter, he put a big platter beside the pan.

“This is the four-hand part. The turkey always sticks to the cooking bag. So when I pick up the turkey, you have to pull the bag off the bottom and stick the platter underneath.”

Thran regarded the roasting pan dubiously. “You... cooked the turkey in a plastic bag?”

“It’s a special kind of bag, just for cooking. Keeps the turkey moist, and cuts an hour off the cooking time. A great invention, it is.” Bard slit the bag open to reveal the turkey, then picked up two large meat forks. He stuck the forks in either side of the turkey. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Up she goes, then. Be careful; the pan’s still hot. Just get the turkey loose.”

Thran had to press close to Bard to free the turkey from the plastic. Even through their clothes Thran was exquisitely conscious of the warm body against his. It was all he could do not to press closer to feel the play of Bard’s muscles against his. “It is loose.”

“Okay; hold onto the platter so the whole thing doesn’t go on the floor.” Bard angled the turkey onto the platter, and Thran kept it anchored on the countertop. “There. Not a spill. I’ll just put the stuffing in the oven, and in fifteen minutes, we eat.”

He stuck his head out of the kitchen. “Table crew, you’re up.”

Bard and Thran slid out of the way to let the three children troop into the kitchen to fetch plates and flatware and glasses. Once again, he was painfully aware of the man at his back, and had to press his hands against his thighs to keep them from pulling Bard closer. Bard must have felt just as charged, because he moved away to supervise the children. Thran stayed by the stove while he remembered to breathe again.
“Thran, would you turn on the broccoli, please?” Bard asked as the children laid the plates and flatware around the table.

Thran thought about what he’d rather arouse than a pot of broccoli, but duly peered at the control knob for the burner under the broccoli. He met Bard’s eyes with a mischievous half smile. “How high?”

“Um, all the way up,” Bard replied, swallowing, looking away. Thran turned back to the stove to turn on the heat and grin to himself. What a ridiculous pas de deux this was!

In ten minutes, everything was ready. Bard hauled the turkey platter to the table, and the stuffing and potatoes and broccoli followed. Thran found himself at one end of the table facing Bard, with Tilda and Bain on one side and Sigrid on the other. Bard sliced turkey and passed the plates around, and then everyone helped themselves to the rest.

At first, Thran settled for only turkey and broccoli, but when he noticed the children looking at his bare plate, he took a little of the stuffing, the potatoes, the cranberry sauce. Everything had so much more flavor than his plain boiled chicken and steamed broccoli! But the pleasure of sharing the meal with others was even better. The easy rapport that Bard shared with his children was another kind of dance that ebbed and flowed. Thran was happy to listen to the conversation flow around him.

“Time for dessert?” Bard asked, when the food had been nearly consumed.

“Yes!” Tilda exclaimed. “It was my turn to pick the dessert, Thran.”

“Your turn?”

The little girl nodded vigorously. “Each holiday, one of us chooses the dessert. Sigrid did Easter, and Bain did Fourth of July.”

“So no pumpkin pie,” Sigrid explained. “Tilda chose angel cake.”

“With chocolate syrup,” Tilda supplied.

“So does your Da get to choose the next dessert?” Thran asked.

“It’s Sig’s turn next,” Tilda shook her head.

“Oh, so your Da does not get a turn?” Thran teased her. “That does not seem fair at all. What if he does not like any of the desserts you choose?”

“Da says he likes everything we choose,” Tilda protested, drawing Bard’s chuckle.

“Not that he eats much dessert,” Sigrid said, giving Bard a look.

“I eat my share,” Bard protested mildly. “Sig, you collect the plates, Bain, you help Til with the cake and the syrup, and Thran and I’ll get the food put away.”

With everyone working, cleanup didn’t take long. The dishwasher got loaded, the food went into bins and then into the fridge, and Tilda and Bain had clean plates and the cake ready on the table.

“Who wants tea?” Bard asked the air.

“Me,” Sigrid called.

“I, too,” Thran added.
“Tea for three, then,” Bard said. “Bain? Tilda? You want anything?”

“Milk,” both children chorused, so Sigrid poured the glasses while Bard juggled the kettle and the mugs.

“Come on!” Tilda called impatiently. “I want my cake!”

“Yes, Miss Impatient. Right away,” Bard teased, bringing the teapot and cups to the table. He glanced at Thran. “Pass the knife to the expert so he can do the honors.”

Sigrid handed Thran the knife. He made the first cut, but wasn’t sure how big to make the slice. When he made the second, Bain said, “Oh, can you make mine bigger than that, please?”

“No,” Bard gave Bain a quelling look. “That’s plenty.”

Thran sliced two other pieces of the same size, and Sigrid passed one to Tilda and took the other for herself.

“What, don’t I get one, too?” Bard asked plaintively.

“I thought you didn’t like dessert, Da,” Sigrid protested.

“I like it now and again,” he allowed, keeping his eyes on his daughter rather than Thran, but the very avoidance made Thran’s stomach flutter. He cut one more slice for Bard, and a small one for himself, though he didn’t indulge in the syrup. It was an airy confection, a fitting end to a bountiful meal.

“Dishes, you three,” Bard said, when everyone was through. “Make sure you start the dishwasher when you’ve got everything in it.”

“Yes, Da.”

Bard took his mug of tea into the living room, gesturing for Thran to join him. He waited for Bard to settle in the chair before he sat on the corner of the sofa beside him. For the first time, he found Bard’s eyes waiting for his when he glanced over. Bard smiled ruefully, shaking his head slightly as he indulged himself with a long look, turning Thran’s skin into gooseflesh. Bard leaned over to put his mug on the table, and took up the TV remote to give his hands something to do.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?” Bard whispered.

Thran laughed silently. “I have been called worse.”

“Lately?”

Sobering, Thran shook his head. “Not for a very long time.”

Bard exhaled. “Know the feeling.”

He clicked on the TV, but left the sound off, and put his finger to his lips. Thran gave a slight nod, cutting his eyes to the kitchen. Bard nodded in reply, and only a second before Sigrid stuck her head out, a plate and dishtowel in her hand.

“You need more tea, Da?”

“I’m fine, Sig. Just looking for something on the tube other than American football.”
“Hey, you’re not eating Thran’s chocolate, are you?” Bain appeared after his sister. “Because you said we could have some after dinner, and it’s after dinner.”

“One more. Let’s make it last a couple of days, okay?”

The dishes done, the children scrambled in to jockey for a good spot around the chocolate box to choose their treats. When the candy had been suitably oohed and aahed over, Bard put the box away in the kitchen. When he came back, Thran got to his feet.

“I thank you for the delicious turkey dinner, and even more for the company. It has been a long time since I have had such a good time.”

“I didn’t get to ask about the cookie children in the ballet,” Tilda protested.

“That will be a good tale for next time, then,” Thran promised her. “It was very kind of you to explain the parade to me. I liked that quite a lot.”

Tilda dimpled. “You’re welcome. There’s a parade on New Year’s Day. Maybe I can explain that one to you, too.”

Thran finished pulling on his boots. He offered Tilda his hand, which she took. He brushed a kiss on the back of it. “I look forward to that.”

He offered Sigrid his hand, and he brushed a kiss on hers as well. When he offered his hand to Bain, though, he grinned.

“I will not kiss yours, only shake it.”

“Oh, okay, that’s good,” Bain agreed, and gave Thran’s hand a firm shake. “Come back again, please? I’d like to hear more about the stage building stuff.”

“Of course. Until then.”

Thran picked up his sweater, but he didn’t put it on as Bard opened the door for him. He turned back to the children and offered a wave. “Thank you again.”

“Bye, Thran.”

Bard followed him out.

“You were great with the children. Thank you for that.”

“They are wonderful children, and very kind to a stranger. Like their father.”

“So are you going to shake my hand, or kiss it? Not that I didn’t enjoy the view all afternoon.”

Thran laughed. “I savored my view well, too. But I do not think it would be wise to shake your hand or kiss it. So I will leave you with something to think about instead.”

“What?” Bard growled, leaning on the doorjamb.

“Black silk.”

Thran started up the steps, but he was still close enough to hear Bard’s muttered curse.

“You really are a bastard.”
Thran looked back, smiled, and then continued leisurely on his way.

Once he got into his rooms, he let his sweater drop on the chair, and leaned against the door with his eyes closed. He didn’t know if he’d given Bard reason enough to lie awake tonight. But he’d certainly done so for himself.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The saint ponders the temptations of an angel, but it takes the blessing of a worldly innocent before he does more than that.

What the angel does in response is not very angelic, but it is nevertheless divine.

Chapter Notes

Dreamworks Animation SKG and Aardman Features own the copyright to "Flushed Away."

Paramount Pictures and Hasbro own the copyright to the Transformers films.

After the angel flew back to heaven, Bard played board games with Tilda and Bain while Sigrid worked on a term paper due for her nineteenth-century world history class. Once lunch had settled, the four of them ventured outside to horse around the local small park, kicking Bain’s soccer ball back and forth until everyone was breathless and ready for turkey leftovers. As expected, Bain finished the stuffing, and the turkey was so reduced that it was ready for the soup pot. Bard broke up the carcass and put it on to simmer for an hour or so while the children negotiated between themselves about what film to watch. Bain wanted what Bard had dubbed “more stuff blows up.” Sigrid wanted fantasy. Tilda wanted mice. None of them would budge until Bard stuck his head out of the kitchen to suggest the old reliable “Flushed Away.”

“I’ll get the DVD,” Bain said into the silence, smiling.

Roddy St. James from Kensington duly sparred with Rita, the slugs stole the show yet again, and derring-do thwarted the evil Toad and his Frog minions. Sigrid went back to her paper, Tilda and Bain showered, and Bard deboned the turkey stock and cleaned up the kitchen. Bard read Tilda her bedtime story, and kissed her goodnight. Bain said goodnight, then went off to read while Sigrid showered.

Bard exhaled. Quiet once again. The apartment was still reasonably neat. Maybe they could keep it this way for a day or two, at least until he had to go back to welding on Monday. When he worked two jobs, it was tough to get through even the basic chores – laundry done, food bought and made, dishes washed, homework completed. He sat down in his chair, determined not to fall into that same, never-ending thrash of worry about money and everything that needed doing, not on a holiday. There’d be time enough for that on Monday, too.

He’d shut his eyes, just for a minute, just until Sig finished her shower, and then he’d take his turn. Until then, he’d think about nothing.

His thoughts abhorred a vacuum just as much as nature did. What slipped into his vacuum was the devastating angel who had graced his home, and charmed his children with his quiet regard. He
hadn’t talked down to them, he’d put up with their examination and their joking, and he’d been an easy guest. As for what else he’d been... Thran hadn’t had to offer his parting shot about underwear. Bard still savored the soft, black silk tee that had clothed that beautiful torso, that narrow waist, those sculpted shoulders; and bared those alabaster arms. And that hair...

“He’s gorgeous.”

Bard started awake hard enough that his shoulder twinged in complaint. Sigrid looked down at him, smiling. “Gods, Sig. Give your Da a little warning.”

“I said, he’s gorgeous.”


“You know who, Thran.”

Bard shut his eyes and shifted deeper into his inelegant slouch. “Uh-huh. It’s the hair. The ladies love the long, white hair.”

“Da.” Sigrid sat on the end of the sofa beside Bard’s chair, in the same spot where Thran had sat earlier. She put her elbows on her knees and leaned towards him. “He’s nice. He was really sweet with Tilda. It’s okay.”

Bard blinked again. Was he dreaming this surreal conversation with his daughter? “Okay? Of course it’s okay how good he was with Til. She can’t wait to ask him about those cookie things.”

“The two of you were mooning over each other all afternoon. It was kind of cute.”

Bard shut his eyes. At least his daughter’s characterization of cuteness gave him a legitimate reason to blush. “Do you know who he is, Sig?”

“He’s a gorgeous ballet dancer who likes us, and who likes my Da. I like him, too.”

Bard told her what he’d read on the Internet. If he expected her to blanch or to look surprised, she did neither. Instead she shrugged.

“I read all that, too.”

“ ‘I read all that, too.’ What does that mean?”

“It means I checked him out, of course. He could have anything he wants, like a fancy penthouse and a posse and fifty assistants to run around and do for him. He doesn’t. He lives here, for gods’ sakes. So...”

“So what?” Bard said tiredly.

“So maybe you ought to give him the benefit of the doubt, and yourself a break.”

Bard chuckled ruefully as he wrung a hand over his face. “Are you trying to give your Da dating advice?”

“I was going to say ‘friending’ advice, but it sounds like you’re past that point.”

“Past what point?” he growled, finally waking up enough to be chagrined.
Sigrid shook her head. Her smile was part resignation, part exasperation, but completely loving. “Gods, Da. You’re so dense sometimes.”

“I think I’ve just been dissed.”

“’Mam’s been gone a long time, Da. I miss her, too, but... she’s not coming back. Thran’s nice. Whether he becomes a friend or more than that...” She shrugged. “You always tell us to keep an open mind. So follow your own advice.”

“Thank you very much, Dear Abby,” he said wryly, but Sigrid saw right through him.

“You’re welcome,” she said pertly, reverting from the yenta to his sixteen-year-old daughter as she brushed a kiss on his cheek. “Sleep well.”

“As if I can, knowing my daughter’s setting herself up as a therapist. You know you can get arrested for practicing without a license, right?”

Grinning, she stuck her tongue out at him, but relented with a smile as she patted his knee. She got up and went back to her term paper things spread out on the table. Bard stayed in his chair, eyes shut, until Sigrid closed her computer, tidied her papers, and put them in her backpack so the table would be clean for tomorrow’s breakfast.

“G’night, Da.”

Bard got up to hug his daughter and kiss her hair. “G’night, Sig. Sleep well.”

“You, too.”

After Sigrid closed the door to the room she shared with Tilda, Bard shuffled into the bathroom, showered, and pulled on his sleep pants and tee. He climbed into bed, pulled the quilt up, and shut his eyes.

What would it be like to lie next to an angel in his huge, silk- and cashmere-clad bed? To feel the warmth of that pale alabaster skin, and savor the caress of those long fingers and silky white hair? To be close enough to discover what he smelled and tasted like?

That kept Bard awake for some time.

* * *

Breakfast was a splurge. Rather than the usual oatmeal and toast, Bard made the concoction that Sigrid had dubbed the Egg Puff when she’d been Tilda’s age. It was a simple, frothy soufflé, nothing more than eggs with a little water and flour, then sprinkled with cheese and herbs, so easy to make that Bain could make it, and Tilda soon would be able to, though someone would still have to help her get the heavy iron skillet in and out of the oven. It looked festive, and paired with biscuits and some cut-up fruit made a good holiday breakfast. Today was the day that traditionally the children worked on their homework so they’d have the weekend free, especially Saturday.

“What do you want to take to the house tomorrow?” Bard asked.

Tilda looked up from the table. “I’m invited to Sarah’s tomorrow. Can I still go?”
“Your sleepover,” Bard remembered. “I’d forgotten. Of course you can still go, Til. What time are you supposed to be there?”

“Eleven. We’re having pizza and films all afternoon, then a hayride and the sleepover.”

“You have to wrap the books you got for Sarah.”

“I will, after I finish my homework. You’ll have to help me with the bow.”

“That’ll make me Bard the Bow Man, won’t it?”

“Oh, Da!” the groan went around the table. “That’s so old!”

“It still gets a groan out of you,” Bard pointed out with a smile. “So Bain and Sigrid, tomorrow’s lunch?”

“I... think I’m going with Jackson and Luke,” Bain hedged. "We want to see that new ‘more-stuff-blows-up’ film.”

“Sig?”

“Chicken sandwiches, clementines, and fig bars.”

Bard nodded. “Sounds good. Til, Sig and I’ll drop you off at Sarah’s when we head out. Bain, you know the drill – home before dark, and no friends over until Sig and I get back.”

Bain nodded, his mouth full of Egg Puff. “K, Da,” he garbled, then stuffed another forkful into his mouth. Bard shook his head. Given how much his son ate now, he didn’t want to think about how much would go down his throat in another year or two – likely as much as the rest of the family combined. Their meager budget would have to find leeway somewhere to accommodate.

Breakfast consumed and dishes done, quiet settled as the children started their work. Bard took out the pot of turkey stock and added potatoes, carrots, celery, and the leftover green beans and corn he’d stashed in the freezer a couple of weeks ago. He sat with Tilda in the living room to explain fractions to her by drawing circles cut into wedges like pies. Bain and Sigrid tapped away on their computers, giving Tilda reason to comment that they sounded like the mice running around in the first act of the Nutcracker. Bard’s mobile rang, Steffen telling him to look at the fourth floor hall light that was sputtering. Bard went out, tightened the fixture wiring, replaced the bulb, and came back to add parsley and sage to the soup. Tilda finished her homework and packed it neatly away. Bain was next with his.

“Essay done?” Bard asked.

“ Mostly.”

“How mostly?”

“I wrote the whole thing,” Bain assured him. “I just have to check it for spelling and stuff.”

“Everything else done?”

“Half a geography worksheet.”

“After lunch, then,” Bard said. “You know the rule.”

“I know,” Bain exhaled. “No film until the homework’s done.”
“Good,” Bard gave his son an encouraging smile. “Finish those, then you’ve got two whole days to do whatever you want until Monday.”

“The last free time until Christmas, probably,” Bain shook his head.

“Exams are coming up,” Bard agreed, drawing Bain’s grimace and Tilda’s groan. Sigrid frowned, but kept typing. “How’s your paper going, Sig? Close to a stopping point so we can have lunch?”

“I might as well stop now,” she grimaced. “I just realized that I made a big assumption that I don’t have any citations for. It’ll take a while to sort that out.”

She cleared off her papers and the computer, and lunch was duly laid on – the soup, cheese and crackers, and their favorite holiday fruit, the small clementine tangerines. There was half a bowl of soup left when everyone was done, which Bard scarfed down once it was clear than no one else wanted it. Thran’s chocolates were for dessert, two apiece. They’d have enough for one more lunch, since the last of the angel cake would disappear tonight after supper.

“Any requests for supper?”

“Pizza!” Bain replied instantly. “We’ve got time to make the dough, right?”

“Yes, pizza!” Tilda agreed. “I can cut up the carrots!”

“Carrots don’t go on pizza!” Bain made a face. “Where did you get carrots?”

“Because we always have carrot sticks and celery sticks with the pizza. I can do them.”

“We’ll leave that for Sig, Til. You’re not quite ready for the chef’s knife yet,” Bard said, thinking about who was very good with a chef’s knife, half appalled and half amused at the jolt he felt in his solar plexus. “You can put on the pepper strips.”

“All right,” Tilda agreed. “The park first, please?”

They headed out to the park in short order. The sky was growing overcast, but the sun was still intermittent enough to keep the temperature comfortably chilly rather than frigid. Sigrid and Bain passed the soccer ball back and forth while Bard watched Tilda hurtle up and down on the swings, then laughed when she hung upside down on the jungle gym. He ignored the stares of a couple of mothers shepherding their children when he climbed up after Tilda and hung upside down next to her. To his lights, the sound of his youngest child laughing at his antics was well worth any social comment. It wasn’t as easy for him to flip himself down the way Tilda did, given that the gym was sized for children, but he extricated himself neatly enough, taking a facetious bow to Tilda’s applause.

“Look out, Da!” Tilda exclaimed, pointing in time for him to field the soccer ball Bain sent hurtling towards him. He kicked it back between Sigrid and Bain, sending them scampering after it.

“Race you,” he challenged Tilda, and they ran after the two older children pell mell. Bard let Tilda edge just ahead of him as they caught up to Sigrid. Tilda kept running after her brother, but Sigrid snared Bard’s arm.

“Da, I don’t think I can go with you to the house tomorrow,” she confessed with a look of guilty regret. “I made a mistake in my paper, and I can fix it, but it’s going to take me a lot longer than I thought. I need to stay home tomorrow and fix it. Please?”

“It’s okay, Sig. You know schoolwork comes first. If you have to stay, you have to stay. There’s not
much to do out there this time, anyway. Shut off the water, check the usual stuff, make sure the windows are tight.”

“Why don’t you ask someone to go with you?”

Bard gave her a long look. “This is a very convenient homework misfortune.”

Sigrid didn’t look away. “I did make the mistake, Da. I really did. It’s not fatal, but I’m going to need most of tomorrow to fix it. If Til and Bain are off with their friends, and you’re at the house, it’ll be quiet for me to work. Then I’ll be home if Tilda needs anything, and home when Bain gets back from the film. So... why not?”

Bard didn’t have to think about it, but he felt guilty about wanting to do just as Sigrid suggested as badly as he did.

“Oh, ye gods and little fish hooks, Da!” Sigrid exclaimed, throwing her arms wide. “I’m sixteen! I don’t have but so much maturity in me, and this is pushing it. So say yes before I say I’m going to tag along and forget about the social ramifications of the emerging working class in late nineteenth century England.”

Bard laughed and looped an arm around the shoulders of his daughter. “I don’t know whether to tease you about turning into a matchmaker or a social scientist.”

“I think they’re the same thing,” Sigrid snickered. “So call him when we get home, okay?”

Bard grumbled, but nodded. “I’ll call him.”

“Good.”

They trooped home from the park. Bard made pizza dough and set it in the oven to rise while Sigrid retreated to her room to work on her paper, and Tilda and Bain perused the DVDs. When one of the Transformers films cranked up, Bard went into the bathroom, shut the door, and pulled out his mobile. He punched Thran’s number in and waited for the call to connect.

“Bard. Hello.”

Bard gulped at that warm voice. “Hi, Thran. Um... are you busy tomorrow?”

“Just my usual work in the morning at the barre.”

“Would you be interested in an outing?”

“Of course. Do you take the children somewhere?”

Bard gulped again. Gods, this was worse than high school! “Um... the children will be busy with friends or school. It’d just be you and me.”

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening. “I would like that, very much. Where do we go?”

“Um... can you trust me to let it be a surprise? It’s something special to me. I’ll tell you about it when we get there. I’ll stand you a picnic lunch, too.”

“I am honored that you want to include me in this something special.”

“We’ve got to walk maybe a couple hundred feet, all told. Is that okay for your ankle? Do you have
hiking boots or something so your ankle isn’t stressed?”

“I do. Dress warmly, yes?”

“Do. Chicken and fruit okay for lunch? Maybe you’d like to bring some salad?”

“That sounds good. I will bring salad for two. Maybe a treat, too.”

Bard thought about all the things that might mean, and couldn’t resist a smile. “Um, you do have something to wear other than silk and velvet and suede, right? Don’t wear anything good. It might be muddy, and it’ll definitely be dusty.”

Thran’s chuckle was warm, even over the mobile. “You have piqued my curiosity very badly, Bard. Battered jeans and hiking boots it shall be.”

“Great. I’ll come up once I get Tilda to her party. Maybe around eleven?”

“I will be ready. I look forward to the adventure.”

Bard rang off. And looked at the mobile.

He’d just made a date with an angel.

* * *

When Thran put his phone down, his fingers were trembling. He had a quick look in the refrigerator — yes, there were plenty of salad ingredients. He found one of his studio bags, cleaned out the stray towel and tights and dancer’s belts and leg warmers, and set it on the kitchen counter. He found the large plastic box he used to carry his lunches to and from the studio — it was big enough to hold a two-man salad — and put that beside the bag. He looked through the stash of wine that he rarely drank. What did one drink with chicken? White? There was a nice bottle of champagne that would suit. He put that in the refrigerator to chill. He found a couple of glasses, a kitchen towel, and a corkscrew, and put them in the bag.

He went into the bedroom closet and found his hiking boots. Thick socks. A pair of very old and comfortable black denim jeans. A dark grey Henley. A black silk tee. His ancient grey naval pea coat with the arctic-quality interlining. His red scarf.

Then he thought about eleven o’clock tomorrow morning.

* * *

Bain was the first out of the house at ten the next morning. A couple of his mates came jumping into the living room to chatter about the upcoming film and some pickup soccer games and maybe a trip to the arcade. He waved goodbye to Bard and his sisters, grabbed his soccer ball and cleats, and sprinted out after the two other boys. No sooner had he headed out than Bard’s mobile rang. One of the other parents taking a child to Sarah’s party offered to pick Tilda up so that Bard didn’t have to take her. Bard had given lifts to the other little girl several times, so this was a nice gesture on behalf of
the other parent. In fifteen minutes, Tilda and Bard were waiting outside the apartment building with Tilda’s present and backpack. Nicole and her mother drove up calling a greeting, and Tilda piled inside with her friend.

“Buckle up, remember?” Bard reminded Tilda. “Thanks, Morgan. I appreciate you giving Til a lift.”

“Glad I can for once, Bard. You’ve been a lifesaver so many times.”

“Glad to do it. Do you want me to pick up tomorrow morning?”

“I’ve got it, but thanks for offering. I should have Til home about ten or eleven.”

“I’ll be here. Thanks again. You girls have a great time, and Tilda, remember your manners.”

“Of course I will, Da! See you tomorrow!”

“Bye! Love you, little doll!”

“Love you, too, Da! Bye!”

Morgan waved as she pulled away from the curb, and was soon around the corner. Bard took the steps back inside two at a time, and came back to his eldest daughter already ensconced at the table with her computer sitting amid her books and papers.

“You’re sure you don’t want to go, Sig?” Bard asked.

Sigrid rolled her eyes and gave him a typical sixteen-year-old’s look of exasperation. “Don’t get cold feet now, Da. Pack your lunchbox and get out of here.”

Bard rolled his eyes back at her, earning a snicker, and went into the kitchen. His work cooler was already on the counter. In went an ice pack, the plastic bin of chicken, the small block of Swiss cheese he’d splurged on, the bag of clementines, a couple of apples, and the fig bars. A bag held French bread; plastic plates, utensils, and cups; a jug of water; and napkins.

“I’m off,” Bard grinned, waiting.

Sigrid filled in the rest of the joke with a giggle. “Yeah, and you’re leaving, too. Hope nothing major’s up with the house this time.”

“Me, too. I won’t worry about it until I get there. Hope the socio-economic whatchamathing about the late nineteenth century British invasion of the Beatles straightens itself out.”

“Social ramifications of the emerging working class in late nineteenth century England, Da,” Sigrid gave a longsuffering sigh. “But to be honest, what you called it sounds a lot more interesting.”

Bard spread his hands wide. “That’s why I was never very good at history. My stories were always better than what I read in the books. I’ll be home for supper. I got out the meat for hamburgers, or we can do bean skillet.”

“Okay, Da. Now go. Don’t forget your tool bag. Remember last time when the hinge froze on the front door?”

“Got it in the truck already. See you soon.”

He kissed Sigrid’s head, she gave him a hug, and he was out of the door with cooler and bag in hand.
It was only ten-thirty, but he started up the stairs anyway. When he reached the fifth floor, he knocked on the door of Apartment 5B.

“Bard?” Thran called from behind the door.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Come in. The door is open.”

Bard shifted the bag to his other arm, grasped the doorknob, and let himself in.

“I’m early,” Bard said, shutting the door and putting down his things. “Tilda got picked up by a friend, so –”

He turned around. Thran was still at the barre. Cream leg warmers and shoes. Cream tights, so formfitting as to disappear into the muscles and curves beneath them. Ratty, pale grey knit top with a wide, torn neck and raveling sleeves pushed up above the elbows that left absolutely nothing to the imagination about what was underneath. That white hair in a messy braid. The left hand lightly on the barre. The most elegant arch of the back and neck, the full extension of the right arm as the right foot made very small, very controlled circles on the floor. The right leg lifting into the most impossibly effortless stretch back until it was parallel to the floor. That erect, still back, arched like a swan. Thran’s face was in profile, but his gaze slid sideways to meet Bard’s.

That beautiful face warmed into the smallest, most self-possessed smile.

“You are such a royal bastard,” Bard whispered.

The right leg fell perpendicular to the floor. The foot circled. The leg went up. Fell. The foot circled. The leg went up again.

“How many of these must I do?” Thran murmured.

“You’ve done enough,” Bard breathed.

In a heartbeat – a thunderous one – Bard crossed the white rug, wound one arm around Thran’s waist, twined his fingers in the white, silky hair at Thran’s nape, and pulled him close to engulf him in a kiss. Alabaster arms went around his neck. Long, elegant fingers scraped through his tangled hair. A taut, muscled leg wound around his legs. The embrace was so overwhelming that Bard forgot everything but the feel of the warm, hard body straining against his, the scent of sweat and excitement, the sound of a soft, breathless, nearly silent moan that might be Thran’s, or his.

“Gods, you bastard. You fight dirty.”

A soft chuckle. “And you knead biscuit dough as if you massaged your lover, and wear tight blue tee shirts, and press close when you put a turkey on a platter, and look at me with warm brown eyes that make my breath catch. What do you call that?”

Bard buried his face in the crook of Thran’s neck, breathing in, tasting salty sweat on his lips. Just the feel of another body against his after so many years threatened to drown him. He had to draw away to catch his breath. What on earth had possessed him?

An angel had. An angel that he had no business even touching.

“Don’t,” that soft, Russian-accented voice whispered. The lips that had spoken those words kissed his ear. “Don’t say you are sorry. I am not. I very much am not.”
The hands wound in his hair tilted his face up to bear the angel’s regard, and the angel's lips kissed his again.

Bard kissed back, refusing to think about all the reasons why he shouldn’t. He stroked the white, silky hair. Caressed the strong back and tight buttock above the leg wrapping his. Bit at the soft lips seeking his. Wanted to drown in all of it and never surface again.

He found the points of Thran’s hips and eased him away. The angel sighed in want, tightening fingers on his shoulders so that Bard couldn’t push him away but so far.


“We can’t do this. Not yet.”

Thran’s eyes met his. “Why not?”

Bard fought against every piece of him wanting nothing but to pull Thran’s body against his. He shut his eyes, struggling to resist so compelling a need.

“Because. Because of today. Because of what I want to show you.”

“It is important?”

Bard nodded.

Thran stroked Bard’s cheek with long, elegant fingers, the touch lingering, then tracing over Bard’s lips. Bard nipped at them, drawing breathy laughter. “Then I will get dressed, and we will go out.”

Thran’s fingers traced down Bard’s arms as he eased away. His grey eyes held Bard’s, then he disappeared into the bedroom. Bard stayed rooted to the spot until he heard the shower going, then he shut his eyes, wrung his hands over his face, and sat on the sofa. He put his face in his hands.

He was mad. He was totally mad.

Apparently Thran was, too.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The saint has confessed to madness. Will the angel be as consumed, and what mysteries will be revealed in the aftermath?

This was exactly the way Thran had imagined he’d meet Bard this morning, in well-worn practice clothing, at the barre. He’d imagined it as soon as Bard had seen him in his black tee. He would stay late at his morning ritual for no other purpose than to hear that knock on the door, to see shock transfigure the face of the saint who entered, and then to brace for that moment when the saint gave up hope for anything but salvation in his arms.

When Bard came in, just as he imagined, when Bard’s eyes widened in disbelief, just as he imagined, adrenaline flooded Thran with fire. His skin felt raw, as if electricity burned it. His muscles, usually so completely under his control, quivered. He traced each rond de jambe à terre into an arabesque à la hauteur in slow motion, each one a seduction, each one a beckoning call, until Bard flung himself at Thran, wrapping desperate arms around him, actually lifting him off the floor, as if he were one of the ethereal creatures that Thran so often lifted across the stage. How easy was it to relinquish all control, all connection to the earth, and let Bard embrace him there suspended? Just as easy as it was to revel in Bard’s hands as they roved over his body, twined in his hair, and pulled him close for a deep kiss. It was all Thran could do not to spasm in release as he was held above the earth, his hands full of unruly dark hair and his lips nearly crushed under Bard’s.

When Bard let him slip back to the floor and drew away, it was like having a limb hacked off. Thran’s breath stuttered at the loss.

“Oh,” he pleaded. “Don’t say you are sorry. I am not. I very much am not.”

He kissed Bard again, reveling when Bard’s arms tightened hard around him again and his lips returned every caress with another. The slow trace of Bard’s hands over his back, his buttock, was intoxicating. Fingers kneaded his hips in slow, sensuous strokes until Thran was about to beg Bard to strip the clothes from them both, then deliver them out of misery and into ecstasy.

But those hands didn’t venture past his clothes, or continue their stroking. Thumbs caressed the creases of his torso where it joined his hips, then eased him away.


“We can’t do this. Not yet.”

Thran’s eyes met his. “Why not?”

Bard’s breathing was ragged. His eyes were shut. He trembled. “Because. Because of today. Because of what I want to show you.”

“It is important?” Thran said softly. A whisper was all he could manage.

Bard nodded.
Thran didn’t know where he found the discipline to force his body to relax, to turn away from the bounty before it. He stroked Bard’s cheek, his lips, delighted when Bard nipped at his fingers. Oh gods – the way his eyes were downcast, hidden behind dark lashes; the way Bard’s tousled hair fell into his eyes, as if he’d just come from bed... Thank all of the gods that this saint wore armor, a heavy coat that veiled his powerful, beckoning body, or there would have been no possibility of Thran stopping.

“Then I will get dressed, and we will go out,” he promised, and backed away so that he looked as long as possible at Bard before he had to turn away.

That was only the first promise he hoped to make to the saint with so much longing in his tired brown eyes.

A hot shower didn’t calm Thran much, but given that a cold one in cold weather was risky for lean dancers, he made do. He hated to wash Bard’s touches away. Rather than washing, he wanted to smell Bard on his skin, to smell both of their scents comingled, but he was too rank with sweat. He dried, wishing Bard held the towel, not him. He dressed in jeans and tee, combed his hair, and pulled on his socks and hiking boots. The Henley was waiting on the bed, but Thran was too warm to put it on yet. He stuffed his wallet and key in the back pockets of his jeans, picked up the Henley, and took a deep breath before he went back to the living room.

Bard sat on the sofa, his head in his hands. He looked up at Thran with such a panicked expression that Thran scrambled to sit at his side, crowding close, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder. He put one arm around Bard’s shoulders, and twined his fingers with Bard’s.

“Stop. It is all right. It is.”

“I know,” Bard gulped. He wrung the hand that Thran didn’t hold over his face. “That’s the problem. Oh, gods, Thran... it feels right, it feels so much more than that, but it... it can’t be. It’s mad.”

“Why is it mad?”

Bard wrung a hand over his face again, but he didn’t try to extricate the other from Thran’s. He did glance at their entwined fingers, though, before he looked away.

“Look at you. You’re...” He gestured at Thran with his free hand. “You’re... you. An angel.”

Thran chuckled, and rested his chin on Bard’s shoulder. “Shall I tell you how I think of you, at night when I cannot sleep, which is your doing? You are a saint. A beautiful saint who is patient, and kind, and brave.”

Bard’s chuckle was embarrassed. “My children would disagree with you.”

“No, they would not. They know what their father is even better than I do.”

Something about that made Bard laugh. He shook his head in wry amusement.

“What?”

“My daughter. Sigrid. She made me call you last night.”

“Did she?” Thran’s laughter was silent, but pleased. “I am grateful to her.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want to on my own,” Bard said. “But I thought... eh. Then she said that she
thought it was cute the way you and I mooned over each other on Thanksgiving Day, and that I’d better call you.”

“We were that obvious? I thought we were both quite subtle.”

Bard snorted. “Says the man in the black silk tee, who has the same thing on today.”

“Your blue shirt was no less mouthwatering.”

Bard grimaced. “Gods, listen to us. We sound like a couple of teenaged girls.”

He’d said us. Not you and I, but us. Thran brushed a kiss on Bard’s ear. “Then let us go to see your important thing, out in the world where we will act more sedately.”

Bard rubbed a hand through his hair self-consciously. “I wonder how far we’ll get?”

“Let us find out.”

Thran drew Bard up with a tug on his hand. Gods, how much effort was it to resist when Bard’s fingers tightened on his wrist? To pull the Henley over his head when he really wanted to strip the black tee off, then Bard’s heavy coat and faded blue Henley?

“Should I braid my hair before we go on our adventure?” he managed to ask in a light tone.

“Either way,” Bard said, looking at Thran’s mane, then shaking his head and looking away. “Gods, Thran. Stop making me look at you.”

“Perhaps I should braid it, then,” Thran said, his fingers already twisting the long white strands into a quick three-strand plait. “I must tie it off.”

He fetched an elastic from the bathroom and wound it around the end of his braid as he returned to the living room. Bard watched him come, shook his head, and looked away.

“Mad. Totally fucking mad.”

Thran allowed himself a wicked grin as he fetched his bag of picnic things from the kitchen. “Not yet. But I hope soon.”

Bard shot him an incredulous look. “I don’t believe you. And put on a coat, funny dancer. You’ll catch your death outside.”

Thran pulled on his coat and scarf, shouldered his bag, and pointed to the door. “If that happens, I hope you will think of some way to keep me warm.”

“Enough, okay?” Bard protested, half laughing. “I’ve got to drive, and I can’t if you’re going to distract me all the way.”

Thran gave an exaggerated sigh. “If I must.”

They forged downstairs and into the street. Thran jammed his hands into his coat pockets so that he didn’t link his arm in Bard’s as they walked down the street. For now, the change in the way they looked at each other would have to remain private. Half a block down, Bard pointed to a heavy-duty tradesman’s pickup truck, old and well worn, but well maintained.

“It’s not a limo,” Bard warned, unlocking the driver’s side door.
“I am not fond of limos,” Thran confessed, as Bard stowed the cooler behind the seat, then the bag. He leaned into the cab to unlock the passenger side door, then jumped out to take Thran’s bag to stow it. When it clanked, Thran remembered the bottle inside. “Make sure that does not fall over. I brought champagne.”

Bard turned a mock glowering look on Thran. “It’s chilled, too. So you plotted last night what you’d do to me this morning.”

Thran laughed as he circled to the passenger side of the truck and climbed in. After he shut the door and fastened his seatbelt, he watched Bard do the same, start the engine, and check the gauges. “Would you rather I say that the champagne has nothing to do with you? That of course dancers subsist only on the finest French champagne, and never deign to let soda or mere water pass our lips?”

Bard laughed at Thran’s imitation of a flighty ballet dancer as he maneuvered the truck away from the curb and down the street. “Of course, I should have realized that the champagne was for you. The poor welder will have to make do with water.”

“I brought two glasses.”

Bard snorted. “Real glasses, too, I’ll bet.”

“It does not taste the same in plastic.”

“I wouldn’t know. Though I grant you that water doesn’t taste the same in plastic, either.”

“Nothing does.”

Bard concentrated on getting them through the crowded streets. Before long, they were on the highway, heading west away from the city.

“Why don’t you like limos?”

The dark windows. I cannot see out of them. My stomach does not like it when I cannot see where I go in a vehicle in motion.”

“Been in a lot of them, I guess.”

“More than I prefer.”

“Are you warm enough? I can turn up the heat if you’re not.”

Thran gave Bard a smile. “I am fine. I will not break.”

“You looked thoroughly miserable the night you banged on my door.”

“I was soaked, and frozen. And rude. I am sorry.”

“You had a right to be angry. And it all worked out.”

“I hope it does.”

Bard swallowed, but kept his eyes on the road.

“May I ask where we go now?”
Bard’s face was shadowed with something intangible. Were they making a pilgrimage to a cemetery, perhaps? To the grave of Bard’s wife? Wouldn’t that be an important place to Bard?

“It’s... not far. I’ll explain everything when we get there. But it’s something I want you to see first, before I say anything.”

Thran nodded acquiescence. “All right.”

“May I ask about your son? Legolas?”

“Of course. He is fourteen, perhaps the same age as your Bain. He has very blond hair, rather than white as mine is, and his eyes are blue. He looks more like his mother than me, and he shares our slender build. He is a good student, but he excels at fencing and archery. His dream is to make the Olympic team in one of those disciplines, but he is not yet old enough to try out.”

“Does his boarding school give him the chance to do the fencing and archery?”

Thran nodded. “It is a good school, and Legolas likes it well enough. I am the one who wishes it were not necessary. But to travel with me, or to be at home alone with a tutor, is no life for a child. The boarding school allows him to have friends of his own, a stable base, the athletic training he loves, and the chance to do many other things well.”

Bard nodded in understanding. “But you miss him.”

“Very much. One day, when I no longer dance on a regular basis, perhaps we will be together. But he will be old enough to go to college soon, so perhaps we will never live together again as a family.”

Bard’s face tightened. He knew better than Thran about the rigors of parenting children alone. It was surely a much direr, hard-scrabbling worry for him than a well-paid dancer. Thran thought he was about to speak of that, but Bard forced the worry from his face and glanced at him with a shrug.

“It’s never easy,” was all he said. “It’s never easy trying not to worry about it every second, either. But today, we’ll take a breather from the real world. Today we have a better way to spend our time.”

“This morning was very nice,” Thran grinned, trying to ease Bard’s mood. He was glad when Bard reddened. “Ah. I think you thought so, too.”

Bard shook his head, smiling. “Nice is not what I’d call it. An ambush is a better term for it.”

“It was a very nice ambush. I have not had the pleasure of being swept aloft in the arms of a beautiful saint before.”

“It was you ambushing me, not the other way around.”

“We were both entranced. It does not matter who started it.”

Bard sighed, but kept his eyes on the road. “We’re almost there. Next exit.”

When they’d left the highway, they were in a small community, not quite rural, but far from urban. The sign off the exit ramp read Greenwood Dale on the Lake, 3 Mi. Thran’s eyes flickered in recognition. Ah, the mysterious saint’s story was becoming interesting – this was no cemetery they were about to visit. He recalled what he’d read online when he’d typed Bard’s name into the search engine, but held his silence. Let Bard tell his tale in his own time.
Two miles on, a small cluster of upscale touristy shops fanned out on both sides of the road, an eclectic collection of art galleries, artisan clothing boutiques, the requisite coffee shop, a rustic mountain-themed bistro, and so forth. It was nicely laid out and blessedly free of ubiquitous chain eateries, with spacious car parks off the street to encourage strolling. It was quite busy, perhaps with holiday shoppers. Bard drove past the collection, not looking to either side as they went. He was on familiar territory, then.

Past the tourist mecca, Thran saw signs directing travelers to wineries, art galleries, and so forth. Another mile further on, Bard turned down a narrow track, pulling off to the side about fifty feet in. He turned off the engine and gave Thran a glance.

“Here we are. Almost.”

“Almost?”

Bard pointed out the right side of the windshield, past a locked gate and up a small rise. “Where we’re going is about fifty meters that way.”

“Let us go, then.”

They got out of the truck. Thran walked around to the driver’s side to take his bag from Bard. He took the bag of picnic supplies, too, for Bard hauled a big canvas duffel of what sounded like tools over his shoulder and hefted the small cooler. He locked the truck and crossed to the gate, fishing a key out of his pocket. When he’d freed the padlock and let them in, he locked the gate behind them, then led Thran up a slight rise along an overgrown path.

“Watch your footing. It can get muddy near the top,” Bard said, looking back at Thran. “Don’t hurt your ankle.”

“My ankle is fine, Bard.”

Thran followed Bard up the rise, which steepened just below the top. Bard held his free arm out to him, so Thran grasped it as dancers often did, fingers around wrists. When Bard’s fingers tightened against his wrist, Thran marveled at how such an innocuous touch sent so much adrenaline rushing through him. It was such a jolt that he wondered if Bard were right about madness.

If it were, so be it. He knew what he wanted, who he wanted. If Bard felt the same way, then Thran wouldn’t let anything stand against them or their madness.

Bard pulled Thran up to the top of the rise without effort, his easy strength only adding to his allure, giving Thran more than enough to smile about. Bard caught his expression, and smiled back for just a second before looking away. He nodded at the building ahead of them.

“We’re here.”

The building was a house. It was large, but well proportioned, with a porch around the front and sides. The front door was beautiful with carved panels, and stained glass sidelights and transom. Other panels of stained glass topped the many windows across the front, and the trim around the windows was intricately carved. But it was clear that the house had seen better days, for the white paint was chipped and peeling, and a piece of plywood covered one of the upstairs windows. Dried leaves cluttered the porch, and one of the balusters was broken. Another baluster was gone completely. The roof looked sketchy, and the ground around the house hadn’t been mowed in weeks.

“It doesn’t look like much, I know, but...”
“On the contrary,” Thran shook his head as they walked towards the house. “It has a beauty about it, even now. It must have been unbelievably beautiful at one point.”

“A long time ago,” Bard mused, looking up and down at the house. “Come on. The inside’s in better shape. I’ve got a couple of things to do, then we can eat.”

Bard let them in the front door. A wide entry hall lay before them, with a big room off to each side. The floors were dusty, but they were oak, with bands of lighter and darker wood beautifully inlaid around the edges. The two side rooms were bright with light, even on this mostly overcast day, and one had a figured plaster ceiling, though the central chandelier Thran expected to see was missing. Facing them was a wide wooden staircase with a broad landing a dozen steps up, where the staircase split to either side to go up to the second story. Looking up, Thran saw that there was a third story as well. The balusters were twisted iron, some threaded with clear, lobed glass spheres.


Bard nodded, his face easing into a smile.

Had he worried about what Thran would think? He looked around at the beauty still peeking through the ruin and thought about what he’d read, then turned to Bard.

“This is a great treasure. Your great treasure.”

“You understand, then,” Bard murmured. “I’ll tell you the secret now, not that it’s much of one. Daphne and I bought this when it was an even bigger wreck than it is now. We fixed it up as we had the time. It was coming along well; we actually lived in it for a couple of years. Then...”

“The accident.”

Bard nodded. “It’s paid for, at least, because it was such a wreck when we bought it. There was no baluster. With everything that needed doing, it was frivolous of me to spend so much time on replacing it, but... you see it. I don’t regret it. Moving away, into the city, nearly broke my heart, but I had to, to be near whatever work came my way. I can’t keep up with it now, so it’s going downhill faster than I can fix it, and the property taxes are painful. But... the children played here. I put a lot of work into it. So did Daphne – she did the murals upstairs, and all of the faux finishes. I keep hoping that one day I’ll find a way to get us back here. But I don’t know if that’ll ever happen.”

Thran wanted to offer Bard more than just the comfort of words – a hand on the shoulder, or the presence of another at his back. But this morning would muddle his offer of comfort between friends, so Thran held off. There was something he could offer, though.

“I would like to see the rest, if you would show me.”

Yes, that was the right thing to say, for Bard’s lips curved up. “Come on.”

Bard led Thran through the dining room to the expansive scullery kitchen, where they left their bags. It was only partially restored, but the cabinets had been stripped and repainted white, and the butler’s pantry had a satiny walnut countertop. There were no appliances – maybe Bard had had to sell them at some point – and the floor was scuffed and dull, but the potential was there for epic cooking. A wood-paneled sitting room with a fireplace followed, and off that was a small solarium, which would be magical with the plants Bard talked about keeping there. Off the center hall was a main room with a grand fireplace, though it lacked a mantle now. Upstairs were several bedrooms; the colorful murals of animals, plants, and the planets revealed which room had belonged to each of Bard’s children. The third floor had had no work done on it, so the plaster was in poor shape, the floors
looked worse, and the window trim was hacked and gouged. But the two rooms would make cozy studies or playrooms when restored.

They went down into a dark and dingy cellar, typical of such houses, only long enough for Bard to close the valve to the outside water line, to protect it against freezing. They went back upstairs for Bard to replace a window latch so that the double hung window could be locked rather than remain ajar as it was now. There were a few other minor repairs, then checking that the chimney flues were all closed, and the roof gutters were clear, and the attic hadn’t let in any mice or squirrels. Then they circled the house outside to check the foundation. Looking around, Thran spotted the barn he’d read about, but so far, Bard hadn’t spoken of it, nor did he before they came inside.

“The children and I come out here several times a year – more often in the summer,” Bard explained as they went back to the kitchen to make their lunch. “We clean out the dust, and I fix whatever needs fixing, and we have a picnic like you and I are about to. Tilda doesn’t remember living here, but she still likes being here. So every time I think about selling it, I think about her, and Bain and Sig, too, and then I scrape up the property taxes one way or another.”

Thran knew how Bard had scraped up those property taxes, but as that was part of the tale that Bard hadn’t revealed yet, he held silence.

“I understand why,” he nodded, as Bard spread a towel over the marble top of the kitchen island and unpacked the cooler onto the towel. “It has good bones, and so much light. Restored, it would be a gem. And to hear your children laugh and run through the rooms...”

Bard nodded. “I still remember what that sounded like. And that’s why I can’t sell it.”

Thran winced at that quiet voice. When he came behind Bard and put hands on his shoulders, it was to comfort them both. Bard started, but Thran was rewarded when Bard relaxed, even leaned against his chest. Thran dared to ease him closer, close enough to wrap his arms loosely around Bard’s shoulders, then shut his eyes to savor their closeness. Bard seemed to appreciate it, for his hands came up to grasp Thran’s wrists. How easy it would be to get used to this closeness...

Bard’s hands tightened after some seconds. “Let’s make a plate, and then we’ll eat in style.”

Thran loosed his hands enough to catch Bard’s eyes. “This is a very stylish kitchen, indeed.”

Bard chuckled and unpacked the bag containing the plates, utensils, and napkins. “We’re not going to eat in the kitchen. I’ve got one more room to show you. The folly.”

“The folly? What is a folly?”

“This house,” Bard said, handing Thran a plate, “has a ballroom.”

“A ballroom, as in a room where one holds elaborate parties?” Thran asked, taking out his box of salad, the glasses, and the champagne.

“Very elaborate parties, from what the local historical society said,” Bard grinned, opening the box of chicken and putting the French bread on a plate to slice it. A small block of Jarlsberg cheese went beside it. “Bain would rather hold very elaborate indoor soccer games, which he and Tilda have done a few times. So however you want to characterize it, we’ve got it covered.”

Thran found the corkscrew and deftly uncorked the champagne, offering an amused bow when Bard murmured appreciatively. He poured the two glasses, held one out to Bard, and took the other one himself. He held up his glass. “Lyubov.”
“Cheers.”

They clinked glasses, and sipped. Thran thought this was one of the better champagnes he’d had, but the company likely colored his impression.

“What’s Lyubov mean?” Bard asked, contemplating his glass.

Thran’s grin was sly. “To love. It is usually offered to a beautiful lady, but you are no less worthy of it.”

Bard grimaced as he helped himself to chicken, but it was half of a smile as well as a grimace. “You’re the beauty, Thran. I’m the beast.”

“I will be the judge of that for myself. As you are for yourself.”

When they’d shared out the food, Thran looked expectantly at Bard. “Now. This stylish ballroom.”

Bard offered him a tongue-in-cheek bow, and pointed back towards the front hall. “Right this way.”

With glass and plate in hand, Bard led Thran back through the hall and into the main room, through the door at the far end, and into the ballroom. The ceiling was at least fifteen feet high, with another elaborate plaster ceiling and places for three chandeliers. A wooden floor laid in an intricate herringbone pattern was dusty, but intact. A huge fireplace flanked by two windows stood at the far end; bowed windows stretched across the near end, revealing the dead and tangled remains of an overgrown flower bed outside. Incongruously, an iron garden bench, pair of chairs, and table sat opposite the fireplace, which was where he and Bard arranged their plates and glasses. Bard took one of the chairs, but Thran straightened to survey the ballroom again. He could easily visualize a scene from Anna Karenina in this airy room, with a pianist at a grand piano, or a string quartet, playing opposite the fireplace for elegantly dressed dancers...

Or for a troupe of ballet dancers as they practiced their grand jetés and pliés...

That was not his vision to have.

Before the thought was complete, he found himself aloft in one of those grand jetés, if a gentle one in deference to his healing ankle, and his lack of warmup. The split was easy, and he did a half twist in midair so that he could launch and land on his right leg.

“You make that look so easy,” Bard marveled, as Thran landed without too much of a clunk, even given his hiking boots. “Gods, Thran. You are an angel. I can see your wings.”

Thran put his hand to his heart and bowed. “That is the highest compliment. Thank you.”

He came to sit by Bard and take up his plate, but Bard considered him with such awe that he reached forward to stroke that dark hair.

“Do not stare, gentle saint. Or I shall be forced to kiss you again.”

Bard blinked. “I’m sorry.”

Thran sipped his champagne. “Do not be. It would be a pleasure to kiss you again. I resist the urge only to respect your sensibilities.”

Bard swallowed, then a smile began, but just as quickly, it faded. He ducked his head to his plate and concentrated on his lunch. Something clearly tugged at him, but Thran was patient. The afternoon
was not over, so perhaps Bard would unburden himself without prodding before they returned to the city. He ate his lunch quietly, appreciating the beautiful setting and the welcome company.

They took their time, talking quietly of less charged subjects, until the angle of the sun told them that it was time to leave. There was little other than the half bottle of champagne to pack back in the cooler and bags, and Thran was sorry when Bard locked the door behind them, dropped the key in his coat pocket, and headed back towards the truck. Thran, though, didn’t follow.

“When will you tell me the rest?” he asked softly, putting his bag on the porch.

Bard looked back at him with a frown. “What rest?”

Thran nodded towards the barn behind the house. “That rest.”

Bard stilled, as if he’d felt a trap fall over him. Thran went to him quickly, stroking his arm. “Please. It is all right.”

“You know what’s in the barn?”

Thran nodded. “The Internet knows many things. That you are not merely a tradesman welder, for example. You are an artist, as your wife was, but in metal rather than oils. I saw pictures of your work – it is quite good. I would like to see some of it in person, if you would show me. Please.”

Bard’s jaw tightened. “I’ve had to sell most of them.”

“To support your children.”

He nodded. “And pay the property taxes.”

“Tell me.”

With a sigh, Bard put down the cooler and his bag of tools beside Thran’s bag on the porch. He looked at his boots, then towards the barn, his posture hunched. “I told you that Daphne had a good head for business. Thank the gods for that, because I don’t. We bought this house not just because it was beautiful. There was an artist’s colony forming here, and she was hired to manage a lot of it. We were doing well enough with her income as the colony manager and a rep for several of the artists, me included, and the money my pieces brought in. I worked on my commissions, and did most of the childcare. But after Daphne died... everything fell apart. The colony didn’t get someone as good to replace her, the artists lost our rep, and after a year or so I had to move to the city to find work. It was a scramble to find childcare – not just warehousing, you understand, but good childcare. Then to find work around their schedule... I won’t lie, Thran. We live hand to mouth. I’m not with my children as much as I want because I work two jobs to keep a roof over us and food on the table. At least I don’t have to worry about the state stepping in, now that Sigrid’s sixteen and Bain’s thirteen. Tilda’s just ten, but as long as she’s with someone older than twelve, it’s legal, so either Sigrid or Bain can step in if I get caught late somewhere.”

“But it is a constant worry.”

Bard swallowed hard. “The understatement of the year. So far, everything’s hanging together. But... Sigrid will want to go to college in two years, and I can’t afford it. I have no health insurance. Sometimes I’ve had to work scab jobs because I need the money, and if the union finds out, I could lose a lot of work. Everything’s balanced on the edge of a knife. It can fall apart at any second. If I get hurt at work, or the union finds out, or one of the children gets sick....” He looked nervously at Thran. “Do you understand why I’m so leery about... us?”
“No.”

Bard laughed, a bitter sound, and looked away again. “You’re not the only one who knows how to use the Internet. Here’s what I found out about a certain Thran Oropherson. You’re not just some ballet dancer – you’re one of the best dancers working today. You’re sought after all over the world. That dance with the knives you told Bain about? You didn’t merely learn it. It was commissioned just for you. It’s your signature piece. Your sprained ligaments? You got them when two muggers with knives tried to rob you and another dancer. You gave one a broken leg and the other a punctured lung with his own knife, and the ballerina you were with wasn’t touched. Maybe your dance company doesn’t think enough of you saving one of their ballerinas and yourself to hold your job for you, but half a dozen other ones are jockeying to offer you another one at a salary I can hardly imagine. Unless you’re a fool with your money, which judging by your apartment contents, you aren’t, you’re already worth millions, and you’re likely to make a few more. So that makes me look like a poor starving artist trying to snare a sugar daddy. I won't go there. Not even for my children.”

Thran put his hands in his coat pockets and looked down at his boots, then looked askance at Bard. “If you prefer, you could be the boy toy of a frivolous artiste.”

Bard’s eyes snapped to his, so startled that Thran laughed openly. “Ah. Outrage. That is a good sign.”

Bard half opened his mouth to curse, but clamped it shut and turned away. Thran sobered, then came slowly to Bard’s back.

“I tease only. But... I think perhaps you need to learn more about how to surf the Internet.”

“Why?” Bard said shortly.

“Because it also should have told you that I am something of a recluse. I dance, and do little else. I do not party, as many dancers do. I do not engage in... liaisons. I do not live in the insulated world of the primo, but apart, in a building that is close to the studio and the market and nothing else, because I have no use for most of the world outside of the dance, other than the food that allows me to dance. If someone tries to ingratiate himself, they find that I am just the Prince of Ice I am often called. Neither am I Rudi Nureyev, who mechanically had too much sex merely to have it. I have not had a lover since before Vileria died, seven years ago. I understand that this makes me an oddity. I understand that your worry only confirms that you are a decent man. So... if you put aside money, could you consider that we might be two artists who fall in love?”

Bard swallowed convulsively. “We’ve known each other less than two weeks!”

“Bard.” Thran turned his companion around to face him, and tapped his chest. “What is in here?” When Bard swallowed hard, Thran nodded. “I feel it, too. It is full of fear, sometimes. But also full of excitement.”

But Bard looked no easier. He shook Thran by the shoulders gently, as if wondering if he were real.

“It’s more than that. You’re someone I could drown in, Thran. Without a second look back. But I can’t. Neither can you.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve got children.”

That stopped Thran as nothing else could have. Legolas. Of course. How could he have forgotten,
no matter how much Bard drew him?

“Oh, gods,” Thran flinched. “My son. For the first time in years, I did not think of him. Why did I not?”

Now it was Bard’s turn to jostle Thran in commiseration. “You just had a reason to want something else for the first time in a long time. You would’ve remembered him in a minute or two.”

Thran grimaced. “I am still ashamed of myself.”

“Give yourself a break. You have to let down every now and again.”

A chuckle. “If nothing else convinces you that there is something between us, then this should. You made me forget about Legolas for an entire minute.”

Finally, Bard lost the hunted look in his eyes, and he shrugged. “If all you managed was to forget him for a full sixty seconds, then he’s in good shape, and so are you.”

“What about our children concerns you?”

“Legolas isn’t here. He doesn’t see you often, but when he does, he’s used to having you all to himself. He may not like his father having a... companion. He may not like my children, or me. Assuming we find out that what’s sparked between us isn’t just a flash in the pan, we owe all of our children a chance to get used to it. Does Legolas come home for the holidays at all?”

Thran nodded. “He does. We will have a month together, starting in two weeks.”

“When he comes home, then, you do all the things with him that you usually do. After a week or so, maybe we meet at the park, or something easy. Maybe we have supper together. But mostly you have to remind him that you love him, and you’re there for him, first and foremost.”

Thran nodded. “You are a wise saint, as well as a beautiful one.”

Bard laughed.

“So... please, would you show me the art you have made?”

Bard nodded. “I will.”

They left their bags on the porch. At the barn door, Bard fished out another key, opened the padlock, and slid the wide door open, flooding the interior with the pale overcast light. The space was mostly empty, for only a few pieces remained out of the many Thran had seen on the Internet. There seemed to be the machinery of a workshop in the back, but the front housed several metal sculptures. He recognized a graceful stylized antelope with curving horns from pictures he’d seen on the Internet, and a tall pillar of intertwined fish. Behind them was a pine tree that seemed to blow and tremble on the breeze, for all that it was made of bronze. A more modern piece was a hollow sphere made of intertwined rings, undulating in shades of copper and purple and blue. Next to it was a piece made of humble black iron, an intricate knot of thin rods with a patina that varied between the blackest black and the rustiest red. Despite the weighty material, all of them had a quality of lightness and nimble rhythm.

“I have never seen hard metal look so fluid or so light. So graceful. So beautiful.”

Bard nodded in appreciation. “These are the ones I’d hoped to keep for myself. It’d kill me to sell any of them, but... we’ll see how things go.”
“If you have to sell any of them, offer them to me first. What is the appropriate idiom? ‘I am good for the money.’ ”

Laughing, Bard brushed a fleck of grass off the iron knot. “I’ll do that. At least I know they’d go to someone who saw the magic I tried to put in them. Just... don’t get your hopes up yet. Everything may hold together a while longer.”

“I hope so.”

Bard locked his treasures in the barn again, and they walked together back towards the house. They sat on the porch steps, hip-to-hip and shoulder-to-shoulder.

“Are there any more secrets to be revealed?” Thran asked with a smile, leaning into Bard.

“I used to be a corporate spy,” Bard deadpanned, wrapping an arm around Thran’s waist. “All that illicit welding I did? It was really to install listening devices in half a dozen stockbroker houses to overhear all the insider trading.”

“Ah,” Thran deadpanned back, his hand wrapped around Bard’s thigh. “I suppose I must confess that I was a trained assassin, then. My targets were all hated ballet critics.”

“I bet you had no end of work, then,” Bard grinned.

“I did not. So, if we have revealed all our secrets, then we must negotiate terms.”

“Terms? Of what?”

“To court. For I intend to. We have our children to respect, of course. We will want to reassure each other that neither of us carries HIV, not that I do, nor that I think you do, but it is a courtesy we should grant each other. We will not be flagrant about our affections in front of the children because that is disrespectful, or in public, because that is crass. We need time to learn about each other before we cloud it with sex, delirious though that sex would be, for it is better to be friends first and then lovers. If and when we decide that ours is not an infatuation that passes, we must discuss what follows, and whether a prenuptial agreement is called for. All of that will come. But first, I want to know whether you consider this spot on which we stand a public place or a private one.”

Bard had started laughing halfway through Thran’s recitation. “You’re serious? You are. Gods, Thran – do I what? Is this a public or... why?”

“Answer me first.”

Bard shrugged. “This is still my porch, so I guess it’s private.”

“Good. Then I intend to kiss you again, because we are in private. As cold as it is, we will not get ourselves into further trouble, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Bard looked away, shaking his head, still laughing. When he looked back at Thran, though, his eyes softened, and he reached out to stroke the end of Thran’s long white braid. “You might, though. What if I offered to unlock the door and ask you back inside?”

“I would accept,” Thran breathed, turning Bard’s face towards his to stroke his hair. “I would bring the rest of the champagne with us to celebrate.”

“I wouldn’t need any champagne,” Bard shook his head. He leaned into Thran to brush a kiss on his lips. “I’d have an angel in my arms, and no champagne could top that.”
Thran slipped fingers into Bard’s coat pocket, fished out the house key, and held it out. Bard eyed him until Thran jingled the key. When Bard finally took it and got up to unlock the door, Thran crowded hard behind him. He had Bard’s shoulders in his hands before they were fully inside, but it was Bard who kicked the door shut and pressed Thran against it. Widening his stance to lessen his height, Thran pulled Bard’s hips hard against his, holding him there. Bard leaned into him, stripping off his coat, then grooping to unbutton Thran’s to press them chest-to-chest. His elbows rested against the door at Thran’s shoulders, so he could twine his hands in Thran’s hair as they kissed. Thran fell into their embrace without resistance, rubbing himself against Bard, biting those seeking lips, nipping that throat, kissing that hollow at the base of his throat. He found the back of Bard’s jeans, pulled the hem of his Henley free, and slid his hands under it and up Bard’s back, around his ribs. When he found Bard’s nipples, already hard, he stroked them with his thumbs and bit Bard’s lower lip, tearing a moan from his lover.

“Gods, Thran!” Bard gasped. “Gods, you greedy bastard –”

Thran grinned as Bard pushed himself away and tried to master himself. Had he teased enough to send Bard over the edge? No, Bard wrestled his arousal down, if reluctantly. Thran stayed leaning against the door, his legs still wide. He rubbed his hands against his thighs as he appreciated the turmoil before him, as well as what raged inside him.

“I assure you, you have given me nothing to worry about yet,” he teased, panting. “So far, everything has been delicious.”

Bard brushed another kiss on Thran’s lips, a kiss that Thran met without resistance, without trying to tease Bard into more. “So far, you have been no angel, and all devil.”

“I enjoy both roles. But that is enough of both for today, perhaps.”

“It’s not nearly enough. But it’s all I can handle.”

Thran nodded. “Then kiss me once more, to last me until the next one.”

This kiss was slow and lingering, less frantic passion than affection. When it was over, Thran eased away from the door to pick up Bard’s coat. His lover was shoving the tail of his Henley back into his jeans, so Thran held out the coat for Bard to slip on. Once outside, Thran rebuttoned his coat while Bard locked the door, then they carried the bags back to the truck, and climbed in for the drive home.

They were silent most of the way, but it was a comfortable silence, occasionally punctuated when a hand strayed to touch a thigh, or a smile passed between them. When they arrived back in the city, it was almost dark. Bard parked across the street from their building, and they walked up to Thran’s apartment with their silence still intact. At the door, Thran took Bard’s face in his hands and pressed a kiss on his lips.

“Today was perfect.”

Bard nestled Thran’s hips against his. This time, he was the one who widened his stance to ease Thran closer. “I can’t even tell you what today meant. So I won’t try.”

”Tell me that you want to us to spend more time together as much as I do.”

“I do.”

“Then we will.”

Bard kissed him again, and went downstairs without a look back.
Thran let himself into his apartment. He dropped his bag by the door, then his coat, and sat in the middle of the sofa. He stretched his legs out before him and leaned his head on the back of the sofa.

How would he survive until they were together again?
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The saint has dared to fly to the heights, but the price for those few moments of ecstasy is high - so high that not even the solace of an angel can ease the resulting despair.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

suka = bitch (Russian)
blyad = motherfucker (Russian)

Bard didn’t look back at Thran when he went down the stairs. He was afraid that if he looked back, the angel who had upended his life would be gone, vanished into the same oblivion that had claimed everything else he’d hoped for in the past decade. He didn’t think he could bear to regard the door to Apartment 5B closed and silent, without a tall, graceful, beautiful angel standing before it with beckoning eyes, smiling lips, and a body that drew Bard like nothing had in years. Better to treasure the warmth that still lingered on his lips than look back and find the vision had faded before the warmth of his kiss did.

When he got to Apartment 2A, he almost didn’t want to go in, not because his children were there, but because the weight of the rest of his life was.

It was late. Sigrid and Bain would be hungry.

He went inside.

The clock on the bookshelf that held his tools read 5:20 p.m. It wasn’t as late as he thought. The overcast sky had made him think it was later. Sigrid looked up from the dining table, still in front of her computer, still in the middle of papers and books.

“Da?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

“Hi, sweetness. How’s the paper?”

The smile on her face was relieved. “I finally got it worked out. I’ve actually got a better premise now than I did originally, so I’m happy, even though it was a lot of work. I think I’ll get a better grade.”

Bard finished stowing his tools. He hung up his coat, left his boots by the door, and came to press a kiss on the top of his daughter’s head. “That’s my girl. I had no doubt that you’d sort it out. Where’s Bain?”

Sigrid straightened a stack of her papers. “He and his mates couldn’t get the early tickets to the film, but they got ones for the last matinee. He texted me first to find out if it was okay. I said yes, so I
“That’s fine. Thanks for taking care of that. Wonder if he’ll be hungry when he gets home, or did he blow the last of his allowance on popcorn?”

“He’s a teen-ager, Da,” was Sigrid’s dismissal. “He’ll be ravenous.”

Bard chuckled as he went into the kitchen. “You’re right. Tilda didn’t call?”

“She texted to say that the hayride was fun and that a goat wanted to stick its nose in her pockets, but that’s it.”

“So you’ll get the room to yourself tonight. You can stay up all night reading if you want.”

Sigrid tsked. “I’ve done nothing but stare at the printed word all day. Maybe I’ll watch a DVD or something, unless there’s something on you want to see.”

“Help yourself. No hockey or soccer on tonight. Steffen didn’t call with anything, did he?”

“For once,” Sigrid sniffed.

Bard should’ve reminded her about the reduced rent, but after today he was more inclined to mind how Steffen took advantage, so he didn’t say anything.

“Was everything all right at the house?”

Bard looked in the fridge, found the ground beef, and put it on the counter by the stove. “Replaced the broken window lock, shut off the water, cleaned the gutters, refastened the squirrel baffles in the attic, and checked everything over. There’s still that broken window upstairs. I forgot to get the glass to replace it.”

“How was lunch?”

“Fine. Hamburgers or bean skillet?”

“Fine?” Just ‘fine?’”

Bard looked out of the kitchen door at her. “It was chicken sandwiches, clementines, and fig bars. They were all fine.”

“Da!” Sigrid glared back in exasperation. “How was Thran?”

“He brought salad. That was fine, too.”

“What’d he do, hold the torch?”

“And a fine job he did of it. Held the ladder when I checked the gutters, too. Pretty handy for a ballet dancer.”

“And?”

“And the question’s still open – hamburgers, or bean skillet.”

“Hamburgers. Now what about you and Thran?”

Bard stuck his head out of the kitchen door again, a can of beans in his hand. “Does this mean that I
“get to ask you about your dates from now on?”

“Oh, so it was a date. Did you show him the barn?”

A long silence stretched, long enough that Sigrid got up and came into the kitchen. “Da?”

Bard swallowed. “It was hard to see the house, Sig, that’s all. A lot needs fixing.”

Sigrid laid her hand on Bard’s forearm. “I’m sorry, Da.”

He gave her a smile. “Eh, I couldn’t have done most of it today, anyway. Too cold. Better to start on that in the spring.”

Sigrid mustered a smile for him, took the can of beans, and moved around him to get the can opener and saucepan. It occurred that he wasn’t the only one dissembling. He pretended that the spring would find him with the wherewithal to make the repairs, and his daughter pretended to believe him.

Not being able to stop the house from decaying wouldn’t have bothered him so much if he hadn’t spent the afternoon with an angel.

Sigrid seemed to sense his melancholy, for she didn’t ask about his afternoon again. Instead, they talked about Sigrid’s upcoming exams, what to get Tilda for Christmas (where would he find the money for much?), and whether Bain would eat two or three hamburgers for supper. At five minutes before six, when Bain clattered in smelling like the outside and teen-aged sweat, the conversation was more lighthearted. Supper was duly cooked, eaten, and cleaned up.

Bain never asked about the house.

After the children went to bed, Bard sat on the sofa, relieved to be alone, no longer required to keep a mask over his feelings. At least now he could think about kissing an angel, having him in his hands, feeling the urgency that strained against him...

Gods. It was painful.

Madness was always painful, but this was too painful to bear. All he wanted was to be three flights above his dump of an apartment, above his constant worry of three children, two jobs, only one of him, and no money –

His mobile buzzed. Steffen. The heat was off in 7A.

Sigrid was still awake, so he told her where he was going. He put on his boots, got his tools, climbed the stairs, and endured Lotho and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins giving him an earful about how the heat had been off since noon and how poorly maintained the heating system was. Theirs was one of the double-size apartments that took up the whole floor, and it was so crowded that it took half an hour just to clear enough room for him to reach the radiator valves. His mobile buzzed before he was through. Apartment 8A had the same heating issue, plus a clogged kitchen sink. So he went from 7A upstairs where the Ur brothers, Bom and Bo, were in the middle of some arcane holiday cooking ritual. They were decent sorts, if eccentric, and Bom was enormously fat. Bard bled the radiators, then fished out a wad of potato and apple peelings and from the sink trap. He had a hellacious time trying to get the sink trap reconnected, but finally, after an hour, he convinced the PVC pipes to align well enough for the epoxy to hold. The brothers were very appreciative, unlike the Sackville-Baggins, and pressed a couple of raisin cookies on him before he left.

His mobile buzzed again. Heat, 8B.
If he wasn’t already suspicious about the rash of radiators that needed bleeding, Mr. Dori confirmed it. He was a fussy hairdresser, but another decent sort. At least he left Bard alone to do what was needed, so blessedly it took only a few minutes. The poor man was most appreciative as he pulled the blanket wrapped around his shoulders closer.

“It’s been off since noon. I called, but given how late you are, I imagine a lot of people have had the same problem. I’m sorry you’ve had to work on it so late.”

Steffen had known about the problems, then, and hadn’t done anything about them himself. He’d waited until he could get Bard to do it.

His mobile buzzed. Another clogged garbage disposal. Was half the building up after midnight cooking like the Ur brothers? This one was in 9A.

It wasn’t a clogged garbage disposal. It was a toilet, which had clogged hours ago, and the owner was getting desperate. By the time Bard had snaked it clear and cleaned up the mess, it was nearly two a.m., and he stank like the nearest water treatment plant. He came out of the apartment and into the stairwell feeling numb.

He carried his bag of tools down the stairs.

When he reached the fifth floor landing, he paused by the door to Apartment 5B.

He reeked of fermenting apple peelings, something gamy – with the Ur brothers, there was no telling what the gamy stuff was – PVC epoxy, and sewage. His clothes were much the worse for the wear, and he was exhausted.

He swallowed.

Which was worse – the mad desire for an angel, or knowing the angel was out of reach? Neither the angel’s words nor his ecstatic temptations changed a brutal truth.

A tall, elegant, pale creature of the air had no place venturing into the dregs of the building.

He shut his eyes.

He took his bag of tools and went back to the dregs of the building.

* * *

At length, Thran unlaced his hiking boots and toed them off his feet. He slipped off his coat, then got up to wipe the mud off his boots and put them in the closet. He hung up his coat. He recorked the champagne and put the bottle in the refrigerator. He washed the empty salad container and the champagne glasses and put them away. He put his muddy jeans in the hamper for launderers to pick up on Monday, and dressed in loose sweats to do his PT exercises. It felt good to stretch, even if gingerly. A hot shower followed, then a light supper of chicken – boiled, but with some of the spices Bard had told him about – and broccoli.

Then he thought.

A once-beautiful house was in his thoughts, and so was the man who owned it, but they were the
roots of much more. He opened his laptop, and found the articles he’d read a week ago about Bard Bowman, artist in metal. He read new ones about Greenwood Dale by the Lake, the artists’ colony that had begun there, and what had happened since. One article led to another, and another, and another. Before long, Thran had a list of things he wanted to discuss with his agent about his current contract. He had a similar list of questions for several other people, including his banker.

A familiar step on the outside stair brought Thran out of his dispassionate reverie with a jolt. Thran glanced at the clock by his chair. Nearly midnight. No matter – time was immaterial when it came to Bard knocking on his door. Thran sprang out of his chair to reach the door –

The steps continued upstairs. Thran winced. Bard had been called out to see to something – another cold radiator, perhaps. He settled back on the sofa with his computer, keeping one ear cocked for the sound of Bard coming back downstairs. But more than an hour passed, then nearly another. He’d heard boots on the stairs going upstairs, then again, and again. Eventually he pieced together what was going on – either a rash of outages, breakages, or clogs had seen fit to plague the building all at once...

Or the landlord had left the days’ repairs to the night super, when the residents would be desperate, and just as furious as Thran had been when he’d confronted Bard about his cold radiators.

“Suka,” he growled under his breath, and savagely added another line to his growing list. “Suka, blyad!”

Thran stayed on the sofa, listening for those boots to come back downstairs. At nearly two a.m., the sound came, but by the time Thran woke and registered it, Bard had passed his floor. Thran eased his door open to look down the stairwell. The door to 2A had just closed. At least Bard was going into his apartment, rather than having to make another call.

Thran shut his door. Where was his mobile? He called up Bard’s number to send him a text.

What should he say? What could he say? That he loved Bard? That he was sorry he’d been called to work so late? He gulped – he had to send something quickly or not at all, before Bard fell into much deserved sleep.

*I am beside you wherever and whenever you need me – Thran.*

* * *

Bard’s mobile buzzed yet again. It was all he could do not to swear. He was desperately tired, filthy, and depressed. He almost didn’t pull his mobile out. If Steffen would just leave him alone until the morning, just until the morning, he’d take care of all the things Steffen couldn’t be bothered to do –

*I am beside you wherever and whenever you need me – Thran.*

Bard’s throat closed.

He set down his tools, got a quick shower, and found his sleep pants and tee. He crawled into bed and pulled up the quilt.

He looked at the text again.
He didn’t reply.

* * *

Thran slipped into bed with his mobile in his hand. But it remained silent.

He wouldn’t blame Bard for turning his mobile off – or throwing it against a wall, for that matter. Or maybe Bard didn’t have texting capabilities? No, he’d seen Bard scroll through it at the house when they’d come in for lunch, checking that his children hadn’t left him a message. So maybe Bard had merely turned off his phone.

He hoped nothing else had happened.

He felt it in his bones. Something had.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

While the saint despairs, the angel marshals his forces. When the moment comes to strike, though, the angel proves that a denizen of heaven can be a real badass.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

blyad = motherfucker (Russian)
сука бляд = motherfucking bitch, more or less (Russian)
лобов моя = my love (Russian)

“– quiet, Bain! Da was up until after two last night.”

“That rat Steffen?”

“Who else?”

Bain muttered under his breath. “What was his excuse this time?”

“Da didn’t say,” Sigrid said. “Just got his stuff and went.”

“Just like he always does. That’s why that fat bastard keeps doing it. He knows Da can’t say no.”

“Even if he could, he wouldn’t.”

“Maybe he ought to.”

“You know why he doesn’t. Trying to take care of us.”

“And that house.”

“He loves that house,” Sigrid said sharply. “I love it, too.”

Bain made conciliatory noises. It sounded and smelled like he was making toast. “He say anything about going out there yesterday?”

“Said he fixed a lot of things, but not much else. He was kind of down.”

“Like there’s a lot to look forward to out there.”

“He’s doing the best he can, Bain. What else do you want him to do?”

“I don’t know, Sig. I don’t know.”
Conversation lapsed. After a few minutes, Bain got up to wash his dishes, then tiptoed past Bard’s alcove to disappear into the bathroom. Bard turned over and sat up, rubbing his eyes, pretending he’d just roused. He pulled on the clean tee he’d put by the bed last night, then picked up his mobile to check the time.

_I am beside you wherever and whenever you need me – Thran._

He’d left Thran’s text on the screen last night. Swallowing, he thought about deleting it, but something kept him from doing so. Maybe he couldn’t be with an angel, but at least he had something tangible to remind him that he’d flirted with one.

Tangible – that was a laugh. The arrangement of pixels on a screen was about as tangible as thinking he had anything to offer anyone. He stabbed a finger to banish the text.

He didn’t delete it, though.

It was near nine, so he got up, murmured good morning to Bain as they passed between the living room and the bathroom, and he took care of necessities. At least he had a clean pair of jeans to put on so he didn’t have to don yesterday’s filthy pants. Sigrid was still in the kitchen, looking over her paper while she ate her usual peanut butter toast.

“Morning, Sig. Does the paper still make sense?”

She grinned. “Yeah, thank the gods. It really does. Ms. Blanca had better like it. It’s amazing how you have an idea, then once you start writing, the idea changes, and you come up with something cooler than you thought you would. So keep your fingers crossed that Ms. Blanca thinks so, too.”

Bard held up both hands, all fingers crossed, drawing Sigrid’s laughter. “So what’re your plans today?”

“Bain and I are doing our Christmas shopping. You can’t come.”

Bard gave his daughter a mock sad face. “Not being able to go to a hot warehouse full of cranky people fighting over some bit of overpriced something that no one can use? I was so looking forward to it.”

“Maybe you ought to come,” Bain offered as he came from his room, arming his way into a clean flannel shirt. “Then Steffen can’t palm any more of his stuff on you this morning.”

“He’d just do what he did yesterday,” Sigrid said cynically. “Just wait until everyone’s furious and it’s too late for anyone but Da to fix it.”

His children were right, but Bard hated to see and hear so much bitterness from them. He opened his mouth to remind them about the rent, but Sigrid turned a sharp gaze on him.

“I remember about the rent, Da. But honestly, he’s getting the bargain, not you. He doesn’t pay you, and he doesn’t work, either. You do your job and his for nothing – in fact, you still pay some rent to him, so that’s worse than slavery.”

Bain made noises of agreement, but he looked embarrassed.

Bard swallowed. “It’s what gets us by right now. What I want you both to remember is how angry you feel about it. Then make yourself a promise that you won’t ever act like Steffen.”

Bain snorted. “Like I’d ever want to.”
Sigrid’s response was more measured. Still, the way her lips thinned and she crossed her arms over her chest were just how her mother would have reacted. “Honestly, Da. You’re a saint to put up with the way Steffen treats you.”

Someone else had called him a saint, someone Bard couldn’t bear to think about. “He’s not going to think I’m a saint this morning,” he managed to say.

“What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to spend the morning bleeding the rest of the radiators I didn’t do last night, then I’m going to send Steffen the bill for the lot. Then I’m going to hope that bleeding the rest keeps me from having to do it after midnight tonight.”

“You ought to come with us to the mall, Da,” Bain coaxed.

“Tilda’s due home at eleven, and she’ll be exhausted. You two head to the mall, and the apartment will be quiet for her to sleep. I might do a little of that, myself.”

Bain and Sigrid exchanged inquiring glances, then nodded. “All right, Da. You want us to bring you anything?”

_A million dollars_, Bard thought, but he didn’t say it. “I’m good.”

“What about the market? Do we need anything?” Sigrid asked.

Bard looked in the fridge. Nothing was out for tonight’s supper, so he looked in the freezer. There were still two whole chickens from the bulk package he’d gotten on sale at the discount house, so he took one out and put it in a bowl of cold water on the counter to thaw. “Chicken for supper, with...” he looked back in the fridge, “rice and broccoli. There’s still stuff for your school lunches tomorrow, so we’re good for the market until Tuesday.”

Broccoli. It was the last from the huge bag Thran had brought for Thanksgiving.

He had nothing to offer that angel of light. Nothing.

“Make it with the rosemary, please?” Sigrid asked.

Bard nodded impassively. “Rosemary it is.”

Sigrid stood up. “Then we’ll head out, then. Good luck with the radiators.”

Bard waved a hand. “I’ll tackle that early. I’ll bet our little doll comes home with a roaring case of the sugar highs and the no-sleep cranks. She’ll crash and burn as soon as she hits the door.”

His children laughed in commiseration. “Just like we did when we were ten,” Bain had the honesty to admit with a sheepish grin. “We’re off, then.”

“And you’re leaving, too,” he gave his usual exit line, walking them to the door. "Come home safe."

"We will, Da."

After a hug from them both, he shut the door behind them, and then confronted the silence of the empty apartment.

_Don’t think of anything. Just don’t._
He made himself some ramen noodles, which saved the oatmeal and toast for the children. Then he dressed, got his bag of tools, and started at the bottom of the building, knocking on doors to see to the radiators. Most tenants were home, and glad to see him. He made steady progress, finishing the first six floors before eleven when Tilda was due home.

He didn’t look at the door to Apartment 5B when he went up the stairs.

At eleven, he was down in his apartment to wait for Tilda. She came in as excited and overtired as he expected, and she crashed with Mr. Bun as soon as she finished brushing her teeth. Bard saw her solidly asleep, then risked heading back upstairs to finish the radiators of the last three floors of the building.

Steffen lived in the so-called penthouse on the tenth floor. He could see to his own damned radiators.

He went back downstairs to watch over Tilda. The chicken was thawed, so he drained off the water and put the bowl in the fridge. He gathered up the laundry hamper with his filthy jeans, found an open washer in the basement, threw everything in, then went upstairs for the thirty minutes it’d take for the clothes to cycle through. He got everything in the dryer, then made himself more ramen for lunch. Down to empty the dryer, up to fold the clothes, and then finally he could sit on the sofa for a few minutes.

When he looked at his hand, his mobile was in it.

*I am beside you wherever and whenever you need me – Thran.*

How could he reply to that?

*I’m fine.*

*Thank you, no.*

*Go away; I have nothing to offer you.*

*You’re everything I wanted, and I know I can’t have you.*

*Gods, just cut me a break.*

The last one was closest to the truth, but it wouldn’t help to send it to Thran. The ones who could help had never answered.

That left him with nothing to say to an angel.

* * *

Thran slept poorly all night. When he gave up trying to sleep, it was only seven o’clock in the morning. He dressed warmly for his morning rituals of yoga and barre, and proceeded methodically through both without ever feeling the calm centeredness that they usually brought him. He did his PT exercises. He showered and dressed, then had his breakfast.

Throughout breakfast, boots thumped up and down the stairs, boots that didn’t stop on the fifth floor.

He retrieved his mobile from under his bed pillow where he’d cached it last night, and tapped a
familiar number. When the line connected, a gruff voice answered.

“Mr. Nori, please. Thran Oropherson.”

The voice didn’t reply, but Thran was used to that. In time, another gruff voice came over the line.

“I have work for you, Mr. Nori. Several items. The first concerns a city landlord, Mr. Steffen Masters...”

Thran told Mr. Nori what he wanted him to pursue for each item, which the ever-efficient Mr. Nori duly noted. He provided the additional information that Mr. Nori needed to begin his inquiries, discussed contingencies on a few of the items, then hung up.

Thran went to his laptop, and perused his accounts to further refine the lists he’d made last night.

He went back to the barre. There was nothing else to do until tomorrow, when his banker would be in his office, and other businesses would be open to make more inquiries. His mobile stayed maddeningly silent - no chirp signaled a text or call from Bard - and so did the stairway outside his door - no familiar footfall echoed on the stair. He wouldn’t press, no matter how much he wanted to know what had happened. Bard was already harried enough without Thran adding to his burdens.

He thought of Saint Sebastian. Like the martyr, his saint in Apartment 2A suffered from so many arrows. He hoped Mr. Nori could complete his inquiries before the next one struck Bard’s heart.

He hoped that hadn’t already happened.

The day dragged on. He heard nothing from Bard. On Monday, the weather was sunny, so he assumed that Bard was on site welding. He called his banker and had a lengthy discussion. He did not call Mr. Nori. That individual would call when he had something worth saying. He went to PT, then his doctor, who cleared him to resume class, so he spent the afternoon at the school, doing little other than the basics, but just to move again was a great relief, and the need to pay attention to the dance master and the other students kept him from thinking about Bard. After class, he had a long discussion with another pair of dancers who passed along some interesting gossip.

Tuesday. More of the same.

Wednesday. Entirely too much more of the same.

Thursday. Mr. Nori called to relate several things, but Bard still had not surfaced. Thran was so distressed that at eleven that night, he texted Bard again.

I am not an angel without my wings. Please text me. Thran.

There was no answer.

After a restless night, Friday dawned to reveal the city as a miserably cold and rainy mess. Bard would not be welding today. The public schools, however, would still be in session. Since Tuesday morning, Thran had watched Tilda’s bus roar down the street, stop to pick up the little girl and several other children, and then roar away. When the bus had rumbled out of sight, Bard had shouldered his bag of tools, gotten in his truck, and driven off. Today, though, because of the weather, once Tilda got on the bus, Bard would not drive off to work. He’d come back to the apartment.

Thran was already dressed and standing by the window, watching for Tilda’s bus. When it trundled into view, Thran dashed down five flights of stairs and out of the apartment building’s front door. He
stuttered to a stop, waiting until the children were on the bus and the bus pulled away. As the parents scattered, Thran scanned for Bard. Oh, gods, yes! There he was - he turned, and slowly paced towards the apartment building, eyes downcast, oblivious to the weather. Thran scrambled down the stairs and sprinted through the rain and down the sidewalk. He was nimble and swift enough to be right in front of Bard before the man looked up. At Thran's unexpected appearance, Bard flinched badly, and his eyes went wide with shock.

“Tell me what happened,” Thran pleaded softly. “Please, do not do this to me any more. Just tell me what happened. Did I hurt you?”


“You do not have to lie. I know something happened. I have been so worried about you.”

Bard looked away, swallowing so hard that Thran’s throat hurt in sympathy. “Reality happened. That’s all. Saturday was... I thought... oh, gods, Thran.”

“Saturday was wonderful, until that suka blyad landlord treated you like a slave. I heard you labor up and down the floors until two in the morning. Whatever he had you do, it was terrible, because it let him steal you from me, and me from you. I won’t let him do that.”

“There was nothing for him to steal.” Bard finally met Thran’s eyes, but his expression was bleak as he spread his arms. “Look at me, Thran – I have nothing to offer you. I didn’t before Saturday, and I still don’t.”

Hissing, Thran grabbed Bard’s upper arms and gave him a rough shake. “Don’t you dare let that fat blyad make you believe such a fucking lie! Don’t you dare!”

Bard’s eyebrows went up, and he glanced at Thran’s hands clutching his arms, and unaccountably a pale smile touched his lips. “Huh. The angel curses. He’s got a pretty strong grip for a ballet dancer, too.”

“Don’t make me show you how I put two muggers in hospital, you bastard,” Thran spat. “Now, it rains like a mother, and you know I am not at my best when I am cold and wet. So do you want to come to my apartment, or do you want me to come to yours?”

Bard looked down again for long enough that Thran tsked in exasperation and gave him another shake. “Hell, Bard! I do not get any warmer or dryer. So. Mine, or yours?”

Bard sighed, but met Thran’s eyes with a little more warmth. “Some Earl Grey would taste good right now.”

“Mine, then. Come.”

Thran linked his arm with Bard’s to pull him up the rainy sidewalk and back to their apartment building. Inside, Thran pushed Bard ahead of him up the stairs to the fifth floor. By the time Thran pulled out his apartment key, Bard was smiling a little. Once inside, Thran shrugged out of his leather jacket, letting it drop to the floor, then drew Bard’s off his shoulders to fall beside his. He stroked the wet hair out of Bard’s eyes, wiped the rain out of his eyebrows – that drew a smile from Bard – and put his arms around Bard to hold him close.

“Please, lyubov moya, don’t do that to me again. I have not slept for a week.”

It took a very long time, but Thran was determined to stand there until Bard melted. Slowly, slowly, Bard’s arms went around Thran’s ribs, and his head fell onto Thran’s shoulder. Thran nestled him
close, rubbing his back slowly, pressing a kiss on his temple. He was content to let his body reinforce just how relieved he was to have Bard back, without words.

Thank the gods for rain.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

While the angel has delivered the saint's body from hell, his spirit has yet to be revived. How persuasive must Thran be before Bard rediscovers his hope?

If you'd like some atmosphere as you read, try some Russian ballet music in your choice of media. It's been my inspiration for the past couple of chapters. Or maybe it's just all the versions of The Nutcracker floating through the air at this time of year :-).

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

- lyubov moya = my love (Russian)
- lyubov yego = his love (Russian)
- fy nghariad = my love (Welsh) (pronounced fing gariad, more or less :-)

Out on the sidewalk, Thran had abandoned his usual elegant grace to shake Bard so hard that Bard still felt the force of Thran’s grip on his arms. Then he’d pulled him through the rain and into their apartment building, and pushed him upstairs with firm hands on his hips. Once the apartment door shut, however, Thran’s insistence faded, and Bard was enfolded softly in his arms, as if wings encircled him. The steady stroke of hands against his back comforted him. A quiet plea revealed that Thran hadn’t treated last Saturday as just a tease. Slowly, slowly, despite everything he’d feared and everything he’d told himself in the last week, the salve of Thran’s touch grew too much to resist. He inched hands around Thran, and laid his head on Thran’s shoulder to nuzzle the hollow at the base of Thran’s throat. Why did this feel like redemption instead of the travesty it was? The unexpected kiss on his temple was an overwhelming grace.

Bard didn’t move for long moments, soaking up the solace that Thran offered. In time, though, Thran grasped his shoulders to hold him at arm’s length.

“We both need a towel. Then you need a dry shirt and tea, lyubov moya. So, off with the boots.”

Thran pulled his off, then left Bard to unlace his boots while he fetched a dry shirt and towels. He draped one towel over his shoulder, then rubbed the other over Bard’s head vigorously, drawing Bard’s chuckle.

“I can do it, Thran. You make me feel like Tilda,” Bard protested with an embarrassed laugh as he took the towel. He wiped his face before rubbing the towel over his tangled hair.

Thran tsked as he mopped his face, and squeezed his braid in a fold of the towel. “No one has done anything for you in so long that you have forgotten what a grace it is when someone does. Please, Bard. Off with your wet shirt, before you get sick.”
Bard laughed self-consciously. “It’s not that wet –”

“Off. Now.”

Bard swallowed, drawing Thran’s glare.

“Oh, for all the gods, Bard! I have no intention to seduce you this morning, though on another morning, that will not be true. This morning, though, it would be evil to take advantage of you when you hurt so much. I merely want you to be warm and dry. So. Off.”

It wasn’t until Thran feinted at him, threatening to peel the shirt for him, that Bard held his hands up in concession. “All right, all right. Gods, Thran. You’re a force of nature when you’re pissed off.”

Thran grinned. “A Russian is no Russian without attitude, especially when he swears.”

“What did you call Steffen?”


Bard rolled his eyes, but pulled his Henley over his head. When he stood bare-chested, Thran was not eying him, but the clean grey Henley he’d brought out. “This one is too small for you. The one I have on is the biggest one I have, so you will have to wear it. It was clean when I put it on a few minutes ago, and it is not wet.” He peeled it off in one smooth motion, and handed it to Bard. As Thran pulled on the clean shirt, Bard pulled on the blue-grey one, unexpectedly comforted by Thran’s faint scent that clung to the soft waffle-weave cloth. The thick, plushy fabric was better quality than anything Bard had bought for himself before, and it was strange to pull up sleeves that weren’t frayed and unraveling, or pull down a hem that had no ragged threads adangle. The shirt was still warm from Thran’s body, too, which offered another comfort.

“Good. Now, tea.”

Thran led the way into the kitchen. He filled the kettle, set it on the stove, set out cups and saucers and teapot, then took the tea caddy out of the cabinet.

“Ast, fwcar.”

Thran cast him a considering look as he measured loose tea into a sleek black porcelain teapot.

“What is that?”

“Welsh for bitch, fucker. The closest I can come to your Russian curse.”

Thran grinned as he capped the tea caddy. “I am glad you know how to curse. It is one thing for me to call you a beautiful saint, and another for you to bear the ills dealt to you like one.”

The shock of Thran’s confrontation was fading, and everything Bard had told himself in the past week settled back into his chest like a stone that he couldn’t choke down. “I’m not a saint, Thran.”

“No more than I am an angel. But you are my saint, as I am your angel.”

“Is that what you called me? Your saint?”

Thran put the tea caddy back in the cupboard, then looked over his shoulder at Bard. He seemed to debate with himself, but reached out to stroke Bard’s damp hair.

“Lyubov moya. My love.”
Gulping, Bard turned away to stare out the window. He wrung a hand over his face, then through his hair, combing the wet strands from his face. Thran moved behind Bard to rest hands lightly on Bard’s shoulders. His chest just brushed against Bard’s back.

“You said you had nothing to offer me. But that is not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it is not.”

“I have nothing good to offer you, Thran. I have not one but two lousy jobs, I barely put enough food on the table for my children, I barely put a grotty roof over their heads, and I have zero prospects of that changing.”

“Must I remind you of what you showed me Saturday? You are a talented artist, you have a beautiful house, three wonderful children, and more generosity and compassion than can be described.”

“The house is a wreck, I don’t have the wherewithal to be the artist, my children are barely hanging on, and my so-called generosity and compassion don’t put food on the table.”

Hands tightened on Bard’s shoulders. “So much depression! I have half a mind to kneecap our landlord because he brings you so low.”

Bard twisted to look Thran in the eyes. “Stabbing muggers and kneecapping landlords? You must have done a stint with the Russian mafia.”

“Not personally, but I have connections,” Thran quipped, smiling so perversely that Bard wasn’t sure if he joked or not. “But we will not waste time on our suka blyad landlord now. Let us go back to the scene of the crime and reconstruct.”

“What crime?” Bard asked, looking at Thran askance.

Thran snickered as he jostled Bard’s shoulders. “Forgive me. I have a weakness for that crime drama that is spent mostly in labs. The labs are for crime fighters what ballet school is for me – both teach techniques from which one solves a crime or makes a dance. So I will reconstruct Saturday night.”

Despite the weight in his chest, a smile tugged at the corners of Bard’s lips. “This I’ve got to hear. The Russian Sherlock.”

“Tea first, Watson.”

The teakettle had began to steam, so Thran turned off the burner, poured the water into the teapot, and put the teacups and saucers into Bard’s hands. With teapot and trivet in hand, he beckoned Bard after him to return to the living room. He arranged the pot on the table before the sofa, then the cups and saucers. Taking Bard’s hand, he sat them down on the sofa side by side. He sat close, as he had on Saturday morning after their first kiss, his long fingers entwined with Bard’s.

“So. Saturday. You and I began something good, something that we both wanted very much. We came back here. Those are just the facts, as the crime drama so often says. But I can deduce what came after. Late that night, several emergency work orders appeared on your mobile, and you had to leave your children to traipse up and down the stairs until two a.m. to fix one thing or another. I imagine also that several of the tenants were no kinder to you than I was when we first met, because Steffen had received the complaints hours ago and ignored them until he could dump them on you. After many hours of such treatment, and likely several nasty repair jobs, you were exhausted and filthy, and you could bear no more, and you fell into the pit of self doubt that Steffen’s abuse had dug
for you.” Thran sat back. “How well did I do?”

Bard slipped his fingers out of Thran’s. He leaned his elbows on his knees, and rubbed his hands through his hair, and clasped his hands behind his neck. “Got it in one.”

“I should have realized then, and not offered only the comfort of a text. I should have followed you downstairs to tell you in person.”

When a hand stroked over Bard’s back, he shut his eyes. It was so easy to sit silently and enjoy the comfort that Thran offered. But Thran deserved more than that.

“I stood outside your door. I almost knocked. I did. But I was even filthier than you imagined, and I... I didn’t want to see your face when the smell of shit hit you. I’m surprised the stench didn’t wake the children when I came in.”

“I might have made a face, yes. But only because of the smell, not because of who had suffered it. Shit washes off.”

Bard exhaled. “Until I have to do it all again.”

“Don’t worry about that yet. We will sort that out soon enough. First, I want to restore the spirit that was yours when we had our Saturday. Please, I hope that you do not tell me that we cannot continue what we began then. I want it, very much.”

Bard sat back against the sofa, both hands full of his hair, pulling it in frustration. “But Thran, I still don’t have anything to offer –”

“No, lyubov moya. Put aside material things. Think about intangible ones, for without them, material things do not matter. Look in here.” Thran tapped Bard’s chest. “What is in there about us? Think of that only, and tell me what you find.”

Bard had tried not to think of that all week. He’d concentrated on why Saturday had been insanity, because that kept him from admitting how much he wanted the pale angel who had descended upon him in such fury just three weeks ago. It wasn’t mere lust or infatuation that flooded him, though who wouldn’t treasure Thran’s beautiful body; or adore the way he moved, or the gleam of that pale hair, or the flash of those intense grey eyes, or the caress of that soft, exotic accent? All of those were all-consuming, but none were as intense as the enticement that beckoned to him most. It was the caressing look that Thran had given him when they’d cooked on Thanksgiving Day, then offered him again half a hundred times on Saturday, a light that he’d despaired of ever seeing again after Saturday night’s ordeal. When he stole a glance at Thran, though, the angel’s eyes still held that light, and if he stared at it for long, it would melt the stone in his chest.

How had an angel come to love him?

How had he come to love an angel?

Gods. This was madness. This was a cliff that offered only wrack and ruin at its bottom.

No, it wasn’t. The light in Thran’s eyes proved it. The ache in Bard’s heart proved it. It was a cliff, but they were poised above it together. An angel’s wings would carry them gently past it, and a saint’s strength would make sure they made the most of whatever they found at the bottom. He had only to be brave enough to accept it.

Marshaling his courage with a deep breath, Bard took Thran’s hand in his, and pressed a kiss on the back of it. “Fy nghariad.”
Thran’s smile was small, but for him alone. When he traded Bard’s kiss for one of his own, the soft touch on the back of Bard’s hand sent the rest of his skin into gooseflesh.

“It sounds as good in Welsh as it does in Russian,” Thran murmured, stroking Bard’s hair.

Bard took the end of Thran’s braid and gave it a tug. “It sounds good in any language.”

* * *

To see Bard unwind from his tight knot, to visibly relax, flooded Thran with relief. At last, at last, the damage had begun to slip away. He so wanted to engulf Bard in a tight hug, but Bard was still too fragile for that. The last thing Thran wanted was for lyubov yego to feel manipulated, used, taken advantage of. Better to restrain himself now, to ensure that Bard’s faith in himself and the two of them together stayed strong and steady.

Still, when Bard’s skin flexed into gooseflesh, a sympathetic tension stirred in his abdomen, his loins – the first moments of arousal. Soon, soon, when they had washed the dregs away, when their lives began to blossom further, he wouldn’t restrain himself, and he’d show Bard how easily an ethereal angel could embrace far more earthly pursuits.

“I regret that the rest of our champagne went flat,” Thran said lightly. “Else I would bring it out to celebrate.”

“Tea is fine,” Bard allowed, smiling, tightening the pressure on Thran’s hand for a second before releasing it. “I’m still on call today.”

“No, you are not,” Thran protested, belatedly pouring the steaming tea in their cups. “You are the night super, if only for the moment. Let Steffen stir his great bulk on behalf of his tenants.”

“He won’t,” Bard shook his head as he leaned forward for his cup.

Thran spread his arms wide. “Then I shall call him and demand that you see to my radiators at once. I will make sure that the job takes all day.”

Bard’s smile was lopsided. “We’d have to be careful not to set off the sprinkler system.”

Good; Bard was recovering enough to banter. “One day soon, we will. But you recover from a grievous wound, and to immolate ourselves now would not be wise. We have other things to do first.”

Leaning back to sip his tea, Bard played back their last few exchanges and mulled what Thran might mean. His gaze sharpened into a frown.

“Um... what did you mean, I’m the night super, ‘if only for the moment?’”

“We will not be here all our lives, I meant.”

Bard’s expression was mild. “I have three children, Thran. Three good children, but they’ve all told the biggest lies in the city when it suited them. I hope you aren’t trying to do the same thing. I can smell a lie from a long way off.”

Thran chuckled as he curled one leg under the other. “No lie intended. Remember that I have
worried about you all week, Bard. You have emerged from a terrible place. I want you to understand what a bastard tried to do to you, and to know that I have your back, and to believe that nothing else matters as long as you are my saint, and I am your angel. Until you know those things in your bones, I am your protector against the rest of the world.”

“I’m all right, Thran,” Bard protested, then amended his rebuttal with a sheepish shrug. “Eh, I am now. I’m not going to snap in the breeze.”

“Says the man who worries about me to get caught in the rain, or whether my ankle will crumple at the slightest touch, or if the slightest breeze will turn me to ice.” Thran sipped his tea. “It is very sweet of you, but I will ask you to visit one of my dance classes soon so you see just how unfragile I am.”

“All right, maybe both of us need to worry less,” Bard conceded, but he turned a wry expression on Thran as he sipped his tea. “Though Sigrid would think it was cute.”

“Your eldest daughter is a wise and compassionate soul.”

“What about our children, Thran? We said we’d hold off until your son came home, but after today, it looks like we haven’t. You and I have become... us. We’ve become a pair.”

To his credit, Bard mulled that over in silence for some time. He drained his teacup, set it with careful deliberation on the table, and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and fingers steepled and pressed against his lips. He nodded to himself before looking back at Thran.

“That I can believe in. As long as I bring something to the table, not just you. Good enough?”

Thran nodded. “Good enough. So good that I want to break today’s prohibition against the physical and kiss you.”

Bard leaned forward and kissed first. Thran shut his eyes to better appreciate the caress, and teased himself by threading his fingers through Bard’s hair. “Mmm.”

Bard grinned. “I didn’t have a prohibition to break, so I thought I’d save you from breaking yours.”
“You recover fast,” was Thran’s sly assessment. “Almost you tempt me away from my consideration for you. But to describe my activities of the past week will relieve your worry better than a dalliance would.”

Bard sobered, but he was reflective, not brooding, which reassured Thran. “You’re right. So what have you been up to?”

Thran grinned. “Do you want to hear about the morally ambiguous parts first, or the straightforward ones?”

Bard’s expression was unsettled. “I take it you haven’t been someone’s angel this week.”

“Yours, entirely. Others, not at all.”

Slowly, Bard’s expression came to mirror Thran’s mischievous grin. “This had better be good, funny dancer.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The angel reveals some serpentine maneuvering, then tempts the saint with a vision of the future. Is the vision madness, or Nirvana? Perhaps the saint will find them to be one and the same.

“I will tell you the morally ambiguous parts first, to dispense with them,” Thran began. “They do not bear on us in the long term. I considered them only because they eased our journey.”

Bard sat back against the sofa. One eyebrow went up, and his lips pursed. “Go on.”

“I had an acquaintance look into the business interests of our suka blyad landlord. Did you know he owns several buildings in addition to this one?”

Bard nodded. “Three or four, I thought. This one’s the smallest. They’re all in good locations, but aren’t in the best of shape; this one’s just the second he’s renovated. It’s a hard choice for him – he wants the higher rents he can get from the renovated spaces, but he hates to shell out the money to do the renovations. That’s why the heating system is so touchy in our building. It needs to be replaced, but that’s a big expense. He’d have lead paint abatement to worry about, displacing the tenants while it’s done, and so on.”

“So my acquaintance tells me. He also told me that some of the work Steffen has already had done is questionable at best. Perhaps it has not been done to code despite his protestations. His maintenance record is not so good, either.”

Bard clenched his fists against his thighs. “Gods, Thran. Don’t push him on that. I’m his maintenance record in this building, and if there’s any question, it won’t be Steffen who takes the blame. It’ll be me, and that’ll cost me the apartment for the children.”

Thran laid a calming hand on Bard’s shoulder. “I will not put you or your children at risk, Bard. There will be no mention of maintenance issues at any point. There may, however, be mention of our suka blyad’s habit of stealing.”

“What’s he stolen, and what mention will be made of it?”

Thran savored the thought of exacting revenge on the lowlife who had made his saint so miserable. Mr. Nori had been quite animated as he’d described the “accounting anomalies” he and his brother Ori had unearthed one night while having a clandestine perusal of Steffen’s double set of ledgers. “The less you know of this, the better, I think, but it seems that perhaps the delineation between business and personal funds is not one our Steffen is inclined to respect.”

“Embezzling?” was Bard’s shrewd guess. “Ah. Why am I not surprised?”

“No more than I. So that is the morally ambiguous part.”

“It sounds like Steffen’s the one with the ambiguous morals, not you.”

Thran shrugged. “I was not motivated by a sense of justice. He reminded me of certain officials in
the old regime. It pleases me to see one such fall, and for what better reason than to avenge the cruelty done to the one I love?"

“Hmm,” Bard rumbled, but he was smiling a little. “You did do a stint with the Russian mafia, didn’t you? Have I fallen in love with a ruthless gangster?”

Thran smirked as he held up his hands in denial. “Only an angry dancer.”

“You’re sure?”

“I swear on the grave of my mother.”

“I’ll bet your mother is a babushka somewhere in Latvia, happily cooking goulash.”

“My mother is dead. No, it was many years ago, when I was Tilda’s age, so do not concern yourself. I had not seen her often since I left home for the dance school at six. But that is another story. So no, I have never worked for the Russian mafia. They have no need for dancers, even ones who dance with knives. And Latvia is not known for goulash. That is Hungary, another country entirely, far southwest of Latvia.”

“If you’re sure, then,” Bard said warily, but from the twinkle in his eye he was teasing. Yes, it was good to see his saint revive. “Maybe I’ll just think of you as an agent of karma. That sounds less... dire.”

“If it is more palatable, I am happy to be your agent of karma.”

“So what is the point of digging up dirt on Steffen Masters?”

“The point, lyubov moya, is to persuade him to cooperate. He will see the error of his ways and bring in fulltime repair teams to address the ongoing needs of his buildings.”

Bard didn’t flail into the obvious panic about losing his position as the night super. “And?” was all he said.

“Along the way he will be persuaded to offer you your apartment for the next six months rent free, and you will not be on call as the night super.”

“What will I be doing all night instead?”

“It is not for me to say, but I imagine that you will sleep in your apartment, and care for your children.”

“And will I still weld all day, oh, pale agent of karma?”

“Perhaps.” Thran sat forward to put his arm around Bard’s hips, and to rest his chin on Bard’s shoulder. “I have some other ideas, but they are only ideas. I offer them, but it is you who must say if they are acceptable or not.”

Bard took Thran’s hand in his, and leaned his head against Thran’s. “Hit me with your best shot, fy nghariad.”

“All right. I would like you to lease your beautiful house to me. But only for six months.”

That wasn’t what Bard had expected to hear. He drew away from Thran enough to look him in the eye, and his brown eyes were startled rather than affectionate. “You want me to... the place is uninhabitable, Thran! You can’t live in it for two days, much less six months!”
“No, I cannot. No one can until some important repairs are made – the roof, likely the furnace...”

“The plumbing’s got to be completely replaced, the kitchen has no appliances, it needs new light fixtures –”

“I have no doubt that you know exactly what needs to be done and in what order, Bard. So let me explain myself. You said that your wish was to live in that house with your family one day. Yes?”

“Yes, but –”

“My wish is that we live in that house together. With all our children. Our family. Is that something you would wish for, too?”

“Of course, but –”

“Please, lyubov moya, hear me out just for one moment more. If we wish to live there together with our children, we must make the repairs. If you lease it to me, then I can hire you to oversee the repairs. The general contractor, it is called? Six months will not be time enough to repair everything, but perhaps it is enough time to fix enough that we can move in? All of our children can finish the school year where they are now so as not to disrupt them, but there are several excellent schools nearby that they can attend next year. While you work on the house for us, we can have others come in to see to the roof and the pipes and the appliances so that you can devote yourself to the artistic pieces, and then when the work is done you can begin on your sculptures again. I have heard of an artist’s agent who might help you promote your work –”

Bard stared, eyes unblinking and mouth slightly agape. Thran had blurted this part quickly, because he was worried that Bard would negate the idea if Thran couldn’t get it out all at once.

“But I get ahead of myself. House first. All right, you can tell me what you think now. Go ahead. Tell me I am crazy.”

Bard folded his arms over his chest and covered his mouth with one hand as he skewered Thran with an incredulous stare. He shook his head, still staring. “You are. I think you are, Thran. You are what my children call bat shit crazy when they think I’m not listening.”

“Does that mean that you do not want to try this? That it is impossible?”

“It’s you fronting all the money, Thran. I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not? I have more money than all of the gods, and nothing to spend it on but a new life to replace my old and empty one. You are the one who will have the far harder job – to put in most of what they call sweat equity, and to manage the headaches to renovate the house. If you like, I will write you a clear contract so that you know the house will remain yours, regardless of what happens between us, and you will renovate the house as you see fit. If you think that your sweat is not as good an investment as my money, then when you are paid for the commissions that will come to you, you can pay me for the Aga. Or you can become the boy toy I suggested before, and I will take whatever amount you think you owe me out in trade.”

Thran’s deadpan joke didn’t make Bard laugh as he expected. In fact, he seemed to pale. He passed a hand over his eyes. “I’m, um, feeling a little lightheaded. I swear you just said you wanted us to move into my house and...”

“I did.” Thran narrowed his gaze on Bard. “Lightheaded? Have you eaten today?”

Bard didn’t look up.
“Have you? Bard, you have not, have you?”

“No.”

Thran tsed furiously. “Why is it that saints are always so determined to kill themselves through lack of food? They are as bad as dancers!”

Thran ducked into the kitchen, scanning for what he had to give Bard. Eggs. He had lots of eggs. He ate them hardboiled on his lunch salad many days. He had several cold ones he’d made yesterday, so he dumped them in a bowl, fetched the salt and pepper, and carried them out to Bard.

“Here.” He thrust the bowl at Bard. “Eat.”

Bard put the bowl on the table and took an egg. “Have you eaten?”

“No.”

Bard pointed to the bowl as he peeled his egg. “Then follow your own advice. Eat. Did you skip your morning dance stuff, too?”

“That is not material.”

Bard grunted, then took a bite of egg. “Yes, it is. For a dancer, I’d say it’s worse than not eating.”

Thran put his arms akimbo and favored Bard with an exasperated frown. “If a certain artist had seen fit to answer my texts, I would not have had to stand at the window all morning to watch for him, then pelt down five flights of stairs and sprint the length of the street to rescue him. I could have done my morning work and eaten breakfast; instead, I must perform what the Special Forces call an extraction.”

“Oh, gods, you are the Russian mafia.” Bard’s lips slid into a rueful, lopsided smile. “You’re cute when you’re mad, too.”

“Cute?” Thran drew himself up, and icicles dripped from his single word. “Am I?”

Bard chuckled. “Hell, no. The beautiful Prince of Ice is damned intimidating. So come down from the mountain, and have an egg. I hate to eat alone.”

Thran sat beside Bard, silently growling. Bard’s smile widened as he leaned into Thran, holding up his half-eaten egg. Relenting, Thran engulfed the rest of the egg in a single bite. They sat chewing for several seconds. Thran took up another egg, peeled it, and sprinkled it with salt and pepper. After taking a bite, he held the rest out to Bard, who managed to get most of it in his mouth without making a mess.

“So, will you think about it?” Thran murmured, his hand coming to rest on Bard’s thigh. “You do not have to say anything now. But please, I ask you to think about it. It is your decision.”

Bard swallowed his egg, peeled another, and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. He must be famished. How long had it been since the man had eaten a decent meal? He chewed his egg hungrily, washing it down with the remains of his tea. Then he regarded Thran.

“What about your dancing? How does that fit in to all of this?”

Thran smiled. “How you choose to renovate the house, I defer to you. But I have some suggestions for the ballroom. When we get to that point. First, you must think about whether my madness
matches yours, and whether we can make it our madness. There is no hurry. I do not want to force you into anything you do not want, and of course you can choose to do nothing. So take the time you need to consider.”

Bard’s hand tightened on Thran’s knee, and he tilted his head up to nuzzle Thran’s ear. “I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“Why don’t we talk about what we’ll need tomorrow when we take another look at the house? We have a lot of work to do in the next six months.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A little naughty, a little nice, and Legolas. What more could you want?

Happy New Year to one and all! May 2016 bring you happiness!

Chapter Notes

I hold no rights to Aga or La Cornue stoves.

Translation Notes:

mon cher, ma chère = my dear, meant in a friendly, nonromantic way, a term of respect (French)
synok = son (Russian)

For the first time in years, visiting his house was a joyous experience. The day was bright, cloudless, as crisp as fresh apples, and in the bright winter sun even fading white paint and untrimmed landscaping couldn’t keep the house from looking beautiful.

Then again, maybe Bard’s hopes for the future saw past the neglect for the first time. Gods, how many times had he hoped to do exactly this, to restore his life as well as a house? This had to be a dream –

Bard stiffened his spine. This was no dream. It would not evaporate. What was the point of holding back when something so good had graced him? He would throw himself over the cliff, into the arms of an angel, and devil take the rest.

The children had come with them in the back seat of Bard’s truck, all of them excited. Bard had said nothing to them about what the future held, but his happiness was obvious, and all three of them had picked up on it, consciously or not. As he and Thran spread their lists and papers across the kitchen counters, laughter drifted to them from the ballroom, where Bain and Tilda had quickly put the soccer ball into play. That sound, so long absent, was overwhelming, and Bard’s eyes stung. He kept his gaze on the papers, but a slender, understanding hand slipped under his coat to rub his back.

“That’s the sound,” Bard whispered, swallowing hard. “Gods, Thran. That’s the sound I remember.”

“We will hear it many times from now on, lyubov moya,” Thran murmured. “Perhaps soon we will hear Legolas practice his fencing there, too.”

Bard nodded. “That’s a great idea. When does he come from school?”

“This Thursday, I am happy to say. I thought it would be later, but the luck of the exam schedule
favored him this year, and so he finishes two days early. I am eager to see him.”

“Remember what I told you,” Bard said. “Spend every second with him for at least a week. Then we’ll have you down for supper in the house of chaos.”

“I hear and obey, my saint,” Thran teased, giving him an indulgent look.

“Like hell, you do,” Bard snarked back softly, grinning. “So are you okay with white appliances? I’ve never liked stainless steel. Too industrial, and they show smudges.”

Thran hummed agreement as he studied Bard’s rough drawing. “I have lived in too many institutions full of that soulless metal. White is good.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to do the kitchen in black? Just to give you a properly theatrical stage to highlight your ethereal paleness when you get the urge to make chicken soup?”

Thran’s lips curved in a sly smile. “Hmm. That sounds perfect. What will you do if I say yes?”

“Tell you that a black kitchen means you’ll do most of the cooking. I can’t see in a black kitchen.”

“I hope to learn to cook, but perhaps not every meal. So we must forgo your perfect theatrical setting to allow for practicalities. A white kitchen it is.”

Bard snickered. “White appliances, then. Big fridge – we have four hungry children. Gas stove – there was one here before, so the line’s already in place, so that’ll be easy to install. Agas and La Cornues aren’t worth the price to me, but we’ll need a big one, whatever it is. Double sink, maybe a work sink, too. Microwave. I don’t drink enough for a wine fridge, but we can get you a small one to keep your French champagne perfectly chilled, if you want.”

Thran smiled slyly again. “I think lyubov moy is as funny a general contractor as he is a welder.”

“So says a funny dancer.”

“I do.”

Bard looked up at Thran. “Do you?”

Thran leaned his elbows on the counter, and turned his pale grey eyes on Bard. He nodded. “Very much, I do. Do you?”

Bard glanced right and left, then leaned close to Thran to brush a kiss on his lips. “I do.”

Silent laughter rippled through Thran. “You are not supposed to kiss the groom until after the vows.”

“I never liked that tradition.”

“You two are awful,” Sigrid said. When Bard tore his eyes away from Thran, he found his oldest daughter standing in the doorway to the hallway, arms akimbo and a fond but exasperated smile on her face. “Sappier than a pair of teenagers.”

“We are celebrating our agreement on white kitchen appliances,” Bard said mildly, straightening as Sigrid inserted herself between them to curl her arms around their backs.

“Whatever.” Sigrid pecked a kiss on Bard’s cheek before offering the same to Thran. “I’m happy for you. And don’t worry – Bain’s clueless, Tilda isn’t old enough, and Legolas isn’t here yet, so I’ll keep quiet until you’re ready to say anything. Is it okay if I call you Ada, Thran?”
“Ada? What is Ada?”

Sigrid’s smile was mischievous. “What, you haven’t seen all those Hobbit films? You kind of look like that bratty Elf king with the long blond hair, though you’re better looking and a lot nicer. You two saps are going to get married, right? Since that’ll make you my stepdad, I looked it up – Ada is one of the Elvish words for Da. So I’d have Da, and Ada. I like it.”

Bard had never seen Thran so flustered. He actually blushed, he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe, and he certainly found no words to say. It was so atypical for Thran to look anything but calm, self-possessed, and confident that Bard couldn’t smother a laugh.

“You’ve never had the pleasure of a teenaged daughter who lives to unnerve her parents,” Bard informed Thran. “This is just the start.”

“I’m not trying to unnerve anyone,” Sigrid protested. “Did I unnerve you, Ada?”

Leaning his elbows on the counter, Thran cocked his head to look at Sigrid askance. “I believe you did, ma chère. I am quite speechless.”

Sigrid glowed with triumph as she pressed another kiss on Thran’s cheek. “Cool! I bet not many people can say they unnerved the great Thran Oropherson.”

“So far, only those who call him Ada,” Thran exhaled wryly, finally rallying.

“And Da when he calls you that Welsh thing,” Sigrid riposted. “So, what’s the kitchen going to look like?”

As Sigrid scanned the kitchen plan, Thran’s eyes met Bard’s over her back. Bard shrugged, mouthing, “Get used to it.”

Thran’s lips trembled in a bemused smile. Did he realize what a boon he’d been given? No teenaged girl was easy to live with, but it was much easier when the one in the family loved her parents. Both of them.

* * *

The day continued like the best dream – not a dream, Bard firmly reminded himself again. Reality, not a dream. He and Thran moved through the house, discussing and listing what they wanted to do. They had few disagreements; both liked calm, serene surroundings, though Thran tended to like more streamlined furnishings than Bard. Thran was not fond of dark colors in a house, which suited Bard, as well. He’d lived in too many dark and dingy places to want to cast any darkness in his own house. So the kitchen would remain white with black granite countertops under the cabinets, and white marble atop the kitchen island. The dining room would get a new coat of pale green, and the main room would remain white until they figured out what else it should be. Upstairs, the children decided to keep their old rooms, leaving three others for Legolas to choose from. The master suite was large enough to accommodate Thran’s huge bed with room to spare. When Bard thought about slipping into that refuge, knowing what awaited him there, he had to spend a few minutes thinking about that most boring of sports, American baseball, before he could think straight about anything else. The soccer game in the ballroom after lunch dispelled the last of that, for it vigorously pitted Thran and Sigrid against Bard, Tilda, and Bain. While it was not stellar soccer, it was hilarious soccer.
Perhaps the clearest reassurance of what the future held was Tilda’s doing. She looked around the ballroom, and tugged on Bard’s sleeve.

“So we’re really going to live here, Da?” she asked.

Bard stooped beside her. “Not for a while, little doll, but soon.”

“By next Christmas?”

“By next Christmas.”

She pointed to the end opposite the fireplace. “Can we put the Christmas tree there?”

Bard gave the space a considering smile, then her. “That’s a good place for it. A tall one, with a star on the top.”

Tilda’s eyes widened. “It’ll look just like the ballroom where the mice danced.”

Thran looked back at her. “In ‘The Nutcracker?’ You are right, Tilda. Perhaps we can dance here on Christmas Eve, just as Clara did.”

Tilda smiled. “That would be nice. I’ll have to learn, though. I don’t know how to dance.”

“It is not so hard,” Thran offered. “Just a simple step or two. Would you like me to show you?”

Tilda looked at Bard, who nodded. “Go ahead, Til. Thran’s a good dancer.”

“I know. Sigrid told me,” she said as if that explained everything, and took the hand Thran held out to her. Sigrid came to stand beside Bard to watch Thran guide Tilda through a simple waltz step, then dance her around the room slowly. Their heights were so disparate that Thran had Tilda put her hand at his waist while he put his on her shoulder, rather than the other way around, but he managed them gracefully. Bard and Sigrid decided to try it themselves, and were soon laughing as they attempted to imitate Thran and Tilda.

“Look, we have inspired your Da and your sister to try, Tilda. But they do not look as elegant as we do, I think,” Thran said as he escorted Tilda around the room again. “What do you think?”

“They look okay,” was Tilda’s measured opinion. “But no, not as good as we do.”

“We should help them, yes?” Thran led Tilda to Sigrid’s side. “Show Sigrid where to put her hand as I put mine, and I will show your Da. There, better? Now, around you go.”

Bard and Sigrid duly proceeded, Sigrid laughing when Thran gestured for her to raise her chin. “I don’t know, Da,” she laughed. “Maybe by Christmas we’ll get better.”

“You’d better let the master show you, then,” Bard grinned, twirling her into Thran’s arms. “Come on, Tilda. You can help your Da.”

So they went around again. Bain looked on with skeptical consideration, finally shaking his head as he bounced his soccer ball. “I don’t know; it looks silly no matter which of you do it.”

“Ah, you would prefer a more vigorous dance?” Thran teased. “Which of the dances in the Nutcracker did you like? The Chinese dance, perhaps? Or the Russian one?”

Bain’s face pricked with interest. “Which one had that cool kicking and jumping thing? You know, the one where they looked like they were sitting down and kicking?”
“Ah, the Russian one. To do that one, I have to take off my boots. Do you want to try it? It is very vigorous.”

“Oh, try, Bain!” Tilda clapped her hands. “I want to try, too!”

Thran unlaced his hiking boots, then took the broom they’d brought and swept the floor clean in the middle of the room. “First, a few stretches to warm the legs…”

They all watched in fascination as Thran stretched this way and that to limber his muscles. Bard made no attempt to duplicate them, though Bain and Tilda did. Even Bain, a good athlete, wasn’t able to stretch so completely bonelessly as Thran did. Even though Thran wore old jeans and a ratty Henley – oh, gods, Thran had put on Bard’s old shirt that he’d left in Thran’s apartment yesterday – he still made the moves look fluid and elegant. So much grace and control coiled in that long body...

In just a few moments, Thran folded himself down into the position Bain had remembered. “So, here we are in the crouch. The kicking goes like this…” he folded his arms in front of his chest, and kicked with each foot.

Bain gave it his best shot, managing a few before he lost his balance and fell over, laughing. Tilda’s lower center of gravity helped her manage a few before she fell over, too.

“Not so easy, is it, Bain? You got a few in there, though,” Bard said. “You, too, Til.”

“It’s hard!” Bain agreed. “You ought to try it, Da. It’s really hard.”

“I believe you. You’re doing a lot better than I would,” Bard assured his son. “Look at him. Still kicking away.”

“Then comes the hands,” Thran demonstrated, “and then the leaps.” He bounced to his feet, doing a pair of split jumps. He landed in an exaggerated stance, smiling as he offered a silly bow to acknowledge the applause from Tilda and Sigrid. He took an exaggerated deep breath. “A very vigorous dance, indeed.”

“I’d like to see your knife dance one day,” Bain offered, sprawled back on the floor. “I saw it on YouTube. Have you seen it, Da? Splits and everything.”

“You can do splits?” Tilda asked, interested.

Thran slid effortlessly into a split.

“Is that hard to learn?”

Thran shook his head. “I did not think so, but I started very young, perhaps five or six. I like the technique I learned in yoga, to stretch down as low as possible without strain, prop oneself up on a block, then merely sit. The muscles and tendons gradually stretch. The key is to be very careful and very patient, and to relax.”

Thran levered himself up on his hands to carefully turn the other way. “One must do both sides. That is something else I learned in yoga class, to learn balance.”

“How do you get out of that?” Bard shook his head. “If I ever got down into that, I’d never get up again.”

Thran turned his body to the center, curled his feet inward to cross his legs, and stood smoothly. That fluid control made Bard’s mouth water. What he wouldn’t give to wrap that elegant, effortless body
around his, in the middle of dark grey silk sheets...

Baseball, baseball...

Thran’s smile was not the slightest bit wicked, but his pale grey eyes held laughter as they met Bard’s. The angel hid a devil behind his wings, and not very well, the bastard. He probably divined everything that went through Bard’s thoughts. While his children all were intent on Thran, Bard glowered at him.

“That was amazing,” Sigrid shook her head.

“Very.” Bard said. Let’s see – were the Mets in the American or National League? “Very impressive, indeed.”

Thran put a hand to his heart and bowed. “You are generous. So, enough dance, perhaps. More soccer?”

“Go ahead,” Bard waved at them. “I want to check the windows upstairs, and the bathroom plumbing.”

“Then I call Thran and me against Til and Sig,” Bain announced eagerly, bouncing the ball to Sigrid. “You kick off, Sig.”

Bard left the quartet as he climbed the stairs to the second story, list in hand. Two windows in Sig’s room, both needing stripping and reglazing...

Thran in splits, with his Henley stretched across that broad chest...

Sig’s closet door needed stripping and painting...

To strip that Henley away, in the middle of those grey sheets...

Two windows in Bain’s room, glazing still intact but needing new paint and a new sash weight, and the floor needed stripping... hell, forget that; all the floors needed stripping and refinishing...

A certain ethereal bastard needed a good stripping, and damned soon, as badly as he deviled Bard. Gods, gods, an ache settled in his solar plexus, then lower...

Which team had won the World Series last year? He knew it wasn’t the Chicago Cubs. They hadn’t won the title since 1908...

Tilda’s room needed some plaster work in the corner by the window. And ditto for her windows; they all needed reglazing and...

Bard sighed in exasperation. Even the repair work conspired against him – floors and windows all needed stripping, and he knew an angel who did, too. If he didn’t find something to distract him, he’d start thinking about exactly how to strip Thran down to nothing but his smile and lowered eyelashes –

“How do the windows progress?” Thran called, coming up the stairs.

Bard swallowed a plea to the gods for mercy. “Um, just fine. How’s the soccer game?”

“Exhausting,” Thran said, following the sound of Bard’s voice to find him. “Even ballet training is no match for the energy of children.”
“What are they doing now, without their ringer?”

“They went out to see if the gazebo still has a bird’s nest in it.”

“Good.” Bard looked over his shoulder at Thran just coming through the door. He turned, took Thran’s shoulders in his hands, and urged him against the wall before Thran was fully in the room.

“You’re wearing my shirt.”

Thran’s smile was entirely too feline. “Of course I am. It smells like you, and I like to have your scent on me. You must feel the same way, because you still wear my shirt. Shall I tell you how much I like to feel a piece of you caress my skin?”

Bard swallowed, his hands tightening on Thran’s shoulders. “One day, you bastard, you are going to tease me past all control, and get us into so much trouble,” he growled, drawing Thran’s silent laughter.

“One day? Maybe today,” Thran teased, widening his stance. He had Bard’s hips in his hands, holding him tightly against him. “If this is what teasing you gets me, I will never stop, lyubov moya.”

Thran twined a hand in Bard’s hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him into a kiss. The caress was silent, but not gentle. Bard surfaced panting, wanting nothing but to drown in another, but he pushed away to look up at the beautiful face of an angel bent on unangelic things.

“If I ever figure out how to tease you as badly as you do me, you’ll be the one past all control.”

“I will tell you how to do it,” Thran whispered, brushing another kiss on Bard’s lips. “Pick me up, the way you did last Saturday morning at the barre. Take me off the earth, and I am yours.”

Bard had Thran off his feet, pinned between his hips and the wall, without thinking. The light in Thran’s eyes sparkled as he wound his legs around Bard’s waist; his breath stuttered; his hands convulsed on Bard’s shoulders. This time, it was Bard’s hands that went under Thran’s Henley to stroke his ribs, knead his back, dare to run around his chest to knead his nipples. Thran couldn’t keep silent any longer, gasping as Bard pulled up his shirt to nuzzle first one, then the other nipple –

“What are they doing now, without their ringer?” echoed up the staircase.

Bard let Thran slide to the floor, grinning ruefully. “That’s great, Bain! What about the one in the holly bush out back?”

“Hey, Da! The bird’s nest is still in the gazebo!”

Bard surveyed Thran, still leaning against the wall, panting. “Saved by the bell, you are.”

Thran’s grin was pleased as he pulled his shirt down. “Finally, the saint takes off his leash.”

“Finally, the angel gets a taste of his own medicine.”

Thran hummed. “And very tasty it was, too. Monday morning, we will get that blood test.”

“Yes, we will.”

Thran straightened, and put a hand out to stroke Bard’s hair. “It is good to see you restored, Bard. I am so relieved.”

Bard gave Thran’s braid a tug. “I haven’t felt this way in a long time. So help me with the rest of the
windows, before we get caught again.”

Bard held out his hand, his skin tensing into gooseflesh when Thran clasped his wrist with the warmth that was for him alone.

* * *

Thran was glad that the drive back to the city was after dusk. It was hard enough to keep a serene demeanor in the dark, and would have been impossible in the light. He was not concerned about revealing his agitation to Bard, but to his children was another matter. He and Bard had agreed not to make a public spectacle of themselves to anyone, but especially their children. Still, Thran hadn’t felt so delirious for so long that it was hard to master his feelings. He managed well enough by the time they reached the city that he could share pizza and salad with Bard and his children at the small corner pizzeria near their apartment building. He managed to get the bill before Bard did, and the excited chatter of the children at the rare treat was worth bearing Bard’s glare. When he bade them goodnight at the door to their apartment, it was with a pang of regret, and not just because he and Bard must part. He’d enjoyed being with the children, too.

“Thank you for today,” he bade all of them with the little bow that the girls liked so much. “I will see you all again soon.”

“Come for supper tomorrow. Chicken, or something,” Bard asked, and he nodded gladly. It would be hard not to see them all day tomorrow, but with supper to look forward to, he would manage.

“I’ll find something to bring other than broccoli,” Thran smiled, as he went up the stairs. “Perhaps... Brussels sprouts.” When the children made the expected faces, he snickered. “No, I hate them, too. Perhaps something else.”

“Garlic bread!” Bain suggested.

“With the cheese?” Tilda added.

“I shall find it,” Thran agreed. “Until tomorrow, then.”

“Bye, Thran,” the children chorused.

“I’ll text you about the garlic bread,” Bard said, holding up a hand in farewell.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Thran nodded, and went up the stairs.

He opened the door to an empty, silent apartment, sighing.

Be patient, he told himself. This empty silence won’t last much longer.

He busied himself with a shower, then a distracted perusal of his computer, but even a new episode of his favorite crime lab show didn’t tempt him. He put his computer aside and crawled into bed. He thought about the room in Bard’s house that would hold this bed before too many months had passed, and what the light would look like in the morning when it fell across Bard’s bare chest. Then he thought about what the chest basking in the sunlight would look like...

His mobile buzzed. He’d left it in the living room, so got up naked to retrieve it. Yes, it was a text
from Bard. He settled against down pillows, under silk sheets and cashmere blankets, before he displayed the text.

_In bed?_

Thran grinned. _Naked. Shall I send you a picture?_

_Bastard_

_You love it, lyubov moya. Where are you?_

_In bed. In plaid flannel sleep pants. You don’t want to see a picture_

_I want to see you against my silk sheets, naked_

_So do I. Mamma Leonora’s Herbed Mozzarella Garlic Toast_

Thran blinked. _What?_

_The bread. For tomorrow. About five_

_Ah. Is it at the market?_

_Aisle Six, freezer case, halfway down on the right. Two loaves_

_I have my orders. I cannot wait to give you a few when I get you in bed with me_

_I’m not good at following orders_

_Even better. Unruly lovers are gems_

_Be careful, or I will pick you up again_

_You did it divinely. If you don’t do it again, I’ll tease you until you do_

_Then we will both be in trouble_

_I don’t care who’s in. Either is ecstasy_

_Fucking bastard_

_I hope you are, too_

_Only with an angel. Gotta go. Children. Fy nghariad_

_Lyubov moya_

Thran put his mobile on the nightside table with a sigh. Sexting did not make up for sleeping in an empty bed.

* * *

It was just as well that Thran didn’t see Bard until supper on Sunday, as he spent most of the day
marshaling resources. He had his morning rituals to perform, of course, and because he had not gone
to class on Saturday he added extra work to compensate. He walked to the market to find the
children’s preferred garlic bread. He appreciated Bard being so specific in his instructions, as simple
carbs were something Thran knew only to avoid. Bard’s biscuit had been the first such thing he’d
had in years. Once he was home from the market, the talented Mr. Nori had words for him, and his
banker had a few more. Suppertime came before he realized it, and the ensuing silliness spent the
evening in seeming seconds. He and Bard had only seconds outside the latter’s apartment door for a
hasty kiss, then Bard had to dash back in to deal with Tilda’s homework.

At least Bard wasn’t on call as the night super anymore. That was one of the matters he’d discussed
with Mr. Nori. Bard wouldn’t be the only night super in Steffen Masters’ crumbling fiefdom who
wouldn’t bear sleepless nights anymore. All of them would see a nice few months of free rent, and
those who wanted to continue as supers would even receive a stipend in addition to their free rents.
That would ensure that Steffen wouldn’t target Bard as the cause of his troubles.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday blurred into a spate of goings and comings. He had morning rituals
and class and the last PT sessions for his ankle. He and Bard kept their clinic appointments for their
blood work. Bard had lists of appliances for them to look at. They hired a roofing contractor, a
plumber, a furnace technician, and an electrician. He helped Bard stock up on many bewildering
things necessary for home renovation – various pots of sticky substances, packets of pins and nails
and screws, bags of steel wool, and sheets of sandpaper.

“All of this has a purpose, I am sure,” he said dubiously, handing Bard the heavy bucket of grout
compound.

“It does.” Bard took the bucket and stowed it in the back of the truck. “We need it all, I’m afraid. I
won’t be able to start on much until the plumbing and heating are done. At least we don’t have to
deal with the full lead paint abatement process, which is expensive. That’s one reason Daphne and I
were able to get the house so cheaply. The previous owner went broke just after doing it, and wanted
to sell fast. So once the plumbing and heating are done, the kitchen can go in. After that, we can
spend the weekends out there, and I’ll get more done.”

Bard jumped down from the back of the truck, and they got inside for the drive home. “About this
weekend, Thran. Legolas comes home tomorrow. The children and I will likely be up at the house
for a lot of that, so take the time with your son. If things go okay with him, maybe the two of you can
come with us next weekend.”

“You are right, Bard. I just... hate to lose our time together. We have so little of it.”

“I know. But Legolas needs you. I don’t want him to think that I’m taking his father away. Once he
knows you’re still there for him, he’ll feel better about joining the chaos.”

“Agreed. And I am very eager to see him again. I haven’t since September, and I have missed him
very much. I want to take him to skate at Rockefeller Center. We do that every year.”

Bard glanced at him as they pulled out of the car park. “It doesn’t surprise me that you know how to
skate – you’re from a cold country, after all. But I’m surprised that any ballet company lets you skate.
Too risky for their star dancer?”

Thran grinned. “I suppose technically I should not, but life is too short to worry about it. I have
skated for a long time, and I do not attempt any jumps or exotic spins, so I am reasonably safe. Can
you skate?”

“I haven’t in years. I used to in Wales as a lad, though. A long time ago.”
“Perhaps next year we will skate together.”

Bard nodded. “Bain will love it. He wanted to play hockey, but thank the gods he liked soccer more. Hockey equipment’s expensive. I can afford the soccer stuff without so much overtime.”

“No more overtime,” Thran said firmly. “You are my general contractor for the moment, and soon to be a full time artist in metal. Next year, you will have money for Bain if he wants to play hockey. One of the schools near the house has a boy’s hockey team. A soccer team, too.”

“What’s Legolas’s school like? I’m a little worried about what’s going to happen when a lad from an elite boarding school and three children from a grittier world try to find common ground.”

“I have thought about that, too,” Thran admitted. “Your children are all good natured, and you have passed your kindness and generosity to them well. My son is quieter. He was only seven when the bomb killed so many in Saint Petersburg.”

“Was he hurt in the explosion?”

“Superficially. A few cuts and bruises only. A very large man in front of him on the platform took the full force of the blow. Vileria was not so well protected, and died under my son’s eyes. He did not speak for some weeks afterwards. I did not dance for some months to be with him. He was close to both his mother and me, and so he gradually recovered enough for me to dance again. I have not liked to send him to boarding school, as I think he spends too much time alone. But there is nothing else to do. I cannot be at his side every moment, nor would he want me to be.”

“The balance is never easy,” Bard agreed, as they drove home. “After Daphne died, I sometimes thought that my life was nothing but a series of choices between bad and worse. Never the right choice or a better choice.”

“I have felt that way many times, too. I hope that Legolas finds that a home with our combined families offers more comfort.”

“So do I,” Bard exhaled. “I don’t want to give you up.”

“Nor I you.”

“Does Legolas know you’re gay?”

Thran nodded. “Vileria and I did not parade our choices before him – before anyone, given the state’s position, but even in the privacy of our flat, we did not. Before Vileria died, Legolas was too young to understand, at any rate, and so it did not arise. But two years ago when he was twelve, he asked, and so I explained. I made sure he knew that both his parents loved him very much, and that we were very proud to be his parents. I suspect that he asked because someone in his school made cruel remarks about male dancers, but I found a way to address that.”

“Oh?” Bard looked over with interest. “What did you do?”

“I danced at the school’s next Career Day,” Thran grinned smugly. “They were used to an occasional ballerina who appeared in a frothy tutu. I took the opposite approach and danced part of my knife dance, but in a Cossack’s pantaloons, boots, and tunic; the original costume for my knife dance is minimal, and would not have helped me make my point. I embellished with a few gymnastic extras, so as to leave no doubt as to the strength a dancer needed. It was a success, for Legolas heard no more comments about the prissiness of male dancers.”

“Well done,” Bard mirrored Thran’s satisfied smile. “Sigrid knows about me, obviously. Bain’s
almost as oblivious as Sig says he is, but I have had The Talk with him. Tilda’s getting close. I expect she’ll ask questions before long, just because of us.”

“I hope it will not be a difficult conversation.”

“It’ll be awkward. The first two were. But we’ll get through it. And my little doll likes you, so that will make it easier.”

“She is very sweet,” Thran agreed.

Once home, Thran and Bard made soup in Bard’s kitchen, and then spent the afternoon nested together on the old sofa to watch a film before the children came home. This would be Thran’s last private time with Bard for several days, until Legolas had eased into being with him.

“I could get used to this,” Bard murmured. He leaned comfortably back against Thran’s chest, both their feet propped up on the fruit crate coffee table, Thran’s arms around him. “Just to feel another body...”

“Just any body?” Thran teased, rubbing Bard’s arms slowly.

“Just yours, funny dancer. Just yours.”

Thran took his urges in hand, not wanting to arouse either of them this close to their looming separation. Bard was right to soak up the warmth of their closeness, for that would sustain them better than running amok would. For the next few days, they would bank the fire between them to focus on their children.

“We will get used to this. Very soon.”

“The roof contractor’s already started, and the plumber’s coming Friday. I’ll be out there after Tilda goes to school. I hope the furnace company will be there, too.”

“So it progresses. Perhaps we will be able to move sooner than we expect.”

“The children need to stay here to finish the school term,” Bard reminded Thran. “But maybe we can spend weekends there, once the lead paint assessment clears. I think I said the previous owner did the abatement, but it’s still got to be cleared given all the renovation that we’re doing. Keep your fingers crossed. If we come up short, that’ll be expensive.”

“The price of safety for our children,” Thran waved a hand, as the film credits rolled. “Oh, lyubov moya, I should go. It’s almost time for Bain to come home.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s hand, then pressed a kiss on it. “Just keep reminding yourself that you won’t have to go much longer. What time do you pick up Legolas tomorrow?”

“Not until two. I will meet his train then.”

“Then do your morning rituals, and eat your porridge, and then be Da for the next week. Text me about how it’s going, and we’ll figure out how to make the introductions.”

Thran hugged Bard against his chest, kissed his temple, then let Bard slip out of his hands. As Bard turned off the television, Thran slipped on his hiking boots and got his leather jacket.

“Have a happy reunion with Legolas. I’ll text you goodnight every night.” Bard tugged Thran’s braid, then touched his own chest. “Know you’re in here.”
Thran touched his own. “You are quite firmly in here, too. And one day soon, you will be quite firmly —”

“Don’t say it. I already miss you, and your unangelic teasing will make it worse. Have mercy on me, just this once.”

“For my saint, anything, even no teasing.” Thran kissed him quite gently, drawing Bard’s fond smile. “See you soon.”

“Not soon enough, but it’s for a good cause. Take the best care of Legolas.”

Thran’s journey up three flights of stairs seemed much longer today, and even the prospect of seeing his son tomorrow didn’t shorten it.

* * *

Legolas’s train was on time, but Thran fidgeted on the platform all the same. He found himself by an advertising kiosk, out of the way of busy travelers, bobbing up and down in pliés while he waited — how funny to revert to that old habit. That was how he used to stay focused at auditions, counting the repeats of up and down, up and down, up and down, to better ignore the bustle of other dancers around him. In a way, he shouldn’t be surprised to fall into his old habit. If all went well, Legolas’s homecoming would shortly lead to an audition for them both into new circumstances. But that would not be his focus today. Today, it was only to find his son, and tell him how glad he was that they were together again.

For the tenth time, Thran craned his neck to peer up and down the track. He had no need to do so. At his height, he had no trouble seeing the entire platform. He checked his mobile for the time. Another three minutes. Gods, he hadn’t been so eager to see a train in years, and not just because of Bard and his children who were busy in another part of the city. He had missed his son very much in the past three months.

The train was here! He spotted Legolas’s pale hair behind one of the windows.

I see him on the train. Love you, he typed hastily.

Enjoy, Bard sent back at once. Thran smiled at the sentiment, then thrust his mobile in his pocket and angled up the platform to Legolas’s carriage.

There he was, stepping off the carriage and onto the platform. That long swath of pale blond hair — were those tiny braids by his ears? Green ones? — and that slender figure, already tall for a boy of fourteen, were unmistakable. A backpack was slung over one shoulder, and he stood tall to look up and down the platform. Thran threaded quickly through the crowd towards his son.

“Legolas!” he called, waving and smiling.

At the sound of his name, Legolas turned, spotted him, and his solemnity vanished in a wide grin. He strode towards Thran as fast as the crowd allowed. They met in the middle of the platform, engulfing each other in a hug.

“Father!”
“I have missed you so much, Legolas,” Thran hugged his son tightly. “I am so glad to have you back again.”

“I am very glad to be back.” His son squeezed Thran hard. “How is your ankle? Better, I hope?”

“It is well, and I am back to the dance again. And you? How were your exams?”

“I think I did well, all but the literature one. That one was hard. You know we had to read Moby Dick this term. It was boring. Every time I picked it up, I fell asleep. So I hope I scraped by on that. I’m sure I did much better on the Julius Caesar part. I liked that.”

“We will keep our fingers crossed. Now, you have baggage?”

“Mostly sports equipment – my bows and blades, as you call them. A big suitcase of clothes.”

“The contents of which must be laundered, yes?”

Legolas gave a sheepish shrug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to wash them after my exams. I would have had to take a later train.”

“A small price to pay to have you home earlier. But what are these?” He twitched one of the small, dyed braids by Legolas’s ear.

Legolas’s smile was both self-conscious and satisfied. “I like them. They’re different.”

“So they are. Will they be green forever?”

Legolas grinned at his father’s tolerant tone. “Maybe blue next?”

“Anything but orange, please.”

“Or pink.”

“Agreed. Pink would look like you had candy floss stuck in your hair. Hardly a good fashion statement.”

“Ugh. No.”

“Come, let us find your things, and go home. I want to hear everything.”

They made their way down to the baggage car, collected Legolas’s case of fencing blades; the other pair of cases holding bows, quivers, and arrows; and the immense suitcase. They piled everything into a taxi and sped home, then hauled the lot up to Thran’s apartment in two trips. Thran did not look at the door to Apartment 2A; the children were at school, and Bard was likely at the house. By the time they were settled, it was after four, and Legolas was hungry.

“What are you hungry for, synok? This is your first night back after many exams, so you choose where we will celebrate the end of them.”

“Perhaps that seafood house with the shrimp and scallop pasta?” Legolas looked hopeful.

“That is perfect. Let us go.”

Out they went. Legolas wolfed down his favorite seafood pasta and two baskets of bread in addition to his salad, reminding Thran of Bain’s all consuming appetite. He was quite content with his baked salmon, steamed vegetables, and salad. He opted for spiced tea when Legolas worked through a
huge slice of coconut cake.

The best part of the meal, though, was the conversation that sparked between him and his son. The restaurant was not too loud, so they were able to talk unhindered in between bites of their meal. Legolas did most of the talking. He’d continued to lose his Russian accent, sounding as American as any other fourteen-year-old as he talked about school. His favorite topic was archery – even fencing didn’t compare. He had progressed quite well, even earning a place on his school’s first team. That was quite an accomplishment, given that Legolas was just a freshman student, and juniors and seniors usually made up the first team. Thran smiled proudly as he complimented his son on his honor.

“The fencing is not as interesting, then? It is never easy to move to a new school and a new coach,” he ventured.

Legolas sobered as he chewed another bite of cake. “I love it just as much. But... I miss Master Finn from my old school.”

“In what way?”

“He was always very demanding of his fencers, but we never minded, Father, because when you did something well, he made you feel like all the hard work was worth it. Even when you tried and didn’t get it, he still encouraged you, so you wanted to keep trying.”

“And the master at your new school is not like that.”

Legolas shook his head. “He isn’t as well trained, I don’t think. Master Finn seemed to be more nuanced. Not that I’m an expert by any means, but... Master Schroeder isn’t... encouraging the way Master Finn was.”

Thran read between the lines. “So does he merely yell at you for general principles, or does he yell at you for specific ones?”

Legolas dipped his head. “Both. But it isn’t just me he yells at. It’s everyone. He yells even more at the best fencers, and the things he says are not kind. In fact, he has a mean streak. It’s hard to fence well when you’re braced for getting yelled at for anything. Some boys have left the team. Others of us have tried to practice on our own, but it’s hard to find a time where we can all meet.”

Thran hummed. “That is not good. I do not want anyone to turn your love of your sport sour. As long as you love it and want to pursue it, then we will decide what to do. Perhaps I can speak to the head of the school. Or we can find a coach for you.”

Legolas’s smile was gratified. “That would be great. I do want to get better, Father. But I don’t think I’ll get better with him.”

“Nor I, from what you say. So, are you finished?”

“I am. It was delicious.”

“Mine was, too. Let us go home.”

They walked home swiftly. They made a good pair; for all that Legolas was still four or five inches shorter than Thran was, his son kept easy pace beside him as they covered the few blocks to their apartment building. As they passed the corner pizzeria where Thran had eaten with Bard and his children, Legolas sniffed appreciatively.
“That smells so good, doesn’t it, Father?”

Thran gave his son an incredulous look. “You just ate! How can you still be hungry?”

Legolas gave him a sheepish smile. “Um... because I’m fourteen?”

With a laugh, Thran slowed outside the pizzeria. “We can take a pizza home, if you would like. They make a very good pepperoni and onion one here.”

Legolas looked at him in astonishment. “Since when have you eaten pizza?”

Thran smiled proudly. “I had some once, in this very pizzeria. It is very good. Should we get a large one?”

Legolas’s laugh was delighted. “Could we get onion, peppers, and pepperoni?”

Thran pulled open the pizzeria door, then offered a theatrical bow inside to his son. “After you, synok.”

Legolas eagerly went inside, leaving Thran to follow him, chuckling. Clearly, the first order of business after tomorrow morning’s rituals would be a trip to the market. That was likely going to be a common errand as long as Legolas was here.

As Legolas hurried to the counter to peruse the menu, Thran recalled that his son was not the only boy who loved pizza. Bain loved pizza, too.

Friendships had begun on less.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The angel cares for the young, the saint labors in the house of promise, and both of them try to subsist on the crumbs of affection conveyed via text messages. It is a spare diet.

Sounds like time for a pizza extravaganza. Will there be more in the offing?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As each day of the following week passed, Bard had no lack of distractions – on Saturday and Sunday, he took the children to the house, and while they completed homework or played outside, he swept and cleaned the inside, then trimmed back the unkempt landscaping, such that it was, until the place didn’t look so abandoned. On the following weekdays, he made breakfasts and lunches for the children, then saw them off to school, then flew down the road to the house to oversee the work that had begun, as well as do a large share of it himself, then flew back to the city to get Tilda, make supper, and oversee homework. He was busier now than when he’d welded by day and overseen the apartment building by night, though he was getting more sleep. He didn’t mind – this was the best kind of busy, because it meant better times were coming.

Still, he wasn’t nearly busy enough that Thran ever left his thoughts. He missed his tall, ethereal angel so badly that his bones ached.

At least he was working on their future by reclaiming the house. The roof and gutters were almost finished. The plumbing was involved, but was proceeding well. The lead paint abatement assessment had been done, and the house had been cleared, which relieved Bard immensely. Not only did that spare Thran a huge expense, but it also saved a delay of at least a month, for no work could take place as long as the house was enclosed to attend to the lead paint. Consequently, he’d had the electricians start to replace the wiring. The results looked terrible –snarls of wire waiting to be snaked through the walls, and protruding wires that waited for fixtures to be installed. The junction boxes and switches would soon be in place, though not many of the light fixtures. It would be better to repaint the walls and ceilings before he installed the fixtures he’d stacked in a corner of the kitchen.

The furnace and air conditioning units had to be replaced, which was no surprise. Insulation needed to go in, too. He set that in motion. At least the newer systems would be more cost effective than the old ones, and safer for the children.

He refused to worry about how much of Thran’s money he was running through. Thran had no concerns, though Bard intended to give him a complete accounting once they could spend time together again. He wanted nothing to be a surprise, or to engender mistrust. He was careful to use only the most qualified and experienced firms to do the work, so that nothing would have to be done over again.

The nightly texts he and Thran traded helped him bear their separation a little better. Blessedly, Thran kept his messages light, without the charged banter he so loved, instead texting about what he and Legolas had done – the skating Thran had mentioned, a visit to the MOMA, another to the Hayden Planetarium, dinners out to sample several exotic cuisines, and long walks.
Are you neglecting your morning rituals? Bard typed, smiling.

Legolas sleeps almost as much as he eats. Never up before 10 or 11. Lots of time for rituals

How’s your fridge holding out?

Empty every 2 days. How do you feed 3???

I use a shovel esp w/ Bain

Our first night L ate full supper. By the time we walked home we had to stop for pizza where we ate last Sat

Did he leave you any, lol?

I ate half a slice. We brought home half of the pizza. Gone when I got up next a.m.

Ouch, sounds like Bain

Pizza may be good way for them to bond. Or mass quantities of anything

Good idea. I can make or we can go out. Weekends are best, as S, B, & T have homework weekdays

Understood. Will let you know. Hope for Fri. How is house?

Lead testing passed! Big deal. Roof/gutters done. Heat/AC nearly done. Wires/pipes/insul next

It goes well, then

Will give complete acctng when c u

Not worried. Will be fine

Kitchen soon! Need to pick colors so can paint before refinish floors

If there on weekend, can choose colors. Or you can choose. I don’t mind

Ideas on how to get L to house?

Fence in the ballroom

Who’ll fence with him?

I will. Knives aren’t only weapons I learned from Russian mafia

The medieval Russian mafia, given the weapon

Funny saint!

Can’t wait to c fencing. And u. Miss my angel

U have no idea how much I miss my saint. Hope for Friday pizza!

I do. GTG. Long day tmw. Take care of yr wings

U r my wings. Take care of yourself until I can, lyubov moya
Stay safe for me, too, fy nghariad. Night

Night

Bard turned off his mobile, smiling. He shut his eyes, and thought about Thran, three floors above him, likely smiling as he lay in bed. He was probably naked, with his white silky hair spread across his pillows like a beautiful mantle. In a few weeks, Bard intended to shed his plaid flannel sleep pants and tee, climb into that bed, and wrap himself in that white silky mantle.

What happened after that...

Bard sighed. If he thought about that now, he’d never get to sleep. So he tried not to.

That was damned near impossible, but he had a secret weapon that worked no matter what he thought about. Exhaustion.

He was asleep in minutes.

* * *

Bard’s mobile buzzed at two the next afternoon. He was at the house, talking to a contractor to determine what millwork to use in the third floor rooms.

Can I call u? he read from Thran.

I’ll call u in 10, he typed. He wrapped things up with the contractor, then keyed his speed dial for Thran.

“How’s my angel?” he said, when Thran answered.

A chuckle. “Do you know how much I enjoy it when you call me that?”

“No, but I’ll let you tell me in detail one night before too long.”

“You certainly will. I have my test results. Yours are likely in your mailbox.”

Bard grinned. “I’ll check as soon as I get home. Good news?”

“As pure as my hair.”

“That’s pretty damned pure. Don’t know if I can live up to that.”

“I hope you can. About Friday...”

“What about it?”

“Five-thirty at the famous corner pizzeria?”

Bard grinned. “That’s great! You think he’s ready, then?”

“He has been home long enough to tire of just his father’s company.”

“How do you want us to play it? Have you said anything to him about you and me?”
“Only that a friend has a son about his age who enjoys soccer and pizza.”

“Sig will be mum. I don’t think Bain or Tilda have made the connection about you coming to the house yet, though I’ve learned that children are a lot more aware of things than they sometimes let on.”

“Things will progress as they progress. I admit that I am impatient for them to do so.”

“If things go well, do you want to spring the plan about the fencing on Saturday? It’ll be a tight squeeze in the truck, but we’ll manage.”

“I would like that very much. Oh, he is out of the shower. I must go.”

“See you Friday, then. Miss you, fy nghariad.”

“And I you, lyubov moya.”

Bard went back to the concerns of millwork and paint with anticipation.

* * *

Thran’s mobile buzzed. It was late, and he was in bed. Legolas was in his room, plugged into his computer playing a video game, so Than picked up his mobile. Yes, it was Bard. Even though it was only a text, it was still a welcome reminder of the saint three floors below him.

*Pure as your hair,* it read.

Bard’s blood work had come back, then. Smiling widely, Thran typed quickly.

*I had no doubt. You are a saint, after all*

*Not for much longer. Want you*

*I am just as eager. Soon*

*Not soon enough. Sleep well now. You won’t later*

*How am I to sleep now, if I think of all the ways we will not sleep later?*

*Try home renovation. Even if you came down here, I couldn’t stay awake for long. Tired*

*Don’t hurt yourself, lyubov moya*

*It’s a good tired. Working on our future. Nothing better*

*I wish I could be there to help*

*U r w/ Legolas, and u r doing yr dance rituals. That’s help. Can’t wait til Fri to meet him. And c u*

*I miss you, too. So sleep well now. Soon, you won’t, either*

*Can’t think of anyone I’d rather not sleep with, ha, ha*
Thran chuckled softly as he typed. *Funny saint. You won’t laugh when I tie you to the bed and have my way with you

*LOL you don’t want to tie me. Think what that would keep me from doing to you

Bastard saint. I am wide awake now

Paybacks are hell

Hell with you is paradise. Until Friday, saint

Until Friday, angel

Thran set his mobile on the nightside table, and settled under the covers again. He closed his eyes, and thought about the day when he’d reach under the covers for the dark velveted body of the saint next to him. No matter what position they chose after that, it would be paradise.

* * *

On Friday, Bard picked up Tilda from school early and came home to find Sigrid already at her homework. Bain came in not even a minute later, panting from his pickup soccer game.

“Into the shower with you, Bain,” Bard pointed, as he hung Tilda’s coat beside his on the hooks by the door.

“Now?” Bain protested, yanking off his cleats. “I’m starving, Da! I’ve got to have something to eat now!”

“We’re having a treat tonight,” Bard explained, as both of his daughters looked up at him. “Pizza at Iolanda’s. Once you’ve showered.”

“Sweet!” Bain yelped, dropping his cleats and dashing to the bathroom. “I’m halfway washed already!”

“What’s the occasion?” Sigrid asked from the table where she typed on her homework.

“A good one. Bain, hold on a moment, so you can hear, too.”

“You said get in the shower, so I’m going, but now you want me to stop? Da, there’s pizza waiting!”

“It’ll wait for a minute longer. Remember when I told you that Thran’s son was coming home from his school?”

Sigrid gave him a look. When Bard winked at her, she looked back at her computer, shaking her head and smiling.

“I remember,” Tilda said helpfully. “You said his name was Legolas, and he likes fencing and archery.”

“That’s right, Til. He’s a year older than Bain. He doesn’t know any children here, and Thran wondered if he could introduce Legolas to you all so he’d know some. It turns out that Legolas likes pizza almost as much as Bain does, so Thran thought that pizza would be a good way for him to get
to know all of us, and for us to get to know him.”

“Whatever. As long as there’s pizza,” Bain shrugged, licking his lips. “So can I shower now, Da?”

“Just one more thing. It sounds like Legolas is pretty quiet, so you three take it easy on him. Show him a good time. All right, Bain. Go.”

“Gone!” Bain claimed, as he dove back into the bathroom.

“Do you think Legolas would like a picture?” Tilda asked thoughtfully a few minutes later. “I could draw him one.”

“That’d be a kind thing for you to do, little doll. I think he’d like a picture. What are you going to draw?”

“Maybe a picture of him with his bow and arrow – wait, I don’t know what he looks like.”

Bard fished out his mobile. “Thran sent me a picture. Let me find it.” He paged through his photos, mostly of his children, and found the one Thran had taken of his son skating at Rockefeller Center. “Here it is.”

He came to the table so Sigrid could see the picture, too; she and Tilda bent over Bard’s mobile to study it.

“Does he have white hair, too?” Tilda said.

“I don’t know,” Bard admitted. “I think it’s blond.”

“His hair’s almost as long as Thran’s is,” Sigrid agreed, squinting at the picture. “Wait... is part of it green?”

Bard chuckled. “Just the two braids in the front, or so Thran says. But they might change to blue before long.”

Tilda frowned, still concentrating on the picture. “He’s skating?”

Bard nodded. “So he is.”

Sigrid looked up at Bard. “Wow. Skating, archery, fencing... he’s good at sport, all right.”

“I think he’s learning to ride a horse, too. So yes, very good at sport.”

“Sport?” Bain came back into the living room, still rubbing his hair dry. “Who’s good at sport? Legolas?”

Bard nodded.

“Do you think he likes soccer?”

“That gives you something to ask him,” Bard smiled.

“Hey, is that him?” Bain leaned forward to look at Bard’s mobile in Sigrid’s hand. “Wow, he’s skating? Maybe he likes hockey.”

“That gives you something else to ask him.”
“Cool. When do we go?”

Bard took his mobile back from Sigrid. “It’s nearly five now. We’ll meet them at Iolanda’s at five-thirty. So get dressed, Bain. Something without holes in it.”

“Can I wear my soccer jersey?”

“Only if it’s clean.”

“It’s sort of clean. Only one practice.”

Bard smothered a grin. For Bain, that was sort of clean; for anyone else it would be rank, but in the scented atmosphere of a busy pizzeria, no one would notice.

“Fine. As long as it hasn’t got any holes.”

“Yes!” Bain ran off to find the cleaner of his two jerseys.

Tilda had collected her paper, crayons, and colored markers and arranged them next to Sigrid’s things on the table. She chose a marker, considered her paper for a few seconds, then started to draw. Sigrid shared a fond smile with Bard, then gathered her papers and shut off her computer. Bard ducked into the shower to wash off the day’s construction efforts, but Sigrid was waiting for him when he came out of the bathroom to find a clean shirt to wear with his jeans.

“Why don’t you wear that nice new Henley you got recently?” she suggested with a mischievous smile as Bard considered the options in the drawer under his bed.

“Hm, that sounds like a suggestion,” he said mildly. He’d resisted the urge to wear Thran’s shirt all week, not willing to waste it on a construction site. He’d had to wash it, so it didn’t still smell like Thran, but the luxurious touch of the soft fabric was a delicious reminder of him. He pulled it out and armed his way into it. “It’s a very nice shirt.”

“It certainly is,” Sigrid said, standing beside him. She lowered her voice. “Does Legolas...?”

Bard shook his head. “Let him get to know us first, okay? Be nice.”

“I feel like a fellow conspirator. Does that make me an adult?”

“No more than it makes the rest of us,” Bard chuckled. “Still... thanks, Sig.”

Sigrid patted his arm. “It’s good to see you so happy, Da. And we’re getting out of here.”

“We’re getting out of where?” Bain asked, coming out of his room with his soccer jersey, jeans, and battered trainers on.

“Out of here, as soon as Tilda’s finished her picture. Pizza, remember?” Bard replied smoothly, with a wink at Sigrid.

“Then hurry up, Til!” Bain exhorted his sister. “I’m starving!”

“She’ll be done in a minute, you. Tie your shoes while you’re waiting.”

“You’d better find yours, Da,” Sigrid pointed to Bard’s bare feet. “Before Hurricane Bain erupts down the stairs.”

By the time Bard had put on his shoes and socks, Tilda had added the last flourish to her picture and
held it up for approval.

“Do you think it looks like him?”

Bard considered, cocking his head at the paper. The figure was obviously drawn by a child, but it was much better than a messy scribble by her contemporaries. She’d be a good artist before long. He smiled; if Tilda wanted art lessons at some point, soon he’d be able to pay for them. It was one thing for him to give up the things he loved, and entirely another for his circumstances to force his children to. “It’s good, Til. There’s his bow and his long hair, and there’s the archery target.”

“Oh! I forgot!” She turned back to the table, found her green marker, and added two careful squiggles. “I forgot the green braids.”


“Then let’s head out,” Bard said, grabbing his coat and Tilda’s from the wall hooks by the door. “Got your picture, Til?”

“Got it,” she said, holding it up. “I’ll roll it up so it doesn’t blow away when we get outside.”

They trooped down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk, and walked quickly to the pizzeria. Iolanda herself was behind the counter tonight, a pixie with spiky grey hair, five earrings in each ear, and a wide smile. She had to stand on her tiptoes to see over the counter and wave when Bard stepped in with his children. When he told her that two more would join them, she waved them to the biggest table in the place, the big round one in the back corner. Bard ordered a couple of pitchers of water – he’d learned long ago that water was free where soda and tea were not, and that was one more way to stretch his meager budget.

“Can we please order one of the pizzas now?” Bain pleaded, crowding into the center of the banquette, right at the corner between the walls. That was his favorite seat because he could watch the pizzas coming out of the oven as well as the front door to see who came and went. “I’m starving!”

“Give Thran and Legolas a chance to get here,” Bard counseled. “We don’t know what kind of pizza they like.”

“Thran ate pepperoni and onion with us,” Tilda remembered, putting her picture carefully on the table before she sat down.

“He did,” Bard agreed. “But let’s be polite. They invited us, not the other way around, so they get first dibs on choosing the pizza.”

“I hope they don’t like that white pizza,” Bain grumped. “Too much garlic!”

“I liked that one,” Sigrid said. “With the five cheeses and the seasonings. Though to tell the truth, I’m happy with any pizza that doesn’t have anchovies and pickles on it.”

“I don’t like the fish things, either,” Tilda told her sister. “They have whiskers!”

“I know!” Sig agreed, laughing with Tilda. “How can a fish have whiskers? It makes no sense.”

“Ugh,” Tilda made a face. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to eat any fish that has whiskers.”

Bard chuckled as Iolanda came with a tray of water glasses and the pitchers. “Evening, all! Anything to start while you wait?”
“We’ll wait,” Bard demurred. “They won’t be long – in fact, there they are. Give us a few minutes, and we’ll make up our minds.”

“Sure,” Iolanda nodded with a smile. “Take your time. Just come up to the counter when you’re ready. I’m short tonight – well, ha, ha, I’m short every night, but tonight I’m short-handed as well as short-heighted – so if you’d order from the counter, that’d be a help.”

“Glad to,” Bard assured her, then turned back to see Legolas come in behind his father. Only a couple of inches shorter than Bard, and crowned with silky blond hair – plus the green braids that hung down in front of his ears – Legolas had his father’s handsomeness, if not his ethereal quality. He was not as pale as Thran, though as he took off his coat, he revealed a frame just as slender as his father’s – this youngster had a ways to go before he filled out. His shoulders were broad and his arms were muscled under his olive green thermal shirt, evidence of his archery and fencing training, and he had the balanced carriage of a fencer. His jeans were a well-faded grey, and he wore black boots with lugged soles. The hand not holding his coat was stuffed in the front pocket of his jeans, and he had a quiet, shy air.

When Bard’s eyes met Thran’s, the jolt that shot through him felt strong enough to shake the ground under his feet. Under his leather jacket, Thran had on one of the soft Henleys that he favored, this one in dark burgundy; his usual black jeans; and his hiking boots. As usual, he made such simple, unadorned clothing look elegant. That smile, those clear grey eyes intent on his, the beautiful, erect bearing and silky movements of a dancer, and that crown of silky white hair...

Gods, what he wouldn’t give to be able to kiss his angel. But that had to wait for another time.

Bard offered a wave, not quite trusting his voice to be steady. Thran waved in response, just as silent, but he offered a word to Legolas and pointed towards their table. Legolas scanned the faces watching him expectantly, and dipped his head, perhaps a little nervous.

“Hello, one and all,” Thran began with a smile. “It is good to see all of you. This is my son, Legolas. Legolas, this is Bard, and his children, Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.”

“Hello,” Legolas said with a nod. He had a quiet voice, without Thran’s Russian accent. “I’m glad to meet you all.”

“Let’s sit down,” Bard said, and managed to put Thran between him and Legolas, Tilda beside him, and Bain and Sigrid beside each other in the corner.

“I made you a picture, Legolas,” Tilda offered, leaning forward to see Thran’s son around the table. She held out her paper to him. “Da told us that you like archery, so I drew a picture of you and your bow.”

Legolas took the paper and unrolled it, smiling at the drawing. “It is a good picture, Tilda. You even put in my green braids.”

“I did that specially. Though if you do a different color, I can draw you another one with the new color.”

“Thank you very much. It was nice of you to think of me.”

“So can we order the pizza now?” Bain asked hopefully. “I’m starving!”

Thran looked at Legolas with a wry smile. “Where have I heard that before?”

Legolas gave Bain beside him a tentative smile. “We should be polite and order something for Bain,
Father. He’s hungry.”

“And of course you are not, yes?” Thran teased. “Well, then, perhaps we should order just one to hold Bain until the rest of us have made up our minds.”

“Oh... perhaps two. Just to make sure,” Legolas amended.

“Of course. What would you and Bain suggest?”

The two boys looked at each other, not sure how to proceed. But Bain’s hunger was a great driver, for he grabbed one of the menus and opened it to the pizza section. He put it between him and Legolas on the table. “They have really good pepperoni here. And the sausage is really spicy. But this is the best one of all.” He pointed, and Legolas leaned near to read what Bain pointed at.

“‘Meat Extravaganza,’ ” he read aloud. “‘Ham, pepperoni, sausage, ground beef, and bacon, with extra cheese.’ ” He looked up at Bain. “That sounds awesome!”

Sigrid rolled her eyes, and Bard smothered a laugh at both her and the boys. Thran looked appalled, but so would any ballet dancer with an aversion to fat calories and carbs. He met Bard’s gaze with a comical wince. “We know what to get for the boys. What would our two jolies filles like, then?”

“I would like cheese, please,” Tilda replied gravely, drawing Thran’s smile.

“I’m happy with veggie, or pepperoni, or any combination,” Sigrid said. “Whatever you and Da want, Thran.”

“I’m fine with whatever you want, too,” Bard added.

“Then perhaps half with just vegetables, and half with vegetables and the pepperoni?”

“Good by me. Sig?”

“Perfect,” she nodded. “Maybe one of their big salads to share, too?”

“Of course. So a large for the boys, a small for Tilda, and a large for the rest of us, and salad. I shall pass the word.”

Thran got up to relay their order to Iolanda, which gave Bard the chance to watch Legolas and Bain get to know each other. The pizza order had broken the ice, and Legolas was asking Bain about his soccer jersey, and by the time Thran came back with a basket of rolls and a plate of olive oil, the boys were talking easily. Tilda reached for the jar of crayons that always sat in the middle of the table, and soon she and Sigrid were drawing on the paper covering the table. Bard took up a crayon to draw a house that looked like his, and both the girls leaned over the table to add trees with a swing and a gazebo. Thran added an angel on the roof, under the sun that Tilda added. Snickering, Sigrid added a stick figure with a tiny bow and arrow, and another kicking a soccer ball, but Legolas and Bain were too busy talking about sports to notice. Bard caught Thran’s eye and winked.

By the time the drawing had acquired a zoo, an airport, a bus, two giraffes, and an alien space ship, breadcrumbs were sprinkled over the paper, and the water glasses were getting low. Iolanda brought the boys’ pizza, which they met with a yelp. Two pieces were gone before Iolanda could bring Tilda’s small pie and the other large one. Silence descended as everyone dug in, making Iolanda grin as she refilled their water pitchers.

“This is really good,” Legolas managed to say around his third piece. “Really good.”
“Mmm,” was all Bain could manage, with a tomato smile.

Thran ate mostly salad, but he had a slice of the veggie part of the pizza, and half of a pepperoni one. He even sampled the ice cream that Legolas had afterwards. There was very little pizza left over, just one slice of the veggie pepperoni and one of Tilda’s cheese, but the boys scarfed those down without pause. They tried to convince Bard and Thran to order another large mushroom and pepperoni pizza to go to take home with them, but both men nixed that.

“I made gingerbread yesterday, if you’d like some,” Bard offered.

“Yeah, it’s really good, and we can play video games for a while if you want, too,” Bain enticed Legolas.

The blond looked to Thran. “Could we, Father?”

“It would be nice to do that, yes,” Thran nodded, and though he looked thoughtful, Bard caught the gleam in his eye. “For a while, perhaps?”

“Let’s go,” Bard agreed. “You know the drill, children. Iolanda’s busy tonight, so help her clean up. Crayons back in the jar, chairs pushed in, coats on.”

He and Thran went up to settle the bill – Bard insisted on paying his family’s share – while the children tidied the table. Iolanda noticed, and gave them a bright smile back with their change.

“Wait, thanks for cleaning up,” she said, scooping up a bag full of rolls and handing it to Bard. “You’ve got a couple of chow hounds. Maybe a few extra rolls will help keep them full until the morning, eh?”

“You’re a gem, Iolanda,” Bard grinned. “It was good as always.”

“Good to see you all again. Things are better, then, Bard?”

He nodded. “Lots better. Thanks for asking.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll see you more often now.”

“You’ll certainly see my son,” he laughed. “Have a good night.”

“You, too. Ciao!”

He and Thran shepherded the children out and back towards their apartment building. Once they got to Bard’s apartment, Bain drew Legolas to the sofa, handing him a game controller, and turning on the TV. Bard went into the kitchen to get the gingerbread, and Tilda settled at the table with her drawing things. Thran opened the cabinet Bard indicated for the plates, and Sigrid found the forks. She leaned against her father as Thran put the plates on the table and came back for the cake slicer.

“So are we all going to the house tomorrow?” she murmured in his ear.

“Shh. We’ll see. Give it a bit longer,” he cautioned. “But it looks good so far.”

“Excellent,” she rubbed her hands together with a calculating smirk on her face. “Our plan proceeds apace.”

With cake slicer in hand, Thran had paused to listen, raising his eyebrows at Sigrid’s exaggerated pose. “Ah, you have become our accomplice, then, ma chère? And a fine accomplice you make. I will see that you have an extra nice slice of the gingerbread.”
He gave the cake slicer an expert twirl and saluted Sigrid with it, smiling, which Sigrid returned with a flourish and a bow.

“Pirates, both of you,” Bard murmured, then looked towards the living room. “Gingerbread, lads!”

Bain and Legolas came to the table only long enough to wolf down their pieces, then returned to the sofa to continue their game. Tilda and Sigrid took longer to finish theirs, then Tilda fetched a book for Sigrid to read to her. They sat at the table, Tilda drawing as Sigrid read, so Bard and Thran retreated to the kitchen to talk quietly.

“Tea?” Bard asked. When Thran nodded, he filled the kettle at the sink. “There’s the caddy. Pick your poison.”

Thran found cups, then opened the caddy, passing the package of green tea to Bard. When Bard reached for it, he held onto Thran’s fingers.

“Missed you,” Bard whispered, not letting go.

Thran squeezed Bard’s fingers back. “I also. Hurts here.” He pointed to his chest.

“Know the feeling, Gods, I know. I want to hold you.”

Thran released his fingers, leaving the tea packet in Bard’s hands. He moved the two cups closer to the stove, which let him press his hip against Bard’s. He brushed a quick, surreptitious kiss on Bard’s temple, his breath catching. Bard returned the caress before they moved apart.

“Sig, you want any tea?” Bard asked, forcing his voice even.

“No, thanks, Da,” came Sigrid’s voice.

“You’ve got to come out to the house tomorrow,” Bard whispered. “I can’t go another week like this.”

“Then let me set that in motion,” Thran whispered back, his hand touching Bard’s arm only briefly, before going out into the living room.

“Legolas, we have been invited on an outing tomorrow. Bard has a house outside the city that he restores. It has a ballroom that is the perfect size for us to fence. Would you offer your father a match or two?”

Legolas looked up at his father with a pleased look of anticipation. “Really? It’s big enough for fencing?”

“I would like to, Father,” Legolas nodded. “I would like that very much.”

“We can take a picnic and make a day of it,” Bard said, coming behind Thran. Gods, the urge to touch the back in front of him was almost irresistible, but somehow he kept his hands at his sides. “I’ve got some work to do out there, but the ballroom’s yours all day, for as long as you want to use it.”

“Then we would be delighted to visit,” Thran said, turning towards Bard. “We can stop at the market on the way to collect a lunch, then be on our way. What time would you like us to be ready?”
“Nine or ten? On Saturday, the market will be crowded if we go much later than that.”

“Can you get up by then, Legolas?” Thran asked.


“Nine-thirty, then. You will have to get up in time to have breakfast before we go.”

“Will that give you time enough for your morning practice?” Bard asked Thran.

Thran nodded. “I will do only the yoga. The rest I will do in the ballroom, before the fencing.”

“Good enough,” Bard nodded.

“We should go in a few minutes, then, Legolas, so that you get enough sleep to get up so early tomorrow.”

“Can I finish the game with Bain first, please?”

“If it takes only a few minutes, and not half the night,” Thran replied.

Bard laughed. “You’ve learned. Some of those things go on for hours.”

“This one is a short one, Da,” Bain called from the sofa. “Fifteen minutes.”

“That’s fine, Bain.” Bard came around Thran to pick up the cake plates and forks. “We’ll have time to drink our tea.”

The kettle whistled, Bard poured the water into the teapot, and ran enough water in the sink to wash the plates and forks. Thran took the dishtowel to dry each one as Bard finished it, his fingers brushing an occasional touch on Bard’s hand. They didn’t speak, but at least they were able to look at each other. When the plates and forks were put away, they sipped their tea in silence, leaning side by side against the counter. It was as much comfort as torture, for while they were physically close enough to touch, they couldn’t. Bard sighed silently.

“This is going to kill me,” he breathed.


“I will if you will.”

Thran hummed. “It is not easy.”

“No. I’m going to hug you tomorrow no matter what it takes.”

“I need that as badly as you. But tonight, it is the children’s hour.”

“We’re finished, Father,” Legolas called.

“Then it is time for us to take our leave. We will see you tomorrow morning at nine-thirty, then.”

“We’re looking forward to it,” Bard said. Gods, how badly he was looking forward to it bore no contemplation. “Just knock on our door when you’re ready, and we’ll head for the market.”

“Until then,” Thran nodded. “Sigrid, Tilda, good night, mes jolies filles. Bain, good night. You were good to host Legolas so well. Bard, thank you for the gingerbread.”
“Thank you for the pizza. Legolas, it was nice to meet you at last. I’m glad you and your father will be with us tomorrow, too.”

“I had a lot of fun,” Legolas said simply, his smile a little wider than it had been when he’d first met Bard. “And I look forward to tomorrow. I’ve missed not being able to fence, so I appreciate you giving me the chance.”

Legolas went to Tilda. “Thank you for the picture, Tilda. I like it very much. I’ll put it on my wall upstairs.”

Tilda put out her hand, which Legolas took. “You’re welcome. And thank you for my pizza, too.”

Thran and Legolas walked to the door, collected their coats and boots, and went outside.

“Good night,” everyone chorused, and Bard had just a second to catch Thran’s eye before he went up the stairs after Legolas. He was sorry for Thran to leave, but at least he would see more of him tomorrow. And somewhere, somehow, he’d find a private moment to tell his angel how much he missed him.

By the time he’d shut the door, Bard had started a solo game on the TV, Tilda had gone back to her drawing, and Sigrid had gathered up her homework. There was little to clean up, so Bard eased into his chair to think about tomorrow. When Sigrid headed to her room to work, she squeezed his shoulder, drawing his gaze to hers. She winked as she passed by.

Later, once the children had gone to bed, Bard put on his flannel sleep pants and ratty tee, and got into bed with his mobile.

*In bed yet?*

*Damnably alone. Want you now!*

Bard exhaled. *If only. Can you die from lack of an angel?*

*From lack of a saint, too*

*All I want for Christmas is an angel in my arms*

*Do you celebrate Christmas?*

*We do. No room for a tree in the apartment, but we do gifts and dinner. Do you?*

*We do. No tree, either, but gifts. Next year, Tilda’s tree*

*Yes*

*Do you want to do Christmas together? A dinner would be nice, Thran texted.*

*It’s next Friday. Turkey again, or something else?*

*Discuss tomorrow. Perhaps ham?*

*What, no poultry?*

*Funny contractor. One day of ham will not kill me*

*Children like ham. Legolas?*
Loves it

So ham. Wish I could have held you tonight

I die of skin hunger. Would settle for us nested on sofa

Wouldn’t even need to watch a film. Just nest

Mmmmm

So go to sleep. Make tomorrow get here sooner

I hear and obey, my saint

Miss you too much to make a snarky comment. Gods I love you

I love you, too. See you tomorrow

You, too, angel

Bard sighed, switched off his mobile, and put it on the floor by the bed. He shut his eyes, and willed himself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. - In the interest of moving the story along, I did a little judicious rewriting of Chapter 12 to preclude the need for poor Bard to go through lead paint abatement on his beautiful house (required in the US for all houses built before 1978). This is a bear that takes weeks if not months to do properly, and costs more than many cars do. Most of you won't care about this, but for you sticklers of home repair, I had the previous owner of Bard’s house take care of this horrendous chore.

None of us want that kind of delay to deter Bard and Thran from *finally* getting past the wishing and sighing stage, do we?
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint venture forth with blades in hand - fencing blades, and saw blades. But with four children in tow, it'll be hard for them to cut up in any but the most decorous fashion. Words may have to suffice.

Words between frustrated lovers are still potent weapons.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

Mab i ast = son of a bitch (Welsh)

“Legolas?” Thran edged open the door to his son’s room. It was completely dark, given the pulled shades and drawn draperies. An unmoving lump sprawled across the bed. “It is quarter of nine o’clock, synok. Do you want porridge, or eggs?”

“Mfph,” came from somewhere in the middle of Legolas’s bed.

“Porridge, then?” Thran persisted, smiling. He recalled his own bleary mornings in countless dance academy dormitories. Why was every child a night owl, or at least as slow to rise as one? “Come, Legolas. I look forward to the rare chance to fence today. Porridge or eggs?”

A groan issued from the middle of the disarranged bed linens. “Ummm... wha...”

“Breakfast. Fencing. Immense lunch. Remember?”

Legolas sat up, his long, blond hair messy around him. A lot of it fell in his face, so a hand emerged from the blankets to brush it away. Some of it refused to go, and so the other hand had to join the first to urge the rumpled locks back. He blinked against the bright light coming from the doorway, and stretched – only to flop back down onto his back with a deep breath.

“It’s too early,” he wheezed.

“The world does not wait for sleepy children. It is a sunny day, though cold, but not so damp a cold as to be miserable. Come and eat something, or you will have to wait to get something at the market before we leave for the country. So... porridge, or eggs?”

“Um... both?” Legolas sat up again, and this time actually got his feet over the side of his bed. He was bare but for his baggy boxers. Thran smothered a giggle; the boxers had small cherubs bearing bows on them – Cupids, he recalled. He wondered what the story was about those. Despite the dim light, a slouch, and a fumbling rub of the eyes, the strength of Legolas’s shoulders and chest stood out. He’d filled in a bit more since Thran had seen him in September. He’d grown a couple of inches, too; he was already as tall as his fiery mother had been. Before the next year was out, he’d
likely be taller than Bard, who was a respectable couple of inches over six feet.

Bard. His breath caught for half a heartbeat. Gods, he was dying for lack of svyatoy yego, son saint, viņa svētais, his saint. No matter what language he used, none of them assuaged how badly he craved the easy company of a tall, muscular, gentle man with unruly dark curls and warm brown eyes. This was more than missing mere sex; it was missing companionship, understanding, love – his other half.

Not that Thran didn’t want to indulge himself in playing with Bard’s most companionable body... no, not at all. But that was no longer all that he wanted.

“The porridge is already hot. I will put on the eggs.”

“Hard boiled again?”

Thran looked back at his son. “That is my usual.”

“We’ve had hard boiled eggs every morning since I came home.”

“Would you like another kind?”

Legolas gave his father a half smile. “Do you know how to make another kind?”

Thran chuckled. “No, but if you do, perhaps you will show me, and I will make those.”

Legolas stretched again. “Is there a drop of butter in the fridge? Or oil in the pantry?”

“Of course not.”

“Of course not.” Legolas stood up for yet another stretch. “Then do you have a nonstick pan?”

“I have no idea. Come look. If not, then I will get one, and also butter the next time we go to the market.”

Legolas shook his head, smiling. “You are still my inadvertently funny father.”

“All ballet dancers are eccentric,” Thran waved his hand, playing along with Legolas’s teasing. “This one prefers to be careful about what he eats rather than to ruin his teeth through constant purges.”

“I’m glad of that. I’ll dress, and then see about the eggs.”

Thran went back to the kitchen to look for some sort of pan. He had bought a set of them, but he’d never ventured so far as to use the skillet. Skillet meant frying, and frying meant oil, and oil was not something he ate a lot of, just enough to keep his hair shiny and his body well maintained. It was easier just to boil his chicken, or to roast it in the small square pan that had come with the set.

He hoped Bard could tell him more about cooking. Legolas didn’t want to eat every meal in a restaurant, so he needed to learn some simple things to keep Legolas properly fueled. Tomorrow, he would make a soup in the biggest stovetop pan –

“How many eggs do we have?” Legolas asked, appearing in a tee shirt and baggy pajama pants. Was that what Bard wore when he slept? Hmm. Thran would find several ways to convince his saint of the delights of sleeping nude –

“A dozen eggs.”
Legolas stuck his head in the fridge. “No butter, as you said.” He went through the pantry, pulling out a jar. He unscrewed the lid to sniff. “What’s this? The coconut oil for your hair? You can eat this, you know.”

“I had not assumed otherwise, given that it is made of coconuts, which as I recall are still your favorite chocolates in the box.”

“Mmm,” Legolas wiggled his eyebrows at his father. “So eggs and oil. Any spices or herbs?”

Thran pointed to the canister of parsley proudly. Legolas gave him a surprised look, but took out the parsley and the pepper beside it.

“Now, a pan? Hmm. You’ve gotten some new ones since September.”

“I bought a set just after you left, because I thought that I should learn to cook.”

“Good, you have a skillet. So, scrambled or fried?”

“Which has the least amount of oil?”

“Scrambled.”

“Then show me how to make those.”

Legolas put the skillet on the stove, turned it on – just to medium, Thran noted – and cracked six eggs into a bowl. He put a small dab of the coconut oil in the pan to melt, then smeared the liquid oil over the entire pan surface. He stirred the eggs to a uniform yellow, then poured them in the hot pan.

“Cooking tools,” Legolas said, when he couldn’t find a spatula. “We need to get you some cooking tools.”

He used a fork to stir the eggs around until they were soft curds, sprinkled them with parsley, stirred a bit more, then shoveled them out onto a plate. After adding salt and pepper, he offered his father the fork. “Have a bite.”

“Very good,” Thran discovered.

“And not too much oil.”

“Not too much oil. So now I can make soup and scrambled eggs. I progress.”

“And last night you ate pizza. Amazing!” Legolas pretended to marvel as he took his plate to the kitchen table and sat down. Thran spooned bowls of porridge for them both, brought them and a bowl of cut-up fruit to the table, and sat down. As he sprinkled the bananas and apples on his cereal, Legolas gave him a look.

“What kind of soup can you make?”

Thran sprinkled cinnamon on his porridge, then poured vanilla almond milk – unsweetened, of course – into his bowl. “Chicken with carrots and celery. And the parsley. It is chicken noodle soup without the noodles.”

“What, did you find one of those cooking shows on the net that showed how to make it?”

Here it comes, Thran thought, but he kept his face serene as he began his breakfast. “I had a cooking lesson from Bard, whom you met last night.”
“Oh?” Legolas seemed to mull that over. “Why’d he give you a cooking lesson?”

“I was very rude to him and his children the day the ballet company suspended my contract. I had had to walk home in the rain, and so was soaked and chilled. I came home to a cold apartment, for the radiators were not working. Bard was the night super on duty that day, and I was very angry because I thought he had ignored my request to fix the radiators. But he is a patient man, and fixed the radiators without complaint, even though he was not the one who had ignored my repair request. I apologized, of course. He took pity on me and taught me to make the soup so that I did not get sick from the weather.”

“Did he introduce you to pizza, too?”

Thran chuckled. “I know what pizza is, Legolas. I know what nachos and burritos and chimichangas are, too – even hamburgers and potato chips and ice cream. That does not mean I eat them.”

“But did you eat pizza with him before last night?”

“Even worse. I had Thanksgiving turkey and cranberry sauce and potatoes with Bard and his children. I made the broccoli. We plan to share Christmas dinner, too. Perhaps ham?”

“Mmm. Ham!” Legolas brightened, then went back to his speculative look. “He seems like a normal guy. What’s he got to do with the ballet?”

“Nothing,” Thran shook his head. “He is a gifted metal sculptor. Perhaps he will show you some of his work at the house today.”

“So why does he live here, if his sculpture’s out there?”

Thran gave his son a look. “For his children, mon cher. He needed another job to support them after their mother died, and so he sacrificed for his children. Soon, maybe he will be back to his sculpture, once he has finished his house.”

Legolas turned his attention to his eggs, shoveling them down in fewer bites than seemed physically possible. Porridge came next, all that Thran hadn’t eaten topped with the remains of the fruit. Thran wondered if his tenacious son would let the conversation lapse, so he drank his tea quietly and waited. He didn’t know whether to hope Legolas let it go, or pursued it. But his son concentrated on his food and made no further comment.

When Thran had finished his tea, he got up to clear the dishes away, and pushed his sleeves up to run soapy water in the sink. He gave the bowls and cups a good soaping and set them on the dishtowel to drain. Legolas finished his porridge, and brought the bowl to the sink for Thran to wash.

“What blades will you choose today?” Thran asked his son. “I am very out of practice, whatever your choice.”

“Perhaps the foil, then? Smallest target area.”

“Not épée, to give you the best chance to score?” Thran teased. “Or sabre, to make the most of your speed? Not that it matters. You will soon outfence me, regardless of which weapon you choose.”

Legolas grinned, pleased at Thran’s prediction. “Your height will always give you an advantage at épée, Father. As for the others, it’ll be a while before I best you at those, too.”

“It will not. And when you do, I will be very proud of you.”
“You’ll still outdo me with knives.”

Thran put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “This is not a competition between us. I am not the fencer or archer you will be, just as you will not be the dancer I am. Take pride in what you do, not what another does.”

Legolas nodded, smiling. “I will, Father. So... I have blades for all three in the case. We can see what we feel like when we get there.”

“That is good. So, all is clean and put away. Dress, and we will venture downstairs.”

Legolas disappeared into his room to change out of his pajamas. Thran brushed his teeth, braided his hair, and put a warm sweater on over his Henley (not Bard’s, he thought with a pang, but Legolas would wonder why he wore such a shabby thing for anything other than ballet practice). He found coat and gloves, his red cashmere scarf, and a large zippered canvas bag.

“I’ve got the fencing jackets and masks,” Legolas said, coming out of his room with the mentioned pieces. “The jackets are clean, you’ll be glad to know. I did get those washed before exams.”

“I thank you.” Thran held the canvas bag open. “They can go in this. The only other thing we need is the blade case.”

Legolas returned to his room to fetch the blade case, and his coat. He pulled a slouchy knitted hat on his head, armed his way into his coat, and hefted the case. “Ready.”

Thran locked the door behind them, collected the bag of equipment, and went down the stairs after Legolas. Their footfalls were light, apt testimony to the years of athletic training that had formed both father and son. At Bard’s apartment, Legolas knocked softly.

“Hi!” Bain greeted them breathlessly, yanking open the door. “C’mon in, Legolas. We’re almost ready. Hi, Thran!”

“Hello,” Legolas ventured, coming after Bain.

“Are those your swords?” Bain asked eagerly. “Can I see them?”

“Sure,” Legolas agreed. “They’re not sharp or anything, but um, please don’t touch them?”

“No, course not. I’ll just look. C’mon, we can put your case on my bed, out of the way.”

“Hello, Sigrid, hello, Tilda, hello, Bard,” Legolas waved in passing as Bain pulled him into this room. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” the girls waved.

“Ooh, I’d like to see the fencing things, too,” Sigrid said, realizing what the boys were up to. “Come on, Tilda, Legolas has real swords!”

“Really?” the little girl looked up from her oatmeal. “I’d like to see them, too.”

She trotted after her sister, leaving Bard to meet Thran at the door.

“Hey, my angel,” Bard breathed, his eyes brightening. “You are a beautiful way to start the morning.”

“No more so than you, lyubov moya,” Thran murmured back. Pulling off his glove, he kissed his
index finger and touched Bard’s lips with it. “This is all I can offer now, but take it as a promise for what I would prefer to offer.”

Bard’s lips twitched in a perverse smile. He kissed his index finger and touched Thran’s lips, but didn’t stop there. He traced his finger down Thran’s chest and past his belt buckle to the zipper of his jeans, and circled there. “See you, and raise you.”

Thran’s eyes widened. “Don’t, you bastard. I already have too hard a time to control myself.”

“I can tell,” Bard poked the zipper of Thran’s jeans before backing away a step.

“Supremely arrogant bastard,” Thran growled under his breath, but a smile twitched at his lips. “One day, you will regret that you do that to me.”

Bard arched an eyebrow. “No, I won’t. And neither will you. Let’s rally the troops.”

He headed back to Bain’s room. “Come on, lads. Time to go. Tilda, finish your oatmeal and wash your bowl. And put away the milk.”

“But I didn’t leave the milk out, Da,” Tilda said in injured tones, coming out of Bain’s room.

“Then whoever did, put it away. Bain, come on. Legolas will show us everything as soon as we get to the house. So let’s get the kitchen shipshape, and ourselves out of the door.”

The children scurried – it was Bain who’d left the milk out – and soon were gathering coats and hats and gloves. Bard had a bag of tools to take and an empty cooler, Sigrid had her computer and school backpack, Tilda had a bag of drawing things and her books, and Bain had his ever-present soccer ball, so they were well laden as they came out onto the sidewalk. Bard’s truck was almost right in front of the door, so he opened the lid on the back to stow the bags, the cooler, and his tools, fastening everything down with bungee cords to keep them from shifting as they traveled.

“Okay, this’ll be a tight squeeze, but we’ll get it sorted. Tilda, you’re up front between Thran and me.”

“Legolas can sit in the middle in the back,” Bain offered, hopping into the back seat. C’mon, Legolas, there’s more room in the middle for your legs.”

Thran’s son climbed in after Bain, and Sigrid squeezed in after him with her computer cradled in her arms. Thran took the front beside Tilda, and Bard climbed in last.

“Everybody buckled? Good. Next stop, the market.”

They were still reasonably early, so they found a parking space not too far from the market, and soon emerged with several bags of provisions to stow in the back of the truck. Shortly thereafter, they were on the highway, heading west. Sigrid got Legolas to talk about his archery, and soon Bain could carry the brunt of that conversation. Thran asked general questions about the repair work, as if he were only making polite conversation, and Bard kept his side of the conversation just as neutral. Thran was relieved that the children sounded relaxed. Whether consciously or not, Bain’s genuine interest in all things sport was drawing Legolas out, so the time it took to get to the house passed easily. Before long, they pulled into the short lane. Today, however, they didn’t stop by the gate that guarded the path up the short rise to the house. Bard continued on to pull into a driveway that ended at the front corner of the house by an outbuilding - perhaps a garage? Bard had taken Thran up the rise the first time to show him the house to its best advantage, from the front.

After Bard parked next to the garage, everyone piled out of the truck while he jumped in the back.
Once he’d handed down all the things they needed to bring into the house, everyone had lots to tote.

“Once the construction’s mostly done, the carriage house will be empty enough to actually put a vehicle in,” Bard commented, leading past the garage and towards the porch steps. Thran let the others precede him, taking in the changes that had taken place since he’d last been here. The grass was mowed, the bushes were trimmed, the leaves were swept off the porch and out of the borders, and even though the outside paint was still worn, the place looked much less neglected. What had been a beautiful relic was still worn on the edges, but it was no longer a relic. Thran had not thought that his spirits could rise more this morning – he was already thrilled to be with lyubov yego, at the house that would soon bring them together – but the ongoing restoration heartened him even more.

The day was coming. It was coming. Thran had to swallow down his anticipation as he belatedly followed after the rest.

Inside, the most apparent change was in the just inside the entryway. What had been an empty, dusty space was clean and bright, if not yet painted. In the middle of the floor was Bard’s stylized antelope sculpture. Now that it was freestanding rather than mired in the clutter of the barn, its satiny finish glowed a warm caramel gold in the light of the open door and sidelights. The antelope rose on her hind legs, her front legs kicking out as she looked straight up, her curving horns making an elegant vertical arc from head nearly down to her tail. She stood nearly eight feet high, but as there was not yet a chandelier in place, the height didn’t matter.

“Da!” Sigrid exclaimed, touching one of the antelope’s front hooves. “Oh, Da! You put Hope the Lope back! You put her back!”

Sigrid let everything in her arms slide to the floor, even the bag with her computer, and flung her arms around Bard in a tight hug. The spontaneous embrace caught Bard by surprise, but he wound his arms around Sigrid and held her as she squeezed him.

“Of course I put her back. This is where she belongs,” Bard said, holding Sigrid close. He caught Thran’s eyes, and gave a self-conscious smile. “Come on. Let’s get everything in the kitchen, and then you can come back and give Hope a proper hello.”

Everyone followed Sigrid and Bard as they circled the antelope, passed through the dining room, and came into the kitchen. It, too, was much cleaner, if still echoingly empty. Part of the walls had been tiled in white subway tiles, though the grout was not yet done. Light switches and fixtures were in place. A large farm table now sat in front of the windows, albeit with only three chairs around it, but it was a good place to put their supplies for lunch.

“It looks so different,” Tilda said into the silence. “Nicer.”

Thran thought so, too, but kept his silence.

“It gets nicer every day, little doll,” Bard replied. “Who wants to show Legolas around? Or would you like to see the ballroom first?”

“I want to see the rest,” Thran said. “This is a beautiful house.”

“I’ll give you the tour, then,” Bard said, smiling. He was relieved, then. Gods, had he worried that Thran wouldn’t love the differences? The care and attention Bard had lavished on this place were already apparent, even after just a few days. What a spectacular place this would be before long!

“The wiring’s done pretty much all over, and the plumbing, so the place has water and bathrooms now,” Bard said. “Heat’s on, too, so we’ll be comfortable today. The roof’s done, and the gutters.
Nothing’s painted yet, and the floors will be refinished once the painting’s done. The entryway will be just the woodwork and a pale paint that makes the most of Hope...”

They went through the house, Bard describing what had been done, what was about to be done, and what would be done after that. The children ran ahead of them, but at no point did Thran feel safe enough to say much. Anything he said would reveal everything to everybody, not just Bard. So he schooled his face into only polite interest. Fortunately Bard understood his reticence, so wasn’t upset when Thran said little. Finally, when all four children ran down to the ballroom ahead of their fathers, Thran risked stroking Bard’s hair as they descended the stairs. Bard stopped stock still, looking back at Thran.

“It is perfect. Everything. You make our home,” Thran whispered, stroking the side of Bard’s face. “I see it everywhere. You have no idea how badly I wanted to tell you so.”

Bard tugged the end of Thran’s braid. “I saw it in your eyes. Don’t worry. Come on. The ballroom.”

Thran nodded, and they continued down the stairs. “Tell me about the antelope.”

Bard ran a hand through his hair. Self-conscious, then. “It was one of my first pieces. I’d seen an animal documentary about lions, and there was this antelope that no matter how many times the lions went after it, it just refused to go down. It was this beautiful creature, nearly too beautiful to live, but it was also one tough mother, the way you have to be in this world. I called my antelope Hope, after the one the lions couldn’t take down. It was Sigrid who called her Hope the Antelope, shortened to Hope the Lope. The entry hall was where she stood when we were here. I don’t expect Bain remembers, and I know Tilda doesn’t. But Sig didn’t forget.”

“She is back where she belongs, then,” Thran agreed. “I see why you did not want to sell her.”

“She would have been the last one,” Bard nodded. “Though if I’d ever had to... I think it would have killed me.” He glanced at Thran. “Ballroom.”

“Of course.”

A soccer game was already in progress when they came in.

“Father, this is amazing!” Legolas called. “It really is a ballroom. I didn’t expect it to be – it’s more than big enough for four fencing pistes. And the floor is perfect. Not too hard, not too bouncy.”

Bard laughed. “I guess the folks who built the place knew what they were doing about a suitable dance floor.”

“Then we must put it to good use, yes?” Thran grinned. “I will do a short barre first, to warm up.”

“I should do the same. I haven’t since before exams,” Legolas grimaced. “I can feel it.”

“Then let us make do with the scaffold,” Thran pointed at the end of the ballroom, where a structure of pipes was set up, ostensibly for the painters to reach the ceiling, but as the painting had yet to be scheduled, Bard must have put this in the ballroom just for Thran and Legolas to use. He glanced at Bard, offering silent thanks. “I do not think the painters will mind if we use it today.”

“There’s a pantry in the kitchen if you want a changing room. There’s a half bath in the sitting room, too. So... I’ll leave you to it. Sig, what’s your plan for the morning?”

“I’ve got a paper to write, so I’ll work on that for a while. Though... Thran, Legolas, when you do the fencing, do you mind if we watch?”
Thran looked to Legolas, leaving it up to him. But his son shook his head. “No, it doesn’t bother me. I’m used to people watching the matches, so if you want to, I don’t mind.”

“Sweet,” Bain muttered, his hands clenching in approval. “Um, yeah, Da, I know, I have a math thing to do before I watch. I know. So I’ll get on that.”

“I don’t have any homework,” Tilda said. “So may I stay in here?”

“As long as Thran and Legolas don’t mind. Make sure you listen to what Thran says about it. I’m going to finish some woodwork so it’s ready for the painters when they get here. Anybody need anything before I head upstairs?”

No one did. So Bard ducked out of the ballroom as if he had no interest in seeing Thran do his warmup.

Thran knew better. It gave him something to smile about – sigh about – as he changed his Henley, jeans, and hiking boots for stretchy knit top, warmup leggings and fencing shoes. As Legolas gathered his things to change, Thran went to the scaffolding. It wasn’t at exactly the usual height, but it was adequate for the day. He fell into the stretches and steps and folds, savoring the familiar routine, the quiet that always descended inside when he was at the barre. He sensed Legolas taking his place beside him, and Tilda at the far end by the garden furniture with her books and drawing things. Upstairs was the faint sound of footsteps as Bard made his rounds. Thran shut his eyes, and let the routine take him. This was the first one he would do in his emerging home, and he wanted to do it justice.

** * *

Bard gritted his teeth as soon as he was out of sight of the children. Gods, what he wouldn’t do to stay in the ballroom, watching Thran warm up for his fencing practice with Legolas! Nobility for the sake of their children was becoming nearly unendurable – first no touches, then no words, and now not even a look! He had the worst urge to march downstairs, cart Thran out of the ballroom over his shoulder, toss him into the truck, race down the road, cart him into the first vacant room in the first B and B he found, and then lock them both inside for a week with nothing to do but have at each other, until they were too exhausted to do more than fall into bed for another week.

That would be a shitty thing to do to Sigrid, leaving her to make do with three children.

Gods, he couldn’t stop being responsible even in his daydreams!

Sighing, he plugged in the miter saw, put the first strip of molding on the table, measured the space he had to fill, marked the molding, cut the molding, plugged in the nail gun, nailed the molding into place around the door. He measured the next space, marked the molding, cut the molding, nailed the molding. Repeat, repeat, repeat. He didn’t think about anything but the molding, so he got the whole room done in twenty minutes. That was enough, right? Wasn’t that enough to justify a break?

It wasn’t, but he went downstairs anyway, and let the gods bite anyone who complained.

Thran was still at the barre. So was Legolas, but Bard had eyes only for his father. The last time he’d seen Thran at the barre, he’d lost all control and plunged them both into a love affair that so far was laughably chaste. Only the presence of four children kept him from changing that. Behind him, Bain and Sigrid still worked at the kitchen table. Tilda sat at the garden table in the ballroom with her
drawing supplies arranged, but she was quietly watching the two at the other end. Legolas seemed to concentrate on stretches for his fencing, but Thran was inward, meditating on the small, controlled movements of each muscle from head to toe. Then followed the longer stretches into extensions of arms and legs that seemed as alien as they were graceful. Even more amazing than the extension was the seeming ease, as if there were no bones or joints to impede the movements. Not a muscle trembled, and neither gasp nor ragged breath ruined the illusion of infinite ease. No human could possibly move that way.

Of course no human moved that way. Only an angel did.

“He makes it look like anyone could do it, and yet no one could do it,” Sigrid murmured at his shoulder. “It’s no wonder he’s the best there is.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it, either,” Bard shook his head.

“You are both kind,” Thran said, as his arm swept down to his toes, then up over his head, his fingers gracefully poised. “It is funny, yes? How many years it takes to make so much effort look like no effort?” He looked back at Legolas. “I am ready when you are, synok.”

“Can you still do the Scorpion?” Legolas asked. His tone was so casual that Bard gathered that whatever Legolas had asked had had a history.

Thran laughed. “Why do you like that one?”

“Because it’s hard. Because it’s cool. Please?”

Thran took a deep, marshaling breath, then moved away into the middle of the floor. He leaned over and put both hands on the floor by his feet. He was so flexible that his chest touched his knees, and his elbows were bent. One leg went straight up, then the other, putting Thran in a perfect handstand. When Thran arched his back, his legs curved over his head - of course, that formed the scorpion’s tail. But the pose didn’t stop there; Thran’s feet came to rest on the back of his head.

“Whoa,” Bain whispered, peeking behind Bard. “How does he do that?”

“I have no idea,” Sigrid breathed. “No idea at all.”

Thran held the pose for a full thirty seconds, then gracefully uncurled. When Bard and his children all applauded, he offered them a graceful bow. “My son never fails to ask for that one. It is the hardest one I know. I think he asks me to wear me out and make it easier for him to win at the fencing. Are you ready, Legolas?”

“I’ll get the jackets and masks,” Legolas said, and fetched the bags from the kitchen.

As they put on the white jackets, Bard asked, “Where do you want us to be so that we’re out of the way?”

“The end by Tilda is fine, or if you want a better angle to see the exchanges, then one side or the other, but not both,” Thran directed. Legolas opened the case of blades by Bain, and the younger boy peered in eagerly.

“They’re all different?” Bain asked curiously.

Legolas shook his head. “There are three kinds, for the three fencing events – foil, sabre, and épée. Everyone usually starts with the foil. Sabre’s the fastest. I like épée the best. It’s the most like real fighting used to be a long time ago.”
He explained a little about the different blades and the different target areas allowed for each type of blade. Legolas said that the entire body was a valid target during an épée match.

“The foil is the lightest blade, and you can touch only the upper body to score a point. Father, do you want to start with foil?”

“Your preference, Legolas. If you want to go right to épée, I do not mind.”

“Épée, then.” Legolas took out two of the blades, and handed one to his father.

Both put on their mesh masks. Bard and his children moved out of the way to stand along one of the long sides, Tilda with Bard, and Bain with Sigrid. Thran and Legolas then positioned themselves opposite each other in the middle of the ballroom.

“En guard,” Legolas said. Both he and Thran came to their stances, épées ready, knees bent, opposite arms behind them.

“Prêt?” Legolas asked.

“Prêt.”

“Allez!” Legolas barked, and the two fencers began their dance.

Bard had seen fencing only rarely, mostly every four years when the Olympic Games appeared on mainstream television, so he didn’t know the intricacies of what Thran and Legolas did. But he understood the goal for one fighter to score a touch on the other while preventing the reverse from happening. Those opposing goals made the dance between the two fighters seesaw up and down the ballroom. Each time either scored a touch, they would reposition themselves in the middle of the ballroom to start again. Both were skilled fencers, but where Thran had more experience to anticipate Legolas’s moves and a longer reach, Legolas was more practiced, and a hair faster. Soon, his speed would best his father’s experience and reach. Both scored several touches back and forth, but whether one scored more than the other didn’t seem to be a concern. They merely enjoyed the interplay, the strategy, the expertise. They were not silent, either, both calling out to recognize a good feint or touch, or to comment on a missed opportunity. Even though Bard couldn’t see Thran’s face behind his mask, the alertness of his body, the intense focus on Legolas, and the swiftness of his moves revealed how much he enjoyed himself.

After about five minutes, Legolas called, “Arrêt,” signaling the end of their play. Both he and Thran eased out of their stances, and pulled off their masks to reveal matching grins.

“You are faster than ever,” Thran complimented Legolas easily, bringing an appreciative glow to Legolas’s face. “Soon I will not keep up with you at sabre, I think.”

“Your ankle is fine, Father. I didn’t notice any slowness or imbalance at all.”

“That is good,” Thran said. “I will not audition until after the holidays – now is the time I spend with you. But afterwards, when you are back at school, I have two or three scheduled. I will have to increase my practice to prepare for them. I want to be well healed by then.”

Gods, Bard had forgotten that Thran was on a forced hiatus from his dancing. Wouldn’t living forty-five minutes from the city be a burden on him, compelling him to spend so much time on the road? Did Thran even drive? Have a driver’s license?

_Calm down_, he ordered himself. Trust Thran to raise the issue if it was one. He wouldn’t have put himself to the expense of renovating Bard’s house if he didn’t intend to live here. And he had said on
the stairs how excited he was about this being their home.

It was moments such as this one that made Bard wonder again about dreaming, or the wisdom of falling so hard for an angel less than three weeks after meeting him. Talk about the sappy teenager routine...

Thran and Legolas began another bout, this time with the lighter sabres. Here was where Legolas’s speed shone, and Thran’s height didn’t offer as much of an advantage. But his dancer’s reflexes, so exquisitely honed over so many years, still made him a respectable opponent for his son. Legolas might be just fourteen, but the seed of a gifted fencer was already clear, and Bard hoped he’d get his chance at an Olympic berth in a couple of years. Thran had mentioned last night over their pizza that Legolas was already used to competing at a high level for his age group, but was unhappy with the coach at his boarding school, and so he would look into alternatives in the next week or so.

Did Greenwood Dale on the Lake have a fencing club, or was there one nearby?

He gulped. He was getting ahead of himself. Legolas wasn’t his son.

Was it a good sign to think about what it would be like to have another son join his children?

Gods. He hadn’t managed to kiss Thran in days, and here he was noodling about looking out for Legolas. If this wasn’t a ridiculous situation, he didn’t know what was.

Thran and Legolas finished their match, to the applause of their four spectators. Legolas offered them a pleased smile as he saw to the weapons, wiping them from one end to the other before carefully stowing them in the case. Sigrid asked to hold one, and then Bain, so Legolas got out the thinner foils. He directed them in how to take the proper grip, come to the starting stance, and follow some of the rules about carrying the blades safely. Tilda went over to stand beside Legolas, asking questions, though she didn’t ask to hold any of the swords. Bard ventured to Thran’s side to watch them.

“You are both very good. Legolas will be superb before long.”

Thran nodded gravely. “He will be more than superb. That is why I will find him a better alternative to his school coach. The man is an ogre.”

“I was just thinking that we should find out if Greenwood Dale on the Lake has a fencing club.”

Thran’s eyes took him in as he took off his fencing jacket and draped it over the scaffolding. “I am touched, lyubov moya. Thank you.”

“About those auditions...”

Thran shook his head, looking at the children and then looking back. “They will hold until a later moment.”

Bard jammed his hands into his front jeans pockets. “Mab i ast, Thran! There are things we need to talk about, and things we want to talk about, and we can’t figure out how to do either.”

Thran sighed. “I know. I know. Perhaps in a few days? Rest assured that I have no worries about the house. Do as you see fit for both of us, as you have done so well already. Whatever color you want to paint anything is fine.”

“Even bordello red for the bedroom?”
Thran’s eyes slid to his, and he smiled. “You would not do that, as red does not suit either of us. You are an artist. You know what colors would.”

“Peacock blue, with silver and grey,” Bard murmured without thinking.

Those grey eyes slid to his again, and a faint, pleased smile curved Thran’s lips. “I leave it to you. Now. I must stretch, so that the muscles do not tighten.”

“How long do you need? I’ll get lunch ready.”

“What, you will not watch?”

Bard snorted. “That... would not be wise. And since I can’t do anything but watch, better I take a rain check.”

“I would rather you take me.”

“So would I, you bastard. But I can’t, so stop teasing me before I embarrass both of us.”

“Payback for your provocation this morning.”

Bard held up his hands in surrender. “Stretch. I’ll get lunch.”

“Fifteen minutes, then. I will not draw it out.”

Bard headed into the kitchen without a backward look. It didn’t help. His imagination was more than enough to devil him without a single glance back at his angel.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The angel and the cherub have had their fencing match, but the pas de deux between angel and saint continues. Fencing is not the only game of strategy in play - is there a brief respite in sight?

Chapter Notes

I don't hold any copyright to the syndicated comic strip, Blondie. I only enjoy their antics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Thran had properly cooled down from the fencing, he came into the kitchen to find the children unpacking the lunch things they’d bought at the market. To his relief, Legolas was helping – he and Bain passed him carrying the garden bench from the ballroom, then returned to bring in the two chairs, to add seats around the kitchen table. Tilda kneeled on the garden bench to reach the tabletop so she could arrange fruit in a basket. Sigrid retrieved containers of cheeses and meats from the cooler. Bard took a large container of salad from a shopping bag, and got a stack of paper plates, napkins, and plastic utensils from a cabinet to put beside the salad. Everything went down the middle of the table, and Bard began to fill plastic cups with water from the sink, handing them to Sigrid to place around the table. As everyone chose a seat, Tilda sat down on the garden bench, but it was so low that she barely peered over the table.

“I think you need a taller chair, little doll,” Bard grinned, as Tilda leaned her chin on the table, making googly eyes as a joke. “You look like a head and nothing else!”

“Then you’ll have to feed me,” she said, opening her mouth wide. “Grape, please!”

Bard popped a grape into her mouth, then picked her up to drape her over his shoulder. She giggled as he plopped her down in one of the taller chairs so she could sit higher. “Do I need to get you a box, too?”

“No, silly Da, this one is tall enough,” she said, still giggling as she pulled one of the paper plates over. “Pass the bread, please?”

Bard reached for the bread Tilda wanted, then took a large bowl out of a cabinet and passed it to Thran. “Here, Thran. Salad’s easier to eat out of a bowl than on one of those flimsy paper plates. I got some roasted turkey breast so you don’t have to eat plain salad in the midst of all the gluttony. Low salt, low fat.”

He caught Bard’s eyes, touched at his thoughtfulness, but his only outward sign of his appreciation was a nod. “Thank you,” he said casually as he filled his bowl from the container and took Tilda’s vacated garden bench next to Legolas as his perch. As hands reached here and there, nibbling bits of cheese (Tilda), or scarfing down whole slices of meat (Bain), or arranging a tidy sandwich (Sigrid),
Thran realized that Legolas had already assembled an impressive sandwich that featured something of everything on the table but the fruit.

“That looks like a Dagwood sandwich,” Tilda decided. “Like the ones that man in the comic with the funny hair eats.”

“Impressive,” Bard allowed, smiling at Legolas, who smiled back.

“How do you manage to eat all of that?” Thran marveled, as Legolas took an unapologetically huge bite.

“Teenaged boys defy physics,” Sigrid declared. “Or maybe their legs are hollow or something. All that stuff can’t possibly fit in their stomachs alone.”

“You’re jealous,” Bain shot back, his mouth full of the enormous sandwich piled on his plate, a respectable match to Legolas’s. “You wish you could eat as much as Legolas and I can.”

“I wouldn’t eat half of the things you eat, Bain,” Sigrid said with a shudder. “That awful chili that you eat cold – cold! – out of the can, or that fake cheese dip out of another can. There’s no end to the things that you eat that I wouldn’t touch.”


“The stuff the school makes is okay. I don’t know if it comes out of a can, but it’s hot. It doesn’t have a lot of beans, but it’s pretty good if you put a lot of cheese and onions on it. I haven’t had the kind you like.”

“That’s because your school doesn’t want to poison you,” Sigrid said with a pointed look at Bain.

“Oh, Sig, it’s not poison! It’s good! Tilda likes it, don’t you Til?”

Tilda looked dubious as she nibbled her plain cheese sandwich. “It was sticky. I’d rather have Da’s soup.”

That sent a laugh around the table as everyone settled to their lunch. Bard hadn’t sat down yet - he seemed to find no end of other things to do, such as pass Tilda a napkin, or refill Legolas’s water glass, or wash the grapes. It dawned on Thran that Bard wasn’t just fussing – he was waiting to make sure the children had enough to eat before he made his lunch.

Gods. When was the last time Bard had eaten something other than whatever the children had left him?

Soon, Thran would take Bard to a very good restaurant, tell him to order whatever he wanted, and see that he ate every bite of it. No matter how much Bard protested. The man needed to eat, especially given the heavy manual labor he did every day. If he didn’t eat more, he’d never regain the strength he needed to work metal again.

“Everyone has enough,” Thran finally said, when he could endure Bard’s forbearance no longer. “Come, Bard. Make something for yourself.”

Ah, an expression of being found out washed over Bard’s face, but only for a split second. By the time Sigrid gave her father a look, Bard revealed only mild amusement. “I was waiting until it was safe to stick my hand in the melee. I didn’t want to lose an arm.”

Sigrid looked no more convinced than Thran did, but between the two of them they stared Bard into
the chair between his daughters. Sigrid handed him a plate, then the bread. Bard offered her a smile as he took two slices of the bread.

Conversation lapsed again as everyone eased their hunger. When the pace slowed, Bard got up to bring the boxes of brownies and oatmeal cookies to the table. As eager hands dove for the treats, Bard reached across the melee to hand Thran a smaller box.

“Even ballet dancers need dessert,” he observed, as he snared a brownie for himself.

The box held raspberries, one of Thran’s few indulgences. He gave Bard a half smile – oh, to be able to give him a much more overt sign of his appreciation! – and opened the box eagerly.

“This is one of the best desserts to have,” he observed just as blandly, and sat back to enjoy his treat. “Decadence that does not ruin the body.”

Thinking about all the ways he wanted to ruin Bard’s body made the raspberries taste even better.

* * *

Few leftovers remained from lunch. Tilda and Sigrid were so fond of the seasonal clementines that they each ate two, and Legolas and Bain needed no encouragement to finish off the meat. Thran and Bard sent the children back to play in the ballroom while they cleaned up the few remains.

“Here. I want you to eat this.” Thran handed Bard the container that held the last of the Swiss cheese. “I know it is one of your favorites, and it is not enough to take home. So enjoy it. As I did my raspberries.”

Bard gave him a sheepish smile, but took one of the slices to nibble.

“I see I will have my work cut out for me, getting you to eat enough,” Thran murmured, circling the table to stand beside Bard. His hand strayed around Bard’s hip, stroking lightly.

“Look who’s talking,” Bard murmured back, swallowing his cheese. His hand strayed behind Thran’s back to run up his spine, between his shoulder blades. “The dancer tells the welder to eat more.”

“The dancer knows to a nicety how to care for his body. The welder worries too much about others to do so for himself.”

“That’s the way the world works sometimes,” Bard looked down at the table.

Thran’s fingers traced up Bard’s back, slid into his hair, and tipped Bard’s face up to his. “That is about to change. Now, before we are interrupted...”

Thran pressed a quick kiss on Bard’s lips, or at least he had intended it to be quick, until Bard’s hand went to his nape, stroking his hair and urging him into a deeper kiss. It was impossible not to melt under that beckoning touch, but they didn’t dare let it linger too long. Bard bit at Thran’s lower lip as they eased out of the caress.

“I don’t know which is worse – these little scraps, or nothing at all,” Bard winced.

“I don’t know, either. Both are agony. We have to do something, lyubov moya.”
“I have an idea. I’ll text you tonight. It might get us a couple of hours.”

“Anything. Anything.”

“Later.”

Reluctantly, they eased apart to finish the cleanup. Thran snared the last piece of cheese to feed it to Bard in bites, something they both enjoyed. Thran unbent enough to sample a bite of an oatmeal cookie, even a bite of a brownie, if only to give the rest to Bard. Other than a few cookies and pieces of fruit, everything else had been eaten.

Legolas asked to fence another few rounds, to which Thran gladly agreed once lunch settled. In the meantime, Bard took them out to the barn to show Legolas his sculpture. This time, he pushed the barn door completely open, flooding the interior with light. He’d wiped the dust from the pieces since Thran had seen them, and the metal gleamed in the bright afternoon sun.

“Are you going to put these in the house, too?” Legolas asked. “Like the antelope?”

“I’ll put this one outside the solarium,” Bard replied, touching one of the branches of the pine tree. “You’ll be able to see it from the inside, right in the middle of the center window. It’ll really stand out when it snows.”

“It would look especially striking if you put it in the middle of a pond,” Thran said. “Like some of the formal Japanese gardens I have seen. Natural, but very stylized. Very modern, yet very old at the same time.”

“I like that,” Bard nodded. “I’ll give that serious thought.”

“What about the rest of them?” Thran asked.

“They’re all outdoor pieces, so they could go anywhere,” Bard shrugged. “I’m focusing on the house right now, but once it’s done, I’ll see where they fit. I may have to do a bit of landscaping to make the right place for them.”

He led the way further into the barn, back to where his workshop was. Had Bard had to sell any of his equipment? Perhaps not - an anvil and locked cupboards of tools and supplies were still in place.

“Is this where you made the balustrade for the front stairway?” Thran asked, pointing to the anvil.

Bard nodded, leaning over to pick up a stray piece of iron. He hefted it, a piece about four feet long with a twist in the middle. “This was one of the experiments I made to decide which pattern I wanted to use. This one was too thick and too elaborate. I ended up using thinner, plainer ones that looked better with the glass globes. Sigrid thought the globes looked like little pumpkins, so she wanted to paint faces on them. It took a long time to talk her out of it.”

Bard had smiled as he related his tale, an expression that Thran was happy to see. He suspected that for many years Bard had recalled such things only as bleak reminders of how much he’d lost.

“I think we ought to put Santa faces on them at Christmas,” Tilda decided.

“Do them as eggs for Easter,” Sigrid added, smirking at her father.

“Turkeys for Thanksgiving!” Bain suggested.

“How about we just admire them the way they are?” Bard shrugged. “Save the decorations for
“Where’s the fun in that?” Bain snorted. “Hey, Legolas, did you know there’s a bird’s nest in the gazebo? I can show you if you want.”

The boys ran off as Bard shut the door to the barn.

“Will you show me where you want to put your pine tree?” Thran asked.

“Sure. It’s around the back of the house.”

Sigrid and Tilda came with them as they paced over the grass until they faced the wide expanse of glass that fronted the solarium.

“Did you ever see one of those wild Welsh cottage gardens with everything growing over the edges of the gravel paths?” Bard asked. “I wanted to put one outside the solarium because when you came into the room with all the glass, you wouldn’t know at first what was inside and what was outside. But there isn’t enough light here to do it – it’s too northerly an exposure. It’s better suited to mosses and evergreens, which would also suit the pine tree better. Your idea about the Japanese garden is something I hadn’t thought of, but it’d look great. I’ll save the Welsh wilderness for the end of the house around the ballroom. Better light there, and it’d still look great outside those windows opposite the fireplace.”

He walked to a spot some twenty feet from the solarium windows and held his arms out. “Do I look like a tree, little doll?”

“You need more branches,” was Tilda’s verdict.

“I need help for that,” Bard said, abandoning his pose to sweep Tilda into his arms, He lifted her up to sit astride his shoulders. “There, you’re the top of the tree, Til! Stick your arms out!”

Laughing, Tilda did, and Bard held out one of his, keeping a tight grasp on Tilda’s legs with the other.

“What do you think?” He asked Sigrid and Thran. “More treelike now?”

Thran laughed, but it was Sigrid who spoke through her amusement. “You two make your tree sculpture look even better, Da. Even with Tilda, you make a spindly tree.”

“No respect,” Bard grinned, tumbling Tilda head over heels and into his arms. “Your sister thinks we make a poor tree, little doll. I guess we’ll have to go back to being people.”

“Or we could practice being a tree more,” Tilda smiled up at him. “That was fun.”

Bard ruffled her hair, sending a flutter in Thran’s stomach as he wished for Bard to ruffle his hair like that. As good a time as he was having now, he couldn’t wait until tonight to find out what Bard’s plan was to give them a few minutes together, without children.

“I’ve still got some more woodwork to put up, if you and Legolas want to get back to your fencing,” Bard said. “I’ve done one room’s worth, but I’ve got another one I want to finish today if I can. The painters can’t start for another week or so, but I’ve got a lot of things to do before they get here.”

“Is it hard, this woodwork?” Thran asked curiously. He’d never thought about how houses went together before.
“Not with the right tools. The boys are still looking at the gazebo, so you can come take a look while you’re waiting for Legolas. Come on, girls.”

They went back inside, shed their coats, and trooped upstairs to the third floor, where Bard had been working earlier. As he showed how he cut and set the pieces of trim, Thran savored the assured way Bard handled the wood and his tools. His saint might not be a dancer, but he had his own beautiful way of moving. His fingers caressed the wood, holding it firmly in place as he nailed it in place.

“No hammer and nails, then?” Thran marveled. “This is a wonderful invention, this nail gun.”

“My best friend,” Bard grinned. “No pounded thumbs, no dents in the trim; one little press of the button, and the nail’s in. The best invention in a hundred years.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Only a guy would say that.”

Bard turned that mild look on his oldest daughter that Thran recognized as Bard’s unique brand of quiet humor. “And what would a woman say? The hair dryer?”

Sigrid stuck her tongue out at her father. “That’s old fashioned, Da. Everyone knows it’s the ceramic plate hair iron.”

“A power tool, nevertheless,” Bard said, winking at Sigrid. “So let me get on with this before it gets too late and we have to head home.”

“That is what we call on the stage a cue to exit,” Thran said to the girls. “Let us leave the artist to his labors.”

“I want to look at the mural in my room again. I might want to change it. Maybe add a meadow around the trees. What do you think, Da?”

“That’s fine with me, but it’ll be a while before I get someone in to do that,” Bard shrugged. “I can paint a wall, but not a meadow.”


The two girls headed downstairs, but not before Sigrid gave her father a wink. He slowly reddened.

“She’s going to give someone hell one day,” he murmured, looking askance at Thran.

“She is a most able accomplice,” Thran replied, already reaching for Bard. He filled his hands with Bard’s buttocks to coax him close. “Let us make the most of her efforts. Give me the kiss I have craved all day.”

Fingers slipped into his hair to trace over his scalp. Thumbs stroked his earlobes. Lips nipped and nibbled before they enveloped his in a kiss. If Thran thought such a moment would ease the ache in his chest, though, it only made it grow even more unbearable – there was so much more he wanted. But he savored all that this moment had to give, and tried to contain his anticipation of all that would come later.

“You are going to kill me, if the lack of you doesn’t first,” Bard whispered in Thran’s ear, his breath warm against Thran’s skin, giving him gooseflesh. “I can’t stand this much longer.”

“Nor I.” Thran drew Bard’s hips against his and rubbed against him until the urge for more made him stop. “When our time comes, it must be a very long time. Perhaps an eon. I will need that long to
have enough of you.”

“You have no idea.”

“Let this be encouragement for you to eat more. I would not want to wear you out too early because you are malnourished.”

Bard chuckled and mirrored Thran’s position, taking Thran’s buttocks in his hands to keep them close. He kissed the hollow of Thran’s throat. “I’ll finish the kitchen before New Year’s, all but the floor. We’ll be here when the next year begins, with our children, in our house, even if we can’t live here yet. Then I’ll finish our bedroom, where I want to commit every sin I can think of with an angel.”

“It will be no sin, lyubov moya. Only sacrament.”

“It won’t get here soon enough.”

“If it were today, it would not be soon enough. But we will survive, if not easily.”

“Father? Are you ready to fence?” Legolas’s voice echoed up the staircase.

Thran eased away from Bard, his fingers stroking Bard’s lips before he leaned over the landing rail. “I am. I will be right down.”

He turned back to Bard, who faced away from him, leaning on the saw table, his head hanging down. He stroked Bard’s back.

“Finish soon, then come down. If I cannot kiss you, at least I can look at you.”

Bard looked up at him, straightened, then put a strong hand behind Thran’s head at his nape. He pulled Thran close for a fast, hard kiss.

“This’ll give you something to think about while you fence,” he whispered, then bit at Thran’s lips again before letting him go. “It’ll certainly give me something to think about while I do molding.”

“Please, lyubov moya, if you are as bedazzled as I am, then you must take care not to nail your fingers to the wall instead of the trim.”

Bard smile was crooked. “Good luck scoring against your son, too.”

He turned back to the saw and the pile of molding, then looked back over his shoulder to watch Thran turn and go downstairs.

Thran got six steps down the staircase before he realized that he had to rearrange the contents of his jeans. Part of him was far more interested in something other than fencing.

***

When Bard crawled into bed that night, he sighed. The day had gone well; his children had enjoyed themselves, though he wasn’t sure what Legolas thought about things. Thran had not been able to say much about what he thought about the work on the house, but the glow in his eyes had shown his pleasure. It was humbling that Thran had such trust and faith in him to make his house a retreat
for both of them. As fast as Bard could make that happen without compromising the quality of the work, he intended to do so. Tomorrow, he would call the kitchen appliance house he’d been working with to finalize the order for stove, fridge, microwave, and Thran’s small wine cabinet. The cost was a bit higher that he might get at some of the big box stores, but this place had guaranteed everything to be in stock and ready for installation before the end of the year. Having the kitchen ready would make it much easier for him and the children to stay there on weekends while he worked on things.

As for Thran... Bard closed his eyes and swallowed a moan. That ethereal ballet dancer had become his worst addiction, even though they’d had almost no chance to act on it. This was more than sexual appetite, though the gods knew that burned in both of them at a fever pitch. They fit together so well, complementing and balancing each other. Where Bard was practical and grounded, Thran conjured a glamour that turned their time together into a refuge and haven. Bard knew the value of a home and gave Thran the solid base he’d never had before; Thran understood the sacrifices to his muse, and encouraged Bard to follow his. Bard was well organized in running a household; Thran had the business savvy to protect them both.

He wished he knew what Legolas thought of this, if anything. Sigrid was firmly approving. He expected Tilda to take it all stride. Bain... he liked Thran, and had been so impressed with the fencing that he didn’t see any problems there. But Legolas, Legolas... He was a quiet boy, reserved if friendly enough, and more than willing to help with lunch chores. Bain’s interest in his fencing seemed to touch him. Maybe the strangeness of living in a boarding school had taught him to withhold immediate judgment. Bard couldn’t imagine a boarding school being so comforting a place, with so many people around but no family. He’d heard tales of the elitist attitudes of some, and the cruelty of hazing at others. Add the rarefied air that a rising athlete breathed, and the isolated existence with his father when he wasn’t at school, and who knew what Legolas’s reaction to Bard and his children really was?

He put all that aside as he settled into his pillow with mobile in hand.

*In bed, angel?* he typed.

A few seconds went by.

*Almost. In 10.*

Bard swallowed his impatience, shutting his eyes in the darkness. He willed himself to patience by going through the list of things he wanted to see to next on the house. First, order the kitchen appliances. Fill the holes in the walls where the insulation had been inserted. Prime the walls and trim. Decide on the paint and order it. Retile the downstairs half bath. Get estimates for a big tub in the master bath; an achy ballet dancer would need a place to soak in the warmth. Retile the bathroom. That white marble was expensive, but Thran would love it, so he’d spring for it. Bard was saving money by doing the tile work himself, so the budget could bear it. Figure out when to call in the floor refinishers –

*Now in bed. How are you, lyubov moya?*

*Missing an angel. Good day, though*

*Any day we kiss, even in so quick a fashion, is a good day*

*A better day would be doing more than snatching one kiss*

*There was more than one, lol*
Several small ones. Hardly enough

So what is your plan to let us savor more?

Bard felt his anticipation rise, as well as something else. *Legolas sleeps every morning to 10 or 11?*

*Now he sleeps to 11 or later. Why?*

*I order our kitchen apps tmw*

*Yes?*

*So I don’t have to go to the house Monday unless I want to*

*And?*

*Sig leaves at 6:50. Bain at 7:40. Tilda’s bus comes 8:45. That leaves 2 hours before Legolas gets up*

*As soon the bus leaves, text me, and I will be down!!!*

*Bard typed with a grin, Or I down on you, lol*

*Don’t tease. I already find it hard to sleep*

*You do that to me several times a day, not just at night*

*Stop!*

*Then tell me about L. Any indications? Did fencing help?*

*I think yes. He asked pointed questions at breakfast, but didn’t pursue*

*Boys are slower than girls. About 2 yrs. So if Sig’s got it at 16, L’s at about 12*

*Good to know. He seems to like you all*

*I wish they’d all instantly divine it. No fun being noble*

*None at all*

*Don’t want to push L, but if you want to come down tomorrow, that’d be great. If it’s better for L to let it ride, do so. We’ll survive*

*I’ll see. You’re wiser about such things than I*

*Just more children, that’s all. Better go. I’ll text you tmw if I don’t see you. Love you*

*Love you. And miss you*

*It’s coming*

*Soon you will be, too, lol*

*Thought you said no teasing?*

*I am not a good angel when I have the chance to devil a saint*
I bet you're damned good. Prove me right Monday, you bastard

You are one, too. So sleep well tonight and tmw, then. You will need it

So will you

I hope so. Love you

Love you. Night

Night

Bard set aside his mobile, swallowing hard. Gods, how was he going to get to sleep, thinking about Monday morning?

It took a long time.

Chapter End Notes

To all of you who asked for pictures of Bard's house, I tried to put them in a separate chapter, but it doesn't want to cooperate. So I put them on my Tumblr page:

www.eldritchmage.tumblr.com

Hope they help you visualize a bit more!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

It's Monday morning. That Monday morning, when an angel and a saint will have two precious hours alone together. After so many sighs and longing looks, don't you bet they'll make the most of it?

Chapter Notes

Yes, this is a chapter that earns the Explicit rating. Enjoy.

Thran lay cradled in silk and cashmere, but his thoughts were so charged that he struggled not to toss and turn in his elegant nest. It wasn't the faint murmurs of Legolas's computer game that needled him; rather, a few silent letters conjured on the tiny screen of his mobile had wound him more tightly than anything could, short of an appearance by the man who'd typed those letters.

In thirty-six hours, he would have two hours alone with lyubov yego.

Could any prisoner drool about release with any more intensity?

Before those two hours would arrive, though, Thran had to get through tonight, all of tomorrow, and tomorrow night, likely without sight or sound of Bard. Thran couldn't recall feeling so keyed up over a dance performance. The fire that was his anticipation of dancing before an audience was something he could manage with barre work, or yoga, or walkthroughs with his dance partner when there was one. But this... there was nothing to practice, nothing to do... nothing but wait.

He refused to think about what those two hours would bring. This was one dance he did not want to choreograph or direct. He wanted it to be spontaneous, without expectation, to unfold as it would. Anything less would do no justice to the moment.

So he tossed, turned, tried to calm his eagerness... and failed.

Eventually, he fell asleep.

Morning arrived.

He woke groggily. It was late, nearly eight. He usually rose an hour before that. He didn’t like to disrupt his usual routine, but he consoled himself with the knowledge that one more hour had passed between now and Monday morning. He rose, took care of necessities, rinsed his face, braided his hair, put on his practice attire. He put on Bard’s worn Henley as a comfort, but feeling it against his skin roused him so much that he had to take it off. The ragged shirt he wore the day he’d teased Bard at the barre was no more settling. So he put on the rattiest top he had, one that was not a Henley, because the raveled and faded fabric reflected the disorder of his mind.

There was no sound from Legolas’s room, not that he had expected there to be. His son had stayed
up well into the morning, for Thran had seen faint light glowing from under Legolas’s door when he’d gotten up in the night for water. He went to the barre, then, hoping for the familiar routines of yoga and ballet to settle him. Perhaps they did, but only as long as he was in the middle of them; once he stopped, his anticipation rose again.

He didn’t know whether to be annoyed or amused. Or to just declare the whole scenario too sad or ridiculous for words.

He showered, dressed, and ate his breakfast in distraction.

At eleven, when Legolas still showed no signs of rousing, Thran left him a note about going to the market, got his coat and market bags, and went downstairs. He looked at the door to Apartment 2A, but didn’t slow. He jounced down the front stairs and headed for the market, thrusting his hand deep in the pockets of his pea coat to draw it closer to his body. His brisk pace helped to warm him, and to burn off some of his agitation.

Once at the market, he perused the stalls slowly. He found some cooking tools. He bought some ground beef for Legolas to make the ubiquitous hamburger sandwiches, as well as cheese, ketchup, and buns. He bought a piece of salmon; Bard had told him how to cook it in the oven. More spinach, peppers, and leaf lettuce for salads. More eggs. Legolas went through more eggs than a fox. Butter and olive oil. Bread – wheat with oatmeal. A jar of peanut butter – natural, chunky – and saltines, things that Bard told him Bain ate a lot of. Two kinds of ice cream, another thing boys ate a lot of. More tea for himself. And raspberries.

His bag was getting heavy, so he carried the perishables to the stall register, paid his bill, and hefted the load over his shoulder for the trip home.

He look at the door to Apartment 2A on the way up, but didn’t slow.

After twelve. Noon. Legolas still hadn’t roused. Thran put his groceries away, washed his cooking tools, and found an empty drawer near the stove to hold them.

Legolas finally shambled out of bed while Thran was making his lunchtime salad, close to one o’clock. Despite his preoccupation, Thran grinned at the rumpled hair, the bleary eyes, the cartoon character boxers – someone with a bow and arrow. Yesterday, Cupid; today; superhero archer. Was Legolas’s choice of underclothing his doing, or one of his schoolmates’ ideas? It must not be an unpleasant one, or Legolas would have shed such outrageous things as soon as he’d gotten home.

“Who is that on your trusy?” Thran could not help but ask, as his son came in to give him a good morning hug.

Legolas yawned and tried to run fingers through his tangled hair. “Hawkeye.”

“And yesterday was Cupid. Do you invoke the mojo of the mythical to help your archery?”

Legolas snickered. “You said mojo.”

“Do you prefer magiya?” Thran deadpanned, arching one eyebrow. “Or perhaps I should just call them vashi volshebnyye trusy.”

“My magical underpants?” Legolas translated with a wince, drawing Thran’s smile. “Father, you get stranger every day.”

“Then I do my job well.” Thran heaped the spinach and lettuce in a bowl, added shreds of chicken, a few walnuts, then a handful of chopped carrots and peppers. “So what would you like to do today?
Or are you too sore from yesterday’s fencing for anything other than a film or a gentle walk to the park?”

“Yesterday was fun,” Legolas admitted, smiling, reaching over to filch a piece of chicken from Thran’s salad. “It’s always fun to fence with you, Father. But it’s also a relief to fence with someone who doesn’t think yelling makes the lesson sink in better.”

Thran hummed, poking Legolas’s fingers with his fork when his son tried to filch another piece of chicken. “There is plenty of chicken in the refrigerator, Legolas. As well as peanut butter and ice cream, even ground beef if you want to make yourself a sandwich. Leave my poor salad in peace.”

“Ice cream? Were you out to the market already today?”

“After my morning rituals.” He opened the drawer by the stove and brandished one of his new spatulas with a flourish. “We now have cooking tools.”

“You bought ground beef?”

“As well as cheese, buns, and ketchup. You will forgive me if I did not buy that strange plastic yellow cheese. I bought a good cheddar instead.”

“Any lettuce?”

“In the crisper.”

“Crisper?” Legolas gave his father an incredulous look. “Now you know what a crisper is?”

Thran opened the refrigerator door and pointed to the label printed on the front of the bin. “It says crisper. Right there. You do recall that I read English as well as Cyrillic, yes?”

“Yes, but you never said crisper before.”

“I never had a need to.” Thran gave his son an amused look. “You are in a mood this morning. Perhaps you need to eat something. Or perhaps vashi volshebnyye trusy are in a twist.”

Legolas gave his father a look reminiscent of the ones that Bain gave Bard at frequent intervals. His son was almost completely an American now, as Thran never would be, but the thought was more of a comfort than not. “I’ll get dressed, then I’ll make a hamburger.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, reappearing a few minutes later with his hair combed, jeans over his boxers, and a long sleeved tee shirt. Mismatched socks, but Thran made no comment. While Thran sat at the kitchen table, Legolas patted two lumps of the ground beef into patties, then assembled the makings of his sandwiches while the meat cooked. He sat down with Thran and set to with gusto.

“This is good cheese,” Legolas commented.

“I thought so, too. Nicely sharp. Yesterday’s fencing did you good, then.”

Legolas nodded. “A good piste, and a good opponent. You haven’t lost your edge, Father.”

“You have honed yours well. I am very proud of you. It is a joy to fence with you, and to have you here. I miss you when you are in school.”

“We Skyped a few times.”
“True. But to see you twitch and jerk on a little computer screen is not the same as when I sit across the table from you.”

Legolas finished his sandwich and started on the second.

“I hope you enjoyed our time with Bard and his children. I have become quite fond of them.”

Legolas gave his father a look. “The little girl, Tilda, was very nice to make me a picture. And Bain likes so many sports. He’s a good soccer player. I can’t say about Sigrid. She is very smart, I think. She works very hard.”

“Bard says she is very smart. Tilda will likely become a good artist, like her father.”

“So... you’ve spent a lot of time with them,” Legolas ventured.

“Not a lot. Only since I was injured. They have been very kind to me, and I like them.”

“I’m glad you have friends outside the company. I know it’s a good one, Father, but some of them are...”

“They are. I have looked at other companies already. I have no worry about any of the auditions. The more important factor will be to find a company where I feel comfortable. I will not dance for an overseer again if I can help it.”

“Will we have to move?”

Thran shrugged. “I will not worry about that until after the auditions. It is not a change to consider until then. But I do consider a different change.”

Legolas paused in his chewing. “What?”

The effort to remain calm and casual and assured was tougher than preparing for many of the ballets Thran had danced. “I like Bard very much. I will ask him out before long.”

Legolas blinked, and his hamburger was cradled in his hands, forgotten. “You mean... ask him out... on a date?”

Thran nodded.

“So he’s...”

Thran nodded again.

“How does he have three kids if he’s gay?”

“How did I have you?” Thran took a bite of salad. “I would likely have had more, if your mother had lived.”

“Is he divorced?”

“His wife was killed by a drunken driver when Tilda was a baby. He has been alone for many years.”

Legolas considered that as he ate his sandwich, but Thran resisted the urge to ask what Legolas thought. He would not give the impression that he looked for permission or approval; he loved Legolas very much, but his son would not have veto power over such an important part of Thran’s
personal life. So he attended to his salad, chewing each bite carefully, and waited to see what fruit his revelations would bear.

Legolas looked thoughtful. To be honest, he looked so neutral that Thran couldn’t tell if regret, jealousy, resentment, or acceptance prevailed. As Legolas finished his sandwich, and Thran had the last bit of chicken from his salad, he decided to move on.

“So what would you like to do this afternoon? Museum? Film? Walk? The shops? You likely need new clothes for next term, yes?”

“I do need new jeans. I’ve outgrown two pairs since September.” Legolas stuck out his leg, where an incongruously long shin, ankle, and foot protruded from a short pant leg.

“Then we will shop. Perhaps you also need new trusy without so much mojo.”

Legolas grinned self-consciously. “I think I’m good there.”

They finished their meal and cleaned the kitchen together. Then they went out to the nearest mall where they got two new pairs of jeans for Legolas, and one pair for him. Despite his wealth, Thran was not one to indulge in designer clothes for either of them, though he had a few things for them both that were de rigueur when they attended certain of Thran’s ballet premieres. Legolas’s new pants were perfectly serviceable if unremarkable, but given that he’d outgrown them before his next school term was over, nothing else made sense. His own jeans were more expensive, given their better quality and the unusual size to fit his tall slender build, but they were still plain, black, velvet cut corduroy.

Shoes, however, were another story. Like his father’s, Legolas’s long, slender feet required shoes that were not run of the mill. They were fortunate to find a new pair of athletic trainers in his size at one of the specialty running stores. It was important to Thran that Legolas have the best equipment to safeguard his training, and good shoes would let the miles of conditioning runs pass by as comfortably as possible. He let Legolas talk him into trying on a pair for himself, though his were not the flamboyant green things that his son’s were. He kept to his usual palette, choosing comfortable ones in plain black.

“Boring, Father,” Legolas sighed, but Thran contented himself with a smile. His son had yet to learn that it was better to have people look at him, rather than his clothes.

He looked forward to the day when he could take Bard shopping. Clothing that muscular body properly would be a pleasure. So would unclothing it afterwards...

He would NOT think about tomorrow morning. Not yet.

By the time Thran and Legolas finished their shopping, it was time for an early supper, so they decided to make a pilgrimage to their favorite Russian restaurant. It was a small, unpretentious place, with a large, devoted clientele of expatriate Russians. They served a well-spiced Georgian lamb stew that Thran particularly loved, and Legolas was happy with a huge plate of lamb pelmeni doused with lots of butter and sour cream. He also enjoyed the chance to listen to the tongue he’d spoken for so long, and to speak it with his son.

They came home tired and well fed, happy to spend the evening talking about Legolas’s schooling, what sort of fencing coach to consider, and the subjects that Legolas would study next term.

Thran had lived all of his life in the isolated, rarefied world of dance – many years at the Vaganova Academy of Ballet in St. Petersburg for his training, and the following years dancing in the
Mariinsky Ballet associated with the academy. There had been little time for outside interests, and friends outside of that rarefied world had been almost nonexistent for all of the dancers. It did not escape Thran that his son was just as isolated, if for different reasons. Yes, he was a gifted athlete, and yes, he was quiet, but he was not in a state-run institution that restricted time and contact outside of studies. Even so, Legolas had few friends.

Why else would a teen-aged boy be content to spend so much time with his father?

Thran sighed. He’d have to be very careful that his relationship with Bard did not cause Legolas to worry that his father was abandoning him.

At length, Legolas retreated to his room to play his computer games – he seemed quite enamored with a role-playing one full of Elves, Orcs, Dwarves, and other fantastical creatures. Left to his own devices at last, Thran showered, taking particular pains with his hair. Three stories below, did Bard wash his tousled locks with as much care? Gods, he wanted his hands full of Bard’s hair – so much more than that. He forced himself to wash slowly, to oil his hair and body carefully. What would it be like to run his fingers through the hair on Bard’s chest – to actually see that chest for the first time? To see more than that? Thran couldn’t think of it for long; he didn’t want to drive himself to such a fever pitch that he came alone in the shower. When he released, he wanted it to be under Bard’s hands.

He dried his hair to its usual pale silkiness. He put on his Mandarin silk robe to retreat to his room, shut the door, and disrobed to settle into bed. His mobile showed a text message waiting. From Bard, just five minutes ago.

In bed yet?

I am now. Just out of the shower

Me too

Please tell me that we are on for tomorrow a.m.

Gods, yes! Can’t wait!

I do not expect to sleep well. Impatient!

Me, too. Missed you all day

L and I shopped. I bought kitchen tools and jeans. Had Russian lamb stew.

Sounds delicious

Was. Still missed you. I told L that I would soon ask you out on a date

You did???? What did he say? Was he okay?

He asked if you were gay, and how you had 3 children if you were

And you said...?

That I was, and had him, had I not? Told him of Daphne. He mulls

So S for us, L on the fence, and B & T no idea. Why did you decide to tell him?

It was time. When will you tell T & B?
This week. After tmw
Thran snickered. Ah, you wait to see if I am worth more than a test drive
You never know about those foreign imports. Some are high maintenance
Some are exquisite high performance delights
Modest, aren’t you?
What is the adage? I do not brag if it is true?
LOL, bastard!
I hear Welsh imports are well known for their stamina
They take careful handling. The first ride is liable to be fast, but they get better with repeated efforts
Now you are the bastard
So go to bed. Make the morning come faster
I am in bed, and I can’t wait to make you come faster
All you’ll have to do is look at me, and it’ll happen all by itself
I would enjoy that. Then I will enjoy the rest of you
I don’t want to say goodnight, but if I don’t, it’ll happen without you even looking at me
My poor saint. Please save it all for me
Then go. I’ll text you as soon as the bus leaves. 8:45!
I will be ready
Fy nghariad
Lyubov moya
Than put his mobile aside.
The night wouldn’t pass quickly enough. When it did, may the gods preserve the health of children about to go to school, the reliability of busses that carried children to school, and the habit of teenaged boys to sleep until noon.
He and Bard would see to the rest themselves.

* * *

The alarm on Bard’s mobile chimed, jerking him awake.
6:00 a.m.
His eyes flew open. He’d sat up before he’d registered the motion. Gods, gods, it was Monday morning! He flitted into the bathroom quickly before Sigrid decamped from her room, then pulled off his tee shirt and replaced it with the long-sleeved shirt he usually wore to make the children’s breakfasts and lunches. On went the tea water, the porridge. Sigrid’s wheat bagel went in the toaster and the peanut butter went on the table with a knife. Green tea in the pot. He started the usual assembly line for sandwiches – one plain cheddar cheese on wheat for Tilda, two ham and cheese with lettuce for Bain, one ham and lettuce with no cheese for Sigrid. Fruit – clementines for Til and Sig, pear for Bain. Fig bars all around. Napkins. Water bottles. Where was Bain’s lunch bag?

As he looked around for it, Bard noticed his hands were trembling.

6:20 a.m.

Sigrid padded into the kitchen. She gave Bard a sleepy kiss.

“Morning, Sig.”

“Morning, Da.”

“Usual bagel?”

Sig pushed the toaster lever down. “Uh-huh. Green tea left?”

“In the pot. I’ll get the water.”

“I’ve got it.”

“Thanks.” Bard got two mugs from the cupboard. “Have you seen Bain’s lunch bag?”

“Uh-uh. Probably left it in his book bag again. Hope there’s nothing ripe still in it.”

The toaster popped, Sigrid put the hot bagel on the plate Bard had set out beside the toaster, and carried it to the table. Bard brought her tea and set it beside the bagel.

“Thanks, Da.”

“Welcome.” Bard poured tea for himself and sipped gingerly. He was too charged to eat, but he had to eat something, so he dished up a bowl of porridge and carried it to the table. Raisins, cinnamon, milk. Mix, mix, stir, stir. Shovel it down.

6:40 a.m.

Sigrid finished her bagel, her tea, carried the dishes to the sink, and washed them. Left them in the drainer to dry.

Why was every sound so clear and precise?

Sigrid vanished for her second foray into the bathroom, soon emerging with makeup in place – not too much, thank the gods, because Bard didn’t have the capacity to argue about it this morning – and backpack in hand. Bain shuffled in, yawning, waving mutely as he ladled out porridge. Bard went with Sigrid to the door.

“I’m off,” Sigrid smiled.

“And you’re leaving, too,” Bard smiled back. He gave her a hug. “Do your best, just like always.”
“I will. See you this afternoon. I’m tutoring today, so won’t be home until five.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye, Da.”

“Bye.”

One down. Two to go.

6:50 a.m.

Bain was eating his porridge. “Where’s your lunch bag?”

“Dunno,” Bain said sleepily. “It’s not on the counter?”

“Would I ask if it were? Go check your book bag, please.”

Bain got up from the table as if he were sleepwalking, shuffling back to his room.

“Found it,” he mumbled, handing it to Bard as he resat himself in front of his porridge bowl.

Fortunately, the bag was empty. Bain didn’t have the capacity to argue about smelly lunch bags this morning, either. He packed Bain’s sandwiches, fruit, and cookies in the bag and set it on the counter. Bain finished his porridge, went back for more, ate that, got up to wash his bowl, and shuffled off for his second foray into the bathroom.

Ten minutes went by. 7:10 a.m.

“Getting late, Bain. Time to go.”

“Coming, Da.”

Bain reappeared in his school clothes with book bag in hand. A handful of papers stuck out of the top.

“Put those where they belong before they blow down the street,” Bard asked, pointing to the papers.

Bain was too sleepy to argue. He settled his papers, took the lunch bag Bard held out to him, and packed it with his books.

7:25 a.m.

“I’m off,” Bain murmured, finally looking awake enough to smile at their old gag. Bard ruffled his hair, handed him his coat, and walked him to the door.

“And you’re leaving, too. Do your best, just like always.”

“I will. Soccer today. Tomorrow, too, but not Wednesday.”

“No more until after the holidays. So get your kicks in today and tomorrow.”

“Ha, ha, Da,” Bain groaned, arming his way into his coat. He hefted his backpack. “Love you.”


“Bye.”
Two down.

7:30 a.m.

It’d be half an hour before Tilda got up. Bard was too keyed up to surf the TV channels, so he went into the bathroom to shave. His hands were still a little shaky, but he managed to get through without cutting himself. He trimmed his mustache, his sideburns, combed his hair, not that that would help. His long hair would be in his eyes within five minutes. He hated to pay someone to cut it when the children needed more important things. He’d just keep pulling it back into its tail. Besides, Thran seemed to like it long –

Gods, that long white hair. That long, silky white hair...

Bard swallowed. Rinsed his face. Washed out the sink.

His hands were shaking again.

He went back to the kitchen, cleaning up the spilled tea, the crumbs on the table.

7:55 a.m.

Tilda’s alarm chimed. After not hearing anything for a few minutes, Bard headed back to Tilda’s room. Oh, gods, don’t let her be sick, today of all days...

The light was on, and Tilda was pulling the sheet and quilt up on her bed. She placed Mr. Bun in the middle of the pillow. When she heard his step, she looked around with a smile.

“Morning, Da.”

“Morning, little doll. What would you like for breakfast this morning?”

She considered. “Apple and peanut butter?”

“Coming right up. Tea?”

“Yes, please.”

“You get dressed and I’ll cut up the apple.”

“Okay.”

Bard returned to the kitchen, got the apple – two left, enough to last before the holiday break, which meant he wouldn’t have to go to the market for more – and cut it up on a plate for his daughter. Peanut butter was already out; so was the knife. He needed a teacup and another napkin. Tilda came out of the bathroom, already dressed. When she sat to eat her apple and peanut butter, Bard kept her company with a second cup of tea. It gave his hands something to do.

“Just two days after this, then a holiday,” he said.

“Are we going to see the big Christmas tree near the ice rink this year?”

“We do every year, don’t we? I wonder how tall it’ll be this year?”

“Maybe bigger than last year,” Tilda allowed, painting another apple slice with peanut butter. “I like to watch the skaters.”
“Remember that boy last year who did all the fancy jumps?”

Tilda nodded. “He was good. Maybe we’ll see him again.”

“Or someone else just as good.”

“I finished my apple, Da.”

“Go brush your teeth, then. I’ll wash up.”

Tilda made her final foray into the bathroom. Bard washed her plate, the knife, the teacup. Put away the peanut butter. Rewrapped the bread. Dumped the tea leaves. Wiped up the crumbs.

8:20 a.m.

There were butterflies in Bard’s stomach.

Tilda came out of the bathroom, so Bard grabbed his jeans and shirt, and ducked into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and exchange his ratty sleep pants and tee for jeans and Henley. Damn, he’d forgotten his boxers – no time to grab them. He grinned; would going commando imply he was eager?

He was, but Thran would be just as eager. It’d be funny if he showed up just as unencumbered.

He found his socks and boots and sat on the sofa to pull them on while Tilda got her backpack. He handed her her lunch, got her coat and his, and made sure to stuff his mobile in his jeans pocket.

8:35 a.m.

“Ready to go?”

Tilda nodded. “All ready.”

“Let’s go wait for the bus, then. We’re off…”

“And we’re leaving, too,” Tilda grinned gleefully. “I’ll do my best today, just like always. So you do, too.”

He hoped he would. “I’ll give it my best shot, little doll. Okay. Got my key. Let’s go.”

They went down the stairs, out the door, and onto the sidewalk. Bard resisted the urge to look up, to see if Thran’s tall figure stood at his window to watch for him. He and Tilda went the half block down the street where a group of parents and children already stood waiting.

The bus arrived only five minutes after they reached the bus stop, but it was the longest five minutes of Bard’s life. As the children lined up, Bard gave Tilda a hug.

“Love you, little doll.”

“Love you, too, Da. Bye!”

“Bye!”

He saw Tilda safely onto the bus, and the bus well away. He turned back to the apartment building, his mobile already in his hand, ready to text. But he didn’t have to.
I come!

Bard jammed the mobile back in his pocket and ran up the street. He took the steps two at a time, shoved through the door, ran up the stairs, groping for his key –

Someone was pelting down the stairs. Thran, winging around the last landing, white hair flying around him in a cloud, grey eyes wide as he leaped down the last flight of stairs –

Oh, gods, oh, gods, oh, gods –

Somehow Bard got the key in the lock, the door open, and both of them inside. As the door slammed shut, arms went around him, pulling his coat off his shoulders and down his arms to drop to the floor, then hands wound in his hair, and lips swallowed his in a desperate kiss. White hair fell over his face, down his back, over his arms, hair that curved him like an angel’s wings. He wound arms around that angel, no longer elusive and ethereal, but real and trembling under his hands. He picked the angel up off his feet, carried him to the sofa, and threw them both down on it, scrabbling on top into a tangle of arms and legs.

“Oh, gods, oh, gods, oh, gods, I am going to die if I have to wait one more bloody second!” he snarled, knees burying between Thran’s, one hand going behind Thran’s head to grab a handful of hair, and the other pulling Thran’s leg over his back. He dove in for another kiss, fell into it, and reveled in the soft caress of hands over his back and down his ribs to massage his buttocks. As Thran kissed him back thoroughly, it sank in what he finally, finally held in his arms. He drew a stuttering breath.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“You did not hurt me. I am here. I am yours. Just...”

“I did hurt you, didn’t I? Oh, gods, Thran, I’m sorry!”

“I am fine, Bard. I am fine. All I ask is that you leave no marks on my skin. Bruises take a long time to heal for me, and I will audition soon –”

“I won’t. I won’t. I don’t want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you.”

“Nor I you, lyubov moya. Nor I you.” Hands stroked down his back, slowly insinuating themselves under his shirt. When long, warm fingers traced over his skin, he shivered. To look down at the pale angel lying so willingly beneath him, white hair flung in all directions, made him gulp. Thran looked up at him through his lashes, his lips curving into a half smile.

“Kiss me again,” Thran whispered. “Please, kiss me again.”

How could Bard do anything else? He fell into that invitation without resistance, but his kiss was softer, gentler this time, a caress rather than urgency. Long fingers kept working the tail of his shirt out from his jeans until it was free, then inched it up over his ribs.

“Let me see you,” Thran invited, thumbs stroking Bard’s ribs. “Let me see you.”

As Thran eased Bard’s shirt higher, Bard shrugged out of it without embarrassment, pleased when Thran’s breath caught. A long slender hand stroked up his belly and over his sternum, playing with the dark hair that covered his chest.

“You are so beautiful.” Thran traced a finger under first one pectoral, then the other, before laying a hand over one. He rubbed softly, his palm dragging against Bard’s nipple. Soft lips went to the other
nipple, nuzzling and suckling gently. The sensation was so intense that Bard gasped and had to ease away.

“D-don’t. I won’t last a second if you do that. In fact, if you do anything, I won’t last a second. Don’t take me so fast.”

“I promise to take you a second time, lyubov moya. You will enjoy that one even more than the first,” Thran purred, still stroking Bard’s chest. “But first we must enjoy the first one.”

Bard hummed as Thran’s touches warmed his body. “How would that look? I’m on the top, but not the one in control.”

“I think it will look delicious. Shall I go on?”

Bard had to shut his eyes – looking at Thran, curtained in his disheveled white hair, teasing him with soft eyes and slow, enticing touches, was too erotic to bear. “Gods, you are such a bastard.”

“I take that as a yes.” Thran untied the ends of his knitted top, slipping them to the side, baring his chest to Bard’s eyes. Such exquisitely defined musculature under alabaster skin, veiled only with the palest fuzz of absolutely white hair, was so compelling a sight that Bard only belatedly registered the fingers slipping down to his belt buckle, his zipper, easing his jeans down over his hips.

“Thran, wait –”

“Shh, my eager saint,” Thran purred again. He combed fingers through the dark hair that curled within Bard’s jeans, then drew Bard’s cock, already erect, out to rest on his abdomen. His touch felt like warm velvet against Bard’s skin. “Savor.”

Thran cradled Bard between his legs, stroking his buttock with one long, flexible foot, twining a hand into his hair to hold him close. He suckled Bard again, stroking the other nipple at the same time, and pressed their bodies together with his foot. Those chiseled abs rubbed against him slowly, slowly...

Against such an overwhelming assault, Bard had no defense. The urgency that so far had only teased him rose unbearably to consume him. He convulsed helplessly, falling into Thran’s arms without thought of anything but ecstasy, gasping as breath failed him.

Arms enfolded him, cradling him as he calmed. He lay against Thran’s chest, listening to the combined beating of their hearts as Thran stroked his bare back slowly. As his release faded, leaving calm behind, Bard remembered to breathe again.

“You really are a bastard,” Bard rasped, smiling. “And I love you for it.”

A low chuckle rumbled deep in Thran’s chest. “Show me,” he whispered, as he stroked Bard’s back, then spread an elegant hand over Bard’s buttock to squeeze gently. “I am yours, so take me, as I did you.”

Bard lay still only for a moment, savoring all the ways there were to repay an angel for his teasing. The toughest part was to decide where to start.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Just how do you think a saint repays an angel for pillaging him so fast? Not so fast, and twice as thoroughly. Which one will be the last one standing?

Chapter Notes

Yes, this is another Explicit Chapter. But you expected that, right?

Thran lay under Bard as his love lost control, finally – finally! – surrendering to the compulsion that Thran had stoked in him. It was only the opening act of the morning’s ballet, only the first delirious confection, but Thran was well satisfied with it. He had not had to work very hard to bring it about.

Not fifteen minutes ago, he’d stood at his window, watching for the first sign of a yellow school bus. He was dressed in old jeans, his new supple black trainers, and a thin, soft, wrapped practice top, easy to shed when the moment was right. His hair was sleek, soft, and loose around his shoulders. A thicker shirt, his cashmere scarf, and his coat lay on the chair by the door, ready for him to grab. His mobile was in his hand, waiting for his cue that the dance was about to begin.

As soon as Tilda’s bus appeared down the street, Thran had typed I come! into his mobile, but hadn’t press Send. He’d watched as the bus had stopped, Tilda had gotten on, and Bard had waved a farewell as the bus had trundled away.

Only when Bard had turned back to the apartment building had Thran pressed Send. He’d grabbed his shirt, scarf, and coat, slipped through the door, and locked the door behind him. He’d thrown himself down the stairs as recklessly as a boy, without thought for a body that had taken years to train, that had been cosseted and protected as a national treasure for almost as long. He’d given no thought to spraining an ankle as he took the steps three at a time until the last landing, where he’d flown down the last flight without touching any of them.

The front door of the apartment building had banged open. Bard had crashed through it and bounded up the stairs like a stag, his coat flying wide, his hair in glorious disarray, so intensely alive. He’d unlocked his apartment door by divination, his eyes only on Thran as he’d flown down beside him, throwing himself into Thran’s wide-stretched arms. They’d dragged each other into Bard’s apartment, Bard kicking the door shut and groping to throw the lock as Thran had dropped his shirt, scarf, and coat, kicked off his shoes, and pulled off Bard’s coat. Then he’d enveloped Bard in the kiss he’d ached to give him, one as long and deep and thorough as his saint deserved.

This much, Thran had choreographed. What was to come, he had not. To Thran’s delight, the improvisation that followed was his abduction. Bard tore him off the earth, threw him onto his back, and descended upon him like a beast. This was even better than Thran had hoped for. He gave himself up willingly to grooping hands, frantic lips, lunging body. Hands wound themselves in his hair, pillaging it thoroughly as lips had bitten and gnawed his. Thran wrapped himself around his possessor, reveling in the play of the muscles under his hands, those hard clenches of shoulders and
arms and buttocks that were so irresistible.

And then his saint recalled his humanity, worrying about the angel beneath him that he was about to despoil. The first despoiling would have to be Thran’s doing, then. He’d anticipated as much, but as despoiling was just as delightful as being despoiled, he never cared which happened first.

He teased both of them when he coaxed Bard out of his shirt, revealing the powerful muscles he’d known would be there – tight pectorals, taut rectus abdominals, and his favorite, the delicate external intercostals along the ribs. It was unusual for someone who was not a trained athlete to have so much muscle delineation; it was because Bard had shorted his rations in favor of his children for so long. While Thran abhorred those circumstances, he couldn’t deny that the muscles flexing under his hands made his mouth water. Even better, Bard’s chest was beautifully velveted in dark hair. Thran’s body was not hairless, but his hair was all as pale as what was on his head, and fine, with just faint fuzz over his chest that was more suggestion than reality. If Thran were the smooth, refined, elegant dancer, Bard was the rugged film idol. It was no conscious act to lay a hand on that chest, to trace the lines of muscle, to revel as the muscles tensed and jumped under his hand. And those nipples, those small, hard, brown pearls beckoning within dark hair... they begged to be caressed and kissed. They were infinitely responsive, too – jewels, indeed. Not all men had such gifts, so Thran treated them as they deserved, kissing and suckling and rubbing, until Bard was frantic. He didn’t feel Thran breach his belt buckle, his zipper – ah, nothing underneath! Was that Bard’s normal habit, invitation, or mere oversight? It made no difference. Thran caressed the lavish hair underneath, found Bard’s cock, and teased it out. It was as muscular as the rest of his lover, setting Thran’s loins to aching in response.

But it wasn’t yet time for that ultimate joining. First he had to ease the blinding urgency that had driven Bard into oblivion.

Thran trapped Bard’s cock between their abdomens, clamping their bodies close with a foot pressed hard against the middle of Bard’s lower back. He tangled a hand in Bard’s hair too deeply for him to pull away. Then he abandoned himself to the brown pearls that beckoned to him so compellingly, teasing himself with the sound of Bard’s soft moans and the skittering twitch of muscles under his hands as he drove Bard’s body past control.

It had taken only seconds, but Thran had reveled in them all. He closed his eyes when warm liquid spread over his abdomen, and smiled. His saint was delivered, then.

He couldn’t wait to see what reward his teasing gained him.

The first things it earned him were kisses. The strong body atop him held him close as Bard pressed kisses on the top of his head, his forehead, his nose, his ears, his cheeks, and finally his lips. A tongue pressed against his teeth, and he welcomed it eagerly, his abdomen tightening in anticipation. His fingers clenched against Bard’s back, hard enough that he had to force himself to relax them before he left marks. Even in the depths of his arousal, Bard had respected Thran’s pale skin, so easily marred. It was hard to maintain his reputation as the Prince of Ice with a lover’s marks scraped across his ribs, though on Bard, such marks would be more erotic than anything else. Until Thran learned whether such things concerned Bard or not, he would refrain from marking his pelt.

He forgot that resolution when Bard bit his lips and slid down to kiss his throat, the hollow at the base of his neck, the line between his pectorals. Perhaps his fingers dug in too hard, for hands found his, drawing them above his head. When one hand pinned them there, Thran barely suppressed a gasp. Bard gave him a look, understanding enough to smile in anticipation.

“Gently,” he whispered, kissing Thran. “Gently.”

Thran forced himself to relax, swallowed hard, and nodded, but the hand holding his squeezed once, ruining his efforts. Bard’s sly smile ruined any hope Thran had of relaxing, no matter how hard he
tried. Thank the gods he had Bard’s body above his to keep him on his back. Bard resumed his kissing, teasingly avoiding Thran’s pale nipples until Thran wanted to beg him to kiss them. As if he heard that plea, Bard finally nuzzled his left nipple, but only lightly, drawing Thran to groan in frustration. That only encouraged Bard to take his nipple in his teeth, tightening oh, so lightly, not to the point of pain, but twitching was out of the question. When a thumb and forefinger trapped his right nipple, rolling it roughly between them, Thran arched up in a gasp.

“You are not a saint,” he growled, because there was no movement allowed him.

Bard drew in his nipple to suckle, pressed it between teeth and tongue, then let it slide out before favoring him with a perverse smile.

“Saints take no pleasure when they deliver a payback. I do.”

He raised himself to his knees, one hand still holding Thran’s above his head. He had a good look at Thran lying beneath him, humming in appreciation. Thran quite enjoyed the view of Bard’s bare chest, his jeans breached, his cock already twitching for a rematch.

“What turns you on more? Me telling you to strip, or me doing it myself?”

“I like both. But since you’ve pinned me so nicely, I will enjoy it when you do it yourself today.”

“Good. I’ve always wanted to strip an angel bare...”

Bard unbuttoned his jeans, unzipped them, and dragged them down off his hips, all while still holding his wrists. Each touch drew Thran taut, his skin in gooseflesh, a smothered whimper on his lips. Fingers stroked down his abdomen, down each side of his cock without touching it. Bard drank in each every reaction and altered his teasing accordingly, which spiked Thran’s arousal still higher. Gods, those teasing fingers that refused to touch... the very thought of them tightening about his cock had him half erect already. But the touches didn’t come until Bard leaned over to swallow his lips in a hard kiss. Only then did a hand envelope his cock, and if it didn’t manhandle him, it stroked him none too gently. Thran’s back arched, and the moan on his lips turned into a gasp under such a concentrated attack.

“Should I take pity on you? Ease your suffering?”

Thran grinned. “If this is what it is like to suffer, then I suffer quite deliciously. I am in your hands willingly, to do with as you see fit.”

“Then I’ll indulge both of us.”

Bard released Thran’s hands, but it was no reprieve; he wound both arms around Thran’s hips, settled between his legs, and bent over Thran’s cock with a sigh. Lips descended, first licking and nipping, then sucking his cock into a warm mouth. A tongue caressed him; teeth nipped delicately in the most divine places; everything narrowed down to the talented mouth engulfing him in that most intimate way. The pleasure after so many years of abstinence was nearly unbearable. His cock rose hard under such temptation, and the rest of his body curled in on itself, but that only thrust him deeper into Bard’s mouth. Bard wound his arms around Thran’s hips too strongly for him to get away, as if he were such a fool as to want that. He found himself on his elbows, to savor the sight of Bard’s dark, tangled hair falling over his abdomen. Bard pushed Thran’s legs wide, the better to feed on him. And feed on him Bard did – such a skilled mouth with a tongue that rubbed against the underside of his cock, then licked at the tiny opening in the head so insistently; and teeth that found the exact spot just above his balls that was the most vulnerable, the most sensitive; and lips that sucked him in, then out, then in, then out... When he tried to pump his hips in rhythm, Bard’s grip on
his thighs tightened, holding him still. It was Bard who fed, who consumed, and Thran who was the sacrifice, not the other way around. What could be better?

Bard loosed one arm from its insistent grip on Thran’s hips. A second later, he closed his hand around Thran’s balls, massaging and rolling and teasing in tempo with the assault on his cock. To be so open, so taken, so desired, was too much to resist, and Thran thrust up, driving his cock deeply into Bard’s mouth, and let everything go. Strong hands kept him pinned throughout, and that talented mouth took every drop of him until he was drained. As his pleasure waned, lips nibbled at him until he fell back on the sofa, eyes closed.

The grip on his hips eased away. A hand rubbed his abdomen slowly, mixing a few drops of his issue with all of Bard’s to anoint him. Thran kept his eyes shut, but grinned as he stretched, enjoying Bard’s caress and the aftermath of a release so long denied.


Thran smiled in contentment. “Willingly so. How soon before you do it again?”

Soft laughter. “Greedy bastard.”

“I have done without for eight years. You, likely more than ten. Tell me you are not just as greedy.”

Bard ducked under Thran’s leg, went to his knees on the floor, and leaned over to brush a kiss on Thran’s lips. “I can’t. Even if I hadn’t gone so long, I would have been just as eager. You’re beautiful, and completely evil. I could drown in you.”

Opening his eyes, Thran stroked Bard’s unruly hair out of his eyes. It was such a pleasure to have that hair in his hands that he didn’t stop, gratified when Bard closed his eyes and leaned into his caress with a hum.

“I intend to make you drown as often as I can get my hands on you. But I warn you. I will not always be the one who begs.”

“No, you won’t,” Bard admitted. His gaze strayed down Thran’s chest, then to his own. “We’re both pillaged.”

“We will wash soon, but not yet. Unless it is too late.”

Bard dug into his jeans pocket, pulled out his mobile, and looked at it. He grinned. “Only 9:45. We’ve still got time.”

“Good. Just to look at you without having to veil my glance is such pleasure. To see you in such disarray is more so, especially when I am the one who made you that way.”

“That’s what I mean about you being completely evil. You like to pillage.”

Thran sat up to lean against the back of the sofa. His hair looked like he’d been doing exactly what he had been doing, which he savORED. There were few better sensations than those after loving, even in the dance. “I like to pillage. I like to be pillaged. I like many things that are love between two. I do not like to hurt, or to humiliate, or violence. I hope you feel the same.”

Bard clambered to his feet, hitched up his jeans to hang on the point of his hips, and sat next to Thran. “So... tackling you and tossing you on a sofa isn’t violence, then.”

Thran stretched a long hand across Bard’s thigh and rubbed up and down, drawing Bard’s sigh.

“Good. I don’t ever want to hurt you or humiliate you. You’re my pale angel. I want you to be so for a long time.”

“We will be many things to each other. But all will mean beloved.”

Bard leaned close to nuzzle a kiss behind Thran’s ear, a very sensuous place to kiss. “I’ll take that as a promise.”

“I will take more than that, because it is still early. Feel free to stop me if you prefer.”

Thran slipped onto his knees between Bard’s, leaned in, and bit at the dark hair still visible above Bard’s jeans. Bard jumped at the unexpected touch. Good. How much could he make of that? He looked up into Bard’s eyes, narrowing his gaze as he tugged at the back of Bard’s jeans.

“Take them off. Now.”

“I can’t. Boots,” Bard said weakly.

Instantly, Thran was yanking laces free, boots off. “Now. Take them off.”

“You are one greedy –”

“Now. Or I will. I will likely leave marks.”

Bard hastily shifted his hips up to slide his jeans down, which gave Thran the perfect opportunity to dive into Bard’s crotch. The cock within so much dark hair was still soft, so Thran got it all in his mouth before Bard could flinch. He tightened his teeth on it, holding Bard immobile while he yanked Bard’s jeans down his legs, then off, and then pushed his knees wide. He kept his hands on Bard’s thighs while he teased, not going for finesse this time, but intensity. When Bard’s cock swelled too hard for Thran to hold it all, he kept its head in his mouth, put one hand around the shaft, and the other as a cage around Bard’s balls. Bard’s hands wound in his hair, keeping the white strands out of the way so that he could watch Thran take him. At the last second, when Bard bucked hard underneath him, Thran looked up to revel in how Bard’s orgasm consumed him. His head went back in rapture, or perhaps agony, his eyes fluttered closed, and his hands clutched against the sofa cushion. When Thran’s name stuttered out of Bard’s mouth like a confession, Thran laughed softly, well pleased. He bent low again, licking and kissing and stroking, until all of Bard was limp under him.

“Consider yourself mine. From this day forward.”

“Gods.” Bard’s chest heaved as he remembered to breathe again. He managed to look up. “You’re the palest angel I’ve ever seen, but your heart is darker than Satan’s.”

“Only for you, my love. Only for you.”

An exhausted smile twitched at Bard’s lips. “I’m doubly blessed. And pillaged. Now I do need a wash.”

Thran shifted aside, letting Bard up to resume his jeans, rising after him to pad to the bathroom. Bard ducked into the shower for a washcloth, and found a clean one for Thran.

“Do you want to shower?”
Thran shook his head. “We do not have time to do that justice. And since this is our first time, I want
to keep your scent on me.”

“I feel the same way. So a quick wash’ll do.”

Thran leaned on the doorjamb while Bard cleaned the worst signs of their indulgence off his torso. It
was entirely too enticing to watch him disarrange the dark hair that so fascinated Thran, to lean over
the sink to rinse the soapy water off, then to towel dry – too enticing by halves. Even to watch Bard
shimmy his jeans up over the points of his hips and fasten them was erotic. When Thran had his turn
at the sink, his hands were not matter-of-fact as he eased his jeans off his hips and stroked the
washcloth over his skin.

Hips pressed against Thran's buttocks. Warm, brown eyes savored the reflection of his pale body.
Arms slipped under his and around his ribs. Hands cupped over his pectorals to drag over his
nipples. Fingers took his nipples to gently squeeze. Those hands stroked lower, circled his hips, and
took the washcloth out of his hands to rub his abdomen gently.

“If you’re going to enjoy a little warm water and soap so much, let me make it worth the effort. I
want to watch you come.”

“You will be the death of me,” Thran breathed, as the washcloth ended up in the sink and slick,
soapy hands explored him. A breathy kiss pressed against his neck, and the rough cloth of Bard’s
jeans rubbed against his buttocks. Gods, his skin clenched and a chill ran up his spine.

“What, you don’t want me to do this? You want me to stop?”

“Does it look like I do?” Thran hissed. His cock was already alert.

“It looks like you want me to do exactly what I’m doing.”

“My body is a discerning connoisseur.”

“Then watch me tease you, and watch me watch you enjoy it.”

The mirror doubled the pleasure of Bard’s hands roving over him, slippery and insistent, because it
revealed every nuance of each caress. It revealed Bard kissing his shoulders, his back, his neck. It
revealed how his body twitched and arched and yearned under those touches. To watch another
possess his cock, stroking it gently at first, then, when he was hard and aching, jerk him off without
mercy, was not a pleasure he’d had before. His saint, it seemed, had just as dark a heart as he did.
Oh, how much they would make of that, now and forever!

When he released, Bard’s arms held him up, compelling him to watch every last spasm, hear every
cry, feel every muscle strain up to that sweet height of ecstasy. And when he came down from that
height, Bard washed him gently clean, dried him tenderly, and eased his jeans over his hips. He
carefully tucked the curls of damp hair and exhausted cock inside, eased up the zipper, and buttoned
the top button. Then he turned Thran around to take him in his arms. Thran wound arms around his
lover, and they stood there in the bathroom together, savoring satiety.

“I do not want to, but I should check the time,” Thran winced at last.

Bard sighed. “I know. I don’t want to, either, but we should. I hope we won’t have to for much
longer.”

“Nor I.”
They returned to the living room. Bard cleaned up the traces of their indulgences while Thran checked his mobile.

“Ten-thirty,” he sighed.

Bard sighed, too, as he stooped to retrieve Thran’s extra shirt from the floor. “Change of wardrobe?”

Thran smiled as he took his shirt. “I am a devious parent. I thought I would change my shirt and take a walk around the block before I went back upstairs.”

Bard’s laugh was chagrined as he shook his head. “I had the same thought. We could walk to the market if you need anything.”

“Do you?”

Bard held up his hands. “I always need something. Come on. Let’s go. It’ll be our first shared domestic chore.”

A wide smile crossed Thran’s face. “I would like that. You can show me some new food to try. But first, to change my shirt – shall I go into the bathroom so that I do not inflame you again, or can I do it here?”

“Would you do it here, so I can enjoy it?”

Thran had endured too many frantic costume changes that had left him stripped to dancer’s belt and nothing more, with hands tugging and pulling at him to get him into another costume, to suffer from modesty. But those times had never been erotic the way peeling off his thin practice shirt was today, in front of his lover. Bard hummed in appreciation, even leaned close to kiss him, but he didn’t venture more. As Thran pulled his heavier Henley over his head, Bard trotted to the bathroom, returning with a comb.

“I don’t use this much, if you can’t tell, so it’s more or less clean. But the Prince of Ice will ruin his reputation if he goes out looking like you do right now.”

“As you say.” Thran took the comb, returned to the bathroom to smooth his hair – he couldn’t remember the last time it had looked so disarrayed – and returned with a satisfied smile. “I cleaned the comb so as not to leave incriminating evidence of my part in your ruination.”

“Maybe watching those crime lab shows has a practical benefit,” Bard allowed. He had his boots and coat on, and handed Thran’s coat and scarf to him. “Off to market, then.”

“Not yet.” Thran used his cashmere scarf to lasso Bard, easing him close. “A kiss, first. The first of many.”

“Mmm. You’re delicious as well as evil. The perfect combination.” Bard flipped the scarf over Thran’s head, and tucked it around his neck. “Now. Bundle up so you stay warm. Can’t let you risk a chill.”

“You look after me well, lyubov moya.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Bard snuck a hand under Thran’s coat to squeeze his buttock. “It’s really my pleasure, fy nghariad.”

Snickering, Thran pulled Bard towards the door. “Market!”
They forged out of the apartment and down the sidewalk, side by side.

Thran’s balls ached, but his heart didn’t.
After a sublime morning, an angel and a saint turn domestic - shopping and tending to the young. An important milestone is set, then carefully scrutinized by the choir. When two voices are not so sure of the tune, two disparate discussions ensue. Both prove that parenting can be awkward.

Cold, damp air rushed into Bard’s face as he and Thran forged out of their apartment building. The sky overhead was grim, full of lowering clouds that threatened imminent rain, and the breeze was fitful and sharp. None of it dimmed the warmth glowing inside him, a warmth that sparked anew each time he looked at the tall, elegant angel beside him. How had such a talented man, so exotic and beautiful, come to walk beside him? He waited until they turned the corner, away from their apartment building, before he lengthened his stride, fell into step with Thran, and put an arm around his hips. As Thran’s arm went around his shoulders, Bard felt lighter than he had for longer than he remembered.

They just beat the rain, dashing into the pavilion before the drizzle grew stronger. Inside, they walked up and down the aisles of shops, stopping here and there, but the scenery was mere backdrop to their conversation. They talked about everything – what they saw, where they’d been, what they’d known and liked, and their plans for the house. Once it was ready for them to move in, what little furniture they had between the two of them would not be enough to equip it. Bard suggested that second hand flea markets that would be fun to peruse, and he was gratified when Thran agreed.

“Of course it would be fun. It is the thrill of the chase,” Thran observed, picking up a strange vegetable. “Things with a patina appeal more, and would fit the house better. What is this, lyubov moya?”

“I like flea market finds more than new, too, and not just because they’re cheaper. That patina you mentioned... that’s exactly the right word. It’s a story waiting to be told. I spend a lot of time on the patina of the metals I use. That? Oh, that’s a gourd. Decorative. You can’t eat it.”

“That is a relief,” Thran put the gourd down gingerly. “So many points and bumps... it looks like it would cause a stomach ache.”

Bard laughed.

“So perhaps we can visit these flea markets,” Thran continued.

“The children love to go. Bain looks for sports cards, and Sigrid likes old jewelry, and Tilda is happy with books. Maybe Legolas would like them, too.”

“Perhaps. I think he has been too studious, and at the same time too devoted to his sports. He does not have many other activities, and few friends.”

Bard hummed. “Me and mine are likely overwhelming him. How can we make it easier for him?”

“I begin already. I told him I wanted to ask you out, so he knows I am interested in you as more than
a platonic friend. The next thing is to ask you out. So, Bard, will you go out with me? I would like to
take you out for a nice dinner, where you do not have to worry about your children eating enough
before you eat.”

Bard tensed. He’d done just as Thran had observed for so long that he no longer thought about it, but
having it pointed out to him embarrassed him. He concentrated on the bin of onions, putting a couple
into the shop basket he carried. “You don’t eat for your dancing. I don’t eat for my children.”

“Both are true. I mean no criticism, Bard. I merely worry for you.”

Bard added sweet potatoes to his basket, and one apple. Thran’s voice was soft, and his expression
was concerned, so Bard sighed. “I’d hoped that this would be the last hard year. Once I got us
through the summer, Til would be in middle school, which would mean I could get on site earlier to
weld. The middle school is closer to the apartment, and the afterschool program is open later, so I
could pick up more jobs. Maybe be full time somewhere long enough to get health insurance for the
children. So things would look up soon.” He glanced at Thran, but found only understanding, not
censure. “You’ve had to sacrifice for Legolas, too. It goes with being a father.”

Thran nodded, picking up a red pepper. “Can I cook this?”

“Red pepper. It’s good cut up raw in your salads, or even just to eat. Raw is better than cooked, to
my lights, unless you’re doing spicy sausage with onions and peppers. But sausage is something I bet
has never passed your lips.”

Thran snickered ruefully. “Not for a long time, no. But yes, I have done things for Legolas. Dance
when not quite well, or slightly injured, both manageable if done carefully. The biggest sacrifice is to
send him to boarding school. I miss him.”

“How many years has he been in boarding school?”

“Four years. Every time, it is the worst feeling of my life to put him on that train and watch it pull
away from the platform. I hate it.”

Thran’s face spasmed with regret, drawing Bard to put a commiserating hand on Thran’s shoulder.
“So now neither of us will have to do a few of the things we hate. You won’t have to put Legolas on
a train, or miss him, or dance when you’re sick for him. And once I go back to the metal, I’ll be able
to pay for Bain’s soccer, and Tilda’s art lessons, and Sigrid’s college. So not only do we have each
other, we’ll keep our children well, too.”

“And you will eat more. Though not too much, because your body is beautiful, and it would not do
to spoil such perfection.”

Bard laughed. “High compliment, coming from the most ethereal ballet dancer in the world.”

With a wave of his hand, Thran dismissed Bard’s demurral. “I know what I look like. I know what
you look like, too, and I find it divine. So, please come to dinner with me.”

“It can’t be anyplace fancy, Thran. You’ve seen me in my best clothes. This is it – work jeans and
steel-toes. I’m not fit to go in most places in the city.”

“You don’t know the best places to go in the city, lyubov moya. Places where your jeans and mine
are more than fine, where the emphasis is on delicious food and good company, not uncomfortable
chairs and small plates and haughty waiters who look down their noses. There are cuisines from all
over the world, and welcoming smiles from waiters who are glad to see us, and delicious things to
eat. Tell me what food you would like to try, and we will go out tomorrow night. Please?”
Bard didn’t have to think about answering for himself, but his prevailing thought was about his children. They wouldn’t have activities after school tomorrow, not this close to the holiday. If he made a good pot roast for them, he could see them well fed before he went out with Thran.

It would also start the conversation about their Da dating, and everything that came after that...

Better to start that than not. Sigrid was already on board, and Bain liked Thran, and might be a good friend to the lonely Legolas. That just left Tilda, and the whole conversation about sexual orientation...

Eh... he’d need to have that conversation with her sooner or later. She’d handled the whole female puberty thing at school with her usual aplomb, especially with Sigrid’s help from the female perspective. She’d heard the basics of sexual education along with that, so the conversation about his nature was coming soon, whether he went to dinner with Thran or not. After that conversation, he wouldn’t have to hide so many things, and the house would be waiting, and...

He’d return to his art again.

Gods, could he stand to risk breaking his heart again over so much scrap metal and the images he saw in his thoughts that turned the metal into visions?

He’d given Hope the Lope her name for a reason.

So he’d go to dinner, and that would be the start of much more.

“Okay,” Bard agreed. “I want to make sure the children get their supper and start on their homework, but okay after that.”

“Good. Thank you, lyubov moy. That makes me very happy. Now tell me what kind of food we should try.”

Spreading his hands, Bard chuckled. “As long as it’s not ramen, I can find something pretty much anywhere.”

“Ramen? Do you mean those small packets of dried noodles and their enclosed smaller packets of supposed seasonings? Gods, Bard! Those are not food! Nasty, soggy cardboard, at best!”

“They’re cheap, Thran. Ten for a dollar. The staple of college students and starving artists everywhere.”

“No ramen! If that is the best you can offer, then I will choose something. Do you like steak? Asian food? Sushi? Afghani? Lamb or pork? Spicy or mild? Tell me.”

Bard laughed to see Thran so animated. “You’re funny when you’re excited, and you’re very excited for a man who doesn’t eat much. I like beef, pork, lamb, seafood – speaking of that, let’s get you a nice piece of salmon. You need the Omega-3s and such to stay healthy. Cold water fish, that’s the thing.”

“Salmon, then. Lead on to the fishmonger. But first, we pay for the vegetables.”

They did so, and found the fish counter for Thran’s salmon. Their last stop was the grocery to get Thran a few herbs for his fish.

“There’s all kinds without salt in them, or sugar, or oil, already mixed for you. You can put them on your salads, too. Maybe you have to stay away from simple carbs and such, but there’s no reason
why your food can’t taste better than bland.”

“I will try this one, then,” Thran said, picking up a blend of green seasonings. I have eaten a lot of French influenced foods, and I like the seasonings. And this spicy one. You say this one is good on the salmon?”

“I like it,” Bard nodded. He didn’t say that it had been years since he’d bought salmon. It was one more thing his scanty budget didn’t often accommodate. He thought about how good it was poached with that seasoning coating it, and perhaps the slightest drizzle of orange sauce...

Thran paid for his spices, and they took a look outside to see how the rain had progressed. The drizzle had paused for the moment, so they decided to head home.

“So, the dinner,” Thran continued. “What is something you like, but have not had in a long time?”

“That would be not ramen, and not chicken. I like the chicken, but I eat a lot of it.”

“So, that leaves beef, pork, lamb, seafood...”

“What do you like?”

“Everything except ramen and eggplant. And haggis.” Thran cast him a look. “I hope the haggis does not offend you.”

“It’s Scotland, not Wales, that eats haggis.”

“Ah. Good. No haggis or chicken or ramen, then. Greek lamb kabobs are very good. Or grilled redfish.”

“I haven’t had seafood in a long time. That’d be good.”

“So it is decided. We shall eat seafood. I am especially fond of calamari. And oysters.”

There was a bit of a leer in Thran’s smile as he said the last part. Bard gave him a mild look. “This morning wasn’t enough for you, then? Or was it too much, and you need to recharge?”

Laughing, Thran linked arms with Bard to pull him up the street. “It was what that small girl said in the tale – just right. But I admit I look forward to more very soon. What do your children do tomorrow morning?”

Bard felt a jolt in his loins, hard and insistent, something the tough fabric of his jeans rewarded with an uncomfortable scrape against tender skin. “Goldilocks. You mean Goldilocks and the three bears. You’ll have to be her because you’ve got the hair. I’ll have to be the bears because I’ve got the pelt.”

“A pelt I find very erotic, one I cannot wait to pillage again. So, tomorrow morning?”

“Tomorrow morning.” Bard winced, drawing Thran’s worried expression.

“You are all right?”

“A little too all right, fy nghariad. I forgot underwear this morning because I was distracted, for some unknown reason, and jeans are not the most comfortable way to go commando, especially when an angel plots to pillage me again. So what’s your excuse? I didn’t see any of that black silk you teased me about.”

Another lecherous laugh. “I saw no reason to impede whatever happened once I flew down the
stairs. As I have never found underpinnings to be erotic, no matter what they are made of, I dispensed with them.” He gave Bard a sideway glance, his lips curving up. “It was a good gambit.”

“I’ll say. Although I expect the black silk looks stunning with all that white hair.”

“If you say so,” Thran said shrugged, but the arch of his neck as he looked at Bard through lowered lashes was just so, and laughter lurked behind his smile.

“They call that eye fucking, you know,” Bard breathed. “You know you’re doing it, too. You do it so well that I’m surprised some photographer hasn’t begged you to pose for him – or her. It’d be hard core porn without you ever showing an inch of skin.”

“I shall keep it in mind when I no longer dance,” Thran grinned wickedly. “Perhaps this photographer will see me making such eyes at you and ask to photograph us both. We would make your hard core porn even harder, without either of us showing an inch of skin.”

“Hard core porn with you, yes. Photographer, no. I’m camera shy.”

“You will have to get used to a little of it, I fear. It will be my fault. Cameras like me, though I do not like them, and it happens.”

“I’ll stay in the background. If anyone asks, I’ll tell them I’m your... driver.”

Thran’s eyes widened, and he laughed. “We will make that truth soon enough. And I yours. Both are delicious to consider. But not quite yet for either, do you think? They are the ultimate moments, and I want them to be perfect for both of us. Not rushed, not catch as catch can. In the right place.”

“So... does that mean you want us to get married? Or be in the house, or...?”

“That, we should both decide. There are things to recommend several situations. Being lovers, but not spouses, is forbidden and dangerous and flaunts authority. I like those things. Being spouses as well as lovers is proud and unashamed and committed, and is kind for the children. I like those things, too. Being in our house... yes, that would be very nice, rather than in my sterile apartment or your children’s haven or an anonymous hotel room. What do you think?”

Bard considered. “I want those moments to be special, too, so what you says makes sense all around. The house would be nice – it would be ours, not mine or yours, but something we made together. So why not make love for the first time in the place we’re making with love? Gods, that sounds sappy.”

Bard glanced at Thran, wincing, but his lover looked back without derision. “I do not think it sounds sappy.”

“Okay,” Bard nodded with a sheepish smile. “So which one of us will get down on bended knee to offer marriage to the other? Though the renegade lovers sounds sexy. I’ll need a biker’s jacket and some tats for that.”

“No tats, please, Bard? I love your skin the way it is. Ink would ruin it.”

“Yours, too. No tats, either of us. But you’d look good in a biker’s jacket, too. Gods, maybe we should find that photographer. You’d be stunning.” Bard winced again, but waved off Thran’s concern. “Jeans again.”

“What’s in them, you mean. And I will pose only if you pose with me. I would find it quite erotic.”

“Hmm. Don’t think I’m ready for that yet. I think I’ll stick to worrying about getting our kitchen in
by New Year’s Eve. I want us to be there then, to start next year where we belong.”

“How much is left to do? Just the appliances, you said?”

“The floor, but that’ll come later. I want to be able to cook. We’ll make a good supper, and have treats at midnight. You can put a bottle of your fancy champagne in your new wine fridge.”

“Along with milk for the children.”

Bard snickered. “And milk for the children.”

The apartment building was before them, so they went up the stairs and inside. Outside Bard’s apartment door, they lingered.

“So... do you need me to write down how to do the salmon for you?” Bard asked, not willing to let his angel go.

“I do not need you to,” Thran murmured. “But I would like for you to. And I must get my shirt.”

Bard let them in, shut the door, and turned into the arms that already reached for him. They twined around each other for a long moment, enjoying the closeness. Then Bard slipped away, found a scrap of paper and a pencil, and scribbled the few steps needed to poach the salmon while Thran put his practice shirt on over his Henley, tying it loosely. He armed his way back into his coat, then took the paper that Bard handed him with the recipe.

“I hate to let you go, fy nghariad.”

“You do not let me go. I am merely three floors above. Separate, but not gone. We will text tonight.”

“We will. The same time tomorrow is good, unless I text you otherwise?”

Thran nodded. “It will be perfect. As today was.”

“Make sure you do your yoga and barre. And your classes, now that your ankle is healed. You’ve got auditions coming. I want to know all about those, how I can help other than preserving your perfect skin. It’s a treasure, you know. Just as the rest of you is.”

Thran offered a chuckle and a little bow, one hand over his heart. “I hear and obey, my saint.”

Bard took Thran in his arms to hug tightly. “Miss you already. Hope all goes well with Legolas today.”

“And I. Know how much I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

They shared one kiss that didn’t last nearly long enough, and then Thran slipped through the door with his bags and was gone.

Bard locked the door, shrugged out of his coat, and leaned back against the door, his eyes shut. How could such a crowded apartment seem so empty?
Thran carried his bags of groceries up to his apartment and let himself in. He toed off his shoes and
took off his coat, then carried the bags into the kitchen quietly. Before he unpacked them, he looked
at the door to Legolas’s room. Still closed. He went into his room long enough to put his practice top
into the laundry hamper in his closet, then returned to the kitchen to unpack his purchases. He had
everything on the counter and was reading the label on one of the spice containers when Legolas
shuffled out of his room.

“You are a sleepy one this week,” Thran commented, smiling. Legolas didn’t need to know how
much he’d appreciated that this morning.

Legolas grunted. “To the market again? Father, you got salmon?”

“I did. I ran into Bard there, and he wrote down a recipe for me. Wait, it is in my coat pocket.” He
fetched the small scrap of paper and handed it to Legolas. “It is easy, and he tells me that cold water
fish are good for athletes. That is both of us, so I thought it would make us a good supper tonight.”

Legolas read the recipe. “Sounds easy. What to go with? Could we have potatoes?”

“I have rice. Bard bought sweet potatoes this morning, so perhaps you can go down and borrow
some from him. Or I can. By the way, I asked him to go to dinner with me tomorrow. He said yes.”

Legolas leaned elbows on the counter, watching his father put the salmon and the red pepper and the
eggs in the refrigerator. “So... he likes you.”

Thran thought about all that a certain bathroom mirror had deliciously revealed earlier this morning.
“I think so.”

“And... you like him.”

“I like him very much.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have not decided yet. He likes seafood. I thought I would take him to Kasim's. You remember his
small café, and the redfish that he grills so well?”

“That isn’t a very fancy place.”

Thran put his two spices in the cupboard. “Bard is not a very fancy sort. Nor am I. He values good
food. So do I. What would you like to have for tomorrow’s supper? I will make sure it is ready for
you. Would you like to ask someone over?”

Legolas waved a hand. “I’m fine, Father. There are plenty of things to eat here, and you won’t be
gone that long.”

Was Legolas asking for reassurance, or...? Thran couldn’t tell, so he answered matter-of-factly. “I do
not expect to be out very late, no. Bard’s children remain in school tomorrow and Wednesday, and
he has work to do on his house. So perhaps nine or ten.”

“I’ll manage.” Legolas belatedly took a bowl from the cupboard, then the oatmeal, and set to his
breakfast. “Did you say something about Christmas dinner with them?”

“It was mentioned. More to your interest, ham was mentioned. I will see if more has developed
tomorrow at dinner. Is there something special you would like? I can offer to bring it.”

“I liked those small tangerines.”

“Clementines. Spanish in origin, though many come from California now.”

“Pie?”

“I will see what our hosts would prefer. We will have time to get something on Wednesday or Thursday. Now, what is your plan for today?”

“When do you have class?”

“At two.”

“Maybe a film afterwards? There’s a space one that looks cool.”

“Of course. And salmon afterwards. With potatoes. Which we do not have. I will ask Bard if I may borrow some.”

“Rice is okay,” Legolas shrugged.

“Then rice we shall have.”

In a way, Thran was relieved that Legolas was happy with rice. If Thran saw Bard again so soon after their tryst this morning with Legolas in tow, his son would know that they had shared much more than a meeting at the market. In a few days or weeks, they could be more open with their relationship. But to thrust it upon his son so abruptly would do more damage than good.

As Legolas cooked his porridge, Thran sighed at the irony of the parent having to be more circumspect than the child.

* * *

The phone call from the kitchen appliance supplier elated Bard as much as deflated him. He listened as the woman explained, gave her his answer, discussed ramifications, then hung up. He leaned back on the sofa, his mobile still in his hand. He called Morgan, the mother of Tilda’s friend Nicole, and made the needed arrangements. The next call was to Thran.

“Bard?”


“Tell me.”

“The good news is that I got a big break on the kitchen appliances. Saved some money, and everything will be installed early. The place had another job fall through, and was looking to fill the hole if I could take everything on short notice. The bad news is that everything’s coming tomorrow morning early. It was then, or we’d likely have to wait until after the first of the year. So I said yes.”

“I would have said the same. Do not worry.”
“That shouldn’t change our dinner plans. Just the morning, which I hate to do.”

“We will manage.”

Bard swallowed. “You could come with me, if you want. Legolas, too. More fencing, or practice for your auditions, or something, but we’d have to leave by seven-thirty. I have to be there at eight-thirty, so I’m dropping Tilda off at her friend’s flat to get on the bus.”

“I will ask. I could spend the time in much-needed practice, in addition to the fencing. It is important that I resume my usual practice before my technique starts to deteriorate.”

“That’s the most important thing – you take care of the dancer. I’ll take care of the kitchen.”

“Just so.”

“Legolas is likely with you, so I know you can’t say much. But text me tonight, as I will with any updates, and we’ll plan.”

“As you say.”

“I know you love me, so you don’t have to say it. I love you, too.”

“Of course. Thanks for letting me know. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Bard switched off his mobile with a wince. Yes, the greater goal was better served by getting a break on cost and installation of the heart of the home he made, but his heart – well, his cock, too – was not convinced. He tried to ignore his disappointment by calling the plumbing firm that was working on the house. It was too much to ask whether they could be out tomorrow to hook up the gas stove, but he’d ask.

A few minutes later, Bard switched off his mobile again. The plumber would be out late Wednesday morning to connect the gas line.

They’d be cooking by Christmas.

He tried to keep that in mind through the rest of the day. He went to the home center to buy more paint and brushes, and he perused the contractors’ lists to see which firms were skilled in restoring vintage floors. It was important to find one that would guard the beautiful inlaid borders from damage, and could attend to any special considerations for the ballroom floor so that it was suitable for Thran to dance on. Before he knew it, Sigrid was home, and Bain shortly after her. Tilda came home on the bus today, since he was home, so before long he put aside his papers and lists to start supper. The children rallied to help with their usual chores.

After they’d sat down to Indian spiced chicken, rice, and green beans, Bard cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Um, about tomorrow...”

Sigrid looked up in interest, but didn’t say anything. She had this suppressed look of glee in her eyes, mostly at his discomfort. His eldest daughter was getting entirely too good at divining the source of her father’s awkwardness.

“The kitchen appliances are all coming to the house tomorrow. The place had a delivery opening,
and gave me a break on the prices as well as free installation if I could take them first thing in the morning. So Bain, you'll need to be out the door ten minutes early. Til, you'll need to get up with Bain, so I can take you over to Nicole’s to get the bus. It'll be a big help to me if you both get yourselves ready as easily as possible tomorrow.”

“No problem, Da,” Bain shrugged, shoveling more rice into his mouth.

“I like going to Nicole’s,” Tilda offered. “I get to play with their cat.”

“Thank you both. And um... I’ve been asked out to dinner tomorrow. So I’m going to make your supper a little early so I know you’re all set before I go.”

“Spaghetti?” Bain asked quickly. “Can we do spaghetti?”

“That’s easy. I want you to eat salad, though. You all need the veg.”

Bain made a face and disapproving noises, but a quelling look from Bard reduced the grumbling to an afterthought. That same expression didn’t deter Sigrid’s speculative expression. She folded her arms before her on the table.

“You’re going out to dinner with Thran, right?”

Three pairs of eyes met his. Bard smothered an awkward smirk and told himself he would remind Sigrid of this the next time she brought home a boyfriend.

“Yes,” Bard said. If his children knew how hard he worked to make that single syllable matter-of-fact and casual and relaxed, they’d laugh.

Tilda looked puzzled, and Bain’s eyes flitted back and forth between his father and his sister. Ever tactful, Bain cleared his throat and said, “Is it a date? You’re going on a date with Thran?”

Wincing, Bard rubbed the back of his neck unconsciously. “I guess I am.”

Sigrid snorted and took up her fork again. “There’s no guessing about it. It’s a date.”

“A date?” Tilda ventured. “You mean, like when Sigrid went to the films with Finn Durinson that time?”

“Exactly like that,” Bain chortled, because Sigrid’s dramatic roll of the eyes hadn’t disguised the blush that washed over her cheeks. “When’s he going to ask you out again, Sig?”

“Shut up,” Sigrid hissed. “As if that’s any of your business.”

“That’s enough, you two,” Bard cautioned. “Whether Finn asks Sig out again or not is none of your business, Bain, and there are nicer ways tell Bain that’s none of his business, Sig. So you both owe each other an apology.”

“Sorry, Sig,” Bain muttered.

Sigrid sniffed, drawing Bard’s regard. She exhaled and looked at her plate. “Sorry, Bain.”

“Da?” Tilda asked, looking up with a puzzled look. “I don’t understand what a date is, then? I thought –”

“Let’s get through supper, all right? Then you and I can talk about it while Sig and Bain clean up.”
“Da!” both Bain and Sigrid protested, but Bard gave them both an exasperated glare until they subsided. “Yes, Da.”

They got through supper without any more awkwardness, though Bard didn’t taste much of the rest of his. Nerves. He got his two elder children started on the cleanup, and then sat with Tilda on the floor of her room with her in his lap, took a deep breath, and had The Talk. There was no easy way to broach the subject of a parent who was normal but not typical, and even though he’d done this twice before, it was harder this time. It was hard enough for children to think of their parents as anything other than a parent – always there, always attentive, always protecting, always without any other role outside of a child’s champion. But where Sigrid and Bain remembered their mother, and remembered her with Bard, Tilda didn’t. All she had to help her understand was what she’d seen among the families of her friends. The biggest help came when Bard remembered one of the boys in Tilda’s class.

“Remember Mason in your class? He has a sister, Tayloe, who’s a couple of years older, right?”

Tilda nodded. “He has two Mams. But no Da.”

“That’s right. So parents come in all kinds. Sometimes it’s just one, or an Auntie or a Gran. When there are two, sometimes it’s a Da and a Mam, and sometimes two Mams, and sometimes two Das. So... the way it starts out is that one person finds another person they like, and they spend time together to become good friends. Sometimes, good friends fall in love and become a family, and then, sometimes, the family grows to include children. So... I like Thran, and he likes me, and that’s where we are so far.”

“Is Thran going to become our Da?”

Bard swallowed. “Maybe. We want to be friends for a while first. What do you think about that?”

Tilda snuggled into Bard’s arms. “I like him. I could help him with parades and things. He doesn’t know very much about a lot of things.”

Bard chuckled. “He’s had to work very, very hard to be such a good dancer, little doll. He hasn’t had a lot of time to do much else.”

“So... does he have time to be friends with you? With us?”

“I think he’d make time for all of us. He hasn’t had the chance to be in a family much, and he misses it. He was sent away to a special dance school, away from his family, when he was six.”

Tilda sat up to look at him. “By himself? Who took care of him?”

“The teachers, I suppose.”

Tilda shook her head emphatically. “I wouldn’t like that. Mr. Fundin is nice, and he makes everything interesting, but it’d be hard having only him look after all of us in my class. I’d miss you a lot.”

“I’d miss you, too, little doll.” He rubbed Tilda’s back gently. “So have I explained everything you want to know?”

“So a date is when two people who like each other do something fun together.”

By Tilda’s definition, how he and Thran had spent the morning was a date. A hell of a date, but one nevertheless. Bard smiled, but only a little.
“That’s right.”

“You should ask Thran on a date to go to the zoo. That’s a fun thing to do together.”

“That’s a good idea,” Bard grinned. “Maybe I’ll ask him to go to the zoo. Maybe you’d like to go, I take it?”

“Da,” Tilda snorted. “It’s not a date when children go. That’s a play date.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll keep that in mind. So, any homework for tomorrow?”

“Just a work sheet for history.”

“Let’s get you started, then. You need to go to bed a little bit earlier tonight, because you’re getting up earlier tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Tilda sighed. “Just two more days until Christmas vacation.”

“That’s right. We need to plan our trip to see the tree at Rockefeller Center.”

“You could ask Thran and Legolas.”

“That would be a play date, then, right?”

Tilda giggled. “You’re silly, Da.”

“I’m silly. And you need to finish your work sheet. Come on.”

After Tilda clambered out of Bard’s arms to unpack her school things, Bard went out to check on Bain and Sigrid. Furtive whispering abruptly ceased as he came down the hall. He stuck his head around the corner, arms akimbo.

“Yes?” he asked pointedly, smiling.

Sigrid and Bain looked at each other guiltily.

“I see. Sniping about Sigrid and Finn Durinson, or me and Thran? Likely both, I imagine.”

The looks turned chagrined, but Sigrid recovered first. “It’s okay with us about Thran.”

Bard laughed. “Oh, well, I’m glad that’s settled. What about you and Finn? Is that okay, too?”

Sigrid reddened again, and Bain snickered. “That is still none of anyone’s business,” Sigrid declared, turning back to the sink with a flounce. “Maybe I don’t even like him.”

“Maybe,” Bard allowed, which drew Bain’s snort. “Be nice, Bain. When you decide to ask Angelica Crofton to the eighth-grade dance, you’ll want your sister to be nice to you.”

It was Bain’s turn to redden furiously, and Sigrid’s to laugh.

“Now that we’ve discussed all of our social lives, get started on your homework. Tomorrow morning’s going to be hectic, so I want you both to get everything done tonight. Not that your routine will change, Sig, but yours will, Bain. You won’t have time for any last minute scribbling tomorrow morning before I have to head out with Tilda.”

“Yes, Da,” both children chorused, and the usual homework routine began once more. Tilda sat with
her work sheet and map, Bain puzzled over pre-algebra, and Sigrid sorted through French grammar. Bard retreated to the sofa, feeling a bit like he’d survived a major military engagement.

But the children were on board.

* * *

Bard was in bed early, in preparation for tomorrow’s campaign. He had his mobile already in hand.

*In bed yet?*

*Not yet. But no matter. Rather hear from you*

*Miss my angel*

*Miss my saint. I am sorry but we cannot go tomorrow. I sense that would push Legolas too much. And I should go to class*

*I expected as much. But I’m sorry to be right*

*As am I. Wednesday?*

*The plumber’s coming to hook up the gas in the kitchen, but not until 11. We’d have a little time*

*I want that. Your children will be home for winter holiday after that, and then we will have no time together at all*

*I told S, B, and T that you asked me out. I have their permission to date you*

*LOL! Did you ask for it? How did it go?*

*No, but since they approved I didn’t tell them I hadn’t asked for it. They like you*

*I am honored. Wish L was more at ease*

*He’s afraid of losing you. I understand. We’ll make sure he knows he isn’t losing you, just gaining us. Or maybe that is what scares him, lol*

*The former, I think*

*We need to look at schools for next year. Maybe one of them will offer things that will give him something to look forward to*

*Like soccer for Bain, so archery and fencing for Legolas*

*Yes. We should visit schools once children return to school after holidays*

*Yes*

*GTG, fy nghariad. Early and long day tomorrow. Don’t want to be ragged for my hot date*

*I love you disheveled. I love to dishevel you*
Hold that thought until Wednesday. Love you, my angel

Love you, my saint, lyubov moya

Bye

Bye

Bard put his mobile aside, pulled up his blanket and sheet, and shut his eyes. There would be no angel in the morning, but the kitchen would come together, which would bring his new life with an angel one step closer.

In the afternoon he’d be home to see to his children, and then in the evening, he and Thran would venture out on a date. After this morning’s decadence, it would be a sedate, almost prim affair. It was still an important milestone, all the same, for it eased four children closer to the idea that one day their fathers would not be alone.

That would be good seasoning, no matter what was on the menu.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

A kitchen causes sparks for an angel and a saint, and a benevolent cherub bestows his blessing.

Bard was on the highway and heading west in record time. Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda had been champions this morning, getting themselves ready and out of the door without fuss. Even Tilda, who’d had to get up an hour early, had had no complaint because she’d been excited to visit Nicole and her cat. Morgan had greeted them at the door with a smile and happy wave, and Bard had left feeling relieved that all three of his children were in good hands. The trip to the house passed quickly, and he parked by the carriage house just before eight-thirty.

He turned up the heat out of its standby mode, and went into the kitchen with his carafe of tea to get a cup. It was good to feel the heat come on enough for him to shed his heavy coat. His tea was still warm, if not piping hot, but he drank it knowing that in just a few hours he’d have a stove and a microwave to provide the means for hot tea on demand. He found the broom and gave the spaces for the fridge and stove a good sweeping. He’d already cleaned the floor with steel wool and mineral spirits, then polished it with paste wax, so he wouldn’t have to move the appliances once they were in place. He liked the old, distressed wood, and decided that the soft, waxed finish was perfect for the homey space; anything more elaborate would wait for the fancier inlaid floors in the public rooms.

The installers arrived less than twenty minutes later, and Bard’s tea was forgotten as the workmen came in to prep the spaces. To Bard’s surprise, a plumber that the installer had provided came in first to assess what she needed to do to connect the gas to the stove.

Oh, gods, he’d have tomorrow morning with Thran –

Calm down, Bard told himself sternly. He wouldn’t get his hopes up until the installers were done, and he saw for himself that everything was in place as it should be.

The stove came in – a professional, six-burner model with a grill, two ovens, and a warming tray that took an immense dolly and three men to move it into the kitchen. The plumber squirmed behind it to connect the flexible gas conduit, then slithered out again. The installers nudged the stove into its niche, and methodically checked each oven and burner. As the range hood went up, the plumber sorted out the dishwasher and sink disposal. The microwave and Thran’s small wine chiller were next. The last piece was the immense fridge. As the installers wrestled it carefully into place, the plumber connected water lines and got the cold-water dispenser in order.

The room had suddenly gone from construction site to working kitchen. The house was now a home, albeit an empty, unpainted, unpolished one. But with a working kitchen to cap off a new furnace, functional bathrooms, and a solid, insulated roof, the rest would follow.

“Sign here.”

Bard tore himself from his reverie, took the clipboard holding the installer’s paperwork, read everything, and signed his name with a quiet feeling of elation.
It was happening.

When the installers were gone, Bard called the plumber he’d scheduled for tomorrow to cancel the appointment. Then he went back to the kitchen to admire the stove, listen to the fridge cool down, set the clock on the microwave, sweep the floor again, and wipe down the countertops. He got the boxes from the solarium that held the new red cookware, all ceramic-clad cast iron, expensive but worth it to feed his family well, and set it in the cabinets. He arranged cooking tools in a deep ruby red art glass vase beside the stove. He put the black teakettle on the stove. They still needed dishes, glasses, and flatware, but nevertheless, the kitchen was ready.

He checked his mobile. Eleven-thirty. Thran should be through his yoga, barre, and breakfast. His class wouldn’t be until the afternoon. Bard took a picture of the fridge, captioned it with Ready for food! and sent it to Thran.

He sent one of the wine chiller. Ready for champagne!

He sent one of himself in front of the stove, pointing to the teapot. Ready to cook! Call me!

His mobile beeped immediately. “It is done? It looks fantastic!”

“It’s beyond words, Thran. Amazing. The installer sent a plumber, so the gas is on, the water’s on, everything’s working. Stove, fridge, your fancy wine chiller. I wish you were here. It’s a working kitchen now. We have pots, and once we find some plates at the flea market, we can eat here. We just need a few more chairs.”

“I wish I were there, too, lyubov moyya. It looks and sounds wonderful. I cannot wait to see it in person.”

“I want to visit the flea markets as soon as possible so we can start to come out here on weekends.”

“Perhaps this weekend, after the holiday?”

“I’m game. But we’ll have a chance tomorrow for a little holiday of our own before then. Since the plumber came today, I don’t have to come out here tomorrow. I can stay in the city and hope that an angel might want to come with me there instead.”

A soft chuckle. “I will watch as before, and alight shortly thereafter. Be ready.”

“The next thing to do is get the painters out here. Or I can do a lot of it to save us money.”

“Let us settle on colors, then hire someone. Have it done quickly, while we peruse the flea markets. Then we will have those weekends in the country until we can move there full time.”

“We won’t have much luck trying to hire painters until after Christmas, so you can come out here to see the paint in the right light, and we can decide. Once the holidays are done, I can wrangle the painters while I work on whatever. After that, the floor, and we’re done.”

“This is the best news.”

“It is. I won’t keep you, angel; you’ve got to eat before class, so I’ll see you for dinner.”

“I will see you at six.”

“I’ll be ready. Jeans washed, boots polished.”

Another soft laugh. “I love you, lyubov moyya.”
“I love you, fy nghariad.”

Bard switched off his mobile, and spent another few minutes looking around at the kitchen, the heart in the center of a promise. Then he drove... not home, but back to the city. Home was now behind him.

* * *

Thran put his mobile down, grinning about how a few pictures of a kitchen’s resurgence and his lover’s excitement had delighted him. Bard had outdone himself to jockey so much work to completion in such a short time – roof, insulation, kitchen, furnace, plumbing, hot water heater, and surely half a hundred other things that Thran knew nothing about. More than anything, he wanted to be with Bard to share their growing excitement as their house blossomed into the beautiful home they both wanted. But working towards this new life was not Bard’s undertaking alone; Thran had had his own part to play, a part that so far was still developing. Once Thran finished packing the things he needed for his afternoon class, he took up his mobile again and called the resourceful Mr. Nori to ask a few more questions. He followed that up with a call to his agent, discussed his upcoming auditions, agreed to another one, then ended the call well satisfied. Matters were progressing.

Legolas surfaced from his blankets at last to spoon his way through his morning oatmeal, if noon were still considered morning. He planned to avail himself of the barre this afternoon and then practice his fencing exercises while Thran was at class, then peruse a film on his computer afterwards.

“You are so much by yourself,” Thran ventured as he filled a glass with water from the kitchen tap. He looked over his shoulder at his son who sat at the kitchen table. “Would you like to ask Bain to come up to play a game, or watch a film with you while I am at dinner tonight? Or you are welcome to go there instead.”

“I like Bain,” Legolas admitted. “We had a good time together at the pizza shop. But... to be honest, Father, I’m glad to have a little time alone. I am never alone at school.”

Thran turned off the tap and carried his glass to the table to sit across from Legolas. “You are never alone, but never with anyone, either. Am I right?”

Legolas looked up guiltily, swallowed, then looked back at his porridge.

“I called it ‘Alone in the Midst of the Throng.’ I hated it.”

Legolas looked up again. “That’s what you felt when you were in school?”

Thran nodded. “Always. At first, when I was very small, I thought it was only because I missed my mother and father. But after some years, I discovered that it was more than that.”

“What else was it?” Legolas asked, his porridge forgotten as he regarded his father.

Thran shrugged. “Some of it was my nature to prefer my own kind, which the school and the regime did not tolerate. Some of it was because I looked so different – you know my hair turned white when I was younger than you are now, and I chose to wear it long, which made it all the more obvious. Some was because I had nothing in common with any of the other students. I became very good at the dance very fast, and I was much younger than the other dancers. All uncomfortable.”
Legolas looked back down at his cereal bowl.

“It is like that for you, too, perhaps?”

Legolas swallowed his porridge, but looked as if he weren’t sure of what to say.

“I do not think you are gay, so that is probably not what isolates you. But you are an elite fencer and archer, and I expect that some of the older athletes do not appreciate your abilities. Your looks set you apart as well. And I would not be surprised to find that you have little in common with most of your fellow students. To be in such a situation is hard, and I well understand your desire for a respite.”

Legolas nodded. Perhaps the last bite of porridge went down in more of a lump than the others had.

“You have kept up with the crime dramas you like so much,” he said with a smile.

“I do not need a crime drama to tell me that my son is weary.”

Legolas sighed. “The boarding school is very good in many ways – the subjects are interesting, and I learn a lot. But... I am in the high school section now... the social groups, the cliques, they’re so intense, Father. Many of them are cruel to students who don’t look or act the way they do, or worse. And the fencing, one of the two things I love most... several friends from my middle school team started on the high school one, so I had friends, but then so many dropped out because Master Schroeder sucks the joy out of the art. And you’re right, some of the older boys don’t think I should be on the team. Fencing was my refuge, as dance was yours. But...”

Legolas sighed again. “I know why I have to be there, Father. I do, and I appreciate the sacrifices you make to send me to such a good school. But... honestly? I would rather be here with you.”

Thran’s throat closed. He choked his next sip of water down with difficulty. “I do not like being apart from you, Legolas. Not at all. I hope it will not be for much longer. You are fourteen now, and able to see to yourself when I am in class. The only difficulty is when I must travel, as I still must do a few times a year. I do not like to leave you alone then, and it is not feasible or fair to you to make you follow me about. But my ankle injury has caused me to consider my future, and yours with it. You know that I must audition to regain my place in the company. I have arranged other auditions as well, to see if I can change my circumstances so that you and I can be together again.”

Legolas’s eyebrows went up. “Really? Other auditions? With other companies?”

“So... instructor? Or maybe offer master classes, as so many dancers do?”

“So I consider, yes. It does not interest me to teach small children, but master classes for senior dancers offer interesting possibilities.”

“Wow.” Legolas looked at his father with surprise. “That’s a big change.”

Smiling ironically, Thran shrugged. “I like the chance to dispense with your boarding school. And to face banishment instead of gratitude when I save one of the company’s princesses - that I will not accept meekly.”
Legolas grinned, even chuckled in appreciation. “No, I can’t see you doing that. When will you know anything?”

“Likely not for a while yet. But perhaps you will not have to go back to the boarding school after this term.”

Legolas’s grin waxed wider. “I hope not. I hope it comes together, Father.”

Thran grinned back. “So do I, synok. I very much do. Now, I must go to class. Nothing will happen if I do not keep the body fit.”

“Have a good class, Father. I’ll see you after.”

“Enjoy the barre and the fencing.”

Thran put on his coat, scarf, and boots; collected his bag; and waved goodbye to Legolas as he went through the door. As he walked downstairs, he thought about all the future plans that swirled around him. May they come together, and sooner rather than later.

* * *

After his class, Thran walked home briskly, pleased at how well his ankle had handled the precise movements and strenuous exercise after its layoff. He could resume his regular daily classes without risk of aggravating his ligaments now. It had felt good to stretch, to enjoy the work with the dance master who knew him well and could challenge him without overstressing his body. He had landed each jeté precisely; traced each tendu, développé, and plié with control. He was well able to read the mood of the other dancers as well as the dance master, and he was satisfied that word would soon pass that his form was as strong as it had been before the muggers’ attack. Not only would that give him more leverage with his existing company, should he decide to stay there, but also with the other avenues he pursued.

Legolas was working on his forms when Thran returned, and they spent some time discussing finer points of one position or another. It was a pleasure for them to converse on any subject, given the more than three months that had passed since the start of Legolas’s term, but the finer points of fencing or archery or the dance were their especial pleasures.

Thran left Legolas to finish his stretches while he showered before his dinner with Bard. He paid his usual careful attention to his hair, deciding to leave it loose rather than confine it in its usual daytime braid. Clothes were nothing to fuss over tonight, merely the jeans and Henley that had become his usual attire when he was with Bard. Wallet and keys went into the pockets of his jeans, and he came out into the living room. Legolas was curled comfortably on the sofa, listening to music on his computer while he waited his turn for the shower.

Thran bent for his hiking boots and sat in the chair beside Legolas to lace them up. Legolas looked him up and down.

“So, Kasim's grill?”

Thran nodded. “That is my plan. If it changes, I will text you. Call if you need anything.”

“I’ll be fine. There’s some leftover salmon from last night. That’ll be good. And the last of the
cooked rice.”

“Eat some vegetables, of course. There is a lot of broccoli.”

Legolas laughed. “There is always a lot of broccoli. Our refrigerator will never be completely empty, because there will always be broccoli in it.”

Laughing, Thran patted his son’s knee. “Eggs, also. Always eggs. Enjoy your film.”

“Enjoy your dinner, Father. I’ll see you soon.”

Thran armed his way into his coat, collected his scarf and gloves, and lifted a hand in farewell. He descended the stairs to Bard’s apartment to knock on the door. Sigrid opened the door, greeting him with a big smile.

“Ada!” she winked as she drew him in. She raised her voice to call back into the apartment, “Da! Thran’s here!”

“Be right there!” Bard called back from the kitchen.

Taking advantage of the momentary privacy, Sigrid gave Thran an impulsive hug. “Thank you for making Da so happy,” she whispered.

Thran took her hand and brushed a kiss on the back of it with a pleased smile. “It is my pleasure, ma chère. You are kind to welcome me so kindly. I am grateful.”

“Sigrid, spaghetti’s on,” Bard called from the kitchen.

Sigrid rolled her eyes at Thran. “We can get it, Da. Go have your dinner.”

“As soon as you sit down, I’ll go. Bain, get the salad bowls out of the cabinet, please.”

“We can get it, Da,” Bain echoed his sister’s protest. “Look, Til’s got the bowls already. So we’re set.”

Sigrid squeezed Thran’s hand before she headed for the table. “Yeah, we’re set. So go on, Da!”

Bard came out of the kitchen looking harried, but Thran expected it was more nerves than anything else. He was freshly washed and shaved, in clean jeans and plaid shirt and the boots Thran had expected. He smiled in welcome when he met Thran’s eyes, and seemed to settle. “Hi, Thran. Be right there.”

Thran stuck his head into the kitchen. Sigrid ladled out noodles from the colander, Bain got the sauce out of the microwave, and Tilda took a block of cheese from its waxed paper wrappings to set by a small box grater. Salad waited on the table. Tilda gave him a warm smile.

“Hi, Thran!” she greeted, and Bain echoed her.

“Bon soir, ma petite Tilda, and mon cher Bain. You are all well tonight?”

“Very well,” Tilda nodded. “Only one more day of school before our holiday vacation! I can’t wait! Do you know we’re going to see the skaters by the big Christmas tree one day soon?”

“That is always fun,” Thran agreed. “Legolas and I go every year, too.”

“It’s my favorite place to visit at Christmas,” Bain chimed in. “Because I get to skate!”
“Legolas enjoys that, too. Perhaps you and he can go together this year.”

“That’d be good!”

“We will plan to, then, if your Da agrees,” Thran said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Bard winked at Tilda. “It’ll be a play date, right, little doll?”

“Oh, Da,” she shook her head.

“Go on, Da,” Sigrid gave Bard a shove. “Or you’ll make Thran think you don’t want to go!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bard said mildly. “So be nice, clean up, and start your homework. It’s the last night before you won’t have any for a week, so finish strong.”

“Yes, Da,” came the chorus.

“See you soon. Call if you need anything. I’m off...”

“And you’re leaving, too!” chorused the children, giggling at the old joke.

Grinning, Bard pressed kisses on the heads of his children, and let himself and Thran out of the apartment. When the door closed behind them, Bard leaned in for a quick kiss, one Thran was happy to return before they ventured outside to the sidewalk.

“So where are we off to?” Bard asked, buttoning his coat.

“A warm harbor. But first, a quick walk to a busier street to find a cab. Would you tell me about the kitchen while we walk?”

They forged down the street together, Bard describing how the kitchen installation had gone, answering Thran’s questions along the way. They quickly found a cab to sweep them quickly to the small restaurant that Thran had chosen. It barely registered as an eatery, but the smell emanating from the door was proof enough that an expert chef was on premises. Bard sniffed appreciatively.

“I like it already,” he nodded, taking in the raw bar to the left, the scant dozen small tables lit with tiny votive candles on the right, and the patrons casually attired in jeans and sweaters. The chef in a long white apron came forward to meet them, smiling as he recognized Thran.

“Welcome back, Thran!” the chef held out his hands wide. “We have missed you! How is your son? Still shooting his arrows?”

“Still,” Thran replied, smiling. “Kasim, this is my friend, Bard, and I have told him how excellent your grill is. What is good tonight?”

“Come,” Kasim beckoned, showing them to a small table in the back. “Our grill is always good, Thran. You know that! But tonight, I will tell you that I think the salmon is best. It has a nice glaze, not too sweet, not too hot. There is your favorite redfish, too, and a good grouper. Oysters, of course. And perhaps I can find a few rings of calamari? And of course there is what’s on the menu.”

He waited until Thran and Bard had piled their coats in the extra chairs, then handed them the short menu with a flourish. “I will bring you a glass of wine and a few oysters while you decide, perhaps?”

“Are the oysters Pacific or Atlantic today?”
“We have some very nice Atlantic Beausoleils, small, and very nutty. I think you would like them.”

“You know I cannot resist them, Kasim. Six would be very nice.” Thran looked to Bard. “Do you like white or red wine, lyubov moya? Or would you prefer very cold vodka with your oysters?”

Bard leaned over his elbows. “I like a red, when I drink it.”

“I as well. So, Kasim, perhaps an Austrian Zweigelt for us both, to go with the oysters? And a small plate of the calamari.”

“Of course. I will bring them while you decide about the rest.”

Kasim trotted off, so Thran turned to Bard. “Kasim knows I must eat small portions of everything, and makes the plates for me himself, just so that I may sample the other good things here. Kasim will bring us more of anything if you wish.”

“I’m good.” Bard gave Thran a lopsided grin. “I’ve never gotten to be the girl on a date before. Should I flutter my eyelashes or something?”

“Gods, I hope not,” Thran scoffed. “Only enjoy yourself. That is all you need to do. Now, the menu. What looks good to you?”

Bard was scanning the menu carefully. “Hmm. It all looks good. Though yesterday, when we bought your salmon, I thought that sounded great. So I’ll go with that. What about you?”

“I love their redfish, so that will be my choice. The salad has a nice bitter tang to it to contrast with the slight sweetness of the glaze, if you like that. Or the asparagus is specially grilled and sprinkled with lemon juice, and is very good.”

“I’m always up for asparagus. I think I’ll try the beet salad with mine.”

“Also good. There are four kinds of beets in it!” Thran grinned.

Kasim set their appetizers and glasses of wine before them, took their order for their entrees, and swept away to see to the grill.

“So. The oysters.” Thran gave Bard a look. “Do you like them?”

“I’ll try anything once,” he said, looking askance at the plate. “Though I must say that the lad who tried the first one was brave.”

“Or desperate,” joked Thran. “They are not auspicious to look at, I concede. But if you ignore that part, they are the best taste of the ocean there is.”

“Do you put all of these on one oyster?” Bard pointed to the wedges of lemon, the salt, the small dabs of cocktail sauce and hot sauce.

“I prefer mine with just a hint of lemon, nothing more. But try the cocktail or hot sauces if you like. Or they are good plain. Then, like so,” Thran squeezed a drop or two of lemon juice atop one of the oysters, “and like so,” he picked up the shell, “and like so.”

He slurped the oyster and its juice off the shell, chewed appreciatively, swallowed, and had a sip of wine. “Delicious. Nutty, just as Kasim said.”

Bard had paid close attention, so when Thran waved a hand at the plate, he considered the seasonings, chose just the lemon, slurped, and chewed thoughtfully. “I understand what you mean
about the taste of the ocean. Just a little salty, and nutty. And you’re right. They taste better if you don’t look at them.”

They had the last four, though for the last one Bard tried a little of the hot sauce. “Mmm. That adds a good tang to it.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them. Would you like more?”

“I’m ready for the calamari. And dinner’s coming after that. I have to pace myself, or I’ll be too full to enjoy it all.”

Thran wondered when the last time Bard had been too full. Likely the last time Thran had been. They both had reasons for sparse rations. But tonight there would be nothing of that. They dug into the crispy calamari and remoulade together, enjoying the treat with their wine. As they sampled, Bard told Thran about the conversation he’d had with Tilda to explain what a date was, which made Thran laugh. In turn, he told Bard about the conversation he’d had with Legolas about the boarding school, and that he’d scheduled another audition for late January.

“What kind of auditions?” Bard asked. “For other companies, or specific roles, or something else? This is all foreign to me.”

“My agent has talked to other companies, but he is also pursuing other things. I did not say much to Legolas about them, other than it was my hope that he would no longer have to go to boarding school after the spring term. I consider several things, and I will tell you what they are so far. It may be better for me not to sign a contract with a single company where I would dance the roles they tell me to dance. Some are not suited to me, nor I to them. I am known for some of the more... outré works. My knife dance is one. The Prodigal Son is another. The Golden Slave in Scheherazade is a third.”

“The Golden Slave?” Bard grinned, giving Thran a look that sent a jolt through him. “I might like to have a personal demonstration of that one. Does it come with chains?”

“It comes with a delightful slave’s costume. I die at the end most horribly. That happens in Spartacus, too. At least as the prince in Sleeping Beauty I get to keep the girl.”

“The girl?”

Thran shrugged. “I am known as a romantic dancer, lyubov moya. The eye fucking? It works very well on ballet audiences, even for a gay dancer.”

Bard nearly choked on his calamari, and they both had a hearty laugh.

“To be honest, I think they put me in Spartacus because he has to carry Phrygia so much in Act III. It takes a strong back to do that. I am of a size and strong enough to make it look much easier than it is.”

“What’s the hardest role you do?”

Thran considered.

“Prodigal Son is very hard, but I enjoy it. I like many of Nijinsky’s roles because he trained at the Mariinsky before it was named thus, and his roles are emphasized there. Nureyev also danced there, and added his own stamp to many of Nijinsky’s pieces. I like Scheherazade because it was Nijinsky’s most famous role. The choreography caused a scandal when it was created, because it was very sensuous and Oriental and foreign, and of course the story is scandalous. The rajah goes
hunting, the concubines bribe the eunuchs to release the male slaves, and an orgy ensues. At the end, the rajah kills everyone but Scheherazade, who stabs herself for the loss of her Golden Slave. All very epic, and outré for 1910.”

“Why do I not find it surprising that you like flamboyant roles?”

“Perhaps because I am a flamboyant dancer?” Thran teased.

“Maybe you are. I haven’t seen enough to know, though I’d like to change that. But you look pretty epic draped over my ratty sofa like a virgin sacrifice.”

“That is a role I particularly enjoy. I’m very good at deflowering virgins, too. I hope to give you a personal demonstration of that very soon.”

Bard’s grin was part hilarity, part grimace, as he shifted in his chair. “Damn, Thran.”

“Ah, perhaps the addition of underpinnings has not helped?”

“No,” Bard gave him a mock glare. “I don’t think either of us needed the oysters, either.”

“Not in that sense. But I like them, and as you say, it is important to eat well. You must do so, too. You need strength to work the metal, yes?”

Bard picked at the emptying plate of calamari. “Less than you think, but enough. It’s not like I have to lift a finished piece, or bend iron bars like the lad in the circus. More endurance than anything else. Some parts of forming or assembly take a good stretch of time. I used to put a sign out by the barn door before I began a long session. It said ‘Metal in Progress – Go Away.’ An interruption at the wrong time could ruin the piece.”

“I will not intrude when your sign is in place.” Thran speared the last piece of calamari, dipped it in the sauce, and held it out to Bard. “So build your strength, Bard. Finish the calamari.”

Bard leaned forward to bite the tidbit off the fork. “Yes, fy nghariad. Right away, fy nghariad.”

“Such compliance!” Thran laughed. “What else can I entice you to do?”

“In a public restaurant? Not much other than enjoy the company and the food. Both of which I am happy to do.”

“Nothing else?”

Bard grinned and a gleam was in his eye. “Hmm. Maybe one more thing.”

“We agreed to that during my second visit to the house.”

“That was just a warmup for the real thing.”

“Be sure of what you ask of me, lyubov moya.”

Bard shrugged. “I’m game if you are.”

“You are very nice game. I get very hungry to look at you. So yes, I am game, too.”

“You’re sure, too?”

Thran edged a hand across the table. “How better to treasure the beautiful saint who has graced my
“And the angel in mine.” Bard met Thran’s fingers with his own. “So...”

“Yes. You?”

“Yes. Just yes.”

Thran’s lips curved up into what was likely a silly grin. “Ah. Once again, oysters have justified their magical reputation.”

Bard sat back, laughing softly. He ran a hand through his hair, pausing at his nape to savor his incredulity. “Forget the mollusks. It was the kitchen installation pictures.”

“Likely so. To see them made everything seem more real. Like the way scenery changes a bare stage to a place of magic.”

“It was magic. I wish you’d been there to see it, Thran. One minute, it was a construction site. The next, it was a kitchen. No, more than that – it was a home. Still rough on the surface, but it’s coming. It was amazing.”

“I’m sure I will feel that way when I see it for myself, too. But now, let us allow poor Kasim deliver our salads. He has been most patient with us.”

Bard sneak a look at the chef moving about the room to attend to other diners. Yes, Kasim had kept an eye on them, proving so with the most conspiratorial smile he bestowed upon Thran. In seconds, the chef was at their table to sweep away their empty hors d’oeuvres plates and quickly return with their salads. He didn’t speak, but his smile was benevolent as he left them to indulge.

“He’s on to us,” Bard muttered to his plate, looking chagrined.

“Kasim is a most discerning and attentive fellow. How are the beets tonight?”

“Delicious. I don’t get to enjoy them too often, as Sigrid and Bain aren’t fond of them. Tilda likes them, though. So this is a pleasure. How’s the lettuce?”

“Arugula. Quite piquant. I like it.” He drizzled the barest bit of balsamic dressing over it and started to eat. “Bitter things are good to balance the sweeter seafood, the slight glaze that will be on the redfish. A good tonic.”

Bard hummed and attended to his salad. Their entrees followed, Thran’s redfish was grilled to Kasim’s usual perfection, but as much as he enjoyed it, it was even better to watch Bard savor his salmon with reverent appreciation. The salmon was just the barest bit crispy on the outside, but still buttery on the inside. Bard offered him a taste; the only reason Thran consented was because he could offer Bard a taste of his redfish, which his saint enjoyed. The Zweigelt that had accompanied their appetizers worked well with the fish, and Thran regarded his empty plate with a sigh of contentment.

“That was wonderful,” Bard said. “The best meal I’ve had in I don’t know how long. Your friend Kasim is a genius.”

“Please tell him so,” Thran asked. “It would please him very much. So, dessert, and tea?”

“Only if you’re having some of each.”
“Such a night deserves both. Let us see what Kasim has to recommend.”

Thran looked for their chef, but he was already heading for them, a platter in hand. With a flourish, he set two small ramekins before them, then spoons, then a pair of filled champagne glasses. He offered them both a bow.

“May I be the first to offer my congratulations?” He turned to Bard. “Thran has been a good friend for many years, and I hope you will soon be, too, Bard. Please, enjoy a little sweetness from me to compliment yours.”

“Kasim, you are magnificent! Crème brulée au chocolat avec des framboises?”

“Your favorite, I know,” Kasim said smugly. “You did not expect me to forget that, did you? Of course I remember. I am Kasim.”

“You outdo yourself. I am touched beyond speech.”

“Then eat, eat! Enjoy!”

“This is nice of you,” Bard said simply. “Everything I've had tonight has been delicious, and I'm sure this will be, too. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome. Now, enjoy.”

Kasim went to attend to other diners, leaving Bard to regard Thran with speculation. “Did the children tell you how much I like chocolate crème brulée? And did you tell Kasim?”

Thran held up his hands in denial. “I did not speak to anyone about dessert, either your children or Kasim. This is his initiative, and his alone. But it is a very nice initiative, isn’t it?”

Bard took up his champagne glass. “Very nice, indeed. So, fy nghariad, to us, the night, the brilliant chef, a perfect dinner, and everything that follows such an auspicious start.”

Thran touched his glass to Bard’s. “To everything.”

For the first time in memory, Thran drank his glass empty. Bard was no less thorough. To toast all that was to come with less bore no contemplating.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

A pair of inquisitions ensues. Then a pair of lovers steals a little private time.

Chapter Notes

Ah, yes, another chapter that earns the Explicit rating. Enjoy it.

Enjoy the cold shower that follows, too :-).

The cab ride home was warm and loud, thanks to their Algerian cab driver. He had the heat on full blast, as well as some wonderfully raucous music that wailed too loudly for anyone to talk over. Beside Bard, Thran made an incredulous face, which drew them both to laugh, but they were content to take in the overload without complaint. Bard relaxed against the back of the cab as the ululating music swept over him, its jubilant racket the perfect accompaniment to his happiness.

A mere glass of wine, even when followed with gleeful champagne and wild North African music, was not the reason for his high spirits – an angel was. His angel. His angel alone, as thoroughly as he was the angel’s saint.

What a couple of delirious saps they were.

The cab racketed through the streets back to their apartment building in minutes, the lights of the city streaking by like fireworks to accompany the staccato music. When Bard and Thran emerged before their apartment building, Bard felt as if he’d passed through a festival. As the music from the cab faded into the distance, Bard thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets and took a deep breath of the chill air and relative quiet that stretched up and down the street. With Thran beside him, they climbed the stairs to their building, slipped inside the door, and shut the door behind them.

“That was quite a meal,” Bard breathed, his fingers reaching for Thran’s in the dimness. “Perfect place, perfect food, perfect company. Especially perfect company. You know how to show a welder a good time.”

“I expect you to put out, of course,” Thran deadpanned, as he slipped his hand around Bard’s hip to stroke his buttock.

Snickering, Bard’s hand snaked to Thran’s nape and pulled him close enough to kiss. “Always the greedy bastard. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow morning. And we both decided that we’d put out only so much until the right place and time came along.”

“True. But know that I would prefer to coax you into my bed and keep you awake all night, even though we must bow to the needs of our children.”

“Not for much longer, my angel.”
Thran hummed as he eased his arms around Bard and kissed him again. “How I love to hear you call me that.”

“Somebody told me once that it wasn't bragging if it was true.”

“I leave it to you. Just as you must leave the bestowal of sainthood to me. So... until tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow. Unless one of us decides to text something racy from bed.”

“That would keep us both from sleep, which would make the time between now and tomorrow morning pass much more slowly.”

“True. I’ve got enough to think about, anyway. Do you want a ring? I’d like us to have them.”

“As would I. White gold for me.”

“For me, too. Nothing ostentatious, but not completely plain.”

“Of course not. Neither of us is plain.”

Bard laughed. “Not at all. So give it some thought.”

“You, too.”

They walked up the stairs to Bard’s door. One last kiss, a lingering touch of hands, a whisper of farewells, and Thran turned up the stairs. He turned at the landing, smiled, and disappeared on soft feet, back up to heaven.

Exhaling, Bard indulged in a private grin. How had his life become such a fairy tale? One where a tall, exquisite ballet dancer acted as both prince and fairy godfather, making all things happen? Thran was such a skilled dancer that maybe he’d danced dual roles in a single ballet so effortlessly before. May these two be ones that his angel would grace for the rest of their lives.

* * *

Legolas looked up from his computer as Thran let himself in the door. “You’re back early.”

Thran blinked as he slipped off his coat and took off his hiking boots. “Am I? What time is it?”

“Just nine-thirty.”

“Kasim asked about you. He sends his warmest regards.”

“That was nice of him. What did he have for you?”

“Beausoleil oysters. Calamari with his special remoulade. Grilled redfish, asparagus, his special arugula salad, and crème brulée au chocolat avec des framboises. All up to his usual excellence.”

“What did Bard have?”

“Grilled salmon with the asparagus and the beet salad, and the crème brulée. Also excellent.”

“Did you... have a good time?”
Thran sat down in the chair by the sofa and stretched his long legs out in front of him before giving Legolas his full regard. “I had a wonderful time. A very wonderful time.”

His son paused his game, but said nothing, only gazed at him with a mixed expression. Oh, so much to say, and how to say it? Such things were never easy.

“I like Bard very much,” Thran said.

A long silence passed, but Thran was content to see how much Legolas would press if given the time.

“How much?” Legolas finally ventured.

“More than I have liked anyone since your mother died.”

“So... more than just as a friend.”

Thran nodded.

“And... does he...”

Thran nodded.

“Oh. So... what does that mean?”

“It means that we will continue to do what is best for our children. The four of you will always come first for us.”

“So all those things you talked about earlier, about your auditions...”

Thran got up out of his chair, sat beside Legolas, and put an arm around his son’s shoulders. “Those things began as I told you – because of the poor treatment from my company, and because I hate to send you to boarding school. I have never liked to be apart from you for so long at a time, and I do not like that you are miserable there. I know what that is like, and the sooner that ends, the better for both of us. Nothing matters as much as that. Nothing matters to me in the same way that you do.”

“So... what happens now?”

“I do not know, entirely. I have started my search for a suitable school for you, and for fencing and archery instructors. Until I decide what to do about my contract, decisions must wait. But I will not choose a school or instructors for you until you see them first. Be sure of that. I do not want to change one ill-fitting situation for another.”

Legolas didn’t hug his father, but he didn’t move out from under Thran’s arm, either, glad of the physical closeness. Thran jostled him gently.

“I love you very much, Legolas. You are my son and treasure, and I am very proud of you. No matter what happens, those things will always be true. So you will not lose me to anyone. This will likely cause you great distress when you start to date.”

Legolas snickered. “It will, if you glare at everyone I bring home the way you glare at me.”

“We shall see when that moment comes. Until then, you must bear the glare alone.”

As Legolas went back to his video game, smiling, Thran took a surreptitious deep breath.
Two speculative stares skewered Bard as he came into his apartment – Bain and Tilda were on the sofa together, watching a film. A flurry of motion came from Sigrid’s room, and his oldest child scampered down the hall.

“How was it?” she asked breathlessly.

“Delicious. Very, very good.”

“What’d you have?” Bain asked, pausing the film. Oh, gods. There would be no avoiding the Spanish Inquisition tonight.

Bard hung his coat up on its hook and unlaced his boots. “The first part was oysters.”

“What, fried?” Sigrid asked. When he shook his head, her eyes went round. “Not raw?”

Bard sat in his chair to describe the eating of raw oysters, and then of everything else. Tilda wanted to know if the crème brûlée had the crust on top, and Bard assured her that it had taken three raps with his spoon to crack the hard sugar crust to reach the creamy chocolate underneath. Then he had to describe everything that Thran had eaten, and all about the restaurant, and Kasim. It was a pleasure to savor each detail again as he described it for the children. Bain was especially fascinated with the description of the nimble oyster shucker who manned the raw bar, skillfully opening and preparing the mollusks, then dealing them out to the patrons sitting before him as if he laid out their fortunes. They were so interested in everything, down to the color of the cloths on the tables – blue gingham, not the expected red – that Bard almost thought they’d forget to ask anything else.

Sigrid soon disabused him of that hope. “How was the date part?”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “The... date part?”

“Yeah, the date part. In and around the food, how were you and Thran?”

Three sets of very curious eyes bored into Bard. All they needed was a bright light to shine in his eyes – on second thought, they didn’t need the light. Their eyes were bright enough.

“Um, let’s turn that around. How was the date part when you and Finn went to the film?”

“Yeah, how was that?” Bain chortled gleefully, laughing even though he’d been no less interested in anything Bard had to say.

“That’s none of anyone’s business!” Sigrid huffed.

“That’s right. It isn’t. So if you want others to be respectful of your privacy, then you need to be respectful of other’s privacy, too.”

“So there was a date part, then!” Sigrid pounced, sending Bain off into laughter again. Tilda cradled Mr. Bun and frowned.

“I had a very good time, with very good food, with a very good friend,” Bard said patiently. “I
enjoyed it very much. What’s the matter, little doll? You’re frowning.”

“I thought a date was what people who liked each other did that was fun. Your dinner sounded fun. So what are Sigrid and Bain talking about? Wasn’t the dinner the date part?”

Bain collapsed into gales of laughter, and even Sigrid started to laugh.

“The dinner was the date part, yes,” Bain told her, giving Tilda’s siblings a glare. “And it would be wise for two particular children to think carefully about what they say next, unless they want to spend a large part of the holiday grounded. What I said about respect still holds.”

Bain and Sigrid exchanged looks, but subsided.

“Homework?” Bard asked, glad to have diverted his children, if only for the moment.

“I’m done,” Bain said, and Tilda echoed her brother.

“Almost done. A bit more on my French essay, that’s all.”

“Everything in the back packs? Baths?”

Tilda and Bain had packed their things and bathed.

“Then into bed, you two. Tomorrow you can stay up a bit longer for the holidays. Tonight, though, it’s still a school night.”

As the children scattered, Bard got up to brush his teeth, glad to leave the field of battle relatively unscathed. It wouldn’t last.

* * *

Up at six-thirty. Very slow stretches in bed before rising – ankles, wrists, hips, shoulders, neck, all gently but completely, like the luxuries of an odalisque, or a sleek feline. He thought of what it would be like if Bard lay sleepily beside him to watch him stretch, gradually awakening as Thran teased him with his languid movements. How long would it take before he could rouse Bard to do more than watch? Thinking of the possibilities lent a warmth to his extensions that they would not otherwise have had.

Finally rising, morning ablutions, practice attire, then to the barre for the morning ritual. A bit shorter today, then the yoga, though it was hard to center himself this morning. The reason for that gave him something else to smile about as he did pliés, arabesques, tadasanas, utanasanas. He made his porridge. He brushed his teeth, showered, dried his hair, braided his hair, put on his clothes – Chinese mandarin tunic in grey blue slubbed silk with monkey paw buttons, pale grey leggings, and loose, darker grey wooly socks.

Only then did he look at his mobile for the time. Eight-thirty-four.

He took up his station by the window.

In ten minutes, Tilda’s bus made its appearance. Thran had his mobile and keys in one hand, a collection of heavier clothes and his boots in the other.
Yes? he sent, when the bus drove away.

Yes!

He let himself out of his apartment, padded downstairs in his socks, and met Bard, who was already smiling a welcome as he unlocked his apartment door. Thran followed him inside wordlessly, put his things with the coats and boots and other accouterments by the door, and straightened to find Bard’s eyes on him.

“I could get used to having an angel meet me at the door every morning.” Bard reached out to touch the collar of Thran’s silk shirt, then traced a finger down his neck to the first button that Thran had not bothered to button. He traced down to the second button, also unbuttoned. The third was buttoned, but only until Bard’s fingers reached it. Once the button came open, Thran took Bard’s fingers to kiss.

“If you want to unbutton any more, my saint, you must take off your coat, and your boots, and perhaps a little more.”

Bard’s coat fell to the floor. As he stooped to untie his boots, Thran touched the bent head, stroking the tangled curls, threading his fingers through it as lightly as a breeze. The boots followed the coat, and Thran drew Bard to his feet to cradle his head in his hands. He brushed the lightest of kisses on Bard’s lips, more invitation and promise than actual touch. Bard traced his hands around Thran’s ribs, settling at his waist just above the points of his hips, tightening to ease him closer.

“So how should I tease you this morning, lyubov moyya? Be your sacred angel, or your profane devil? Be your spoils of war, or the one who despoils you? Tell me your greatest desire.”

“Are you a magic djinni, then?” Bard breathed, rubbing his hips against Thran’s slowly back and forth, back and forth.

“Would you like me to be? Only remember that the next choice is mine. So choose wisely.”

“Take off your clothes. All of them. I want to see you naked.”

With a smile of anticipation, Thran backed away a step to give Bard a better view. He unbuttoned his shirt slowly – was he tentative, or teasing? Shy, or seductive? He let Bard decide. The exotic style of his shirt, and the soft silk, so soothing against his skin, whispered of secret and arcane rituals that he would reveal to his lover. He teased himself with that fantasy to turn the mere removal of clothes into the unveiling of a present. When he let the shirt slide oh, so slowly off his shoulders, down his arms, and over his hands, he laid it on the back of Bard’s chair. He shook his braid over his shoulder, letting it swing against his back like the touch of a lover’s hand as he hooked his thumbs in the top of his leggings, eased them lower, then caught his underwear, and eased both still lower, letting Bard savor the view from behind. It was a subtle trick to step on the toe of a sock so that it slipped off when he slid his leggings down. He lifted first one leg, then the other, letting the leggings and socks and underwear fall to earth before straightening to his full height. Turning only slightly towards Bard, Thran looked over his shoulder, teasing his lover with what he showed and all that he didn’t. He made an elegant gesture with his hands, both presentation and invitation.

“Oh, gods,” Bard swallowed. “Oh, most holy gods, Thran.”

“Touch me.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”
Hands alit on his shoulders, squeezing briefly, then stroked down his arms to his hands. A kiss pressed against his nape, then traced down his spine, one vertebra at a time, then fingers kneaded his trapezius and deltoids in slow, delicious strokes. Thran hummed softly as the slow, lulling massage flooded him with endorphins. He shut his eyes to intensify the feeling, leaning into Bard’s caresses.

“So good,” he whispered. “So very good.”

Bard drew him closer. The touch of a soft shirt against his shoulder blades, the small coldness of a belt buckle against the base of his spine, the rougher scrape of jeans against his buttocks, had his flesh in goosebumps – to be naked, with another’s hands on him from behind, one still clothed, had always aroused him because of the implied danger. Whether he was the sacrifice, or the god to whom the sacrifice was to be made, made no difference. Both were irresistible.

His breath lurched as his arousal grew. Bard wound his hands around Thran’s ribs in reaction, kneading and stroking, then pulled him against his jeans. Fingers explored the points of his hips, then knuckles pressed into the hollows below the points, circling lower to his groins and the creases between torso and legs. Being pressed between Bard’s clothed body and those insistent hands flooded him with more than endorphins. Did the mortal behind him take him, or did he call the mortal to worship? Moaning soundlessly, he clenched hands around the thighs behind him. In response, Bard pressed their chests together and swallowed him in a kiss, his fingers winding in the base of Thran's braid as if it were a leash. Fingers traced the crease between his buttocks, both invasion and temptation, making him gasp, making him wrap one long leg around Bard’s waist, and both arms around Bard’s ribs. Kisses nibbled their way from his lips down his throat to his chest to nip at both nipples, more tease than anything else, then continued lower. His braid fell free as hands dragged down his back to his buttocks, then Bard sank to his knees before him. The tongue tickling Thran’s flanks wormed its way through the hair at the top of his pubic bone to lick the base of his cock. Oh, gods – this was both possession and worship, profane as well as sacred. Thran swayed against the insistent pull of Bard’s mouth engulfing the core of him, Bard’s hair brushing against his thighs, Bard’s hands kneading his buttocks. When he stroked Bard’s tangled hair, it was a plea for mercy, yet also encouragement for more. When the warm, wet touches turned savage, they drove him to irresistibly to ecstasy. As his body convulsed, as he cried out wordlessly, his knees turned to water, and all that held him upright were strong arms wrapped around his legs. They held him through each tremor and spasm.

As the intensity faded, lips kissed his softening cock gently, and nuzzled his pubic hair with gentle, tickling caresses. The hands that had cradled him so firmly kneaded buttocks, hamstrings, thighs gently, and then Bard straightened to hug Thran against him – no, not just hug him, but pick him up and carry him to the sofa to deposit him on the soft blanket draped there, as if he were a great treasure. As his eyes closed, Bard stroked the tousled strands of hair that had escaped from his braid away from his face, and pressed a kiss on his temple.

“You are amazing.”

Thran smiled and opened his eyes. His lover regarded him with so much awe that Thran took Bard’s hand to press a kiss against it.

“I rather think that you are the amazing one, lyubov moya. You have the most irresistible mouth. I may not survive when you finally make love to me.”

Bard’s awe faded into a crooked smile. “I’ll make sure you do, fy nghariad. Just so I can do it over and over again.”

“How delicious. When our moment arrives, I intend to repay you in kind.”
“I’m looking forward to that.”

“So am I. How soon before we can move into our house?”

“We need furniture. Once I get the painters started, I’ll scour the flea markets, and antique stores, and whatever else we run across.”

“I will enjoy that, too. This will be the first time I have ever had the chance to make more than a few rooms to hold a bed where I sleep between classes and rehearsals and performances.”

“Then we’ll plan to start looking this weekend. We’ll take the children. I know one place that comes up with some of the most intriguing pieces. A lot of Oriental, for some reason. Some nice carved pieces.”

“I like those, too. I admit I am not overly fond of ornate French pieces. Too much like the Hermitage museum. Beautiful, yes, but so busy that it becomes tiresome to look at. I like more serenity.”

“I feel the same way. We’ll see what we can find.”

Thran stroked Bard’s cheek appreciatively, drawing Bard’s smile.

“Are you warm enough? Would you like some tea?”

Thran grinned. “I am very warm after our ardor, sweet Bard. And I do not need tea. I will enjoy a few more moments of respite to savor your delight, and then it will be my turn to ask something of you. There are so many possibilities, I hardly know where to begin…. No, that is not true. I know exactly where to begin.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “Do you?”


“I’m waiting.”

Thran stretched luxuriously, and his smile was sly. “Ah, my lover awaits my commands, as he should. So here is the first.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint make the most of the limited time available to them. They make the most of each other, too.

Chapter Notes

This is a very short chapter, because the next bit is Christmas, which is long and involved, and it would have been cruel to delay the conclusion of Wednesday morning's tryst. It's another Explicit chapter, so I don't guess you'll mind terribly.

Our boys certainly didn't.

Bard’s loins clenched hard when Thran stretched fully prone on the sofa, reveling in the elegant body that looked so ascetic, yet so voluptuous at the same time – lean and attenuated from so much training, yet moving so sensuously, so invitingly. To finally see that pale, graceful body without the blasphemy of clothing was a gift. Unmarred skin, pink nipples and long, graceful cock, completely white pubic hair – no armpit hair, though; Bard seemed to remember reading that many male dancers shaved it off – were more dreamlike than real. Perfect musculature under that silky skin trembled and tensed when pleasure flooded them. To have that body under his hands seemed more surreal fantasy than reality. But he’d driven that exquisite body to orgasm just seconds ago, driven it to abandon all its years of discipline and training and dissolve into uncontrolled, overwhelming release. Would he ever get tired of that?

Would he ever get tired of Thran’s retaliation?

It was such delight to suffer in the arms of an angel.

Thran finished his stretch, then slid over to the end of the sofa to rest against the arm, reclining like a sultan. He draped the blanket over his body as if it were the sultan’s robe, leaving one shoulder and part of his chest bare. He eased the elastic off the end of his braid and shook out the twists to let his hair twine loosely over his shoulders and down his chest. Now he could be either prince or princess inviting a lover into his/her bed. The gender didn’t matter; both were alluring enough to make Bard lick his lips.

The arousal behind Bard’s unconscious movement wasn’t lost on Thran. The smallest smile touched his lips – a wicked one.

“Take that off,” Thran said, one hand gesturing from Bard’s head to his heels, then pointed to his shirt draped over Bard’s chair. “And put that on.”

Bard stood up. He was too eager to take his clothes off as slowly as Thran did, and he couldn’t have done it so provocatively, anyway. So he peeled his Henley off over his head, facing Thran to watch what kind of reaction he got. He’d learned that already from Thran, who was a master at tailoring his
actions to make the most of Bard’s reception. Thran’s eyes were not on his, but on his chest, and then his jeans when Bard unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned the top button and unzipped. To be so thoroughly ogled sent a flush of heat throughout his body, and made the hackles on the back of his neck go up. He maneuvered his jeans down over his hips with little tugs, first to one side then the other, before shucking them off to lie in a heap. He’d forgone socks this morning just because he was in too much of a hurry to bother with something he’d fully expected to strip off within minutes of putting them on. His cock was already half erect – how could it not be, after bringing Thran to orgasm the way he had, and anticipating what might happen next? He took it in his hand and stroked once, which got a hum out of Thran.

“Not yet. Turn around first.”

Bard obeyed, but he didn’t take his hand off his cock. It felt too good, especially with Thran watching him as if he were on an auction block. Perhaps the sultan had asked the merchandise for a demonstration? Hmm. Thran loved fantasy, and Bard was learning to, so perhaps he ought to spike the fantasy with a little rebellion...

“Not yet. Put my shirt on first.”

“I thought you liked your slaves naked.”

Thran’s eyes widened. “I like them to do as I bid them.”

“No, you don’t. You like them to fight a little. So make me stop, and make me put your shirt on.”

Thran’s grin was entirely feral as Bard stroked his cock slowly. What would Thran do if Bard shut his eyes and let his breath catch just a little?

What it got him was Thran biting his bottom lip, then prowling naked off the sofa to wind an insistent hand in the back of Bard’s long hair. The kiss that followed was rough, but Bard responded in kind, biting and nipping, and still stroking.

Thran pulled Bard’s head back by his hair. His angel was all but crackling with tension, drawing Bard’s unrepentant grin. He forced his head forward to bite at Thran’s lips again.

“I was right. The sultan likes merchandise with a little fire. Don’t you?”

The hand in his hair forced him to his knees, then released him only to yank his hips back hard against the taut body behind him. Knees shoved his legs apart, then muscled between his thighs. Finger pads goaded his nipples until they ached, then dragged their way down either side of his cock, massaging the base of it, and cradling his balls gently despite the posturing. Teeth gnawed at his earlobe, then bit at his neck. The final enticement was the long, erect cock that slid between his buttocks to press against his balls, so unexpected that he gasped, making his cock spasm in response. Hands pried his away from his cock only to possess it instead. When he fell forward onto his hands, Thran was right there, crowding behind him, even biting at the base of his neck like an animal would do. Oh, gods, to feel Thran all over him like this, so relentless...

“The next time you try to take yourself before a sultan,” Thran hissed in his ear, “you will find yourself on your knees just like this, and I will have my cock buried inside you as well as my hand around yours, and I will rip your release out of you the way you so richly deserve.”

Just the thought of Thran sliding inside him pushed Bard over the edge. Thran felt him spasm and twined one hand in his hair again to further reinforce just how possessed he was. As he released, he let Thran wring him dry without resistance.
The fingers in his hair turned soft and caressing, and the hand around his cock soothed and massaged gently, bringing him down slowly. The teeth that had bitten his ear slipped behind soft lips that kissed his neck, his shoulder, his spine.

“Can you get up?” a soft voice whispered.

Bard grinned, deliberately misunderstanding. “Not for a few minutes, you greedy bastard. Can’t wait for want another one, can you?”

Thran asked. “I meant, can you stand up? Your knees...”

“They still work. But I admit they’ll work better in a couple of seconds.”

“You don’t make a very biddable slave, lyubov moya.”

“You don’t like biddable slaves, fy nghariad.”

“I do not. Unruly slaves are a much more delectable delight. Never change that.”

Chuckling, Bard shifted a bit, and Thran eased from between his legs to get to his feet. He held out a hand to help Bard up, who rose gingerly in deference to the unaccustomed position. Thran wrapped him in an embrace, kissing his neck and stroking his hair.

“You are a jewel. My jewel,” Thran whispered in his ear. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, angel. Now let me brush my teeth so I can kiss you.”

Thran scoffed, and gave him a full kiss on the mouth. “A little essence does not deter me. Especially when it’s mine.”

Bard laughed. “You’re filthy.”

Thran’s grin was unrepentant. “Filthy would be to kiss you if it were not my essence. But if it were not my essence, I would not kiss you.”

“No chance of it being anyone else’s. I’m happy with the only angel on earth, and I intend to stay in his good graces. Among other things, before too much longer.”

“Before too much longer. Now, we are a delightful mess, so we must wash.”

“That’s an order I can get behind.”

They padded naked to the bathroom, Thran to wash his hands, Bard to brush his teeth and wash his torso. What a contrast they were – Thran pale, slender, and seemingly hairless, and Bard darker, more muscled, and pelted in dark hair. Thran finished his cleanup quickly, then made no secret of watching Bard rinsing away signs of their indulgence. He massaged Bard’s shoulders as he watched Bard dry off in the mirror. Those adept fingers were both wonderfully soothing and rousing at the same time.

“What time is it?” Bard asked, as they came back to the living room. He ducked into the kitchen to fetch paper towels to sponge the carpet clean, dabbed quickly, then disposed of the towels in the trashcan.

“A quarter of ten. Time enough for me to ask you to try on my shirt. I think it would suit you to have something exotic. The color is good for you, too.”
Bard eased his undershorts and jeans on, then he armed his way carefully into the silk shirt; he was beefier than his slender angel, and he didn’t want to tear it. It was only a little tight across the shoulders, but the soft fabric was lush against his skin.

“Trying to turn me into a peacock, are you?”

Thran shook his head as he studied Bard. “I am enough of one that we do not need two. But you are not a drab little wren, lyubov moya. You have your own beautiful grace that I enjoy. To be honest, I cannot wait to see you work on your metal, as I imagine it turns you quite sweaty and gritty, and in your jeans and boots I will not be able to resist you. But that is for me to see, not the world. In the world... the biker persona you mentioned would suit you well, but it is so overdone. Something more unexpected will be much more intriguing. A Tibetan shirt, perhaps, or a Cossack one, with your jeans. Do Welshmen wear kilts?”

Laughing, Bard shrugged out of Thran’s shirt and pulled his Henley over his head. “No, fy nghariad. That’s only the Scots. Wales doesn’t have a national costume.”

“Just as well. A kilt would make you look too civilized. I like the rebel.”

Even a thoughtful naked Thran drew Bard’s hands to him. He eased his angel close to kiss, to stroke that long, white hair that flowed over them like a veil, then rubbed his buttock. “I like you in anything. I especially like you in nothing.”

“I cannot wait to get you in bed that way. We will see how unruly you are there. I hope very.”

Bard laughed as he rearranged his jeans. “Gods, Thran.”

Thran didn’t help matters by putting a hand over his crotch to squeeze gently, but let his hand slip away to stoop for his clothes. Bard sat on the sofa to admire Thran as he slithered into the black silk underwear he’d teased Bard about at Thanksgiving, then sorted through the clothes he’d carried down with him. He put on the Mandarin shirt, but drew on heavier jeans rather than his leggings. One of the long, soft sweaters that so suited him went atop his shirt, then he drew on wooly socks and boots. When he was dressed, he ran fingers through his hair to untangle it, then sat beside Bard to braid it.

“So what’s our plan to follow the morning’s indulgence?” Bard asked, when Thran had finished his hair.

“A walk in the park, perhaps? We can discuss Christmas dinner.”

“Good by me. Oh, before we go...” Bard pulled the blanket off the sofa and arranged it atop his bed, smoothing the quilt on top. He gave Thran a considering look. “When I get into bed tonight, it’ll smell like you.”

Thran tsked. “I am envious. I will have no such reminder of you.”

“I’ll give you my shirt to take with you,” Bard said facetiously as he grabbed his coat and Thran’s. He tossed Thran’s to him and armed his way into his. “You can sneak it under your pillow.”

Thran, however, didn’t laugh. “I would like that.”

Bard’s gaze softened as he locked the apartment behind them. “Okay. A walk in the park, then back here, and my shirt is yours.”

A kiss brushed his cheek. “Thank you, lyubov moya.”
Gods. What a couple of saps they were. Horny saps, but saps nevertheless.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

It's only Christmas Eve, but intangible gifts are already arriving for an angel and a saint.

A brisk walk after such an indulgent morning was a good tonic. The fitful breeze was cold, the perfect enticement to draw Thran’s saint close, and they paced arm in arm twice around the children’s play areas and most of the sport fields, discussing their plans for Friday’s Christmas dinner. They agreed that it was too much to push the children into the exchange of gifts, but would keep the early morning for their private exchanges, then Thran and Legolas would come down to Bard’s apartment around eleven to start the meal. Most of the prep work would happen tomorrow, Thursday, so that all they’d have to do on the actual day would be to put everything in the oven.

“So come down tomorrow before lunch, and we can do the prep,” Bard said. “The children and I make the prep into part of the celebration of Christmas Eve. We make the dessert, get the rolls in the pan ready for the oven, prep the veg, the potatoes au gratin, and so on. Everyone makes one dish, and I make everything that’s left. Two more sous chefs would be fun, and give Legolas a chance to ease into the mix.”

“I would like that,” Thran nodded. “Though you know I am not much of a cook. Perhaps Tilda will take pity on me and help.”

Bard chuckled. “It’s funny. You know a lot about good food, but you can’t cook.”

“I know how to drive a car, but not how a car works,” Thran pointed out. “You likely know how your truck works, I imagine, but I do not. But I will not always be ignorant of cooking. I enjoy when you show me.”

“So do I,” Bard agreed. “I liked when we puttered about for Thanksgiving.”

“I did as well. So what will we make tomorrow? Oh, you said potatoes au gratin. What is that?”

“It’s potatoes with milk and cheese with crumbs on top. The children like it with ham. Sigrid’s doing that this year. We’ll have the ham, of course. That just gets stuck in one of those cooking bags, so it doesn’t count as something someone does. Yeast rolls – that’s me. Tilda will do green beans. Bain’s doing dessert. Sigrid wanted pumpkin pie, so he decided he’d do that rather than the potatoes.”

“Legolas said something about clementines. He liked those, so we could bring a box if you would like them. And he said pie.”

“The children can’t get enough of the clementines. As for the pie, does Legolas know how to cook at all?”

Thran shook his head. “More than I do, but that does not say much.”

“Then maybe he’d like to help Bain with the pie. It’s easy, and it’d give him and Bain something to do together.”

“Perfect,” Thran agreed. “And what should I make?”
Bard’s eyes never left the view before them, but his arm around Thran’s waist tightened. “If you
don’t make a thing, it won’t matter. You’ve already made me happier than I deserve.”

Thran’s throat tightened. “You deserve good things no less than anyone, lyubov moya. We both do.
So we will make each other happy without apology. But as to the Christmas dinner – how will it
look to our children if I do not help with something?”

“Valid point. You can do the ham, then. That’s easy. Maybe chop some carrots. And we can tease
each other when we’re kneading the bread dough.”

“Terribly romantic,” Thran tsked, smiling.

“It won’t be like Swan Lake,” Bard conceded.

“Ah, the welder knows Swan Lake!”

“I looked it up on the Internet. I’m trying to become educated.”

“The Internet will not tell you that most ballet corps hate Swan Lake. In Russia, it is danced in three
acts and several scenes; in this country, four acts and several scenes, but the result is the same.
Beautiful, but at a price. The prince is onstage for all of them, and the corps also for most... nothing
but aching feet by the end.”

“I read about the mess of dancers’ feet,” Bard winced. “I couldn’t do it.”

“That is the price of dancing en pointe for so many. The ballerinas. A few men do it, also, but I am
not one of them. I am tall enough as it is, and the pressure on my feet would be devastating. It is hard
even to manage four acts of Swan Lake as it is.”

“I can’t imagine. My steel-toed boots have good cushioning in them, but even with that, after I’ve
been on my feet all day, I feel it, and I’m not leaping about carrying pretty ballerinas around.”

“You are likely on your feet during the day more than I am, doing heavier work.”

“We both do heavy work. Yours is cleaner and more elegant than mine, that’s all. They’re both a
living.”

Bard angled them across the sports fields, off the path they’d been following around the park. He’d
done so on their first circuit, too, but Thran hadn’t commented about it then. Now, however, he cast
Bard a look.

“Why do we avoid that corner of the park, Bard?”

“We’d probably be okay today if we went on around, but that’s one of the gang turfs, so I tend to
skirt it. Discretion being the better part of valor, as they say.”


Bard met his eyes. “Oh?”

“The two who accosted Irina and me. It was near that corner.”

“People stay away from that corner at night unless they want drugs.”

Thran shrugged. “We did not want drugs. Irina lives nearby. I offered to walk her home. Generally I
am of a size that deters predators. It did not that day. Irina was not hurt, but badly frightened. She has
since moved to a safer place.”

“You’re lucky it was just two of them.”

“We were lucky that two policemen arrived just as I hurt my ankle.”

“I’ll bet one of them was Mr. D.” At Thran’s inquiring expression, Bard explained. “Mr. D’s the local plainclothesman – a sergeant, but everyone calls him Mr. D. Quite a character. Short bald guy with an earring and more tats than a gang of bikers. Everyone knows who he is, and nobody messes with him. He looks after this park especially. Loves the kids. They love him, too, despite what he looks like. You’ll generally find him around when the kids have their rec council games.”

“He was one of the policemen,” Thran confirmed. “I was quite impressed at his command of several languages.”

“All of them profane,” Bard grinned.

“Very. I taught him suka blyad.”

“I bet he loved that,” Bard chortled.

“He thanked me. I do not think he knows how to smile.”

“It’s not part of his persona, but he’s got a good soul. He’s a Pagan, or something – not the biker gang; the religion – so he doesn’t celebrate Christmas. Every year, he’s here to watch over the children trying out their new bikes or sleds or whatever, making sure the gangs leave them alone. We always come out to play a little soccer after dinner, and we bring Mr. D a slice of pie, or a sandwich. It’s not Christmas without seeing Mr. D.”

“Then I hope we see him this Friday, so I may thank him for his timely appearance.”

“The news stories made it sound like you didn’t need any help.”

“Not with the two who attacked us. But I suspect that more would have arrived shortly if Mr. D. and the other officer had not arrived so quickly.”

“Probably.” Bard gave a look around, but the park was empty, so they headed back to the apartment building.

Once back inside, Bard stripped off his shirt as promised, and tossed it to Thran. As he got a clean one to put on, Thran held the shirt to his nose, breathing in.

“Yes. That is my saint. It will ease my sleep tonight.”

Bard gave a gentle tug to Thran’s braid. “As long as it doesn’t keep you awake.”

“I will not complain if it does.”

Bard took the braid in his hand to caress. “You need to get enough sleep, angel. Auditions coming up.”

“Having something to look forward to with you will do me more good than a few missed hours of sleep can upset.” Thran stroked Bard’s hair away from his face. “Now, I do not want to, but I must go. I want to be back upstairs before Legolas wakes. I do not want to have to explain why I am carrying a pair of my leggings and your shirt.”
Bard’s wince was amused as well as sympathetic. “I understand completely. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Though I wish we could split supper tonight. I’ll miss you.”

“I will, too. But we will have most of tomorrow, and then Christmas Day. So the children will be used to us being together soon.”

“Not soon enough. So kiss me. It has to last me until tomorrow.”

It was a pleasure for Thran to enfold Bard in his arms, to feel his solid, powerful body in his arms, to feel powerful arms wrap him in solid comfort. He soaked up that warmth, comfort, and affection for long seconds, nuzzling his nose into Bard’s neck, savoring the tickle of Bard’s hair against his cheek. But eventually, they had to ease apart.

“I’m going to look at the school web sites I found,” Bard offered. “I’ll email anything interesting to you, if you’re going to be online today. No, I’ll text you to go look at your email if I find anything. Then you can do your barre, or go out with Legolas. We’ve got a while on that, but since I’m not going out to the house today, I thought I’d do that to keep us forging ahead.”

“I’ll look at anything you send me, plus I will look at the ones I found, too, as well as fencing and archery coaches. As you said, we will forge ahead.”

“Miss you already, angel.”

“And I you, my saint. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Thran slipped out of Bard’s apartment reluctantly, and climbed the stairs. He rolled his leggings and Bard’s shirt up as small as he could make them, and stuffed them under his coat, but he needn’t have bothered. Legolas’s door was still shut when he got into his apartment, so he shed his boots and coat, stashed Bard’s shirt in his room, and exchanged his jeans for the leggings. He made himself a cup of tea, and settled on the sofa with his computer.

It was hard to concentrate on so many jarring websites when he had tomorrow to think about.

* * *

It was barely eleven, and Bard was too antsy to stay in the apartment and look at school web sites. The schools were important, but they had nine months before the children would have to attend them. What they needed first was furniture for the house so they could at least spend weekends there. Bard put his boots on, got in the truck, and headed out to the house. If he stayed off the highway and took the back roads, there was a horde of small junk shops, antique stores, and consignment shops along the way. He stopped at the first several, not finding much beyond a battered fainting couch that would look perfect in the solarium. It was just the thing for his angel to relax on amid the plants. A small fountain would be nice, too, to add the sound of water, just what Thran needed to help him relax. He’d keep his eyes out for one.

He almost didn’t stop at a place that looked more closed than open, for there were no lights on that he could see, and no cars out front. But he’d found some good things here a time or two before, eccentric finds more than rare ones. He wasn’t interested in provenance, only character, so he figured it did no harm to stop. Almost right away he found bins of mismatched flatware, most of it sterling.
He picked out enough for twelve place settings, and even found some serving spoons and forks. The price was so little that he flipped the pieces over again, just to check that the maker’s marks were what he thought they were, but yes, they were sterling, even if badly tarnished, with a nick here and there. A little polish, not too much, and they’d gleam, but still have the patina of age that he liked so much.

Silverware, done.

Another table held beautiful old crystal. Nobody wanted such things anymore, or so he’d been told when he’d tried to sell his mother’s things after her death. Less than a hundred dollars for the lot was the best he’d managed, so it was still in the attic at the house, in boxes. He’d have to remember to get it down and wash it. It’d look good behind the glass-fronted cabinet doors in the butler’s pantry. He added a few etched glass bowls to his trove that were a close match to his mother’s things.

There were many tables of old china, but most of it was so ornate that it would upstage any food put on it, and none of it would blend with the pale green paint in the dining room. He’d be happier with plain white dishes, if he could find them.

He found a black cast iron teapot, likely Japanese, and five cups. They made him think of Thran, so he added those to his trove. He had to smother a smile about his angel playing the feral sultan this morning. Gods, that had been the most fun he’d had in years. Stripping that angel bare had been, too.

He just might explode waiting for the children to go back to school, when he’d have more than an hour at a time doing everything he and Thran could come up with to each other, with each other.

He was so busy trying to decide how he wanted to make love to Thran first that he almost missed a side room that held furniture rather than tables full of dishes and flatware. He ducked in as an afterthought, just because he liked to be thorough in his searching.

He couldn’t wait to thoroughly search Thran...

A small carved chest attracted his attention, but only because he appreciated beautiful things. It was impractical for his needs, a woman’s jewelry box with three drawers, with an inlaid design of butterflies on the top. Still, he ran a finger over the top, appreciating the skill that had gone into setting the mother-of-pearl into the rosewood so evenly. He moved on, his eyes falling on another piece of carved wood that unfortunately ended in a ragged break. It looked like a column of some kind, so he stopped to puzzle it out. Perhaps it was a piece of architecture salvage for a doorway. If there were two columns, he might be able to use them to frame the solarium doorway. But no, there weren’t two columns – there were four, and some sort of framework – was that a canopy?

His brain finally put all the pieces together – it was an ornate, carved frame for a daybed, vaguely Indian, or Indonesian, or something else equally exotic. It was old, for the wood had weathered to a silvery grey finish. It looked wider and longer than normal, and he wasn’t sure all the pieces were there. Still, he imagined it reassembled, the grey wood enhanced with a bit of silver gilt, dressed in silk, and Thran ensconced in the middle of it...

He looked around. No one else was perusing, so he kept going, seeing what else there was to be had. He found an offbeat blue table inlaid in shell, and an old battered Persian rug that had faded to a soft rose red. He found the owner drowsing in the back, told him what he wanted, and came to a good price for the lot.

“What’s the story about that carved lot of stuff in the side room?” Bard asked. “Against the wall?”

He had to show the daybed frame to the man before he recalled it.
“Oh, that. Indonesian, I think, but it’s a size no one wants, and it’s missing part of the canopy and bottom frame. Been here for years. You interested?”

“Dunno... maybe, if you give me a good price on it.”

They haggled a bit, but the lowest the man would go was higher than Bard wanted to pay for a lot of scrap.

Thran on that bed, in their bedroom, on silk sheets...

“We’ve got a deal,” Bard agreed. If the scraps were beyond repair, he could still use them to frame doors, or build a folly for the solarium.

It was a tight fit getting everything in his truck, but if he piled the flatware and glass bowls in the front seat, put part of the scraps of daybed in the back seat, and shifted his tools, he just managed to corral the biggest pieces of the frame in the bed with the rug and the inlaid table, albeit with the tailgate open and a lot of cordage to keep things in place. Once he got into the truck and headed down the road, he allowed himself a big smile. Thran would love the bed, if Bard could fit it all together.

He didn’t have much more room in his truck, but Bard stopped at two more places to see if they were worth revisiting. One was more sixties retro, which he’d never cared for. The other, however, was old and dusty, with another room piled high with dishes. He found a nearly complete set of white ones that looked like cabbage leaves. The color was what he preferred for showcasing food, and the leafy design was a nice organic fillip. He piled that in the front seat with the flatware, along with seven etched Russian tea glasses with silver metal frames.

It was getting late, so he headed straight for the house, piled the dishes in the kitchen, hauled the inlaid table and rug into the empty main room, and got the fainting couch into the solarium. Then he carted the pieces of the shattered bed frame up to the master bedroom. He managed to piece together most of the bottom; there was a piece missing from the footer, but he thought he could replace that. One of the canopy posts was cracked, and another one was snapped in two, but he jogged out to the barn for clamps. There was wood glue enough to see to both posts, so he daubed liberally and clamped everything in place. A piece from the canopy was also missing, but he’d figure out a way to replace it, too. The bed was an odd size for a daybed, more square than rectangular, but it looked long enough to fit Thran’s long body. In the center of the room, cleaned up and with that silver gilt he’d add, it would be spectacular.

Maybe not grey silk bedding, but a soft Rembrandt red for winter, and a cool peacock blue for summer...

Bard’s cock liked the thought of both.

He didn’t linger to speculate more. He needed to get home before Tilda’s after-school care program ended. There was just time to wash all the dishes and flatware he’d bought and stow them in the kitchen. He locked the house, got in his truck, and zoomed back to the city, a big smile on his face.

He couldn’t wait to tell Thran about it all.

* * *
Later that night, once the children were done with supper and they’d planned tomorrow’s cooking, Bard crawled into bed. Gods, his blanket still smelled like Thran – a bit of vanilla, a bit of coconut, and some rare oil. Likely shampoo rather than cologne, or maybe body wash; Thran didn’t seem the type to like cologne. He breathed in, savoring the scent of his angel, and listened to the quiet for a few seconds, imagining the coming day when he’d have more to comfort him than merely his angel’s scent on his blanket. He reached for his mobile and started to tap.

In bed yet?

Sadly, I am in bed alone

What’d you do today?

Thought about how well you tease me. You are evil

You like me that way

Mmmmm. I very much do

LOL. Don’t drool all over those beautiful grey silk sheets

I want to come inside you with you sprawled all over these beautiful grey silk sheets

Gods, for 2 cents I’ll be up there

You work cheap

I’d pay to work you over on those grey silk sheets until we’re both toast

I’d pay you to do it. But, alas... What did you do today? Schools?

Too keyed up after what an angel did to me this a.m. Went shopping.

What did you buy? House things?

Beautiful house things. Flatware, plates, tea glasses, inlaid table, Persian rug, fainting couch

OMG, sounds wonderful. Wished I could have been with you

Me, too. We’ll go back to some. Guess what the best part was?

Better than podstakannik and magic carpets?

I found the perfect bed. A wreck, in pieces, needs a lot of work. But it’s a temple

Tell me!!!

Sending you a pic

Bard found the picture he took of the frame partially assembled in their bedroom, typed, Indonesian? grey wood, carved posts, canopy and sent it.

OMG!!!

Will look wonderful trimmed in silver gilt. And you will look beautiful in it. Had to have it

Stunning! Can’t wait to see it in person!
Odd size, will likely need custom mattress, bedding. Will see what I can do with it

A custom mattress is no trouble for such a wonder

Got 2 broken posts glued, clamped. Maybe put rest tgr when there next

Make more rounds on Saturday?

That’s my plan. Hope u like plates. Flatware’s sterling but mismatched

More charming that way. I will love all

I can’t wait. This is magic

It is, lyubov moya. So happy

Me 2. Ought to go to sleep. Make tmw get here sooner

Will be hard to sleep if I think of our bed. I would think of how best to christen it!

How about we christen it many times?

And every room in the house, too

Think about how & where you want to do it first. I will, too

I have a very long list of how I want to do it

How horrible it’ll be to work through your list. I’ve got one, too

Delicious. Damn you, bastard saint! It will be hours before I can sleep now!

Sorry... not, lol

Enough. Let us try to sleep. I will see you ~11. Can we bring something for lunch?

I have a pot of chili on. It's turkey, so you can eat it without fear of beef fat

You look after me so well

U R my pleasure. REALLY my pleasure

Stop! Good night!

If you insist

I don’t want to. But I need to sleep as you say. I love you

Love you, too, angel. Sleep well

You too. Bye

Bye

Bard plugged in his mobile to charge, smiling. Thran was as excited about the wrecked bed frame as he was, which made him feel good. The rest of his haul was good stuff, too, but what he thought about for the next few minutes was that bed frame repaired, refinished, gilded, assembled, cradling a
mattress, and harboring an ethereal angel, one he couldn’t wait to desecrate.

He looked forward to the angel returning the favor.

* * *

It was a luxury to lie in bed longer than 6:00 a.m., an even bigger one not to work through making breakfasts and lunches for three children and himself. He snuggled deeper into his blanket to drift off for another hour or so, then got up long enough to get the crockpot of chili out of the fridge and plug it back in. Back to bed for another drowsy hour before finally getting up at just before eight. He padded to the bathroom to take care of necessities, then changed his tee shirt for a warmer Henley to make himself tea. He was just putting on a couple of eggs to soft boil when Tilda padded into the kitchen, Mr. Bun under her arm.

“Good morning, little doll.” Bard stooped to hug Tilda, who rubbed her eyes sleepily. “How are you and Mr. Bun?”

“Sleepy.” She blinked a little, then her eyes sharpened and she smiled. “It’s Christmas Eve today!”

“It is,” Bard confirmed, his arms on her shoulders. “What would you like for breakfast? I was about to make some soft-boiled eggs. Would that be good?”

She nodded. “But not too soft. I don’t like the runny part.”

“So hard-boiled, then. One egg or two?”

“Just one, please,” she nodded again. “And toast?”

“Butter or marmalade?”

“Marmalade, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Bard put an extra egg in the saucepan and set it on the stove to boil. Tilda sat at the table, content to hold Mr. Bun while the eggs cooked. Bard took his out early, then put bread in the toaster for them both while Tilda’s egg finished cooking. He put Tilda’s egg in a bowl and set it down in front of her, then the toast, and then joined her at the table to have his breakfast. They shared a companionable silence as they ate, then washed their few dishes. When Bard settled on the sofa with his tea, Tilda climbed into his lap with Mr. Bun and nestled close.

“You’re a snuggle bug this morning, little doll,” he murmured, putting his arms around his daughter.

“Still sleepy,” Tilda sighed comfortably, shutting her eyes and tucking Mr. Bun under her chin.

“No harm in that,” Bard agreed, pressing a kiss on the top of Tilda’s head. “Did Mr. Bun keep you awake?”

“Uh-uh,” she denied. “Excited about Christmas Eve.”

“What part?”
“Getting presents, of course. I think Bain’s getting me a real paint set.”

“We’ll see tomorrow morning, won’t we?”

Tilda hummed. “I like the food, too. I like making it with everyone.”

“I like that part, too. Even better than the presents.”

“Are Legolas and Thran coming?”

“They’ll be here this morning at eleven to help us cook. Legolas and Bain can make the pie. Thran will do the ham and help me with the rolls.”

“Mmm,” Tilda said, smiling. “Ham. And cheesy potatoes.”

Conversation lapsed, and they sat quietly for a few more moments. Eventually, Bard nudged Tilda.

“It’s nine-thirty, Til. I’ve got to get your brother and sister up to have breakfast and get dressed before Thran and Legolas come down. We’ll have chili for lunch.”

“Biscuits, too?” Tilda sat up to stretch.

“Biscuits, too. Cheesy ones. Or maybe garlic chive.”

“I like both.”

“Me, too. So you and Mr. Bun get yourselves dressed while I roust the rest of the troops.”

“Okay, Da.”

Neither Sigrid nor Bain were too happy to wake up, but the prospect of visitors and the Christmas dinner preparations dispensed with most of the moans and grumbles soon enough. In an hour, everyone had had breakfast, was dressed, and the apartment was tidied. They had just a few more minutes before their guests would arrive.

“So, we need Christmas music,” Bard reminded his children as he looked through the stack of CDs. “I vote for Charlie Brown.”

“I like that one, too,” Tilda agreed.

“The harp one?” Sigrid suggested. “I don’t know why, but it makes me think of Wales.”

“I like the Trans-Siberian Express,” Bain chimed in.

“That one’s good for later, after everyone’s awake,” Bard decided. “So Charlie Brown first, harp second, then the TSE after lunch.”

He put the CD in the old player he’d gotten for a couple of dollars at the thrift store, and soon the sounds of Vince Guaraldi played softly. The first track was only half over before a soft knock sounded at the door, and Bard let Thran and Legolas in.


“We are early, so I hope that is all right,” Thran said, his eyes warming when they met Bard’s. “We went to the market, and got back early.”
“Glad you are. Hope you two are ready to cook.”

“We brought you some clementines,” Legolas offered the box shyly. “I liked them a lot when I had them with you all.”

“Thanks,” Bard nodded. “Children, the fun has arrived.”

“Hey, Legolas!” Bain waved. “Do you want to help me make the pie? It’s pumpkin, and really easy. Or you can do the carrots.”

“Pie sounds like more fun than carrots,” Legolas agreed. “You say it’s easy?”

“Yeah, just the crust, which I know how to make, and the rest you just stir up in a bowl. You want to do that part?”

“Sure. Hi, Tilda. Hi, Sigrid.”

“Hi, Legolas. Come on in. We’re just starting, so you can help us get everything out.”

Legolas went into the kitchen with the children, so Bard risked a quick kiss. Thran met him halfway, and they had a good grin about it.

“So, what is a ballet dancer to do?”

Bard snickered. “I think we have a CD of the Nutcracker somewhere, if you want to try to dance on the living room carpet. Otherwise, you’ll have to make bread dough with me.”

“Ah, I have been promoted from potato slicer to bread dough maker. That is much more useful than to dance the Nutcracker on such a small stage.”

“Then come on.”

They joined the children in the kitchen, who were getting out vegetables, eggs, shortening, and other things, and sorting out who would work where. Tilda took her sack of green beans to the far side of the table to snap them into a bowl. Sigrid joined her to thinly slice her peeled potatoes and arrange them into a baking dish, then moved to the stove to make the cheese sauce. Bain was showing Legolas how to make piecrust, which they put in a pan, then they began to mix the filling. Thran took over Sigrid’s spot at the cutting board to slice carrots and ginger into another bowl, and Bard made sure everything moved smoothly, passing out needed ingredients or bowls or serving dishes as they were needed. Eventually, the boys’ pie went into the oven, Sigrid’s potatoes were ready for baking tomorrow, and the carrots and green beans were cut and stored in plastic bins. Once the boys went into the living room to play a video game, Bard and Thran started the bread.

Bard did the mixing, but he turned the kneading over to Thran, who’d never done it before.

“You just stick your hands in it and squish it together. That’s easier than trying to use a fork,” Bard advised, so Thran pushed up his sleeves and plunged his long fingers into the bowl. Once he had everything mixed, Bard had him dump the unfinished dough out on the counter in the middle of some flour, and then showed him how to slap it down on the counter, knead it into a roll.

“Keep doing that,” Bard explained. “See how it gets glossy? When it springs back when you poke it, you know it’s ready.”

Thran nodded. “Just so.” He slapped and kneaded some more, adding the quarter twist that Bard had showed him. “Very therapeutic.”
“I think so, too. While you knead, I’ll mix up the biscuits for lunch.” He raised his voice to carry into
the living room. “Cheese biscuits, or garlic chive?”

“Cheese!” was Tilda’s vote, then Bain’s.

“Garlic chive,” said Sigrid.

“They both sound good,” Legolas said diplomatically, drawing Thran’s smile.

“Either,” was Thran’s choice.

“I like the garlic chive,” Bard said. “Only one thing to do with a tie vote. Make both.”

He divided the dough into two parts, mixing cheese in the first until it was ready, and plunked that on
the baking pan, then mixing the garlic and chives into the second part. He patted the dough out as
before, trading sly glances with Thran as they worked their doughs. He had Thran put his dough
aside in a bowl to rise, then put his biscuits in the oven.

“Lunch in ten minutes, all. Let’s get the table cleaned off for the chili.”

By the time the biscuits were browned, the table was ready, and everyone crowded around the table.
It was a tight fit, but no one seemed to mind. The bowls of chili went around, then the plate of
biscuits and butter crock, and everyone set to with appetite.

Bard sat across from Thran, but if he wasn’t beside his angel, he was better able to trade glances with
him. The children sat on either side of them, chattering and laughing, even the quiet Legolas. For the
first time in a long time, he dared to relax a little of his worry, wondering how he would care for
them. Legolas seemed happy to be with them, and Thran was laughing as Sigrid practiced her
French with Legolas. She was unabashed about her accent, but happy that she did well enough to be
understood.

This was going to work. It was.

The lump in his throat was hard to swallow, but it was a happy lump, not a sad one.

To great applause, Bain and Legolas got the finished pumpkin pie out of the oven to cool on the
counter. The latter seemed astonished that the soup he’d mixed up had turned into pie filling,
touching it gingerly to confirm that it really had set. As the children set to cleaning up lunch, Bard
and Thran got the bread dough into the baking pans, ready to go into the oven tomorrow. That was
the last thing to be done today; the ham would wait to go in its cooking bag tomorrow morning.

Their work done, Bard expected Legolas to want to go back to his apartment, but to his surprise he
seemed in no hurry to leave. Bard was happy to sit on the sofa with Thran as the children chose a
film to watch, and the rest of the afternoon passed so gently that Bard kept pinching himself.

“What do you do?” Thran finally asked him after the film was over, when the boys had gone into
Bain’s room to play a game, Sigrid went into the kitchen to make tea, and Tilda padded to her room
for a book.

“Pinching myself,” Bard whispered back. “I can’t believe this is happening. We’re a family together.
Gods, Thran. We’re a family.”

A long, slender hand rubbed his thigh. “I cannot believe it, either. I am very happy for us all.”

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.”
“What is this other shoe?”

“That everything’s going too well. That it’s too good. The calm before the storm. Something will happen to ruin it all.”

“Don’t worry, lyubov moya. All is well.”

Bard leaned his head on Thran’s shoulder for just a moment, before any of the children came back. “You’re right. It is. It is.”

“May it stay that way,” Thran whispered back.

“Yes.” He gave Thran’s leg a rub. “Merry Christmas Eve, fy nghariad.”

A quick kiss brushed on his hair. “To you, too.”

Bard smiled. It didn’t matter what present he got tomorrow. He’d already gotten all he’d wanted today.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Chili is in the crock pot, and Christmas dinner is underway. With so many willing hands to help, how can an angel and a saint help but see that brighter days are coming?

Only Sigrid sees the trouble lurking at the end of this day, and only when it's too late to avoid it. How long a shadow will it cast?

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to "The Christmas Story," the film about Ralphie's lust for a Red Ryder BB gun. It's a great film!

I don't own rights to any of Marvel's X-Men, Wolverine, and Storm stuff, either. I'm just a fan, that's all.

Many Christmas Eves had passed since Thran had one as happy as this one. The warmth of Bard’s small apartment crowded with animated children, the busy ebb and flow of cooking, the smell of spices and cheese, sounds of soft Christmas music – the harp was especially nice – were comforting. The best part were Bard’s soft looks as he oversaw the industry, looks that radiated quiet happiness. His saint was most content when he cared for his family.

Thran couldn’t wait to see Bard restored enough to begin his art again. When that happened, Bard’s recovery would be complete.

Bard was not the only one to relish the day’s domestic tasks. Thran’s mother had died when he was Tilda’s age. While his father had been proud that his son had been enrolled in such a prestigious ballet academy, he was more comfortable with the monthly stipend he received for Thran’s contribution to the state than he was with a gay son. He had rarely asked Thran to come home to visit. He had died just before the train station bomber had claimed Vileria. Now that Thran considered it, outside of his returns to his parents’ home for their funerals, he had gone back to Latvia only six times. All of the visits had been awkward, as if between strangers, and Thran had always been glad when they were over. Even the train back to St. Petersburg seemed friendly compared to the silence of his parents’ home, broken only by the sound of a nearby factory klaxon and a quavering teakettle.

To watch Legolas and Bain confer over the mixing of pie filling, darting fingers into the bowl to taste when they thought no one watched them... Sigrid helping Tilda snap the cover on the plastic bin of beans... Bard putting a bowl to hand or offering a spoon or mopping up a spill without anyone noticing he did so... Bard’s hand on his as he showed Thran how to knead dough... these things were gifts.

Lunch was more comedic as the children bantered back and forth about their cooking efforts. Sigrid was brave enough to practice her French with Legolas, who had grown up speaking it, but she was
good-natured about her American accent.

“At least you know what I’m saying, so it can’t be that bad,” she shrugged, unconcerned. “I heard about one college where you can live in a dormitory where nothing but a foreign language is spoken. I bet that’s the way to get better fast. Is that why your French is so good, Legolas – they spoke it in your school in Russia?”

“I learned in school in St. Petersburg, yes,” Legolas confirmed. “We learned English and French as well as Russian. I didn’t have to learn French, but it is the language used in fencing, so it was a help to know it. Father speaks it so well that we often speak it at home.”

“And how come you speak French so well, Thran?” Bain asked.

“The Vaganova Academy, where I went to school, was one of the first ballet academies in the country,” Thran explained. “The method of training came from French masters, so in the dance classes, instruction has always been in French. So in my educational classes, we learned French as well as Russian, and also English.”

“Wow,” Bain shook his head. “Just learning the French is hard enough for me!”

“Some of your English isn’t so good, either,” Sigrid snarked.

“Hey, I may not be the writer you are, Sig, but I do all right. I got an A on the part about Julius Caesar, didn’t I?”

“Oh, I liked that, too!” Legolas chimed in, eyes brightening. “We just did that this term. That and Moby Dick. I hated that part!”

“Ugh, I did, too,” Sigrid made a face. “Ahab was a nut, if you ask me, and not one I wanted to read about.”

“We’re going to read Macbeth next term,” Legolas said. “That one has witches and fighting, and sounds exciting.”

“I think I am, too,” Bain said. “It’s all about Scotland, which is sort of near Wales. They’re nothing alike, really, but I like that it’s sort of near someplace that my family once was.”

“I saw a picture of Wales in a book from the library,” Tilda offered. “It was all green.”

“That was Ireland,” Bain corrected, slathering his biscuit with butter.

“It was not,” Tilda protested. “Wales is green, too.”

“A lot of the world is green, Bain,” Bard said, when his son drew breath to protest. “Look at Hawaii. It’s very green there.”

“Yeah, that’s where they filmed all those dinosaur films!” Bain enthused. “Have you seen those, Legolas?”

And so it went all afternoon.

Thran thanked the gods for icy radiators, and for night supers who were generous enough to fix them.

When eventually Thran and Legolas took their leave, they were both sorry. They’d stayed long after supper, which was the rest of Bard’s huge pot of chili, more biscuits, and salad that Thran fetched
from upstairs, so no one complained. They agreed to regroup at eleven tomorrow to put their dinner in the oven, and watch a film while waiting for the ham to cook.

“I will text you,” Thran whispered, as the children discussed what film to watch tomorrow. “Today has been perfect, lyubov moya. I love you.”

“It has. Love you, too, fy nghariad. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow. Bye, Tilda, Bain, Sigrid. Until tomorrow.”


“Yeah, bye, Legolas! Bye, Thran!” the children waved, and Legolas waved back with a smile. He preceded his father up the stairs to their apartment, which seemed empty and quiet after the liveliness they’d left behind. Thran closed the door behind them, and turned on a light.

“I hope you had a good time,” Thran ventured, as his son went to the window to look out.

Legolas turned to regard his father. “I had a great time. It was fun making the pie, and seeing everyone doing different things. Everything tasted so good, too. I was sorry to go.”

“So was I.” Thran carried his salad box into the kitchen to wash. “Would you like tea, synok?”

“That would taste good, Father. Thank you.”

Thran put on the kettle, washed out the salad box, and set it in the dish drainer to dry. Legolas set out the teapot and two cups, and looked through the cupboard for the fig bars he liked. He wolfed down a couple of the cookies before the kettle heated, drawing Thran’s smile.

“I’m sorry,” Legolas said, as he paused before engulfing a third cookie. “Would you like one?”

Thran shook his head. “Thank you, but no. I have eaten biscuits today, and butter, and tomorrow I will eat potatoes and bread and especially pie that my son helped to make. So tonight I leave the confections to you.”

“You did your barre and yoga.”

“I did. And I will do them tomorrow, too, and every day after that. In a week we will have another feast, and after that I must prepare for auditions, so it is best not to make too much work for myself between now and then. I would rather have a taste of your pie tomorrow than a fig cookie tonight. It smelled delightful while it cooked, didn’t it?”

“It did. At first, I thought Bain was having me on, telling me to mix up all this stuff in a bowl that looked like soup. But he wasn’t. That’s really how you make pumpkin pie. It was easy!”

Thran looked at his son. “Why would you think that Bain would trick you?”

Legolas shrugged. “That happens a lot at school. I know who does it, so I find other boys to talk to.”

Thran winced. “We will find a new school, Legolas. The more I hear about this one, the less I like it.”

“I stay out of most of it, Father. I do. It’s all right. I know what to look for, who looks like a friend but isn’t for long.”

“I hope you don’t think Bain and his sisters are like that.”
“I don’t...”

The teakettle was ready, so Thran poured the hot water into the teapot before he gave Legolas his full attention. “But you are not sure?”

Legolas shrugged. “I like them, Father, I do. Sigrid was brave to speak French even though her accent is terrible, even though she knows it’s terrible. At school, that would have gotten her royally dissed, but she didn’t care. And Bain was great about the pie, and showing me his soccer cards. He knows a lot. And Tilda is sweet. They were all nice to me.”

“So what are you not sure about?”

Legolas sighed, but met his father’s eyes. “I hope they weren’t nice because they wanted something.”

Thran blinked. “What would they want?”

A shrug. “At school, some boys want to say they know the fencing prodigy. Or the girls want to... well, I’m not sure what they want, but it’s weird.”

Thran laughed. “You are a handsome young man, of course, and your hair is likely a novelty that sets you apart. Bard’s children do not know you are a fencing prodigy, or an archery prodigy, for that matter, though if they did, they would not care. Bain is interested in many sports. He is a good soccer player, so he appreciates talking to someone who is just as fond of sport as he is, regardless of the sport. When he heard that you skated, he thought that the two of you might have fun skating together. As for Sigrid, I have heard from Bard that she is interested in a boy named Finn. Tilda is too young to be that sort of admirer. So I do not think they want anything from you, other than to be friendly. I have found them to be very kind, just as their Da is.”

Legolas nodded. “Thank you for telling me that, Father.”

His son was so polite, so unconcerned. How often had Thran presented that same face to the world when he had been in school? He, too, had learned that being different attracted the curious, the infatuated, and the jealous in enough quantities that people genuinely interested in friendship had been hard pressed to get through the throng. That his son had already learned to present that careful façade of neutral confidence concerned him. But before he could think of how to say so, Legolas had decided to shower and then play his solitary video games.

Before long, Thran followed him through the shower and into bed. He settled into his nest with his mobile.

*I’m naked in bed and wish you were here in the same condition,* he sent.

*I wonder if Santa Claus would send me up there to give my angel the perfect Christmas present?* Bard sent back.

*I’d give you a present, too, lyubov moya. It would not include sleep*

*I wouldn’t want to sleep*

*Thank you for a wonderful day. I have not been so happy in a long time*

*Me, either. That was the best Christmas Eve in a long time*

*Yes*
So go to sleep so we can have Christmas Day. Hope for another perfect day.

I will hope so. I will also hope for the day when we hope together rather than apart.

It’ll be here soon. The sooner we find bedframes for the children, the sooner we can spend the weekends there. I can’t wait!

Perhaps Saint Nicholas will be kind to a fellow saint and speed the time along.

If he does, I’ll thank him kindly. Barre and yoga tomorrow a.m.?

Of course.

Of course. Now imagine I’m kissing my beautiful angel goodnight. I’ll see you soon.

I send you a kiss, too. Until tomorrow, my saint.

Bye.

Bye.

Thran laid his mobile aside, settled into bed, and shut his eyes with a sigh. He was very tired of sleeping alone.

* * *

“It’s Christmas Day! Come on, Tilda! Come on, Sig! Christmas Day!”

Bard jolted awake. Once again, Bain was the one to herald the arrival of the holiday. For a lad who was generally so adamant about sleeping as late as possible, he was invariably the one to get up early on Christmas Day. Bard rubbed his eyes and groped for his mobile to read the time. Eh, not too terrible – it was just a little before eight. As he sat up on the edge of his bed, Bain leapt past his niche, heading for the living room sofa. That was where the Christmas gifts appeared magically once the children went to bed. None of them believed Santa Claus actually flew around the world to distribute presents, but they had the utmost faith that one of Santa’s elves made presents appear on their battered sofa.

Bard grinned. Being one of the millions of Santa’s elves was a job he enjoyed. All the ramen he’d eaten was worth it, as long as he had a few things to put on that sofa for Christmas Day.

“Come on, you two!” Bain ran back to the girls’ room. “Come on, come on, come on! It’s Christmas Day!”

Bain ran back to the living room, hair flying. He was still in his sleep tee and carried his fleece pants, but at least he had socks and underpants on. Tilda and Mr. Bun were close on his heels; her sleep-tousled braids stuck out at funny angles, and she tried to pull her shirt down with one hand while holding Mr. Bun with the other. Bard stood up to stretch, then smothered laughter when Sigrid paced past, her expression disgusted.

“Too early for you, Sig?” Bard joked, pressing a kiss on his daughter’s head.

“I don’t want to see a teenaged boy’s purple underpants coming out of a dryer, much less on my
brother’s body when he bursts into my room and wakes me out of a sound sleep to leap around like an electrocuted frog. I’m scarred for life.”

Bard laughed. “At least he had the purple underpants on, Sig.”

“Ew! Da!” Sigrid shuddered. “That is so gross!”

“Come on, come on, come on!” Bain badgered, running back to pull Bard forward. “Come on! Or I’m opening mine without you!”

“You can wait, Bain,” Bard said mildly, as Sigrid disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door with an emphatic thunk. “Give your sister a minute or two to recover from your purple underpants, and we’ll be right there.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with my underpants? They’re on, aren’t they? Come on!”

“Hang on. Let everyone cycle through the bathroom first. Til? Did you stop in the bathroom?”

“Yes, Da.”

“All right. When Sig comes out, let me go in, and then we’ll do presents.”

Bain rolled his eyes and threw himself into Bard’s chair with a loud exhale. “Don’t take all day!”

“The louder you complain, the slower I go,” Bard warned, as Sigrid reappeared. With Bain’s loud complaint in his ears, Bard took his turn to tend to necessities and splash some water over his face. He traded his sleep tee for a long-sleeved shirt, then prepared to face the frenzy in the living room.

There weren’t a lot of presents on the sofa, but each of the children had more than one – one from Bard, and usually one from each sibling. There was also the Elf Box - a wrapping paper-covered shoebox - that sat empty until Christmas Eve, when supposedly Santa’s elf filled it with sweets. This year, Bard had filled it with candied orange slices, chocolate peppermints, nuts in the shell, and a small Italian panettone, a sweet bread studded with fruit.

“May I open the panettone, Da?” Tilda asked, reaching for the small box.

“Do the honors, little doll. I’ll get the bread knife.”

The small loaf was duly sliced into four pieces, and everyone had one as they pounced on their gifts.

Sigrid got the blue sweater she’d liked so much at the mall from Bard, a bag of pistachios from Bain, and a blue beaded necklace that matched the sweater from Tilda.

Bain got new soccer cleats from Bard, a two-pound box of chocolate caramels from Sigrid, and three packets of soccer cards from Tilda.

Tilda got a beautiful illustrated storybook from Bard – a book he never would have been able to afford new – and a big box of good-quality art supplies from Sigrid and Bain.

There was also a package of second-hand books for the family, which was one of Bard’s favorite Christmas traditions. In the same shop where he’d found Tilda’s storybook, he’d picked up *Horatio Hornblower, Twenty Years After*, and *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* – the latter two were sequels to *The Three Musketeers* – for Bain and Sigrid. He’d also found a nice copy of *Wind in the Willows* for Tilda.

“Open yours, Da,” Sigrid invited, holding the largest remaining gift out to Bard. “This is from all
three of us.”

The children had combined their money to buy him a shirt – a good one. It was thick, blue plaid flannel, and if it came from the thrift store, it was so nearly new that Bard couldn’t tell. It was the nicest one he owned.

“This is wonderful,” Bard marveled, shaking out the folds and holding it up to admire it. “Feel how soft it is. And my favorite color, too. You all picked a winner. Thank you!”

He unbuttoned the shirt to put it on over his Henley. “It fits just fine, too. It’s just the thing to wear today. It’s a Christmas shirt.”

“I still say we should have gotten Da the Wolverine underpants,” Bain shook his head, but he was laughing.

“I like my new shirt much better,” Bard assured his children. “Wait, there are two more presents on the sofa. Whose are those?”

“They’re for Thran and Legolas,” Tilda said, smiling.

“They’re nothing big, Da,” Sigrid assured Bard. “Just something fun.”

“Fun, as in embarrassing?” Bard gave Bain the eye. “If they’re underpants, the answer is no.”

“They’re not underpants, and they’re not embarrassing,” Sigrid assured her father, also giving Bain the eye. Sigrid’s brother sighed, clearly unimpressed with his family’s sensibilities. “It was Tilda’s idea, and it was a really good idea.”

“Well, then I won’t worry, if Tilda thought of it,” Bard said, giving his youngest child a smile. “Did you think of something nice, then?”

She nodded vigorously. “But you can’t know what it is yet, so you don’t ruin the surprise.”

“Good enough. All right, breakfast. Big dinner coming, so what would you like to follow your panettone?”

They settled on eggs with cheese, and toast, so Bard set to. Tilda picked up the scattered wrapping paper, and Bain set the table, and Sigrid got the toaster and bread ready. They had a leisurely breakfast to the tune of their Christmas CDs, cleaned up, and settled to their presents. Bard made tea and picked up *Horatio Hornblower*. It’d been years since he’d read that rousing seafaring tale –

A knock on the door broke the quiet air. Their guests were here – no, not guests, Bard corrected silently. The other half of their family was here.

“Merry Christmas, Thran! Merry Christmas, Legolas! Come on in! What did you get for Christmas?” Bain greeted.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Legolas heralded, waving. “Father gave me a new bow, Bain. I can’t wait to try it out.”

“Sweet! I’d love to see it,” Bain breathed. “I got new soccer cleats, caramels, and new soccer cards.”

“And what did you get for Christmas, Thran?” Bard asked with a crooked smile. From the answering smile he received, Thran was just as eager for the present Bard wanted to give him as Bard was to bestow it.
“Much joy, and an ironic tee shirt.” As Thran slipped off his hiking boots and added his coat to those on hooks by the door, he gave Legolas a mock glower, provoking a snicker from his son. This morning, he wore a cushy flannel shirt in a soft red – yes, Thran would look stunning on Rembrandt red sheets – atop a grey tee shirt. He unbuttoned the flannel shirt the rest of the way – gods, he couldn’t think about what was under that shirt, not with the children around – and held it open to reveal Wolverine leaping with claws at full extension. “Apparently synok thinks that my exploits with the knives of muggers deserve such a shirt.”

“It suits you,” Bard laughed. “At least he didn’t give you a Storm tee shirt instead.”

Thran’s expression was blank. “What is this Storm?”

“She’s another one of the X-Men. The one with long, white hair.”

Thran’s glare turned glacial as he turned it on Legolas, who snickered, then pretended to cringe. “I’ll remember that one for your birthday, Father.”

“No, you will not,” Thran growled, but a smile pricked at the sides of his mouth. “I would not want to embarrass this Storm because I certainly have much nicer hair than she does.”

That provoked much laughter, and Bard beckoned to Thran. “Come on, Wolverine. It’s time to put the ham in the oven.”

“No, not yet!” Tilda piped. “Thran and Legolas have to open their presents first!”

“We brought you a present, too,” Legolas held out a rectangular box to Sigrid.

“A small gift only,” Thran demurred, as they all found seats on the sofa, the chair, or the floor nearby. “But we hope you enjoy it as much as we do.”

“It’s pastry,” Sigrid discovered, reading the box. “Alexandertorte.”

“It’s a popular pastry in Latvia, where Father was born,” Legolas explained. “It’s thin layers of cake with jam and fruit in between, and then sweet icing on top. I like it a lot.”

“So much that I had to get Legolas his own pastry, otherwise I would have not been able to keep him from eating this one,” Thran teased his son.

“They’re good, Father!” Legolas protested, as if that explained everything.

“Now you open your presents,” Tilda prompted eagerly. She handed one of the two small packages to Thran, and the other to Legolas.

“Whatever those are, they’re Tilda’s idea,” Bard held up his hands, when Thran shot him a look.

“Then let us see what Tilda’s idea is, Legolas,” Thran prompted, slipping off the ribbon and opening the paper. His face spasmed in laughter, and he held up a pair of brightly striped socks – electric purple, peacock blue, and vibrant green alternating with black. Legolas had a similar pair in green, yellow, and orange. “It is a very good idea, Tilda. I do not have any socks this color. I like them very much.”

“Yes, thank you,” Legolas grinned. “They’re nice and soft. They’ll keep my feet warm when I practice my archery outside.”

Tilda’s smile was gleeful. “I told you he’d like them! I told you!”
Bain rolled his eyes; apparently he’d been less sanguine. Sigrid’s expression was suppressed laughter, so clearly she’d been in the pro-socks camp. Bard chuckled at the discussion that must have taken place in the shop where they’d bought the socks. Thran offered his hand to Tilda, who gave him hers willingly. He kissed the back of it.

“I congratulate you, ma chère Tilda, on choosing exactly the present I needed. Now I will not have to wear plain black socks when I visit you.”

“You are very welcome,” Tilda said with great dignity, but then she smiled widely. “I’m glad you like them. Maybe next time I’ll get you dotted ones.”

“I have no dotted ones, so I am sure you will choose good ones,” Thran nodded. “Now, let me help your Da with the ham so that our dinner will be ready soon.”

“It won’t take us long,” Bard told him. “Children, you decide what film we’re going to see.”

“Thank you for being kind,” Bard whispered, when he and Thran were in the kitchen. “She was really excited.”

“They are nice socks, and playful. They will be a good reminder to smile when I see them.” He brushed a kiss on Bard’s cheek. “She is very sweet, just as her Da is.”

Bard heard a noise behind them. There stood Sigrid, arms akimbo, shaking her head at them. Grinning, he winked at his daughter, then deliberately kissed Thran’s cheek. Sigrid threw up her hands and retreated, drawing Bard’s laughter as well as Thran’s.

How good was it to tease his daughter? Almost as good as it was to kiss Thran without embarrassment.

* * *

Thran smothered a snicker as Sigrid retreated in the face of her father’s unabashed delight when he bestowed a kiss on Thran’s cheek. Bard was as amused, but he quickly brought them back to task.

“The ham,” Bard exhaled, and handed Thran a small box. “One of those. I’ll get the ham.”

Together they got the ham packaged in its cooking bag, and then into the oven. They had two hours before it would be ready, then they’d see to the potatoes and vegetables. The children had chosen a film that Legolas had not seen about a boy who wanted a BB gun for Christmas. As Thran had not seen this film, either, he had a good laugh over the antics that poor Ralphie endured. They managed to fit Thran and Bard on the old sofa, with Bain in Bard’s chair, Legolas beside Thran, Sigrid beside Bard, and Tilda on Bard’s lap. It was a tight fit, but to be so close to lyubov yego was no hardship. When the oven timer dinged, Bard got up to wrangle the ham out of the oven, the potatoes and rolls in, and the vegetables on the stove. That left Thran alone with four children, which was a distinctly novel experience.

This was what it was like to be in a family.

Ralphie’s problems solved, everyone sat down to the dinner they had all worked to make. Because
they’d already shared two meals together, this one was relaxed, without so much excitement at the novelty of guests. Bard was right. The children were getting used to each other. The only thing that kept Thran from relaxing completely was the apprehension Legolas had revealed last night. Still, continued visits would ease that better than anything he could say to his son.

As usual, Bard’s cooking had produced a hearty, tasty meal that everyone enjoyed. Thran made a point of having a full slice of the pie that his son had made, which pleased Legolas. Thran refused to worry that a slice of pie, a helping of creamed potatoes, and a buttered roll would instantly ruin his body – he’d gotten up half an hour earlier this morning to spend longer at the barre to compensate. The pie was delicious with spices, complemented nicely with similarly spiced hot tea. When all declared themselves stuffed, he and Legolas pitched in with the rest to clean up the remains of the meal.

“Now soccer!” Bain clamored, his new soccer cleats in his hands. “Soccer, Da!”

“In a minute, Bain.” Bard was still in the kitchen, sandwiching a thick slice of ham inside a roll and slathering it with mustard. “I’m just making Mr. D’s sandwich and wrapping up the last piece of pie for him.”

“Here are the bags.” Sigrid passed her father a plastic food bag to hold the sandwich, then another for the pie. “I’m putting one of the peppermints in there, too.”

“Mr. D likes peppermints,” Tilda handed the candy to her sister.

“I know he does,” Sigrid agreed. “Even if he doesn’t smile, I know when he likes something.”

“All done.” Bard hustled to clean the knife he’d used on the sandwich. “All right, Bain. We’re ready. You’re going to try your new cleats?”

“Course I am! Where are the soccer balls?”

“I’ve got them,” Sigrid said, holding up the net bag holding the two balls.

“I’ve got the sandwich,” Tilda said. “And Da has the pie.”

“Boots on, then,” Bard shooed his children. “Coats, one and all.”

They trooped outside and headed to the park. It was only three o’clock, but the layer of high, pearly clouds made it seem later. As the children walked ahead of them, Thran fell into step with Bard.

“Thank you for a most excellent meal, lyubov moya. And a perfect day.”

“Everyone helped with the meal, fy nghariad. That’s what makes the day so good – because it’s got something of everyone in it.”

“True,” Thran conceded. “But I see who orchestrates it all to be so good. You are the choreographer.”

Bard shrugged, but his smile was pleased. “Whatever works. Whatever makes us happy.”

“I am very happy. Each day seems to bring a little more.”

“It does.” Bard thrust his hands in his pockets and looked up at the sky. “It would make me very happy to hold you right now, but since we’ve got only Sigrid on board with that, you’ll have to imagine me doing it.”
Thran’s laugh was quiet, but lecherous. “I can imagine much more than that, dear saint. None of what I imagine is saintly, or angelic.”

“Guess I’d better get my ass around to fixing that bed frame, then.”

“If you cannot, I can offer you several alternative positions for your ass, all close to mine.”

Bard snickered. “We are terrible.”

“We will be worse in bed. I look forward to it.”

“Right now, we’d better haul our asses to the park. The children are leaving us behind.”

Thran lengthened his stride. “Then let us give chase.”

* * *

Sigrid was almost as eager to reach the park as Bain was. Soccer didn’t hold the same fascination for her as it did for her brother. But it was an inviolate part of the High Ritual that was the Bowmans’ Christmas Day.

Every year, no matter what, that ritual held without fail. The day before, they worked together to prepare Christmas dinner. The day of began with presents on the sofa, maybe not many, but some, then progressed to a film, and after that soccer in the park no matter rain, snow, or sun. Afterwards would be a supper of leftovers, and hot cocoa. The next day or so, they'd make soup from the last of the ham or turkey, and make a pilgrimage to the house.

That inviolate High Ritual became even more precious once Sigrid realized how much work Da put into making it happen without it seeming like he did anything at all. When she figured out that all the extra overtime, the ramen he claimed to like, and long, sleepless hours acting as night super were what made the High Ritual possible, she’d cried. Then she’d worried when the strain increased, and whether she should tell him not to work so hard. Then he caught her sneaking her tutoring money into the household change jar, and made her take it back. So she’d said that she thought she was too old for Christmas, and he didn’t have to get her a gift.

He’d smiled back and said that was sweet of her, but that he liked making a nice dinner and giving her a gift too much to stop.

So each year Sigrid made the most of the High Ritual, because Da worked hard to make it so, and he liked to see her and Bain and Tilda enjoy it. So what if soccer was more Bain’s joy than hers? It was her joy to see Da happy.

This year, Thran and Legolas were with them, and her Da had never been so happy, because he was in love with Thran Oropherson, ballet dancer extraordinaire. It was soooo obvious, Da and Thran mooning over each other, sneaking kisses, whispering to each other, and looking like they couldn’t wait to hold hands on the street. How did Bain and Tilda manage to be so oblivious? She wasn’t sure that Legolas was as oblivious, but he was so private, nice enough, but content to stay hidden behind his mask. Maybe he was shy, or maybe it was hard for him to be easy around new people. He unbent a little when she tried out her French on him. Her accent was atrocious – Mme. LeClaire had all but given up on it – but she understood the grammar reasonably well, and her vocabulary was improving. Legolas spoke beautifully, and was nice enough not to tell her what she already knew
about her pronunciation, and seemed to loosen up when she laughed at her mistakes.

She wanted to like Legolas, because she wanted Legolas’s father to keep making Da so happy. How much money had he given Da to fix up the house so they could move there? Would he come with them? She hoped so.

The boys had run ahead of her and Tilda, looking for Mr. D. They found the bald policemen near the swings, lounging against the heavy iron framework. He was outfitted in his usual well-worn leather jacket, blue jeans, and shit-kicker motorcycle boots. A small gold ring gleamed in one earlobe, and his scarf didn’t quite cover the top edge of one of the tattoos at his neck. He was covered with them, as was obvious during the summer when he patrolled in just a tee shirt.

“Look, Til,” Sigrid pointed. “Bain and Legolas have found Mr. D.”

“I’ve got his sandwich,” the little girl grinned. “Come on!”

Sigrid followed Tilda more slowly, for she had the netted balls over her shoulder. By the time she reached the other children with Mr. D, he’d already scarf ed down half of his sandwich.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. D,” Sigrid waved. “Da’s got your pie. He’s coming along in a minute.”

“Thankee, lass,” the short, stocky man said in a thick Scottish accent. “Merry Saturnalia to ye. Here to play a bit of soccer, as usual?”

“As usual,” Sigrid smiled. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without it.”

“Mr. D has a new tattoo,” Tilda told her sister. “It’s a family crest on his arm.”

“Aye, the McTavish sigil,” he said, chewing. He pointed to the inside of his left arm. “Right here. I’ll show ye come spring, lassie. Too cold today. Ah. Hullo to ye, Bard. Merry Saturnalia. And ye be Mr. Oropherson, aye?”

Thran held out his hand. “Call me Thran. I hoped to see you today to thank you for your help a few weeks ago.”

“Ach, laddie, ye barely needed me. Two down and one with his own knife – nicely done, I call that. And this be yer son, aye?”

“I’m Legolas,” Thran’s son said quietly, offering his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Mr. D whuffed. “Glad to meet ye, too, laddie. Though there are some who don’t agree with ye, but they’re not worth thinking about.”

“Brought you some pie,” Bard handed over the small bag. “Hope you’ve had a quiet day of it today from those who aren’t worth thinking about.”

“Not bad, not bad,” Mr. D nodded, opening the baggie and engulfing the pie in two bites. “Nicely done with the pie, as yer usual. Weather’s kept most people in, but a few hardy souls have ventured out. None of the troublemakers so far. Never doubted ye and yers wouldn’t make it out. Hardy souls, ye are.”

“We’d never miss our Christmas Day soccer,” Sigrid said firmly. “Or seeing you, either, Mr. D.”

“Then off with ye, lass, and yer sister and brothers, and right quick with ye, or I’ll be tempted to make a right fool out of myself with ye. Get ye along, then.”
“Bye, Mr. D,” Tilda waved. “See you later!”

Sigrid waved, and followed Bain and Legolas past the swings and jungle gym to the playing field. She let the balls fall out of the net, and sent one careening off after Bain and Legolas, and the other towards Tilda. They quickly spread out in a big square to send the balls flying back and forth. Legolas was a good runner, and easily intercepted the balls Sigrid sent his way. Bain was the better player, practicing a few knee ups and headshots as they came to him. Tilda might be smaller than her three playmates, but she was quick and had a good command of kicking, usually directing the ball where she wanted it to go.

Da and Thran remained behind to talk to Mr. D, but were still within earshot. After a few minutes, Mr. D waved goodbye and continued his patrol around the park, leaving Da and Thran to talk among themselves. Probably making googly eyes at each other and whispering like the love-struck couple they were. She fielded the ball that Tilda had sent her way and gave it a hearty boot, sending it past both Bain and Legolas. Uh-oh – they were drifting towards the druggie stop, the nasty part of the park where the addicts collected, not that most of them gave anyone any trouble. It was the thugs who supplied the addicts who were the problem. She waved at Bain, signaling him to head back this way, but her brother didn’t see. He and Legolas were in a full-throttle kicking frenzy, sending the ball back and forth in a blur.

Sigrid caught up to her sister. “Hang on, Til. We need to get the boys to come back this way. They’re getting too near the druggie stop.”

Tilda sobered instantly, coming to stand close to Sigrid. “I don’t see anyone there. Do you?”

“Not yet, but it’d be better if we played farther away. I’m going to tell them to move back.”

She waved at Bain again, without success, so she yelled his name. Ah, she had his attention now. She pointed behind him, then beckoned him back towards her. He waved, telling her that he understood, and trotted towards her.

Legolas, however, didn’t know about the druggie stop, and thought Bain was still playing. He kicked the ball past Bain - well past, and far closer to the druggie stop than Sigrid liked. She grabbed Tilda’s hand and hurried forward.

“Bain! Get Legolas! Wait for Da!”

But Legolas had already trotted after the ball.

Three figures sitting at a battered picnic table watched the ball roll near with Legolas coming after it. As they got up, Sigrid recognized one of them, and swore under her breath. Tilda stopped cold.


Tilda turned and ran as fast as she could.

Sigrid wanted to run away, too. But instead, she ran after Bain and Legolas.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The storm is swift, savage, and leaves wreckage in its wake. How will an angel, a saint, and their cherubs fare?

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:
sukin syns = sons of bitches (Russian)
slava bogam = thank the gods (Russian)

Legolas skidded to a stop as soon as he spotted the three who had Bain’s soccer ball. The one in the middle had his foot on the ball, his arms crossed over his chest and a glower on his face. The two on either side of him looked no less intimidating, hands at their sides, but twitching, as if wishing for a knife, or worse. Maybe they were a year or two older than he was, if that, but there was a feral hardness to their faces and a skittish, jumpy tension in their bodies that made them seem much older. Each one of them wore a blue bandana around his forehead.

Even he knew gang members when he saw them.

He’d pointed to the ball before he thought. Damn it, that was stupid – worse, he’d made eye contact with them. He should’ve just turned tail and run, then bought Bain a new soccer ball rather than risk any of them getting hurt. But the boy in the middle rolled the ball under his foot.

“What, you want your ball back, Blondie? Pretty little Blondie wants his ball back? C’mon, we can be nice. You come get it, and we’ll show you how nice we are.”

“Lance? Lance Dunmont!” That was Sigrid, her voice high and strained. He could just place her out of the corner of his eye, her face tight, her hands twisting the net bag that had held the soccer balls. Bain was on his other side, standing his ground, but clutching the other soccer ball looking scared. “I know that’s you, Lance. Just kick the ball back, and we’ll clear out. Come on.”

“’Lo, Sigrid Bowman,” Lance drawled, rolling the ball under his foot. “You know the rules, doncha? This is Crip turf.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sigrid snapped. “You and Manny and Jinks aren’t any more a Crips set than I am. You just want to look tough. Just give us the ball and we’ll leave you to your crummy turf. Just drop it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, smartass Sigrid,” Manny snarled. “We’re a real set now – running for Angelo. Keeping his turf clear for business. Your friend Blondie here crossed the line. We can’t have that. Those nice, green shoes of his will look real good as a marker for us on the power lines.”
Manny and Jinks started towards Legolas, who backed away in response.

* * *

Tilda flew away from Sigrid, her heart pounding so loudly that it was all she heard. Da – where was Da? There, ahead of her, smiling and laughing with Thran, not looking at her, just laughing –

“Da! Da!” she gulped, hardly able to speak. “Da! Help!”

Da was beside her, stooping beside her. “What’s wrong Tilda? Is someone hurt?”

“Legolas kicked the ball into the druggie stop and Lance Dunmont was there and they took the ball and Sigrid told me to get you –”

“Oh, gods!” Da grabbed Tilda hard, his eyes searching the field frantically.

“What is it?” Thran stooped beside them, his voice higher than usual.

“Lance’s a wanna-be thug. Does some running for the local heroin dealer. Til, Til, Mr. D’s by the swings. Run straight there and tell him to run to the druggie stop. Can you do that, little doll?”

She nodded. Bard thrust his apartment key in her hand.

“Run hard, tell Mr. D, then you go straight home. Stay in the apartment. Don’t come out.”

“Da –”

“Go, Tilda. Go!”

Da and Thran raced towards the druggie stop, so Tilda turned heels and ran for the swings. Halfway there, she spotted Mr. D. She screamed his name, over and over. He ran to her quickly.

“The druggie stop!” she gasped. “Lance Dunmont and two more – going to hurt Legolas and Bain! Hurry!”

Mr. D ran, already calling for backup on his police monitor, leaving Tilda to clutch the apartment key.

She started to sob.

* * *

“Oh, for gods’ sakes, Lance!” Sigrid snapped. “Jacques doesn’t know it’s anybody’s turf! He’s just a guest, here for the day! He doesn’t speak English very well, so he doesn’t know what you’re telling him! Just leave him alone! Frère Jacques, le gendarme arrive, tu comprends? Marche à reculons vers moi.”

Legolas didn’t laugh at Sigrid’s mention of the old song, Frère Jacques. The important part was the
rest – the policeman’s coming, walk backwards towards me. He tried to look calm, not confused or scared. But Lance’s two companions leaped forward, and he found himself on the ground with both boys on top of him. Before he could get a grip on either, one grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked hard. The second sat on his chest and struggled to pin his arms over his head. The third one was at his feet, wrestling off one of his shoes no matter how hard he kicked.

“Stop it, Lance! Stop it!” Sigrid shrieked. “Or I’ll scream so loud that Mr. D will beat your ass into pulp!”

“You open your mouth, ho, and I’ll slap it into the Bronx!” Lance snarled.

“What, you’re going to stop me, ball boy?” Lance taunted, yanking Legolas’s shoe free. “Little Blondie girl’s gonna stop me? Your fucking sister’s going to stop me?”

Manny fielded Bain’s soccer ball right in the face, knocking him off Legolas. As he fell onto the grass, Sigrid ran forward to slap the soccer ball net at Lance’s face and smacked him hard enough to earn her a curse. Legolas heaved and kicked, unseating Jinks, then grabbed his shoe, rolled away from the trio, and scrambled to his feet. He had a disjointed view of Sigrid winging the ball net around her head, then flicking it over and over at Lance, who fought to grab the net. Bain had plowed into Jinks, the smallest of the three, punching and grabbing, trying to keep him away from Legolas. That left Legolas with Manny, who put his head down and charged at him. Legolas dodged him easily, but Manny didn’t circle around for another shot at him; he ran back towards the picnic bench where the trio had sat earlier.

“Manny’s going for help, Sig!” Bain called to his sister. “Back off, back off!” Bain grabbed Legolas’s arm, pulling him after him. “Come on, Legolas, before Manny gets back!”

Lance finally landed a hand on the ball net and jerked hard, pulling Sigrid forward, grabbing her around the waist.

“Fuck off, lowlife!” she snarled, stamping her foot full force on Lance’s instep. He howled, and Bain and Legolas jumped forward to pull her away. “Let’s go, let’s go!” she shrieked.

Manny and a pair of glowering strangers blocked their path. Jinks and Lance regrouped at their backs, and the five spread out in a circle around them to trap them in the middle.

“Face out!” Legolas told Sigrid and Bain, and they jostled to do that. Beside him, Sigrid put on a brave face, even laughing.

“You bastards are in so much trouble,” she taunted. “Be smart, Lance. Back off before you get your asses handed to you on a platter!”

“Who’ll do it, bitch? You? The three of you?”

“That’s right, cumrag,” Sigrid shot back. “We will. We’re the Three Musketeers! And we’ve got cavalry. Better run before it gets here, or we’ll stomp you like maggots! Nos pères sont ici!”

Our fathers are here! Legolas translated, then burst into a grin. Yes, Bard and Father raced towards them. Bard jerked Manny around by the back of his jacket and tumbled him into the grass. Father stood between Manny and the rest to keep him from rejoining them, and Bard pushed Jinks out of the ring.

“Everybody calm down,” Bard panted, holding his hands out. “The children didn’t know they were
so near your turf, Angelo. They were playing soccer on Christmas Day, that’s all. We’ll get them out of here, and leave the place to you.”

The new arrivals ignored Bard. One of them stared at Father. “You. White hair.”

When Father favored Angelo with an unblinking stare, Legolas gulped. That was the glare reserved for only the most loathsome of ballet critics, and even though Angelo was bulkier than his father, he couldn’t compete for menace with the Prince of Ice.

“You’re the one who put Carson and Rossi in hospital.”

“Bain, Sig, Legolas, marchez vers moi,” Father murmured quietly. *Walk towards me.*

Legolas groped for Sigrid’s hand and Bain’s, and edged them towards Father.

“They don’t move,” Angelo snarled.


“Stand still.”

“Angelo, they’re children,” Bard urged. “They’re not cutting into your business, not crossing your turf. Just let it drop.”

Angelo pulled a knife. That was stupid – all it did was deepen the menace coiled in Father’s body.

“Ah. I believe that is my cue to ask you not to threaten our children,” Father said. His face was even more ghostly than his hair, his voice had dropped an octave, and his glare should have melted Angelo where he stood. “We will leave, and not bother you, or you will regret it.”

Angelo smiled, and took a step towards Father, who was poised as precisely as he would be on the stage, smiling the most horrible grimace Legolas had ever seen. Gods, did he think this was a game?

Sigrid’s grip on his hand grew excruciating. *Gendarme D est derrière le connard,* she hissed. *Mr. D is behind the asshole.*

“You hurt two of my boys, white hair. Eye for an eye.”

“Sig, Bain, Legs, to me!” Bard shouted.

The three of them moved as one, swinging and kicking and punching at Lance and Jinks, charging away from Angelo and Thran as they squared off. Mr. D hurtled into the mix like he was still a star rugby player, and he and Bard clotheslined the other adult beside Angelo and thwacked him into the grass with a sickening crack.

One down.

Legolas put a shoulder into Lance’s gut before he could get out of the way. Sigrid flung the net over Lance’s head, then threw all her weight behind it to send him face first into the ground. She scrabbled over his body to jerk his arm up his back, hauling on it until he shrieked.

“You twitch, Lance Dunmont, and I’ll break your arm!” she snarled, hauling on his arm again to reinforce her point.

Two down.
Bain was doing his best against Jinks, so Legolas piled into the smaller boy to knock him down. Bain stomped both feet onto Jink’s arm at the elbow and grabbed his wrist, levering hard enough to keep the boy flat on his face.

"Unless you want me to break your arm, don’t you twitch, either!" Bain spat. "Fucking bastard!"

Three down.

Manny took one look at Legolas and turned tail. The last time Manny had fled, he’d returned with reinforcements, so Legolas stormed after him, launching himself to tackle the boy. They crashed to the ground, Legolas on top of Manny, so he copied Sigrid, grabbing an arm and cranking it up his back.

“Hold still, connard!” Legolas growled.

Four down.

That just left Angelo, and his Father. He looked around frantically –

Mr. D and Bard still wrestled with the man they’d taken down, and just beyond, Angelo lunged with his knife right at Father. Legolas fought down the urge to scream a warning, because that would only distract Father from concentrating on the blow, but Angelo was so fast, so big, so strong, and Father was so much lighter –

Ever the graceful danseur, Father stepped nimbly towards Angelo, throwing off the thug’s approach, grabbed his knife hand at the wrist, and wrenched it back and down so hard that Angelo shrieked. Had Father driven the knife into his chest? No, no, only the most basic of karate moves to apply pressure to the wrist. Father squeezed hard, and Angelo let the knife drop.

Five down –

“Look out, look out!” Mr. D shouted. “He’s pulling a knife, the bastard –”

Mr. D kicked once, twice, and Bard wrestled to grab the thug’s hand before he could get the knife free. The man’s wild kick knocked Bard away, and Mr. D dove in with fists flailing. The pair rolled around, which encouraged Manny to start struggling again. Legolas gave his arm another wrench –

A shot, then Sigrid's scream. Father lit out with words Legolas had never heard him say before and kicked Angelo in the head so hard that the thug fell still.

The silence was uncanny for three seconds, then sirens wailed in the distance. Lights flashed a block away, coming around the park towards the druggie stop. In less than another minute, uniformed figures ran towards them. One officer took Jinks away, leaving Bain to struggle to his feet. Another relieved Sigrid of Lance, and two others took off Angelo. One of them had a gun in a plastic bag. Had it been Angelo who’d fired? Finally, finally, an officer stopped beside Legolas.

“I’ve got him, son,” the female officer assured him, and he was able to climb off Manny.

“Thank you,” he said faintly. The polite reply sounded ludicrous even to him.

He joined Bain and Sigrid, both of them pale and shaking, to watch Mr. D direct a trio of officers in hauling off the fifth man. Father came to him at once, pulling him into a hug. Bain and Sigrid huddled close with him, and Father pulled them into the embrace. They were all safe.
Dazed and numb, Thran clung to his son, his lover’s children. Legolas was safe in his arms, and so were Sigrid and Bain. They were safe. It had taken only a few seconds for child’s play to erupt into a fight over nothing, a fight that could have taken his children’s lives. Just a few seconds. Only a few precious seconds. How could so much terror descend in so short a time?

Legolas was safe. In his arms. Sigrid was safe. Bain was safe. All was well. It was. All was well –

“Is everyone all right?”

Thran’s head snapped up. Was that Bard? His voice sounded thin, even wheezy. He looked up from the children to find his lover swaying on his feet, his eyes unfocused. He was terrified when Bard stumbled to his knees.

“Bard?” Thran wavered, clutching the children. “Lyubov moya?”

“Da?” Sigrid gasped. “Da, what’s wrong? Da!”

Bard stuck a hand inside his coat. When he pulled it out, it was bloody.

“No, no, no, no!” Sigrid shrieked, pushing away from the huddle to run to her father. Bain was right behind her. “Da! No! Mr. D! Mr. D! My Da’s been hurt! Mr. D!”

“Suka blyad!” Thran gasped, barely aware that Legolas had mouthed the same thing. “Oh, gods, lyubov moya!”

Sigrid and Bain supported their father between them, but he slumped against them. Mr. D waded into the mix, grabbing Bard and easing him to the grass. The policeman shot a harried glance at Thran.

“You! Get them away so I can work!”

Thran grasped Legolas’s shoulders. “Help me.”

As he and his son drew Sigrid and Bain away, the stocky plainclothesman stayed beside Bard, barking orders in a Celtic brogue so thick that Thran couldn’t make it out. A policeman came running with a medical kit, and another was radioing for an ambulance. Mr. D ripped Bard’s coat open and yanked his shirt up. Blood covered his left side in such gouts that Thran’s throat closed.

Oh gods oh gods oh gods, please don’t steal his saint from him, from his children –

Did he hear a child’s hysterical crying?

“Tilda!” Sigrid pushed away from Thran to intercept the little girl who ran towards them. Thran followed with Bain and Legolas as Sigrid engulfed her sister in her arms. Tilda collapsed into sobs, burying her face in Sigrid’s chest, clutching her arms around her.

“Is Da dead?” Tilda sobbed. “Da’s dead, isn’t he?”

Bain and Legolas closed ranks around the girls, Thran with them though he desperately wanted to be beside Bard. They stared in shock as Mr. D swabbed at the blood with the hem of Bard’s shirt, then pressed the cloth to Bard’s side. Thran couldn’t stand it, so he jostled the boys.

“Stay here with the girls. I will see how Bard is.”
He hastened to Bard’s side, attracting Mr. D’s glare. “You! Down here!”

As soon as Thran scrambled to his knees, Mr. D grabbed his hand and slapped it on top of the cloth pressed to Bard’s side. “Keep a good firm pressure on it. Don’t let go, ye hear?”

“I hear you,” Thran grumbled, leaning over Bard to scan his face. “How badly is he hurt?”

“Just a graze. Looks a lot worse than it is. He’ll be fine.” Mr. D looked up at Thran, cocking his head. “Question is, will you be?”

“Slava bogam,” Thran gulped. His gaze sharpened to skewer Mr. D. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Not leery at the sight of blood, are ye? Yer lookin’ a wee bit pale.”

“I always look a wee bit pale,” Thran snapped. “This is what color I am all of the time!”

“Ach, likely so. Not to worry. Yer friend will live to rue the day. Ask him yourself.”

Thran tore his eyes from the stocky policeman, and found Bard looking up at him with a bemused expression on his face.

“If you push any harder, Thran, you’re liable to break my ribs.”

Bard’s voice was so weak that Thran’s throat closed. He managed to find an affronted expression. “Hush. I keep the blood inside you.”

“It hurts.”

“Good. That means what I do works.”

Mr. D had a wad of gauze. “All right, laddie, let me get in there with this until the EMTs arrive.”

Thran took his hands away. Mr. D pulled up the shirt to reveal a long, bloody weal across the right side of Bard’s ribs. He pressed the gauze over the wound, and pulled Thran’s hands down on top.

“Keep pressing. The EMTs will be here in a tic.”

Mr. D looked around to call to one of the other officers, so Thran risked twisting around to find the children.

“It is not serious!” he called to them. “Sigrid, Bain, Tilda, your Da will be fine! Legolas, make sure they understand.”

“I will, Father,” Legolas nodded, and began to speak softly to the other children. In a few seconds, all of them ventured close.

“Da?” Bain wavered.


“We’re fine, Da, we’re fine,” Bain replied, but he was just at the shredded ends of his composure. “T-Tilda’s fine, too.”

“Tilda’s here?” Bard’s eyes flew open. “I told her to go home. Is she here?”

“I couldn’t!” Tilda sobbed. “I was scared and I didn’t want to go home by myself and I couldn’t stay
there by myself!”

Bard tried to sit up, but Mr. D clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Yer nae going anywhere, Bard. The EMTs are coming, and Thran will see to your bairns. All right, Thran, give the techs a wee bit of space, and we’ll see to him.”

“Do you want me to take the children home? Will Bard need to go to hospital?”

“Can’t say about hospital; that’s the EMT’s call. Ye wait a bit here with the bairns, and we’ll know something in the meantime.”

“Then you see to the suka blyads who threatened my children and hurt lyubov moya. I will gladly help you cut off their balls with a rusty can lid, even those of the young ones. If doing so is frowned upon, then I will try to make do and press every charge I can think of.”

Mr. D smiled. It was more a fierce grimace than a smile, but anything gentler would not have been fitting. “Aye, I’d like tae oblige ye, laddie, but that’d land us both in more trouble than they’re worth... almost. But I’ll see they hae a nice long stay in a cell with their own kind. That ought tae weed out a few of the bastards.”

“Not enough.”

“Not nearly enough. Ach, here are the EMTs. Nice work on this lot. Ye all did well.”

Mr. D stood up to wave the pair of medical techs to Bard’s side.

“I swear, Thran, you really are in the Russian mafia,” Bard whispered, smiling thinly.

“If I were, then very little of those sukin syns would be left to be thrown into a cell.”

“You’re cute when you’re mad.”

“I am not mad. I am scared to death.”

“I’ll be fine, fy nghariad.”

“I will hold you to that. Now, here are the EMTs. I will watch our children, so they will be safe. You will do everything the techs tell you, yes? Promise me.”

“I promise.”

A hand slid beside Thran’s. It belonged to one of the EMTs who would see to Bard. Thran backed away a step or two as the two techs busied themselves with swabs and gauze and more things than he wanted to think about. He went to the children, still huddled together. All of them were weepy and shaky, understandable after such an ordeal. He folded himself down on the ground, eased Tilda into his lap, Legolas beside her, and Bain and Sigrid to either side, and put his arm as far around the lot as he could stretch them.

“Your Da will be fine,” he told them. “It is not more than a big scratch. I have seen it. It is not so bad at all. So all will be well very soon.”

The children didn’t speak, but they settled against him with a bit more ease.

Now, if only someone would ease the pounding of his heart...
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Plans change in the aftermath of a holy war.

Chapter Notes

Once again, I don't own any rights to "Flushed Away." It's just one of my favorite films, that's all.

I had a little fun with some cameos in this chapter, so I hope you enjoy them.

Many thanks to MaleficentGirl for her help with the police procedures.

People flitted in and out of Bard’s vision in a dizzying blur. Or maybe the agony branded across his ribs was what made everything reel so badly. Or the burning torment that intensified each time he tried to breathe in. It seemed to be getting dark, too, for his vision greyed out – no, it lightened... no, it greyed again...

He got a fractured image of Thran’s horrified white face staring at him. His angel had his arms around Legolas, Sigrid, and Bain. Good, they were safe. They were all safe...

Sigrid and Bain were beside him, both of them screaming. The pain in his left side was fully awake now, tearing at him like a beast, pulling him to the ground...

Mr. D appeared above him, snarling and snapping, tearing at his clothes, then Thran was beside him, pressing on the point of his worst agony, greying his vision again...

The next moments were nothing but shards, disjointed images and sounds and sensations. Did he speak to the shadows who visited him, his children, his angel, an angry bald policeman with an incomprehensible Scottish burr? He wasn’t sure. The only thing that seemed real was the pain gnawing at him, turning his stomach queasy and his thoughts to mush.

“I’m giving you something for the pain while I stitch you up,” a voice wandered into clarity. “You’ll feel better in a minute.”

“Are my children all right?” he struggled to say. Had he said that already? Did he say it now, or just think it? He had no idea whether he’d gotten the words out of his thoughts and into sound, but maybe he did, because another voice assured him that all of them were fine. There was a sting in his side, then another – hypodermics? There were bright flashes of light – a police photographer documenting his wounds – and more mutterings as the EMTs described those wounds to a shadowy figure in a drone that Bard couldn’t decipher. After a few seconds, the pain receded one small bit at a time. Gradually, gradually, the world settled, and he floated down into it again.

“Back with us now?” a genial baritone voice queried.
Bard opened eyes on the pair of EMTs crouched beside him. One of them had a bush of dark red, wiry hair, a serious beard, and a nametag that said Gloin. The other one, Oin, was even hairier, with wiry grey beard and hair in a long queue that fell over his shoulder. Gloin rummaged through his box of gear, finally coming up with a big tube of something, and handed it to Oin, who’d spoken to Bard.

“Think so,” Bard ventured.

“Ah, good.” Oin took the tube, squeezed out a generous dollop of goo into his surgically gloved palm, and smeared it over his side. Those gloves were also smeared with blood, which Bard didn’t want to think about. “Nothing too serious, you’ll be glad to know, no matter that it burns like the depths of hell. Not deep, and only about five inches long. I’ve put in ten stitches, steri-stripped it to boot, and I’m coating it with this stuff. It’s a bit more potent than your garden-variety triple antibiotic ointment, but it does the same thing – keeps the wound moist and protected from germs. I’ll put a dressing over it. If you want a trip to hospital, I can see to it, but you don’t need to go unless you want to.”

“I want to take my children home,” Bard said without hesitation.

“Good man,” Oin nodded with satisfaction. “Once you get them there, have them do for you for a day or two. I’ll give you a sheet of instructions about how to take care of your souvenir.”

“Make sure you follow my brother’s instructions to the letter,” Gloin gave him a stern look as he handed gauze pads to Oin. “That’s not a terrible souvenir, as Oin likes to call them, but you still need to take care of it properly. I don’t want to see you in hospital with an infection because you lack the common sense to look after a few stitches.”

“I’ll be a good patient,” Bard smiled, surprised that he no longer hurt too much to preclude smiling.

“See that you are,” Oin nodded. He looked off to the side, then back at Bard. “Ah, your friend with the white hair has your instructions. In about four hours, the stuff I gave you will wear off. You can have some regular OTC painkiller then, if you need it. Any of the acetaminophen family’s better than ibuprofen, all right? Not aspirin. Just the regular dose. If they don’t ease you, see your regular doctor.”

“Yes, sir,” Bard agreed.

“Sir, yourself,” Oin grinned. “Now, let’s get you over to the ambulance, where it’ll be a bit warmer while we get some wrappings around your souvenir. After that, you’ll be set to go.”

Oin and Gloin carefully got Bard to his feet, which instantly drew Thran and the children to his side, all of them anxious and worried.

“He’ll be fine,” Oin assured them, quieting the clamor that greeted Bard. “We’re just going to do a bit more bandaging over at the wagon, that’s all. When you get him home, you see that he rests for a day or two, won’t you? No more fisticuffs or brawls, and don’t let him stand up for too long tonight.”

Bard let the two EMTs guide him to the ambulance, where he sat on the back bumper for them to complete their work. The children held his coat and watched closely while the EMTs reinforced the tape on his bandage, then wound a few rounds of elastic mesh around him. Then they eased his shirts down, and helped him into his coat, for which he was grateful. Shivering in the cold would not have been pleasant even without a wound that pulled and burned.

“Can we take him home now, please?” Thran asked. Gods, his angel was even paler than usual, and
his face looked haggard. The children were little better – little Tilda still clung like a limp rag doll to Sigrid, and Bain looked like he’d played in the world’s longest soccer game. Legolas was pale, too, and kept one hand on his father. The lot of them needed to go home as much as he did.

“I’ll check with the officer in charge of the crime scene,” Gloin replied, and ambled off to find him.

Crime scene? Gods, that what it was, wasn’t it? Not a park, but a crime scene where an errant soccer ball had nearly gotten his children, his lover, and him killed.

“Steady on, laddie,” Oin grabbed his arm. “You turned white as your friend’s hair. The pain medication shouldn’t be wearing off this fast.”

“I’m fine,” Bard said through gritted teeth. “I’m fine. It just hit me that those bastards tried to kill my children.”

Mr. D threaded through the officers still going to and fro, trailed by a taller man in a nicely tailored suit and topcoat. When he removed his fedora, he revealed neatly trimmed dark hair threaded with grey. His beard and mustache were greyer, but also neatly trimmed, and his steady eyes were a deep blue. His steps were unhurried, deliberate, and calm, and he carried his head high, but with gravity rather than arrogance.

“This is Mr. Bowman, Thor. Bard, Chief Inspector Thor Oakland. He’s in charge of this wee minuet.”

Bard gingerly extended a hand. “Chief Inspector.”

“Mr. Bowman,” Oakland shook Bard’s hand gently. “Sergeant Fundin’s given me an earful about what’s happened in the last hour. If you’re up to it, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“A lot of questions, I’d guess,” Bard gave him a crooked grin. “Would you let me take my children home first? They’re exhausted and scared. You likely want to talk to them and Thran Oropherson, too, so you’re welcome to come with us. It’ll be out of the cold.”

“That’ll be fine, Mr. Bowman. I’ll send a pair of officers to get you home safely, and to start the interviews.”

“Thanks. Can we go now?”

The inspector nodded. “As soon as I’ve got a couple of officers to go with you. Dwalin, send Jackson and Boyens with them.”

“Aye; I’ll see to it.”

The chief inspector nodded to one and all before moving off with Mr. D to make the rounds of his officers. Oin and Gloin stayed with Bard at the ambulance until Mr. D reappeared with his two uniformed officers in tow, one a short, squat, rumpled man with disheveled hair, and the other a tall, neatly dressed woman with a mane of dark hair pulled back into a long, straight ponytail. Bard climbed into the ambulance for the brief ride across the field – Thran would follow on foot with the children – and in a couple of minutes they let him out in front of the apartment building. Thran and the children arrived breathlessly within seconds, and they trooped with the two officers inside and into Apartment 2A.

Never had that crowded apartment seemed so welcoming.

Thran took charge immediately, as imperious as any ballet impresario, ordering Bard ensconced on
the sofa with Tilda tightly at his side – the right one, fortunately. Bard would have laughed if he hadn’t been so suddenly weary, and did as he was told. Officer Boyens went with Legolas into Bain’s room to talk, leaving Bard and Tilda with Officer Jackson, while Thran shepherded Bain and Sigrid into the kitchen to muster something to eat. Tilda was so exhausted that the officers asked their questions of her first, and then she immediately fell asleep with her head in Bard’s lap. Thran handed around cups of tea, for which Bard was profoundly grateful. The warm comfort of the humble beverage sustained him during the next hour as the officers wrote down the events at the park from everyone’s point of view. After they conferred, they asked a few more questions, then took both of Bard’s shirts and coat as forensic evidence, but at last they were done, and took their leave.

When Thran closed the door behind the officers, everyone gathered in the living room. Thran sank into Bard’s chair, shifting his legs so that Legolas had room to sit between his legs. He wound arms around his son, who leaned back against his father. Sigrid sat carefully beside Bard and Tilda on the sofa, leaned her head against Bard’s shoulder, and rested her hand on Tilda’s hair. Bain settled on the floor between Bard’s knees, snuggling himself between them and wrapping an arm around Bard’s leg. No one spoke. Bard savored the closeness of his children, and if he couldn’t touch Thran, he could at least look at him and be grateful that his angel hadn’t been hurt. Thran still looked wan and hollow, but the grey eyes looking back at him warmed, and a faint smile eased the lines in his face.

Legolas finally looked up. “You were amazing, Sigrid.”

Sigrid had Bard’s hand tightly in hers, and her eyes were red, but she breathed easily, and a small smile touched her lips.

“Thanks.”

“No, you really were. You should have seen her, Father. She spoke French so that Bain and I knew what was going on, and could work together. And I heard one of the gendarmes say that she broke Lance’s foot when she stamped on it.”

“I did? Good. He’s such a rat bastard.”

Bard didn’t know whether to be appalled or amused at the satisfaction in Sigrid’s hard voice. “You did what? Why? And what did you call him?”

“He deserved it,” Bain growled, his fingers tightening on Bard’s shin. “He called my sister a ho. Nobody calls my sister a ho.”

“You were great, Bain,” Sigrid sat up a little more, and her smile grew a little wider as she tugged a piece of Bain’s unruly hair. “You put that soccer ball so hard into Manny’s face that I hope he lost teeth. It was brilliant.”

“Thanks, Sig. And Legolas, where’d you learn to tackle like that? I thought you’d drive Jinks through the ground to China! You drilled all three of them.”

Legolas sat up, too. “You both got me out when they tackled me. I was glad to return the favor.”

“Wait,” Bard held up a hand. “I’m not sure whether I want to know what you all are talking about or not.”

“I do,” Thran said without hesitation. “I want to know about the brave exploits of our children.”

The three older children began to talk all at once, one starting a sentence and another finishing it, but gradually the tale of what had happened came out, complete with profanity. Bard found it impossible to rebuke them for any of it, and he was proud of how well they’d handled themselves.
“So you really were the Three Musketeers,” he complimented. “I’m proud of all of you for sticking up for each other.”

“Yeah,” Bain grinned proudly at his two cohorts, who grinned back. “We really were.”

“It was more than the three of us,” Sigrid said. “Tilda was just as brave, running off to get you both and Mr. D for us. And Da tried to cool Angelo down, and then he and Mr. D took out that big guy, and Thran – gods, Thran, you took out Angelo barehanded – you saved my Da. So it was all of us. The whole fierce tribe of us.”

Bard laughed softly. “Clan Ffyrnig.” When all eyes were on him, he shifted gingerly. “Welsh for the Fierce Clan.”

“Yarostny Klan,” Thran murmured, smiling at Legolas. “In the Russian. But as that is too hard to say, let us call ourselves Clan Ffyrnig.”

“Yeah,” Bain sat up, nodding. “Yeah. We’re Clan Ffyrnig.”

Bard let the children savor their moment. There would be unpleasant consequences of what they’d done today – what all of them had done – but now wasn’t the time to mention them. He and Thran would talk later, and act accordingly. For now, it was enough that the children rallied.

In a few minutes, Thran led Legolas, Sigrid, and Bain into the kitchen to bring out plates of food. It was mostly leftovers from their earlier feast – that was a lifetime ago – with a few additions. Once rolls filled with ham and various embellishments, leftover potato casserole, more of Thran’s salad greens, and the box of clementines filled the table, Bard was allowed to gingerly walk from the sofa to a chair to eat. Tilda had rallied, though she refused to move away from Bard’s side for more than a few seconds. After they ate, Bard was ordered back to the sofa while the rest of the clan saw to the cleanup. Bard found a soccer match rebroadcast and turned the sound down low, which provided a comforting low buzz of normalcy to the day’s events. The others drifted in one at a time to settle with him. Thran was last, bringing Bard a fresh cup of hot tea.

“You all will spoil me,” Bard teased, but Sigrid gave him a sharp look.

“We want to. We’re glad to. You could have –”

Her breath caught, and she looked away as she struggled to keep her composure, but Thran set Bard’s teacup down and eased Sigrid into his arms.

“Your Da will tell you not to cry because he is all right. But I will tell you that few things merit tears more than relief when the ones you love survive. So you have the best reason to cry if you want to.”

Bard felt his own eyes burning when Sigrid turned into Thran’s arms and buried her face against his shirt. But after just a moment she looked up, smiling. She patted Thran’s chest.

“Thank you, Ada. I’m all right now.”

“As you say.” Smiling, Thran touched her nose with a long finger. “So, perhaps a film or Bard’s soccer game would be nice?”

The old reliable Flushed Away went into the DVD player, and everyone settled for a dose of calm and normalcy as only modeling clay magic could deliver. When it was over, Thran stirred in Bard’s chair.

“You are comfortable, Bard? More tea, or something else to eat? Do your stitches hurt?”
“I’m fine, Thran.” How touching was it to see his angel look after him with such care? “I don’t need anything.”

“Then let us read the instructions about how we are to care for you.” Thran retrieved the sheet he’d gotten from the EMTs, and sat down to read it. “So. We have fed and warmed the patient. We have gotten him to rest, and must continue to do so. We have asked him if he needs something for pain, and he says he does not. We must not let his stitches get wet for two days.” He looked over at Bard. “So no showers, only sponge baths, and you must wind plastic wrap around the bandage just in case.”

What Bard wouldn’t give to be able to ask Thran to help him with those sponge baths, but the children were not quite ready for that. He sighed, and hoped that the children took his regret for the inconvenience he was about to be put to, rather than for a missed opportunity.

“I’ll do my best,” he conceded. “But I’ll still be grimy at the end of it.”

“We’ll sort out something,” Sigrid looked up from reading the paper over Thran’s shoulder. “I can scrub your hair for you over the tub, Thran can help you get up and down, and we’ll manage.”

Well, out of the mouths of babes… Bard had all he could do not to grin in anticipation of Thran’s part in this, if not Sigrid’s.

“The important part is to rest,” Thran said smoothly, concentrating on the paper. Gods, the bastard was having the same thoughts he was about “helping” Bard wash. “Now, we have all had a long afternoon and evening, and it would be best if we rested. I do not want to leave you to fend for yourself, Bard. So Legolas, if you do not mind resting alone upstairs, or if you can make do on Bard’s sofa, I will watch over us from this chair, and see that we all rest in quiet.”

“I don’t want to be by myself,” Legolas said at once.

“You can stay with me,” Bain offered quickly. “I have a double bed, and… I don’t want to be by myself, either. You can have either side you want. Or we could stay up and read or play a game or something.”

“That’d be good,” Legolas agreed.

“You don’t have to do that, Thran,” Bard felt obligated to protest. “I’ll be fine. You and Legolas need to rest, too, and you’d rest better in your own beds.”

“I will rest best when I know that you are well and do not need anything,” Thran shot him a dismissive frown. “Legolas and I will be fine.”

Bard held up his hands. “All right, Prince of Ice. Do as you like.”

“I always do.” Thran said offhandedly, continuing to scan the paper. “It is the prerogative of the Prince of Ice. Now. It is late, and perhaps the children should bathe. Legolas and I will go upstairs to do so and be back in a few minutes. Sigrid and Bain, make sure that your Da does not do anything foolish while we are gone.”

Sigrid giggled. “I think I’m going to like pushing Da around for a couple of days. Right, Bain?”

He grinned. “Paybacks, Sig. We’ve got major paybacks coming.”

Laughing, Thran and Legolas let themselves out.
“I think we should just let Tilda sleep,” Bard said, rubbing the little girl’s back. She’d fallen asleep in her father’s lap halfway through the film, and didn’t rouse now.

“I’ll get her in bed,” Sigrid decided. “Bain, go wash, and I’ll follow you.”

“Sure, Sig. Done soon.”

With coaxing, Bard and Sigrid got Tilda upright, and her older sister guided her into the bathroom to brush her teeth. In a few minutes, Sigrid returned to sit next to Bard.

“Tilda’s already asleep.”

“That’s the best thing for her.”

A long silence was broken only by the sound of water running as Bain showered.

“It seems like a bad dream,” Sigrid murmured.

Bard reached up to stroke her hair, but stopped short when his stitches pulled. “It came out all right.”

“For now. You know as well as I do that Angelo’s gang won’t like what we did.”

“Don’t worry about that tonight, sweetness. Rest, and tomorrow we’ll take stock.”

“Easy to say, hard to do.”

“I know.” Bard settled for rubbing Sigrid’s knee with his other hand. “We’re safe tonight, and after a good night’s sleep we’ll figure out what to do.”

“All right, Da. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Sig. Sleep well.”

Sigrid padded off to the shower. In a few minutes, the water went on. Bard clicked the television back on, and found a hockey game to provide more of that comforting background hum that signaled normalcy. He shut his eyes, trying not to think about anything for a few minutes while the announcer droned about an icing penalty and Sigrid’s shower ran. The water was still going a few minutes later when a knock sounded on the door. Bain dashed out of his room to get it.

“Look through the peephole first,” Bard cautioned him, as his son reached for the doorknob. Bain processed that quicker than Bard expected or liked, and looked without protest.

“It’s them,” he confirmed, opening the door. Thran and Legolas came in with armloads of stuff – pillows, blankets, and clothes in Thran’s case, and a computer and game controllers in Legolas’s.

“I brought that new zombie game,” Legolas greeted Bain, who grinned widely.

“Sweet! Come on!” the boys disappeared into Bain’s room.

“Don’t stay up too late, Bain, and keep the sound down,” Bard called softly.

“We won’t, and we will!”

The door closed with a hasty click.

Thran put his armload of things down in Bard’s chair, and sat carefully on the right side of the sofa
so that he didn’t bump Bard’s stitches. “The girls are in bed?”

Bard nodded. “Tilda was out right after you left. Sigrid’s probably going to read a bit.”

“And the boys play zombie apocalypse.” Thran looked puzzled. “I have never understood the attraction to shoot decayed corpses in decayed environments.”

Bard chuckled. “It’s the age, I guess. It’s not my hobby, either.”

“So we are alone for the moment, then?”

Bard’s smile was rueful. “Subject to change at any second.”

“Then I will make the most of it.” Thran put his arm carefully around Bard, and laid his head on Bard’s shoulder. “I have never been so frightened in all of my life as today, lyubov moya. I could have lost you. I could have lost you.”

As Thran clung to him, Bard stroked Thran’s thigh, his arm, his hair. “It could have been any of us, fy nghariad. Any of us. One of the children, you, me, any of us. Be grateful that all it cost us was ten stitches.”

“I watched the EMT put in each one of those ten stitches. It was horrible. I never want to see anyone put stitches in your body again.”

Bard chuckled. “Better me than you. On me, it’ll look sexy. On you, it’d ruin your Prince of Ice hauteur.”

“It is not something to joke about!” Thran hissed. “It is far from anything to joke about.”

“I’m not trying to joke, Thran.” Bard took up Thran’s hand to brush a kiss on the knuckles. “I’m just trying to help you feel better.”

“That will not be easy,” Thran swallowed. “I have been noble all afternoon. I have fought suka blyad heroin gangs, protected our children, been strong for them when their father is hurt, answered many police questions, and acted like my heart does not break in my chest, and I am well tired of all of it!”

Warm drops fell on Bard’s shoulder, which brought a lump to Bard’s throat. “It’s all right now, angel. It is. I’m fine, and so are the rest of us. It’s all going to be fine.”

“How can it be fine when we spent the afternoon to make minced meat out of a heroin dealer and his minions, for which they will surely want to exact revenge before long?”

Bard winced. “You thought of that, too, did you? So did I, and so did Sigrid, and Bain’s not much farther behind. We’re probably all right for a day or two, but probably not longer than that.”

“All for a stupid soccer ball?”

“Not for a soccer ball, Thran. Because we didn’t let them push us around.”

Thran took an uneven breath, and looked up. His eyes were red. “It is a difference that does not matter.”

“True.”

“So we need to take ourselves out of harm’s way.”
Bard nodded slowly. “That’s what I’ve been thinking all afternoon. Legolas will be back in boarding school in another ten days or so, so he’ll be okay. My children are more at risk –”

“So you must move them to the house now, before their term ends.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking all afternoon. I don’t like moving them into a construction site, or in the middle of the school year, but better than letting Angelo’s gang come after them. I can work on the house full time, then, and get it finished faster. You’ll have to come, too. You can’t stay here, not after two run-ins with those fuckers.”

“My auditions –”

“I thought about that, too,” Bard said quickly. “If I paint the house rather than contractors, that’ll save a big chunk. Take that money and buy a good car to take you to and from the city. If it’s not enough money, then pull Legolas out of that boarding school so he can start with the other three in a new school, and they’ll have each other to help them along.”

“That is very close to what I was about to suggest,” Thran said. “We will need a bigger vehicle to carry the six of us, so perhaps an SUV rather than a car. And my auditions are not all within the city anyway, and will require some travel. But we will worry about the details of that once I know more about the auditions. For now, we must explain the move to our children.”

“Sigrid’s already thinking about this. Legolas wants to get out of that boarding school, so he’ll go with it. Bain’s complained often about being the lone boy to the two girls, so he’d like to have Legolas to balance the load, so to speak. And I don’t think Tilda will mind at all. She likes you and Legolas a lot.”

“And I will certainly not complain to finally have my saint within reach.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s thigh, and rubbed it slowly. “Oh, I will certainly not complain about having an angel to hold,” he exhaled, and brushed a kiss on Thran’s cheek. “So that leaves just one question.”

“Do we get married now or wait?”

“Exactly.”

“I know what I want. I know what you want. But I think we should wait still a bit longer, so that it does not seem so abrupt to our children.”

Bard snickered. “You think they’ll go with us living together? In the same bedroom? Oh, I guess we’ll have to do separate ones until I get our bed put together.”

Thran’s expression finally eased from its haunted worry. “Perhaps that would be best. Well, shall we go through the list again? Sigrid is for us. Legolas understands that I am very fond of you, in that special way. Bain is clueless, and Tilda will likely not care.”

“That’s the way I’d call it, too. So that’s... what, one for, two unopposed, and one doesn’t know?”

“I concur.”

Bard exhaled again, albeit gingerly. Thran was instantly alert. “Does it hurt now?”

“It’s fine.”
“You are sure, lyubov moya?”

“I’m sure, fy nghariad. Don’t worry.”

“Now you know what it is like to have someone think you might break at the least strain.”

“After watching you throw yourself down the stairs last Monday morning, I know you won’t break at the least strain.”

“I am not at that point yet. Perhaps in a while.”

“So we’ll tell the children tomorrow. Over breakfast, before we go to the junk shops.”

Thran’s laugh was a choked, incredulous sound. “What did the EMT tell you, whose instructions you promised me you would follow? Rest, rest, rest! Perhaps Sunday or Monday we will go.”

“We’re moving into our house as soon as we have enough furnishings to hold us,” Bard insisted. “I won’t let a few stitches stop that. It’ll be good for us to get the children outside and away from here, anyway.”

Thran looked unconvinced, no matter how much he wanted to move ahead with their plans. “Let us see tomorrow at breakfast, Bard, how your stitches feel.”

“And how your back feels, too, funny dancer. This sofa isn’t what you’re used to. In fact, why don’t you take my bed, and I’ll stay here? Maybe I won’t sleep that well anyway, so there’s no reason you should lose sleep, too.”

“I thought you said you didn’t hurt.”

Bard gave Thran an exasperated expression. “I don’t. But I might. So take my bed. It’ll smell like me. You’ll like it.”

Thran’s lips twitched in a smile. “Oh, my saint, that is not fair. But even that will not tempt me. I will stay here, and you will go to bed. Now. Or you will be too tired to go tomorrow. Please, lyubov moya?”

“Gods, Thran. You’ll put pleading little puppies and kittens out of business with those soulful grey eyes of yours.”

“Then let my puppy/kitten eyes persuade you to do as I tell you. Go to sleep.”

Bard sighed. “How about we just sit here for a while? That’s even better than looking into your puppy/kitten eyes.”

Thran stroked Bard’s tangled hair out of his eyes. “That would be fine, Bard. Quite fine.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

While the angel and the saint consider, their able co-conspirator makes her case, and Clan Ffyrnig prepares to fly.

Keep an eye out for two more cameos!

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

spokoynoy nochiu, ya lyublyu tebya, svyatoy moy = sleep well, I love you, my saint
(Russian)

cysgu yn dda, rwy'n dy garu di, fy angel = sleep well, I love you, my angel (Welsh)

After such a day, all Thran wanted to do was to nest. How nice it would be to take Bard upstairs and enfold him in Thran’s silk and cashmere bedding, even if all they did was to lie beside each other. But they would make do on Bard’s old sofa. Thran wanted to swath them in the pile of pillows and soft blankets he’d brought from his apartment, but Bard thought he ought to wash what he could first.

“I’m still covered with blood,” he admitted ruefully. “This is not a come-on to get you in the shower with me, though I wish it were, but I’m going to need help.”

“You will have it, lyubov moya,” Thran said, stroking Bard’s arm. “I do not take advantage of an injured man... at least, not tonight.”

Bard gave him a wry look, eased off the sofa, and fetched his sleep tee shirt, flannel pants, and warm socks from his bed. Thran followed him to the bathroom to help him ease out of his flannel shirt, then strip the rest off. Thran winced at the splotches of blood on Bard’s back that remained from the EMTs’ work, and stroked Bard’s arm in sympathy. Bard looked over his shoulder at himself in the mirror, caught Thran’s grimace, and shrugged.

“It’ll wash off, Thran.”

“It will not wash out of my thoughts so easily, lyubov moya. I am very glad that it is no worse than ten stitches.”

“So am I,” was Bard’s frank assessment, as he got his washcloth out of the shower. “Though I wish they hadn’t ruined the shirt I had on. That was my Christmas present from the children. Now it’s in a police file somewhere.”

“That is a hard thing to lose. But perhaps it will help to prosecute the sukin syns that ruined it.”
Bard’s hum was noncommittal as he turned on the water in the tub, as if he would’ve gladly taken another ten stitches if doing so would’ve preserved his children’s gift. Bard managed to wash and rinse everything but his back, so Thran carefully sponged the splotches of blood away to keep the bandages dry. Then he dried his saint with utmost care, helped him into his pajamas, and followed him back to the sofa.

“You should go to bed, Bard,” Thran urged. “You need to rest.”

“Not when I have a legitimate reason to snuggle with an angel on the sofa until the angel decides he’s ready for bed.”

“I would rather snuggle with you than sleep, too. So let me make us a nest.”

Thran arranged down pillows in the corner of the sofa, then sat himself against them, and urged Bard to lie between his legs against his chest. They shifted until they were mostly reclining, and both of them were comfortable. Bard wrapped an arm around Thran’s bent knee, rubbing slowly. In return, Thran ran his fingers through Bard’s unruly hair, smoothing it out of his face, calming himself with the soft touches.

Bard sighed. When his body eased a bit more, it reminded Thran once more of how much he could have lost this afternoon.

“I’m all right, angel,” Bard murmured, before Thran realized he’d tensed. Bard’s hand tightened briefly on his knee. “Everyone’s all right.”

“So I try to remind myself. It is not easy.”

“I’ve got the easy part. I get to lie in the arms of an angel, where it’s hard to think of anything bad. If it’ll help you feel better, we can switch.”

Thran tsked. “You have seen to everyone around you for so long that you do not know how to let someone else see to you. Let me do this for you. Are you warm enough? Do you want a blanket? Or your warm socks?”

“I’m fine. Better than fine. Nothing hurts, I’m warm, and I’m with you. And we’re allowed to touch. Nothing could be better. Are you comfortable? I’m not crushing anything important, am I?”

Thran grinned. “No, you are not, and yes, I am very comfortable. You are warm, and close, and safe, and mine.”

Bard’s chuckle was sleepy. “Yes, I am. Gladly so.”

“Then rest. Enjoy our chance to be so close until we sleep.”

Bard stroked Thran’s leg again, and he shut his eyes. “I will if you will.”

Thran stroked Bard’s hair. “We both will. Spokojnoy nochiu. Ya lyublyu tebya, svyatoy moy.”

“Cysgu yn dda. Rwy’n dy garu di, fy angel.”

* * *

*[Translation:]: Spokojnoy nochiu. Ya lyublyu tebya, svyatoy moy. — Peaceful night. I love you, my saint.]

*[Translation:]: Cysgu yn dda. Rwy’n dy garu di, fy angel. — Peaceful night. I love you, my angel.*
Everything faded away into a warm blur for a while. Eventually, the body cradling Bard shifted, nudging him to awareness again. That body shifted again, and Bard woke fully. He was still on the sofa, nestled between Thran’s legs. Gods, what time was it? He groped for his mobile on the coffee table. 3:12 a.m. He groaned softly and sat up.

“Are you in pain?” Thran’s voice was soft.

“No, but you probably are, considering I’ve been lying on you for three hours. Did you sleep at all?”

“I enjoyed to hold you.”

“You didn’t, then. Please, angel, take my bed and rest. You aren’t built to stay awake on an old sofa all night.”

“And how would it look in the morning when our children awake to find me asleep in your bed and you awake on the sofa?”

“I won’t be awake on the sofa. So go. Please. I won’t sleep well if you don’t.”

A tsk. “That is most unfair, to claim you will not sleep unless I take your bed.”

“Whatever works.” Bard rubbed Thran’s leg. “If you want, I can pull out the big guns and tell you to get off my sofa so I can go back to sleep.”

Thran sat up beside Bard stiffly, not groaning, but the ginger way he moved showed how uncomfortable he was. “You do not know the concept to fight fairly.”

“Not when you hurt, I don’t. I hope my bed’s not too short for you. Take one of your blankets with you, and your pillow.”

“I may take one of the pillows, but the blankets are for you, lyubov moya. Enjoy them. Soon you will enjoy them every night, but on a bigger bed, and with me beside you.”

Bard hummed in anticipation. “Oh, that’ll make it easy for me to go back to sleep.”

“See that it does,” Thran’s lips curved up in a smile. He leaned over to kiss Bard’s lips, then got to his feet with one of the pillows in his hands. “See you in a little while.”

“You, too.”

Bard waited until Thran had settled in his bed before he headed to the bathroom. His side was tender, so he took a couple of acetaminophen tablets with a little water, then padded back to the sofa to rearrange Thran’s blankets and pillows. They made a cozy nest, and Thran’s scent on the fabric was comforting enough that he dropped off without effort. Everything faded away for quite a while, for when he roused next, pale daylight shone through the window by the dining table. Sigrid was eating a slice of bread and butter.

“Da?” she asked, when he levered himself up carefully. Yes, his stitches were definitely sore this morning, and he was careful not to flex his abs. “Are you okay, Da? Do you need any help?”

“I’m fine,” he demurred. “Keep it down, Sig. Thran didn’t go to bed until three, and I want him to sleep as long as possible.”

“Okay,” Sigrid whispered, as Bard tiptoed to the bathroom. Yes, Thran was still curled up on his bed, his back to the rest of the apartment. Good. Yesterday’s ordeal had taken it out of Bard’s angel,
and he needed to restore himself as best he could on Bard’s meager bed. He half wished he’d persuaded Thran to sleep in his own bed, but the luxury of nesting with him last night on the sofa was something he was grateful to have had. He hoped Thran didn’t wake up sore and exhausted.

He tended to necessities, washed his face, and joined Sigrid at the table.

“No toast?” he queried, as Sigrid buttered another slice of bread.

“I didn’t want to wake you with the toaster.” She passed Bard the loaf of bread. “So how did you end up on the sofa?”

“Because I wanted to be. Thran’s an elite athlete who needs a decent night’s sleep, and isn’t used to sleeping on a sofa. I slept on it just fine.”

“What’d you do, claim you liked to sleep on the sofa? He loves you too much to take your bed without a fight.”

Bard gave her a look, which she returned with an exasperated sigh.

“Well, he does, and I’ll be really glad when we can get the rest of Clan Ffyrnig with the program. Watching you two trying to act nonchalant is funny, but it’s wearing thin. So what’d you tell him?”

Bard smothered a chuckle. He agreed with Sigrid heartily, but telling his teenaged daughter so was not a good idea. “I told him the sofa had mega fleas nurtured on all the cracker crumbs you three have scattered over it. He went like a shot.”

Sigrid giggled. “No, you didn’t, but it’s a good story.”

“Glad you liked it. What time is it?”

“After nine.”

Bard blinked. “Hmm. I’m surprised the boys aren’t up. Or Til.”

“Are you kidding? The boys were booping and beeping and blowing stuff up all night. They crashed about four or so. Tilda was exhausted, so it may be a while before she surfaces.”

“Sounds like you didn’t sleep all that well.”

Sigrid waved a hand. “I did, actually. I heard the boys cycle through the bathroom. They were still chortling, but yawning so hard I didn’t figure they’d last much longer.”

“I’ll put on water for tea. You want some?”

“That’d be good. And I’ll put it on. You’re supposed to rest.”

“Putting the kettle on the stove isn’t work.”

“Sit, Da. I’ve got it.”

Sigrid filled the kettle and set it on the burner carefully so that it didn’t clank. In a few minutes, she put a pot of tea on the table and a cup for each.

“I put some eggs on, too. You need something warm.”

Bard thought about teasing Sigrid for her doting on him, but her determined face persuaded him
otherwise. “That’ll be nice, Sig. Thanks.”

He quietly sipped his tea while Sigrid set out a spoon for each of them, then salt, pepper, butter, and jam. Maybe she was making toast, too. But no, in a few minutes she put a bowl with two soft boiled eggs in it in front of him, then a plate with the two remaining rolls from yesterday’s Christmas dinner, nicely warmed.

“This is great,” he smiled, as Sigrid sat beside him with her own bowl of eggs.

“Better eat one of those before I eat them both,” she warned, pointing to the rolls. “You know how much I love them.”

“I know,” Bard agreed, taking one and buttering it. Sigrid took the other without hesitation. “I’ll have to talk Thran into making some more.”

“Do that,” Sigrid nodded, her mouth full. “I may not be able to wait until your stitches are healed before we have these again.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“So I was thinking about what we have to do about the druggie lords,” Sigrid said in an offhand voice. She concentrated on shelling her eggs, interspersed with bites of her roll. “We have to move, of course, and since you’re already working on the house, I think we should just move there now and be done with it. So we need to call a moving company today and see when they can come to lug our stuff. You said Thran and Legolas don’t have a lot of stuff, but it’ll take us a while to pack everything, so we’ll need boxes. The boys will think it’s exciting, but I’m a little worried about Tilda. She was so scared yesterday... what?”

Bard gaped at her, his roll and eggs forgotten. A soft chuckle came from the doorway, where a tall ballet dancer leaned against the doorframe. “You are a surprising young woman, Sigrid. You have left your Da speechless.”

“She said –”

“She said exactly what you and I said last night, and she has considered what we must do to make that happen. I would like to hear what else she has considered. Are there more eggs?”

“If you don’t mind them hard-boiled,” Sigrid replied, glowing with triumph. “I can put some more on if you want them soft boiled, or some porridge.”

“Hard boiled is fine,” Thran agreed. “I will wash my face, and be back.”

Sigrid snickered to herself as she got up to put Thran’s eggs in a bowl, pointedly ignoring Bard’s incredulous look.

“Sig –”

“He said you two discussed the same thing last night, Da. I agree with you. We have to go.”

“But what about school?”

“There are schools in Greenwood Dale on the Lake. Probably better ones than here.”

“It’s in the middle of the year.”

“So?”
“So... you’re okay with packing up and moving at the drop of a hat. You’re okay with changing schools in the middle of the year. You’re okay with living in a construction zone until I can get enough of the house painted and the floors refinished. Are you okay about moving away from Finn Durinson, too?”

“That sucks,” Sigrid admitted. “That’s the only thing that does. But... Finn’s kind of a doofus about getting together, anyway, so... maybe this’ll make him go one way or the other. And it’s only forty-five minutes away, so...” she swallowed, then looked at Bard. “I’m not giving that dickwad Lance Dunmont another shot at any of us, Da. Especially Tilda.”

Thran slipped into the chair across from Bard. His hair was combed and he had a warm sweater on over the shirt and soft pants he’d slept in. He looked reasonably refreshed, much better than how drawn and pale he’d been after the fight yesterday. Sigrid slid his bowl of eggs towards him, drawing him to nod his thanks.

“You do know it’s not a good idea to call anyone a dickwad in front of your Da, right?” Bard said mildly.

“I get an exception this time because Lance Dunmont is a dickwad. You have to grant me that.”

“True enough,” Bard conceded. “And yes, Thran and I talked about moving last night. I’m not willing to put you and your brothers and sister out there for Angelo’s minions to harass.”

“So call a moving company this morning. Maybe they can come next week while we’re still on break.”

Bard glanced at Thran, quietly tending to his eggs. A perverse smile twitched at his lips. As soon as he felt Bard’s regard, he shrugged. “She makes a very good co-conspirator, our Sigrid.”

“Yes, I do,” Sigrid agreed without apology. She stood up. “I made a list of moving companies on my computer last night. I’ll go get it.”

As soon as she was out of the kitchen, Bard wrung a hand over his face. Thran laughed quietly as he peeled his eggs and sprinkled them with salt and pepper.

“Remember when I said that Sigrid would give someone hell someday?” he whispered to Thran.

“I do.”

“I didn’t expect that I’d be the first.”

“She takes what comes in stride, and then acts. Just as her Da does.”

“Maybe. It doesn’t seem so unnerving when I do it, though.”

“Of course not. You are in control then. This time, she is, rather than you.”

“And you’re encouraging her.”

“I am. She is right, just as we were last night. So let us look at her list, and make some calls. It would be wonderful to be in our house before the New Year arrives.”

“It would.”

Sigrid returned with her laptop cradled in her arms. She sat at the end of the table, and both Bard and Thran slid closer to peer at the screen.
“I made a list of eight of them. I like this one. They specialize in quick moves. I think they’re a big name in the divorce market, people needing to move fast, I mean. At least that’s what I thought, reading between the lines. They’ll even help us pack if we want, but if we get some boxes, we can probably get most of our stuff packed ourselves in a day or two. Then there are these other three that looked good, and four more run of the mill ones...”

Sigrid had done her research well, Bard had to admit. So he pulled out his mobile and dialed some of Sigrid’s second choices, just to see what prices and time frames would be like. When he got three that were comparable, he called the quick move specialists.

If Clan Ffyrnig would pack up by Tuesday night, Dain Brothers movers could be there first thing on Wednesday morning.

Both Thran and Sigrid nodded vigorously. So Bard took a deep breath.

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” he breathed, looking at Legolas. “I didn’t want to say anything to Legolas, because he’ll be back at his boarding school soon. But it’d be an awful pain trying to stay out of the gang’s way all of the time for the next however long.”

“You are kind to want to spare Legolas, Bain,” Thran said.

“You’ll go back to school, little doll,” Bard assured her. “It’ll be a new school, near the house.”

“Will I get to see my friends again? Nicole? Sarah?”

“We’ll call them once we move and you can make as many play dates with them as you want.”

“I’ll have a new teacher, too?”

Bard nodded, wincing. Sigrid was right; this move would be the hardest on Tilda. “That’s right. A new school and a new teacher. It’ll be hard for a few days. But you’ll soon make some more friends, and we’ll all be there together. So we’ll help each other get through it.”

“Why are we moving?” Tilda asked. “Because of what Lance did yesterday?”

“Because of some things that happened yesterday, but that’s not the only reason. You know we were planning to move anyway, right?”
Tilda nodded, holding Mr. Bun a bit tighter than usual.  

“We’re just moving a little earlier than we thought, that’s all.”  

“All of us are moving?” Tilda persisted. “Thran and Legolas, too?”  

Bard swallowed. Gods, the moment was here, and he wasn’t sure if he would find the right words to say or not.  

“Thran and Legolas, too. They’re part of Clan Ffyrnig.”  

Tilda sat up to look at Bard, then speculatively at Thran and Legolas. Legolas looked bemused, and considered Bain with a long look.  

“I told you,” Bain muttered.  

“Hmm,” Legolas replied, considering his father.  

“They’ll live... in our house?” Tilda asked.  

Bard swallowed again. “That’s right. We’ll all live in our house together.”  

A long silence fell that no one wanted to break. Tilda hadn’t quite worked things out yet, and the boys were wise enough to remain silent. A pale, pale blush bloomed in Thran’s cheeks, and Bard swore he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Sigrid was doing her best not to laugh, either, and stared down at her lap to keep quiet.  

Bard sighed. Why did such things always fall to him to explain? He sighed again.  

“We’re all going to live in our house, Tilda, because that’s what families do. Thran and I are going to be a family together with all of you, in a house for all of us.”  

“Finally,” Sigrid exhaled, shaking her head.  

Bard gave her a look. “It was nice the way you all hung me out to dry like that. I’m supposed to be recuperating.”  

“I just wanted to see if you’d really say it,” Sigrid shrugged.  

“Father?” Legolas finally spoke. He still looked confused.  

“Yes, synok?” Thran answered softly.  

“On Wednesday, we’re going to move to Bard’s house?”  

Thran nodded. “To a house for all of us, yes. Out of our bare apartment upstairs, and into a real home.”  

“Will I still go to boarding school?”  

“Only if you wish to. As soon as we move our things, Bard and I will look at schools for all of you, and for new fencing and archery coaches for you, and perhaps a soccer coach for Bain, if he wants that.”  

“I want to be with you, Father. And it would be nice to have another brother and two sisters.”
“The sisters can be a right pain, so it’d be a relief to finally have someone else on my side. Right now, I’m outnumbered,” Bain grimaced, which drew Sigrid to stick her tongue out at him.

“Have I explained everything so you understand, Til?” Bard hugged his youngest child carefully, in deference to his stitches.

“We’re going to be a family with Legolas and Thran,” she summarized. “And we’re going to live in our house together with them.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m not sure how I feel yet. I’ll miss my friends.”

“That’s okay, little doll. You may not know for a while how you feel. Not all of this will be easy. But once we get settled, things will be easier. We can talk about it any time you want to. We’ll help each other to get through it.”

“Father?” Legolas asked.

“Yes?”

“We’re... not just moving because of what I did yesterday, are we?”

“You did nothing wrong yesterday, Legolas,” Thran shook his head emphatically. “As Bard said, we had planned to move, and so now we merely move earlier than we expected. I love Bard very much, and want us to be that family he spoke of. Clan Ffyrnig. While I do not like what happened yesterday, I am still very happy that we will become a family earlier than we hoped. I am proud of you, and all of our clan, for what we did yesterday. We did not start a fight. But we finished it.”

“Yeah,” Bain seconded, but softly. He took Legolas’s arm and jostled it. “It’s okay, Legolas. I should have told you about the druggie stop, and I didn’t think to do it. So if it’s anybody’s fault, it’s mine. You didn’t know. It’s okay.”

“So now that the big secret’s out in the open,” Sigrid said, “What’s Clan Ffyrnig’s first order of business? I say we get our hands on a lot of boxes and start packing.”

“Will I have to leave my toys here?” Tilda asked in a small voice.

“Not even one,” Bard hugged her. “All your toys and books will move with us. Everything.”

Tilda looked around at the apartment. “I think we’d better get a lot of boxes, then.”

And so they did. Sigrid found a moving office that sold boxes, so they called to reserve enough for both apartments, then Bard headed out with Thran and the boys to pick them up. Bard was not allowed to lift anything, only drive the truck. Once they luged the boxes inside, packing commenced.

The next few days were a flurry of sorting, packing, and stacking, with little time for anything else. Thran and Legolas had very little to pack, and the movers would take care of the furniture. They spent most of their time in Apartment 2A, helping Bard and his children pack the contents of their crowded rooms into cardboard boxes, separating only to sleep. There were a few loose ends to tie up – Bard let the police know that they were moving, and what their new address was. Thran scheduled an interview at a school that looked promising for all of the older children, and another at a school for Tilda. Still, the stack of cartons by the door grew higher, and the children’s rooms were soon bare of everything but the minimum needed to get through those few days. The kitchen was reduced to a
stack of paper plates, plastic utensils, a couple of pans, and the teakettle.

Wednesday morning dawned. Everyone was up early to eat the odd assortment leftovers from the fridge – a few pieces of leftover pizza, oatmeal, an odd bowl of stew, and a bowl of hard-boiled eggs. When a heavy hand banged on the door, everyone stilled, and Bard went to the door to reveal a thickset man with a red Mohawk, a formidable beard full of dangling charms, and a pair of matching dangles in one ear.

“And a good morning to you. Dain Brothers. You the Bowmans?” he whuffed.

“That’s us,” Bard nodded.

This flat and 5B, too, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Bard nodded.

“Right. All right, I’ll have my boys get started on your boxes while I have a look upstairs. Want to get this lot loaded right quick. The van’s double parked.”

“Suits us,” Bard agreed, as another mover came to the door, this one with spiky black hair, a black and white-striped beard, and a huge dangling earring. He muttered in a language so guttural that Bard couldn’t tell if it were Slavic, Germanic, or Mongolian. The lead mover answered back in the same tongue, and headed with Thran upstairs.

A steady stream of moving men soon descended upon them. Bard was impressed with how fast the apartment emptied, first of the many boxes, then the furniture. Occasionally some piece of Thran’s possessions came twisting down the stairs to join their things in the van. The children stayed in the kitchen for the most part, for Bard and Thran were leery of them lingering on the sidewalk for long, not knowing whether the heroin gang would be lurking nearby. Tilda was content to stay inside with Mr. Bun; she was still feeling the effects of those few moments of terror in the park, and had stayed close to Bard since. The older children had their various computers and gaming consoles in hand, preferring to take them themselves rather than pack them in the moving van.

By eleven, Dain Brothers movers had emptied both apartments, closed the back of the van, and driven off. They’d meet Clan Ffyrnig at the house.

Bard, Thran, and the children took one more look around their empty apartments, but they were not long looks. The better view lay forty-five minutes away, and everyone was excited to get there.

“Everyone make one last trip through the bathroom,” Bard called, as they trooped down from Thran’s apartment. “Once I turn in the key, you’re stuck until we get to the house.”

Everyone cycled through Apartment 2A, then Bard locked the door for the last time. Thran took the keys upstairs to give them to Steffen, then they were out on the sidewalk. Bard’s truck was just half a block down, and they walked briskly to it and piled inside. Thran and Bard stuck the cooler holding the few remaining perishable food items in the back, then climbed into the front seat on either side of Tilda. Bard started the truck, but before he put it in gear, he looked around at everyone.

“Everyone ready? Seatbelts on?”

“Yes, we’re ready.”

“Next stop, the ancestral home of Clan Ffyrnig.”

As Bard maneuvered the truck away from the curb, he wasn’t the only one grinning.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The consecration of the house happens in the best way - with a pot of hearty soup and a loaf of good bread.

Thran found it hard to control his excitement as Bard pointed the truck down the road and onto the highway. Grinning widely, he looked over Tilda’s head at Bard, and got a wide grin in response. He looked behind at the older children, still smiling. Sigrid looked especially smug, and he offered her a wink as befitted her standing as excellent co-conspirator. She chuckled silently and winked back. Legolas, he was happy to see, was also smiling as he leaned towards Bain to share a word.

Tilda sat quietly with Mr. Bun firmly in hand. She had not been herself since the fracas in the park, but she was gradually coming back to her normal sunny self. Perhaps the house, far away from the menace of the heroin gang, would further ease her.

The forty-five minute trip passed slowly, but that was due to Thran’s anticipation rather than traffic. The last time he’d been to the house, it was as a guest, with Legolas to fence, and Bard had done a lot since then. Now he returned as a resident, part of a family, something that had never been true anywhere else before. The heart of this new home, the kitchen, would be the biggest change, for it was ready to host them. Once the movers unloaded their things, there would be chairs enough to go around the table, and more pots and pans, and dishes and glasses and bowls. They still needed a trip to the market to fill the refrigerator, but other than that, everything would soon be ready for Bard to fire up the stove and cook. And then they would eat together.

As a family.

If Bard had asked him to explain what this meant to him, he would not have been able to.

“The first thing we need to do when we get to the house,” Bard said, “is for Legolas to choose his room. There are four you can choose from, Legolas. Any of them is fine. Then we can tell the movers where to put your things.”

“I get to choose? Legolas repeated. He sounded surprised, and when Thran turned to regard him, his brow was wrinkled.

“Course,” Bard replied. “There’s a couple on the top level, but they’ll be the hottest part of the house in the summer, so think about that. There are two on the same floor as the other children’s rooms, so you’d be closer to them. It’s your choice.”

“If Legolas picks one of the top rooms, can I move up there, too?” Bain asked, then looked at Legolas. “If you wouldn’t mind, of course.”

“Sure, but remember how hot it gets up there in July and August,” Bard reiterated. “And you’d still have the same bedtime.”

“Aw, Da,” Bain grumbled.

“You still have to get up for school, no matter what room you’re in, Bain. But let Legolas choose
“what he wants before you go moving yours.”

“Yes, Da.”

Thran had the feeling that having a son away in boarding school for four years had dulled his parenting skills, but four children would soon change that. Thank goodness Bard was well versed, or there would soon be havoc in the house.

“The next thing we need to do is to decide where the big things go, Thran, so the two of us can help direct the movers. I’m sure there will be several things that we’ll end up shifting, but it’ll help if we can get most of the big stuff in the right places. I hope that the movers will put the bed frames together and place the mattresses, which’ll help.”

“I will be ready,” Thran nodded. He looked down at Tilda. “I think perhaps our Tilda would be a good helper for you, Bard, as you should not lift anything heavy. And Mr. Bun.”

Struck by the idea, Tilda looked up at him with interest, an expression that didn’t escape Bard.

“That’s a great idea. What do you say, Til? You can help me direct traffic while Thran helps Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid.”

“Okay,” she nodded, smiling a bit. “I can do that.”

“I heard the movers say they’d stop someplace for lunch before they deliver our things, so why don’t we stop someplace, too? Then we’ll be ready to get our things arranged.”

That met with unanimous approval, so the discussion turned to where to stop. Everyone was too excited to want something that took a long time, so they ended up at the carryout bar of a local grocery while Bard went around collecting enough things to tide them over for a few days. Thran got his usual salad, then a big slab of lasagna for Bard. The children got noodle bowls or sandwiches.

The rest of the way to the house passed quickly, and they pulled into the driveway. As they carried their lunches into the kitchen, Thran marveled at the change the appliances made. Bard had been right – this was a home now. While Bard quickly put a pot of soup on to simmer for tonight’s supper, the children sat around the table to engulf their food, too excited to spend long at it. Legolas and Bain ran off to choose the former’s room, leaving Thran to slip Bard’s lasagna into the microwave to reheat it.

“How long should this heat, Bard?” Thran asked, fingers hovering over the control pad. “A minute? Ten?”

Bard looked up from his pot. “Um, maybe three? Push three-nil-nil, then Power, then seven, then Start.”

“What does the seven mean?”

“That’s to cook at seventy percent power. So that the inside gets hot before the outside turns into leather. Thank you, fy nghariad.”

“Let me help you so you have time to eat before the movers get here. What else needs to go in your soup?”

“The meat and onions are brown, and I splurged just this once to buy cut-up veg because we don’t have a knife yet, so that’s in. Just open the can of tomato stuff, and pour that in.”
Thran looked around in various drawers. “Is there a can opener?”

Bard winced. “Hmm, that’s in the moving van, too. We’ll add that later. So all it needs is water. Just to the top of the cut-up stuff.”

In the cupboard, Thran found a tea glass in a silver metal holder and used that to add water to the pot. He held up the glass to Bard. “This is beautiful. This is one of the podstakanniks you found last Wednesday?”

“I did. Only seven, so one got dropped somewhere in its life, but as there are six of us, we have one to spare. And look in that cupboard. I saw that and thought of you.”

A Japanese teapot in black cast iron sat in the cupboard, along with a standard set of five handleless porcelain cups. “I like it very much. So elegant!”

“Like a certain dancer I know,” Bard smiled. “Maybe I can find another set of teacups so we have more than the usual five. Or someone can use one of your podstakanniks. All right, soup’s on for later.”

The microwave chimed. “Then come eat your lasagna, Bard, before the movers get here.”

Thran carried the container of lasagna to the table and urged Bard to sit before it. Tilda was still working on her cheese sandwich, and Sigrid had almost finished her bowl of noodles. Thran found a couple of forks in a drawer, and sat down beside Bard to eat his salad.


Thran accepted the taste. “Mmm. Lots of cheese.”

“You and Tilda,” Bard grinned, ruffling Tilda’s hair. “She loves her cheese sandwiches.”

“I would not be a good person to work in a cheese shop,” Thran admitted. “That is the hardest thing for me to resist, much more than sweets.”

“I wouldn’t be very good in a cheese shop either,” Tilda decided, after thinking about it. “I’d want to try all of them.”

“Is there a cheese shop in the village?” Thran asked. “Perhaps you and I can find a few things to try there. If we go together, we can help each other not to eat too much.”

Tilda brightened. “That would be fun. And we’ll know a good place to go for Christmas presents next year.”

“Then we will venture out soon in search of cheese shops,” Thran agreed.

Bard wolfed down the rest of his lasagna. “Better show you and Til where things are supposed to go before the movers get here. Bring your sandwich, little doll. Sig, you want to come, too?”

“Sure. I want to see all the stuff you got last week. I’ve never seen a fainting couch before.”

They went through the house quickly, deciding where to place what little furniture they had; most of it would go into the children’s bedrooms. As they went upstairs, Legolas and Bain met them to show off the room the former had chosen. The attraction of the private upper rooms was difficult to resist, but the rooms were smaller, and the summer heat had swung the decision. Legolas chose a room on the same side of the house as Bain’s, with a room between them that all four children could share as
a study and playroom. Tilda and Sigrid had their rooms on the other side of the house, with the main bathroom and the narrow servants' staircase up to the third floor between them. The master bedroom, closet, and bath stretched the length of the floor on the northern side of the house, between the two sides.

There was just time for Thran to see the fragmented bed frame that Bard had pieced together, and to feel an anticipatory lurch in his loins when he thought about ravishing a certain saint within it. But that would have to wait until Bard could repair it, and they could order the needed mattress and bedding. For now, Thran’s bed would have to do. So he helped Bard shift the pieces into the playroom, so that the movers could set Thran’s bed into place.

A bang on the door signaled the arrival of the Dain brothers. Tilda ran downstairs first, at last giving her excitement full rein, but the other children came right behind. Sharing a grin, Thran and Bard followed only a bit less slowly, and soon the parade of boxes and furniture began. Sigrid ran through the house to tape the room labels she’d readied to doors and walls to help direct the movers. Bard and Tilda stood in the central hall to direct each load to its correct room, and the two boys raced around looking at each new addition.

Thran spent a little time directing movers and children, but mostly he watched his saint. With each box or article of furniture that came in, Bard’s face grew lighter. Time and again, he looked around to remind himself that this was reality – his family had returned to its home, a family that had expanded to include two more in its circle. Time and again, he swallowed hard as he struggled to contain his emotions.

It took less time to empty the van than it had to fill it, so by just past three the last box came inside, and the movers filed out. Thran took care of the bill, and shut the door behind them. The children had all gone upstairs to unpack their things, leaving Bard to stand beside Hope the Lope. The soup had sent its aroma through the house, and the children’s excited conversation drifted to Thran as he turned back to Bard.

His saint looked up at the ceiling of the stairwell two floors above, and swallowed yet again. Thran came to his side to envelope him in his arms.

“We are home, lyubov moya.”

Arms wound around his ribs, tightening until they were close. “We are. I’d thought we never would be. But we are. Thank you for it all.”

“Not just me, Bard. You, too. You have made this our home. Thank you for it all, too.”

Bard pressed a kiss to Thran’s jaw, and stroked the back of his head gently. “Both of us, then. I just...”

“Yes,” Thran rubbed Bard’s back slowly. ”I feel it, too.”

They held each other for long seconds, because today was the end of a long famine and the start of better times. Eventually, Bard’s arms tightened around Thran briefly, then eased away.

“Better see what the children need before it gets too late. And somewhere in all of this, we need to find their bedding...”

“I saw those boxes go upstairs,” Thran assured Bard as they started upstairs. “So they will have their blankets and pillows soon enough.”

The afternoon was spent getting the children’s rooms in shape. The movers hadn’t assembled the
bedframes, but with everyone helping those were soon put together and the mattresses returned to their proper places. Sigrid and Tilda found the boxes of linens, and bit by bit four rooms full of stacked boxes transformed to occupied rooms. Tilda finally put Mr. Bun down to arrange her books on the bookshelf, and the boys debated whether to put the computers in their rooms or in their study.

“In the study,” Bard and Thran both chorused, much to their amusement, which prompted a protest from both boys. “The bedrooms are for sleeping and quiet time,” Bard continued. “The playroom is for playing.”

“Father...” Legolas looked exasperated.

“Bedroom, sleep and quiet. Study, ‘more stuff blows up,’” Thran reiterated. “And schoolwork, in its time. We will have to get them desks, Bard.”

“Agreed. Sig, how’s your room coming? Do you need help with the mattresses?”

“I’ve got the bed together, and the mattresses down. But... I can’t find my mattress pad?”

Tilda trotted into her room and came out with the pad. “I have it, Sigrid. It was with mine.”

“Thanks, Tilda,” Sigrid smiled. “Do you need help with your sheets?”

“With the bottom one, yes, please.”

“I’ll help you with that, then.”

Thran took over unloading towels and bathroom supplies while Bard helped Tilda unload her clothes into the closet. They left the children to continue arranging their things and went downstairs to unload kitchen items. Thran unpacked and unwrapped while Bard added the last ingredients to the soup, then they arranged items on shelves and in cupboards. The soup continued to simmer, its warm aroma promising that a good supper was on the way.

“We’ll have to leave the rest of this until later,” Bard said. “The soup’s ready.”

“I will move some of the chairs from the dining room in here. The garden chairs go back in the ballroom for now, yes?” Thran asked Bard.

“They’ll go outside on the terrace before long, but for now, into the ballroom with them.”

Bard came around to pick up one end of the bench, drawing Thran to tsk.

“Your stitches, Bard. I will call the boys, and they will move this out as they moved it in.”

“My stitches are fine, Thran.”

“Of course they are. And I intend for them to stay that way.” He went through the dining room and into the central hall to call up to the boys, who quickly appeared to haul the garden furniture out of the kitchen, and three of the chairs from Bard’s apartment out of the dining room and into the kitchen. They now had enough chairs to seat everyone at the big kitchen table.

“Supper in ten minutes,” Bard told the boys as they headed back upstairs. “Tell the girls, and make sure you wash your hands.”

They ran off with assurances of both, leaving Thran to bear Bard’s reproachful look.

“I’m not going to rip out my stitches by moving a few chairs, angel.”
“As I said, of course not, for I will not let you. So, I found the spoons and such earlier. Where are the plates and bowls?”

Sighing, Bard gestured to the correct cabinet and stirred the soup again.

Thran stroked Bard's back as he went by, and pressed a kiss on his neck. “I know you are not made of glass, lyubov moya. No more than I. Do not be angry that I look after you as well as you do me.”

“I’m not angry,” Bard murmured, lips curving into a chagrined smile. “Not at all. I’m not a good invalid, that’s all.”

“All of us should be such good invalids as you, dear saint. You have worked hard all afternoon to set our children right, and you have made us delicious soup, and all is perfection. Where is the bread knife?”

“It’s supposed to be in the knife block, but... I don’t know where the knife block is. Maybe it got stuck in the pantry?”

“I will look. Yes, it is with the canister of flour. Did we ever find the can opener?”

“I found that. Now we have the knives. Is the cutting board in there?”

Thran kept rummaging. “What color is it? White?”

“There’s a wooden one. A little bigger than the white one.”

“Not here.” He stuck his head out of the pantry. “Where else would a cutting board be?”

“With the cookie sheets, maybe? Same size. I think it got packed with the cookie sheets. So...” Bard studied the cabinets, then opened a tall, thin one. “Right. Cookie sheets, roasting pan – ah. Here’s the wooden cutting board.”

Thran pulled it out. “I think it will take us some time to sort everything out, yes?”

Bard grinned. “Yes. But we’ll have a good time doing it. I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do tonight.”

Thran slid a few things around on the kitchen island to make room for the cutting board, retrieved the bread knife, and unwrapped the loaf of French bread. “I can. Do you want me to put the knife block by the stove? It would be convenient there.”

“That’d be fine. What would you rather do? Unpack the stuff in the main room?”

Thran sliced the French bread into rounds. “After supper, we will unpack and arrange our bedroom, lyubov moya. After that, nothing will stop me when I take a saint to bed.”

Bard paused in his stirring to stare off into space, then looked around at Thran. “Um... did I say something rash about rearranging the kitchen tonight?”

Thran’s looked through his lashes at Bard. “I do not think so.”

Bard put down his soup ladle, came around the kitchen island, and settled Thran’s hips against his. “Oh, good. Because I just thought of a few things to do that are much better than rearranging the kitchen.”

“Did you?” Thran left the bread knife on the cutting board to put his arms around Bard’s neck and
brush a kiss on his lips. “I can think of a few, too. Perhaps more than a few.”

“Mmm,” Bard kissed back. “But I warn you...”

“What?”

“It’s our first night in a strange house. Don’t be surprised if we’re interrupted while our children settle in.”

“Hmm. I had not thought of that. You are likely right. Especially Tilda. She will not have her sister in her room now, and she may be apprehensive.”

“She’s the first one I expect. Sigrid is fine. The boys.... could go either way. So all we may get until late is not much of anything.”

“Father first, lover second,” Thran sighed, looking down at his feet, then up at Bard again. “So it will likely be. But at least we will be in the same bed. That in itself is a big accomplishment.”

Bard grinned as he rubbed his hips against Thran’s. “A very big accomplishment. We’ll see how far we get after that.”

The boys’ voices rose as they clattered down the stairs, so Thran and Bard eased apart to finish their preparations for supper. Thran sliced bread and fetched butter from the refrigerator. Bard gave a final stir to the soup, and set out salt, pepper, and a container of strawberries. When the boys came in, Bard had them set flatware and plates around the table, and Thran went to call the girls down. As the children chose their seats – girls to one side, boys to the other, with Thran and Bard at the ends – Thran carted the soup pot to the table, and Bard brought the bread. Bard ladled out bowls of soup, which went around the table, and everyone set to.

At first, everyone was too hungry to talk, but as the soup pot contents diminished, conversation began again. The children were still excited, but were more subdued than they had been at lunch, evidence that the day’s rigors had tired them. They shared out the kitchen cleanup duties, then headed upstairs. The boys retreated to play a video game, and Sigrid decided to read and listen to music. Bard made sure Tilda had everything she needed for her shower, helped her fiddle with the water until it was warm, then retreated. He met Thran coming from the boys’ sanctuary, and they went into their room together –

It was a disaster.

The bed frame was piled in a corner. The box springs still leaned against the wall, but the mattress had fallen over onto a stack of boxes, which had tipped over. Other boxes filled the floor, leaving no room to set up the bed frame. They looked at each other.

“Pile the boxes outside until we get the bed set up?” Bard suggested.

“I will get the boys.”

“No –” Bard blurted. When Thran eyed him, he blushed. “I mean, we don’t need them trooping in here... right now. What’s in the boxes?”

Thran opened one. “Clothing. We could just hang it up and then put the cartons outside the door.”


Thran smothered a smile. His saint was cute when he was flustered, but he said nothing as he
reached into the box for the first items of clothing.

Most of the first several boxes held clothing that went in the closet. As they arranged things, Bard described how he’d combined the original bedroom with a small sitting room to add the walk-in closet on the left side of the room, and the bathroom on the right. The bathroom had a lot of work left, but the shower was finished, and would hold them until the big soaking tub was put in. Thran looked forward to that, especially after grueling rehearsals in the middle of winter. He was touched that Bard had thought so much of his comfort.

The next several boxes were linens, which went in the bathroom closet. That made enough room to move the bed frame pieces into place in the center of the room. The frame went together quickly, and they put the box springs in place. Thran would have preferred asking the boys to help haul the big king-sized mattress into place, but with a little maneuvering they walked the mattress over to the bed and flopped it into place without endangering Bard’s stitches. The dressers went against the walls, and the nightstands went to either side of the bed. When Thran placed lamps on both nightstands, the mess resolved into a bedroom. Thran found the box with the bed linens, and before long, his nest of silk and cashmere beckoned.

Thran flattened the box, and put it outside the bedroom with the others by the stairs. He turned back to find Bard considering the bed, one arm crossed over his chest, and the other hand scratching the small tufts of beard under his lips and on his chin.

“Yes?” Thran purred.

Bard glanced at him. “You don’t want to know. I think I’d better check on the children.”

Thran chuckled. “Then I will see to Legolas, too. Then I want a shower.”

“At least,” Bard agreed. “So, children.”

They went to the boys first. Both had washed and changed into pajamas, and sat on Bain’s bed looking at a video. “It’s late, Bain,” Bard said. “Time for lights out.”

“So it is for you, too, Legolas,” Thran said. “We have many things to do tomorrow to settle ourselves, so sleep well.”

It was a mark of the boys’ fatigue that neither argued, and they were both soon tucked into bed and wished a good night.

Sigrid was ready to rest, and was just getting out of the shower when Bard came to tell her goodnight. She had a ready smile and hug for both Bard and Thran, and shut her door softly behind them.

Tilda was last. She was so tired that she was nearly asleep, with Mr. Bun firmly in her grasp. No bedtime story was needed to coax her to sleep.

“I'll leave a light on in the bathroom for you,” Bard said. “And your night light, too.”

“Okay.”

“How’s Mr. Bun? He looks pretty sleepy to me.”

“He is,” Tilda yawned. “So am I.”

“I can tell. Here’s Thran to tell you good night.”
“Good night, ma petite,” Thran said softly, kneeling at the edge of Tilda’s bed. He kissed her hand. “Sleep well.”

“Night, Thran,” she murmured, all but asleep.

Bard took Thran’s place. He leaned over to brush a kiss on Tilda’s hair. “Good night, little doll. I’ll see you in the morning. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Da.”

Bard switched the small nightlight by the door to glow dimly, then turned off the lamp by Tilda’s bed. He and Thran tiptoed out, and Bard eased the door closed. As he took one more look back, Tilda curled around her toy, and was instantly asleep.

The house was silent, and the nightlight in the children’s bathroom cast enough light to see the stacks of folded boxes and the few left to be unpacked. But Thran had no eyes for cardboard, whether full or empty. He had eyes only for his saint.

He reached for Bard’s hand, urging him towards their room. Smiling, Bard let Thran draw him inside their sanctuary, sliding the pocket doors shut behind them, then easing Thran into his arms. Hands stroked his hair, and fingers caressed his ears, his jaw, his lips. As delicious as these touches were, they were only the beginning.

Silk and cashmere awaited them both.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

The move is over, the hour is late, and the children are finally in bed. It's time for an angel and a saint to begin their private celebration.

Yes, all - THAT moment is finally here... at least the first part is. Enjoy yet another chapter that earns this story an Explicit rating.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

ya lyublyu tebya = I love you (Russian)
zoloto moyo = my treasure (Russian)
rwy'n dy garu di = I love you (Welsh)

“We’re both gritty,” Bard murmured, as Thran nuzzled his neck and rubbed his back slowly.

Thran bit Bard’s earlobe. “I like gritty. In fact, I like almost anything you’d care to indulge in. What would you like first?”

“Mmm. I’ve thought about that every day since we met. I could never decide whether I wanted to take you first on the barre, the way you wanted me to that Saturday, or in this bed, the way I wanted to when I fixed your radiators.”

Thran grinned. “You thought of us as lovers that early? I am flattered.”

“I tried not to think about it at all. You were way out of my league.”

“Do you still think so?”

“I’m down to thinking so only half of the time.”

“I can think of six different games we can play with that. But I would prefer not to play any games tonight. This is our first night in our home, and our first night together. It is our marriage night, in all but the ceremony, which will come at some point. So let tonight be between us, rather than between characters in a game.”

“I’d like that, too,” Bard stroked Thranduil’s beautiful white hair. “I want to marvel at you for a while before I do anything else.”

“I think I shall marvel for my own part, too. So first we bathe. You start, and I will join you in a moment - I must get the champagne from the wine fridge.”

Bard chuckled and looked at Thran askance. “The champagne?”
“Of course, the champagne,” Thran shrugged as if it were obvious. “Did you expect any less? This is the most special of special nights.”

“Children allowing,” Bard amended.

“Children allowing. Now, you start the shower, and I will get the champagne.”

“Hurry back.” Bard pressed a kiss under Thran’s jaw, just where it met his neck. “The shower’s got room for two.”

Thran’s eyebrows went up in anticipation. “I will fly, lyubov moya.”

As Thran hurried out of the bedroom, Bard savored a grin, then bent to unlace his boots and toss them in the closet. He stripped off his clothes, dumped them in the laundry basket, and found his usual sleep tee and flannel pants. He prayed he wouldn’t need them tonight, which would be true only if all four children stayed asleep. He laid them on the foot of the bed rather than on the floor on one side; he didn’t know which side Thran preferred. After so many years of sleeping in a single bed, Bard didn’t have a preference, so it’d be easier for him to accommodate whichever one Thran didn’t prefer.

He padded naked into the bathroom to strip off the bandage covering his stitches. It’d be at least another week, if not longer, before they’d come out. He was supposed to keep them bandaged so that neither clothing nor sheets irritated them, but damned if he’d wear purple surgical tape and steri-strips to bed on the first night he slept with an angel. He’d rebandage them once they decided to sleep – if that happened – but not before. He was still looking in the mirror to peel away the tape when Thran appeared in the bedroom with a tray. A big bowl of ice had a champagne bottle stuck in the middle of it, and a bottle opener and two flutes were beside it. Thran put the tray in the middle of the bed, disappeared into the closet to strip his clothes, and then eased into the bathroom. Bard paused, too intent on the beautiful nude before him to bother with removing adhesive tape from his ribs. At sight of Bard’s bandage, however, Thran’s anticipatory smile turned somber.

“I have not seen your stitches since I watched them sewn in,” Thran said softly. “Do they trouble you?”

Bard shook his head. "Just itchy, which is a good sign. I’ve followed all the directions, so they’re healing well. I can get them wet now, which means I can take a shower. I can’t stay under the water for long, but I can for long enough to get a good scrub.”

He peeled the surgical tape off bit by bit, trying not to rip out any more hair than he had to, but he wasn’t all that successful, and he winced several times along the way. Finally, the mirror revealed the five-inch scar running parallel to his ribs on his left side, punctuated at regular intervals with black stitches. Thran tsked and shook his head.

“My poor saint.”

“What, you’re saying I don’t look good in black silk?”

“That is not the kind of silk I would prefer you wear.”

“They won’t be there long. Another ten days, no more. In a few weeks, it won’t look like anything.”

“Good.”

“You want me scruffy, or shaved? Your choice.”
Thran’s lips twitched slyly as he considered. “That is a most difficult choice. Perhaps shaved, as long as you do not take off this,” he kissed the small tuft of hair on Bard’s chin, “or this,” he kissed the tuft under his lower lip, “or this,” he kissed Bard’s mustache, “or these.” He kissed each of Bard’s sideburns.

“That doesn’t leave me much to shave,” Bard teased. He stroked Thran’s cheek. “Do you have to shave at all? Other than your pits, I mean.”

Thran snorted. “Of course I do. But as all of my hair is white, no one thinks that I do.”

“The pits are because of the dancing?”

Thran nodded. “The sensibilities of the purists, I suppose. It is less obvious on me than on others, but I follow the tradition nevertheless. If you shave, then so should I. It would be easier on your thighs. Assuming I let you off with just a blow job, which I am not inclined to do.”

The offhand remark caught Bard by surprise, and he snorted in laughter. “Bastard.”

Thran cupped his hand over Bard’s cock, fondling it briefly before sidling away to find his razor. “Entirely.”

“You’re going to find yourself fucked in front of the mirror rather in bed if you don’t watch it,” Bard growled.

“That is the pleasure of the mirror, of course. I can watch you fuck me as well as feel it. I would enjoy it immensely, and I am sure we will do it thusly before long. But tonight, let us wash first.”

“Then stop teasing me. Or I’ll be too wired to shave.”

“If I must,” was Thran’s unrepentant reply. He lathered and drew his razor over his cheeks and chin quickly; Bard took longer to maneuver carefully around his mustache and tufts and sideburns. Thran stepped into the shower cabinet and adjusted the water, sighing as the hot water rained over him. Bard brushed his teeth and came in after him, unable to keep himself from stroking the water-slicked alabaster skin before him. Thran hummed in such pleasure that Bard groped for the body wash – only to be confronted by an elegant collection of dark grey bottles and jars, all of them unlabeled.

“Um, which one is your body wash, fy nghariad?”

Thran selected one of the bottles and handed it to Bard. “This one.”

“No labels?”

Thran smiled. “Other than a saint, I have very few indulgences. These are one of the few. I must look after the Prince of Ice properly, so these see to my appearance. They are formulated for me in France.”

“And probably cost more than a small car,” Bard quipped, squeezing out a dollop of pearly white liquid. “Washcloth good, or just my hands?”

“Washcloth. But gently, please.”

Bard eased the plush cloth over Thran’s back in long, slow strokes until Thran purred.

“They are worth it. I work very hard, and a hot bath is a much-needed restorative on many days. Exotic scents and soothing oils make the hot water feel even better. Though tonight I find my nice
soap feels even better when a saint strokes it so deliciously over my back.”

“Turn around, and I’ll stroke it so deliciously over the rest of you.”

Thran complied. “You are a delight, lyubov moya.”

Bard took his time, caressing the exquisite body of his angel from top to bottom. First the long neck, then broad shoulders, sculpted arms, and elegant fingers. Then the flaring chest, flexing so enticingly as Thran reveled in his touch. Such a long, long, abdomen with lean bands of muscle that beckoned with the slightest move, and such narrow hips, and the groins cradling the white nest of hair with its long treasure within. Hard, rounded buttocks just aching to be kneaded, impossibly long legs with well-developed thighs and calves, and long, elegant feet. Touching this treasure was far too carnal to be an act of worship, but worship was what Bard considered it, nevertheless. Why, in the name of all things sacred and profane didn’t his angel have an entire harem of worshippers, all of them princes and princesses begging to see to his every need?

“Because I am just a beautiful animal to them, a performer. The Prince of Ice. I would always play that role for them, never myself. You love me as I am.”

Bard swallowed. He hadn’t realized he’d spoken that question aloud. “‘You as you are’ is spectacular.”

“You are no less spectacular. I am merely the more flamboyant of the two.” Thran offered him a wet kiss. “I will wash my hair, and then I will tend to you.”

Strange purple liquid went into Thran’s hair. He massaged gently, only on his scalp, then squeezed the soap through the rest with painstaking care. Bard took the moment to soap and rinse his hair and face, but when he finished Thran still carefully tended to his mane.

“Purple shampoo?”

Thran grinned. “I like my hair icy white. Purple keeps it so. Other colors turn it yellow.”

“You are a vain creature, Thran.”

“I make the most of what I have. Granted, that is a great deal, but there is no vanity to care for it well.”

“You can’t tell me that you don’t like the way people look at you.”

He shook his head. “I cannot. But if they choose to look at me, I prefer them to see nothing less than the best of me. It is actually an asset that I take these pains, because if my hair is not so white, or my skin is not so smooth, then some think I am not so perfect, and then look for flaws when I dance. Some will always look for flaws when I dance, but I do not have to encourage them to do so.”

Thran stuck his head under the water, letting the suds flush out of his hair. With his head thrown back, hands in his hair, eyes closed, sheeting water, Bard could easily imagine what he would look like under him in the midst of their passion, and couldn’t keep from easing himself against Thran’s chest. He filled his hands with pale, rounded buttocks, and nuzzled a kiss on first one nipple, then another. Thran continued to let the water flow through his hair, his eyes still shut, but with a smile on his lips. He brought his hands down to cradle Bard’s face and kissed him, his tongue pressing against Bard’s teeth, then filling his mouth. Bard’s cock twitched in urgency, drawing both of Thran’s hands to massage it until Bard growled. Thran chuckled.

“I think we had better wash you now, or the bed will miss its christening.”
“Then stop teasing me, bastard. You’re driving me crazy.”

“Not intentionally. I merely wash my hair.”

“Like hell you do. You like to tease.”

“I like to see that need in your eyes, because it matches what I feel, so to posture a little as I wash my hair makes us both happy. So let me caress you as you caressed me, and then we will find other ways to tease each other.”

Thran put some of his soap on Bard’s washcloth and began to rub his shoulders.

“That’s your expensive stuff, Thran. Mine’s in the blue bottle.”

“I want my scent on you. Think of it as a measure of the delight you are, or comfort in our closeness, or me as I claim my property, whichever one arouses you more.”

“Hedonist bastard,” Bard growled, but the last syllable ended in more moan than growl. “Gods, that feels good.”

“Does it?” Thran questioned, smiling. “Imagine that.”

“I don’t have to imagine, not while you’re doing it. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever done in a shower.”

“Hmm. It seems I have some things to show you, especially when your stitches are gone, and especially when our tub arrives. That was generous of you, the soaking tub. You take very good care of me.”

“I intend to waste you a few times in that tub, so it wasn’t entirely altruistic.”

“Even better. Love and lust are a divine combination.”

“You’re a treasure, Thran.”

Bard shut his eyes and let Thran work his magic over his skin. Long, elegant fingers stroked and caressed as they washed him clean, and the rigors of the day’s move melted away into warmth.

“I will wash your stitches very gently with my fingers,” Thran warned, when the rest of him was clean. “You will tell me if it hurts. I do not want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. You don’t have to wash much. It’s mostly a matter of rinsing everything completely afterwards.”

“All right. I begin.”

Light, hardly perceptible touches traced the wound. The healing flesh was still tender, but not uncomfortably so, and Thran was very careful.

“Rinse, lyubov moya.”

Bard did, careful not to let the shower spray land directly on his stitches. As he let the soap wash away, Thran squeezed out another of his potions, rubbed it between his palms, and then stroked it through his white hair. He rubbed what was left over his body, then added a little more.

“Lean over a little,” he invited, and rubbed the potion over Bard’s hair. It was some sort of smoother,
because it coaxed Bard’s tangled hair into less of a tangle, and smelled delicious. It was the lingering aroma of that potion that was part of Thran’s unique scent. “Now rinse only a little. Leave some of it in.”

Bard stuck his head under the shower, running his fingers through his hair. “Whatever that stuff is, it smells wonderful.”

“I like it, too. A little argan oil, a little coconut oil, and other things. All good for hair. Are you ready to get out?”

“I’m as clean as I’m going to get. My body, anyway. I’ve still got impure thoughts about what I want to do with an angel.”

“Mmm. Should I tell you what anticipation of your impure thoughts does to me? Where the flush first begins, and where the ache begins?”

Bard’s loins clenched in response. “Oh, I think I’ve already got an idea of that, because I’m having the same reaction. Dry off, angel, before I take you on the floor.”

“Another delight we have yet to explore. But not yet. Bed and champagne first.”

Thran tossed him a towel, and took up another to towel off gently, as always careful with his pale skin and hair. He found the hair dryer, and flipped his hair over his head to dry it, again carefully, complete with diffuser that didn’t blow the white strands around. Bard wrapped his towel around his waist to watch. How did Thran manage to make such a mundane task look like a photo shoot? It was no wonder that cameras loved him so much – he seemed unable to do anything without grace. When he flipped his hair back over his shoulders, his cheeks were flushed, but they quickly paled to their normal hue. He put a hand to his heart and bowed, accepting Bard’s wordless admiration, then held out the hair dryer.

Laughing, Bard held up his hands. “Wouldn’t have the first idea of how to use that.”

“Then let me do it for you. Wet hair in bed is nice in the heat of summer, but not in the cold of winter. Please?”

Shrugging, Bard agreed. “This ought to be entertaining.”

A big smile crossed Thran’s face. “Of course. Lean over as I did. Oh, first, I need a comb. Your hair is thicker than mine.”

Bard proffered the comb, and leaned over as Thran requested. The dryer was warm, not too hot, and Thran’s fingers working through his hair was unexpectedly soothing. This must be why so many women loved trips to the hair salon – having someone tend to him like this was a luxury. Thran smeared something through his hair, something that smelled like the oil he’d offered in the shower, and the dryer went back to work. In a few minutes, Thran sat him down on the toilet to finish. He watched in the mirror as Thran’s expert fingers flicked a strand here and there. A little more of something else went through the bottom part of his hair, and a little more drying followed.

“There. Perhaps you will let me take you to my hairdresser for a trim, but nothing radical. I like your hair the way it is. Do you pull it back when you work your metal?”

Bard nodded. “Not the thing you want near an arc welder. Or a forging fire.”

Thran gathered Bard’s hair back in a tail, looking at him in the mirror. “It looks nice that way, too.” He let Bard’s hair go. “Or loose.” He ran his hands through both sides, holding just part of it back.
“Or halfway. Very beautiful.”

In the mirror, Thran seemed thoughtful as he stroked Bard’s hair.

“What’s that look mean?”

Thran’s expression waxed sly. “I recall the day we first kissed. Your hair looked as if you’d just risen from bed. Now you are about to go to bed with me. I cannot tell you how much I wanted you to then, or how much I have wanted you to since then.”

Bard got up from the stool, tossed his towel on the counter, and drew Thran close to kiss his lips. “Then take me to bed, angel. I want it as much as you do.”

Humming in anticipation, Thran let his hands fall to Bard’s hips and backed towards the bedroom, drawing Bard with him. Those same hands nestled him close for a long kiss at the foot of the bed, and kneaded his buttocks with strong fingers. Bard found Thran’s nipples to tease and massage, until Thran’s breath stuttered and caught, even as his lips nipped at Bard’s –

“What are these?” Thran broke away to seize Bard’s tee shirt and flannel pants and shake them at Bard.

Laughing at Thran’s indignation, Bard took his night clothing. “Which side of the bed is yours?”

Thran gestured at the left side. “Why?”

Bard tossed his things onto the floor beside the right side of the bed. “Because you’d better find some for yourself. With four children in the house, there will come a night where you’ll need them.”

“Ah. I am relieved they are only a precaution. I was concerned that you intended to wear such things into bed with me. Oh, what about your stitches? Do you need to bandage them?”

“I won’t wear purple surgical tape into bed with an angel any more than I will those flannel pants. So find something for yourself to put on the floor, and then we can get back to us.”

Thran rooted through his dresser for a tee shirt and leggings, dropped them on the floor by his pillow, and then sat on the foot of the bed. A smile was all Bard needed to join him as Thran pulled the champagne tray close. He slid a glance at Bard.

“I think we should drink this first, before we forget to drink it at all.”

“Good idea.”

Bard got the glasses while Thran uncorked the bottle, holding them out to be filled. The bottle went back on ice, and Thran held his glass up to the light, eyeing the bubbles.

“So, lyubov moya. In bed at last.”

“On the bed. Not yet in the bed.”

“True. But I enjoy the anticipation as much as the deed. There will be only one first time.”

“You’re liable to kill us both.”

“Also true. But it is a nice way to go.”

“Very nice. So here’s to a hell of a ride so far, in anticipation of a hell of a ride tonight.”
“Mmm. Perhaps more than one.”

“I hope so.”

They touched glasses, and sipped. The chilled mouthful tingled as it eased down Bard’s throat, then warmed in his belly. It was a heady sensation, tingling followed by warming, but nothing compared to having his angel clothed only in his hair beside him. Bard stroked that hair back from Thran’s jawline, his solar plexus clenching as Thran leaned into his hand. His eyes were half closed, and he sighed as he brushed a kiss on Bard’s hand. It was the only incentive Bard needed to put his glass back on the tray, then set the tray on the floor at their feet. Thran put his glass down on the tray, eyes bright, waiting to see whether Bard would make the first move, or if he should.

If Bard was first, grasping Thran’s shoulders and urging him into the nest of silk and cashmere, Thran was right behind, pulling Bard atop him, dragging them up into the eider pillows and between the layers of silk, his white hair flying around them like angel’s wings before settling into a corona around his head on the pillows. Pleading eyes, parted lips gasping endearments, frantic fingers clutching at his hips were so sweet, so urgent, that Bard fell into a hard kiss, teeth nipping at lips, tongue probing, taking all that was offered and offering his own in return. The hands on his buttocks vanished for a moment, but by the time the loss registered, well-lubricated, slippery hands were groping for his cock, then closing around it. Warm, rhythmic stroking was impossible to resist. Gods, gods, how could anyone deny such insistent, talented hands? But that was only the start. Thran curled his hips, and put his feet on Bard’s buttocks, still stroking his cock without mercy. He stopped stroking only to guide Bard’s cock into position, and then pressed Bard that first little bit inside.

“Oh, gods, Thran, it’s too much, I can’t stop, I don’t want to hurt you –”

“You won’t. I took precautions earlier. I’m open. Come take me. Please, Bard, please, before I die of the want –”

The urge was so, so blinding, so instinctive, but Bard wouldn’t let himself force his angel like a rutting animal. Somehow, he found the strength to ease in, one slow fraction of an inch at a time.

“You kill me, you bastard,” Thran pleaded. “Gods, Bard!”

“If I go any faster, it’ll be all over before I can do anything else! Just – just give me a second –”

“I will try. I will try.” Thran swallowed hard. “I cannot stand it. It is too good, it is not enough, it’s –”

“I’m almost there. Almost all the way in. Just a little more. Mmm. Almost there. Almost there.”

Thran grinned. “Oh, yes, you are. Yes, you are. Ah... mmm. To feel you inside me is even better than I thought it would be.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m there. Lubed enough?”

“I will add a little more when you pull out the first time. It is entirely – gods, I cannot – you are the worst bastard in my life!”

Even in the midst of Thran’s tight warmth, Bard grinned. “You like me like that.”

“I do. I do.”

“I’m going to move. Just a little. Just to make sure we’re lubed enough.”

Thran nodded. “Slowly. Slowly. I don’t want to go yet.”

“I love you, too. Especially when you make love to me.”

Bard pressed a kiss at the base of Thran’s jaw as he rocked his hips back just a little, so slowly, but even that sent so much pleasure racing through him that he had a hard time not wanting to thrust back in. Beneath him, Thran moaned soundlessly, his face transfigured by his longing. As Bard eased out, Thran slathered them both with more lubricant, and the journey back into his depths was less intense, more bearable.

“Good. So good,” Thran whispered. “You?”

“Perfect.” Bard sat back on his knees, savoring Thran pinned beneath him, hair scattered around him, his beautiful body tight with desire. When Bard rocked gently out, Thran arched with want; when he eased gently in, Thran curled around Bard, sighing with satisfaction. The tube of lubricant lay abandoned on the pillow, so Bard slicked his hand, and wrapped it around Thran’s cock. He was already fully erect, and as soon as Bard touched him, Thran writhed and moaned underneath him.

“Slow, or fast?”

“Slowly. Slowly. Oh, gods, I may die. I cannot – you – oh, gods!”

Between the tight hold on his cock and his angel so thoroughly transfixed beneath him, Bard was only seconds from release. He sped up his stroking, wanting to carry Thran over the edge with him. Thran’s hands groped for purchase on the silken sheets. His back arched; his head went back; his lips parted in a gasp. Then he clenched hard around Bard’s cock as his orgasm tore through him, so hard that Bard had no choice but to hurtle after him. As his release rose and crashed over him, he managed not to ram deeper into Thran, or tighten so hard on Thran’s cock that he hurt him. Bard fell forward onto his elbows, still bucking, his lips and tongue seeking those of the impassioned angel beneath him. Thran wound arms and legs around him, keeping him close.

It took several seconds before either of them remembered to breathe.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” Thran breathed into his ear, caressing the lobe of his ear with a kiss. “Zoloto moyo.”

“Rwy’n dy garu di,” Bard replied just as softly as he brushed a kiss on Thran’s cheekbone. “All right, angel?”

Thran nodded. He opened soft, grey eyes on Bard, humming deep in his throat and smiling. “Consumed. Ecstatic. You are all right, too?”

Bard stroked a kiss on Thran’s cheek. “Righter than I have been in a long, long time.”

They rested for a moment, until Bard softened enough to ease out. He got up to wash, smiling at his reflection in the mirror as he rinsed, an expression that Thran matched as he followed Bard in. It was easier for Thran to rinse off in the shower, so Bard had his towel ready for him when he stepped out of the cabinet. Thran’s eyes never left him as he took the towel and dried off, then eased Bard close for a hug.

“You are a good fit,” Thran murmured in his ear with a grin.

Bard snorted in laughter. “Good thing. You didn’t give us much time to find out otherwise.”

“I was hungry.”
“So was I. It was sweet.”

“It was. Let us enjoy our champagne while we savor it.”

They padded back to bed, bringing their glasses with them as they plumped pillows and lay back beside one another. Bard snuggled close when Thran’s arm went around his shoulders, entwining his fingers with those draped over his chest. He held up his glass.

“To the first delight,” Bard said.

“And to anticipation of the second,” Thran replied, smiling as he touched his glass to Bard’s. “And many more after that.”

Bard grinned as they sipped. “Let me savor the first one a little longer, fy nghariad. Then we can tease each other about what a proper follow up should be. Or would you prefer an improper one?”

Thran laughed as he sipped his champagne. “Ah, my saint. You learn fast.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Can an angel introduce a saint to carnal pleasures as yet untried? Of course he can... if he's an angel of the devil. And Thran is.

Yes, it's explicit, and yes, you'll enjoy it. Just lie back and savor while an angel does his worst. Or is it his best?

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:
cariad = my love/my darling (more colloquial than fy nghariad; Welsh)

Thanks to johnnysmitten for technical support :-) You are the best! ♥

Thanks to loveactuallyfan for the amazing artwork for this fic! You can see it on my Tumblr site at

http://eldritchmage.tumblr.com

or at


Thanks to revoluutions for help with my Welsh - You are the best, too!

Thran sipped his champagne and savored the warmth of the body beside him. It was a rugged, powerful body, and thinking of it atop him, inside him, sent a jolt of arousal through his loins up to his solar plexus, no matter that he’d just had the best orgasm of his life. If he thought about it too much, he’d want another right away, and perhaps Bard needed more time to recover than he did.

Thran had never desired mere physical indulgence; he needed rapport with a partner first. But rapport had been elusive, so he’d done without since Vileria’s death. Before that, he’d made do with a partner with whom he did have a close rapport – Vileria was a kind, generous, and true friend – but she was no more sexually compatible with him than he was with her. Bard was both devoted friend as well as divine lover, a bounty that Thran found impossible to resist. How many times in the past month had he thought about Bard lying beside him in this bed, against these grey silk sheets? How the love softly glowing in Bard’s warm brown eyes would change into quiet arousal, and then intensify into fire under Thran’s teasing? He’d seen that fire ignite above him only moments ago, but he hadn’t yet savored its softness in repose, at ease. He drained his champagne as an excuse to slip out of bed and refill his glass. After he poured, he stood at the end of the bed, looking back at Bard.
Gods... bare chest gloved in dark hair, unruly brown hair falling in his eyes, powerful arms and hands, legs swathed in silk but still beckoning, and those nipples, such lovely brown pearls, no longer hard, but soft and beckoning. Strength rested in that body for now, but even that was a tease, for it might rise at any moment. How did Bard exude so much allure simply by reclining in the midst of soft pillows? Thran’s hands itched to stroke that body without Bard ever having to speak an invitation. Would he see that soft look in Bard’s eyes that he anticipated?

Not yet. Bard’s gaze was still intent on Thran, caressing each muscle, each gesture. When a lock of white hair fell off Thran’s shoulder and traced down his chest, Bard tracked its fall so closely that Thran bit his lower lip. No soft repose glowed from those brown eyes, but arousal already rising towards fire again. Just to have Bard’s eyes on him spiked Thran’s thoughts with all they could do next.

“I have thought so often about how you would look enthroned in this bed.” Thran considered Bard again, his regard sliding from unruly locks, past velveted chest, to the barest hint of dark pubic hair. “For you to be here at last... it is hard not to look at you.”

Bard sipped his champagne, keeping his gaze on Thran. “You’re so beautiful that I can’t stop looking at you, either.”

Thran offered Bard a pleased smile, then slid the tray of champagne over to his side of the bed. He sat beside Bard with the bottle in hand to refill Bard’s glass, then put the bottle back in its bowl. He drank most of his glassful, put the glass on his nightside table, then slid the sheets aside to perch across Bard’s thighs. He traced a single finger from Bard’s lips, down his chin and throat to caress the hollow at the back of his clavicle, then slowly traced the line between his pectorals.

“Your body is beautiful, too. Strong shoulders.” Thran ran his hands across Bard’s deltoids. “Broad chest.” he stroked his hands over Bard’s pectorals, dragging his palms over the nipples that so drew him. “Cut abs.” Thran drew his knuckles over the ridges of muscle in Bard’s torso. “I especially like these.” He traced the delicate intercostals, careful not to touch Bard’s stitches. “And these.”

Bard drew a sudden breath when Thran’s hands went around his ribs, and thumbs rubbed slowly over his nipples. Thran swallowed that breathy hitch in a kiss, then hovered until Bard’s breath caught again, offering him another hitch to swallow.

“They are so sensitive,” Thran whispered, kissing the corners of Bard’s eyes. “Where do you feel it when I do this? Not just here, no?”

Bard shut his eyes, one hand kneading Thran’s thigh, the other clutching his glass. “Gods, no. There, and all the way down.”

“How far down?” Thran grinned. “Down to your toes?”

Bard tensed as Thran rubbed his nipples a little harder, and his breath caught again when Thran’s hair brushed against his abdomen. “Just about, you bastard. Let me put this glass down so I can give you as good as I’m getting.”

“Not yet. Let me please you, without you thinking you must do something in return. Let me give you a gift.”

“That’s not fair to you. It’s too one-sided. I don’t like using you.”

“To accept a gift I freely offer does not use me, lyubov moya. You have just made the most delicious love to me, have you not? Besides, it turns me on to watch my lover enjoy himself, to know that I
“please him.”

“If you’re as turned on from watching me as I am from what you’re doing, then you’re very turned on.”

“I am,” Thran grinned, still rubbing. “You are a delicious morsel to please.”

“Be careful,” Bard said, then his breath hitched again. “Mmm, you are such a bastard. You’re going to get into so much trouble if you do that for much longer.”

“I hope so,” Thran bit at Bard’s lower lip. “Will you let me?”

Bard didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “I’ve... never done that with anyone before.”

Thran wasn’t surprised. “You prefer the top.”

Bard looked apprehensive, but Thran massaged slowly, letting endorphins and arousal do their work. “I don’t think it’s a question of... preference. I think it’s a question of... trust.”

Thran insinuated his feet between Bard’s legs, and used them to slide Bard’s legs apart so that he could settle between Bard’s knees. Not being pinned beneath Thran’s weight might help Bard feel more comfortable.

“Or lack of it, yes? The bottom can feel more vulnerable,” Thran agreed.

Bard chuckled. “You don’t feel that way, do you? You revel in it.”

Thran kept up his slow strokes and caresses. “I revel in everything we’ve done so far. I expect we will find much more to revel in as we learn how to please one another. I would like to take the top with you, but only when you are comfortable for me to do so. If it turns out not to be your preference, then we will find other things to do that we both enjoy. That kind of one-sided holds no allure for me.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Did you have a lover who was not kind, or...?” Thran ventured.

Bard shook his head. “Nothing like that. I just... never had a lover I... felt that sure of.”

Thran nodded again. “The top is usually more in control. The bottom is not. If you are not sure of one another, then it is not easy to let yourself be out of control in so intimate a way.”

Bard chuckled again. “You’re never out of control, even when you’re out of control. You orchestrate everything, and then fling yourself after.”

“I am what they call the power bottom, yes?” Thran snickered. “Though that is not entirely true. I like both, and perhaps prefer the bottom only slightly more. It depends on the partner.”

“Versatile.”

“That is the term, or so I have been told.”

Bard sipped his champagne again, and sighed, not fighting the sensations Thran roused in him. He reached out to draw Thran closer for a kiss, then sighed again. Or maybe he marshaled his resolve. “You’ve been honest, so I will be, too. I have thought about what it would be like to do that with you.”
“I take that as a good sign, that I have earned that much of your trust.”

“You have all of my trust. I’ve trusted you since we met. Somehow... we felt right from the start. So I did think about it, just because there’s never been anyone else I trusted so much before. Then last week, last Tuesday, when we rouged around a little... I did more than think about it. If you’d done me then, I wouldn’t have stopped you. In fact, thinking about you doing me was what got me off.”

Thran’s lips curved up in a smile, recalling how close he’d been to doing just that. “I enjoyed what we did. It was good that we went slowly, because it saved something special for our life here. But I am happy that we will eventually come to it, when you are comfortable.”

“Oh, between what you’re doing, this bed, and some very nice champagne, I’m quite comfortable. Besides, I don’t want to deny my angel anything. And I think I’m drunk. Almost.”

“Are you, lyubov moya?” Thran laughed, charmed at his lover’s artless confession.

“Oh, I’m buzzed,” Bard’s grin was crooked. “Are you?”

“No, unless you want me to be, and then I will tell you yes.”

Bard’s smile faded. “Don’t. It’s important that I know you’ll always tell me the truth, no matter what. I don’t want to wonder.”

Thran kissed Bard. “Then I will always tell you the truth, even when we play. So no, I am not drunk. I try never to be drunk, because it plays havoc with my body the next day when I must dance. A slight buzz, as you call it, is the most I indulge in. Tonight, I need one more glass of champagne before that happens.”

“Okay,” Bard nodded, smiling again. “That’s good to know.”

“I hope you are not drunk. I would not want to take advantage of you.”

Bard’s hand went to Thran’s chest, caressing a nipple. “I thought you told me once that you excelled in deflowering virgins.”

Thran snorted in laughter. “Only in the ballet. Such roles are ogres. I would not treat my one true love so contemptibly.”

Bard sipped his champagne, looked at the glass still half full, and drained the rest. Looking bemused, he sighed and shook his head. “You really are a bastard, Thran.”

“Still? Why this time?”

“Because I’ve told you I trust you, I’ve told you I’m comfortable, I’ve told you I’m a virgin, I’ve told you I can’t tell you no, and I’ve told you I’m drunk, and you’re too honorable to do anything about it. What else do I have to say to get you to fuck me?”

Thran sat back on his heels, laughing. “I would not dream to fuck you tonight. Nothing you say can make me do that. But...”

“But what?”

Thran stroked Bard’s chest. “But I would like to make love to my husband on our wedding night. If you ask me to do that, then that I will do.”

Bard handed Thran his glass. “Then please, fy nghariad, make love to me.”
Thran sat Bard’s glass aside, and drew Bard out of the pillows until they kneeled facing each other, kissing and stroking. “Do you want to tell me how I should, or do you leave that to me?”

“I trust you.”

Thran kissed Bard. “Thank you, lyubov moya. Let us see what develops. All you need to do is relax, and enjoy yourself. Nothing more. If something is not right for you, then tell me. You know about trigger words?”

Bard nodded.

“Then if you say... hmm... ‘sanctuary,’ then I will know, and we will do something else.”

Bard stroked Thran’s chest, and kissed his throat. “All right. ‘Sanctuary’ it is.”

Thran did nothing more than stroke and caress for some moments, putting aside his own arousal to make sure that Bard was properly relaxed. What had aroused Bard so much when they’d played in Bard’s apartment? A little feint at dominance had started it all. Thran might need that, as well as the champagne, to ensure that Bard was well prepared. The trick would be to make sure Bard was well aroused, so that Thran’s preparation felt good, the teasing only a prelude to what would soon feel even better.

Slowly, Thran’s hands strayed from shoulders and pectorals and nipples, to abdominals and hips and groins. Bard hummed, eyes closed as he relaxed into Thran’s caresses, and soon Thran’s fingers traced from groins to balls. Fondling gently, he rubbed them at their base, on each pass tracing closer and closer to the opening just behind, quickly finding exactly the right touches to tease Bard’s cock into rising. He shifted to kneel beside Bard, found the tube of lubricant, and slicked his fingers. When he leaned over to take Bard’s cock in his mouth, he stroked Bard’s opening. At just that single touch came a gasp, then a moan, and Bard’s cock spasmed hard. There was an echo of that jolt of pleasure in Thran’s solar plexus, his loins, his cock, then another when he slid one finger inside, stroking in time to the caresses he lavished with his tongue. The second finger went in unnoticed, and Thran flexed them slowly, stretching Bard wider.

“Oh gods, Thran –”

Thran slid the third finger in, stretching Bard still wider. His lover arched back, and the cock in Thran’s mouth swelled harder. Gods, Bard would go before Thran ever got his cock inside, so he sat up, fingers still within, stroking only a little, but stretching a little more. He kissed Bard’s lips, pushing his tongue into Bard’s mouth, wondering if the double penetration excited Bard as much as it did him. Dragging his lips from Bard’s down his jaw, then his throat, he bit at the base of Bard’s neck as he had a week ago, but gently, only a pale shadow of domination. Yes, Bard was well lubricated, well open, trembling as his body rose. He was a pretty sight on his knees, head back, eyes closed, back arched, cock rising thick and engorged against his abdomen. What Thran wouldn’t do to have that cock within him again... but this was not the time for that. Instead, he imagined how it would feel to slide inside Bard. He licked his cock and stroked hard, not that he had to – he was already tense with anticipation of what he was about to do to them both.

With a quick shift, he was behind Bard, between his legs. He pulled his fingers out, took his cock in hand, and pushed inside just an inch. Bard jumped, but Thran grabbed his hips, keeping him centered. He rocked gently, surprised at how easily he slid deeper inside. He’d lubricated them both well, so very quickly he was as deeply inside as he could get, and Bard was arching back to take him. Thran pulled him tightly against his chest, wrapping his arms around him, teeth at his neck. He massaged the base of Bard’s cock deeply, then rolled those brown pearls between his fingers. Bard’s head went back, resting on Thran’s shoulder, completely consumed by everything Thran aroused in
him. It was such a delicious, addictive sight that Thran slicked his hand again. He took Bard’s cock in hand, not gently, and pulled Bard’s buttocks hard against his hips, driving his cock as far inside as it would go. He flexed backwards, pulling out, then forwards, driving in, not stroking Bard’s cock but possessing it. Underneath his hands, Bard moaned, pleading not for Thran to stop, but to deliver more.

“G-g-gods, Thran, gods, take me. I-I can’t stand it!”

Oh, gods, gods, to consume his lover like this was nothing short of delirious, so delirious that Thran bit Bard’s ear.

“Beg me,” he hissed, pulling partially out, leaving Bard suspended on the cusp of his rising. “Beg me to take you.”

“Please, you bastard, don’t stop now! Put me out of my misery!”

“That’s not begging. Beg me!” he growled, stroking so deeply that Bard gasped, then half pulled out again. He let Bard’s cock go, grabbed a handful of his hair, and pulled his head back. He bit Bard’s neck at the base of his shoulder. “Tell me you’re mine, and you don’t want me to make love to you, you want me to fuck you until you can’t see and then some.”

“I’m yours, and if you don’t fuck me until I can’t see and then some, I’ll put you on your face and fuck you until you can’t sit down for a week!”

“Ooooh, you tempt me,” Thran purred, grinning. “But not this time. This time, you are mine to fuck however I choose, until you scream for release. That is what you so richly deserve.”

Thran teased them both for far too long with his long, slow stroking, pulling almost all of the way out, then sliding oh, so slowly all of the way in, still pinning Bard with a hand in his hair and the other clutched across his hips. It was intoxicating to feel himself so deeply within Bard’s body, to feel that body arch and bow with such want, such terrible want, then to slow until Bard moaned in frustration. Playing Bard’s sensations against him was wanton, blatant depravity, so delicious that soon Thran lusted for release as much as Bard did. He sped up his thrusting, holding Bard close by his balls. He released Bard’s hair to grab his cock, stroking it roughly in time to his thrusts. He shut his eyes, savoring the last precious seconds of control, and then he manhandled them both to orgasm. When Bard whimpered and started to buck, Thran used his hold on Bard’s cock and balls to keep himself deeply embedded as they both spasmed in release.

After long, chaotic, delirious seconds, Bard fell forward onto his hands, pulling Thran with him. He was too unsteady to hold there, and fell face down onto the bed panting, Thran still within him. Thran managed to keep from falling on top, but had to press his hands against the mattress on either side of Bard to do so. He was panting just as hard. He stayed on his knees until he’d softened enough to ease out, then flopped down on his back beside Bard, eyes shut.

A rueful chuckle drew him to open his eyes. Bard’s chin was propped up on his hands, but he looked at Thran.

“I thought you said you wanted to make love to your husband.”

Thran grinned. “I did. Then I banged him like a mother. He seemed to like it.”

Bard’s answer was to lay his forehead on his hands, then he looked up again. “I think my life will be in danger no matter how I answer that.”

Thran chose to answer that with a grin. “I wanted to make sure your virgin experience included a
little of everything.”

“Oh, was that what it was? Pure altruism?”

“No, my saint. It was loving tenderness followed by lustful desecration.”

“That it was. I have been well ravaged.” Bard exhaled, eyes shut. “You did it so well that I’ll have to make it up to you the next time I make love to you.”

“You were quite delicious tonight when you made love to me, so I am sure that whatever you come up with in the future will be no less so. Now, I want my last glass of champagne.”

Bard was on Thran’s side of the bed, so he slid over to reach the bottle and Thran’s glass. He filled it and held it out. Propping himself up on one elbow, Thran accepted the glass and sipped delicately.

“Very nice. Though I am afraid I need another shower. And we have pillaged the sheets.”

“We have, that. Where are the clean ones?”

“I put another set aside in anticipation. They are on my dresser.”

Bard rolled over to flop into the midst of the pillows. He tipped the bottle up to his lips to drink the remaining champagne, no more than a couple of mouthfuls. “No point in changing the sheets until we clean up. Can you get to the shower without help, cariad?”

“I can, if I do so before this last glass of champagne hits.”

They clambered out of bed and helped each other into the shower; both of them were too sticky for a less thorough rinse. Once they’d dried, they sleepily fumbled clean sheets onto the bed, balled the old ones into the closet, and climbed into bed yawning. Bard turned out the light on his side of the bed, but Thran lingered until Bard had settled and heaved a satisfied sigh. He blinked sleepily at Thran sitting on the side of the bed as he braided his hair into a loose plait.

“Everything all right, Thran?”

Reaching out, Thran stroked a piece of Bard’s hair out of his eyes, drawing a smile from his lover. Yes, at last, that was what he’d hoped to see, the soft look in Bard’s warm eyes, the proof of his love kept close and alive, banked now, but ready to rise to meet Thran’s without condition.

“All is well,” Thran agreed, smiling.

He turned out his light, slipped between the sheets, and snuggled close, his head cradled on Bard’s shoulder and his arm across Bard’s chest, fingers stroking sleepy circles in the dark hair that furred Bard’s chest so beautifully. Humming, Bard put his arm around Thran’s back to stroke his hip.

“Tomorrow’s New Year’s Eve,” Bard murmured.

“You are right,” Thran realized. “How should we celebrate?”

“We’ll have to get the TV or the computers connected if we want to see the ball drop at midnight.”

Thran hummed. “I’m sure the children can help us with that. I know nothing about anything mechanical.”

“I can handle it. Tilda will want to see the Rose Parade on New Year’s Day, anyway.”
Smiling, Thran rubbed Bard’s stomach. “She will explain it all to me very well, I am sure.”

Bard laughed softly. “She will. She’s my little doll.”

“A very sweet one. So we hook up the TV. We watch the ball drop and the parade. What else?”

“Cooking, of course. I got enough stuff today to hold us until the second, then we’ll have to do a major foray. I’ll warn you ahead of time that the cost will take your breath away.”

“I am sure it will. There are six of us now, not just one. I will survive the shock.”

“You need to do your barre and yoga tomorrow. You didn’t today, and you’ve got auditions coming. I can wrangle the kitchen and unpacking while you do your work.”

“I want to know where you put everything in the kitchen, or I will never learn to cook.”

“I’ll sort it out first, figure out where things need to go, then I’ll show you everything. It’ll take a few days of cooking to settle on some of it.”

“We have interviews at schools for the children next Monday.”

“We do. I hope we’ll get them settled quickly, so they don’t miss more than a couple of days. I like one in particular – the Imladris Academy. Covers kindergarten through high school, so all four could be in the same place.”

“I like that one, too. They have soccer for Bard, archery for Legolas, art for Tilda, and writing for our Sigrid. A good academic program for all, too, though I must ask about fencing. Then once they are in school again, lyubov moya, let us go to the county office and get a marriage license.”

“I want to, too. I can’t let anyone pillage me that thoroughly but my husband.”

“Nor I.”

“When is your first audition?”

“January nineteenth.”

“Soon.”

“And I will have to work very hard to be ready. I have not been consistent for the past week, and I feel it.”

“Then getting ready for your audition takes precedence, Thran. That’s your life. Whatever you need to do, I’ll work around it.”

“My life is more than the dance now, Bard.”

“Of course it is. But the dance still takes precedence. Until I can work metal again, you’re the breadwinner.”

“It will work out, dear saint. It will all work out.”

Bard sighed beside him, continuing to stroke Thran’s hip slowly. The gentle caresses against Thran’s skin lulled him into half sleep, but he was still aware of the substantial body beside his. He stroked Bard’s chest in appreciation.
“I know it will. It’s already worked out better than I ever thought anything could.” Bard caught Thran’s hand and pressed a kiss on it, then another onto the top of Thran’s head. “Sleep well tonight, angel.”

Thran smiled in his half sleep, and snuggled closer into Bard. “You have seen to me so well that I am sure to. Even better, my saint will be beside me, as I have wanted for so long. I love you.”

“I love you, too, cariad.”

They lay entwined, and lapsed into silence.

Thran drifted for a few moments in his half stupor, then gently faded into sleep.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

An angel and his saint might enjoy a little domestic bliss as they start their new life, but Sigrid's got business to take care of, much to her father's amusement.

Sun shone palely through the windows when Bard woke the next morning. For a moment, he stared blankly at the ceiling, not remembering where he was. This looked like the master bedroom in his house... ah, he was dreaming about it again. Even though he’d had to move away from his house eight years ago, he still dreamed about it at least once a week. At first the dreams had been memories of living there with Daphne and the children, happy memories of laughter and endless work and his wife’s sweet face as she painted the children’s murals. Then, as life got more precarious, the dreams had been of the house abandoned, empty, and decaying, and himself wandering from empty room to empty room, wondering where the children were. Even those had faded; for the last couple of years, the dreams were only of him standing outside the house, unable to go inside because he’d lost the key to the front door. In one, the house had turned into a dusty doll’s house; in another, it had crumbled to dust at his feet. To finally dream about being inside the house again was an improvement... except that was still a tease, still an elusive, unreachable dream. To dream about lying in bed in his bedroom was even worse. This would never, never happen –

The bed shifted beside him. Daphne? Years had passed since he’d dreamed about her, so long that he didn’t remember her voice or how she moved, only how she appeared in old photographs too painful to look at. He looked right –

Wait... he’d slept on the right when Daphne had been alive. So...

Thran lay beside him, still asleep.

His angel. His love. Lying here, beside him, in his house – their house! – asleep.

Oh, gods.

This wasn’t a dream? This was real?

Bard shut his eyes, swallowing hard, his heart racing, his body flushing with heat as it threw off its repose. He held his hand up before his face, pinched his arm, tasted the worst morning breath ever.

This was real.

Bard took a long, deep, marshaling breath. Thran lay on his side, facing Bard, his ribs rising and falling in slow rhythm, his face heartbreakingly beautiful as he slept. His long lashes were as dark as his eyebrows, and his braid of silky white hair lay curled on the grey pillowcase by his head. Bard watched Thran breathe until his heart stopped racing, until he’d reminded himself of everything that had happened in the past week, and of each detail of yesterday’s move, and then of last night, how he and Thran had thoroughly driven each other into exhaustion.

Bard smiled. Well, perhaps not complete exhaustion. What could he entice Thran into tonight? Not this morning, as tempting as that was, because his angel needed to be about his preparations for his
Bard took pains to ease out of bed without waking Thran, then tiptoed to the bathroom with flannel pants and tee shirt in hand. He tended to necessities, stretched, splashed water over his face, ran a comb through his tangled hair. It looked good this morning, if as unruly as ever, but shinier, smoother, all courtesy of Thran’s expensive hair potions and hair dryer. He’d have to learn to dry it himself like Thran had, though it had been wonderful to have Thran do it for him. He stretched again in the mirror, trying to work out the small kink at the base of his neck, but it didn’t ease. He put fingers to it, kneading gently, but it didn’t feel like a muscle strain; more like a bruise. Where was the hand mirror? He found it in one of the vanity drawers, angled it to see the reflection of his back, and snorted in chagrined laughter when he saw what it was.

Bite marks. Right over his spine, at the base of his neck. Claimed, he was, right and proper.

Thran padded into the bathroom, an ethereal creature of light and air despite looking so sleepy. He took in the hand mirror, and what Bard looked at, and bit his lip. His small smile was both apologetic and mischievous as he turned Bard around to face the wall mirror. He pressed a soft kiss on the mark, and put his arms around Bard’s shoulders.

“Oh, my poor saint... I am so sorry, Bard,” Thran murmured, pressing a kiss on his hair.

Bard folded his arms across his chest. “You are the spawn of Lucifer.”

Another kiss pressed against his ear. “You were very hard to resist last night, lyubov moya.”

Bard grinned as he savored how he’d acquired those marks. He slipped one arm around Thran’s waist. “You were very hard last night. I might try that last bit with you, though I promise not to leave the same marks. No need to advertise that you’re just as claimed as I am.”

Thran’s smile widened. “Thank you, lyubov moya,” he said meekly, drawing Bard to laugh.

“Mmm, I want to hear that soft little voice in bed later. But this morning we need to get you to the barre, and me to the kitchen. Tell me what you’ll want to eat when you’re done, and I’ll have it ready for you.”

“Do we have porridge, eggs? Any fruit?”

“Both porridge and eggs, and we have bananas, raisins, blueberries, and raspberries.”

“Porridge would be nice, then, with blueberries.”

“I’ll have it ready. Tea?”

“Yes, please. Whatever kind you prefer. Although no fruit tea, please. I am not fond of those.”

“I don’t like them, either. How about lemon ginger? That’s a good tonic. Or black?”

“I have not tried the lemon ginger, so I will try that one.”

“Lemon ginger it is.”

Bard stroked Thran’s bare buttock, and left the bathroom to his lover. Back in the bedroom, he put away his nightclothes, dressed in jeans, socks, and Henley, and made the bed, force of long habit. He pocketed his mobile, noting that it was still early, around seven. As he padded out of the bedroom, he paused on the landing to listen for sounds from the children, but wasn’t disappointed to be greeted
with silence. Seven a.m. on a holiday morning was way too early to expect any of the four to be up yet. He continued on downstairs, threaded his way through the boxes stacked in the dining room, and came into the kitchen. A few boxes remained there, too, and a clutter of things remained on the kitchen island. He stuck his head in the pantry, but little of that had been unpacked. Where was the oatmeal? He rooted around until he found one of the boxes of staples. Yes, there was the oatmeal. Milk, raisins, and blueberries were in the fridge, so all he needed was sugar. Fortunately, sugar was in the same box as the oatmeal, so he set that on the counter, then put the rest of the items in the pantry.

Thran padded into the kitchen, dressed in his working tights and shoes, leg warmers, several layers of sweaters, and fingerless gloves. Bard took one look at all the layers and shook his head.

“It’s too cold for you to work, isn’t it? I haven’t set the thermostat program yet, so I’ll do it now. There’s a separate heat zone for the ballroom, so you can make it as warm as you like.”

Thran snickered. “I understood very little of that, I am sorry to say, other than it is too cold, and I can make the ballroom warmer.”

“Do you want some tea before you start?”

“Tea would be nice, yes.”

“Kettle’s on, then. Come on, I’ll explain the programmable thermostat to you while it’s heating.”

Bard led Thran to the control panel in the dining room and explained how it worked. He keyed in the settings for the lower floor, all of which Thran watched closely.

“So there is a heating zone on this floor, and another for each of the upper floors, and one for the ballroom?” he summarized.

“Exactly. So let’s go set the one in the ballroom so it’ll be warm enough for you once you’ve had your tea.”

The kettle had boiled, so Thran waved to Bard. “I will set the thermostat in the ballroom myself, if you would make the tea.”

“Sure,” Bard grinned. It was funny to watch an elite athlete – on the dance floor as well as in bed – get excited to learn how to program a thermostat. He found the teapot, made a potful for him and Thran, and set out a big mug for Thran and a smaller cup for himself as the tea steeped.

Thran reappeared, looking exasperated.

“I’ll fix it,” Bard said hastily. “It’s all right. Thermostats can be confusing, I know.”

“The thermostat is set,” Thran replied. “Your explanations were very clear, so I had no trouble. I need your help with something else.”

“What?”

“I think the movers confused the main room with the ballroom.”

Thran led Bard into the ballroom. Thran’s barre was there against the wall, but so were several stacks of boxes, all standing in front of the barre.

“Looks like they did. Do you want me to move the boxes out completely, or just get the barre out for
now?"

“I can work quite well among the boxes. I need only help to free my barre from its captivity.”

Snickering, Bard offered a sketchy bow. “Then let me slay the box dragon for you, Prince of Ice.”

Thran offered him a theatrical bow in return. “I will be in your debt, my champion.”

“Are you trying to get me back into bed again?”

“I do not think I would have a very hard time to get you there. But we both have work to do before we earn that delight.”

“Sad, but true.” Bard shoved a few of the boxes, making a narrow path between the middle of them to reach the barre. “Oh, I see. The legs turn flat to store. So all I need to do is lift it over the boxes…”

“Do not pull your stitches, Bard!” Thran exclaimed hastily. “Hand me one end, please!”

“As long as I pick it straight up and don’t twist, my stitches will be fine, angel. Don’t worry.” Bard suited action to words, got the thing over his head, and slipped out from between the boxes to set the barre on the open floor. “I’ll hold it while you turn the legs.”

Thran did so with well-practiced ease, and then he and Bard slid it well away from the boxes.

“Good?”

Thran nodded. “Thank you. I am sorry I must ask you for help.”

“I’m not. Gives me a reason to give you a kiss.” He did so, gaining a smile from Thran. “That’s one of the joys of having a partner – always someone to help share the load. So come enjoy your tea, and the ballroom will be warm for you when you finish it.”

“I will fetch it, and bring it back here to sip as I warm up.” A long, slender hand reached out to stroke Bard’s hair as they walked back to the kitchen. “You encourage me to invent things for you to help me with.”

Bard poured tea into Thran’s mug and slid it to him. “If you run out of things, I’m sure I can think of a few more.”

A wistful sigh escaped Thran as he collected his mug. “You must stop, Bard. Or I will never be able to concentrate on my barre.”

“I’ll have breakfast and start on the kitchen, then. Will my rummaging bother you?”

Thran shook his head. “It will be fine.”

“There’s an old CD player somewhere I can set up for you if you need music.”

“Not today, but thank you.”

Bard gave Thran’s braid a tug. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Call if you need anything.”

“I will.”

Smiling, Thran stroked Bard’s hair and disappeared into the ballroom. Bard turned back to his tea, made himself a bowl of porridge, and ate it standing up in the solarium as he looked out at the terrace
and imagined what his pine tree sculpture would look like in the middle of the Japanese garden Thran had suggested. Still spooning up his breakfast, he wandered into the sitting room, seeing nothing but a clutter of furniture and piles of boxes, then back into the main room – virtually empty of boxes, so Thran had probably guessed correctly that the movers had confused the ballroom with it – and around into the front hallway where Hope stood. He wound his way back through the dining room and into the kitchen, and he was ready to start reclaiming his home from the boxes.

He worked steadily, unpacking the things they’d brought from their apartment kitchens. Afterwards, he went upstairs to the attic for the boxes of his mother’s things he’d stored without hope eight years ago when he’d had to leave the house. Carting them downstairs, he washed and dried the contents, and put the old stemware, platters, and other dishes on the shelves and in the cabinets of the butler’s pantry. An old silver tray went in the corner of the walnut countertop, the perfect setting for his mother’s crystal decanter and a pair of her glasses etched with flowers, angled to catch the undercabinet lighting. Most of what was left on the kitchen island was stuff for the pantry, so he mulled the best way to arrange that. As he put things away, he started a fresh pot of tea, then a list of everything they’d need to completely stock their shelves. By the time Sigrid came into the kitchen, the place looked well settled.

“Wow, Da, you’ve been working hard,” Bard’s oldest daughter commented, looking around.

“Morning, sweetness,” Bard smiled a welcome, hugging her. “It’s coming along. What would you like for breakfast?”

“I’ll get it,” she said, looking into the pantry. “Any bagels left?”

“No bagels until we get to the market, but there’s toast, porridge, and eggs.”

“Porridge, then. What kind of tea?”

“Green jasmine’s in the pot.”

“Mmm.” Sigrid went about making her breakfast thoughtfully, pausing now and again to look about her as if she were just as grateful to be here as Bard was. While she ate, he turned back to the unloading of boxes and bags, and the arranging of shelves. He was almost finished in the pantry when Sigrid came to stand in the doorway.

“So…”

Bard stood up and looked back at her, his eyebrows going up in inquiry.

“Did I hear you say that we were going to look at some schools on Monday?”

Bard nodded. “We’ve got appointments at three. One on Monday, and two on Tuesday.”

“Is one of them the Imladris Academy?”

Bard nodded again, surprised. “That’s the one on Monday. What’s up?”

“I’ve heard good things about it.”

Bard smothered a smile. Sigrid’s voice might sound calm and matter of fact, but her eyes were intent on a box of pasta, not meeting his. He ushered her out into the kitchen, poured them both more tea, and carried it to the big table at the end of the island. He put the cups down, and sat before one of them. Sigrid sat beside him and concentrated on her teacup.
“What things have you heard?”

Sigrid sipped her tea, then heaved a sigh that was half exasperation, half embarrassment. “I called Finn.”

Bard nodded.

“To tell him we moved. To tell him what happened at the park.” She looked up quickly. “Oh, I told him not to tell anyone, but I wanted him to know that I was sorry I might not get to see him any more.”

Bard sipped his tea to cover up his guilt for uprooting his children so abruptly, no matter how necessary it was, no matter how much it was for a better future. “If you want to see Finn again, Sig, we’ll make it happen. You could ask him to a film if you want, and I’ll take you.”

“I know, Da. Finn’s kind of a doofus, but he’s a sweet doofus. I do like him. And if you tell Bain that, I’ll kill you.”

Bard held up his hands. “Not a word. On my honor.”

Swallowing, Sigrid ventured a smile. “Okay. Well, anyway, I didn’t tell him where we were, in case Angelo’s gang wanted to make trouble, just that we were out of the city. And I told him that you and Thran were getting married, and that Thran had a son who was really good at archery and fencing. And he told me about this cousin and the cousin’s girlfriend whom he sees pretty often. They’re both really good at archery.”

“And this cousin and girlfriend go to the Imladris Academy, right?”

“Got it in one,” Sigrid smiled widely for the first time this morning. “They go to the Imladris Academy. The school has a really good archery program, which Legolas might like a lot.”

Bard smiled. “So besides having an archery program that might give you the chance to see Finn when he comes to visit his cousin, does the Imladris Academy have anything else to recommend it?”

Sigrid’s grin was embarrassed but she plowed on. “Finn seemed pretty impressed with it. Of course, it doesn’t have as many idiots to deal with as my old school did, and the kids are pretty smart. They have more class choices than my old school, and tutoring help, and a small student-to-teacher ratio, and a lot of different things to do outside of classes, and before and after class day care, and –”

“Finn knows about student-to-teacher ratios?” Bard arched an eyebrow.

“Of course he doesn’t,” Sigrid rolled her eyes. “But I do, because I looked it up on their website. I can’t tell if they have fencing or not, that’s the only thing. They might, because Finn was sure that Killian and Tara were on the academy’s archery team, and archery isn’t listed on their website. So maybe they offer things not listed on their website.”

“Sounds like you’ve done your homework,” Bard teased gently.

“Da, that is so lame.”

“It is. But I’m glad you were interested enough to look. Just comparing schools by their websites, that’s the one that looks the best to Thran and me, but I want us all to see it in person. A website is one thing; in person is another.”

“So we’ll see it for ourselves Monday?”
Bard nodded. “All of us. Ten o’clock. It’d be great if all four of you liked it, so you’d all be together. But if some of you end up in different schools, so be it. What matters is that we find schools that offer good educations, not just dating opportunities.”

“Da,” Sigrid groaned.

“Sig,” Bard groaned back in imitation, but with a smile. “If it doesn’t work out, you can still ask Finn to a film or something. Okay?”

“Okay.” She sipped her tea. “What do you want me to help with?”

“The kitchen’s in good shape. Just need a trip to the market, and we’ll do that Saturday or Sunday. You’ve got all your stuff put away?”

“Some of it. I thought maybe I could paint my room first, and then put everything away? You’ve got the paint I wanted; I saw it in the main room.”

“The windows need stripping, and so does your closet door.”

“The woodwork doesn’t, though, Da, so I could do the walls now and leave the windows and closet for later. You wouldn’t have to do much for me. I know how to tape the woodwork and use the roller. I’ve already got everything piled in the middle of the room, so all I need are the drop cloths and the rollers and brushes.”

“Let’s see if you’ve got spackling to do first, then we can decide.”

Bard went upstairs with Sigrid, and found the truth to her assertion that everything was piled in the middle of her floor in anticipation of being able paint the walls. The woodwork was unpainted—Bard remembered that Daphne had stripped it in preparation to painting it just before she’d died, and Bard had never had the wherewithal to finish it. It would need priming before it was ready for the bright white paint Bard wanted to use throughout the upstairs, but at least there was no stripping needed. There were few dings in the walls, for ten years ago Daphne had carefully patched everything before she put in the small mural of a grove of trees.

“The walls look good. You’ll have to tape around the moldings, top and bottom, first. Why don’t you start with that, and we’ll see how it goes to paint this afternoon?”

Sigrid pressed an impulsive kiss on Bard’s cheek. “Thanks, Da! Can I use the wide tape? I’m not as good a painter as you are yet.”

“I got extra of the wide. It’s in the main room. The stepladder’s in there, too. Need help with that?”

“I’ll get it. You go back to making sense of downstairs, and I’ll do this.”

“Come get me once you’ve taped, and I’ll clear you for painting.”

“Okay.”

Tilda came out of her room in her nightclothes with Mr. Bun under her arm, rubbing her eyes. “I heard you talking. Is Sigrid going to paint? She said she was last night.”

Bard stooped to give Tilda a hug as Sigrid ran downstairs to collect painting supplies. “She’s got a lot of taping to do first. Then we’ll see about painting. You ready for breakfast?”

Tilda nodded. “Porridge, I hope?”
“Coming up. You get dressed, and come down to the kitchen when you’re done.”

“Okay.” She disappeared into the bathroom, and Bard headed back down to the kitchen. In a few minutes, Tilda appeared.

“Where’s Thran?” she murmured as Bard sat a bowl of porridge and a filled teacup in front of her.

“He’s doing his barre, little doll. Every morning, that’s what he does. So he’s in the ballroom.”

“Can I watch?”

“Not right now, Til. He’s working, and needs to concentrate.”

Tilda nodded. “Oh. Like when I’m trying to draw a picture, when I don’t want anyone to stare at me?”

“Exactly like that. After breakfast, would you help me unload the DVDs? I’m going to set up the TV so we can watch the parade tomorrow.”

Tilda’s eyes brightened. “The Rose Parade! It’s already New Year’s Day tomorrow?”

“That’s right.”

A clatter behind them announced the appearance of Bain and Legolas, both ravenous.

“Morning, lads. Porridge is hot, or we have eggs or toast.”

“Porridge for me!” Bain yelped.

“Legolas, what do you like for breakfast?”

“Porridge is good, and most kinds of eggs. I’d rather not have hard boiled eggs.” Legolas gave a wry laugh. “That’s all Father knows how to make, and I get tired of eating those so often. I can do scrambled or fried myself, but I’ll have porridge today. Too hungry to want to cook!”

“Just as well. It’s going on ten, and we’re going to eat lunch about one. I’ve got a little job for you and Bain beforehand, if you’re up to it.”

“What?” Bain asked, mouth already full of porridge.

“Bain, manners,” Bard gave him a look. “It’s New Year’s Eve, so if we want to see the ball drop in Times Square, we need to set up the TV. Think you and Legolas can help with that in the sitting room?”

“Course,” Bain agreed, making Bard smile at his son’s nonchalance. “Legs and I can do that, right?”

“We’ve got Thran’s stuff to wrangle, too, not just ours,” Bard amended.

“I know how to put that together,” Legolas volunteered. “I did it for him. Father’s not mechanically inclined.”

“He’s good at other things,” Bard agreed. “So after breakfast, we’ll get the sitting room set up so we can watch the ball drop.”

“And the parade,” Tilda amended.
“Where’s Sig?” Bain asked.

“Upstairs. Hot to paint her room.”

“Oh, can we paint, too?” Bain asked, eyes wide.

“One painter at a time. Besides, the sitting room....”

“Father’s at the barre?” Legolas asked.

Bard nodded. “Just like every morning. Do you want tea, Legolas?”

“I’d like juice, please, if we have any.”

“Not yet. Just milk for now. I’ve started a list for the market, so I’ll add juice. What kind?”

“I like grape, and orange.”

“At lunch, we’ll talk about all the things you and your father like to eat, so we can get them on the list.”

“Okay.”

The boys and Tilda had just begun their porridge when Thran made his appearance. His clothing was damp with sweat in places, and his hair was wet at his nape, but he smiled as he mopped his face with a towel.

“Good morning, all,” he greeted, putting his empty tea mug in the sink. “Did everyone sleep well? Where is our Sigrid?”

“Painting her room. Or getting ready to paint her room. She’s got to tape the woodwork first. Do you want to shower first, or eat first?”

“A little tea first, then a little porridge, then I will shower. I am sorry to be so late, but I had extra work this morning to make up for missing so many classes this week.”

“You’re not late for anything,” Bard assured him. “Tilda and the lads are just starting breakfast. They’re going to help me set up the sitting room so we can use the TV, and I’m about to put on lunch to simmer. After that, we’ll all find some boxes to unpack, and get things as settled as we can.”

He put tea in front of Thran, and a bowl of porridge when he was ready, and while the four were eating he put on a kettle of ground beef and vegetables for sloppy joes. He also had a pan of chicken breasts ready for the oven in case Thran preferred that for lunch. By the time Thran and the children were through breakfast, he had lunch well under way, and so shepherded the children into the sitting room. They decided the best places to put the sofas and chairs to see the TV, then Bain and Legolas started to arrange the components while Tilda and Bard put the DVDs and CDs on the bookcase that had held Bard’s tools in the apartment. Sigrid came down to say she’d finished her taping, and upon inspection Bard agreed she could start painting after lunch. Bard hurried to put Thran’s chicken in the oven, and shortly thereafter everyone sat down for lunch. The list for the market grew longer and longer as everyone discussed their favorite dishes. Bard had a good sense of how to add Legolas and Thran to his usual cooking, and how to add a bit more variety into Thran’s rigorous diet. It was going to be a hard balance between four hungry, growing children and a ballet dancer who had to be so careful about what he ate, but Bard would manage.

During the afternoon, Thran helped Bard arrange what little they had in the dining room, mostly a
table and chairs once the boxes were cleaned out. The boxes in the ballroom went into the main room where most of them belonged, but as they got to the boxes containing a little of this and a little of that, progress slowed as the items were distributed throughout the house. Eventually Sigrid appeared, triumphant at completing her painting. She’d chosen a pale green that matched her mural, and the clean, bright walls lifted Bard’s spirits even more. Once the paint dried, Sigrid’s room would look much more cheerful. Supper was full of debate about whose room would be next.

The lads had done a good job of getting all the media components working, and proudly demonstrated that the TV, DVD, and CD player all worked. They sampled some of each all evening, and at midnight watched the New Year’s celebration together. Tilda was almost asleep, but roused enough for the final countdown, then was happy to go upstairs to bed. As the house quieted, Bard and Thran retreated to their room in good spirits. Thran cycled through the shower first, as he didn’t need to wash his hair, and Bard left him to settle into bed while he had a more thorough scrub. When he returned to the bedroom, Thran was curled among the pillows, all but asleep.

“You wore yourself out today, cariad,” Bard murmured, as he climbed in beside Thran.

“I did,” Thran sighed softly, sliding over to make room for Bard. “I did extra barre to make up for missing so many classes, and then I was busy with the unpacking. I never got to ask you about the kitchen.”

“The kitchen will still be here tomorrow, or the next day. Right now, your job is to take care of you.”

“We have so much to do, lyubov moya. The children’s schools first, then finish so much construction, and then find the things to make our house less empty.”

“It’ll come. The house is full of the most important things already – us. Everyone’s getting along – Bain and Legolas did a great job of setting up all the media. Sigrid painted her room, and Tilda helped with the unpacking, and you were able to work in the ballroom. I cooked. Tomorrow we’ll get a little farther on. Sunday, maybe we can take the children to see the tree at Rockefeller Center. You and Legolas have already gone, but Sig, Til, and Bain haven’t, and I promised them we’d go. And Monday we start to line up the children’s schools.”

Bard told Thran what Sigrid had said about the Imladris Academy. Thran listened sleepily, smiling at why Sigrid had taken such an interest beyond mere academics, and agreed that he would ask about fencing and archery for Legolas.

“Enough family business,” Bard said, stroking Thran’s hair. “You’re exhausted, and need to rest.”

Thran didn’t protest as Bard turned out the light and gathered him close, cradling Thran’s head on his shoulder. He rubbed Thran’s back slowly, earning a low rumble of contentment.

“Oh, my saint, you are zoloto moyo – my treasure. That feels so good.”

“I’ll call the tub installers next week. If you’re going to work so hard, you need that soaking tub to recover.”

Thran chuckled softly in the dark. “Only if you promise to get in with me.”

“That’ll get us both into trouble.”

“I hope so.” Thran sighed as he snuggled close into Bard. “I am very sorry, my love. I had wanted to play tonight, but I am very tired.”

Bard hushed him. “If you expect us to pillage each other every night, we’ll be dead before the year is
out. It’s a treat, a treasure, not an obligation. You need to get strong again for your auditions. I’m happy to hold you like this, to be warm in bed with you. So sleep, silly dancer.”

Thran sat up enough to kiss Bard. “You take very good care of me, lyubov moya. I love you very much.”

“Of course I do, angel, just as you take care of me. Now go to sleep.”

“I hear and obey, my saint.”

Bard grinned as he snuggled into the pillows with Thran in his arms. He didn’t have to see Thran’s face to know that he smiled.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Domesticity descends upon the house of a saint and his angel, and the search for a suitable school for four cherubs begins.

Thran drifted off into sleep, cradled in the arms of a saint. He so wanted to do more than soak up Bard’s warmth, feel the soft caress of Bard’s chest hair against his cheek, savor the stroke of Bard’s hand across his back, but he was so, so tired. He’d pushed himself ruthlessly at the barre this morning, not enough to injure himself, but enough to recover a little of the edge that distinguished him from so many other dancers. He still had far to go to recover his full technique, but he was satisfied in his progress. And though he shouldn’t have worked so hard to help Bard unpack, he wanted to – this was his family now, his home, and he wanted to add his stamp to it, too. He had thoroughly enjoyed watching Legolas with Bard’s three children to bring the sitting room into being, and helping to serve the supper, and being part of the cleanup. He’d never done such things before. Even to slump between Tilda and Legolas to drowse through cartoons until midnight, cheer the dropping ball, then shepherd sleepy children to bed, had been novel. He felt like a small child himself, struggling to stay awake so as not to miss a minute of anything.

It was perfect to end the day in bliss with his saint, even if tonight bliss meant only nesting together like puppies.

He slept soundly without waking until morning.

When he opened his eyes, it was to see Bard asleep beside him on his back, wavy brown hair scattered in his eyes and across the pillow, a half smile on his lips. Thran was content to watch Bard sleep for some minutes before he slipped from between the sheets and headed into the bathroom to change into his dance clothes. When he came out, Bard stirred.

“Happy New Year’s Day, angel.”

Thran’s mouth watered at Bard’s drowsy Welsh accent, at warm brown eyes still not quite open, at the first languid stretches of a powerful body, at the heart-stopping glimmer of a smile that greeted him. He’d kneeled by Bard’s side of the bed before he’d fully registered doing so.

“Happy New Year’s Day to you, lyubov moya.” Thran took up Bard’s hand to kiss. “My beautiful saint.”

“Am I?” Bard shut his eyes and chuckled. “Don’t come any closer, then, or my breath will change your opinion.”

Thran added his chuckle to Bard’s. “Stay in bed. It is only seven. I am off to the barre.”

“I’ll be up soon, angel. Stretch well.”

He left before he abandoned his resolve and crawled back into bed with his sleepy lover, took himself down to the kitchen to make tea, carried the steaming mugful into the ballroom, and set to his
work.

It took longer than usual to settle into his routine, and it was entirely because he had more than the dance to occupy him now. He had a lover sleepily rousing upstairs, four children to care for, and a house to settle. But his part in this family was to dance, and he was not in proper condition to do so. That he could remedy only at the barre.

Today’s routine was just as strenuous as yesterday’s, but he wasn’t so drained at the end of it. Once the holiday was over, and the children were in school again, he would be back in class every day, and his recovery would go faster. But after so many years, Thran was well able to put himself through anything from the gentlest to the most rigorous of routines. He followed his barre work with jetés and footwork, taking advantage of the expansive ballroom to push right up to exhaustion without passing into it. His yoga that followed so much work was calming, lengthening, restoring, until he was supple and centered, and ready for the rest of the day.

He took his empty teacup into the kitchen, but no one was there. He followed the sounds of voices into the sitting room where Bain, Legolas, and Tilda had gathered, waiting for the Rose Parade to begin. Tilda brightened to see him.

“Thran! The parade will start in just a few minutes! I’m ready to explain it to you, if you’d like.”

Legolas looked at him as if he were mad, but Thran smiled benignly at him. He put his hand to his chest and bowed to their youngest child.

“I would enjoy that very much, Tilda. I will shower, and come down right after.”

“Okay,” she nodded, smiling. “Get Da and Sigrid, too. They’re upstairs in her room.”

“I will do so,” Thran agreed, and took himself upstairs. He found Bard perched on a ladder, brushing paint on the woodwork between the wall and the ceiling. Even paint-stained work pants and an old tee shirt couldn’t hide Bard’s quiet strength – if anything, the rough attire just added to his allure. If Sigrid hadn’t been painting in the opposite corner, Thran might have been tempted to tease Bard off that ladder and into bed. But the moment for that would come soon, when the children would be in school, and the house would be empty but for the two of them...

A jolt in Thran’s loins drew a wince from him. A dancer’s belt was not the most comfortable confinement for an aroused cock.

“Good morning, ma chère Sigrid, lyubov moya Bard. Already hard at work?”

“Da is such a slave driver,” Sigrid teased, putting her brush down and coming to give Thran a hug. “Morning, Ada. I mean, he made me come up here and start priming woodwork at eight o’clock this morning! Who does that?”

“I think you have a loving Da who lets his beloved daughter convince him to help her paint woodwork at eight o’clock in the morning, yes?”

Sigrid giggled. “Welllllll.... I guess it did kind of happen that way. But it’s going to look great, isn’t it?”

Thran looked around admiringly. The pale green walls and white woodwork looked calm and fresh, and the light streaming in from the two windows was cheerful. The ceiling still looked like it needed painting, and the floor needed a good cleaning, but before long Sigrid would have the lovely sanctuary she craved.
“It already looks wonderful. It will suit you very well, ma chère.”

“We’re doing this ass-backwards, I know,” Bard said, climbing down from his ladder. “We should have done the ceiling first, then the walls, then the woodwork, but I’m not about to turn down such enthusiastic help with the painting.”

“Da makes it go faster, anyway,” Sigrid said, smiling. “He’s got such a steady hand that he doesn’t have to tape everything the way I do. So that saves a lot of time. We’ve got almost all of the woodwork primed, and this afternoon we’ll do the ceiling –”

“You’ll do the ceiling,” Bard amended.

“Okay, then, I’ll do the ceiling, and then we’ll do the woodwork with the gloss white, and it’ll be done. Tomorrow, I’ll clean the floor, and I’ll be set. Da, can I use the sewing machine? I can make curtains like I learned in family arts.”

“It’s in the main room,” Bard replied. “I haven’t figured out where it should go yet. Maybe we’ll turn one of the upstairs rooms in to an art studio for Tilda, and it can go there.”

“I can put it in my room for a while,” Sigrid offered, drawing Bard’s laughter.

“One thing at a time, Sig,” he counseled. “Paint first, then floor, then curtains.”

“Okay,” Sigrid conceded, smiling.

“Finished your barre and yoga, then?” Bard asked, brushing a kiss on Thran’s lips. Sigrid snorted in quiet laughter, but that merely encouraged Bard to wiggle his eyebrows at her and give Thran another kiss.

“I have. I have been directed to shower and then come down for the parade, and to bring the two of you with me.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Not yet. I will eat while I watch the parade. Tilda is eager to explain it to me, and I will not deny her that pleasure.”

Bard’s appreciative smile was such that Sigrid rolled her eyes again. “Honestly, you two are the biggest saps! When we go out in public, try not to do that. It’s cute here, but out in the world, it’s so embarrassing.”

“Paybacks are hell,” Bard winked at Thran, reminding him of when Bard had quoted the old adage to him. His loins jolted again, drawing another wince from him. “You had your chance to embarrass your Da in public when you were a baby. Now it’s my turn to embarrass you.”

“Just don’t do it Monday, okay?” Sigrid pleaded. “I want to like that school, and I want them to like us. So don’t embarrass us. Please, Ada? Please Da?”

“We will do our best to look properly... stodgy, is the word, perhaps?” Thran deadpanned.

“Ew, that’d be even worse. Just look hot, but not all kissy-faced.”

Bard burst out laughing. “You want your Da to look hot? That’s a first.”

“No, it isn’t. Ada, would you please take Da shopping and get him a decent pair of pants and a couple of shirts, and a good pair of boots? Tomorrow? So he looks hot on Monday?”
Thran could no longer suppress his laughter. “Oh, ma chère, tu es formidable! I will do my best, if I can persuade your Da to take us to the mall tomorrow.”

“We were going to Rockefeller Center tomorrow,” Bard protested.

“We can still do that, Da. We’ll go early to the mall, get your stuff, and then go skating.”

“You do need some new clothes, lyubov moya,” Thran agreed.

Bard was laughing, but his face had reddened, and he’d thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “It looks like you two have planned my day, doesn’t it?”

“It’ll be fun, Da. Really,” Sigrid assured him breezily, but Bard regarded her with wary amusement.

“If you say so,” he shrugged, winking at Thran again.

“So I am for the shower, and then for the parade,” Thran wiped his face again with his towel.

“We’ll cap the paint, put the brushes in plastic wrap, and be right down,” Bard agreed. “Porridge good?”

“Perfect,” Thran agreed, and they separated to their various tasks. In the shower, Thran took his usual care with his hair, but he did so quickly, then hurried into his clothes and downstairs to sit beside Tilda. He’d missed only a little of the parade. As Bard handed him a bowl of porridge and a cup of tea, their youngest child launched into an explanation of how all the floats had to be covered in natural materials. Bard returned to the kitchen to bring out a basket of muffins for everyone to share and cups of hot cocoa for the children.

“You spoil us all terribly, my domestic saint,” Thran observed, smiling as four hands descended upon the muffins.

“And happily so.” Bard sat down beside Thran, venturing to take a muffin after four hands had grabbed theirs. “Want a taste?”

“A small one,” Thran agreed, breaking off a small piece from Bard’s. “Mmm. Delicious. Blueberry. So, Tilda, the parade is in California, yes?”

Tilda continued her explaining, which drew Legolas to shake his head, but he listened despite his apparent dismissal, even asking a question or two. When the parade was over, the boys turned on one of the day’s ubiquitous American football games while Bard and Thran got lunch ready. Thran had his tour of the kitchen as he and Bard set out plates on the table, and food on the kitchen island.

“Gods, we’re running out of everything already,” Bard looked apprehensively at the inside of the refrigerator, rubbing his chin. “I think I can stretch everything until Monday. We’ll have to go to the market after we see the school. Can’t go Tuesday, because we have two schools to see, and if I wait until Wednesday, we’ll all be eating ramen.”

“No ramen,” Thran said firmly. “We will make do, and go Monday after the school. We will buy half the store.”

Bard exhaled as he shut the refrigerator door. “I hope you have every one of those millions I think you do, Thran, because I’m running through at least one of them hand over fist. I’m sorry.”

Thran snared Bard by the kitchen island and put his arms around him. Yes, his saint was taut under his hands, but with worry, not arousal, and his posture was hunched. “We have money, Bard. There
is nothing to worry about. None of us will have to eat that wretched ramen, ever. Though I suspect the boys will do so willingly, because boys have little concept of the wretchedness of junk food.”

A little of the tension eased from Bard’s shoulders, and he patted Thran’s hand. “Some moments, it takes my breath away how mad this all is. What was I thinking?”

“That we were in love and had chance to make a better life together with our children. That is what we both thought. We have done the hard part, lyubov moya. We have come together, we have become a family, we have moved here. Now we have the pleasure to finish our home together, and care well for our children. So please, don’t worry. All is well.”

Bard took another marshaling breath. “Keep reminding me of that, Thran. I keep expecting to wake up back in Steffen’s grotty apartment, and that would shatter me.”

“I will remind you. Now, let us call Clan Ffyrnig to the table.”

“The place where they’re at their fiercest,” Bard shook his head, wryly. Good, his saint was back on keel again. “I’ve got your salad greens, and some chicken. What veg do you want with them?”

“I will see to them. You put on the teakettle, and prepare for the onslaught.”

Lunch was a loud affair. The children had been together long enough, and enough time had passed since the fight in the park, that they were easing their careful protectiveness of each other, and snarking back and forth as if they’d lived together for years. Legolas was still quieter than the others, but his expressions of delight, outrage, hilarity, embarrassment, and a host of other emotions were open, without reserve; his son was fitting into this merry band of fierce children well. After lunch, Bard decided what to make for supper, Tilda settled with Mr. Bun to read the storybook Bard had given her for Christmas, and the boys debated which video game to play. Sigrid was eager to get on with her painting, but first she found both him and Bard in the kitchen mixing a marinade for tonight’s chicken.

“Why don’t you two go to the mall to get Da some clothes now?” she suggested. “It’s Friday, the shops will be open, and you won’t have the four of us hanging around getting bored. We can handle everything here for a couple of hours.”

Thran continued to stir the concoction as Bard added more spices to the bowl. “That is a good idea, Sigrid. Do you think so, Bard? There is nothing that we planned to do here this afternoon that cannot wait another day.”

“Except for the bathroom tiling and Sig’s woodwork and half a dozen other things, but I guess there’s no dodging it,” Bard conceded. “If you’re okay with the children being here alone for a couple of hours —”

“Alone?” Sigrid repeated, her hands on her hips and her head canted to one side. “There are four of us, Da. No one’s ever alone in this family.”

Bard’s lips twitched. “That’s exactly the way I want it, sweetness.”

“And that’s the way it is with four of us. We’ll be fine for a couple of hours.”

Bard held up his hands in surrender. “I’m game if you are, Thran. Though I warn you, you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“I do not,” Thran shrugged, stirring the marinade. “It will be no work at all. Wait and see.”
He gave Bard a look, which Bard returned, both of which had Sigrid throwing her hands up into the air. “Ye gods and little fishhooks, get a room, you two! Honestly, it’s like being in middle school!”

Laughing, Bard swept Sigrid into a dance around the island. “It’s getting too easy to tease you, sweetness. So come into the sitting room for a minute so we can tell the lads and Tilda where we’re going.”

They made the children promise to behave – Thran hoped they managed to keep from thumping the house down around their ears – and designated Sigrid as captain with Legolas as first mate for the three-hour cruise. This, apparently, was a reference to a TV show from long ago that Bain found particularly funny.

“And make Da get a coat, Ada!” Sigrid exhorted Thran. “He’s been making do with two sweaters since the cops took his for evidence, but he needed one long before that.”

Thran realized with a pang that Sigrid was right – for the past week, Bard had simply pulled a pair of thick sweaters over his Henley each time they’d gone out. He hadn’t noticed because Bard hadn’t called attention to it.

“You can wear one of mine today,” Thran offered. “Let me get it.”

He fetched coats and boots from the entry closet and came back to the sitting room with his armload, handing his leather jacket to Bard and keeping his grey pea coat for himself. After putting on his boots, Bard awkwardly pulled on Thran’s jacket, reddening when Bain and Sigrid started oohing and aahing. Bard was not as slender as Thran was, but the supple leather accommodated his muscular frame beautifully. Tilda looked at her father with her usual careful consideration.

“You look great, Da!” was Sigrid’s opinion.

“You do!” Bain agreed, sounding so surprised that Thran laughed.

“Very funny, both of you,” Bard grimaced. He gave Tilda a look. “Well, Til, let’s have your two cents’ worth, too.”

“I think you look nice,” she pronounced. She bent to sniff his sleeve. “You smell nice, too.”

“That’s good to know... I think,” Bard ran a hand through his hair. “All right, you lot, no jumping on the furniture, and don’t turn the game console on so loud that the windows blow out, and look after each other while we’re gone.”

“Okay Da.”

“Legolas, please wait to practice your archery and your fencing until we return,” Thran added. “Our usual rules apply.”

“Yes, Father. Have a nice time.”

Thran and Bard made their escape out to the truck, and were soon on their way. Bard ran a hand through his hair again, his usual sign of discomfort.

“What is it, Bard?”

His half grin was both amusement and chagrin. “Children pull no punches. I guess it bothers them, the way I look.”
“I do not think it bothers them. They are proud of you. They are proud of all you have done. They know that you have sacrificed so that they have what they need. Now they are excited for you to have some new things for yourself, that is all.”

“It’s true, most of my stuff is in rags. That didn’t matter when I was welding. Construction’s hard on clothes. I ought to throw most everything I own out.”

“Please do not throw all of it out,” Thran put a comforting hand on Bard’s thigh as they drove. “The sight of you in your boots and jeans... I cannot describe how erotic that is. Especially when those jeans ride so low. I think you do that just to devil me.”

Bard snickered. “I didn’t, but I think I’ll do a little more of it from now on. Deviling you has become one of my favorite hobbies. Enjoying your retaliation when I devil you is another one.”

“Then if you want more retaliation, you will keep your jeans and steel toed boots. Today, then, we will not find replacements for them, but things to wear when we interview schools, and go to films and the market and other places, and talk to artist’s reps.”

“Artist’s reps?” Bard gave him a startled look.

“Not for a while. Our house needs work, and you are the best one to see to that, and I agree with you that that is what you should do. But before long, you will start on your metal again, and you will need an artist’s rep to broker your work. I know of one that I think would be good to talk to, when you are ready.”

“It’s not Isen Saruman Brothers, is it? They’re sharks, both of them.”

Thran shook his head. “No, I am aware of them and their poor reputation. This is a relatively new firm, still small, and therefore willing to work for a few percentage points less than usual. They may not have the widest reach of such folk, but by reputation they are diligent workers, and understanding of their clients. The firm is Shire Hills.”

Bard shook his head. “They must have started after I had to move to the city. But if you think they look good, I’ll talk to them. Just as soon as we get the house a bit farther along.”

“How much is farther along?” Thran asked, curious rather than challenging.

“All the children’s rooms and our room are painted and the floors done. Both of the upstairs bathrooms are finished. The kitchen floor’s cleaned and waxed, and the walls are painted. The other lower level rooms are painted and the floors are done. That should keep us for a while. Is that okay with you?”

Thran nodded. “It is.”

“Oh, and the ballroom needs painting and the floor done. You’ll have to tell me what to do to the floor so you can dance properly. And we have to sort out your auditions. I’ve been worried that you’ll have to take something where you’ll have to live in the city during the week, and spend only the weekends at home. Could that happen?”

Thran considered. “Conceivably, if I decide to take a position that makes the commute too difficult. But the one position that would require that I do not expect to take, so I will not concern myself yet. I also mull the possibility to teach master classes, which I could hold in the ballroom, if that is something you would allow. There is good money in that, and I have had requests to teach before now, so I think I could stage several classes to make the annoyance and cost of insurance worthwhile. I would like to talk to you about that in detail, so you know what would be involved,
and can say whether you would allow such an intrusion into our home.”

“If you would like to do that, then we’ll make it happen,” Bard shrugged. “But right now, you’d better tell me where we’re going. The mall’s just ahead.”

“Then let us forge into the mall, and see what they have to offer us,” Thran agreed. “This will be fun, *lyubov moya*. It will.”

“If you say so, angel. It’s been so long since I’ve been shopping that I don’t know if I remember how.”

Thran grinned in anticipation. “That does not matter. I know how. And I will enjoy this.”

“Just don’t dress me up as a starving artist, please. I’ve already got the wardrobe for that.”

“I don’t intend to ‘dress you up’ as anything. Tcha, do you not know the secret of how to buy the best clothes, Bard?”

“I freely admit that I don’t,” Bard chuckled, pulling the truck into a parking space at the back of the lot.

“Buy only clothes that you wear. Do not buy clothes that wear you.”

Once Bard switched off the truck and pocketed the keys, he leaned over the steering wheel and cast Thran an amused smile. “I hope you’re going to explain what that means.”

“In detail, my saint.”

Bard’s sigh was longsuffering, but the hint of anticipation in his eyes revealed that he wasn’t as tentative about this endeavor as he let on.

* * *

The mall was crowded with shoppers looking to cash in on the last of the holiday bargains, patrons deciding to exchange old gifts for new, and teenagers bored of staying inside with families and eager to catch up with friends. Bard steered them to the directory kiosk, which Thran studied for a few seconds. He pointed to a couple of places.

“These first, I think.”

“Sigrid says that one has a discount department. A lot of designer stuff for reduced prices.”

“A good place to try,” Thran agreed, and led the way through the throng. It struck Bard how many people stared at them – at Thran, not him, and he well understood why. Such a tall, graceful man, so slender, with such hair, was striking even in his usual black velvet jeans, grey Henley, grey pea coat, and bright red scarf. All at once, Bard understood what Thran had meant by buying clothes that he would wear, rather than clothes that would wear him. Nothing Thran wore called attention to itself; in fact most of what he wore was little more than ascetic, if good quality. But the stark colors and streamlined styling emphasized all of Thran’s best features. Realizing that made Bard feel a lot better about this expedition.

“I figured it out,” he murmured, watching a pair of teenaged girls eye his lover, then smother giggles
“What?” Thran murmured back, eyes sliding towards the two girls.

“About me wearing clothes instead of clothes wearing me. Half of the place is looking at my lover because that’s what you do. So we’re here to find things that do the same for me.”

Thran cast him a pleased smile. “Exactly so, my saint. When we leave, I fully expect the other half of the place, as you call it, will look at you. We will make a striking couple, not that we don’t already.”

Bard snickered. “The next thing I want you to teach me is how to ignore half of the place looking at me.”

“That is simple to explain, though hard to do. One – consider your half of the place to be a field of cabbages, because vegetables have no power to unnerve. Two – be aware of your posture, do not chew gum or smoke, do not play with your hair, do not curse in public in a language anyone understands. Three – if anyone speaks to you, be polite, never explain or volunteer anything, do not banter, especially with young females, and pretend not to hear anything said as an aside, good or bad.”

Bard straightened, smiling as he did so. Beside him, Thran also stood a hair straighter, brushed a strand of white hair over his shoulder, and gave a miniscule nod towards the pair of nervously giggling girls as they angled closer.

“Mr – Mr. Oropherson? Please? May – may we have your autograph? P-please?”

Thran’s smile was gracious as he took the piece of paper and pen that one of the girls had thrust out at him. “You are kind to ask, ma chère,” he murmured, his Russian accent more pronounced than was his usual. “What is your name, then?”

“Fern and Miriam?” one offered, clutching her friend’s arm in a death grip. “I’m Fern, and she’s Miriam. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod, it’s like such an honor to meet you!”

Thran traced a graceful flourish on the paper, and another on the paper held out by the second girl. “Are you dancers, mes petites?”

“Oh, we like so are, and we’re your biggest fans ever!”

“Yeah, we’ve watched you on YouTube like so many times, we know all your dances! You’re the best ever!”

Thran handed back the papers, and offered one of his Continental bows. “I thank you so much. I am happy you enjoyed them.”

“Can we have a picture with you, too? Please?”

“Of course.” He turned to Bard. “Perhaps you can take it for her, lyubov moya, so they both can be in the picture with me?”

“Of course,” Bard grinned, tickled at the whole affair. He took a couple of pictures with each mobile of the girls standing on either side of Thran, then handed them back.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you so much!” one of the girls squealed. “And thank you, Mr. Oropherson’s friend, for taking the pictures for us!”
“Glad to oblige,” Bard nodded, smiling.

“You are so lucky to be his friend!” the other one added enviously.

“I am,” Bard agreed, winking at Thran as the two girls scampered off, squealing to each other about their trophies.

“I am the lucky one,” Thran winked back at Bard. “Come, before more descend.”

They continued on their way without interruption. Once in the store, they headed to the men’s department, a place that was blessedly free of teenaged ballerinas. Thran cruised through the racks leisurely but methodically, occasionally touching one article or another, but he didn’t linger over anything until the fourth or fifth item. He took out a blue-grey shirt, and handed it to Bard, then kept moving.

“How do you know when to stop at something?” Bard murmured. It’d been a long time since he’d had the luxury of shopping like this. Usually he headed to the thrift store, or at best the irregular rack of the cheapest off market store, and bought whatever fit him.

“You need shirts, sixteen or seventeen inch neck, thirty-six inch sleeve. You are six feet two inches, which means a tall size. Blues and greys and subtle patterns suit you, not blacks or beiges or loud patterns. So I look only for shirts in those sizes and colors. When I find one, I see if the style suits you and if the fabric is nice. I pick up only what meets all of that.”

“Hmm,” Bard shrugged. “Easier than I expected.”

“It makes sense. Look at only what suits you from the start. Ignore the rest.”

Thran kept moving, and Bard went one rack over to try the same thing. At the end of the row, they had six shirts. They moved on to trousers, and soon came up with four in Bard’s size. Thran ushered him to the dressing room, squeezing himself into the corner while Bard tried on all of the pants. Only two felt good, so Thran collected the other two and put them aside. Only then did Thran pass over the first shirt. That went faster, though Thran silently ogling him from beside the mirror gave them both something to grin at. Four of the shirts didn’t suit, but the last two were possible. Thran held silence as Bard considered.

“They’re both nice, but this one doesn’t feel as good –”

“Then off it comes. Toss it to me.”

“But –”

“No buts, lyubov moya. Your body knows better than your eye. If it does not feel like your skin, then it is not right.”

“That’s not going to leave me with much.”

“Exactly. You do not want anything that does not feel like your skin. Only perfection. Not almost perfection.”

“Okay, then not these pants, either. Just the dark blue ones.”

“And that shirt?”

Bard nodded. “That one’s nice.”
“So put them on together, and see how that looks.”

Bard did, and gave himself a gander in the mirror. Neither blue grey shirt nor dark blue trousers called attention to themselves, but Bard liked the way they looked on him. Thran was nodding, a smile on his face.

“Yes. Those are the best ones.”

They took another pass through the racks, found nothing else that appealed to either of them, then headed on. After visiting five or six stores, Bard emerged attired from head to toe in his new purchases. In all, he was the proud owner of three pairs of pants, two pairs of jeans, seven shirts, a sweater, oxfords, a pair of boots, socks, underwear, winter gloves, new sleep pants that were not plaid or ratty, and a soft grey coat that felt luxurious and looked better.

“Look in that store,” Thran stopped Bard as they backtracked through the mall, heading towards the exit nearest to the truck, both of them laden with bags. “That grey-blue scarf on the last maquette.”

“Mannequin.”

“Yes, that. It matches your coat.”

Five minutes later, Bard draped the blue scarf around his neck, enjoying the soft brush of the plushy weave on his neck.

“Yes,” Thran purred, as they walked.

“Yes what?”

“The scarf feels good, and so does everything else, yes? It shows. You were beautiful before, but you are more so now, because you have an outer skin that suits you. And now your half of the place looks at you.”

Bard winced, but Thran was right. Maybe people stared at Thran first because he was so striking, but Bard was getting a share of the looks, too. Too tongue-tied to speak, Bard could only smile as he walked beside Thran. His tall lover gave him a sideways smile, then linked his arm in Bard’s.

“We are a striking couple, are we not?” Thran murmured.

“We are,” Bard agreed.

* * *

When Bard and Thran walked into the house after their shopping venture, they came into the sitting room where Bain and Legolas were still glued to the TV and their game console. A clatter behind them announced Sigrid’s arrival from upstairs.

“Gods, Da! Look at you!” Sigrid exclaimed as soon as she came into the room. She had a smudge of white paint on her arm, but otherwise looked unscathed from her exercise in ceiling painting. “Ada, you’ve made him look so great! I can’t believe you, Da!”

“Yeah, uh-huh, Da, you look good,” Bain nodded, eyes on the TV and the game he and Legolas were playing. Bard grinned; no coat, pair of pants, or shirt had yet been made that could distract
Bain’s laser focus away from a video game.

Legolas, at least, gave him a little more of a look, offering a smile. “You do look nice,” he said shyly.

Tilda arrived, her book in hand, to look her father up and down. She touched the trailing end of Bard’s blue scarf. “Mmm, that’s so soft. I think you look nice, too.”

“So you’ll wear that Monday when we go to the school, right?” Sigrid asked.

“I don’t know, Sig. Does this look too hot?” Bard teased, holding his new coat open to show his new shirt and pants. “I don’t want to make the other Das feel bad.”

“So what if you do?” Sigrid shrugged. “I can’t wait to visit this new school!”

The shopping expedition, then, had been a success.

The rest of the day flew by. Bard had just time to take off his new clothes before he started supper, and then children began to cycle through baths and wind down for the night, and then he and Thran had time to tend to themselves. Because they expected to spend Saturday unpacking, they kept their private indulgences short, but thorough.

Saturday was a quiet day. Everyone was glad of the chance to spend the day leisurely unpacking, arranging, playing games, eating whenever they felt like it, and watching DVDs. They played a little soccer outside, laughing in the cold air. After Bard showed Thran the extent of their property, they walked around outside the solarium windows, planning their Japanese garden.

The slow day was the perfect lead-in to Sunday, which began with a good breakfast, then a trip to Rockefeller Center for the skating trip that Bard’s children had looked forward to. All of them ventured onto the ice, even Bard. Despite how many years it had been since he’d skated, he still remembered how, and managed to keep his feet for the entire session. Thran was as graceful on skates as he was on his feet, and to see his hair drifting around him in a cloud reminded Bard of how that hair had floated around him the morning he’d come hurtling down the apartment stairs for their first liaison. They circled the ring together while Bain and Legolas rocketed around pretending to be their favorite hockey players.

Sigrid must have called Finn Durinson about the trip, because the stocky boy with a mop of wavy blond hair and a New York Islanders #86 jersey magically appeared, hockey skates in hand, shortly after they arrived. He and Sigrid spent most of the session circling together and talking, which helped Bard feel a little better about uprooting his family so abruptly. Maybe the thought of not seeing Sigrid every day at school had been just the nudge Finn needed to pay her more attention.

Being the youngest, Tilda was not the strongest skater, and by the end of the session she was happy to skate between Thran and Bard, laughing as they sped around the rink faster than she could go herself.

When their session was over, everyone was well winded, though Sigrid lingered on the ice to talk with Finn. It wasn’t until the attendant chased the pair off that they finally exited. Finn came over to the rest of the family with Sigrid, smiling a cheerful greeting to everyone.

“Ah, a good choice of jerseys,” Thran commented as Finn shook his hand. “Kulemin is the only Russian on your Islanders team, yes?”

Finn’s eyes sparkled. “Yes, sir, he is. He’s the best!”

Bard snickered. Thran didn’t know a lot about many things, but he knew his Russian athletes.
Bain and Legolas joined Finn and Sigrid to talk about skating and hockey, so Bard and Thran stood with Tilda to watch the Zamboni trundle around the rink. Tilda happily explained to Thran why the Zamboni had a sticker of a certain cartoon beagle on the side, and how that same beagle was also a World War I flying ace. Bard listened in silence, happy to watch the two of them laughing together.

How had life become so rosy, even in the depths of winter?

In deference to Sigrid’s pleading eyes, they found a nearby place for lunch so that Finn could join them, and the four older children shared pizza at one table while Bard, Tilda, and Thran had their lunch at another. Tilda felt special, as she had the devoted attention of both her fathers, and the four older children were free to laugh and talk about anything they wanted without worry of outraging either younger siblings or parents. Afterwards, as Finn bade them a reluctant farewell, Bard kept quiet about the promise he overheard the boy make about calling Sigrid every night. He didn’t expect to have to remind Sigrid that schoolwork came before mobile calls from hockey-playing boyfriends, but he’d keep an ear out for late-night giggling all the same.

After lunch, they had their traditional walk around Rockefeller Center, then piled into the truck to head for the market. Because it was still early, they decided to shop for provisions now rather than after the school interview tomorrow. Bard had their list in hand as they went into the big grocery. His children knew the routine of not begging for whatever delight they saw, and Legolas was not the child to act that way, either, but even so, the amount of food that went into two carts was daunting. Bard's old anxiety about money rose with each item that went into the carts, but he told himself that it was all right, Bard had their list in hand as they went into the big grocery. His children knew the routine of not begging for whatever delight they saw, and Legolas was not the child to act that way, either, but even so, the amount of food that went into two carts was daunting. Bard's old anxiety about money rose with each item that went into the carts, but he told himself that every shopping trip would not be so outrageous, because this one included all the things they needed to stock their pantry, in addition to the weekly food items. At least he didn’t have to buy many expensive spices, for his stash had moved with them from the apartment. But the amount of meat alone made him gulp. Most of that was chicken, always less expensive than beef. Fish, however, was not cheap, but it was good for the children and Thran, so he got a couple of meals’ worth of that for the week. At least the junk food aisle didn’t get any of their business, or the pastry case, or the expensive boxed cereal section.

He gritted his teeth when the checkout clerk displayed the total for their haul, and tried not to wince. But Thran was his usual unperturbed self as he pulled out his credit card and signed for the lot. The boys wheeled the carts out to the truck, calling and laughing to each other.

“It is all right, Bard,” Thran said softly as they followed the children. “We have to eat.”

“I know we do. It’s just...”

“I understand. But it is all right. We are all right.”

Bard smiled ruefully. “Some of this is still hard to get used to.”

“Some things for me, too. But we will get each other through this. If you want, I can come with you each time we go to the market. I like to visit here.”

Bard gave Thran a surprised look. “You do? Why?”

Thran shrugged, grinning as he thought about it. “Because it is a place so full of possibilities. So many things to try, to look at, to wonder where they came from. To consider the different kinds of fish, to marvel at the lady who iced the small cakes with such a deft hand, to appreciate the artful person who arranged all the rows of yogurt cups into colorful stripes, to smile at the young clerk with the beautiful headscarf at the kosher counter... so many things. Then there is the anticipation of all the delicious meals we will make, and how we will sit around our table with our children and laugh as we eat. What could be better?”
Trust Thran to find the magic in such mundane task as shopping for food. But as Bard thought about what Thran had said, he realized that he enjoyed the market for the same reasons, and felt a little better.

It took everyone to haul in the bags of food when they got home, though Bard was allowed to carry in only one bag at a time, and a light one, at that, in deference to his stitches. Bard had Tilda and Legolas ferry staples into the pantry, Sigrid stack meat into the freezer, and Thran load the heavy jugs of milk and juice into the fridge, while Bain washed the produce before it went into bowls on the counter or the fridge crisper bins. As they worked, they discussed tomorrow’s visit to the Imladris academy, and soon children were scampering to collect their laundry to cycle through the washer and dryer so that they’d have clean clothes for their visit. Laundering was another thing Thran knew nothing about, other than how to wash his dancing things.

“They are things to wash by hand, and hang to dry,” he explained, as he and Bard stood in the mudroom off the kitchen amid baskets of dirty clothes. “Never in the dryer. This, apparently, is too hard for launderers to remember, and after they ruined several things, I chose to do them myself. The rest of my things, and Legolas’s, I sent out.”

“Okay,” Bard nodded, eying the basket full of tights and stretchy shirts and the mysterious dancer’s belts, which he discovered were just a different configuration of jockstraps. “Your stuff, hand wash, line dry. The washer does have a delicate cycle, though. What about that and cold water? That’d spare you all the hand washing, and it’d get more of the water out, so everything would dry faster.” Thran looked dubious, but he shrugged. “I will try that once. But nothing must ever go in the dryer.”

“Got it.”

Bard set to sorting the rest of the laundry, another thing Thran knew nothing about, nor had he used a washer or dryer before, but he nodded understanding at Bard's sensible explanations. He volunteered to put in the first load under Bard’s eye, smiling triumphantly when he adjusted the machine correctly.

“You’re funny,” Bard shook his head as they dumped in the first basket of clothes. “You’re this elite athlete, this eminent dancer, but you get excited about programming the thermostat, or filling the washer, or going to the market.”

“Because all these things mean I live in a home with a family, Bard.” Thran put the last of his tights into the washer and shut the lid. “I did not learn these things as a child in a dormitory, or as a dancer in the academy, or as a dancer with the company. There were people who did these things so that I could perfect my technique so as to reflect well on the state. When I came to this country, I hired people to clean and to launder. I bought food already cooked or things simple enough to make myself. There was no reason to do otherwise until now. Now I learn from the best of teachers so that I can help our family.”

Bard stroked Thran’s hair back over his shoulder. “Hmm. Maybe I can think of a way to reward you for being such a quick study.”

“If it involves a hot shower and a massage, that would be very nice.”

“I’ll give it some thought, and let you know after we get the children in bed. Why don’t we meet in our room at, say, ten, and talk about it?”

Thran gave him a coy look and an anticipatory smile. “I hope we will do more than talk about it.”
“So do I.”

Some hours later, there was very little talking, but quite a lot of soft moaning. Bard rewarded his angel so well that he was well rewarded in return.

* * *

Everyone was up before eight the next morning, Thran included, but he would not take his place at the barre this morning. Instead, he would help to marshal a good breakfast for his family before they went to visit the Imladris Academy. Bard tried out the new griddle on their stovetop to produce a mountain of blueberry pancakes, as well as some scrambled eggs for Thran. The children all talked eagerly about the upcoming visit; Finn had been a wealth of information yesterday at lunch about the school that his cousin attended. He’d confirmed the archery team that Killian and his girlfriend Tara were part of, but also that there was not a fencing team. That did not dismay Thran; he hadn’t expected one, and even if there had been one, it would likely not have been challenging enough for Legolas. Once life stopped whirling like a dervish, he would find a suitable one.

Finn’s testimony had also implied good things about the academic program, if the number of his groans about hard tests and demanding teachers had been any indication.

The school was on the other side of Greenwood Dale on the Lake from the house, but the drive took only fifteen minutes. Clan Ffyrng piled out of Bard’s truck at a few minutes before ten to regard the school campus. It had once been a monastery some decades ago, and had remained a beautiful but empty relic for some time after that. When the artists’ colony had sprung up about fifteen years ago, so many young artists with families had moved in that the local school was hard pressed to absorb them. The old monastery had been opened as a school for the children nearest the artist’s colony.

“It looks like a church,” Tilda ventured.

“It once was a place where brothers of the church lived, little doll,” Bard agreed. “But when they left, there were so many children that it became a school.”

“I think it’s pretty,” Sigrid said.

“Look, Bain, there are the soccer fields,” Legolas pointed to the telltale cages on the athletic fields on the right.

“Wonder where the archery field is?” Bain asked in return, following Legolas’s finger.

They went inside the main hall, and found administrative offices just inside. A receptionist took their names, and showed them to a waiting area. A case of sport trophies beckoned their attention, and the children went up to it to look.

“That’s got to be Killian,” Sigrid looked closely at the team roster picture beside an archery trophy. “He looks just like Finn, but with dark hair. And maybe that’s Tara? She’s got really long red hair, Finn said.”

“Mr. Bowman? Mr. Oropherson?”

The family turned to find a lean, dark-haired man offering them a welcoming smile. He was as tall as Bard, dressed in dark pants and a burgundy tunic with a high collar.
“Welcome to the Imladris Academy. I’m Headmaster Elrond L’Èarendil.”

“Hello,” Bard leaned forward to shake hands, as did Thran. “These are our children, Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda.”

“Good morning to you all,” Elrond nodded, shaking hands with each child in turn. “We have a small meeting room where we can talk for a while. Would you like coffee, tea, or juice?”

Thran and his family followed the headmaster to the meeting room where beverages and a tray of pastries waited for them. Thran was pleased that all of the children showed great restraint and didn’t dive for the pastries at first sight, but waited until they were invited to help themselves. Thran refrained, and he was touched to see Bard do the same so that he wasn’t the only one not eating. He was content to listen quietly to the headmaster’s description of the facility, the curriculum, the philosophy, the class structures, and so forth. He’d endured several such spiels when he’d searched for a school for Legolas four years ago. What impressed him this time was how the headmaster talked to each of their children, not just to Bard and him, inquiring about their interests and their experiences. Bain was the funniest, bringing up Legolas’s proficiencies at archery and fencing before Legolas himself did.

“We do have an archery team,” Elrond confirmed, smiling broadly. “I’m pleased to say that we took the state championship for independent academies last year. How much experience have you had, Legolas?”

Thran listened to his son’s modest assessment with amusement, but it didn’t pass Elrond by that his young son had placed on the varsity team of his school and was training for a future Olympics berth.

“That is quite impressive,” Elrond agreed. “And so are your fencing skills. We do not have a school team, but we are fortunate to have a very talented pair of trainers close by, so the three or four students who wish to pursue the sport have access to their expertise. Both have plied the sport on the international circuit for some years, and are quite experienced – Lady Gondor in the foil, and Lord Gondor in the épée.”

“Arwen and Aragorn Gondor?” Legolas asked. “I know them! I actually saw him at the last International trials! Remember, father? He placed third!”

“I do remember, Legolas,” Thran confirmed. “His match was very close. He almost took it from the Spaniard who took first.”

“Which of the events is your preference?” Elrond asked.

“I like them all, but I love épée the most, like Aragorn. My father is quite skilled, and I love to practice with him.”

Thran smiled proudly at Legolas. “My son is gracious. He takes more of our matches than not these days, and he improves every time we spar. He is very fast.”

Elrond’s eyebrows went up. “Indeed. I didn’t know that your ballet training also included fencing.”

“That’s why Legolas is such a good a fencer,” Bain inserted proudly. “Thran dances with knives!”

Everyone burst out laughing at that, including Elrond. “I see. You are from a talented family, then.”

“We’re all good at something,” Tilda piped up. “You know about Legolas and Thran. Sigrid is a good writer. Bain is a good soccer player. I like to draw. And Da is a metal sculptor.”
“Talented, indeed. I’ll keep all of these things in mind as I take you around the school.”

They put on their coats to visit all the various departments in other buildings. There was a bright and sunny art studio that all the grades shared, full of examples of works from pastels to oils and clay. Elrond made a special effort to find one of the art instructors, Mr. Rohan, who talked to Tilda and showed her the clay horse sculpture he was working on. They met several other instructors, including Mr. Gandalf, who taught chemistry; Ms. Galadriel, who taught history; and Mr. Glorfindel, who taught music. Elrond made a point of taking them through the gymnasium to meet Mr. Faramir, the gymnasium master and archery instructor. To Thran’s surprise, he had heard of Legolas, and welcomed him warmly, saying he would be well pleased to have him on the school team. When Mr. Faramir heard of Bain’s interest in soccer, he found Mr. Boromir, the soccer and lacrosse coach, to talk to Bain. As they were leaving the gym to see more of the classrooms, a shaggy-haired boy shouted and sprinted towards them.

“Hi, Mr. E!” the dark-haired boy heralded with a bright grin and a wave. “I think I know one of your guests. You’re Sigrid Bowman, aren’t you?”

Sigrid’s eyes widened, but she found her poise in another heartbeat. “And you’re Kíllian Dís.”

“Sure that I am, and good to see you!” the boy pumped her hand vigorously. “Hi, all! Finn told me to look out for your lot, and to tell you hello for him. So I’m glad to pass on his message.”

When they introduced themselves all around, Kíllian exclaimed when he met Legolas. “I thought I recognized you! You were on Eregion’s archery team, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Legolas nodded.

“They’re pretty good! Well, just wanted to give you all a shout out. Maybe I’ll see you again. Thanks for letting me interrupt, Mr. E.”

“Quite all right, Kíllian. I hope I’m not going to see you so often this term.”

Kíllian grinned without shame. “I hope not either, Mr. E. Though ‘tis always nice to see you, sir. Bye, all!”

The boy ran back into the gym, waving vigorously at the door before he went in. Elrond shook his head and chuckled.

“That one’s a scamp, I gather,” Bard grinned.

“In the best way, but yes,” Elrond admitted. “Very smart, and the best archer I’ve seen in the school for a long time. A bit reckless, and overly fond of silly pranks. I feel quite bereft if I don’t see him at least once a week.”

Bain snickered, but quickly quieted when Bard’s eye fell on him. “None of you have that predisposition, do you?” Bard asked mildly, winking at Elrond.

“No, Da,” Bain murmured, drawing Sigrid to snicker.

“So let’s continue, shall we?” Elrond turned, leading them towards the next building.

Over the next hour or so, Elrond showed them more of the facilities, introduced them to a few more instructors, including one who taught creative writing for Sigrid to talk to. Along the way, Thran and Bard exchanged glances. Bard’s eyes had the same suppressed excitement that Thran felt in his chest, and the children were all attentive, interested, and full of questions for all of the staff they met.
This was a vibrant place that would encourage their children intellectually as well as artistically and physically.

Thran wondered what the cost of all of this would be. If it were too much, Bard would balk. He already suffered over the cost of renovating the house, the cost of food, the cost of the clothing Thran had bought him, the cost of everything. How dire the past years had been to weigh so heavily on the soul of his saint!

At length, Elrond wound up their tour, and left them for a few moments to discuss among themselves. But there really wasn’t much discussion – the children were unanimous that they liked the Imladris Academy, and both Bard and Thran concurred.

The children stayed in the meeting room with another tray of pastries while Thran and Bard went into Elrond’s office to discuss terms. Elrond indicated comfortable chairs for his guests as he took his place behind his desk.

“I should explain something unique about our Academy. When the artist’s colony was first founded, most of the families lived on a shoestring, because they were not yet established artists. Not all were able to continue here, whether through inclination, or lack of success, or worst of all, family tragedy.” Elrond met Bard’s eyes frankly. Ah, so he knew of Bard’s loss so long ago. “But of those who were able to stay, many were highly educated, and valued the same for their children. So I established the Academy to provide that high level, understanding that high tuitions were not feasible for most of our students. The way we keep tuition low is to call on our parents’ expertise to supplement our instructors. Some work as instructors for master classes twice a year. Some fill in as teachers’ aides. Others donate works that we can auction to raise funds. Still others are part-time instructors. If either or both of you would help in that capacity, I think you will find the tuition quite feasible. Also, if all four of your children choose to attend, we offer a family discount.”

Elrond named a figure that was more than reasonable, if Bard and Thran were willing to commit to a given number of hours as teachers or helpers. Bard was already nodding before he looked at Thran, but Thran was as well.


“I like it, too,” Thran said without hesitation. “I would like to talk again with our children first, if you would indulge us.”

“Of course,” Elrond nodded. “If you would like to take a few days to consider, that is no problem, as well.”

“Let us see what the children think,” Thran replied, and so he and Bard rejoined their children in the meeting room. Bard shut the door behind them.

“What do you think?” Thran asked, sitting beside Tilda.

“We get to vote?” Bain asked.

At nods from both Bard and Thran, the children traded inquiring questions.

“I still like it.” Tilda said first.

“So do I,” Legolas said firmly. “It is much nicer than my boarding school, and to take fencing with the Gondors and archery from Mr. Faramir would be wonderful.”

“I like it, too,” Bain nodded. “Mr. Boromir was really nice, and I liked the languages teacher. And
“We’ve still got two schools to look at tomorrow,” Bard reminded them. “Do you want to think about it overnight, see the other schools, and then choose one? What if one of the schools we see tomorrow is a better one?”

The children looked amongst themselves, but even Tilda shook her head.

“We like this one, Da,” Sigrid reiterated.

Bard’s look at Thran was inquiring, but Thran already agreed with the children that this school seemed to suit them very well.

“I’m good,” Bard said.

“So am I,” Thran agreed. “So let us tell the headmaster that our children are most eager to begin their classes here.”

“All right. You’re sure, everyone?” Bard asked one last time, but he received the four nods he expected. “Okay, everyone. We’ll go sign the papers.”

And so it was done. The children would be in school Wednesday.

As they drove home, the children talked excitedly about their upcoming first day of school. Thran looked forward to it, too. He had a few ideas about how he and Bard could spend their first day alone in their house. None of them were particularly angelic, but all of them brought a smile to his lips.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

When a saint has a crisis of faith, even the grace bestowed by an angel is hard pressed to hearten him.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

Vykluchi etot chertovy svet! = turn off the fucking light (Russian)
Vot der'mo, = oh, shit (Russian)
Oy = ouch (Russian)
Sukin syn = son of a bitch (Russian)
Suka blyad = Motherfucker, bitch (Russian; a good all around useful curse)

The rest of Monday was a blur of activity, all centered around getting the children ready to attend their new school on Wednesday. Bard stopped by the office supply store on the way home for them to collect the school materials listed in the reams of paperwork the headmaster had given them. Bard gulped; more money to be spent. How long would this go on before Thran balked? He didn’t want to think about how much of his lover’s money he’d run through in the past month, or how much he’d spend in the next one. Even he hadn’t realized how much everything would cost, and to be honest, he was just as glad he hadn’t. If he’d counted up just the cost of renovation before he’d met Thran, he would have realized that he would never escape Steffen’s grotty apartment alone, and he would have died inside. He owed Thran so much that a panicky tightness settled in his chest.

The only thing to do about that was to take care of his family as best he could, get busy on the rest of the repairs, and then get back to his metal. He wouldn’t be an equal partner in this family until he contributed something other than sweat equity.

Once they got home, he called both of the other schools to cancel their appointments for Tuesday, then got lunch on. Today’s topic of conversation was what to put in the children’s school lunches on Wednesday. Fortunately, everyone liked ham sandwiches, so Bard planned to cook a ham for tomorrow’s supper as well as the sandwiches. They had plenty of fruit and yogurt, so Bard mixed up brownies to bake. While he was baking, the children spread their new school supplies over the kitchen table, divided everything up, and packed their book bags. They found their lunch bags, and lined them up on the counter with Legolas’s new one, ready for Wednesday’s assembly line. Thran watched all this activity with amusement.

“You are a masterful general, Bard,” the tall dancer declared as he washed the dishes from Bard’s efforts. “None of us would survive without you.”

“You’d sort it out,” Bard demurred, grabbing a dishtowel and drying the mixing bowl.

“I have never done this before, and the children would not know to do it, so it is important that you
“do it for us,” Thran observed. “You are the heart of us, lyubov moya. Our captain, yes? The one who keeps us on course.”

Bard reddened, but appreciated Thran’s sentiment. He’d never thought of what he did in that fashion; it was just what he did to keep everything from crashing down around his ears. But knowing that Thran appreciated and valued it eased the tightness in his chest, and helped him feel a little better about the money he worried over so much. Maybe he couldn’t bring money to the family yet, but to keep it running smoothly was a useful skill, even more important now that there were six of them.

The children retreated to continue their room arranging, and Sigrid asked Bard to show her what she needed to do to the floor in her room, and of course that soon led to Bard getting down on his hands and knees with her to clean the boards with mineral spirits and steel wool. Tilda decided to help, and Thran did a little before reluctantly disappearing into the ballroom to do his delayed barre and yoga.

Once the detritus on Sigrid’s floor was wiped away, Bard, Tilda, and Sigrid set to with paste wax and rags to polish the cleaned boards to a soft luster. As the sky grew dark, Sigrid gleefully cleaned up rags and steel wool and paper towels, and pushed her bed and dresser into their final positions.

The first of the children’s room had been recovered.

“Can my room be next?” Tilda asked, holding the trashcan for Sigrid to dump her handful of used paper towels into it.

“Let’s talk about it at supper, all right? We’ll include the lads, and see what has to be done in all of your rooms, and we can decide. Have you thought about what color you and Mr. Bun would like, little doll?”

“Yellow. To go with my mural. Like lemons, but paler. Not too bright or too loud.”

“Nice and sunny,” Bard grinned, grabbing Tilda for a hug, which set her giggling. “Just like you.”

The resulting dinner conversation gave Bard a list of paint colors – yellow for Tilda, green for Legolas, blue for Bain, and bright turquoise for the bathroom, though the study was still subject to debate. Tilda’s room had the least amount of stuff in it, and the walls were in reasonable shape, and Bain’s room was also in reasonable trim. Legolas’s room, however, needed the most work, for the trim hadn’t been stripped, the walls needed resurfacing before they could be painted, and the ceiling was dingy. Perhaps Bard should repaint the study first to give Legolas a decent place to stay while he worked on the walls and woodwork of his room. Once he finished those two rooms, Tilda’s and Bain’s would follow in short order.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me,” Bard exhaled, as he and Thran settled into bed later that night. “But in a week or two, we’ll have the children’s rooms settled, which means they can settle.”

“It is a lot of work,” Thran laid his head on Bard’s shoulder and stroked his chest. He had switched to Bard’s side of the bed so that he could snuggle close without pressing against Bard’s stitches. “I worry that you push yourself too hard. It will all get done.”

“This won’t be as hard as welding all day and being the night super all night. It’s not so much.”

“Save a little for me to pillage at night.”

Bard rubbed Thran’s arm. “I just want to get us out of the construction site as soon as I can, angel. I won’t feel right until I do.”

Thran was silent, but a faint tension crept into his body. It took him some seconds to speak, and
when he did, it was hesitantly. “Is this about how long the work takes? If it is, then perhaps we should hire painters to do this for us? To help you feel better sooner?”

It was Bard who was tense now.

“Ah. This is not about the time it takes, then. If you want to do the work yourself because you have waited so long to do so, I understand. I would not deny you the pleasure. I only want to make sure you do not exhaust yourself because you think there is some deadline you must to meet. There is not.”

Bard tried to speak evenly. “Um, yes, I always thought I’d do the work myself. It’s not complicated, I take more pains than a contractor would, and...”

Thran’s fingers snaked up to his shoulder and clasped it. “This is about the expenditure of money, yes?”

That tightness in his chest was back, only worse.

“Bard, my saint, my love, please... it is all right. We have money. You do not have to toil as a slave for us.”

Bard gulped. “I... can’t help it, Thran. I’ve lived hand to mouth for so long that I can’t take having money for granted. I don’t think I ever will. It bothers me that I’ve spent so much of yours...”

Sighing, Thran sat up against the pillows, and drew Bard into his embrace, reversing their positions. “I have never lived with such want, so I do not presume to understand. It is not that you mistrust me or my affections, but you are afraid to let down a long held guard, yes?”

Bard swallowed hard. “I trust you. I do. But... those cold, hard numbers...”

“You think that if you do not worry, then something will happen, something that might break you.”

Bard’s throat closed, and he couldn’t speak.

Thran rubbed Bard’s back slowly. “Oh, lyubov moja. I wish I could ease your fear.”

Bard gulped. “I don’t think anything can.”

“Perhaps not. But I will try. First, there is no blame to be laid on you for our expenses so far. You did not spend our money alone. I agreed to each penny, too, or else it would not have been spent. So we spent the money together. What did we spend it on? To make the home we crave, where we and all of our children will be happy. This is so much better than our apartments in the city, yes? Here we are together, our children are happy, we are happy. Where is the sin to spend money for such a cause? What is the point to have money if we do not spend it on something so worthwhile?”

Bard’s throat eased a little, and Thran’s gentle strokes on his back further calmed him. “That’s all true,” he admitted. “But... it’s still a lot of money to spend.”

“Has there been one frivolous expense in any of this?”

“N-no. Unless you count the marble bathroom tile.”

“That is beautiful. I like it. I am glad we have it.”

It was still no easier to breathe. “It’s not the end of the expenses, though. We have more yet to come, and –”
“For things like paint and floor cleaners and other such things. Those are not frivolous expenses, either. They are necessary. I accept that.”

“I... just don’t want it to be so much, Thran. It’s a lot.”

Thran sighed again, but kept stroking. “It seems I must do what you call ‘pull out the big guns’ to try to reassure you, then. Forgive me for this. But those cold hard numbers that you stare at? Let me give you one more to think about, lyubov moya. It is a very important number, so listen very carefully. Are you ready?”

Bard gulped. “I’m-I’m ready.”

“All the money we have spent on our happiness thus far is less than two percent of the money we have at our disposal. Less than two percent.”

Bard’s eyes flew open, and he forgot to breathe. He jerked out of Thran’s arms, sat up, and lunged to turn on Thran’s bedside light.

“Oy! Suka blyad!” Thran flinched against the sudden brightness, shielding his eyes with his hands, then burying his head in the pillows. “Yebena mat’, Bard! Why on earth do you light lamp while we are happy in dark? Sukin syn!”

“Holy fucking shit, Thran! I’ve spent more money than a small country, and you say –”

“Vykluchit etot chertovy svet! Vot der’mo, Bard! Turn off the light! Please!”

“Why in all of the hells are you messing with me when you’re worth – ulp!”

Thran had groped blindly for Bard’s arm, yanked him flat onto the bed, and rolled partially onto his chest, gently pressing his fingers against Bard’s lips. “Stop, Bard. Please stop. The light hurts my eyes, and the shouts hurt my ears.”

“Da?” That was Sigrid’s voice at the door. “Da? I heard someone yell. Are you and Ada all right?”

When Bard sat up, Thran shifted over and buried his face in a pillow. “We’re fine, Sig,” he said, managing to keep his voice even rather than panicky. “I tripped over something on the floor in the dark and stubbed my toe, that’s all. Everything’s fine.”

“Okay, just wanted to be sure you and Ada were okay.”

“Thanks, Sig. I’m sorry I woke you. I’m fine. Good night.”

“Night, Da.”

Footsteps retreated from the door.

Swallowing hard, Bard turned back to his lover. When Thran looked up, his eyes had watered so badly that his cheeks were streaked with tears, and he still squinted against the glare. Could he see anything at all?

“Will you not shout now? Please?”

Bard nodded, so Thran rolled onto his back, and lay against the pillows with his hands over his eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”
Thran snorted. “I ask you to replay the last thirty seconds of our lives. That is why.”

“But that means you’re worth –”

“The number is not important. We have enough. That is all that is important.”

Bard couldn’t keep from doing the math, just like he’d done so obsessively for so long, balancing every expense against every meager paycheck until he knew to the penny how deep the hole was that swallowed him. Even as scattered as he was tonight, he still came up with not the few millions that he’d thought Thran was worth, but twice that, maybe more. Maybe Thran heard the counters whirling in his brain, for he groaned in frustration.

“I did not tell you because I did not want you to worry about it, which you now do. I did not want you to question why I loved you, or if I even did, which you now do. I did not want you to set yourself an impossible task to think how to repay the costs to me, or whatever it is that you expect of yourself, which you now do. So now we have a bigger problem, the awareness of a lot of money and the repercussions thereof. This is not a problem I want in our bed.”

Bard was too rattled to know what to say. When he didn’t say anything, Thran muttered another Russian curse under his breath and climbed out of bed. As he bent for his leggings and pullover by the bed, Bard’s mouth went dry.

“Wha-where are you going?”

“I do not know. Downstairs. Perhaps some tea...”

Bard scrambled out of bed and took hold of Thran’s leggings before the dancer could put them on. “Wait. Wait. Let’s start over. I’m sorry I turned on the light. It hurt you, and I don’t ever want to hurt you. And I’m sorry I panicked. I just... I just... don’t want you to think all I do is take from you, because that’s what I’m afraid I’m doing. I love you, angel, and I wish I had more ways to show you than I do. So... let’s just go back to bed, and turn out the light, and start over.”

Thran’s eyes had finally adjusted to the light, and they softened when they met Bard’s. “I would like that much more than tea.”

Thran put his clothes back on the floor, they eased under the sheets again, and Thran turned out the light. He sighed in relief as darkness descended. “So we are back in bed in the dark.”

“I’m sorry,” Bard whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Thran waved a hand in the dark. “That you turn on the lights, I will survive. That we have money... what do we do to help you survive that?”

“I just never thought that... you had... that much money, Thran. I didn’t.”

“Now that you do, will you not worry when we spend what we need to live well? Please, lyubov moya, you have managed everything so well that I have no concerns about the amount. That amount is far less than if we had had to buy a new house, which would not be as nice as this one. This house is unique, ours alone. I love it here, even though there is still work to do. It will get done, and I have no worry about it. Do you believe me?”

Bard took himself in hand. All worrying had done was hurt his angel, who had told him repeatedly that everything was fine. Didn’t he trust Thran? He knew enough about financial statements to know that Thran was wealthy, and if Thran said the expenses didn’t worry him, then he had to believe him.
“I believe you,” he said softly. “I believe in you, too. It’s me I worry about.”

“Because you do not understand or appreciate what you bring to our lives. You are the heart of the house, the one who sees that everything runs, and is happy and calm. You care for our children. You care so well for me that I am quite spoiled. Remember when I told you that you had made a rare home and family despite few material things, where I had material things but had not made either a home or a family? That is still truth. You will make our beautiful home even more beautiful, and we will all be happy here, and soon you will begin your sculpture again. I have no doubt of these things. What better things should I spend our money on?”

“May I ask how you’ve managed to amass so much money?”

Thran shrugged beside him, staring up at the ceiling. “I had no reason before now to spend much of what I made. I made good investments with a lot of it, and so I amassed more. Money is just a tool that I have learned to use well. It is a pleasure to use some small part of it to make us happy.”

“Okay. I was worried that maybe you’d earned it by doing a lot of wetwork for the Russian mafia, then.”

Snickering, Thran rolled over onto his side to urge Bard to nest with him. To have Thran’s chest at his back was a warm comfort, and so was the hand that caressed his shoulder. “No, lyubov moya. No Russian mafia wetwork.”

“Well... I’ll get used to it. Knowing you have so much.”

“I hope so. Because I want to spend some more of it. I would like your help to do so, but if you were to balk, then I would have to do so alone, and I would likely not spend it so well as if you were to help me.”

“What now? A summer cottage?”

“Tcha, we have our beautiful house, and it will be here in the summer as it is here in the winter. I want to buy an SUV. You know more about such things than I.”

“An SUV?”

“I will need a vehicle to drive back and forth to my dance classes. I think it should be an SUV rather than a small car, so that when I am on the highway I have more steel between me and all manner of mad drivers. It will also be useful to take our children places, such as school or fencing practice or the ice hockey rink. It must have lots of air bags and power steering and room for at least six, but not those ridiculous televisions in the back. Lots of cargo space, and seats that go up and down so we can haul home small treasures from the junk shops, though your truck will be more useful to haul home the larger ones. I have looked at pictures of several SUVs, but you know more about such things than I, so would you please help me decide?”

Thran’s artless recitation was so matter-of-fact that Bard couldn’t resist a chuckle.

“Ah, good. You ease. Though I am serious about the SUV. I have found three kinds so far that are big enough, but there are so many things to consider, and I do not know what are the most important things. Should I care more about pounds of torque or cargo capacity?”

“I’m sorry, but I have to ask, angel. Do you have a driver’s license?”

“Oh, of course I do. Just because I know nothing about cars does not mean I cannot drive one.”
“When was the last time you drove one?”

“Not since I moved to the apartment building last July. I had a car before that. After the sixth time someone broke into it, though, I had had enough.”

“After the radio?”

“I have no idea. I kept nothing in the car, and the radio was cheap, as I would not put anything better in it just to appease the thieves. I never listened to it, anyway.”

“Maybe it just got to be a point of honor to break into your car. But anyway, you’re right that you need something to drive, and an SUV sounds like a good choice. Tomorrow we can look on the Internet to see what you’ve looked at, and when the children are in school one morning, we can go look at some. We can go look at the big used car chain where everything’s vetted and you don’t have haggle, or we can look at the new ones, whichever you like.”

“Does it make more sense to buy a used one, or a new one?”

“We can look up stuff about each one you’re interested in, and see what makes sense. Some brands hold their value better than others.”

“Then we will look up such things tomorrow. So, can you reassure me that the money changes nothing of what you feel for me? We had enough before you knew; we have enough after you knew.”

Bard stroked the arm that cradled him, then took Thran’s hand to kiss it. “I can’t love you any more than I already do. So that hasn’t changed.”

A kiss pressed against his hair. “Nor can I love you any more. I do not want either to change.”

“I don’t, either.”

“Then there is only one more thing I would like to add to your list of things to do once the children are settled in their new school.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to help me properly christen every room in our house, except the children’s rooms, of course. If we do one every other day or so, that would be delightful. If you are so inclined, of course.”

The hand stroking Bard’s shoulder had slipped across his clavicle and down the line between his pectorals, then further down to find his nipple. Bard’s breath caught, and his cock twitched in anticipation.

“Mmm, I think I might be inclined for something tonight, but that’s your intention, isn’t it?”

“It could be.” Thran kissed his ear, then shifted atop Bard, careful to avoid his healing stitches. He brushed a kiss on Bard’s lips, dragging a palm down Bard’s chest, teasing a nipple until Bard moaned silently. “I could say that I just want to help you feel better that we have money to spend, or claim that I need to be soothed after being so rudely blinded, or offer you a taste of what we may do in each of our unsanctified rooms, or just confess that I want you on general principles.”

Bard filled one hand with Thran’s buttock, and the other with silky white hair. He drew his angel close for a long, deep kiss. When they surfaced, he smiled.
“They all sound like good reasons to me. Pick whichever one suits you, and have at.”

Smiling, Thran nipped Bard’s ear. “I will.”

He did.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The holiday season ends with fit celebration, and a new season begins.

It would be good to soothe away the night’s earlier tension with proper lovemaking – not that much of what Thran and Bard would engage in was proper, but Thran wanted to make sure that Bard would be well drained after so much upset. Maybe in the sleepy glow that followed complete release he could relax more of his worries about the abundance or lack of money. His saint was so unaware of his own strengths and assets that it was hard to reassure him that theirs was not an unequal partnership. It was never a chore to lavish the most delicious attention on his saint, but Thran would take extra pains tonight, wanting Bard to believe without question that he was loved, adored, needed, worthy.

Of course, Thran didn’t suffer when he lavished that attention. Pinning such a beautiful body to the sheets, then teasing it until Bard trembled and gasped beneath him was delicious enough. When Bard took his buttocks in hand to pull him in even deeper, then speed their tempo, though... it was the first time Thran had been the ultimate top, only to have the ultimate bottom wrest control from him and consume him without mercy. Power from below was a role he particularly liked for himself, but to have it sprung upon him was irresistible. He wound his hands in Bard’s hair, swallowed Bard’s lips in a kiss, and let his saint take him as he would. The tight, slippery hold on his cock peaked ever so slowly until it was inevitable, then he convulsed as the sensation threw Bard into orgasm. That stuttering tightness was more than Thran could resist, and release exploded through him in an all-consuming flood. He buried his face in the pillow that cradled Bard’s head to muffle his moans. He lay there spasming for some seconds, craving each and every ripple of pleasure that swept through him.

“Vot der’mo,” he whispered hoarsely. “Oy, svyatoj moy, the things you do to me.”

“You nailed me right and proper,” Bard panted. “Gods, Thran. You’re an animal.”

Grinning, Thran growled softly into Bard’s ear. “Perhaps I need more training. Would you like to apply for the job?”

“That might kill us both.”

“What a way to go, yes?”

“Ohhh, yessss,” Bard exhaled. His breath calmed, and he swept all of Thran’s white hair into one hand to get it out of his face. “We should call this position the Lion’s Mane, because I’ve just been engulfed in it.”

Snickering, Thran bit gently at Bard’s lips. “Lions mate back to front, lyubov moya, not front to front. If you like, I can do this again in that position, so you can have my hair run down your back and shoulders, and over your hair while I slip inside you...”

“Gods, you are one greedy bastard, Thran. You don’t finish pinning me to the bed before you plot how to do me next.”
“Mmm, I am, and I don’t, and I do.” Thran kissed Bard’s ear. “It is the most delightful way to enjoy the last drops of ecstasy.”

Bard laughed silently beneath Thran, still massaging Thran’s buttocks. There was a particular spot Bard had found near each hip that brought blissful delight when stroked lightly, a spot just below the iliac joint where several nerves converged. Bard found those spots and stroked them gently, flooding Thran with even more endorphins.

“Mmm, this is another most delightful way. Oh, my saint, you spoil me so. I wonder if we can find someone who can complete the marriage ceremony when we are so entwined? That would be appropriate.”

“Save this for us alone, angel. So have you pillaged me enough, or do you need to again?”

“Is that wishful longing I hear in your voice?”

“It could be, if you’re not sated yet.”

“I am sated enough, if only for now. I must conserve my strength so that I am fit to see our children off to school Wednesday, and to console you afterwards if the house seems too empty.”

“I’ve thought about what to do in an empty house, too. But we’ve got tomorrow, then a busy morning to get through first.”

Thran eased out of Bard. “So we do. So wash, then bed, then sleep.”

They cleaned up quietly. Thran helped Bard bandage his stitches, and they helped each other settle into bed. After the savor of goodnight kisses and whispered endearments, his saint sank easily into sleep.

Thank the gods that Bard was back on keel. His saint had labored alone with nothing, not even hope, for so long. It was time for that to change, now and forevermore.

* * *

Tuesday was a mixture of both excitement and regret, at least on the part of the children. On the one hand, they were excited to start the adventure of their new school. On the other, today was the last day of a long vacation, and the last breath of freedom without homework and school activities for a long stretch. Bard made sure to get everyone up close to the time they’d have to rise on Wednesday morning, just to get everyone acclimated to the upcoming schedule. He made a big breakfast for the children – pancakes with fruit and honey – which even Thran shared with them. Starting tomorrow, Thran would put off his barre and yoga until the children were off to school, so that he could be with them as they got ready, but today, he wanted to be part of the last festivities, too, despite his need to prepare for his auditions. He had two pancakes with fruit and a little honey – Bain and Legolas, in comparison, ate six pancakes apiece slathered in a pool of honey and a pile of fruit – and Bard was pleased that he liked them.

After breakfast, they took a long walk into the village to peruse the shops, enjoying the lack of crowding now that the holiday rush had passed. Sigrid found a pretty marcasite necklace in the antique jewelry bin at one shop. Tilda found one of Andrew Lang’s fairytale books on the dusty shelves of the used bookstore. Bain and Legolas, however, weren’t content with jewelry or books, or
even old toys. They came scampering back to their fathers with bright eyes.

“Father, come see what we found —” Legolas started to exclaim, before Bain yanked on his arm.

“Shh, Legs! I told you!” Bain hushed the older boy. “Never show the owners you’re interested in something. It makes the price go up!”

“Oh, I forgot,” Legolas winced. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Sorry, Bain. Father, Bard, please come see what we found that we don’t really like at all.”

Thran smothered a chuckle. “Our Bain is a canny shopper, it seems. Let us see what not-much-of-a-treasure you have found.”

He and Bard wound their eventual way closer to whatever had entranced the boys, and Bard moved to one side to peruse a chest of drawers while Thran followed his son. Legolas leaned close.

“See those things against the wall? Chests on the bottom, with bookcases on top? They have pieces that slide out to make a desk. Bain said to just look from here first, then walk by casually to see what the prices are. But I already looked.”

Legolas whispered the prices to Thran, who nodded in understanding. There were three of them, tall things in a warm brown wood. They would be elegant fixtures in the children’s study, and would take up less room than conventional desks, which would leave more open space for play. Thran angled his way to Bard ostensibly examining a graceful lady’s desk nearby.

“The children’s study?” Bard asked softly.

“Just so. Legolas told me the prices.” He murmured them to Bard. “Is that a lot?”

“Not for such old pieces. Looks like cherry, not mahogany; but we’ll have to clean up the finish a bit to be sure. They’re taller than eight feet, so they won’t fit in too many modern houses. Our ceilings are ten feet except for the third floor, so they’d fit. Aren’t in too rough a shape, though a couple of the glass panes are missing. That’s easy to fix. This desk would suit Sigrid, too, if she’s interested in it.”

“I will send her over. You look at the boys’ treasure.”

Sigrid had paid close attention to the murmurs and maneuverings, and angled towards Thran when he came towards her. A couple of words were all she needed to go take Bard’s place by the desk he’d examined, so he trailed after her. How fascinating it was to watch his family in action. Was this what his favorite crime scene show meant when they talked about a family of thieves casing the joint? He hugged himself in amusement.

Everyone drifted into other rooms once they’d had their look. Sigrid liked the desk for her room, and the three larger pieces would give Tilda the place in the children’s study that she wanted. Bard and Thran added up the cost of the four pieces, Bard knocked off thirty percent to serve as his starting offer, and they decided what their top limit was. As Bard ambled off to find the owner, Thran trailed along behind to overhear. Fortunatley there was a jumble of old glassware and dishes nearby, so Thran sorted through them – would those two small Asian teacups blend with the ones Bard found to go with his Japanese iron teapot? – as Bard set to haggling.

It took time, and was far from straightforward, but after twenty minutes, Bard had his deal. They didn’t get thirty percent off the listed price, but it was just under twenty with a nominal delivery fee, given that the truck would be close to full when it arrived at their house. When Thran brought forward his two teacups, the owner waved at him and told him to take them. They came out of the
shop feeling elated.

“Bless high ceilings,” Bard murmured to Thran. “I think he was glad to get rid of that lot. That’s why he didn’t dicker much, and threw in just a twenty-five-dollar delivery fee.”

“That was a short negotiation?” Thran arched an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen them go on for a couple of hours, back and forth.”

Thran shook his head. “The markets of Istanbul and Cairo are different. High speed, very agitated. The seller cries that such a low price drives him out of business, the buyer maligns the goods, both walk back and forth and gesticulate many times. Highly entertaining. Russian high dudgeon lends itself very effectively to such methods. This is much more roundabout.”

“If we ever get to Istanbul or Cairo together, you get to do the haggling, then. I’d enjoy watching that. Nice teacups, by the way.”

“I thought they would complement the five you found. Those are all different – very Japanese, that – and so are these two, so it will be nice for us all to have one when we make tea.”

“They’ll fit right in. I guess we’ve done enough damage for today, and should head home.”

“We still have one more shop to explore,” Thran teased, pointing to the cheese shop next door. “It would be a shame not to be thorough.”

Bard laughed, for Tilda had already spotted the shop and was hurrying to Thran’s side.

“Thran! Look! It’s a cheese shop!”

“I attend at once, ma petite!” Thran laughed, letting Tilda take his hand and pull him towards the door. “Let us see what delights are inside.”

Three kinds of cheese later, the group headed home, where lunch went on. The boys found a film to distract everyone for a couple of hours, then Legolas challenged him to a fencing match, which Thran enjoyed for the rest of the afternoon. They had just time to tidy the children’s study in preparation of Bard’s painting work and the delivery of the furniture coming Friday before sitting down for supper.

Everyone busily helped to clean up supper, then arranged school things by the front door, then cycled through showers. Bedtime was hectic as the children bounced around in excitement of what tomorrow would bring. When at last everyone was in bed, Bard and Thran collapsed on the sofa in the sitting room, glad at last for a little quiet.

“How do they have so much energy?” Thran said into the air. “I wish I had some of it. Especially when I dance the fourth act of Swan Lake.”

“I hear you.” Bard stuck his legs out and slumped comfortably, one hand rubbing Thran’s thigh up and down. “I get tired just watching them. Do you want music or TV or anything?”

“Soft music would be nice. Nothing rousing. Perhaps some Ralph Vaughn Williams? ‘Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis?’”

Bard eyed him. “Do we have that?”

“I did. If the boys put all the CDs together, then it will be there.”
Bard got up to look at the stacks of CDs. “Bless Tilda. She sorted all of them by alphabet. Is that one under V or W, cariad?”

“It should be by V, but our Tilda may have put it under W.”

“Ah. Found it. Under W.” Bard put in the CD and soon the quiet strains of Vaughn Williams’s evocative melody filled the room. “I like that.”

Thran hummed. “I have always found it soothing, even though it is so haunting a melody. It is a conversation only half overheard, and even that part is mysterious.”

Bard settled beside Thran again, and they comfortably snuggled together to share the music. By the time it was over, Bard was slumped back in his comfortable slouch, and Thran lay across the rest of the sofa with his head in Bard’s lap. The music was nearly done when footsteps padded near.

“Da, I’m hungry.”

Bain. Thran went to sit up, but Bard’s hand on his shoulder urged him to stay were he was.

“Have some crackers and peanut butter if you want, boyo, or some nuts, or a glass of milk, or a piece of bread. Nothing with sugar, same as always.”

“Okay, Da.”

The footsteps headed into the kitchen, where various rummagings indicated the consumption of food – peanut butter, from the sound of the jar opening and the knife clinking against the countertop. Thran fell back into his reverie until footsteps approached again.

“I’m done, Da.”

Bard patted Thran’s arm as he eased off the sofa. “Kitchen clean?”

“Yes, Da.”

“Okay, lad.” Bard gave his son a goodnight hug. “Be sure to brush your teeth before you go back to bed. I’ll see you in the morning. Sleep well.”


“Good night, Bain. Sleep well,” Thran wished him.

As the footsteps receded up the stairs, Bard came back to the sofa. “Sounds like you need to go to bed, too, angel.”

“I agree with you,” Thran replied, sitting up. “A shower, then bed for me. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Bard held a hand out to help pull Thran to his feet. “It is. We’d better get to bed. Six a.m. comes early.”

Through the bath and into bed, then Thran drew Bard close as they warmed. As chilled as he always was when he first got into bed during the winter, he’d come to relish it if only because it made nestling into Bard’s warmth so much more intense. The silk sheets around him were a cold cocoon at first, but the blood heat from Bard’s body soaked into Thran’s, relaxing and soothing him. He hummed in sleepy appreciation.

“You’re colder than usual tonight,” Bard whispered in concern.
“I worked hard today. First a long walk, then I fended off the attacks of my son's ferocious épée. I will not have advantage over him much longer.”

Bard nestled him closer. “Then come here and get warm.”

Thran twined closer with another hum. “You are very warm. You make me feel like a vampire who lusts after the warmth of the living.”

Bard snickered. “You don’t want to see what my technique is for staking a vampire as beautiful as you. It doesn’t kill you, but it does make you my slave forever.”

“It sounds delightful. Let us do that soon on a night when neither of us is so tired.”

“We’ll put it on the list. But not tonight. I’m knackered, too.”

“Oh? What did you do while Legolas and I fenced?”

“Cleaned and waxed the kitchen floor. Halfway done.”

Thran grinned. “It is well that I did not see you. You know what happens when I see you on your hands and knees.”

“I do. I don’t know which end to guard.”

“Pick one. I will deal with the other most deliciously.”

“Not tonight, vampire. It’s after eleven, and we’ve got to get up at six.”

“I hear and obey, my saint. To sleep we go.”

As they lay nested closely, Thran savored the quiet punctuated by the sound of Bard’s heart beating under his ear. The sound comforted him as he drifted off.

* * *


From Les Sylphides? Ballet music?

Thran got his other eye opened. Bard was already sitting up on the edge of the bed, reaching to turn off the clock radio.

Wednesday. The children’s first day of school.

“Please, leave it on,” Thran murmured, reaching out to touch Bard’s leg. “It is nice music to wake up to.”

Bard leaned over and kissed Thran’s hair. “Morning, angel. The adventure begins.”

Chuckling, Thran stretched one careful inch at a time. “So it does. Have your turn in the bathroom. I will follow in a moment.”

Bard caressed Thran’s shoulder where it peeked out of the bedding, then stood up. “Won’t be long.”
Bard disappeared into the bathroom with sleep pants and shirt in hand, and eased the bathroom door shut behind him. Thran turned on his nightside lamp to its dimmest, and took his time to stretch ankles and wrists, then knees and elbows, then hips and shoulders and neck while the Chopin waltz played just barely at the edge of audibility. He’d eased on his leggings, long waffle-weave shirt, and thick socks by the time Bard came out, so after he’d had his turn in the bathroom, Bard was dressed. They made the bed, then went downstairs together. Thran set the teakettle on the stove and started the porridge while Bard got out everything to assemble ham sandwiches and the rest of the children’s lunches. They snickered about setting up an assembly line where Thran sliced ham and put it on the bread Bard laid out, then Bard added cheese while Thran did lettuce, then they passed the mustard down the line. Bard showed Thran how he wrapped the sandwiches in waxed paper, and Thran put them in the lunch bags. Fruit and brownies and water bottles followed, and by the time Sigrid and Legolas appeared, the lunches were done.

“Bain and Til up?” Bard asked.

“On their way,” Sigrid nodded. “We haven’t gotten the bathroom system down yet.”

“Some of us like to take a long time in the mirror,” Legolas murmured, looking from Thran to Sigrid and back, drawing Thran to smother a laugh. Was his shy son actually snarking at his stepsister?

“I understand, Legs,” Sigrid replied without heat as she took her bowl of porridge from Thran. “You’ve got really nice hair, and you want it to look nice on your first day.”

“Me?” Legolas gaped. “It was you and that stuff you put on your eyes that took so long!”

Bard shared a grin with Thran. “Maybe you could use a makeup mirror in your room, Sig. Four children trying to get in one bathroom at the same time is a tough squeeze. Or you could use our bathroom.”


“A lot of long white hair on the floor, maybe,” Thran offered, trying to get in the spirit of the give and take.

“We’ll talk about it at supper, sweetness. Maybe you can put your makeup in the half bath in the sitting room and do it there. And Legolas, you can use the mirror in your room for your hair.”

“But it wasn’t my hair...” Legolas began, but trailed off as Bain and Tilda came into the kitchen.

“Hi, all,” Bain waved, already stuffing a fig in his mouth. “Where are the raisins?”

“On the table where they always are,” Bard said as Thran spooned out another two bowls of porridge for their last two children. “Morning, little doll.”

“Morning, Da, morning Thran,” Tilda yawned. “It’s too early.”

“It is for you,” Bard agreed. “It’ll take a little while to get used to getting up with the rest of Clan Ffynig. But at least you’ll get home a little earlier.”

“Apple, please?” Tilda asked, taking her porridge from Thran.

“I will cut it up for you,” Thran said, getting the fruit from the refrigerator. “Half, or all, ma petite?”

“Half, please.”
Breakfast proceeded quietly. Once again, Thran noted how quietly Bard steered the children through their meal, replacing the empty milk carton with another before anyone noticed the first was empty, or having the teacups filled for those who wanted it. The children rinsed their dishes in the sink and put them in the dishwasher as they were done, and the race was on to see who could get to the bathroom to brush teeth first. Bard and Thran ran upstairs for jeans and sweaters, then lunches went in backpacks, boots and coats went on, and everyone trooped out to walk to the bus stop.

“Remember you must go to the office together when you get to school,” Thran said, as they headed down the lane. “Someone will meet each of you to give you your class schedules and take you to where you are supposed to be.”

“We’ll be fine, Da,” Sigrid said jauntily, and Bain and Legolas agreed. Tilda, however, looked less sure. She was the only one who would be in the elementary wing. She slipped her hand into Bard’s and looked up at him with eyes that were unblinking and solemn.

“I’m a little scared, Da,” she said in a very small voice, when they got near the bus stop.

Bard stooped beside her. “It is a little scary today because it’s all new,” he agreed. “But Sigrid and Bain and Legolas will be with you when you get off the bus, and your new teacher will be waiting for you at the office. So you won’t be by yourself. You won’t have to move around to different rooms all day as your sister and brothers will, and someone will help you get on the bus to come home. You’ve got your mobile, right?”

Tilda nodded once, her eyes never leaving Bard’s face.

“Then if you want to call me at lunchtime, tell your teacher that I said it was okay, and you call me. All right?”

“Okay, Da.”

Legolas edged closer. “Tilda?”

“Yes, Legolas?”

“I’ve had to go to a new school a bunch of times by myself. It’s hard. But this time I won’t be by myself, and you won’t, either. We’re Clan Ffyrnig, and we’re going together, so it won’t be so bad.”

Tilda ventured a smile. “That’s right, Legolas. We’re going together.”

She slipped her hand into Legolas’s for the rest of the walk to the bus stop. Thran caught his son’s eyes, and gave him a proud thumbs-up. He got a shy but firm smile in return.

Seven other children already waited at the bus stop, along with a couple of parents shepherding younger children. There were a few quiet seconds as the other parents considered them, but a tiny woman with a full head of golden ringlets and lively brown eyes suddenly cocked her head at Bard.


Bard grinned widely as he recognized the woman. “Rosie? Rosie Gamgee?”

“That’s right! Wow, it’s been so long! Are you back now? That’s fantastic!”

“I am. Amazing, I know. It’s great to see you after all this time! Um, this is my husband, Thran Oropherson. These are our children, Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda. We just moved in last week, so today’s their first day at the academy.”
Hi, Thran, nice to meet you! And that’s Bain? Wow, he’s almost as tall as you are now! Hi, Sigrid, Legolas, and Tilda! My brood’s the four curly blonds – Elanor, Frodo, Rose, and Merry. Wave hi, everyone, to Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda. They’re starting school with you today.

The other parents introduced themselves and their children, and chatted amiably for the few minutes it took the Imladris Academy bus to trundle into view. Tilda felt a little better, for little Elanor was a fifth grader, which gave her someone to talk to. As all of the children climbed aboard for the short ride to school, Sigrid turned to grin at Bard.

“We’re off, and we’re leaving too!” she called.

“Do your best, just like always!” Bard laughed as he waved to all of the children.

Tilda perked up at their old saw, and looked a little more sanguine as she waved from the window as the bus pulled away. Thran and Bard waved goodbye until the bus was out of sight, then turned to see the other parents lingering to exchange pleasantries.

“It’s good to have you back, Bard!” Rosie enthused, patting Bard’s arm. “I can’t wait to see new sculpture coming out of your barn again.”

“It’ll be soon, I hope. We’ve got a lot of renovation left to do first. But we’ll get there.”

“Are you an artist, too, Mr. Oropherson?”

“Thran, please. I am a ballet dancer.”

Rosie’s eyes widened. “Oh – you’re... I thought I recognized you. The knife dancer.”

Smiling, Thran offered a slight bow. “I am.”

“You’re a wonderful dancer, Thran. I hope you and Bard will be very happy here.”

“We are most happy, already. And it is a pleasure to meet you and your children. I am sure we will see more of each other as time goes on.”

“I hope so. I’ll see you both later,” Rosie waved, as they separated. “Bye!”

“Bye, Rosie! Give Sam my regards!” Bard waved, as he and Thran turned for home. “Rosie’s a stained glass artist, a lot of modern stuff. I think you’d like it.”

Thran turned a considering eye on Bard as they came back onto the porch of their house. “I know what I would like more.”

“Oh?” Bard returned his consideration with as much intensity, which sent a jolt racing through Thran’s loins. “What?”

“Choose a room to christen, lyubov moya. Right now. Or I will.”

Bard paused by the door, laughing, when Thran gave him a push towards the door. “What happened to your barre and yoga you said you’d do when we got home?”

“I did not promise to do them as soon as we got home, did I? First, I will see to my husband.” As Bard opened the door, Thran followed him in, shut the door behind them, and put a hand on Bard’s shoulder to ease him into his embrace. “So you have but one question to answer. Which room shall we christen first?”
Stroking Thran’s hair, Bard offered him a kiss. “Hmm. Does it matter?”

“No,” Thran kissed Bard back. “It doesn’t at all.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

When the cherubs' choir goes off to school, an angel and a saint find a decadent way to celebrate. Then preparations begin for the angel's return to the heights of the dance, and the cherubs' return home.

Chapter Notes

Yet another chapter that earns the Explicit rating, but not just for erotica featuring an angel and a saint. Thran proves that despite how ethereal he looks, he can swear on a par with the entire Russian navy.

Translation Notes:

suka blyad = bitch, motherfucker (Russian)
sukin syn = son of a bitch (Russian)
sosi moy chlen = suck my cock (Russian)
idi k chertu = go to hell (Russian)
idi na khuy = go to hell, suck my cock (Russian)

“I wanted the ballroom to be first,” Bard breathed, nibbling Thran’s ear.

“So did I,” Thran murmured, letting his coat slide off, then easing Bard’s off.

“But I can’t indulge in what I want from you yet.”

“Why not? I will be yours however you want me.”

“Stitches. They pull.”

“Suka blyad,” Thran growled. “The solarium, then. That fainting couch lures me closer every time I pass it.”

“The room’s bare. It’ll be better when it’s a tropical paradise.”

“True. Our bathroom is still a construction site. The dining room is still bare. The main room is still bare, too, but it has a fireplace, but we do not have time for that this morning. Tcha, this is our first morning alone in our house, and I will have you even if I have to haul you back to our bed. In fact, I will do just that!”

Thran wrapped arms around Bard and muscled him towards the stairs, Bard laughing at his insistence.

“Wait, angel, wait! We’ve got a couple more options. You can haul me up to the garret and have the poor starving artist on his Spartan bed, or against the wall. Or...”
“Or what?”

“There’s still the kitchen.”

Thran paused, humming in anticipation. “Your domain. And all that nice marble.”

“I’ll be benevolent. Do you want top, or bottom?”

Thran grinned perversely. “I am the sous chef, am I not?”

“And?”

“Do you know what sous chef means?”

“Tell me.”

“The under cook.”

“Power, or not?”

“I give you the power.”

“Sweet, or spicy?”

“Ooooh, spicy? That.”

“Sure?”

“Do your worst.”

“On your head be it, then. Come on, angel. It’s time you had a cooking lesson.”

Bard grabbed Thran’s braid and the back of his jeans to haul him through the dining room and into the kitchen. When they got there, Bard jerked Thran around and backed him against the end of the island, one hand pressing against his chest to bend him back, the other hand breaching the button and zipper of his jeans. Another jerk, and Thran found himself flipped around, his chest down on the countertop and his jeans being dragged off his hips. Bard muscled hard behind him, shoving Thran’s feet wider and rubbing the rough fabric of his jeans against Thran’s bare skin. A hand insinuated itself between the end of the island and his hips, finding his cock to fondle it.

“So, what did you say you’d do to keep your position in my kitchen?” Bard growled, leaning over Thran’s back. “Other than this one, I mean. This one suits you, I have to say.”

“Take anything you want. Anything. Take it all,” Thran gasped.

“I might take a lot. I might make you take a lot.”

“I would love that. Gods, I would so love that.”

The sounds of buttons being forced open and a zipper being dragged down had Thran tense with anticipation. He shoved his hips back to press against Bard’s thighs, but Bard drew back.

“What’s your hurry, angel? You’ve got a nice ass. Let me look at it before I dive into it – oh, shit! I forgot the lubricant. I’ll have to dash upstairs.”

“If you dare leave me here to die of anticipation, I will kill you!” Thran growled. “Coconut oil.
Second cabinet. The first ingredient in my recipe for the day.”

“Mmm. You’ll smell like dessert. How appropriate.”

Bard kept one hand on Thran’s braid as he grabbed the jar of coconut oil. He plunked it in front of Thran’s nose.

“Open it.”

Thran got the jar open, and nudged it towards Bard.

“Not me, angel. You. You know what to do with it.”

Once Thran rubbed some of the coconut oil between his palms to liquefy it, Bard wound a hand in his braid and pulled him up.

“On your knees.”

Thran sank to the floor in front of Bard as ordered. His lover’s jeans, already low slung in that way that so aroused Thran, were open, and his cock was half erect in its nest of dark hair. Thran nuzzled into the dark nest, taking Bard’s cock in his mouth and sucking hard until it was too large for him to handle with his mouth anymore. He took it in his oiled hands, stroking as he licked the very end of it, grinning when Bard couldn’t suppress his moans.

“It sounds like you like my recipe so far,” Thran teased.

“Think so? Get up.”

Bard shoved him back face down on the island, pulling the elastic off his braid to muss white hair over his back and shoulders and onto the countertop. A little of the coconut oil found its way onto fingers that slid down between Thran’s buttocks and slicked him inside. Then Bard was on him, in him. It was so intense that Thran gasped, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the countertop, back arching to get as close to his lover as he could.

“You’re a tight one, aren’t you? Mmm, much better. I haven’t had such an accommodating sous chef in a very long time.”

“I love to work under you,” Thran shut his eyes to better appreciate Bard’s stroking. “Gods, that feels good – oh, gods –”

“You’re not going yet, angel. You need to be properly broken in first.”

Bard worked himself up with his thrusting, but kept hands off Thran’s cock, which left Thran hard, aching, and far from release. “Gods, take pity on your poor sous chef. Give me something.”

“I am, as hard as I can. That’s not enough for you?”

“Don’t just tease me, you bastard.”

“Hell, no. You like this too much for me to stop. Besides, you feel so damned good... mmm... Do you know what a turn on it is to see your silky white hair spread wide over so much white marble? Almost as good as it is to see you spread wide over so much white marble. Best sous chef I’ve ever laid.”

Bard slowed his stroking until it was unbearable, that slow, slippery slide in and out that made Thran pant and claw for release, but it wasn’t enough to send him over the edge. Bard’s soft moans teased
him unmercifully, as did fingers caressing his hips and groins just far enough away from his cock that he could only wish for a closer touch. When Bard finally did venture close enough, Thran was so highly wound that each suggestion of a caress had him gasping. He groped for his cock, desperate to ease the urge that drove him.

“None of that,” Bard grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the countertop. “Looks like I need to work on my sous chef’s stamina a little.”

“You will kill me, you fucker!” Thran snarled in frustration, drawing Bard’s laugh.

“I am a fucker, yes. And you’re the one I’m fucking.”

“You do not fuck me; you tease me to death! Do more than tease!”

Bard leaned over him, snickering. “Beg me.”

“Suka blyad!” Thran spat. “Sosi moy chlen! Idi k chertu! Idi na khuy, sukin syn!”

“That doesn’t sound like begging. It sounds like you just called me a cocksucking, motherfucking, son of a bitch.”

“Worse!” Thran snarled.

“Oh, now, that’ll cost you, angel. That’ll really cost you.”

Bard pulled Thran’s wrists behind him to clasp them in one hand. The other hand snaked around to take Thran’s cock and tease it slowly, still not enough to take him over the edge as Bard slid deeper inside him. Ah, here was the ultimate pleasure of the moment, to lie over the cool marble, pinned, bound, and in hand, with nothing to do but enjoy. How good, how good it was to lie here with his eyes shut as Bard mastered him, sending the most deliriously delicious sensations coursing through him.

“Much better,” Bard leaned over him so he savored the weight of Bard’s body on his back. “That’s what I wanted – soft, submissive, subservient. The perfect sous chef.”

The firm hand on his cock tightened to jerk him off hard and fast, much too fast for him to stop Bard from ripping his orgasm out of him. He peaked hard, too wracked to breathe, only to gasp, under Bard’s tight hold. Only when he lay limp and spent on the marble did Bard sigh in satisfaction. He let Thran’s wrists go, clamped hands on Thran’s hips, and stroked himself off. Even though he’d just gone, Thran pushed back against Bard’s thighs, offering the deep access Bard needed to make the most of his release.

“So please, may I please keep my job? Please?” Thran murmured meekly, grinning, as his lover fell over him with a shudder.

“Maybe. You’ll need a lot more training.”


“Gods, I’m in for it, then,” Bard exhaled, finally straightening. He eased out gently. “You’re going to kill us both.”

“We all must die of something. This is one of the best ways to go.”
Bard snickered, drawing Thran up from the counter. “I’ll never see this white marble in the same way again. I’ll think of your white hair messed all over it, and you cursing me like a Russian sailor.”

Thran grinned as he stood up. “I can’t wait to give you the chance to curse me in Welsh. Maybe in your artist’s garret. That will be the most delicious of prizes.”

“In a day or two. Right now, I need to clean up, and you more than me.”

“Truth. Upstairs with us both.”

In the bathroom, they washed in silence, until Bard slid a look at Thran and chuckled silently.

“Yes?” Thran drawled, returning Bard’s look as he dried off.

“Good idea about the coconut oil. Very organic.”

“It was better than to interrupt such a delicious game to run upstairs, was it not?”

“Much better. You’re all right?”

“I am fine, lyubov moya. I am merely well stretched for my barre.”

Bard sobered. “There are only two weeks before your audition. Is that long enough for you to be ready?”

Thran considered as he dried off and headed into the bedroom, Bard trailing after him. “I am not worried, though I will work quite hard. I will describe everything so that you understand it all. It will seem very extreme to you, but a dancer’s life is very extreme. I will be in class or at the barre for much of the day, more than you will think wise. I will also be very disciplined about my diet. I will not eat some things at all, and will eat inordinate amounts of other things.”

Bard pulled his jeans back on and sat on the bed to watch Thran sort out his practice attire. “However I can help, I will. Tell me what you need to eat, and I’ll have it ready for you. I assume you’ll go off to the barre now?”

Thran nodded.

Bard pulled his jeans back on and sat on the bed to watch Thran sort out his practice attire. “However I can help, I will. Tell me what you need to eat, and I’ll have it ready for you. I assume you’ll go off to the barre now?”

Thran nodded.

“I’ll call the tub installer to get that moving along. And I’ll look through that stuff you told me about the SUV, and see what I can line up for us to look at. You need that as soon as we can get it. Then while you’re in class, I’ll get on with the renovations, and make sure the children are set.”

Thran had all of his practice gear out, and he explained it all to Bard as he put it on. Then he explained how many hours he expected to be training each day, and what food he needed to fuel his efforts. Bard listened attentively, nodding several times at Thran’s explanations.

“Okay, I understand how long you’ll work and what you need to eat and when. But your diet’s heartlessly plain, cariad. Can I offer any variances to make it a little less bland? A lot of different steamed veg rather than just broccoli? Can I put spices on the chicken? Put different raw veg in your salads? What about different whole grains other than just oatmeal every morning?”

“Is there any reason to vary other than to coddle my taste buds?” Thran sat next to Bard on the bed.

“That’s enough of a reason, but yes, there are others,” Bard nodded. “A variety of things makes sure you get all your trace elements. Different spices can help your immune system, like turmeric. Red pepper and garlic can help you stay healthy, too. The grains help your gut and boost your endurance.
The different veg can help you get all your needed vitamins. About that – do you take any vitamins? Any herbals? Anything I should know about?”

“No, but perhaps I should. Do you know about such things?”

Bard nodded, but his expression was ironic. “When you don’t have medical insurance, you learn everything you can to keep yourself and the children healthy. I make sure we all take a multivitamin every day. And I take a fish oil capsule. Good for the joints.”

“Then I suppose I should follow suit. And I had a thought…”

“Something else about the veg?”

“No... it is not usually done, but I think perhaps I should have you attend one of my classes, so you know what is involved. At the very least, it should banish your worries about the fragility of my health. They can be quite rigorous.”

“Whatever you need, Thran. I want to see one because I have no idea what they’re like.”

“I will see if I can arrange that. Some dance masters are notorious about allowing no one but dancers in their class. If I can arrange it, you will have to remain silent and unremarkable, so as to draw no attention to yourself. Even if someone gets hurt, or becomes upset, no reaction. Can you do that?”

Bard nodded. “I can do that for you. I’ll be the mouse in the corner.”

Smiling, Thran kissed Bard’s ear. “You are much too large to be a mouse. Or even the cat that chases the mouse. But I appreciate the thought. Now, the barre. I must go.”

“T’ll see you when you’re done,” Bard rubbed Thran’s thigh and kissed his cheek. “It doesn’t matter when. I’m not on any schedule.”

“All right, lyubov moya. You are truly my saint.”

They went downstairs, back to the kitchen. Thran savored a faint stir of arousal as he passed the kitchen island, more appreciation of his earlier enjoyment than anything else, and Bard winked at him as he headed into the ballroom. That gave him something deliciously sweet to think about as he began his stretches and bends.

* * *

Bard puttered in the kitchen, cleaning the signs of the indulgences he and Thran had enjoyed a few minutes ago. The mess on the end of the island was quick to mop up, but the coconut oil took much longer. It was streaked widely across the marble, mute testimony to Thran’s frantic reaction to Bard’s ruthless teasing. Gods, he was turning into such a glutton for any indulgence that a tall, elegant, white-haired angel offered him, no matter the position. Cleaning up streaks of coconut oil was a small price to pay for such bliss. As for payments coming due, Bard expected to owe badly for teasing his angel so mercilessly this morning. He grinned, imagining all the forms that payment might take. He was still imagining when the coconut oil was finally wiped away, long minutes later.

He called the tub installer, checking on the status of his work order. The tub was due in today, so if it did come in, he was on the installation schedule for Friday. That was perfect; he had to be here
anyway to take delivery of the furniture they’d bought at the second hand shop. Once the tub was in, he could finish laying the fancy marble tile, and the bathroom would need only grouting and sealing, then a small bit of painting, to finish it.

He fetched Thran’s computer to research SUVs. The three that Thran considered were all good ones, and Bard found one more to add to the equation. He quickly eliminated that one, though, when he compared the prices and features to the other three. It didn’t take long to decide which one he thought was the best fit, so next he searched to see what was locally available. Three choices – two used, and one new – popped up, so he saved those to show Thran when he surfaced from the ballroom.

As Bard headed upstairs to start planning his attack on the children’s study, he considered all that Thran had told him about preparing for his auditions. He appreciated how clear Thran had been that this would be a long, rigorous campaign. The hours of practice – anywhere from four to eight or more every day – were daunting enough, for all of them would see Thran in constant motion. The number of calories that burned was immense. But the food to fuel that exertion seemed so small, so restricted, so inadequate, that Bard was uncomfortable. How was it enough to sustain such a perfect body?

He’d agreed to trust Thran to know how to care for himself, and so he would. But he’d keep close watch over him, too. He’d guard Thran as closely as Thran did himself.

He’d patched the dings in the study walls, and was draping the floor to paint the ceiling when he realized his stomach was growling. It was only eleven, according to his mobile, but it was no wonder he was hungry. Between the children’s first day of school and his delight with his lover, he’d never eaten breakfast. He went downstairs for a handful of almonds to hold him until lunchtime, then went back upstairs to paint the ceiling. The primer went on fast, so he sanded down the spackling while he waited for the ceiling to dry. Now, what color to paint the walls? The three bookcase desks would take up a lot of the wall space, so it had to be a color that would go with that wood. They needed chairs to go with the desks, too; maybe he could put some of the dining chairs up here to make do. A small, round table would work, too, so the children could put the chairs around the table when the desks were closed...

He worked steadily, putting the final coat of paint on the ceiling, and fetching another can of primer for the walls. His stomach would not be denied at that point, so he went downstairs, made himself a ham sandwich, and got out two packages of chicken to thaw for supper – he’d roast the chicken breasts for Thran, and make the chicken thighs for the children, maybe pot pie, or shepherd’s pie. He hadn’t yet learned all the things Legolas liked to eat, but most children liked pastry- or potato-topped meat pies.

He was mulling the possibilities when Thran appeared from the ballroom, soaked, spent, and drooping. Bard bit his tongue despite his concern; Thran had told him how draining his efforts would be, so he wouldn’t fuss.

“Soup, salad, or something else?”

“What is in the soup?”

“Just chicken breast and veg.”

“That, then. I will shower first.”

“Tub’s coming Friday. If it comes early enough for me to finish the tiling, I’ll do it right after, then grout the next day, then seal the next day. You’ll be soaking on Monday or Tuesday.”
“Slava bogam,” Thran breathed. “Thank the gods. And you.”

“Go shower then. Take your time and get warm. The soup takes twenty minutes.”

Thran brushed a grateful hand across Bard’s back. “That will be no problem. If I am not down in twenty minutes, please come get me. I will have likely dribbled down the drain.”

He padded off. Bard opened the package of chicken breasts, cut off enough thin slices for Thran’s soup, and set it aside while he quickly chopped up celery and carrots, munching some to follow his sandwich. He threw the veg in a pot to sauté for a few minutes in the barest amount of olive oil, then tossed in the chicken. Water, then a can of water chestnuts, a piece of star anise, and a few slices of ginger were next, followed at the very end by a few rings of green spring onions. Along the way, he made a big salad of greens to go with the soup; Thran needed the bulk as well as the nutrients. By the time Thran returned, looking much more refreshed, the soup was ready.

“Nothing fancy, angel, but I’ve thought of how to prep a lot of the soup so it’ll taste better whenever you’re ready to have it. I’ll chop up a lot of the veg and the meat, then once the children go to school I can sauté that to a good color. Once you’re ready to eat, I can add the water and the spices, and you’ll have a good solid soup in fifteen minutes.”

“You look after me so well that I am in awe,” Thran said humbly, as Bard shooed him to the table and put the soup in front of him, then the salad, then the oil and vinegar. He sat across from the dancer to eat a couple of the clementines he and the children loved so much. “I must thank you for making no mention of how bedraggled I looked. Practice can be quite draining, and it shows. But it is nothing to be alarmed about, and I am glad that you took it in stride. I would have worried if you had made a fuss, and then I would have tried to hide the effects in the future. I would prefer our home to be the place where I can let down.”

“Of course you can. I’ll take it as it comes. All I ask is that if you hurt, or something is not right, that you tell me. Please?”

Thran nodded as he sipped his soup. “That is fair to us both.” He smiled suddenly, meeting Bard’s eyes warmly. “I like this home we have. Decadent, beautiful, and warm, yes, but also a place where we are ourselves. That is good. And so is this soup. I am very hungry.”

“You ought to be. We both forgot to eat breakfast.”

Thran tsked. “So we did. The excitement of the children, and then our own, let in no thoughts for food.”

“Neither of us can afford to miss a meal, Thran. What if we eat before the children? Would that interfere with your barre?”

Thran considered. “No. It was my habit to eat after the barre only because I did not want to take the time to prepare the porridge before I did my work. But we have the children to see to, so if we eat when we rise, then see to the children, then get them to the bus... that is enough time to pass so that my barre will proceed as usual. So we shall do that.”

Thran worked steadily through his soup, then his salad. Bard showed him what he’d discovered about the SUVs, explained why he thought one was better than the others, and when Thran agreed with him, he showed him the three he had found.

“So we could see all three of them tomorrow afternoon, if you’d like,” Bard finished.

“Let us do so. You are right, the sooner we have it, the sooner I can get back to class.”
“Okay. I’ll line that up this afternoon. I’m working on the study, too. Ceiling’s done. I’ll prime and paint this afternoon. Then we can put the furniture in place on Friday when it gets here. I just have to pick a color. Any preferences?”

After some discussion, they decided a warm apricot would look nice with the wood bookcase desks, as the window faced east and caught the sunrise well. Bard would have to get the paint at the homeowners’ mecca, but he’d do that after he primed so that the walls would dry while he was out.

“Do you want to go, too?” Bard asked, as they carried the dishes to the sink. “Or enjoy a well-earned rest? I won’t be gone long.”

Thran put his bowl and plate in the dishwasher, then straightened to blink his surprise at Bard. “You go ahead, lyubov moya. I will rest for an hour, then be back at the barre, of course.”

Bard winced. “Of course you will. I didn’t think.”

He bit his tongue again, but Thran smiled at him all the same. “I will not hurt myself, Bard. This is what I do, and have done, for a very long time. Do not worry.”

“It’s just new to me, that’s all. I’ll get used to it. I know you know what you’re doing. I’m just... sorry I pillaged you so thoroughly this morning. We should have taken it easier.”

“Don’t you dare regret something so delicious. You gave me every choice, and if I had wanted something less... vigorous, I would have chosen so. All is well.”

“Okay, all is well. But if you need a massage or something after supper, you’ve got it.”

“As I say so often, you spoil me terribly. You are zoloto moyo, my treasure.”

“And you’re mine. And I’d enjoy my treasure keeping me company for his hour of rest while I prime the study, if he’s so inclined.”

Thran’s smile was pleased. “So I shall. Once you have one of your delicious brownies. Just because I do not eat such confections does not mean that you cannot. Enjoy it.”

“I will.” Bard grabbed a brownie, and broke off the merest corner. “Just a taste?”

Thran nibbled it out of his fingers. “Orange as well as chocolate? Delicious!”

They went upstairs, and Thran sat on the floor against the wall to converse while Bard primed the walls. He was only partially through before Thran went back to the ballroom, so he went downstairs long enough to arrange visits to the car places for tomorrow afternoon, then returned to his painting. He worked steadily until he’d finished the walls. He stuck his head in the ballroom long enough to tell Thran he was off to the homeowners’ mecca, and got a nod and a smile in return. He didn’t linger despite the draw of the elegant dancer posturing and posing, got the paint he wanted and another two gallons of primer, then perused the paint chips. Once all the children’s rooms were done, he could think about the bedroom he shared with Thran. He wanted something special for it. He found some possibilities, stuck them in his back jeans pocket, paid for his things, and headed home.

“I’m back!” he called, when he came in the front door.

“I am in the kitchen!” Thran called back, so he came in to find his angel making tea. He was bedraggled again, but not quite as droopy, and he smiled a welcome. “I make spice tea. Does that suit?”
“Sounds good. I got the paint and more primer, and some paint samples for our room. Do you want to take a look?”

Thran carried the Japanese iron teapot and two of the small ceramic cups to the table. “Of course I do. What plans have you made for us, lyubov moya?”

Bard pulled the paint chips out of his back pocket. “I know I said peacock blue, grey, and silver, but I saw this icy blue grey that would look great. It comes in a sueded finish, which would be soft in the light.”

Thran rubbed his fingers over the sample. “The color is perfect. It is a color that suits both of us very well. And the finish adds patina. I like that, too.”

“It costs a little more –”

Thran shot him a warning look.

Bard held up his hands. “But not much, and it’s just two gallons. So I’m game if you are.”

“I am very game. And gamey. I must wash yet again.”

“I set up the times for us to look at those three SUVs tomorrow afternoon. If you want, I’ll handle the children in the morning so you can go right to the barre, and get in most of your practice before we have to go out.”

“I hate for you to do that, just because it is still so new for me to see to the children. But we need the SUV, and we need me to practice, so I think that is what we should do tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’m going to put our supper pie together, then go back to start painting. If I can get one coat done today, I can get the second one done tomorrow morning, and then all that’s left is the woodwork. I’d like to get at least the bottom of that done before the furniture gets here, so we don’t have to move it back and forth a lot.”

“So we have a plan. I can help you with the supper before I wash, to save a little time. What will you make?”

“Either pot pie or shepherd’s pie. Does Legolas like either of those?”

“The shepherd’s pie has the potatoes and cheese on top? He loves that. The pot pie has the pastry crust, yes?”

Bard nodded as he got the veg out of the fridge.

“He likes that, too. The only thing he does not like that I know of is eggplant, for which I share his aversion. And butternut squash. I cannot remember if I have tasted that, so I cannot say if I like it or not.”

“Does anyone like eggplant?” Bard snickered, getting the cutting board out for Thran. “No one does in this house, anyway. They’re not big on winter squash, either. But they like the summer kinds. Oh, I had this idea about making spirals out of veg so I can make you something that looks like pasta without you having to eat wheat noodles...”

They conversed easily as Bard assembled a big chicken pot pie, then the crust, ready to put in the oven when the children came home. That would be in less than an hour, so Bard hastened upstairs to paint while Thran cleaned up their preparations. He got one wall coated before the front door opened
and four children came clattering inside. He climbed down from his ladder, capped the paint, and wrapped the brush and roller in plastic wrap to keep them damp while he talked to the children, and hurried downstairs.

Had the Imladris Academy lived up to everyone’s expectations?
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The cherubs’ chorus reveals all about their new adventures. Meanwhile, a saint and his angel see to business, an SUV, and a certain bit of administrivia.

Chapter Notes

I don’t own the rights to Miss Othmar, the teacher Linus adored so in the Peanuts comic strip. That belongs to the estate of Charles Schulz.

I don’t own the rights to any part of Harry Potter and the Hogwarts’ Herbology class, either. Those are J.K. Rowling's domain.

Monsieur Cornett is a tribute to my second French teacher of long ago. He was a funny and caring man, and his students didn’t appreciate what a gem he was until years later. Merci, Monsieur!

Translation Notes:

Ya lyublyu tebya = I love you (Russian)
Garu di = I love you (Welsh)

Thran took it as a good sign that the children’s voices were bright and full of laughter, and their footsteps were energetic. He sat at the kitchen table, and looked up from his computer as all four children came clattering in.

“Good afternoon, mes petits!” Thran greeted with a big smile, happy that all of the children were pink-cheeked from the cold and cheerful. “How was the school today? Oh, first, let me get Bard, so he can hear, too.”

“I’m right behind them,” Bard replied, coming in behind Bain, wiping his hands on a rag. “Hi, all! How was your day?”

“I had a good time!” Tilda announced at once. Thran had learned that Tilda was generally the child who mulled things longest, and was most considered with her words. Not today, though – her words were firmly enthusiastic. “I’m in the Blue reading group, which is the one with the most interesting books, though I’ve already read a bunch of them. Miss Othmar says she’ll have to find some new books because of how many I’ve read, and she asked me which ones I thought would be good. And I explained to one of the girls in my math group how fractions are like slices of pie, just like you told me, Da, and she got it. It was a lot of fun all day.”

“That’s great, little doll,” Bard smiled, getting out two big blocks of cheese from the refrigerator and
putting them on the counter. As he got the boxes of crackers, a cutting board, and knife, his face relaxed into relief at news of Tilda’s successful day. “Homework?”

“Some. I understand it all,” Tilda said with a big grin as she opened one of the cracker boxes and helped herself to one.

“Perfect! Go hang up your coat and take off your boots before you eat, little doll. Legolas, what do you want for a snack – oh, I guess cheese and crackers are good, then?”

“Great,” Legolas mumbled, mouth already full as he dove in for another piece amid the other hands diving beside him. “I had a good day, too. I’m in Sigrid’s French class, Father. We’re in the top one.”

“That’s because you speak it so well, Legs – he dazzled the instructor, Ada. I did, too, but in the other way – I understand well enough, but my accent is so terrible! You and Legs have to help me get better! And when we start reading that Camus novel, I’ll be asking both of you vocab questions right and left.”

“I’m in two classes with Bain, too,” Legolas continued. “Science and math. Algebra.”

“The math’s got to be a mistake,” Bain snickered. “What I know about algebra would fit in a thimble!”

“It’s pre-algebra, Bain,” Legolas amended.

“And I know even less about that!” Bain threw up his hands and rolled his eyes.

That got a laugh from everyone. Thran put aside his computer and helped Bard put the crackers, cheese, and fruit on the table for everyone to enjoy while the children described their day. Tilda was the most enthusiastic, but Thran took that to be a sign of just how nervous she’d been this morning, and how brave she’d been to forge ahead despite it. Her teacher was young and attentive, and there were sixteen other students in her class. Twice a week she had art class, twice a week she had music class, and once a week she had a special Plants and Pets class in the school greenhouse, which the children had nicknamed Herbology after the Harry Potter books. Not only were there many plants to see to, but there were several animals to learn about – a tortoise, an iguana, and a ball python among them. It was good to see their youngest child so enthusiastic.

Bain was less effusive; in fact, all three of the older children were more reserved. Thran’s experience in dance school had taught him that it was better to remain above the fray until one better understood exactly what the fray was, and which factions vied for control. Legolas certainly knew that from boarding school. As students in inner city schools, Bain and Sigrid surely knew, too. Some of the conversations he’d overheard between the children since the fight in the park had revealed just how careful one had to be to avoid the wrong elements. Still, if he read the three older children correctly, all three were cautiously optimistic. They were in a wide variety of classes, from the ubiquitous English and maths to French – even Tilda had a brief French lesson once a week this term, which delighted her, as soon she’d understand what her older siblings said – and various sciences. Everyone had some sort of sport – Bain chose soccer, of course; just as predictably, Legolas chose archery. Sigrid was the surprise. She chose running.

“It helps me think,” she shrugged. “It’s peaceful. I never saw the point of chasing a ball, anyway.”

Tilda was in a general sport class; she wouldn’t choose a specific one until next year, but so far she thought either running like her sister might be nice, or perhaps badminton.
“I can lift those racquets a lot easier than the tennis ones,” she informed everyone, which brought another laugh.

“I talked to Mr. Faramir about the fencing, Father,” Legolas said. “I need special permission, which I expected, but it’s just a formality – you must sign a form, that’s all. Mr. Faramir said he’d contact the Gondors, and he didn’t see any problem with me working with them. Their studio is just a block from the school, and the students walk over together in a group, so it’ll be safe. I can catch the late bus to get home after the practice.”

“I can, too, if I make the soccer team,” Bain added. “This season’s almost over, of course, but the team still practices, so Mr. Faramir told me to see Mr. Boromir about it tomorrow or Friday, whenever I have a minute.”

“Did you get to do any archery today, Legolas?” Tilda asked, holding out an apple to Thran for him to cut it up for her.

Legolas nodded. “I did. The school bows are all right, but Mr. Faramir said I could bring mine if I want to, and I do. I met Killian Dis again, and Tara Green. They’re both friendly, and showed me where things are and how the team practices. They’re both very good archers, too, Father. In fact, Killian is about the best archer I’ve seen, and he’s a year younger than me. Tara’s my age, and she’s amazing, too. I’ll have to work hard to stay up with them.”

“All to the good, synok,” Thran nodded. “Such competition will make you sharper.”

The children continued to chat about their impressions of the day, which Thran and Bard followed with interest. About the only negative thing anyone said was about Sigrid's government class. Mr. Saur was like a strange, marabou stork without the ruff that wore the school instructor’s tunic like a straitjacket. He never met anyone’s eyes and kept an odd wide grin on his face most of the time.

“The other students call him the Mouth of Sauron,” Sigrid confessed, looking embarrassed. “It isn’t very nice, but honestly, he does look exactly like that guy in the Return of the King!”

Everyone laughed in varying stages of disbelief, but Legolas nodded in support of his stepsister. “I think I saw him today in the hall. Did he have on a black tunic? With black hair? And that little cap like the cheesemongers in town wear?” Sigrid nodded. “Then Sig’s right. He does look like the Mouth of Sauron!”

“Thank the gods he doesn’t have black teeth. He’s pretty dull, but you can’t take your eyes off him because he’s sooooo strange!”

“My art teacher was out today, but the substitute was strange,” Tilda said, “but in a good way. She wore shoes with great big pompoms on them. They were green!”

“What about you, Bain, and Legolas?” Thran laughed. “Have either of you a strange teacher?”

The boys both shook their heads. “Mostly normal, I have to say, compared to pompoms and funny hats,” Bain shrugged, taking another sip of milk. “I like the French teacher. I think he’s the same one you and Legs have, Sig. He’s tall and thin with these eyes that bug out, but he’s funny, and he explains stuff better than my old teacher. Monsieur Cornett’s his name.”

“That’s him,” Sigrid nodded.

“Oh, I have him, too!” Tilda’s eyes widened. “I like him. He knew I didn’t know any French yet, so when the other children were working on an assignment, he came over to teach me a few things. **Bonjour** is hello, and **à bientôt** is see you later today. He gave me a list of things to learn for next
“Perhaps Legolas and I can help you learn the words, *ma petite,*” Thran offered.

“I think I’ll sit in on that,” Bard commented, nibbling a piece of cheese. “All of you will know French except me, so Tilda, I’d better learn your words, too, so I know what’s going on around me.”

“Father helped me a lot,” Legolas said, smiling. “We would speak nothing but French, or Russian, all day so that we didn’t forget it. Once you know a few words, it’s not so hard. ‘Pass me the milk, please,’ is ‘passe-moi le lait, s’il vous plaît.’ So then you can say ‘passe-moi le pain,’ the bread, ‘passe-moi la fromage,’ the cheese, ‘passe-moi les framboises,’ the raspberries.”

“So passe-moi la fromage, s’il vous plaît,” Bard said to general laughter. “Then I need to get back to painting. Supper’s going on in half an hour, and we’ll eat forty-five minutes after that. So supper crew, you’re on duty in an hour.”

“What did you paint today, Da?” Sigrid asked.

“Upstairs study, so it’ll be done when the furniture comes on Friday. The tub’s going in on Friday, too...”

Thran trailed along after the children to see the progress of the children’s study. Bard had only one wall done so far, but it was enough to show the sunny color. As the children scattered to their rooms, Thran surveyed the wall.

“I like it, *lyubov moya.* Could you use another pair of hands before supper?”

“Always. I’ll cut in, and you can do the roller.”

“Cut in?”

“That means I use the brush to paint up to the woodwork where the roller can’t reach, and you do the wall from that part over. Here, I’ll show you.”

Thran watched closely as Bard showed him how to fill the roller and paint the wall smoothly without streaks, so Thran began carefully as he’d been shown. He didn’t have the fast technique that Bard did, but he was more concerned with keeping the paint even and streak-free. They painted together for a while, talking back and forth about the children’s day, tomorrow’s car shopping, and other inconsequentials. In a bit, Bard went downstairs to put the pot pie in the oven, and returned to help Thran finish rolling the second wall. They managed to get the third wall done before the pot pie was due to come out, so Bard showed Thran how to put the brushes in plastic wrap to keep them moist while they ate. He intended to finish the last wall while the children worked on homework and cycled through the shower. He hoped to finish the second coat and the woodwork before the furniture came Friday so that the furniture could be set in place. Then the children would have a good place to study or play, and the pile of books in the main room downstairs could go on the shelves.

Everyone pitched in to get supper on the table, then cleaned up. Afterwards, the children settled at the kitchen table to start their homework. There was a mountain of forms for Thran and Bard to fill out, as well, so Bard didn’t get back upstairs to finish painting as early as he wanted to. But eventually all the forms were done, and Bard ran back upstairs to get the last wall done before the children went to bed. Despite Bard’s protests, Thran insisted on helping, too, so that his saint wouldn’t have to labor so long. Finally, at close to nine-thirty, the last wall was done. Bard capped the paint, and took the brushes downstairs to the laundry room to clean.
“I’m sure I’ll have to do a second coat, but at least the first one’s done today. I’ll try to get as much done tomorrow morning after the children are off to school, then finish after we go see the SUVs. Make sure you take your driver’s license, angel. If we buy one, you’ll have to drive it home.”

“I will be ready,” Thran assured Bard. “For now, though, let us get the children ready for bed, and then we can have a few minutes to rest before we must follow them.”

All but Sigrid were through their showers, so Bard read Tilda a story before she went to bed. Legolas sat cross-legged on his bed with Thran at the foot, talking a little more about Legolas’s impression of the academy.

“It is much nicer than boarding school already,” Legolas confided. “But I’m glad to have the classes with Sigrid and Bain, so I see a friendly face a few times a day.”

“I’m glad it went so well today. You will soon know more of your fellow students, I am sure. And I want to tell you how proud I was of you this morning when you spoke to Tilda. It was kind of you.”

Legolas blushed, but only a little. “Our Tilda is sweet, isn’t she? She made a picture for me before she ever met me.”

“So she did.”

“So I wanted to help her feel better.”

“It was nicely done, Legolas.” Thran tugged one of Legolas’s green braids. “The green is fading. Will you make them green again, or another color?”

Legolas grinned. “The school colors are blue and gold. Maybe I’ll make them blue this time.”

Thran snickered. “Please make sure the bathroom remains the color it is now when you do. Our Bard works very hard to make the paint look nice.”

“He works very hard at everything.”

Thran nodded. “He takes good care of us all. Now, it is late, and time for bed.”

Legolas leaned over to hug Thran. “I’m glad we’re here, Father.”

“So am I, synok. Very much. Sleep well now. Oh, we forgot to say. Tomorrow, Bard will do all the school prep so that I can finish my barre early. He and I will shop for an SUV for me tomorrow afternoon, so please help him in the morning as you would me.”

“So the SUV?” Legolas’s hands tightened on Thran’s arms in anticipation. “What kind?”

“We shall see tomorrow. We have three to look at.”

“That’s cool! So you might have it when we get home?”

“Perhaps so. If we are not home when you get off the bus, then please help Sigrid until we return.”

“I will, Father. That’s cool!”

“It is. Sleep now, and tomorrow will come sooner.”

“Yes, Father. Ya lyublyu tebya.”
Thran kissed the top of Legolas’s hair, helped him slide into bed under the covers, turned out the light, and pulled the door mostly closed against the light on the landing. Bard was just coming out of Tilda’s room, so he poked his head into Legolas’s room to wish a good night while Thran spoke to Tilda. Bain was tucked in in similar fashion, and then Sigrid. When they came out onto the landing again, they looked at each other with a sigh of accomplishment.

“Music, or film?” Bard offered.

Thran was tempted, but when he regarded the pocket doors beckoning him towards their bedroom, he shook his head. “I am very tired. I don’t need another shower, but you do, so I will settle in bed while you bathe.”

“I’m all for that,” Bard exhaled. “I’d be smart to bathe before I sit down again, anyway, or I may not manage to get up again.”

Thran chuckled in wry commiseration. “It has been a very long day for all of us. So I am happy to take to our bed.”

“Let’s do the rounds, then.”

They checked that all was put away and ready for the morning, and that the children’s bathroom nightlight was lit. Once Bard had bathed, he crawled in beside Thran, and they arranged themselves comfortably in the dark.

“A good day, cariad.”

“A very good day, lyubov moya. The first of many.”

“The first of very many. Garu di, angel.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya, my saint.”

It was a mark of the day’s labors that neither of them lasted more than a few heartbeats after that before falling asleep.

* * *

The next morning came on like a thoroughbred down the final stretch of Bangor-on-Dee Racecourse. Bard hurried downstairs with Thran on his heels, him to the kitchen to start the children’s breakfasts and lunches, and Thran to the ballroom for his barre work. He had the lunches in progress when Sigrid came down.

“Where’s Thran?”

“At the barre early. We’re going into town this afternoon to look at an SUV for him to get him to and from class. So he’s doing his practice early so he stays on track with his audition prep. The first one’s January nineteenth.”

“An SUV? Cool! Here, I’ll help with the lunches,” Sigrid said, setting her porridge down on the kitchen island by Bard’s lineup of waxed paper sheets with bread atop them. “Does Legolas like
They worked on opposite sides of the island to assemble the four sandwiches. Sigrid folded them in their waxed-paper wrapping and put them in the lunch bags; Bard had water bottles filled and fruit ready to add with the sandwiches. The pan of brownies came out, Sigrid put the cookies Bard cut into more waxed paper, and those went into the bags.

“Thanks, Sig. Finish your porridge, and I’ll get this cleaned up.”

“Make sure you eat, Da,” Sigrid replied. “You didn’t yesterday.”

“I ate after you all went to the bus.”

“No, you didn’t. I’ll bet you marched upstairs and started painting, and Thran marched into the ballroom and started dancing.”

What actually had happened when Bard and Thran had come home after seeing the children to the bus had been worth missing breakfast for, but Bard refused to let his face reflect how much he’d relished that. “I didn’t quite march up the stairs as soon as we came back, but soon enough.”

“We’ve got enough now, Da. You can’t keep shorting yourself. And while you’re at it make Thran eat more, too. He’s gorgeous, but he needs more meat on his bones.”

“You’ll have to help me work on that,” Bard shook his head. “I think he needs to eat more, too. But he’s taken care of himself for a long time, and he’s promised to keep doing so. I’ve promised I’d trust him to keep doing so, too.”

“Well, that’s all right, then.” Sigrid finished her porridge, rinsed out her bowl, and put it in the dishwasher.

“It is?” Bard dished up a bowl of porridge for himself.

“Sure. He’d do anything for you, so if you made him promise to take care of himself, then he will.”

Bard smothered a grin at Sigrid’s blunt assessment of her father’s relationship with a Russian ballet dancer. “I hope so.”

The boys and Tilda came clattering downstairs, so Bard handed off his bowl of porridge to Legolas, dished another for Bain, and a third for Tilda. He had to explain where Thran was again, and why he was at the barre so early, so the breakfast chatter was full of speculation about what SUV, if any, might appear in front of the house this afternoon. He set the order of who’d be in charge if he and Thran weren’t back before the children came home from school, and made sure everyone ate enough breakfast. Before long, the children were ready to head out to catch the bus, so they trooped to the ballroom to wave goodbye to Thran. He paused long enough to hug everyone goodbye, then Bard went out with the children. Rosie was already there with her four children.

“I hope you, Thran, and your children can come over to supper with us one day soon, Bard,” Rosie said.

“That’d be nice, Rosie. We’d like that, all of us. I still remember that spicy cornbread you made so often. But I have to hold off for a couple of weeks, if you don’t mind. I’ve got a mountain of renovation to do to get the children’s rooms finished. Thran’s got auditions coming up, and he’s working around the clock, too, to get ready. Would you mind if we get ourselves a little more settled before we visit you and Sam and your children?”
“Of course not! If you don’t mind me asking, it sounds like you hadn’t planned to move out here as soon as you did.”

“We didn’t, but the owner of the apartment building we lived in wanted in on the whole gentrification craze and decided to do a major renovation, then wanted to renegotiate all the apartment leases accordingly. So we decided to move early,” Bard explained. This was the story he and Thran had agreed to use if anyone asked, rather than to talk about the heroin gang. The children had been instructed not to say anything about it, either, as at some point a trial or some other legal proceeding was likely to take place, and Bard and Thran had decided that the less talk about what had happened the better.

“Understandable,” Rosie nodded. “I know you’ll do a good job on it all. You always do. And I can’t wait to see you get back to your sculpture again. A lot of us have a new artist’s rep now. Maybe you’ve heard about them – Shire Hills?”

“I have,” Bard nodded. That was the name of the firm that Thran had mentioned. “They’re good?”

“I like them,” Rosie agreed. “They’re less expensive because they aren’t well established nationwide yet, but they’ve gotten some nice commissions for several of us in the past six months. I got a nice church window job just after I signed with them, and that job brought in two more commissions, good ones. I can get you their name and number if you like.”

“I’ve got it already, somewhere in the piles of stuff not put away yet. If I can’t find it, I’ll ask. Someone else recommended them, too, so I’d planned to call them once the house is farther along.”

“I hope you do. Greenwood Dale on the Lake is just on the edge of becoming a bigger draw, so having you back means one more to help pull us all along. We don’t have another metal sculptor, so you’re filling a niche we need filled. Oh, here’s the bus. Let me know if there’s anything Sam and I can do to help, and you know we’ll be over.”

“Thanks, Rosie. I will.”

As Rosie hurried to hug her children goodbye, Bard turned to his children to complete the old saw.

“You’re off!” he called, grinning.

“And we’re leaving, too!” came back the chorus, even from Legolas.

“Do your best!”

“Just like always!”

When the bus trundled off, Bard waved to the other parents, and headed home at a trot.

“I’m back!” he called as he came in the front door. He walked back to the ballroom, where Thran stood on one foot, the other stretched behind him straight up in a split. His shoulders nearly touched his calf, and his hands grasped his uppermost foot.

Bard paused, mouth open. He belatedly swallowed. “That... shouldn’t even be humanly possible.”

“It is what they call a flashy move,” Thran agreed, eyes shut as he concentrated on the stretch. “A profound stretch of the psoas. But I like it.” He released his foot, which did not move as his torso fell gracefully forward until it met the shin of his other leg. His hands wrapped around his ankle. “The counter is a good stretch of the opposite hamstring. I like that, as well. The children are on the bus without trouble, then?”
“Um, yes, no trouble,” Bard shook himself out of his regard of his lover’s stretch. “Rosie’s asked us to come for supper one night. I said we’d be glad to visit once our place is more settled, and you’re through a few of your auditions.”

“I appreciate that you saw to the children, and got us a little time to settle. I agree with you that we are not quite ready for visiting yet.”

“Anything specific?”

Thran reversed his stretch again, very slowly. “I think we would be wise to be married before we visit too many people.”

“Good point. Maybe we can stop by the county building this afternoon, if we get through the SUV shopping early enough. We have to apply for the marriage license together.”

“We do. Let us take our paperwork with us, and see how the day goes.”

“All right. I’m headed upstairs to paint. I’ll put your breakfast on when you come up for a shower.”

“That would be very nice, but I can make porridge on my own if you are in the middle of something.”

“We’ll see how the day goes about that, too. So practice well, angel. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Thran grinned and blew him a kiss as he backed out. Laughing, Bard came back in the ballroom and waited until Thran reversed his stretch again to kiss him as he reached for the floor.

“Very nice,” Thran purred. “Would that every session at the barre offered such delights.”

Chuckling, Bard headed upstairs and got out his brush and roller.

More than four hours later, it was nearly noon, and Thran had not come upstairs. Bard kept to his painting, but couldn’t keep from worrying. He hoped Thran had gotten something to eat, but he suspected that his lover had stayed at the barre, working overtime to get that long, elegant body back into dancing trim. He managed to get the second coat of paint on all four walls without going downstairs to check, but when the last roller of paint was on the walls and he couldn’t find any more missed places in the bright sunlight, he capped the paint and brought the brushes and tray downstairs to wash in the laundry tub.

When the brush and roller were clean and drying in the laundry room, Bard went looking for Thran. He found him right where he expected – in the ballroom, sitting on his yoga mat, folded over his outstretched legs. His clothing was soaked in places, his hair was mussed out of its usual smoothness, and his pose was limp and exhausted.

“Angel, it’s almost noon.”

“Is it?” Thran looked up, his face pale. “I had not realized it was so late.”

“Did you eat anything?”

Thran didn’t answer. When Bard sighed, Thran flicked him a glance. “Did you?”

He hadn’t. He’d handed off his porridge to Legolas this morning, and had never gotten back to dish up another bowlful for himself. He winced. He came over to Thran’s mat and folded himself cross-legged beside him.
“What are we going to do with us? We can’t keep skipping meals. The children need us healthy, not wasting away because we’re too busy to eat.”

Thran eased out of his stretch to sit beside Bard. “You are right. We have been remiss two days in a row.”

“I’ve just made a new house rule. No missed meals.”

“I had not intended to. The dance took me, and I lost track of time.”

“I guess wanting to get things right for the children took me, too. I actually had the bowl of porridge in my hand, then the children came down, and I gave it to them, and... I never got back to the porridge.”

Thran leaned his head on Bard’s shoulder, and rested his hand on Bard’s thigh. “I admit that I am exhausted.”

“You look it. Not good. I’ll take you upstairs to make sure you get into the shower, then I’ll make us a big lunch. And we both will eat every bite of it.”

“Yes,” Thran agreed simply. How could one syllable contain so much weariness?

Bard drew Thran up from the floor, and they went upstairs arm in arm. Bard hoped Thran was perfectly capable of undressing and getting into the shower alone, but he seemed so droopy that Bard did it for him. When he got Thran into the bathroom, even the ballet dancer winced at his reflection.

“Did you just wear yourself out thoroughly, or did you hurt something, too?” Bard asked as dispassionately as possible – not easy, as pale as Thran looked under the fluorescent lights.

“Nothing hurts. I am well. Merely... tired.”

“Can I trust you to get yourself through the shower while I make us lunch, or do you need me to scrub you down?”

Thran turned the ghost of a sly smile on him, but even the ghost was mostly bravado. “I am as eager to christen this lovely room as you, lyubov moya. But I would not do you justice right now, and I prefer to wait for the soaking tub. So you will make our lunch, and I will revive the dead.”

“That’s not far from it,” Bard returned, kissing Thran’s ear. “Get warm and clean and dry, angel, and then I’ll feed both of the dead.”

Once Thran got into the shower cabinet and under the water, Bard went back downstairs and perused the fridge for lunch. By the time Thran reappeared in black jeans, grey Henley, and warm socks, his hair clean and shining in its loose braid, Bard had a skillet of sautéed chicken; another of quinoa; and a bowl of salad.

“Grab plates, then we can eat,” he invited.

“This smells wonderful,” Thran breathed in deeply as he leaned over the quinoa. “What is it?”

“Quinoa. It’s got a lot of protein in it, which you need. The rest is just onions, raisins, dried cherries, pine nuts, pecans, almonds, a lot of turmeric and cumin, and a little butter and olive oil. I hope you like it.”

“To be honest, Bard, right now I could eat my boots with gusto.”
Laughing, Bard took the plate Thran handed him and waited for Thran to help himself from the pans. When the dancer took only two small pieces of chicken, Bard took the fork, speared another small piece, and put it on Thran’s plate. Thran shot him a reproving look, but Bard shrugged without apology. “You need to eat, Thran. Even Sigrid noticed how little you eat. She fussed at me this morning about us both missing meals, so while I won’t say a word if you pass up the cheese and crackers, cookies, red meat, and simple carbs, I will nudge you about eating protein and complex carbs.”

Thran exhaled in exasperation, but he didn’t remove the chicken. “Is it not enough that I submit most deliciously to you in bed? Now you want power over my plate, too?”

“I want you healthy and happy, with enough meat on your bones to make you worth pillaging. And able to dance. And able to pillage me at any time.”

Thran sat down at the kitchen table with his plate. Bard set his plate down, then ducked into the fridge to pour them both glasses of almond milk. He brought the glasses to the table, put one in front of Thran, and sat down with his. “This stuff’s pretty good. And twice the calcium of the dairy stuff, another thing you need.”

As Thran took up his fork, he glowered at Bard. “You are a tyrant.”

Bard snickered. “You can take it out in trade, once you’ve eaten enough to do so.”

Thran’s glower crumbled into laughter. “That will not be hard, lyubov moya. Everything is delicious.”

It was more than delicious, if the way Thran wolfed down everything on his plate was any indication. He even went back for more of the quinoa, laughing when Bard told him that Tilda called it the Saturn grain, because the quinoa germ traced around each small seed like the rings around the planet. With every bite, Thran revived, and soon he looked himself again. Bard was no less eager to eat, and felt much better when he was full. There were more than enough brownies left for the children’s lunches tomorrow, so he took a small one and cut it in two, offering half to Thran, who looked at it askance.

“It’s only half a brownie, and I promise that I didn’t put any arsenic in it. Besides, you didn’t have breakfast. They have orange in them.”

Thran engulfed the scant mouthful before he thought better of it. “They do. Gods, Bard. You can tempt the Devil towards redemption with these.”

“As long as I can tempt an angel back to balance, Old Scratch can take care of himself,” Bard grinned. “You look better, so I hope you feel better.”

“I am much revived, thanks to my saint, and quite ready for our expedition to view SUVs. When is our first appointment?”

“We’ve got time to clean up before we head out. Wash, or wipe?”

“You cooked. I will wash.”

They cleaned up the kitchen, brushed teeth, and collected paperwork in case they had time to go to the county office for their marriage license. Once on their way, they decided that Bard would make sure the mechanical aspects of the SUVs were up to snuff, and Thran would concentrate on the body language of the sellers. That would help them get the best read on which purchase to make, if any.
A couple of hours later, they had Thran’s SUV. The widow offering one of the used ones was unpleasant – Bard suspected she disapproved of whatever she saw in two men trying to buy her husband’s vehicle – and the new one was tricked out with so much bling that neither Thran nor Bard wanted it. The third one, a recent model, was more serviceable, and had been well maintained, so money changed hands, and Thran got behind the wheel with satisfaction. Bard had been a little concerned about this part – the Prince of Ice actually driving. But on the trip from seller to title shop, Bard’s rear view mirror proved that Thran was more than capable.

Once they took care of the paperwork and fees, Thran pulled out his mobile. “It is only three-thirty, Bard. Do you think we have time to go to the county office for our license?”

“We’re pushing it, but let’s stop anyway. We need our paperwork from the truck, then we can walk over. It’s a couple of blocks, but we’d take just as long walking as we would trying to find another parking slot.”

“Let us go, then.”

They reached the right clerk with fifteen minutes to spare. They handed over their birth certificates as well as the sad reminders of their wives’ demises, and soon had the small certificate in hand. Their expressions remained matter-of-fact in front of the clerk and the various people they passed as they retraced their steps through the building, but Thran gave Bard a surreptitious peck on the cheek as they stepped onto the sidewalk.

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”

Bard swallowed what was surely a silly grin, but he couldn’t smother the chuckle. He put his arm around Thran’s hips under his coat to give a squeeze before they headed back to their vehicles.

“Thank you, too, angel. Let’s go home.”

“Quickly. The children are home by now, and they likely pillage the kitchen as we speak.”

They separated for the brief drive home. As Bard climbed into his truck, his silly grin refused to leave his face. Why had taking care of a trivial and bureaucratic necessity make his heart beat a little faster? It wasn’t as if his feelings for Thran had changed – he still was the most blessed of men to have his ethereal angel as his partner. Had a scrap of paper made their pairing seem more real? Maybe that was it. Whatever it was, he was glad Thran didn’t see the goofy expression that would not leave his face as he drove.

He pulled up to the house and parked his truck beside the carriage house. As Thran pulled up beside him, the front door opened and all four children spilled out.

“Whoa, look at this!” Bain exclaimed, with Legolas on his heels. “Legs and I claim the back seat!”

Bard climbed out of his truck as a laughing Thran let the children climb through the new SUV. “A little more room than Bard’s truck, yes? So we will be more comfortable on trips.”

“It suits you, Ada,” Sigrid stuck her head out of the window where she and Tilda sat in the middle seats. “It’s silver!”

“The angel’s chariot, indeed,” Bard teased, joining Thran to laugh at the children testing the seats and poking into all the pockets.

“Hey, there’s a snack tray!” Legolas called, sounding just as loud as Bain. It was good to hear their quietest child roar a little louder. “Look, Bain! A snack tray!”
Bard leaned towards Thran. “If you’re smart, cariad, you’ll ban snacking in the SUV right up front. Once that artificial cheese smell gets into the upholstery, it never comes out.”

“Ugh,” Thran made a face. “I will do so at once. I do not like that smell in any shape or form.”

“We have one, too!” Tilda announced, pulling the small tray down between her and Sigrid. “See, Bain? We have a snack tray, too!”

Bard didn’t have to nudge Thran before the tall dancer leaned over to look inside the SUV. “The snack tray will make good arm rests, yes. Snack holders, no. We have tables in the house to hold snacks.”

“I knew it,” Bain looked at Legolas. “Your Da listened to my Da, and now we’ll never get to snack in here.”

“You don’t snack in the truck, do you?” Bard looked back at his son. “Same rules apply for Thran’s SUV.”

That met with a chorus of groans, but it didn’t last long given that three of the children already followed those rules in Bard’s truck. After a few more minutes of exploration, the children were ready to follow their fathers into the house to get ready for supper.

Even though Thran had worked so hard earlier, he pitched in to help with the kitchen prep. Today’s menu included salmon, sautéed vegetables, and potatoes, all quick to prepare. In half an hour, all six sat down to full plates.

Bard surveyed the full table. All of the children were full of news about their day at school. Tilda tried out one of her new French words on Thran. Sigrid and Legolas and Bain laughed about a special assembly they’d seen today. At the other end of the table, Thran caught his eye, smiling.

Yes. Just yes.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

A saint and his angel consider ramifications in the middle of renovations.

Chapter Notes

J.K. Rowling holds the copyright on her Harry Potter world, not me. I just enjoy her world.

I don't hold any rights to "The Secret Garden," either.

What was better than the laughter and conversation swirling around the kitchen table? It was surely the smile that transfigured Bard’s face. His saint sat at the other end of the table, watching and listening and savoring the children’s banter more than he would water in the middle of Death Valley. The children’s unconscious ease and good appetite were welcome signs of a whole family, the thing that Bard treasured most.

Thran let Bard indulge in his delight for another few seconds, then caught his eyes again. He held up his fork and pointed to his plate, which brought a chagrined grimace to Bard’s face as he belatedly took up his utensils to eat his supper. At least he ate with good appetite, when he remembered to do so.

Despite their rapid-fire conversation, the children downed their suppers in minutes. After dessert, Bard and Thran marshaled the cleanup crew, then the children settled around the table to work on homework. Thran took it upon himself to preside, and sent Bard upstairs to get the study woodwork painted in anticipation of tomorrow’s furniture delivery. Most of the homework questions he got were about French, especially from Tilda; the older children were able to handle the rest. That was good; Thran couldn’t remember the last time he’d studied pre-algebra, and from the boys’ discussion, he’d be no help to them at all. At least he could still muddle through Tilda’s few questions about her English assignment about the subjunctive verb tense. When she was through, she showed him her list of French vocabulary, and they played with the words. If he had anything to say about it, Tilda would soon catch up to the rest of her class.

At length, it was time for the children to cycle through showers, so Thran went upstairs with Tilda to see how Bard had done with his painting.

“I’ve got the wall done where the bookcase desks will go,” Bard said as he sat atop his ladder. He held a small cup of paint in one hand and his brush in the other, concentrating as he smoothed paint on the next bit of crown molding with precise strokes. “So we can put them in place tomorrow. I’ll do the rest tomorrow, so I can sand and wax the floor by the wall tonight. Those things are heavy, and they’ll be even heavier when we put all the books and so forth in them, so I don’t want to have to move them once they’re here.”

“A good plan,” Thran agreed; his attention wasn’t on Bard’s words, but his shirt. Each time Bard
raised his brush to the woodwork, his shirt rose accordingly, giving tempting glimpses of lean flank. As tired as he was, he still felt a jolt in his abdomen, doubly so because Bard wasn’t paying him any attention, merely attending to his painting with unstudied grace.

“Where are we going to put the desks, then, Da?” Tilda asked. “All on that wall?”

“That’s right, little doll,” Bard glanced down with a smile before refocusing on the molding. “One goes on that end, one goes between the windows, and one goes on this end. They’ll look nice from the doorway with all the books in them.”

“Do I have to put all my books in here?”

“Of course not. You’ve still got your carved bookcase in your room to hold all your favorites. We’ll put the house books in here, though, so we can all get to them to read.”

“And chairs, too?”

“Course. We’ll use some of the dining room chairs until we get some for up here. And maybe a table for doing puzzles or looking at picture books or doing projects.”

“Maybe a rug?”

“That’d be nice in the winter. It’d keep your toes nice and toasty. We’ll look for one in the junk shops the next time we go.”

“When you finish this room, will you work on my room next?”

“I’ll do Legolas’s next, little doll. Yours and Bain’s are in pretty decent shape. His isn’t. In fact, there’s a hole in one of his walls, so that’s not good. I’ll get his in decent trim, then you and Bain will be next.”

Bard finished the end of the molding on this end, so he looked down at Thran and Tilda, giving Tilda a wink before he caught Thran eyeing how his shirt had ridden up. He held brush and paint cup in one hand so he could pull it down, then climbed down from his perch atop the ladder.

“Done all your homework, then, little doll?”

Tilda nodded. “Thran helped me with my French words. He does this funny thing with the Rs.”

“Rrrrrrrr,” Thran rolled, smiling. “Comme ça, ma petite?”

“Oui, comme ça,” Tilda giggled. “Comme ça means ‘like that,’ Da. I can’t do the Rs yet, but I will.”

“Of course you will,” Thran agreed. “It takes only practice, nothing more.”

“So comme ça means like that,” Bard repeated, grinning at his daughter as he put the paint cup on the floor out of the way. “So I’ve got a new word, too. Now, off to the shower?”

Tilda nodded. “Then could we read a story?”

“Course. Which one this time? More Secret Garden?”

“I like that one. You do the accents so well.”

“We’ll have to find something with a Russian in it, then,” Bard ruffled Tilda’s hair. “Thran could do that one.”
Tilda giggled. “He could do all those Durmstrang people in Harry Potter.”

“I have not read any of the Harry Potter books,” Thran confessed. “I did not know they had Russian characters.”

“Book Four,” Bard grinned. “Goblet of Fire. Lots of glowering Russians. You’ll love it. But right now, Til, the shower. You’ve got three more behind you, so we can’t clog up the works.”

“Okay, Da.” Tilda scampered to her room to get her pajamas, and soon disappeared into the bathroom.

“Now you, funny dancer. Did you get enough of a view to hold you until I can do the floor, or do I have to service you first?” Bard murmured, looking Thran up and down.

“Not quite.” Thran took the trailing edge of Bard’s shirt, edged it up, and gave the enticing torso underneath a good ogle – only to expose the bandage over Bard’s stitches. “Oh, my saint, your stitches. How long before they come out?”

“Soon. Another day or so. Won’t be long.”

Thran let Bard’s shirt drop. “I hope not. I am eager to put such unpleasantness behind us. Unfortunately, I must bring up another unpleasantness. I am sorry to do so.”

The teasing expression faded from Bard’s face, and his eyes darkened with concern. He wiped his hands on a paper towel, then gave Thran his full regard. “What is it, Thran?”

“Have you finished the wall as you needed to?” Bard nodded. “And what is needed for the floor?”

“Same as what I did to Sigrid’s floor – light sanding where the bookcase desks will go, then some paste wax. The edges of the floor are in good shape, not like the middle, so they won’t need much to bring them back.”

“Then perhaps I can help you as we talk.”

“You don’t have to, Thran. Just sit while I do it, and that’ll be enough.”

“I do not like all the work to fall to you, lyubov moyo. Is there something I can do that does not cause more trouble than I remedy? If it is, then I want to do it.”

“Sure; it’s not hard, just needs a light hand.”

“Then show me, and I will tell you.”

“Go put on something crummy.”

Thran padded into their room for old leggings and tee shirt, then Bard explained about steel wool and other arcana, and showed Thran what to do. He gave Thran his work gloves, and soon they both sanded away.

“I do not think we should wait too long to have our marriage ceremony,” Thran began.

“You’ve got reasons other than our personal preferences,” Bard surmised.

“The marriage license is a public document, I think,” Thran replied, studying his piece of floor. “It will likely not escape notice that my name is on it.”
“I thought about that, too,” Bard said, sanding away. “I don’t know if you’ve checked the Internet about what happened in the park, but the news wire carried the story for a couple of days because you were involved. A couple tied back to your earlier fracas.”

“I refuse to read anything with my name in it that is not a ballet review,” Thran snorted. “Half of those I wish I had not read, and the other half I do not believe.”

Bard chuckled. “When I was working metal, I felt the same way. I expect I still will when I start again.”

“A healthy reaction.”

“So you think someone will notice, and come snooping around?”

“I hope not, but I must consider it. I do not care for myself. I have dealt with the press for many years. But perhaps you, and certainly our children, have not. I do not want our children frightened or harassed.”

“I don’t, either. What should we do?”

“I expect little of substance to be involved. Likely paparazzi. They can be obnoxious. But as I am only a ballet dancer, and not an eminent statesman or an American footballer or a rock star, they should not be interested for long. So if we teach the children to do what I call the Smile and Nod, we should weather this well.”

“The Smile and Nod,” Bard snickered as he sanded. “And you think we should do the ceremony soon, to as not to drag things out too long?”

“Just so,” Thran smiled at Bard’s amusement. “What would you like to do? We could dress in very formal tuxedos and the children in the same and make a spectacle of ourselves in some scenic location.”

“That might almost be worth it for the sheer rarity of dressing all of us up. But even Sig couldn’t sit still for much of that. What if we do a low-key ceremony and then go watch a spectacle? There’s one of those Japanese steak houses in the village where the chefs cook on a grill right in front of you, and they put on a show while they do so – they juggle eggs, and so forth. Bain’s been trying to get us to go to one for at least a year, but I didn’t have the money. I held him off by telling him he’d have to use chopsticks, but that made Til and Sig want to go more, so I didn’t solve my problem.”

Laughing, Thran looked up from his sanding. “That sounds like fun. Or we could go back to the place where we had the seafood. Bain would like the raw bar.”

“That’d be fun, too. They grilled me about us going there. Til even asked me what color the tablecloths were. They’d like Kasim, too. Or we could go to that Russian place you told me you liked so much.”

“All good choices. I suppose it depends on the ceremony we choose.”

“We can get it done at the county office, first come, first served. It’s open until four on weekdays, so we could pick up the children from school early one day, or right when class ends, go for the ceremony, then do whatever afterwards. Costs next to nothing. Tuesdays and Wednesdays tend to be less busy. Or we could find a justice of the peace and do it over a weekend, I guess. I haven’t looked into that.”

“Either would be expedient, and we would not have to dress up. We consider ourselves married
already, so we do not need the ceremony for sentiment, only legality. Then I like the Japanese restaurant spectacle. We would likely run into fewer annoyances than if we go into the city."

Bard nodded. “That sounds fine. The children will like the cooking thing. We need rings, though – eh, I suppose we don’t, but I’d like one.”

“So would I. So we must find them.”

“There are a few jewelers in the village. We could look there for something unique. Or would that just telegraph our intentions to people we don’t want to telegraph them to? We could look at jewelers in the city. I’m sure a lot of places there would do whatever we want, and no one would notice.”

“I have something planned for Tuesday morning in the city for you and me. We could look after that.”

Pausing in his rubbing, Bard sat back on his heels to regard Thran. “Oh?”

Thran nodded. “I have arranged for you to come to class with me, if that is all right with you.”

“When did you do that? We’ve been busy all day.”

Bard sounded so surprised that Thran laughed. “I asked yesterday. When I helped the children with their homework tonight, I received email that you would be allowed to attend my Tuesday class. I will call tomorrow morning to confirm, and to find out if the master has any concerns you must address. This master is very good, and he and I work well together. He is also very thorough, so you will receive a rigorous introduction to this world. Would that suit?”

“Of course. Of course it does,” Bard was quick to exclaim. “That’ll be brilliant.”

“I will explain everything to you beforehand. I must, as this master prefers to teach mostly in French. Most of his students are old school classicists, but he is primo for refinement and technique for many more than classicists. He is also not so dictatorial that he met my request with scorn or anger.”

“Does he know why you asked?”

Thran nodded. “I explained that my husband wanted to better appreciate the art and discipline of the dance, so that he could embody it in his own art and discipline.”

Bard made suitably impressed noises. “Oh, you didn’t tell him it would be a kindness to let your chauffeur sit in the warmth inside rather than in the cold car outside while he waited for your eminence to take his class?”

“I did not. What respect could the Prince of Ice command to marry a chauffeur? A fellow artist, especially a sculptor of metal, is much more impressive, as well as true. So you must act suitably sculptor-like.”

“Sculptor-like?” Bard gave him an incredulous look, all raised eyebrows and bemused smile. “What does that mean?”

Thran waved his steel wool pad to the ceiling. “I have no idea. Perhaps you could bring a sketchpad? I assume a metal sculptor knows how to draw, yes?”

“Sounds like I need to explain what I do as much as you have to explain what you do.” Bard slid over to sand the next bit of floor. “Yes, I can draw. In fact, it would be fun to sketch your class, if your master allows it. I’d like that.”
“Consider it so, then. I will tell Monsieur LePied to expect such. Have I sanded this enough, lyubov moya?”

They continued to sand the two-foot wide strip of floor along the wall while the children took their showers. The paste wax went much faster, and by the time Sigrid was done, so was the strip of floor. Thran’s fingers ached from the concentrated rubbing, and he flexed them gently as Bard replaced the lid on the can of paste wax.

“That’s enough for tonight,” Bard sighed. “I’ll read Tilda her story, then we’ll get the children to bed.”

“I shall check that everyone’s homework is done,” Thran decided, and headed downstairs to do so.

Bain and Legolas were in the sitting room, playing one of their games. Both of them had finished their assignments, but had left papers and books scattered on the kitchen table, so Thran shooed them back to put everything away. He remembered to ask about lunch bags when Bain’s fell out of his book bag, so soon all the bags and water bottles were ready and waiting for tomorrow’s routine. The boys had another fifteen minutes before bed, so they went back to their game. When he escorted them upstairs, Bard was just finishing Tilda’s story. The three youngest children soon bedded down and were bid goodnight.

Thran followed Bard as he stuck his head in Sigrid’s room.

“Your desk comes tomorrow, sweetness. Where do you want it?”

Sigrid pointed to the wall between her two windows. “Right there, centered. I’ll need a chair and a lamp.”

“We’ll use the dining room chairs until we get to the junk shops. Put a lamp on your list.”

“Will do. Maybe one of those globe ones.”

“We’ll see. Finished your homework?”

“All but the last part of an essay. I won’t be much longer.”

“Okay. I’m knackered, so I’m for the shower and bed.”

“Night, then, Da. Night, Ada.” Sigrid got off her bed to give both Bard and Thran hugs. “Both of you, promise me you’ll eat breakfast tomorrow? Please?”

The look Bard shot Thran was accompanied by a shrug, but both of them clearly conveyed I told you so.

“I will be sure to do so,” Thran tapped her nose. “And I will see that your Da does, too.”

“I’ll have breakfast, and I’ll see that the Prince of Ice does too,” Bard quipped, pressing a kiss to the top of Sigrid’s hair. “We had a long talk about it this morning, and we have a new house rule. No missed meals for either of us.”

“About time!” Sigrid snorted. “Gods, it’s about time. You’re both gorgeous, but you’re both too thin, too!”

“The queen has spoken,” Bard exhaled. “Night, Sig.”

“Good night, ma chère.”
“Night, Da. Night, Ada. See you in the morning.”

Thran gratefully pulled the pocket doors to their room closed behind them. He was exhausted after such a long, busy day, and he was glad to put down the mantle of parenthood for the night. By the end of the bed, Bard stood looking down at the mattress, clearly tempted to merely fall into it.

“Let me return the favor you did me at noon,” Thran whispered as he stood at Bard’s back to ease the flannel shirt off Bard’s shoulders. Bard let Thran slip his Henley off afterwards with only a sigh. Thran rested his chin on Bard’s shoulder and rubbed his thumbs along Bard’s skin just above the top of his jeans, stroking slowly until Bard shut his eyes and hummed in enjoyment.

“Unbutton your jeans,” Thran whispered. When Bard did so, Thran ran fingers under the fabric, caressing the points of Bard’s hips and the creases of his groins. “Mmm, you smell good.”

Bard’s laughter was faint. “I smell like a common laborer.”

“You are an uncommon laborer, and you smell like the man I love. I am half tempted to have you here and now, gamy and half stripped. But you are exhausted, and so am I, and it would be easier for us both if you wash before we go to bed. Then, whatever we are capable of, we have nothing to do after but to fall asleep in each other’s arms. Have I given you enough motivation to get through the shower?”

“Once that hot water hits me, you may end up with nothing but a puddle.”

“Perhaps. But you will be a clean puddle. So wash.”

Thran slid a hand down the length of Bard’s cock only once before slipping away, which got a growl out of Bard. “Bastard.”

“For you, always. Wash, lyubov moya. Before we both fall asleep.”

Bard sat down to unlace his work boots, then stripped off what was left, and vanished into the bathroom with a stretch. As the water came on, Thran slipped out of his clothes and hung them up, trembling as the cool air surrounded him. He hastened into bed and burrowed into the silk sheets and cashmere blankets and down pillows, shivering as the bedding slowly warmed. Gods, gods, it never failed to appall him how quick he was to chill, yet how slow he was to warm. He hoped Bard would join him swiftly and rescue him from the icy bedding. There, yes, the silk was slowly warming, easing his tight muscles, coaxing him from his fetal curl, yes, so much warmer now, so much warmer...

* * *

Hot water was a godsend that took away most of the world’s evils. Why hadn’t church services incorporated hot baths into their liturgy? It was hard not to feel redeemed and saved when washing the day’s labors away with lots of body wash and hot, hot water. Bard managed not to moan too loudly as he stood under the deluge, savoring every drop that ran down his body. It was such a temptation to stay there, warm and loose, but an angel awaited him, one who was likely shivering with cold even under such elegant bedding. Bard shut off the water and dried off, toweling his hair briskly to get as much water out as possible. He was too tired to pull out Thran’s hair dryer, so the towel would have to do.
He didn’t bother to rebandage his stitches, either. They were ready to come out, and Bard would see to that soon. But now it was time to tend his angel, as if either of them were fit for anything tonight. He padded out, about to say something to Thran –

His exhausted angel lay tightly curled in the middle of the bed, sound asleep. Bard smiled at the sight of the Prince of Ice lying so sweetly asleep, so he turned off the lamps and eased in beside him. Thran sighed and loosened out of his curl to soak up Bard’s warmth, but he didn’t wake. Bard had no complaints. He was just as tired, and they had spent too few nights together for him to consider merely sleeping beside an angel to be a poor way to spend the night. He curled around Thran, shut his eyes, and was asleep in half a dozen breaths.

In half a dozen more breaths, it seemed, the alarm went off. The haunting melody that Thran had requested a day or so ago by Vaughn Williams began, and Bard stirred, sorry to have to get up. But it was Friday, and the children needed hot breakfasts and lunches before school. He slipped into the bathroom, then returned to find Thran stirring slowly. Bard sat on the bed to kiss his shoulder.

“Morning, angel. I’m off to the kitchen.”

A long, pale arm snaked out and went around Bard’s neck, easing him down for Thran to press a kiss on his hair. “I will be there in a moment, lyubov moya.”

“Porridge?”

“Yes, please. And tea. Perhaps oolong?”

“Consider it in the cup. See you in a minute.”

Bard pulled on his socks, sleep pants, and Henley, and slipped out of their room. Sigrid and Legolas were already stirring, so he made sure Bain and Tilda were also up before he headed down to the kitchen. The pot of porridge went on, then the teakettle, and Bard piled all the stuff he needed for the lunches on the kitchen island. By the time Thran padded into the room, he had waxed paper and bread lined up for sandwiches. Wordlessly, Thran laid out lettuce across the bread, then took the bin of the remaining ham slices and divided them up across the sandwiches. Once Bard followed with cheese and mustard, they packaged the sandwiches. The water bottles were filled, the lunch bags soon followed, and then Bard put a bowl of porridge in Thran’s hands. Bard had his own in hand as he pointed them both to the table.

“House rules, angel. Eat.”

“As long as you do, too,” Thran said, as Sigrid and Legolas came into the kitchen. Bard made to get up, but Thran glared at him. “Sit!” he growled. “Our children can get their porridge. Sigrid, Legolas, get your porridge so that Bard may eat his.”

“About bloody time,” Sigrid said, filling Legolas’s bowl for him, then hers. “I like that growl of yours, Ada. Sounds serious.”

“It must be, to get your Da to listen,” Thran glowered, drawing Bard’s laughter. “So, eat, lyubov moya, so that I may eat, too, rather than growl at you again.”

“I hear and obey,” Bard teased. “Pass the raisins, please. What’s that in French? Passe-moi the what?”

Legolas snickered. “Passe-moi les raisins.”

“Hmm, I hope I can remember that one,” Bard gave a mock frown of confusion. “That one’s hard.”
Legolas’s snicker spread around the table. Bain and Tilda joined them, and Sigrid got up to help Tilda with the porridge. “Sit, Da. Or I’ll tell Ada to growl at you again.”

“No respect,” Bard shook his head, smiling. He was glad of the warm porridge to fill his empty stomach, and doubly glad that Thran was eating, too. They were off to a good start, at last.

This morning Thran joined the parade to the bus stop, and joined in the old saw about being off and leaving too, and doing their best. Rosie’s husband, Sam, was at the bus stop today in place of his wife, and once the bus pulled away, Sam came up to greet his old friend with a huge hug. Sam was not much taller than the petite Rosie, but he was broad and stocky, with a tangle of blond curls and an open smile.

“Are you still running the Green Thumb, Sam?” Bard asked, after Sam had wrung Thran’s hand in a friendly shake of welcome.

“Of course I am, Bard! You know nothing could take me away from that,” Sam assured him.

“Sam runs the garden and landscape design center on this side of the village,” Bard explained to Thran, whose eyebrows pricked up in interest.

“Do you? Oh, then as spring nears, we will come to see you, then. We have a small Japanese garden planned, and perhaps you can suggest good plants for it?”

“That sounds great,” Sam nodded. “Just the gravel, or something greener?”

“We were thinking evergreens, outside the solarium,” Bard offered. “Remember my pine tree sculpture? I thought it’d look good there with the garden around it.”

“Oh, that’ll be stellar,” Sam’s eyes sparkled. “That’s a northern exposure, isn’t it? I have several hardy things you can think about. But what about a few flowers, Bard? I thought you were a Welshman!”

“I want a proper Welsh garden on the window side of the ballroom, Sam, never fear. Lots of your brightest colors.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for suitable things for that, too. I’ve got a nice bulk discount I offer on blocks of fifty annuals, or twenty perennials.”

“Sounds good. I’ve still go so much to do inside, but I hope we’ll be ready to do something about the garden in the spring.”

“I hope so, too. If you need another strong back for anything, you just let me know, and I’ll be around.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’ll see you later, then.”

“We will. Nice meeting you, Thran. Good to have you with us!”

“Thank you,” Thran nodded, smiling. “Enjoy your weekend, Sam.”

“Thanks! You, too!”

“He is very enthusiastic,” Thran smiled as he and Bard went back to the house.

“Sam’s a good soul. He’s a good balance for all the flighty artists around here – solid as they come, and a true friend, and it’s no lie about his strong back. He’s hauled metal for me more than once.”
“Is he a good gardener, too?”

“The best. Wait until spring. His place is the envy of the neighborhood, and he’s generous to a fault with it. Be careful about admiring anything – he’s liable to dig up a piece of it and give it to you.”

“We will invite him and Rosie and their children over for soup one day, then. They sound like good friends to have.”

“The best.” Bard let them in the front door and headed upstairs to put on his work clothes; Thran followed him to change into his practice attire. “That’s another thing we need to put on the list of stuff to do. Make door keys for you and the children.”

“We need somewhere to put the list, too.”

“We do. A chalkboard, dry marker board, something. It’s got to be in the kitchen, and big, so the children will remember to list things we need at the market when they eat the last of anything. It doesn’t take long to train them to do that, because if it isn’t on the list, it doesn’t get bought, and someone does without until the next trip to the market.”

“Wise,” Thran agreed. “So I will go to the barre, but only if you promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

Thran stroked Bard’s hair, then scrubbed his fingers through his hair, urging him close into a kiss. “I must do my barre, and you must prepare for the installer and delivery truck. Please, please, promise me that we will make time for ourselves today? Our children will be in residence all day tomorrow and Sunday, so we may suffer a long spell without respite if we cannot see to ourselves before they come home from school.”

Laughing, Bard pressed his hips against Thran’s and rubbed gently, then tipped them both into bed, snuggling Thran close. “Hmm. What if we do that right now?”

A knock on the front door rang up the stairwell, drawing Bard’s sigh, as well as Thran’s rueful chuckle. “If that is the plumber, I will not do anything to keep him or her from bestowing our soaking tub upon us, no matter how much I love you.”

“Agreed,” Bard agreed, sitting up and sliding to the edge of the bed so he could stand up. “You get to your barre, and I’ll get the door. I’ll have lunch for you when you’re done.”

They kissed quickly before Bard headed for the front door. Thran listened long enough to confirm that it was in fact the tub installer, then grabbed his practice things and dodged into the children’s bathroom before Bard led the installer upstairs to show him where the tub was to go. As they talked, Thran changed his clothes and took himself off to the ballroom with a sense of anticipation. In another few days, they would have a soaking tub to make short work of cold, aching muscles.

He’d make short work of a saint in that tub, too.

* * *

Bard managed to change out of his decent clothes and into his old painting jeans, shirt, and work boots before the two installers brought the tub upstairs. He made sure they had everything positioned
as he expected and were ready to run the plumbing before he shut off the water, let Thran know the
water was off, then went back upstairs to resume his woodwork painting. He was just about done
when another knock rang off the front door, so he skipped downstairs to find the first bookcase desk
on the porch cradled in its dolly, ready to be hauled upstairs. Unlike the tub, the bookcase desks and
Sigrid’s lady’s desk took only a few minutes to be set in place. Bard signed the delivery slip for the
 haulers, waved goodbye, and then came back upstairs to view the study in satisfaction. The cherry
looked good with the apricot paint, and Bard hastened to paint the last stretch of baseboard. He
found the oil soap and set to work on the grime that clouded the wood in several places. The ladder
made quick work of reaching the top of the pieces, and the clean smell of the soap added a nice
patina to his work. To complete his reclamation, he used a little furniture oil to bring the wood back
to near its original luster. On to the glass in the bookcase doors, which was also well grimed, but a
little vinegar and elbow grease solved that. The two missing panes would be easy to fix once he got
replacement glass – another thing to put on the list for the homeowners’ mecca - but even so, all three
already looked brighter and cleaner.

He stuck his head in the bathroom to see how the tub installers were progressing. The tub was in
place, and the installer had the faucets mostly installed. Even though the tile wasn’t around the tub
yet, the bathroom looked much more finished without the gaping hole by the shower.

“Another half hour, and we’ll be ready to test for leaks,” the lead installer said. “About that long, Pip?”

“Right you are, Merry,” the younger one added easily. “I don’t want to be hasty, but I wager we’ll
be done by elevenses, Mr. Bowman.”

“That’s great,” Bard nodded, smiling. “Let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll turn the water on.”

“Righto,” Merry nodded, and turned back to the piping.

Sure enough, in just a few minutes, he stood by the shutoff valve, ready to turn the water on and off
as the installers directed. There was one small reversal as a clamp was found to be loose, but that was
quickly remedied, and just after eleven o’clock the installers pronounced the tub to be properly
installed and leak-free.

Bard bade them goodbye with a sense of anticipation. He ran back upstairs, pulled the boxes of
white marble tiles out of the closet, set them in the bathroom, and measured the first line of marble he
needed for the wall above the tub. The wet saw tile cutter was still sitting in the solarium, so he got
that outside onto the terrace to cut the marble to size. He’d gotten the wall tiles cut when Thran
appeared in the solarium window, waving to him.

“This is the last of the wall tiles, then I’m ready to put them on the wall. Then comes the little bit of
paint to finish the wall. After that, the floor. I’ll have the marble done tonight, grout tomorrow.
Monday, we soak.”

Thran’s top was soaked and his hair was disheveled, but today he was not paler than normal, nor did
he look as exhausted as he had yesterday. His eyes were bright as he took the piece of marble Bard
handed him. “The tub is in, then?”

“It’s in,” Bard confirmed. “The bookcase desks are in place, too, and cleaned up. So is Sigrid’s desk.
Come see for yourself. The place is coming into its own!”

“Show me,” Thran demanded, and they hurried upstairs, where Thran admired Sigrid’s graceful desk
sitting between the windows, then the children’s study. “The bookcase desks are perfect there, and
will look wonderful with the books in place. I hope the children love it as much as I do. A small table
“We’ll look this weekend. I’ve got to go out to get the glass to replace the broken panes, so we can check through the junk shops and such again.”

“I will enjoy that, too. Now, the tub. I cannot wait to see this marvel!”

“It already looks wonderful,” Bard assured Thran as they went into the bathroom. “Just remember that we can’t climb in just yet. I lay the tile; the mastic sets for twenty-four hours. Then I grout the tile; the grout sets for twenty-four hours. We’ll have to use the children’s bathroom for a couple of days. But after that, it’ll be our playground.”

Thran gave him a sideways look. “It is a wondrous thing, Bard. You are truly zoloto moyo. And all before noon! So tell me this, my saint. How long does it take to lay all this marble?”

“The wall, about half an hour to place the tiles, and another half hour to paint. I’ve already cut all the floor tiles but around the tub, so I just have put down the mastic and lay the tiles. Maybe two, three hours for the floor. I’ll be done by supper.”

“So... I wonder if you would consider the promise we made each other this morning? What if you do the wall tile and paint, then you let me show you how much I appreciate all this work you have done today? I want to do so while we have the daylight to savor, and privacy.”

As Thran stroked Bard’s cheek, smiling in anticipation, Bard savored the jolt in his loins as he thought about climbing into bed with a grateful angel. He gave a gentle tug on Thran’s braid, then an exaggerated sigh. “Huh. The demands some people put on their contractors.”

Thran’s finger traced over his lips, then down his throat. “You suffer mightily. So, I will wash, and you will paint and lay tile. And then, my toiling contractor, I will lay you. Quite thoroughly.”

“Yessir, I’ll see to that tile right away, sir. Right away. Then I’ll see to you, yessir.”

Thran’s grin was feral as he gathered up his clean leggings and shirt and sauntered out of their bedroom with a lingering look back.

Bard ran a hand through his hair, trying to get his cock to behave itself long enough for him to concentrate on arabesque marble tile and pearlescent paint. It wasn’t easy.

He’d have to charge Thran overtime for that.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

An angel's plans for ambush are sidetracked, but not forever. Meanwhile, a saint's labors start to pay off.

Chapter Notes

Yes, the reference to Prince Buttercup is an allusion to "The Princess Bride," which I don't own rights to. Just remember what Wesley meant when he said, "As you wish."

Thran padded into the children’s bathroom, thinking of all the possibilities that awaited him when he was clean and dry and ready to pounce on a certain hunky contractor with unruly hair in his eyes and jeans that rode low. In seconds, his dance belt grew very uncomfortable as his cock considered the possibilities, too. He looked for someplace to put his clean clothes out of the way while he showered —

And found nothing. Not a hook on the wall, nor a shelf that wasn’t already crammed with towels, nor a chair, nor a stool.

Hmmm. Welcome to another reminder of living in the middle of a house in progress.

Despite himself, he looked around as Bard might, taking in the scuffed walls, the corner of the tile floor that was cracked and missing pieces, the relatively new shower cabinet, the double sinks. There was space to put a stool under the counter between the two sinks, and room to one side to add another pair of towel racks. Those small things would add much needed capacity to help the children stay organized, so that each could have a towel rack rather than having to share one. And perhaps a row of hooks on the back of the door, to harbor robes or pajamas? At least the new electrical outlet over the sink was one Tilda could reach, unlike the one in the ancient, battered light fixture over the mirror...

He snickered. If he were learning to assess the needs for renovation, would Bard soon take up dancing in the ballroom with him? Not that that wouldn’t be delicious...

He wandered back into the bedroom to get his bathing things, smiling. “Lyubov moya, I think we should add a pair of towel racks to the children’s bath – what are you doing?”

Bard stood in front of the mirror above the sink, shirt off, small scissors in his hand, looking at his reflection in the mirror. He flinched as if Thran had caught him doing something dodgy, then grimaced. “You’re supposed to be in the shower, angel.”

“I need my towel and soap and so forth,” Thran gestured towards their shower cabinet. “You said you would tile and paint. Why, then, do you stand in front of the mirror with scissors – oh, gods, Bard! You try to take out your stitches!”
“They’re healed, so it’s time for them to go.”

Thran hissed. “You promised me you would do just as the EMTs told you! You would care for them and then you would see your regular doctor to have them taken out. You promised me!”

Bard met his eyes. “So I did. And so I have.”

“You do not take out your stitches! That is for the doctor!”

Bard nodded. “I said I’d see my regular doctor to take out my stitches, yes. And so I am.”

Thran’s jaw fell open, and his cheeks turned hot. Oh, gods, Bard had no medical insurance – there was no regular doctor to see. Hadn’t Bard told him this more than once? Why hadn’t the implications sunk in before now? “Oh. Oh, suka blyad...”

Bard looked back at his stitches in the mirror. “It’s all right, angel. Go take your shower. This won’t take but a minute, and they’ll be gone by the time you get back.”

“Absolutely not. If you insist to do this, then I insist to stay right here. I saw them go in. I will see them come out.”

“It’d be easier if you didn’t watch.”

“Why? Because you expect it to hurt, and you do not want me to know that it does?”

Bard’s lips trembled into a reluctant smile. “Because you watching will make me nervous, and that might make it hurt.”

Thran snorted. “Idi na khuy, you bastard. You will not guilt me so much that I leave you here alone. Besides, you cannot possibly reach the top two. I will have to do those.”

“Thran, you’re making a big production out of this –”

“You make the production! I make only sense. It will take both of us to do this. That means we must be very clean, and neither of us are. So please, finish the tile and the paint, while I wash very carefully. Then we will wash your stitches very carefully, and then all the scissors and pliers and other tools very carefully, and –”

“Pliers?” Bard laughed. “Other tools?”

“Whatever you call those things – the forceps, the tweezers, those. We will wash them very carefully, and only then will we take out your stitches.”

Bard quirked a smile. “You’re cute when you’re mad.”

“Do not make me use my Prince of Ice voice twice in one day. You will do this because it makes sense.”

Conceding defeat, Bard put down the scissors. “As you wish, Prince Buttercup. If you can hold off washing for a bit, then hand me the tiles. It’ll go faster that way.”

“Of course. Let me get a sweater.”

Thran scampered to the closet, where he yanked off his tights and dancer’s belt, replacing them with an old pair of sweats. His sodden top was already icy against his skin, so he stripped it off, yanked on an old sweater, then hurried back into the bathroom; he didn’t trust Bard not to return to his stitch
removal as soon as he was out of Thran’s sight. But no, Bard had put his Henley back on and had taken his boots off, and was stirring the pot of adhesive. He climbed into the tub, smeared a coat of the sticky mess onto the wall, then pointed to the tiles lined up neatly on the floor.

“They’re all laid out how they’ll go on the wall. That end near your foot is the bottom left edge. So start with that one, all right?”

“All right.” Thran squatted by the tiles on the floor. As Bard indicated, Thran fed him one tile after another, until the first line was done. The following courses followed quickly, including the corner pieces, and finally the border tiles. Despite his concern about Bard’s stitches, Thran admired the graceful play of the light across the subtle veining in the marble.

“Beautiful,” Thran nodded, as he stood up. “We will have a palace of a bathroom very soon.” Bard grinned appreciatively. “It looks great. Now, just a little paint over the primer, and these walls are done. So go wash, and I’ll finish this.”

“Promise me you will not touch your stitches until I come back,” Thran put his arms akimbo.

In response, Bard raised both of his in surrender. “I won’t touch them. So go.” Thran sniffed in skepticism as he collected soap and towel, but he went. He expected to be back in the ballroom this afternoon, so he didn’t wash his hair, but he was still glad to soak up the warmth of the hot water. Not for the first time did he appreciate Bard’s insistence for an extra-capacity heater to make sure they never ran out of hot water. He soaked until his limbs didn’t feel so heavy, then dried and dressed quickly to return to the master bathroom to see how Bard’s painting had progressed.

One wall was done, and the second one around the window was nearly so. The paint was white, but something in it reflected the light as softly as pearls. Bard sat atop the ladder wielding his brush to smooth the last edge of the wall, and nodded at the paint tray on the floor. “Would you hand me the roller?”

Thran loaded the roller as Bard had showed him, and passed it over. The paint went on quickly, and with just another couple of roller passes, the second wall was finished. While Thran carried the ladder out of the bathroom, then returned to admire the finished wall, Bard emptied the remaining paint back into the can.

“I’ll wash the brushes, then be back up.” Bard gave Thran a considering look up and down. “Don’t start without me, okay?”

“Don’t make me wait too long,” Thran purred, smiling.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Back in a few.”

Bard carried the paint stuff downstairs, and Thran soon heard water running in the laundry room. He continued to admire the morning’s work, imagining how the floor would shine when marble tile covered the subfloor. He came back into the bedroom, moved the ladder out of the way into a corner of the landing, and then considered what to do about Bard’s stitches.

One must sterilize the scissors and such, yes? He poked through the bathroom cabinet to find rubbing alcohol and cotton balls, then examined the small scissors Bard had held earlier. They belonged to a surgical set, perhaps? Yes, a small kit lay unzipped on the counter. Thran opened it with one ginger finger, cataloging the various implements – this was a full surgical field kit, complete with needles and sutures in sealed sterile packets. Despite himself, Thran shuddered. No matter how much pain from strains, sprains, bruises, wrenches or aches he had endured without complaint during his years
of dance, the very idea of metal objects invading his body made him ill. May he never cause himself enough damage to find out the reality behind his imaginings!

“Why do you have this?” Thran asked with a wince when Bard came back into the bathroom. “These are fiendish devices.”

Bard’s smile was sympathetic. “I work metal, Thran. I can’t run to the ER every time I get a scratch. Fortunately, I haven’t needed those ‘fiendish devices’ for a long time. When you don’t have medical insurance, that’s medical insurance.”

Thran hummed a concession. “Another reason for us to hasten our marriage, then. So that we can get you and the children proper medical insurance.”

“What are you sure you do not want me to do this?”

“I did. I will wash my hands again, and then swab the scissors and the forceps. Then you. Off with the shirt.”

Thran scrubbed busily, then soaked his hands with the alcohol, then the tools. Watching him, Bard ran a hand through his hair before he started to scrub his hands. “You’re making more of this than it is, angel.”

“Let me. Then it will not make more of itself later. So... let me swab the stitches.”

Bard endured Thran soaking his stitches with alcohol, not once, but twice. “That’s good, Thran. You’ve drowned every germ in the world by now. Where are the scissors?”

“Are you sure you do not want me to do this?”

“It’ll be fine, Thran.”

“Rub the alcohol on your hands first.”

“Okay, angel. Okay. There. Now, let me concentrate.”

Thran pressed his lips together and forced himself silent while Bard considered his stitches as dispassionately as if he looked at a maquette – no, Bard had told him the proper word was mannequin. His lover’s hands were steady as he took up the forceps and scissors, picked up the end of the bottommost stitch, and snipped it just above the knot. With only a little coaxing, the stitch slipped out. There was no blood or pus, and only a pair of small red dots showed where the stitch had been.

“See? Not so bad,” Bard said, dropping the stitch in the trashcan.

Thran held silence as Bard eased the next seven out. The last two, however, were right under his pectoral muscle, and impossible for Bard to see except in the mirror. Thran tsked and tried to look at the remaining two stitches with the same dispassion that Bard had showed.

“You cannot reach them, lyubov moya. Give me the tools, and I will get them without poking you as you have done twice already.”

“You look a little pale, angel. I’ll get them.”

“Why do you and a certain Scottish policeman think it is funny to call me pale?” Thran snorted, nearly spitting the last word. “It is an insult, because I am always pale! Come, lie down on the bed
where I can brace my hands, funny welder, and I will take the last two out.”

Thran practically snatched the forceps and scissors from Bard’s hands and pushed him into the bedroom. “Come, come, come! Before I think about this too much! There! Down!”

Bard laughed, but he did as he was told, lying down in the sun where Thran would have the best light to see what he was doing. As Thran draped himself beside Bard, his lover snickered.

“Are you sure you want to do this –”

“Quiet! I begin. Do not move.”

With more aplomb than he felt, Thran took up the stitch end as he’d seen Bard do, found the knot, snipped, and pulled. The stitch came out easily, which encouraged Thran to take up the last one. Up, find the knot, snip, then pull...

“Suka blyad,” he hissed. “This one is stuck.”

“Just pull it out.”

“It is still stuck.”

“Give it a good tug.”

“That will hurt.”

“No, it won’t. Just pull it out.”

“Bard –”

“You’ve got hold of it?”

“Yes – Bard, you bastard!”

Bard had grabbed Thran’s left hand holding the stitch in the forceps and given it a hard yank. He held up Thran’s hand, still holding the forceps. The stitch dangled from the forceps, out at last.

“Any bleeding or pus?”

Thran gave up his glare to check. “No, not that I see. Perhaps it was merely stuck.”

“The important thing is that they’re out. Thank you for seeing to the last ones.”

“I am not done yet. Wait here.”

Thran clambered out of bed with tools in hand, left them in the bathroom, then soaked a cotton ball in alcohol. Returning with it, he rubbed a wide swath of Bard’s side. “Now I am done.”

“And so are the stitches.”

“Does your side hurt?”

“No.”

Thran glared at Bard. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because you’re sweet. Because you made a fuss. Because no one’s ever made the taking out of
stitches into such a production.”

“And just how often have you had stitches taken out?” Thran said icily, but his tone only broadened the smile on Bard’s lips.

“More times than I care to count. This was the best time of all, though. I’ve never had anyone make such a good job of it.”

It was impossible to glare at Bard any longer. The stitches were out, and the fiendish implements of mayhem were back in the bathroom, and his lover lay in the sunlight, smiling fondly at him.

“I love you, too,” Bard murmured, rubbing Thran’s leg.

The last of Thran’s concern melted, and his lips curled into a smile as he insinuated the button of Bard’s jeans open, and the zipper down. “If you take these off, I will show you how much I love you, foolish man.”

Bard had his jeans and undershorts off in a couple of tugs, but he hadn’t kicked them to the floor before Thran had stripped off leggings and sweater and pressed a kiss on his lips. What came after in the depths of silk and cashmere was so thorough, so insistent, so all-consuming, that Bard likely looked forward to the next time he’d suffer stitches. Acquiring them would not be pleasant. But removing them certainly would be.

* * *

By the time Thran finished declaring his love in the most outrageous fashion, the afternoon sun had waned low enough to cast the children’s study into near darkness, warning them that the children would soon be home. Bard lay drowsily for a few more seconds wrapped around Thran, rubbing his lover’s hip in slow, lazy strokes. The head pillowed on his arm shifted a little, and Thran sighed softly.

“We must get up before we are inundated with children,” Thran murmured sleepily. “Though I would rather stay here with you.”

“So would I. But that tile’s not going to lay itself, and your barre isn’t going dance by itself, either.”

“We forgot to eat lunch, too.”

Bard swore under his breath, but with chagrin rather than heat. “Even when we swear we’re going to eat, we can’t seem to remember to. What time is it?”

Thran looked up enough to see the clock radio on Bard’s side of the bed. “Ah. Not so late as I thought. Only just before three.”

“Then down to the kitchen with us, then. Before the children come home and Sigrid yells at us.”

“Preispodnyaya, yes,” Thran agreed. They scrambled into clothes, hastened downstairs, and made a quick lunch of the last of last night’s salmon, a plate of raw veg, and tea. Because Thran had just eaten and did not dance in such circumstances, he offered to help Bard with the marble floor upstairs, so they set to. By the time the children clattered inside around four-thirty, they had most of the floor done. The children trooped upstairs to survey the bathroom and their study, and it took little
encouragement for them to haul the boxes of books out of the main room upstairs. Barn and Thran shared silent amusement at the discussion that ensued about how to arrange the books, which seemed to change every three minutes. When Bard went by to cut the next batch of floor tiles, he found all of the children arranging and rearranging. A well-depleted plate of cheese and crackers sat in the middle of the floor, mute testimony of how the children had fueled their efforts.

“How do you like your desk, Sig?”

“It’s perfect!” she grinned up from the box she and Bain were sorting out. “It looks great between the windows, doesn’t it? Maybe it’ll make the homework get done easier.”

Bain rolled his eyes. “Like anything helps with that.”

Bard laughed. “Just got a few more tiles to cut, then we’re done with the floor for the night. Then we’ll start supper, and talk about how your day went.”

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“Hurry up, Da. I’m starving!” Bain groaned.

“So am I,” Legolas and Tilda agreed, both of them laughing at their inadvertent chorus.

“Okay. Couple more tiles, and we’ll get started. Back in a bit.”

The last tiles were trimmed and fitted in good time. Bard pulled Thran to his feet to survey the expanse of pearly white and silver marble.

“It’s already beautiful,” Thran said, tucking a stray lock of hair behind his ear. “We cannot walk on it until tomorrow, no?”

Bard shook his head. “No, not until the mastic dries. So the children can look through the door all they want, but they can’t go in there.”

“Now, to supper. I confess that I am just as hungry as Legolas and Tilda, even though I did not do my barre this afternoon.”

“You got a workout crawling all over the floor laying tile, angel. So you don’t need to do any more today, by my lights.”

“I agree with you. Let us make supper, then. What do you plan for us tonight?”

“Does Legolas like tacos? They’re fast, and my three love them. I can make some chicken filling for you as well as the regular beef.”

“One meal of beef will not hurt me. It is lean beef, yes?”

“The only kind that comes in the house. All right, Mexican Feast it is.”

The family divided up the chores to make supper, chopping veg, grating cheese, heating filling and beans, assembling salad, warming tortillas. Along the way, the day’s events at school were thoroughly discussed, as were plans for the weekend. Bard, of course, had a long list of things to get at the homeowners’ mecca, from glass for the bookcase desks to house keys for Thran and the children. They also started a list of things to look for at the local flea markets, thrift stores, and junk shops. To celebrate the end of an eventful week, the children took the night off from homework, and they spent the evening in the sitting room. The boys and Bard watched a hockey game, Tilda read one of her books, and Sigrid and Thran played cards. After the game, Bard made popcorn for the children, and everyone soon headed up to bed.
The next morning, Bard snuggled peacefully with Thran for a few extra minutes before the tall dancer slipped downstairs to do his barre and yoga before breakfast. When he’d gone, Bard thought sleepily about getting up to grout the bathroom floor, but the mastic hadn’t had time enough to dry yet, so he enjoyed the luxury of another half hour of sleep. Eventually, knowing Thran was up and working roused him out of bed, if slowly. He eased into his work clothes, and carried his work boots downstairs. Maybe he’d paint one of the kitchen walls while everyone was still asleep. Or maybe he’d make a batch of muffins for the children’s breakfast... orange cranberry, maybe?

The teakettle was still warm, mute evidence that Thran had made his morning tea. Bard made himself a cup, then decided he’d have just time to paint the wall behind the kitchen table before everyone got up in anticipation of their trip to the various secondhand shops. He got the ladder from where Thran had stowed it yesterday, got his brush and roller and the can of paint, and set to leisurely. The morning was quiet and peaceful, and painting was calming. Bringing something into order, making it better, was always a satisfying way to pass the time, especially in such quiet. Painting around the wide windows gave him the outside to look at as well, and he imagined what the Japanese garden outside of the solarium might look like in the spring.

He’d finished the wall before either Thran or the children appeared, but he wouldn’t have time to paint another whole wall before someone would want breakfast. So he cleaned his brushes and put the ladder aside, and started on his muffins. Before long, Thran appeared, shirt sodden and hair mussed, but he wasn’t exhausted. His angel was getting stronger, then, which gave him something else to smile about.

“Something smells divine, lyubov moya,” Thran sniffed appreciatively, wiping his face with a towel, then offering Bard a kiss. “What delight do you bring us this morning?”

Bard stroked his lover’s back. “Orange cranberry muffins. To go with scrambled eggs. Or would you rather have boiled?”

“As long as there is little oil in the scrambled ones, that is fine. I will wash, and be back down. Have you been painting?”

“The window wall. If the children are up, warn them before they come down.”

“I hope they are not up yet. It clogs the works, yes, when I shower in their bath? They cannot use it when I am there.”

“They can come downstairs and use the sitting room bath for the few minutes it’ll take you to wash.”

“I go, then. Back soon.”

Thran was as good as his word, reappearing quickly dressed in jeans, shirt, and sweater. The children appeared soon after, and after devouring breakfast, they set out in Thran’s new SUV. Bard had the lists they’d made last night, and by the time they returned, he had enough supplies to fix several small projects. They also found a small rug for the children’s study, three desk chairs that needed reupholstering, a trio of lamps, and a fountain with a lion’s head spout and a semicircular basin. They spent the afternoon arranging their new treasures while Bard grouted the bathroom floor.

On Sunday, the children worked on homework while Bard painted the next kitchen wall. Life was settling into a calmer routine, and the aroma of smoky bean soup lent a welcome coziness to the house. The ballroom got another fencing workout as Legolas had at with his father, giving Bard something to grin about. Now that his stitches were gone and the remaining scar was solid, he intended to give Thran an entirely different kind of workout in that ballroom. He’d wait until after he visited Thran’s dance class on Tuesday... eh, in another week was Thran’s audition. Maybe he
should wait until after that...

It didn’t matter when the consecration of that part of the house occurred. They had time.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

To (im)properly prepare a saint for his invitation to the dance, he and his angel engage in a different kind of yoga. The next morning brings enlightenment, as well as healing - there are now two artists in residence.

Chapter Notes

I don’t own any rights to Yoda, Jedi masters, or Star Wars. But I agree that Yoda is a yoga master as well as a Jedi master.

Translation Notes:

ty grebanyy huiesos = you fucking cocksucker (Russian)
ty sukin syn = you son of a bitch (Russian)
suka blyad = bitch motherfucker (Russian)
idi k chertu = go to hell (Russian)

When Thran finished drying his hair, he hurried into his Mandarin robe before the heat of the dryer faded. The silk would keep him warm enough until he dashed into bed where Bard waited for him. Still, he lingered to admire the finished bathroom for just another moment, savoring the pearly paint that glowed softly in the light, the opulent mosaic on the floor, the matching arabesques on the wall above the soaking tub – he couldn’t wait to indulge in that; perhaps tomorrow, or Tuesday after his class? Bard had created the most wonderful oasis imaginable, and it was still too recent a change to merely dash out without appreciating it.

He put his hair dryer away, wrapped his robe around him tightly, and hurried into the bedroom. Bard was already there, one arm outstretched to gather him close, so he turned out the light by the bed, stripped his robe, and dove under the covers.

“Gods, you’re cold,” Bard murmured as Thran plastered himself to Bard’s side and wrapped an arm across his chest. “How do you do that after just getting out of a hot shower?”

“I stayed a moment to admire the marble, and to consider when to try the soaking tub. Perhaps tomorrow, or Tuesday after class.”

“Whichever one you choose, I’ll join you. Always wanted to soak in hot water with an angel.”

Thran snuggled close. “And I with a saint, though you are so nicely warm now that it is a delight. Now, I must ask you – what are your plans for the morning, lyubov moya?”

“I planned to start on Legolas’s room. It’s a hovel, and I don’t want him to endure that any longer than he has to. Do you have something else you want me to look at instead?”
Thran stroked Bard’s chest, playing with the dark hair that covered it. Why was that so soothing, yet so arousing at the same time? “We go to ballet class Tuesday, yes? I would like to explain much about it before we go, so that you understand what to expect. So once the children are off to school, if you would like to watch my barre, I could explain.”

Warm, strong hands rubbed Thran’s back and arm, bringing the most delicious ease. “Of course, angel. Whatever you need.”

The caressing rumble in Bard’s voice brought a grin to Thran’s face. “You think of the day I first seduced you.”

“I think of that day more than I should admit. Gods, you didn’t fight fair. Is that what I’m in for tomorrow?”

“We both want to christen the ballroom in homage to that first day. If you want us to end my lesson that way, we will. But I do have much to explain, and if we prefer to save our christening for another time without so much work in it, that is fine, too.”

Bard hummed, then rolled over slowly until he was atop Thran, lips nuzzling the hollow at the base of Thran’s throat. “It depends. Would knowing that I’m going to nail you over your barre at the end of your lesson be too much of a distraction?”

Thran wound fingers in Bard’s hair, shivering as his body responded to the fingers tracing over his ribs and down his flanks. “Mmm... it is a terrible distraction right now.”

“You had me in this bed earlier. Still hungry?”

“I think you are the hungry one this time. Especially when you make.... ohhhh.... such a concerted effort to... d-d-distract me.”

“Oh, am I distracting you?” Bard burrowed lower under the covers until his lips brushed a kiss just above Thran’s stirring cock. Before Thran could moan, his cock slipped between soft lips into a warm, wet refuge.

“Suka blyad, you bastard!” Thran gasped, his fingers clenching on Bard’s shoulders. “This time, it is you who does not fight fair!”

Bard hummed deep in his throat, sending the most delicious vibrations through Thran’s cock before Bard loosed him. “Better do something about it, angel. You’re about to get nailed.”

Thran flailed arms from under the bedding, groping for the drawer of his nightside table that held the lubricant, but he couldn’t pull away from Bard’s arms wrapped around his hips. “Ty grebanyy huiesos, I can’t reach the –”

“Under my pillow. Better hurry.”

“Ty sukin syn!” Thran scuffled through the pillows, found the tube, slicked his hands, and groped frantically under the covers to slather the stuff over himself. Bard crawled up his body, giving him just seconds to grab Bard’s cock with his slippery hands before Bard was inside. But that wasn’t the end of it. When Thran wrapped his legs around his lover’s body and pulled him close, Bard took one of Thran’s ankles in hand and pushed it higher.

“Behind your shoulder. I know you can do that.”

Oh, his bastard of a lover had done his yoga homework, hadn’t he? Thran stretched his leg behind
his shoulder. “You want both of them comme ça, yes?”

“Yes. Very much comme ça.”

“Be gentle. The angle is intense –”

“Good.” Bard took his other ankle in hand.

“Idi k chertu,” Thran gasped, as that angle grew more extreme. To be spread open so wide and filled so completely... even the slightest motion sent waves of pleasure sweeping through him. “Oh, gods, ty grebanyy huiesos!”

“If that means you like being fucked like this, you’re welcome.”

“It does not!” Thran hissed, worming his other leg behind his shoulder. “It means –”

Bard swallowed whatever Thran was about to say in a deep kiss, full of invading tongue and nipping teeth. “Shh, my angel. I know you want more; I know. I’ll do anything you want, I promise. No matter how much it takes to satisfy a greedy, insatiable, demanding angel...”

Bard had Thran’s wrists in his hands, held fast over Thran’s head, effectively locking his legs in place. Gods, who knew that his gentle saint would acquire such a taste for mastering the Prince of Ice? Who knew the Prince of Ice would revel in that mastery? Bard swallowed more of Thran’s curses in another kiss, humming as he stroked.

“Gods, you were right, Thran. The angle is extreme. So intense. Gods, so, so intense. You’re so open... so perfect... oh, gods...”

There was nothing to do but go along for the ride, a ride that grew more overwhelming, more compelling with each teasing, slow stroke, until Thran was taut and gasping for release. Just as consumed, Bard slowed, slowed, slowed, holding himself on the edge of release for the longest seconds, before finally spasming hard. He groped for Thran’s cock, but just his touch was enough to drive Thran over the edge. Bard held him as their orgasms wracked them, pressing kisses against Thran’s jaw.

“Mmm. Much better,” Bard sighed. Thran didn’t need light to see the grin that was plastered on Bard’s face. His tone of voice conveyed it without apology. “That might help me from being distracted tomorrow morning. Maybe. Though maybe I distracted you a little bit.”

Thran sighed as Bard eased first one foot from behind Thran’s head, then the other. He wrapped his legs around Bard’s hips as they calmed.

“The things you do to me, you bastard. This time, you have trashed me,” Thran exhaled gustily. “I have to get in the shower again to clean away all this mess.”

“I trashed both of us. Come on.”

They ducked into the shower again, using the handheld sprayer to keep the water out of their hair, dried quickly, and dashed back to bed. Despite their speed, Thran still shivered, so Bard gathered him close and curled around his back when they piled under the sheets again.

“So you still want me to watch your barre tomorrow morning?” Bard teased sleepily, stroking Thran’s shoulder.

Thran snorted in mock annoyance. “Perhaps I should tie you to the garden bench before I begin.
That might slow you down.”

“It might excite you to do something else, too.”

Thran chuckled, interested despite himself. “It might. I make no promises of forbearance or mercy.”

“How am I supposed to sleep now?”

“If we do not, consider how grouchy we will be tomorrow to make the children’s lunches on three hours’ sleep.”

“Good answer. You were sweet to indulge me, cariad.”

Thran enjoyed a satisfied smile as he shut his eyes. “I was. And you rewarded my sweetness with spice. It was delicious.”

“So were you. Love you.”

“I love you, too, lyubov moya.”

Thran relaxed as the warm body behind his eased towards sleep, taking his with it.

* * *

Once Thran and Bard saw the children onto the bus, Bard turned towards home with a sense of anticipation. Today he would finally get to see Thran in his element. Today he would have full measure of the rigors of that graceful art as revealed to him by one of the world’s best practitioners. He followed Thran upstairs to change into comfortable sweat pants and a sweater, while Thran donned his practice wear. They paused in the kitchen only long enough to make a pot of tea, then Bard followed Thran with the tea tray into the ballroom.

Bard set the tray down on the garden table at the end of the ballroom. “Where will I be out of the way?”

“Anywhere you are comfortable,” Thran waved a hand as he put his water bottle and towel on the floor by the barre, then his computer on the garden bench. “I am used to being stared at, so it does not matter.”

“What, do the other dancers ogle you?” Bard joked, but Thran had started to turn inward, focusing on what was to come, and did not joke back.

“We all look at each other, but not to ogle. To study the technique, the turn of a leg, the position of an arm... and of course the dance master always looks at us, to correct and improve.”

“Oh,” Bard held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Thran. I forgot my sketchbook. I thought that while you practice the dance, I’d practice the drawing, so I’ll be ready to look sculptor-like tomorrow.”

Thran grinned. “Prudent. I will wait.”

“Won’t be a tick.” Bard trotted back to the main room where so many odds and ends still remained to be sorted out. His box of long-neglected art supplies was among the clutter, and for the first time in a long time, he opened it with anticipation. How long had it been since he last sketched anything?
Years. He’d given it up long ago because the ache of neglecting his artwork had threatened to engulf him, and the children had needed him too much for him to give in to his grief. There were his pencils, cached in an old cloth flatware roll. There was his box of pastels, and the other of charcoal sticks. There were his old watercolour box and brushes, not that he’d used them much, even while he’d been working. Maybe Tilda was old enough to use them? He’d think about that. Yes, underneath the lot was a trio of sketchbooks. He grabbed the lot and his pencils, and trotted back to Thran, not wanting to keep his lover waiting.

Thran had begun to stretch, little more than walking about the ballroom, lengthening arms and legs, flexing feet and hands, rolling his neck. Bard settled cross-legged on the floor against the wall, facing the barre, deciding that would give him the best view of the proceedings.

“So. I begin.” Thran said softly, and took his place at the barre. “Every day, six days a week, the day begins this way. One hour and a bit more, to warm the body, to prepare for rehearsal in the afternoon, and then performance in the evening. This is the dancer’s meditation, to refine and perfect technique, to correct problems, to have the master identify things that perhaps the dancer does not see and should. It is done in a room full of people, but is private at the same time. Depending on a dancer’s role during the rest of the day, he or she may work very hard, or not so much. This is the time to work out something, if needed, or to try something new. No one need look pristine or perfect at the barre. That is reserved for performance, of course, and often rehearsal.”

Bard nodded understanding. Thran went on to describe how barre work began slowly with basic bends and stretches, progressed to footwork and armwork, then advanced to steps and turns, saving the most energetic moves, the jumps, for the end. He explained how the masters and instructors worked, calling the sequence of moves to follow. The steps and positions never changed, but the sequence changed every day, to keep the dancers’ bodies properly warmed to address the day’s demand. He also explained that the fortunate companies had a pianist to provide live music every day, because the dancers’ bodies were attuned to address the music, and it was best not to get used to a static piece played on a CD or tape.

“After all,” Thran shrugged, as he bent and limbered, “we dance to live music during performance each night, yes? So it is best to practice that way, too.”

“Makes perfect sense,” Bard agreed.

“So I thought the best way to give you the sense of the class is to show you one in two ways. There are several on the Internet, so I have chosen one so you can watch it and me as I follow it, and also you will see how much the music adds, and how the instructor works.”

“They have classes on the Internet?” Bard’s eyebrows went up.

Thran shrugged. “Many companies struggle. To show the life of a dancer is a good way to raise awareness, and to generate interest in upcoming performances. I like to see what different companies do for professional reasons, and to see how various instructors and masters work.”

“So is this one of your favorite classes that you do over and over?” Bard asked.

Thran shook his head as he opened his laptop and found the class video he wanted. He brought the laptop to Bard and set it beside him on the floor. “I chose one from a good company, but a class I have not seen before, so that you get the proper sense of me not knowing exactly what to expect. So start it as you will, and we will begin. It will last about seventy-five minutes.”

Bard did as directed, and soon the sound of the instructor calling out instructions mostly in French began. Thran had told him that the names of all the positions and steps were in French, because ballet
had originated in France. Bard looked from the screen to Thran and back over and over, marveling that Thran’s steps exactly matched what the dancers were doing in the video. The instructor called out long chains of incomprehensible steps – even if he’d known the movements associated with each term, he didn’t think he could remember the right sequence of steps as easily as the dancers did. Thran might never have seen this video, but he performed everything in the correct sequence, over and over again.

After some minutes, once Bard had the sense of what the class space looked like, and the variety of clothing dancers wore, he looked less at the computer screen and more at Thran, contrasting what he saw on the video and what he saw before him. Thran wore just as many layers of tights and leg warmers and tops and sweaters as any dancer, but he catered to his image as the Prince of Ice, sticking to his preferred palette of creams, whites, and greys; and unfussy, sleek lines. Even his hair was sleek, held in a braid wrapped around his head, with a white scarf at his forehead to keep the braid in place.

They were a quarter of the way through the video before Bard remembered his sketchpad. He propped the medium-sized one up against his knees and emptied his mind, trying to recall what it was like to sketch again. The first tentative traces of pencil on paper were little more than scrawls, but that was always the case, and he ignored them. How to capture the fluidity of a dancer in constant motion on static paper? How to convey the paradox of mortal flesh and bone turned lyrical and evanescent? He held his brain above the question, for it was not for his brain to answer, but for his fingers on the pencil and the pencil on the paper.

By the time the video class turned to jumps, Bard’s hand had recalled its skill, and he sketched rapidly. It was one thing to see little figures performing such moves on a small computer laptop screen, and another to see all six feet and five inches of Thran execute the same moves in front of him. Even though Bard was close enough to see the sweat dotted on Thran’s forehead, hear the power of his breathing, and see the concentration in his grey eyes, it was still more ethereal than labored. The culmination of so much preparation – the turns, the spins, the twirls, and finally the grande jeté – was stunning in the power that it required, as well as the beauty of its execution. When the video ended, Bard didn’t hesitate to applaud.

“That was the most stunning thing I’ve ever seen,” he admitted. “Even more than Bobby Orr skating backwards against three attackers and holding them off with one hand.”

Thran grinned and offered the same elegant bow he made at the end of a performance on the stage. “Thank you, lyubov moya. That is high praise from a hockey fan. Did you understand everything? What can I explain?”

“I understand what’s involved, though I never realized dancers needed such good short term memory. How you remember all the sequences the instructor calls out is more than I can do.”

Thran shrugged. “Long practice. We learn the names of steps as children, and some sequences are typical and familiar. So, now I am properly warmed and stretched, and ready to begin work.”

Bard shook his head. “That’d put me right down for a nap, but you, it just gets ready to work. What comes next?”

“If I were in rehearsal, I would have a fifteen minute break, and then go to work. But as I am not in rehearsal, I will do the yoga. That is my preferred method of refinement. Pilates is also good. Many dancers even work with weights. Modern companies offer many ways for a dancer to stay healthy and strong.”

“What does the yoga do for you?”
“It focuses on balance, mental and physical. It also provides the strength and flexibility training that I prefer. It can be very invigorating, such as when I practice the back bends, or very calming, such as when I practice the headstand. It is flexible enough to accommodate what the day brings me.”

“So what does today bring you?”

Thran smiled. “I think that since tomorrow will bring me ballet, and mostly legs, today I will do inversions. Upside down things, good for balance, good for arms and shoulders.”

Thran slipped back into his inward reverie as he began his yoga. This was done on a mat for the most part, and barefooted. Was the temperature warm enough for such efforts? When he ventured to ask, Thran murmured that it was fine, so Bard lapsed back into silence, not wanting to intrude. The slower movements of the yoga offered Bard more chances to do fuller studies on his sketchpad, and he took advantage of that, seeing just how few strokes he needed to convey the position and the attitude of the poser. Before long, he understood why Thran liked yoga so much – it was another form of dance, albeit a slower one, and each pose held as much beauty as any ballet jeté or plié. By the time Thran settled a blanket over his mat, Bard was entranced.

“So what?” he asked.

Grinning, Thran sat down on the blanket-covered mat and pulled another over his legs. He removed his headscarf and unwrapped his braid. “Every yoga student’s favorite pose. Savasana. Corpse pose. The ten minutes of peace at the end of every class. It is quiet and restoring.”

“Okay,” Bard nodded. “Nighty-night.”

Thran snickered as he lay down and pulled the top blanket up to his shoulders. As he shut his eyes, Bard imagined him communing with the spirits of past yogis and dancers. Had Yoda ever wandered through those exalted realms? The little Jedi master was a guru if ever there was one. Bard smothered a smile – imagine Yoda doing either ballet or yoga!

Bard sketched quietly while Thran completed his internal communion. So much of what he’d seen today was worth sketching, and he’d filled many pages with his impressions and studies. But in the silence, what came to him to sketch was not a yoga or ballet pose. As he drew first one study, then another at a different angle, then another at a third, what came from his fingers was something else again. He let it come, keeping his mind out of it, letting only memory and internal vision guide his hands. As he worked, as the welder and night super melted away, the sculptor came back to claim its rightful place in Bard’s life, and something settled.

He knew what the first piece he’d create would be when he went out to the barn again. He knew.

He was whole again.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

The angel dances, and the saint draws.

Chapter Notes

Charisse is named for the glorious Cyd Charisse, dancer extraordinaire. If you don't know who this lady was, go find out. Think Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, Ann Miller, and my absolute favorite, Vera-Ellen. Cyd's the gorgeously seductive dragon lady in Gene Kelly's long dance sequence in "Singin' in the Rain." Yeah. The one in the green dress with the smoke coming out of her nose. She was one of the best!

As Thran roused from his restorative Savasana, he considered fingers and toes, hands and feet, arms and legs, neck and shoulders, and then the core of his body. Yes, all was well, supple and strong. This was the best he’d felt since before he’d hurt his ankle two months ago. It wouldn’t take much more before he was back in trim, ready for the rigors of rehearsal and performance again. Despite the hours of work that entailed, he looked forward to it eagerly – no, more than eagerly. He craved it. How he had missed the daily classes, the constant refinement, the continual striving for perfection in each gesture, each step. His first audition was a week from tomorrow. It was not the audition he was most interested in, but it was with a reputable company, if more traditional than he wanted at this stage of his career. If nothing else, it would be good practice for the auditions that followed it.

The only thing he regretted about returning to dancing full time was the time he’d be away from Bard, the children, and the house. So much work was progressing, and he wished he could be a bigger part of it, even if he didn’t know much about painting or sanding or all the other things that Bard did so competently. But Bard was as eager for him to be healthy and happy again as he danced, and the renovation would not go on forever. Soon enough, his saint would be just as busy at his art as Thran was at his, and there would be balance.

He rolled to his side and sat up, folding himself cross-legged on his mat for a few moments of pranayama breathing. When he felt calm and centered, he opened his eyes.

Bard sat quietly against the wall, sketching. He looked so focused, so inward, that Thran held his breath, not wanting to disturb his reverie. Something had happened, something profound, and whatever it was, Thran was content to watch Bard from under his lashes. Let Bard think Thran still meditated, so that whatever muse had taken him would release him as she would, without interruption from a dancer.

“It’s all right,” Bard said softly. “You don’t have to sit still. Do what you need to do to stay warm.”

“May I see?” Thran asked just as softly, because the moment didn’t call for more.

“If you’d like to.”
Thran eased out of his blankets, pulled on another sweater and a second pair of socks, then crawled over to Bard, still sketching. He nestled at Bard’s right side, curling an arm around Bard’s waist and putting his chin on Bard’s shoulder to watch his lover complete his sketch. There was Thran, sitting like a Buddha with a blanket draped over his shoulders, braid tracing down one side of his neck. Bard had a very minimal drawing style, almost like the sparsest Chinese brush painting, but despite the few strokes, the subject of the sketch was clear. One hand peeked outside the blanket to rest on one knee, palm turned downward, fingers slightly curled, but still sensually draped. Just a few lines defined facial features, but the angle of the cheekbones, the fall and drape of the braid, the slight angle of the neck – all were unmistakably Thran. It was worthy of a frame, and a place on any wall.

“May I see the rest?”

Bard flipped back through nearly twenty pages of his sketchbook. The first one or two were not much more than scribbles, or perhaps they were to refine the edge of the pencil to Bard’s liking, but the rest were expressive, evocative. Bard let Thran page through them as he would, and he did so slowly – here he was in a simple plié, and there he was in a split. Another was just a torso with one arm half done and the other fully rendered, down to the fingernails – that was exactly how he curled his middle finger the merest hair more than the others. Standing at the barre in fifth position, one hand on the barre, the other curved above his head, arching back. So many more, some the merest few lines in the margins of larger sketches, just a hand or a foot or a nape, and others finely detailed. The yoga poses followed – first a loose Utanasana, standing forward bend, where his chest rested on his thighs and his arms wrapped around his calves and ankles. Then Virabhadrasana, Warrior I, II, and III, all requiring strength in the hips and glutei, and flexibility in the psoas. Sirsasana, headstand. Ahdo Mukha Vrksanana, handstand. Several handstand variations followed, even Legolas’s favorite Vrschikasana, Scorpion, each drawn with calm confidence.

“It is good that you are not a dancer,” Thran said.

Bard glanced at him askance. “Why?”

“Because, lyubov moya, if you were as good a dancer as you are an artist, I would have serious competition. These are marvelous.”

Bard snickered. “You haven’t seen much artwork, then.”

“Yes, I have. All over the world, I have seen artwork, from the worst to the best. I know the hand of a master when I see it.”

Bard didn’t make the joke Thran expected, about either of them mastering the other so deliciously in bed. Instead, he pressed a kiss on Thran’s cheek. “Thank you, cariad.”

Thran kept paging through Bard’s sketchbook, pausing when he got to the pages that preceded the sketch of him meditating. These pages revealed something far different than ballet and yoga sketches.

“What are these?”

Bard smiled. It was his familiar affectionate expression, but with a noticeable change. The faint sadness that had always lurked in his warm brown eyes, regardless of everything else, had eased.

“They’re studies for my next sculpture. I hope you’ll sit for me to refine them.”

Thran leafed through the next four pages, each one full of different versions of the same image, over and over again - an angel with long hair flying around his head in a corona, and magnificent wings fully extended on high as they backwinged, and one toe stretched towards the earth, one split moment before alighting. Before him was the smaller figure of a man lying nearly prone, looking up,
one hand outstretched in longing.

“Oh, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered, leaning his head against Bard’s. “I do not know what to say.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Is that how you look at me?”

Bard rubbed Thran’s thigh, and cocked his head to consider his sketches. “It was, that first morning, when you flew down the stairs like Rahmiel.”

“Rahmiel?”

“The angel of mercy and love.”

Thran put his arms around Bard’s shoulders and nestled his nose in the crook of Bard’s neck, just where it joined his shoulder. “I am not nearly so glorious, Bard, and you are not nearly so small.”

Bard’s right hand snaked around Thran’s ribs, hugging him close. “You were that morning, and I was that morning. I’ve never seen anything that looked like you did that day. I never will again.”

“When you make such a thing, I will never let you sell it. Never.”

“I will never offer it for sale.”

“Good.”

“So will you pose for me?”

“I will.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

Bard chuckled at their tender formality. “Be glad I have a few months of renovations to do, then. It’ll be warm when you pose.”

“Oh, am I to pose in the nude, then?” Thran looked up, laughing.

“Of course. There is no raiment that could do my angel justice.”

“Hmm,” Thran smirked. “Not even a fig leaf?”

“This isn’t a Biblical allegory.”

“Do angels have genitals, lyubov moya?”

“Mine does. Quite delightful ones. Would you prefer this not to have any? Because if you do, you’ll be disappointed.”

“As long as the phallus does not present as erect.”

Bard laughed. “That wasn’t the kind of glorious I intended to convey.”

“Ah. Then I will have some privacy.”
“May it always be so. Now, while you shower, I’ll sort out lunch. Any preferences?”

“I think I will merely change into dry clothes. I expect to be back here this afternoon, so I will wait until tonight to bathe.”

“Want to try the soaking tub tonight?” Bard suggested, smiling.

“I did consider it. But given that tomorrow I want to be at my best, I prefer we christen the tub tomorrow.”

“ Impressions at class tomorrow are important, then?”

Thran nodded. “Word will pass as to my fitness. I want to leave no doubts about it.”

“Then take it easy this afternoon. And soak in the tub if it’ll help; that’s what it’s there for. I can offer you a massage, too. Whatever will help you to be at your best tomorrow.”

Thran’s arms tightened around Bard’s shoulders. “I am the most blessed of angels.”

“You deserve it,” Bard shrugged, climbing to his feet and offering Thran a hand up. “Speaking of deserving, while you’re in here this afternoon, I’ll get Legolas’s walls patched. The lad probably thinks he’s Cinderella, as battered as his room is compared to the other children’s rooms. He deserves better as fast as I can deliver it.”

“He understands.”

“I hope he doesn’t have to for long. His room’s in just about the worst shape in the house.”

“Only on the surface. He did choose it, remember.”

“True. So, back to lunch. What would you like?”

“What is left?”

“Let’s see.”

They perused the refrigerator, deciding on the last of the soup Bard had made Saturday. Bard busied himself with the preparation while Thran changed into something warmer, then they sat down to a hot meal. They talked about tomorrow’s class, and where they’d go afterwards to look for wedding rings. After cleaning up, they went upstairs to look at Legolas’s walls, and Bard showed Thran how to spackle the dings and dents while he cut a patch for the gaping hole.

“This is not so bad,” Thran ventured, scraping off the excess goo with a putty knife.

“No, this is easy. Leave a little extra; the stuff can shrink a bit as it dries, so it’s faster to put on a little more and sand it flat after it dries, rather than to take off too much and have to put on another coat.”

“Ah,” Thran acknowledged, eyeing the gouge he’d just filled. He slathered a little more on it, and smoothed it with his putty knife. “So this dries, and then the primer, and then the color?”

“For the walls, yes. Unfortunately, I’ve got to strip the woodwork before I paint anything.” He rubbed the wooden trim around the doorway, pointing out the uneven surface. “This is what the whole house looked like when we moved in. Stripping woodwork is nasty, so the previous owners never did. They just slapped on another thick coat of paint. So all this has to be cleaned off before I paint anything.”
Thran catalogued the baseboard molding, the crown molding, the window and doorway trim. “This is a lot of woodwork.”

Bard shook his head, exhaling. “It is. It’ll take at least a full day to get it done, if not two, even with a chemical stripper. Legolas shouldn’t sleep in here while I do that, so I’ll move his bed into the children’s study for the duration. It’ll be inconvenient, but at least he won’t have to sleep in the midst of a construction site. I hope he’s patient. We’re out tomorrow, so I won’t start until at least Wednesday.”

“We will explain this at supper, so that all the children understand that you work as fast as you can.”

“Do you think Legolas would like to help paint, as Sigrid did? It’s okay if he doesn’t, but if he wants to help, he can when I get to that point. Just on the weekends. Schoolwork comes first the rest of the time.”

“I agree. We will say this at supper, too.”

“We’ll put it to both of the boys and Tilda. I’m less interested that they do a lot, and more that they understand what goes into it. They’ll need to know one day.”

“So this is Bard’s trade school, yes?” Thran smiled, wielding his putty knife on the next hole. “To educate dancers and children on the rigors of home repair.”

“So far, the dancers and children have been good students,” Bard quipped, grinning. “There. At least the big hole is repaired, and the joint compound’s setting. So now it’s a patched garret, not a ventilated garret.”

“I’m sure Legolas will appreciate the difference,” Thran agreed. “So, I have done this wall.”

“Looks good. That’s the last of it. Since I won’t start on the woodwork today, I’ll see if the walls in Tilda’s and Bain’s rooms need any work, then ours, so I keep moving ahead.”

“It is all coming together well, Bard,” Thran assured him as he helped Bard carry the patching materials to Tilda’s room. “It will all be done soon.”

“I’ll feel better when the children’s rooms are in good shape. They’ll all settle a little more when their sanctuaries are settled. Now, go dance, cariad. I’ll handle the rest of the spackling.”

Thran kissed Bard’s hair. “So I will go. See you soon.”

“Happy dancing.”

As Thran changed into clean dance attire for his afternoon work, he smiled. How many other ballet dancers learned to patch old walls between workouts? Likely few of his colleagues were interested in such things. But Thran was glad to learn, if only for what it meant – he no longer existed in an echoingly empty apartment, but lived in a home, one that harbored his husband and their children. That was worth the struggle to scrub dry spackling off his fingers, and more.

* * *

It didn’t take long to finish spackling the Tilda’s room, then Bain’s, then his and Thran’s room. The
one that took so long, though, was the children’s bathroom. If Bard didn’t have so much to do on the children’s rooms, he would have started with this one. The tile needed work, and the old walls were dinged, dented, and gouged. He spent as much time slathering spackling over these walls and ceiling as he did patching all the holes in Legolas’s room. But eventually he got all of the damage filled.

When he finished, it was time to head downstairs to put on a pot of chili for tomorrow’s supper. It’d simmer until everyone went to bed tonight, so it’d be ready to warm when Bard and Thran got home from the city tomorrow. It had just started to smell good when the children came in from school, and the rush was on to start dinner. Thran came in from the ballroom, and dashed quickly upstairs to change to into warmer clothes so that he could help. The children were settling in well at the Imladris Academy, and the conversation over supper was rife with references to one class or another. Beside Bard, Tilda was her usual quiet self, listening to the other children talking back and forth, so Bard leaned towards her.

“What about your day, little doll? What happened that was interesting?”

She chose a carrot stick and chewed thoughtfully. “My reading class.”

“What about your reading class?”

“Miss Othmar asked if any of us knew what a metaphor was. I was the only one who raised my hand. So when she called on me, I said that the metaphor in the story was a broken heart, because the boy didn’t really have a broken heart, he just missed his dog. Miss Othmar looked surprised, and asked how I knew what a metaphor was, and I said that we read a lot at our house, and that you and Sigrid had explained it to me. I don’t think she quite believed me, because she asked me to give her another example. So I said blanket of air, apple of my eye, couch potato, and early bird. I guess she believed me then.”

Sigrid laughed, but she looked proudly at her sister. “Of course you knew, Til! That was when I had it in my English class, and I didn’t understand it, so we talked about it at supper. Remember how we thought up different metaphors for the next three days?”

“That was fun!” Bain snickered. “It sure made homework a breeze when I got to it in my English class!”

“Well said,” Bard said with a grin, amid the laughter Bain’s metaphor had garnered.

“Remember the fun we had doing collective nouns?” Sigrid said. “Flock of seagulls, herd of horses, gaggle of geese...”

“A skein of geese, too,” Legolas added, getting into the spirit of the game.

“A murder of crows,” Thran said in a deep, menacing voice, wiggling his eyebrows as he took a piece of red pepper from the communal veg plate.

“Ooh, those are good ones!” Sigrid grinned. “Remember your favorite one, Til?”

“A parliament of owls,” she said primly, eyes wide like an owl’s eyes were, then giggled. “We made a long list of them. I wish we still had it.”

“I think we do, little doll.” Bard rubbed his neck, trying to recall where it had ended up in the move. “It’s likely still in one of the boxes in the main room. We’ll have to look for it.”

“When we do, we can put it on the fridge door like we used to,” Bain suggested, mouth full of broccoli. When Bard and Thran both shot him a look, he swallowed hastily. “And add that murder
one. I’ve never heard that one before.”

“What about a clowder of cats?” Legolas offered. “Did you have that one?”

“I don’t think so,” Bain said. “We’ll add that one, too.”

“Let’s look after supper,” Tilda said.

“Homework first, please,” Bard said, an instant before Thran did. “I know, it’s more fun to come up with collective nouns, but it’s important to learn other stuff, too. So after clean up, it’s homework. Maybe it’ll be the breeze Bain thinks it is.”

That met with a chorus of groans, as well as Thran’s laughter.

“Okay, all. Just a word about tomorrow,” Bard went on. “Thran’s going to class tomorrow, and he’s taking me with him. We’ve got a few errands to run in the city after, so we might not get home until just before you do. Whose turn is it to be in charge tomorrow?”

“Legolas,” came the chorus.

“Okay, Legolas,” Bard continued. “Snacks are okay, clean up after yourselves, start on your homework. There’s a pot of chili in the fridge, so Sig, you and Bain second Legolas if it gets late and you have to start supper. Sig’s in charge of the stove. Any questions?”

“Are we allowed to eat the brownies?” Legolas asked immediately. He’d quickly become addicted to Bard’s confections.

“You have to leave eight for lunches the next day. Share the rest out equally. If there aren’t an even number to go around, then cut them in pieces until there are. Unless you can stand to leave the extras in the pan.”

“Okay,” Legolas agreed, trading anticipatory glances with Bain, who was just as enamored with brownies.

“We have a renovation update, too,” Thran supplied. “Bard patched all the walls in our bedrooms and your bathroom today. So Legolas, that big hole in your wall is no more. I take Bard with me to observe class tomorrow so that he knows what that is about, so he will not do more tomorrow. But after that, he must do nasty things to your woodwork to restore it, so we will move your bed into the children’s study Wednesday so that you do not have to endure the smell and mess of that. It will take a few days to fix all the things your room needs, but after that it will be very nice. So I ask you to be patient, and I ask Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda to be, too, while Legolas’s room is under repair. I think it only fair that we respect the study as Legolas’s room while he is there, just as we will respect it as Bain’s room or Tilda’s room as Bard’s efforts progress. This is clear?”

“Yes, Father, yes, Ada, yes, Thran,” went around the table.

“That means that this table becomes homework central again, once I start on Legolas’s room,” Bard continued. “So tomorrow when you get home from school, if there are things in your study that you need for your homework, bring them down here so you’ll have them without interrupting Legolas. You can put the stuff in the solarium for now.”

“Okay, Da, yes, Bard,” went around the table again.

“Thanks for taking it all in stride. It won’t be long before your rooms will be in good shape. Now, who wants dessert?”
Later that night, Thran did opt to try out the soaking tub, but only when Bard prodded him. As they helped the children with homework, Bard noticed that Thran moved a little stiffly, so he dispatched him upstairs to soak. He didn’t have to work very hard to do so, which said something about how hard Thran had worked all afternoon. Bard stayed in the sitting room, available for the children’s questions as needed, listening to quiet music and looking at the book he’d gotten Tilda for Christmas, admiring the illustrations. He had both the boys in for questions about their math class, which he managed to muddle through. That wouldn’t be true for much longer; they’d have to rely on Sigrid before long. Tilda brought her map of Africa to show him how many countries weren’t much older than she was, then she was ready for a story. After a quick one, she headed upstairs to bathe, and the older children cycled through after her. Before long, the schoolbooks and papers were tucked into backpacks, lunch bags sat ready for the morning, and everyone was ready for bed.

Bard headed upstairs to check on Thran. He chuckled to find the tall dancer still curled in the huge, steaming tub, blissfully relaxed in the water.

“I take it you like the tub,” Bard grinned. He sniffed. “What’s that smell?”

“The tub is divine. The smell is a drop or two of the oil I put on my hair. I like the scent.”

“Very nice,” Bard agreed. “The children have finished their homework, and I think Sig’s the last one in the bathroom, if you want to wish them goodnight.”

“Of course. That is my pleasure.” Thran gathered himself up to stand up. Bard’s mouth watered at his angel’s pale alabaster skin and long, slender body as he rose out of the water. As he handed Thran his towel, his lover turned the slightest bit more pink, and looked at him through lowered lashes. “Hmm, how you look at me, lyubov moy. I am abashed.”

“Nothing does that,” Bard grinned. “For which I am eternally grateful. As for how I look at you, you know what you look like, and you know how I love you.”

“I do.” Thran rubbed his face with the towel before he stretched out a hand to stroke Bard’s cheek. “I am grateful for such looks, nevertheless.”

Bard and Thran soon made the rounds of the children to wish them good night, then Bard washed and slipped into bed with Thran. His angel still had on his warm Henley, but slipped it off when Bard lay beside him. They snuggled together to warm each other.

“Ready for tomorrow?” Bard murmured, stroking Thran’s hair.

“I am,” Thran sighed. “Please do not take this as a slight, Bard. I am eager to get back to the dance. I have missed it.”

“I understand. I’m eager to get back to the metal, too, but the renovation is almost as good. When we’re both back doing what we love, it’ll be great.”

“I do not know how you endured going so long without working your metal,” Thran whispered. “I would have died.”

“You would have done whatever it took to care for Legolas.”

“Yes, but for ten years... you are so strong, my saint. And something of you came back this morning, while you sketched.”

Bard nodded. A knot settled in his throat, but it was a good one. “The muse never went away. She was right there, the second I started to sketch. And when she gave me Rahmiel, that was her
forgiving me for not being able to listen to her for ten years.”

“Because she understood why you couldn’t. Because you cared for Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.”

“Maybe so. And tomorrow, your muse will grace you, too.”

“Mine was patient as I healed. So tomorrow, all will be well.”

“It already is.”

Thran chuckled softly, all but asleep. “So it is. Good night, my saint. I love you.”

“I love you, too, angel.”

Bard shut his eyes, and was asleep two heartbeats later.

* * *

How strange was it to climb into the front passenger’s seat of Thran’s SUV? Bard couldn’t remember
the last time he’d been in a vehicle where he wasn’t in the driver’s seat. Today, though, it was his
place to ride shotgun beside a tall, pale ballet dancer. That would be his place all day – he was with
Thran to learn something of his lover’s world, and to support Thran as needed. He glanced at Thran
as he settled into his seat and fastened the safety belt, but his lover was calm as he pulled out of the
driveway and headed down the road.

In case Thran liked to contemplate his coming class in silence, Bard sat wordlessly and watched the
scenery go by. Once they were on the highway, his silence won him a sideways glance and smile
from his lover.

“So quiet, my saint.”

Bard grinned. “I thought you might appreciate the chance to settle yourself without me nattering.”

“This is only class, Bard. A familiar and comfortable thing.”

Bard nodded. “I’m eager to see it for myself. Will there be a live pianist, as there was in the video
you showed me?”

“There will. And Monsieur LePied will be just as staccato in his directions. Unlike Olga, the
instructor you saw in the video, he does not smile so much. It means nothing, his frown. That is just
how he concentrates.”

“Will there be anyone else watching, or just me?”

“There may be. All I ask of you is that you do not talk during the class out of respect for the
instructor and the dancers, but I know that you will be the height of courtesy.”

“Maybe this is a silly question, but will there be any... questions about why I’m there? Or...”

“Or speculation of what you are to me?” Thran grinned. “Likely. Dancers are a gossipy lot. I hope
someone asks me why I am in the company of such a handsome man, just so that I have the pleasure
to tell him that you are the talented sculptor who happens to be my husband.”
A silly smirk would not stay off Bard’s face. “Um. I guess I’d better figure out how to act sculptor-like, then.”

Thran snickered. “If it is anything like what you looked like yesterday morning while you sketched, then you will look formidable.”

They lapsed into silence for the rest of the ride into the city. Thran drove through the crowded streets with confidence, finding them a parking spot just a block from the studio. Bard shouldered his bag of sketchpads and pencils and fell into step with Thran, similarly burdened with his bag of dance gear. Several people called out a welcome to Thran, who replied with smiles and waves, and even a few hugs and the funny air kisses that Bard disliked so much. But when Thran offered them, they were exotically European. Thran was already in his dance attire, so he led Bard through the maze of hallways to a large studio space where the class would be held. He sought out the instructor directly, exchanging pleasantries in French, then drew Bard forward to introduce him.

“Bard, may I introduce Monsieur LePied, the senior instructor here? Monsieur LePied, this is Bard Bowman, my husband.”

Bard shook hands with the master, who was very small and slender, with a shock of wild grey atop his head that seemed more dandelion puff than hair, and black eyes that measured him as precisely as they did dancers. “A pleasure, Monsieur.”

“Thran says you are a sculptor, oui? Here to sketch?”

“Yes, sir. I appreciate you granting me the opportunity to observe your class.”

“You have great appreciation of the dance, then?”

Bard decided honesty was the best policy. “I’m an admirer, though most of what I know about it I learned from the work of Edgar Degas, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir in art school, and now Thran. It’ll be a treat to see more dancers for myself, rather than just in beautiful paintings.”

“I hope so. You are welcome, as long as you remain quiet and out of the way.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

The instructor moved away to speak to someone else, so Bard offered Thran a wry look. “Where is out of the way?”

Thran nodded to the long wall without mirrors. There were a few chairs there, and a few portable barres that were not in use. “There would be best. Though be ready when the barres in the middle of the room are moved out of the way. They will be put with the others on that side.”

Bard nodded. “I’ll keep out of the way. So forget about me for the next hour and then some, angel. Think about class.”

Thran gave him a quirk of a smile. “So I shall. We will reconvene afterwards.”

Bard returned the expression with a wink, and stood watching as Thran carried his bag of gear to a spot along the wall. He set out his water bottle and towel, took off his leather jacket, and looked in the mirror to wrap his braid around his head and tie his scarf around his forehead. Then he began the slow warmup Bard had seen yesterday, gently coaxing his body towards movement. They had arrived some fifteen or twenty minutes early, so several dancers came up to speak to Thran, both men and women. Bard found it amusing that many continued to warm up as they conversed, legs and
arms extending into stretches, ankles and shoulders and wrists rolling, necks and torsos bending this way and that. Several of the ballerinas banged point shoes on the floor, and one or two sewed ribbons into place. As far as Bard could tell, Thran’s presence was met with appreciation and pleasure, without any envy or malice that he recognized. He took off his coat and scarf, using them to pad the hard folding chair he claimed as a perch and sat down. He had just time to get out his sketchpad and pencils before Monsieur LePied called the class to order.

At first, Bard let the sights, sounds, and smells of the class wash over him. The riot of different clothing covered the gamut from the plain dark blue tights and shirt of one male dancer to neon pinks and lime greens of a few ballerinas. One black dancer cut a dashing figure in grey tights, a black vee neck shirt, and a black and white patterned scarf wrapped around his waist like a cummerbund, though it was as likely in place to keep his back warm rather than a stylistic addition to his costume. Several of the dancers, particularly the ballerinas, wore quilted down vests. One ballerina wore just one wildly striped leg warmer on her left thigh. Another wore red and white striped leggings, looking like a sprightly candy cane.

Thran stood quietly in his simple pale grey tights and ruched leg warmers, two layers of darker grey tops, a red cotton scarf wrapped several times around his neck, and a loose white knitted sweater tied around his waist by the arms to keep his back warm. The simple colors and his extreme height made him stand out even amidst all the bright colors.

Once Bard took in the dazzling visuals, the sound of the piano became more obvious. It was in tune, and well played – the pianist was a woman of about fifty, all in black, her steel-grey, curly hair caught up in a messy topknot, with glasses in bright red frames. Her attention was not on her fingers, but the dance master, waiting for his direction as to tempo and duration.

The space was bright despite the lack of windows; racks of lights in the ceiling shed enough illumination for the dancers to cast faint shadows, but the light was without glare. There was the faint smell of heated dust so common in industrial settings, but it was not obtrusive. As the class went on, the smell of working bodies rose, but again, it was not obtrusive. Other than the master’s instructions and the sound of the piano, there was little sound, even though close to thirty people were the room; all the dancers were quiet, concentrating on their movements.

The sequence of the class roughly followed that of the video class Bard had watched yesterday, from warming moves to progressively more energetic ones. Bard felt he was on familiar ground as the dancers bent and stretched and gestured. He was glad that Thran had showed him the video, as Monsieur spoke almost no English in his instructions; he listed the sequence of moves by the French terms, and gestured here and there to indicate where he wanted people to go. As the class progressed to the more vigorous moves, his English comments became more common as he corrected here and observed there.

Bard sketched rapidly, getting the sense of how the dancers moved and flowed. Here was a very small ballerina, very good at rapid footwork. There was a muscular male dancer, powerful and majestic. As Bard worked, he began to pick out the dancers who were principals, whose moves were just that much more crisp and precise, or whose gestures were more expressive, even in a class that didn’t call for it. One principal was likely not dancing in performance tonight, for her work was intense, especially her turns. Another likely would be in performance, for his steps were gentle, marshaling, working to ease the body in preparation for later endeavors.

Time and again, Bard’s eyes went back to Thran, gauging his lover’s efforts against what he saw in the other dancers. Thran worked as hard as anyone in the room, even the ballerina so obsessed with her turns, to build his endurance. But what impressed Bard more than how hard he worked was the precision of his moves. No gesture, bend, or jump was casual, sloppy, or half hearted, but as fully
committed as if each were the last movement Thran would ever make. His grand jetés were stunning, and not merely because of his height or the height of his jumps – each looked as effortless as floating clouds.

If Bard’s completely uneducated opinion meant anything, then his angel was well set to ace any audition he chose to make.

After the grand jetés, the class calmed, allowing the dancers to cool down without injury or stress. As the various layers of clothing had come off, now many went back on so that chills and drafts didn’t stress finely honed physiques. Bard quickly sketched a ballerina, her soft sweater flying around her like a matador’s cape when she threw it around her shoulders. He captured Monsieur LePied in conversation with the pianist, one foot in front of the other, his arms crossed over his chest and fingers pulling at his lower lip as they discussed some refinement. He caught the pianist in the next second, pushing her glasses up atop her head as she gathered up her music. Another trio of danseurs laughed over a joke while one arranged the elastics on a shoe. The wonderful, magical feeling that had begun yesterday, when images flowed from eye to hand to paper, had strengthened, bringing a smile to his lips.

“And what did our class teach you?”

Bard looked up to see Monsieur LePied standing beside him, looking rather imperious. Thran had said he rarely smiled, so Bard didn’t bridle; he merely held out his sketchbook. The master rifled through the myriad of sketches that Bard had made, filling nearly half his sketchbook, with a casual air at first, but after the first few pages, he slowed, studying first one and then the next drawing.

“You have an unerring eye to capture what makes a figure unique,” the master finally allowed. “As rapid as many of these are, I can still identify the individual in each one. What did you say your name was?”

“Bard Bowman.”

“Well. These are very nice. You are welcome to any of my classes.”

Monsieur LePied handed Bard’s sketchbook back to him, offered a nod, and moved away.

Thran had packed his things in his bag, and came up to Bard with a curious look back at the master. “What did he say to you, lyubov moya?”

Bard ran a hand through his hair. “That these were very nice, and I was welcome to any of his classes. I think that’s good.”

Thran blinked in surprise, and gestured towards the sketchbook, which Bard duly passed him. “That is unexpected, but very good, as you thought. He is rarely so forthcoming with praise.” He paged through the day’s sketches. “These are wonderful, Bard. I know which dancer you drew in each one. Even in the ones so quickly drawn, I know.”

“That’s what Monsieur LePied said. So I’m getting back to myself.”

“You are. I see the improvement even after a single day. You are wonderful.”

There was no time for Bard to thank Thran for his praise, for several dancers came up to them. Soon Bard’s sketchbook was making the rounds from hand to hand, and he was pleased to see so many interested in what he had done. One of the ballerinas was so sweet with her praise that Bard took the sketch out of his book and offered it to her.
“Make sure you have him sign it, Charisse,” Thran winked at him. “For then you can prove to your petite Maman that a great artist thought enough of her daughter to sketch her at the dance.”

That brought an appreciative laugh from the dancers and a blush to Bard’s cheeks, but he fished out a pencil to inscribe the sketch, “Charisse at the Dance,” signed and dated it, and handed to the ballerina.

“That’s so sweet of you,” Charisse breathed, “and my petite Maman, as Thran calls her, will like it very much.”

“I hope she does,” Bard nodded, then stowed his sketchbook back in his bag. “I appreciate the kind words, too.”

After a few more words, Thran was ready to go. He ducked into the dancers’ locker room to change out of his dance wear and into jeans and warm shirts, then he and Bard ventured out.

“How do you feel? You looked fit, elegant, well healed... your usual beautiful self,” Bard offered, as they headed back to the SUV with their bags. “Did you make the impression you wanted?”

“I am well satisfied,” Thran nodded, considering. “I felt strong, without pain in my ankle or anywhere else, and I was as precise as I wanted to be.”

“I noticed how exact you were with every move. You were unhurried, like you had all the time in the world to make each move.”

“Ahh,” Thran said with satisfaction. “That was exactly my intent. You know the jazz trumpeter, Louis Armstrong?”

“Satchmo? Everyone knows the great Satchmo. From New Orleans.”

“Yes, that is he. Someone once asked him how he had time to play so many notes. He said there was always time to play all the notes. What he meant was that one must relax and take all the time there is to play all the notes, without rushing or leaving any out. It is a good metaphor for how I was taught to dance. Make the leap, turn the body, make the fingers just so, and then land precisely, in the time there is.”

“The dance take on the jazz take on the Zen take of being in the moment.”

Thran grinned. “Just so. It is good that so many traditions riff on the same thing, yes? So, lyubov moya, what next? Lunch, perhaps, then shopping?”

“Sounds good to me. Anything you want to eat is fine with me.”

“There is a small café nearby that serves wonderful satay. Chicken skewers in peanut sauce.”

“That suits me. It’d be good to talk about where to shop over something warm.”

“That suits me, too.”

They linked arms as they headed down the sidewalk.
A faint, familiar heaviness coursed throughout Thran’s body, the residue of the morning’s exertions. It was without pain or exhaustion, but after a good night’s sleep it would translate into more muscle, more endurance, more control – all things Thran needed to stay the elite dancer he was. He was pleased to feel his edge return.

He had other things to smile about – the warm greetings from his fellow dancers, men and women alike, not the least of them. He and the tiny Charisse had once paired in a comic dance for a benefit as a pair of mismatched clowns, and they had had such fun hamming up their performance for the donors’ gala. She’d been very sweet to compliment his saint so kindly, though Bard’s sketch of her had been worth all of her sweetness. Even the dancers who knew him only by reputation or who were not close had seen his fitness, and word would spread of that quickly.

There would be some discussion about Bard, as well, and not just because of his drawing talents, formidable as those were. Perhaps Bard had not had cause to refer to their pairing, but Thran had dropped word of it once or twice, casually, to the dancers closest to him. Word of that would spread, too.

As close attention as Thran had paid to his dancing during the class, he had surfaced from his reverie a time or two to consider the rebirth of his saint. Bard sat unobtrusively off to one side, sketching rapidly, his surety and confidence growing with each stroke of his pencil. His style was so distinctive, and if it didn’t look anything like Picasso’s line sketches, it shared the same evocative ability. What did one call an artist who worked in pencil rather than paint? Whatever such an artist was called, perhaps Bard would consider doing more of it to complement his sculpture. As soon as Bard spoke to Shire Hills, he would put that forth for Bard’s consideration.

As they walked towards the café, both of them bearing the bags of their callings, Thran appreciated the subtle change in Bard’s usual long stride. He stood a little taller, the light in his eyes was a little brighter, and his step held a firmer purpose. It was such pleasure to draw him close, to feel the subtle adjustment of Bard’s stride as he kept them in step. When he grinned, Bard favored him with a mischievous smile.

“We make a striking couple, do we not?”

Thran laughed. “So we do. May it always be so.”

The café specialized in Asian street food, and did most of its business as carryout, so it held no more than half a dozen tiny tables. Inside, the air was dense with steam and spicy aromas, predominantly cumin and turmeric. Thran breathed in that heady perfume, humming in appreciation. It was such a pungent bouquet of flavors, too many to sort out individually, but the overall sense was earthy and welcoming. A black woman, bundled in a bright green wool coat and darker green earmuffs and scarf, stood ahead of them at the counter, waiting for her foil-wrapped carryout packet – she was one of the ballerinas from Thran’s class, which drew laughter from all three of them. Thran and Bard
invited Marisa to eat with them, and they squeezed around one of the tiny tables to enjoy their food. Thran had his favorite Indonesian satay, and Marisa her British/Punjabi tikka. Bard’s chicken shish kebab came nestled in warm naan, which he wolfed down with gusto. It was wonderful to talk with another dancer again, and Bard fit into the conversation easily, as content to listen to discussions of ballet technique as he was to talk about his sketching or music or cuisine.

“But you draw so fast, Bard!” Marisa exclaimed. “You seem so calm, but your pencil flies! Just a few strokes, and you have the essence of a person! How does that come so easily to you?”

Bard ran a hand through his hair, revealing that he was both pleased as well as embarrassed at Marisa’s enthusiasm. “Oh... I didn’t have a lot of money in art school – no surprise there, right? No art student ever has money. So I worked a lot of craft fairs doing caricatures. You get just a few minutes to capture enough of a person in a cartoon that they’ll be happy they paid for it. It was good training. Better than what I learned in some of my classes, to be honest, and I didn’t have to pay for the privilege.”

Bard’s smile was wry, drawing Marisa to chuckle. “Every art has its self-important teachers who do you the favor of imparting great knowledge, I think. Sometimes that great knowledge is only of what not to do.”

Bard snickered. “Very true. But every now and then one of those teachers turns out to have a lot of good things to offer, so you have to pay attention to all of them. Sometimes it can take a long time to find out which ones were good and which ones weren’t.”

“I had a teacher like that once, when I was a child,” Marisa mused, her lips quirking in a smile. She had a lilting accent, heritage of her London birthplace. “She was very strict and stern, and what child likes that? I almost gave up dancing because she was never satisfied. Over and over, she made me do pirouettes, until I was sick of them! She claimed that I wasn’t straight, so over and over, and around and around...” Marisa rolled her dark brown eyes just as Sigrid did when she was exasperated, drawing Thran’s laughter. “I was sure she didn’t know a thing about pirouettes. Then in my first professional audition, of course the master called for a whole series of pirouettes, and of course I did them my way. I couldn’t hold the number needed. Only then did I realize that old woman knew everything about pirouettes. The next audition, I did the pirouettes her way, and I got the job.”

“Experience is a hard teacher,” Bard agreed, smiling.

“Very hard,” Than agreed. His saint could give lessons to anyone about the truth of that.

Thran and Bard soon bade Marisa farewell, and climbed back into the SUV to make their way to the gold market. As parking was rare, they had a chance to see what shops appealed to them – or not, in Bard’s case.

“I’m not sure about this, Thran,” Bard said, rubbing his chin dubiously. “This looks like the jewelry equivalent of a red light district. A lot of hustle.”

“I am of the same mind,” Thran agreed. “So many signs that shout of bargains... it reminds me of a not-so-savory section of a market in Marrakesh. Perhaps this is not the best place for us to look.”

“I’m not too sure what kind of reception a couple of gays would receive, either.”

Thran glanced at Bard to offer a sly smile. “I thought only one of us was gay, lyubov moya.”

Bard’s wrinkled brow smoothed as he grinned back. “I’m as good as. That’s what loving an angel has done to me. Not that I’m interested in any other guys, mind you. Any other anything, when it
comes down to it.”

“Excellent,” Thran purred. “My evil plan proceeds apace.”

“You’re an impossible act to follow. So what do you want to do? I don’t think this is anything we want to get into.”

“Agreed. Do you want our rings to match, or be different?”

Bard considered. “Which do you want?”

“I asked you first.”

Bard looked back out at the shops rolling by. “I’d like them to match, but only if you would, too. If you’d rather them be different, that’s fine.”

“No, I would like them to match, too. I ask only because if we want them to match, then we should not look in vintage stores, as the chance of finding two such things is not promising.”

“Agreed. We could stop at one of those big box jewelry stores, just because we’d have lots to choose from, and maybe a bit lower price. Or we could look at the shops in Greenwood Dale on the Lake. They could do something custom for us.”

Thran considered. “Let us try the first, if there is one on the way home? It would be less conspicuous, and we would have more choices, as you say. If we see nothing we like, then we can try the smaller shops in the village.”

“If you pass me your mobile, I’ll see what I can find that’s on our way home.”

Thran pulled out the device and handed it to Bard. His lover might have only a basic mobile, but he’d easily learned how to use Thran’s, so he rapidly scrolled through the screens. “If we head back home the usual way, there’s one just two exits down the highway, and another one two exits after that. Different ones, so we’d have a couple of choices.”

“Let us try the nearer one, then. If that has nothing to suit us, we shall try the second. If that does not suit us, either, we shall stop in the village.”

“We have a plan.” Bard put Thran’s mobile in a niche of the central console, and Thran turned them back towards the highway. “What kind of ring do you want? Something plain, or more elaborate?”

“We both like the white gold, yes?” Bard nodded. “With jewels?” Bard thought, but shook his head. “I agree. Just the gold. Absolutely plain seems too stark.” Bard nodded again. “So something not gaudy. Perhaps with embossing, or a beaded edge, or carving?”

“Some sort of texture,” Bard agreed. “No flowers, though.”

“Agreed. And I will tell you now that I will not wear mine always, because I cannot when I dance in performance. On the stage, I must disappear into the role, yes?”

“I won’t wear mine always, either. Not the thing to do when I weld or forge.”

“Prudent. Perhaps we should have a box to hold them when we cannot wear them, to keep them safe.”

“That’s something we can probably find in one of the junk shops. Something that appeals to both of us.”
“I like that. So, this exit?”

“Yes, this exit. Then right at the light, and down half a mile on the left.”

Thran proceeded as directed, and soon they walked into the huge jewelry store. It seemed to cater to more than jewelry, for a display of wedding china appeared to their left, and flatware to the right, with the jewelry counters right before them. There were several patrons already at the counters, which seemed to ease Bard.

“Start on the left and work right?” Bard suggested.

“As good an approach as any,” Thran agreed, so they slowly angled to the left. They perused several of the counters before they found the display of men’s rings, then slowed to see what struck them.

“Trying too hard,” Bard murmured, as they passed the modern styles, and Thran had to agree. None of them looked like anything he wanted either of them to wear. A display of extremely plain styles followed, which also didn’t appeal to either of them. The few that remained were neither one thing nor another, so before any of the clerks came up to them, they made their exit.

“Let us hope the second shop is not as...”

“Plain and vulgar at the same time?” Bard grinned. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed.”

A few minutes later, they walked into the second huge store. This time, the wedding china and flatware were all on the right, and sports memorabilia was before them. The jewelry was on the left, so they started their perusal on the left. There were fewer of the unattractive modern styles, and more of the plain ones, but at least this store had two display cabinets of more interesting pieces.

“Look at that one,” Bard murmured. “Second row –”

“Third one on the left?” Thran finished. “That one drew my eye, too. I like the small beading on the edges, and the carved center. Very elegant.”

“Not gaudy. Not plain, either. Elegant, as you said.”

“Good afternoon,” a middle-aged clerk with thinning brown hair and a black skullcap came trundling down the line of counters towards them. “Is there something interesting you’d like to see close up?”

“Good afternoon to you,” Bard replied. “Um, we’d like to see that one? With the carving?”

“A very elegant ring,” the clerk nodded, opening the case. “What size are you interested in? I’ll see if I have one in your size.”

Bard glanced at Thran. “I probably need an eleven or so. What about you?”

“Perhaps a bit smaller. Ten, perhaps?”

Hesitating, the man gave a sharp look back and forth between them, but before he said anything, a younger clerk came up beside him. “Papa, David needs you to look at the old watch he’s repairing in the back. It’s one of the tricky ones with the seventeen jewels. I’ll take care of the gentlemen.”

“That David, he needs constant watching...” the older man trundled away, shaking his head.

“Papa is more traditional,” the clerk confided with an apologetic smile. “David and I, we have this game we play to divert him. I am pleased to show you whatever you’d like to see of our rings. First, let me size each of your fingers...”
That was quickly done, and the rings were produced. Thran slipped his on his finger experimentally. It was a beautiful piece, and Thran admired the way it graced his hand.

“I am surprised you have such a large stock,” Thran observed. “Usually such things must be ordered?”

“That’s true,” the clerk allowed. “But sometimes we end up with several sizes in stock for one reason or another. This one, for example, is beautiful, but the style is discontinued, so we ended up with the combined stock from several stores. It takes a certain gravitas to wear it, I think. It’s understated, but a statement all the same.”

“It looks nice on your hand,” Bard agreed. “You have the certain gravitas, I think.”

“How does it look on your hand, then?” Thran asked, and Bard held out his hand. “I think you have the gravitas, too, yes? Do you like it?”

Bard considered his hand, nodding. “I do. But you have yours on the wrong hand.”

“Russians wear such a thing on their right hand. Welsh are like Americans, yes? To wear it on the left?”

“It looks very distinguished on either hand,” the young clerk offered, drawing Thran’s soft chuckle.

“So it does. What do you think, lyubov moya?”

“I think we should ask discreetly about the financial aspect of the transaction.”

The clerk grinned at Bard’s wry phrasing. “I think I can offer you a nice price on the two, with a little discount for your patience with Papa. He is a good man, you understand.”

“Of course,” Thran agreed, when the clerk named a very reasonable price for the pair. “Is it possible for them to be engraved?”

“That’s no problem at all. We’re not busy, so if you want to wait a few minutes, I can have that done now, and you can take them with you.”

“Wonderful. Let us consult for a moment, and we will tell you what to engrave.”

“Take your time. Thank you!”

As the clerk moved away, Bard looked to Thran. “What do you want to put inside? Our initials? The date? Which date?”

“I thought I would put in yours, ‘From an angel to his saint.’ And perhaps you would put in mine, ‘From a saint to his angel.’ Would you like that?”

Bard nodded. “That’s perfect. Exactly the right thing.”

They told the clerk, who headed back to the workroom with their rings, and in twenty minutes, their rings were back, properly inscribed on the inside of the bands. The clerk polished each of them carefully once more, tucked them into plush boxes, and those into a small bag, and handed them over with a smile.

“Congratulations. I hope you’ll both be very happy.”

Thran offered a graceful nod. “Thank you. We will be.”
“We already are,” Bard seconded. “We appreciate your help.”

“Please come back again.” The clerk offered a wave. “It’s been a pleasure.”

They walked outside to the SUV, both of them grinning. When they’d climbed back inside, Bard dug the two little boxes out of the bag and opened one. “I don’t want to wait to wear mine, cariad. Let’s wear them now.”

“I agree, lyubov moy y. So give me yours, so I may put it on your finger.”

“Okay, this one’s mine. Here. I’ve got yours. Right or left hand for you?”

“Hmm. On which hand did you wear the ring you had from Daphne?”

“The left.”

“And I wore Vileria’s on the right. So I will wear yours on the left, to honor Vileria as well as you, and because a Welshman bestowed it upon me.”

“I like that. So I’ll wear mine on my right, to honor Daphne as well as you, and because a Russian gave it to me. So together?”

“Of course.”

“For now and forever, my angel.”

“For now and forever, my saint.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, until Bard snorted self-consciously. “Was this sappy?”

Thran laughed. “I do not think so. But then, perhaps I am too entranced with my husband to be objective.”

“I think I’m just as entranced with mine. So I guess we’d better go home and have our children give us a dose of reality.”

Thran rolled his eyes. “It will be a large dose, I am sure. So let us kiss, and savor the moment before the reality arrives.”

They did, just a quick caress, but it was sweet, and brought a smile to both their faces. Thran started the SUV and they had traveled several exits down the highway before either expression faded.

“Do you still have your old wedding ring?” Bard asked after a while.

“I do,” Thran nodded. “I have Vileria’s, as well. Perhaps our marriage was not what either of us would have chosen, but we were good friends, and so I saved our rings.”

“I have mine and Daphne’s, too. I’ve been thinking...”

“Always dangerous,” Thran gave Bard an amused look. “What have you thought about?”

“Vileria and Daphne were the mothers of our children, and while Tilda’s not old enough to remember her mother, the rest of our children are. So I wondered if we might want to put something in the house so the children know it’s all right to think of their mothers, even though we’re together.”

“I would like that, very much,” Thran agreed at once. “Is that why you asked me about my old
wedding ring?”

Bard nodded. “Do you have a photograph of Vileria?”

“I do.”

“I thought if we put up pictures of them, and the wedding rings...”

“A shrine, perhaps.” Thran mused, then grimaced. “That is not the right word, I think. Not a religious place, as in a church. A place of remembrance. I like that idea very much. Where should we put it?”

“I don’t know yet. I thought the central hall, then I thought the main room, then I thought the children’s study... we have time to choose a spot. Maybe the children have a preference.”

“Vileria would like the children’s study, where she would enjoy to watch the children grow up.”

“Daphne would, too. We’ll see what the children think. They might think that’s depressing.”

Thran hummed. “They might. We will ask, when the moment comes.”

They were almost home. It was too early for the children to be home from school, so Bard suggested they stop by Sam’s greenhouse to see if they could find a few plants to make the solarium look less empty. Thran agreed at once, so they pulled in to the parking lot discussing what sort of plants they wanted. Palms were a good place to start, so when Sam came forward to greet them, he steered them towards the back of the greenhouse where he had several large specimens. They chatted briskly about the height of the solarium, and how cold it got and how much sun, and before long they had a quartet of low maintenance palms and a few potted ferns that preferred cooler, lower light conditions. Sam wrapped the pots of the tall palms so they wouldn’t spill dirt all over the SUV when they were put in horizontally, and put cardboard trays under the ferns to keep them from dampening the upholstery. They headed home with their leafy cargo, and were soon carting the pots inside.

“Is it better to put the pots near the windows or the inner walls?” Thran asked, as he carried in the last of the ferns.

“Probably the inner walls for now. I haven’t checked the glazing yet, but I’d bet a lot of it’s old and needs replacing, so it might be drafty. We can arrange them around the fainting couch. That’ll need reupholstering at some point. Just as well. That brown print is some kind of ugly.”


Bard shot him a glance. “There’s this stunning blue called Majorelle blue, named for the artist, Jacques Majorelle. It’s used a lot in Morocco. All that garden furniture in the ballroom needs repainting; I thought that Majorelle blue would be brilliant. That same blue on the fainting couch would make it hard to tell where the inside ends and the outside begins. I like that.”

“Do you have a picture of this color, this Majorelle blue?”

“I do. It’s in my art books in the main room.”

Thran followed Bard into the main room where he considered the remaining boxes. “It’s in one of these. I’ll take this one, if you take the other. It’s a book about Islamic tessellations.”

Thran eventually produced the book, and held it up. “This one?”
“That’s it. So, Majorelle blue...” Bard paged through too quickly for Thran to see a lot of detail, but it was enough for him to want to peruse the book later at more leisure. “There. That’s the color I was thinking about.”

“Ooh, I like it very much!” Thran exclaimed. “Like lapis, but a bit more purple, a bit brighter than indigo. Ultramarine, perhaps? A very distinctive blue.”

“It’s like nothing else,” Bard agreed. “I don’t know if we can find anything that color to put on the fainting couch, but it’d be stunning.”

“We live near New York City, Bard – it is one of the fabric capitals of the world, given all the theatrical and fashion endeavors. I know costumiers of the ballet. They can tell me where to find such a thing.”

“It’d be amazing. But we don’t need to talk to your costumiers yet. I still have so much work to do inside before we get to the soft stuff.”

“It will come. It is good to think of these things now, so that if there are things we want to do on the hardscape to match our vision, we can do so. Would you leave this book out for me? I would like to look at it more. Our solarium would make a fine courtyard like some I glimpsed in this book.”

“That would be something. Sure, keep this one out and we can look at it. Oh, it’s going on four-thirty. The children will be home soon. I want to get the chili out and warming so it’s not too long before we eat.”

“Which one of the children do you think will notice these first?” Thran grinned, carrying Bard’s art book with him as they returned to the kitchen.

“My money’s on Sigrid. She’s got the eyes of a hawk,” Bard said, as Thran opened the refrigerator for his lover to haul out the big pot of chili.

“That would be my guess, as well.” Thran shut the refrigerator, and Bard heaved the pot onto the stove. “The boys will be oblivious, so our Tilda is my second choice.”

“Mine, too. Do you want any tea before supper?”

“I would. I want to use one of our podstakanniks. They are a very elegant way to enjoy tea.”

“They are.” Bard put the kettle on, then came beside Thran to put his arm around his waist. They paged through Bard’s art book together as the kettle warmed. “Just one thing left to do, you know.”

“The ceremony. Perhaps Thursday or Friday, or next week?”

“That’s up to you, Thran. You’ll be back in class almost every day now, right?”

“I will.”

“The day isn’t particular to me. We just need time to alert the school that we’re picking the children up a little early, that’s all. All that’s important to me is that we do it.”

“I feel the same. So perhaps we need to ask the children what is a good day for them. Legolas said something to me about the first day he would go to the Gondors to fence, and I would not want to choose that day.”

“So we’ll ask at supper. But I say we wait to see if they notice the rings, first.”
“I agree.”

“Won’t be long. It’s almost four-thirty now. Any moment, the horde will be upon us.”

The mudroom door clattered open, and four excited voices echoed through the house. Thran gave Bard a quick kiss. “The horde is here.”

Bard laughed. “Think they’ll get it in ten?”

“Before supper, surely.”

“Okay, we’ll see.”

They turned to welcome four children with bright eyes and reddened cheeks into the kitchen.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The saint and the angel find out which of them wins their bet, then engage in an intimate trust-building exercise.

Chapter Notes

I don't own the rights to "Dante's Peak." I just enjoy the "more stuff blows up" in it.

Yes, it's another chapter that earns the Explicit rating. Enjoy!

“Welcome home, all,” Bard heralded, as the children bustled into the kitchen through the mudroom, shoeless and coatless. “How was school today?”

“Archery today, Father!” Legolas replied, a huge grin on his face. “It was so great to pull my bow again! There were a few new students from the lower grades, so Mr. Faramir spent a lot of time with them, but the older students got to hold a shoot off. Once Mr. Faramir saw that I was capable, he let me go with the older students, and then we got down to it. That Kilian is something! I told him he should try out for the Olympic team when he’s old enough. He’s got dual citizenship, American and Irish, so he could try for either team. He’s got three years before he’s eligible, so he’ll be spectacular by then. Tara’s almost as good.”

“Are they more skilled than you?” Thran asked, smiling.

“On any given day, any of us can outshoot the other. But I think Kilian’s got the edge on Tara and me.”

“Honestly said,” Thran nodded. “I hope they both will be friends, then, and not rivals.”

“They’re not like that, Father,” Legolas hastened to say. “That’s so different from my old school. They seemed glad that I was there. I think we’ll be good friends. May I ask them to visit sometime?”

“Of course. Perhaps the weekend?”

“Kilian and Tara both fence, too. So if they could come Sunday, would you referee?”

“Of course. That will be my pleasure. Have you learned when you will go to the fencing instructors?”

Legolas nodded at once. His face lit with even more excitement as he gave his father his full regard. “Tomorrow! Mr. Faramir let the Gondors know I’ll be with the regulars, and I’m so excited to meet them in person, as well as start to fence again. They already have your mobile number, so after I see them tomorrow, they’re supposed to call you Thursday to talk about it. You’ll be in class all day...
then, won’t you?”

“I will. If you would let them know that it is all right to call me in the evening, I would appreciate it. And please tell them I look forward to our talk.”

Bard brought out the bowl of fruit, then the cheese and crackers. “Will you have archery and fencing matches, Legolas? I’ve seen a little of the fencing during the Olympics, but never archery, and I’d like to.”

“I don’t know about the fencing yet, but I do for the archery. We’ll have meets in the spring, when the weather is warmer.”

“When you get a meet schedule, we’ll put it on the board. I know your father will want to go, and so will I.”

“The board?” Legolas repeated, his brow wrinkling.

“Yes, the board... that we don’t have yet,” Bard admitted, looking around the kitchen. “We need somewhere to put up all your schedules, the list for the market, doctors’ appointments, and so on. Another item to put on the homeowner’s mecca list.”

“I learned to jump rope today,” Tilda announced, taking a clementine.

“You already know how to jump rope,” Bain snorted, stuffing cheese in his mouth.

“This is the kind with two ropes,” Tilda corrected.

“What, Double Dutch?” Sigrid asked as she peeled her clementine. “That’s neat!”

“It took a while to get the hang of it. I’m not very good yet. Some of the other children really are. There’s this one boy who can do it on his hands.”

“It takes time to learn anything new,” Thran said.

“Thran’s right,” Bard agreed. “The important thing is whether you had fun doing it.”

“I thought it was fun. And we got a new book to read today. The Hobbit, by JRR Tolkien.”


“I know, but none of the other children have, so I don’t mind reading it again. Except the end is sad. And we started studying Russia in geography. I have a new map. Thran, did you ever live in Siberia?”

Thran laughed. “Despite being so different, no, I was never sent to Siberia, Tilda. It is terribly cold there, and I would not have liked it at all. Perhaps you will show me your map, and I will show you where I did live.”

“What about you, Bain and Sigrid? Anything interesting in your worlds today?”

“Mr. Saur gets stranger and stranger. I liked running in sport class, though. I’m doing okay in trigonometry. I don’t know why it works, or how I know it works, or how you explain it to someone who doesn’t know how it works, so I’ve decided that trigonometry is just a modern word for magic, and let it go.”

That brought a laugh around the table.
“Nothing from me, really, other than geology is cool. Lots of magma and volcanoes this week,” Bain reported.

“So it’s more stuff blows up at school, too?” Bard teased, getting a laugh. “How many times have you watched Dante’s Peak? You could teach the class about acid water supplies and pyroclastic flows.”

“Hey, I could!” Bain agreed, pumping his fist. “I’ll tell Mr. Gandalf that. He’s the chemistry teacher, but he comes in to teach this section about geology. He makes it so interesting! Maybe he’d like to borrow our copy of the film.”

“I’d hazard he’s already seen it,” Bard replied, “but he’s welcome to borrow it if he hasn’t. Don’t eat too much before supper, all. We’re eating at six, and it’s chili, salad, and strawberries.”

“What about dessert?” Legolas asked, pausing his chewing as he imagined the possibilities. “Cake, I hope?”

“No cake today,” Thran shook his head. “We have two kinds of ice cream, I think.”

“Strawberry and double mint chip,” said Bain, the authority on current supplies of dessert.

“What kind of cake do you like?” Bard asked, nibbling a piece of cheese. “I’ll put it on the menu soon.”

“Spice cake.” Legolas looked to his father. “Remember that cake we had at the Russian tea room, Father? Was that spice cake?”

Thran chuckled. “It was applesauce raisin cake, as I recall. With thick, sweet icing. Very, very sweet icing. You ate all the icing off yours and mine both, with great gusto.”

That brought another laugh. “I like the sweet kind, too,” Bain admitted. “But Da never puts enough of it on the stuff he makes.”

“I put on plenty for most humans, just not enough for teenaged boys,” Bard laughed. “Everyone done with the cheese and crackers?”

Bain swiped one more piece of cheese as Bard leaned forward to take the plate. Before Bard could pick up the dish, however, Sigrid grabbed his right hand, squealing.

“What is this?” she demanded, holding it up to the others. “Gods, is this what I think it is? Legs, does Ada have one, too? Did you two get married? Did you? How could you, without all of us? How could you!”

Legolas held up Thran’s right hand. “He doesn’t have one.”

“Yes, he does,” Tilda announced, examining Thran’s left hand, then looked up at him with a reproving glare. “It’s over here. Thran, that wasn’t fair!”

“Geez, Da!” Bain protested. “Til’s right; that wasn’t fair! Legs, they didn’t tell us!”

“Father, you didn’t tell me?” Legolas’s face was downcast, and his tone was plaintive. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You rats!” Sigrid exclaimed, poking Bard so hard in the ribs that he flinched in laughter. “I can’t believe you two got married without us! That is so rude! I can’t believe it!”
“Please, ma chère,” Thran protested through his laughter, catching Sigrid’s hand as she tried to poke him. “Why do you think so badly of us, I would like to know? Of course we would not do such a thing without the four of you! Never would we! We merely bought the rings for the ceremony. They are very beautiful, and we could not wait to wear them, so we did not wait. Instead, we laid a small bet on as to which of you would notice them first.”

“Oh – so you didn’t get married?” Legolas turned a confused look on Thran.

Thran reached out to tug one of Legolas’s faded green braids. “Not yet, synok.”

“But you’re going to, right?” Bain pressed.

“When?” asked Tilda.

“We didn’t get married yet,” Bard assured them. “We wanted rings for the ceremony, so we got them. We just wanted to see if you’d notice them, that’s all. It’s just as Thran said – we would never hold the ceremony without you all. We want you with us for that.”

“Hmm,” Sigrid growled, only slightly mollified, as she poked Thran again, then Bard. “Okay, you’ve had your joke. So what was the small bet about, and who won it?”

Bard looped an arm around Sigrid to hug her close. “We both did. We both said you’d be the first to notice.”

That brought a smug smile to Sigrid’s face. “Well, you had that right. I’ve been watching you both like a hawk since we moved in here!”

Thran’s laughter bubbled out to consume him. “Oh, ma chère, those are exactly the words your Da used. You do not disappoint, woman with the eyes of the hawk!”

“When?” Tilda persisted. “When will you do the ceremony?”

“We thought to make a celebration of it,” Thran said. “The actual ceremony is just a few minutes, and is not all that interesting. But afterwards, there is a Japanese restaurant –”

“Yessss!” Bain pumped his fist again. “Legs, it’s that place I was telling you about with the guy who throws eggs!”

“Really?” Legolas leaned forward to lock eyes with Bain. “The one who juggles the knives, too?”

“Yeah, that one, and he –”

“Let them get the rest of it out, you two!” Sigrid ordered. “So where is the ceremony?”

“We’ll just go down to the county office, and they’ll do it. It’s just a formality,” Bard explained. “After that, we thought you’d all like the Japanese restaurant for supper.”

“May I wear a dress?” Tilda asked. “And try the chopsticks?”

“You can wear anything you want, as long as it’s nice.”

“Are you going to wear tuxedos?” Sigrid asked.

“I think we’ll just wear something normal. We’ll save the tuxedos for one of Thran’s ballet premieres that’ll come along before too long.”
“Really? A premiere?” Sigrid shared an impressed look with her sister. “Tilda, we can really dress up for that! It’ll be fun!”

“No, it won’t,” Legolas sighed, looking at Bain with a glum face. “We’ll have to wear suits, Bain, and stand around looking stoic. It’s boring.”

“Lots of cameras and stuff?” Bain said, struggling to look blasé, but his eagerness ruined the attempt.

“Enough to make you see blue spots in front of your eyes for hours.”

“May I have a new dress for that?” Tilda asked. “Maybe one like the dancers wear, with all the layers in the skirt?”

“We’ll see, little doll. Let us get married first, and let us get Thran through his auditions and back to work.”

“Maybe we will have a premiere for your Da, too, when he is back at his sculpture,” Thran inserted. “We will dress like artistes for that, yes? Perhaps the cliché of a French beret?”

“You can’t get too wild at an art premier,” Bard winced, running a hand through his hair. A lot of art patrons seemed to like to compete with the artwork in making an impression. The last artist’s opening he’d gone to had been a sea of black clothing and multicolored hair, and that older woman with lavender hair... ouch.

“You still haven’t said when,” Tilda exhaled with longsuffering exasperation.

“That depends on all of you, mes petits,” Thran said. “We will choose a day together, yes?”

By the time all the children had sorted out their schedules and Thran had considered his class workload, it was time to get ready for supper, but at least they had a day. They would pick up the children on Thursday at the end of the academic portion of school, and descend upon the county office a few minutes later. Bard would call in the morning to see if there was any possibility of making an appointment, but failing that, at least let the office know they were coming. The suppertime conversation was full of the children deciding what they wanted to wear to the occasion of watching a Japanese chef toss eggs into his toque.

Bard was still laughing about the children’s focus on the theatrical adventure that Thursday offered rather than the marriage of their fathers when he kissed Sigrid goodnight and came into the bedroom. As he expected, Thran was ensconced in the soaking tub. After the dancer had bade the children good night, he’d washed from head to toe in the shower cabinet, and now reclined at his ease in the tub with a glass to hand that contained no more than two mouthfuls of red wine.

“Look at you, you sybarite,” Bard stood with arms akimbo to regard his lover. “You look like some hellaciously decadent rock star, waiting for the virgins to be led in for sacrifice.”

Thran’s eyes remained closed. “I do not feel like a decadent rock star, to be sure. I feel like a very tired ballet dancer. You have bid our children good night, too? They are all in bed?”

“They are.”

“Then I want my husband to wash and then join me so that both of us enjoy his foresight to add this divine soaking tub to our bathroom.”

Bard unbuttoned his flannel shirt, shrugged out of it, and pulled his Henley over his head. “Think you’ll be able to stay awake long enough for me to wash?”
“I will do my best.”

“Open your eyes. Maybe watching me strip will help to keep you awake.”

Sleepy grey eyes opened, then widened as Bard eased his jeans off his hips. “Mmm. Such a beautiful body... such an entrancing sight. I think perhaps I can stay awake now.”

“Won’t be long.”

Bard savored the hot water and soap as he washed away the day’s efforts, then padded to the tub. He thought to dim the lights to a low glow, which brought a smile to Thran’s lips.

“I’ll get in behind you,” he invited, and Thran roused enough to let Bard settle against the back of the tub, with Thran cradled against his chest. “Ohhhh, yes... mmm... gods, this feels good.”

Thran closed his eyes and settled against Bard’s chest with a soft sigh. “Have you never been in a soaking tub before?”

“I was in a hot tub once, but it was ninety and humid, so I didn’t stay in there long. I felt like a lobster about to become supper.”

Thran snaked an arm around Bard’s leg to stroke it languidly. “Hardly the opportune moment. It is much better in glacial winter, so that the warmth is pervasive, and the urge to nestle with another is irresistible.”

Bard stroked Thran’s upper arm and shoulder. Despite Thran’s ease, the muscles under his hand flexed under his attentions. “Nestling with you would be irresistible just about anywhere I could imagine.”

Long, elegant fingers tightened around Bard’s knee before resuming their stroking. “You are no more resistible. But perhaps one day we will visit Norway, or some other land of the midnight sun, and then find a hot tub where we will nestle together in such warmth, while above us dances the aurora borealis. How magical that would be.”

“I’d like to see the northern lights one day,” Bard hummed. “I can’t think of a better way to see them, either, or a better person to see them with.”

“Nor I.”

“Want any more of the wine, angel?”

“I do not need the calories, but I will have the merest drop more because this is our first soak together.”

Bard snared the wine bottle to pour himself half a glass. When Thran held up his, Bard splashed another mouthful into it. They clinked glasses and sipped. “Mmm. I like this one.”

“So do I. Little oak. I do not like tannic acid. This is soft.”

As the warmth of the water soaked into Bard’s bones, the excitement of the day calmed, leaving him with a glow that the few sips of wine further gilded. He slipped his arm under Thran’s to wrap around his ribs, tracing light circles against his lover’s skin. With a soundless sigh, Thran relaxed even more against Bard’s chest. They lay there together in the dimness without words, letting the water ease them.
At length, when the wine was drunk and the water had cooled, Bard squeezed Thran’s shoulders. “Let’s get out, angel. Let me dry you off, and coax you into bed for a massage.”

A long rumble of contentment was Thran’s response to Bard’s suggestion. “That sounds delightful. You take such good care of me.”

“You deserve it. Come on, before you get too chilled.”

They helped each other out of the bath. Thran let out the water while Bard fetched towels, and in a few seconds they were arranging themselves in bed. Bard urged Thran onto his stomach, comfortably propped on a pillow, and Bard kneeled astride him to knead his shoulders.

“Do you hurt anywhere? Anyplace that needs more or less attention?”

“Nothing hurts,” came the drowsy answer. “That is a blessing. I am merely tired. The class was intense, which wore me out well, and the shopping was the same, which also wore me out. Both were good, and I am better for both.”

“Okay. Tell me what feels better as I go, all right? Slower, faster, harder, softer, whatever you would like.”

“What you do now is delicious. Careful kneading, gentle stroking. I like that.”

“Good.”

Bard tended to the beautiful body of his angel, which was as much an indulgence for him as it was for Thran. To soothe such a finely sculpted work of art, one without flaw, was an act of worship, and he put all of his love, affection, and regard for his lover into his touches. From shoulders and arms and fingers, then from back down to hips and buttocks, then further to legs and toes, Bard massaged and kneaded, each stroke a caress. Beneath him, Thran sighed in silent appreciation, but never spoke. Apparently Bard’s touches were just to his liking, without need for adjustment.

“Roll over, and I’ll do your other side,” Bard murmured, stroking Thran’s hair down its length, and when his lover did so, he began at the top again, massaging temples, scalp, neck, shoulders, arms, divine torso, hips, legs. Thran accepted everything he offered, eyes closed to better revel in each touch. The expression on his face made no secret of his appreciation, his enjoyment, his love for such a gift. So much trust was in that expression, for it was not closed, not hidden, but open with how good Bard’s massage made Thran feel. Before he realized it, Bard laid his hand on Thran’s chest, slowly stroking his collarbone, the skin just underneath that bone, down across one pectoral to gently run a finger across the palest of pink nipples.

Thran’s slow breathing hitched only the tiniest bit, but Thran turned his head towards Bard, and opened his eyes. His lips parted as his breath caught again, and he caressed Bard’s cheek with one long, slender hand.

“My saint,” Thran whispered so softly that Bard read the words on his lips rather than heard them.

That was all the encouragement Bard needed to run his fingers over Thran’s nipple again, then trace the barest touch down his ribs, his abs, to the top of his pubic bone. He laid his hand over Thran’s cock gently, the barest caress, but pale skin rippled in gooseflesh nevertheless. The faintest inhalation, the merest tension in hips and abdomen, teased Bard into rubbing gently, until the softest moan stuttered from between Thran’s lips.

“It’s too much,” Bard whispered, letting his hand slip from Thran’s cock down his thigh. “I’m sorry. I know you’re tired. I just... it’s hard not to touch you. You’re so beautiful, and I still can’t believe
“Don’t stop,” Thran turned towards him, stretching out his hand to stroke Bard’s chest. He cradled Bard’s right hand and drew it to his lips to kiss Bard’s ring. “I don’t want you to stop. This is the perfect way to celebrate these, and the days that are to come. Please.”

Thran laid Bard’s right hand over his heart, smiling encouragement, so Bard stroked the lean chest under his hand, and back down his abdomen. He leaned over to kiss Thran’s lips.

“Would you do something for me?” he breathed.


“Show me how you take yourself.”

Thran’s body was no less languid, but his eyes sharpened, and he bit his lower lip. Dark lashes veiled pale grey eyes, but not fast enough that Bard didn’t recognize the arousal in them.

“Would you do the same for me, my saint?”

Oh, he should have realized that Thran would want the same revelation. It took so much trust to reveal something so intimate; in many ways, it was harder to open himself that way than it was to share more blatant pleasures. But Thran’s willingness to reveal himself so completely – was there anything his angel would not do? – demanded no less from him, so he kissed Thran again.

“I will.”

Thran stroked his lips with a finger. “Should I tell you as well as show you?”

Bard nibbled at Thran’s fingers. “Whatever pleases you. However you want me to know.”

“All right. First I think about you, my saint – your tangled curls that look like you just roused from bed, your warm eyes, the beautiful hair on your chest that I cannot resist, and your nipples like two brown pearls that are so sensitive and tender. I love your muscles, how they flex in the light... such a compulsion they rouse in me... I love your cock, as muscular as the rest of you, and how it slides inside me so deeply... I love how your breath catches when I go inside you, how you fall back against me, giving me all of you... all these things and a thousand more I think about, and half my job is done already.”

Thran spoke nothing less than truth, for his long cock was already half erect. The sight of it rising under Bard’s eyes had his stirring in response, but he resisted taking himself in hand, instead watching Thran, who never took his eyes from Bard.

“I think about you taking me off the ground that first day, and how every nerve wanted to die when you put me down again. And then I am ready to imagine you kissing me here,” Thran traced a finger across one nipple, then the other, “and here. So sweet, your touch, lyubov moya; you do not know how sweet. Oh, the urge you raise in me, so intense that I cannot bear it, and my hands cannot contain it, cannot put out that fire...”

Thran dragged his palms over his nipples once, twice, three times, each time sending a ripple of arousal through his body from head to toe. He hissed but only in desire, and he dragged his fingers down his abdomen to rub his groin on either side of his cock.

“It is not enough, because I want your hands on me, not mine, but mine must do in the void, even though they are nothing like yours, not so strong, not so unpredictable, and they are nothing like the...
inside of you, not so tight and warm.” Thran’s hand was on his cock now, but not stroking yet, while the other continued to stroke the skin to either side of it. His breath caught as he ran a finger over the head of his cock, concentrating on a spot just below the opening, making it spasm with each touch until his body knotted as his urgency for release rose. “How you hold my ass to keep me tightly against you when you are inside me from the front, or my thighs when you are inside from behind... How you kiss that place just behind my cock until I want to die, how you lick the very top of it when you are about to engulf me in your mouth... so many ways you tease me.”

Bard licked his lips as Thran roused his body, his own arousal flooding him as Thran’s back began to arch. “Show me how you stroke yourself. Show me how you come.”

Thran’s grip on his cock tightened as he stroked slowly, but that was too frustrating, and his pace increased without conscious thought. He began to pant as the motion of his hand grew frantic, and his other hand cradled and massaged his balls. He still hadn’t looked away from Bard, but his expression was no longer calm and languid, but a rictus of unfulfilled longing.

“Oh, gods, I want you in me, on me, all over me, but I cannot have you this time, you are only a vision that devils me, that damns me to preispodnyaya! Oh, you fucking bastard, oh, gods, oh, gods, put me out of my misery!”

It was hard not to drown Thran in a kiss, or to possess his writhing body. Had he really driven his angel into such an agony of passion?

The blatant answer to Bard’s question came a second later, when Thran’s body convulsed. His back arched, his eyes went wide and unblinking, his mouth worked in a silent prayer of release, and his chest heaved for several breaths as if he’d been starved of air. But slowly, slowly his body calmed until he lay drained and limp beside Bard.

“You are the devil’s child,” Thran whispered. “No saint, but a flame sent to draw a moth to its death.”

“I could say the same of you. Gods, Thran. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Blame yourself, lyubov moya. You saw nothing but the heat you raise in me. I cannot resist it, and so it consumes me with just the barest thought.” He heaved a sigh, opened his eyes, and smiled slyly. “Eh, perhaps you also see how shameless I am, just a little.”

“Just a little?” Bard’s eyebrows went up as he brushed a kiss on Thran’s lips. “If that was just a little of how shameless you are, then you may kill me with any more. I’ve never met anyone as uninhibited as you are. How are you like that?”

Thran grinned. “Only with you am I like this. Not even with another lover before. Only you. Why? Because I feel safe and comfortable with you. You love me, you will not hurt me. Why should I hold back my enjoyment from the one I love and trust? Perhaps my enjoyment will spark enjoyment in you, and then think of the pleasure we will share together. If there is something you do not like, then better I know, and I will adjust. I do not want either of us to hesitate to show our delight in each other.”

Bard stroked Thran’s silky hair, letting the rhythmic touches lull his lover into peace after his exertions. But eventually, Thran sat up, mirroring Bard’s position on his side, propped up on one elbow. Now it was Thran who stroked Bard’s hair.

“If it is too uncomfortable for you to show me now, it is all right. We have many days and nights before us, and I do not want you to feel anything but comfortable in what we do together.”
“I want to keep my word, to you of all people.”

Thran shrugged as he stroked Bard’s neck. “I have no doubt that you will. The timing of it does not concern me.”

“I’m... not sure I can do it the way you do.”

Thran shrugged again. “You don’t have to. You are you, not me. We do not need two of me in our relationship.”

“I’m... not sure how far I’ll get.”

“That does not matter, either. This is an act of trust more than anything else, and you should not force yourself before you are ready.”

Bard swallowed. “I trust you like I trust no one else, Thran. But...”

The fingers on Bard’s lips were gentle, but firm. “You have lived under siege for many years, lyubov moya. You have not been able to let down, not even for a moment. I do not take this as a matter of your trust in me, but in yourself. I am content to wait until you can do this for yourself, not me. However I can help, you know I will, but if you prefer to go to sleep now, I can take what they call a rain check.”

Bard’s lips trembled in a self-conscious smile. “You might have to. But... I’ll see what I can do.”

Thran leaned forward to kiss him quickly. “Lie back, then.”

Bard lay on his back, taking some seconds to relax against the sheets, to sense the soft fabric against his skin. He pulled one of the down pillows to tuck under his head, then glanced at Thran. His lover had already arranged himself on his side, a pillow under his head, and one arm tucked under the pillow. He’d gathered his hair to drape over his shoulder and down across his chest.

“Know that you are safe here with me. You can do anything you want, or nothing. If it helps, shut your eyes. And you do not have to speak, if you choose not to.”

“You might not learn much of anything if I do that.”

Thran’s lips curved into a mischievous smile. “Do not concern yourself, my saint. I pick up hand signals very well.”

“I bet you do,” Bard snorted, unable to resist a perverse grin. He settled himself again, and despite himself, shut his eyes. Thran was right; it was easier to start that way.

When was the last time he’d banged off? It didn’t surprise him that he couldn’t remember. Living in a crowded apartment where he’d had no privacy, not even an identity other than father, welder, night super, hadn’t allowed it. He hadn’t even thought of himself in sexual terms since Daphne had died, because the children had needed him too much to think about anything beyond their survival. He’d barely thought of himself as a man of flesh at all, but more as an automaton, a robot. Just another drudge in the world.

Six weeks ago, the angel who’d flown into his life had changed everything. The man of flesh and blood had come roaring back to life with an intensity that stole his breath, his caution, his shame, and replaced it with a craving for more than the crumbs he’d allowed himself for so long. A flamboyant ballet dancer with a mane of silky white hair, a body that made him ache with desire and goaded him into fantasies uncounted, and a manner that was elegance personified had possessed him. How he
had come to treasure such a lover was inevitable; but how that lover had come to treasure him as much in return was the surprise –

No, it wasn’t a surprise. Thran had been just as bereft as Bard, just as empty, just as incomplete, no matter how much money he had. He’d wanted all the same things that Bard had wanted, so they were not that different at all. As much as Bard wanted a good life with his children, so did Thran. As much as Bard wanted a soul mate, so did Thran. As much as Bard craved a compassionate and playful lover, so did Thran.

But... if they were so much alike, then Thran’s complete abandon in bed had its match in Bard – all he had to do was find it. He thought of how easily they had begun to play.... Thran reveling in being stripped bare and sucked off by a common laborer in his old apartment... him reveling in imagining himself about to be auctioned off to a sultan... Thran taking him their first night in this house... him taking Thran in the kitchen, both of them posturing like a couple of porn stars...

Oh, gods, how many more things they would do together... the shower was only the start of it. What about the fainting couch when the weather got warmer, when maybe he’d come upon an ethereal angel sleeping amid the tropical paradise, just waiting for him to fall upon him and smother him with kisses as he pinned him among the greenery, or would that angel turn into a predator, a spider ready to draw him into a web of ecstasy from which there was no escape? Of course there was the ballroom, where they both wanted Bard to finish what Thran had started that first morning, teasing him until he’d thrown himself at him. The next time he found Thran at the barre in an empty house, he’d have him over that barre or against the wall, both of them grappling and wrestling and moaning while one of them took the other.

So much lay ahead for them to enjoy – lust, love, infatuation between an angel and a saint. Bard wasn’t an automaton, a robot, any longer. He was blessed with an imaginative lover, a treasure beyond all price, and that lover, that treasure, was with him because he had the same imagination. He had only to find it.

“It’s so easy to get myself off. All I have to do is think about this man I met six weeks ago,” Bard whispered. “Except he isn’t a man. He’s an angel, a living angel. Just one look at him, and I want him more than I’ve wanted anything in my life. He’s gorgeous, with this body that drives me wild, this long white hair like silk, these beautiful silver grey eyes... every move, every gesture he makes is as beautiful as he is. All I have to do to get off is to think about how I want to touch him, taste him, strip him bare, make love to him until both of us are half dead. Gods, how he tortures me! I’m a common laborer, and he’s this ethereal creature of light, but it doesn’t matter – I still want him. I want to make love to him until he cries out in ecstasy. I can’t sleep, thinking about him. A touch is all he needs to have me, just one of his long, elegant fingers on my lips...”

Bard touched his finger to his lips, imagining Thran doing that instead.

“He’d trace it down my neck, and find out what he could do to me with these...” he scrubbed his fingers across his nipples until he couldn’t bear it. “Oh, gods, when I think about an angel kissing me there, I am so lost, so lost...”

Bard’s hands stroked down his chest, down his abs, right to his cock, already hard and aching. Just to close his hand around it spread the ache to his loins, his balls, his gut, and it was torture not to stroke himself, so he surrendered to the compulsion, though doing so both eased and worsened the ache, no matter how fast or slowly he did it.

“I think about him touching my cock, first sucking me off, then making love to me... oh, gods, he’s going to be the death of me...”
When he opened his eyes, he found the angel who haunted him right beside him, his ethereal face framed in beautiful white hair. The angel took a lock of white hair to trace over Bard’s lips, his nipples, drawing a near whimper from Bard. At the sound, the angel’s tongue roved over his perfect lips. He bit his perfect bottom lip.

“Come for me,” the angel enticed.

Just the weight of an angel’s eyes, just three words from the angel’s mouth, and he was so, so, close...

The angel brushed the slightest kiss on his lips.

“Oh, gods,” he whispered, and he was gone, everything spasming in the most exquisite pleasure, all senses obliterated in that overwhelming sensation of release.

Soft lips kissed his temple, and a slender hand stroked his face and hair until he had calmed. The bed shifted as Thran got up to fetch a towel from the bathroom, then shifted again as he sat beside Bard to wipe off his belly. He took the towel back into the bathroom, then drew the sheet and blanket over them both. He nestled into Bard’s embrace with a sigh.

“You are the devil’s bastard,” Bard murmured.

A chuckle. “When I called you something similar, you told me that I liked you that way. So I will tell you that you like me that way, too.”

Bard found Thran’s left hand and the ring on it, and stroked it with his fingers. “I do.”

“Then we are well matched, and both of us are happy.”

He was right.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Today's the day an angel and a saint get married. 'Nuff said.

The next morning, the children were not the only members of the household who prepared to leave the house. Thran would resume his usual routine of daily classes, not with his old company, but with Monsieur LePied until he found a new company. Bard was gratified to see how excited Thran was to be back in harness again; it put a new alertness in each step his lover took. Once the children were through breakfast and off to school, the tall dancer must have repacked his bag four times, as excited to be heading to class as Legolas had been. Thran’s son would attend the Gondors’ fencing school for the first time this afternoon, with Killian, Tara, and the other handful of students. Had the long layoff diminished Legolas’s skills? Would he find the Gondors to be a vast improvement over his previous instructor at the boarding school? Perhaps Thran’s chat tonight with the Gondors would reveal all.

Once they’d returned from the bus stop, Thran trotted upstairs to change into his class attire, so Bard headed to the kitchen. He expected to spend most of the day upstairs in Legolas’s room working on the paint-caked woodwork, but he wanted to put something in the oven for tonight’s supper first.

“Bard?” Thran called from upstairs.

“In the kitchen, cariad,” Bard replied.

Thran appeared in his practice clothes, bag in hand. “I will leave in a few minutes, lyubov moya. How will you cope today being the only one in the house until nearly supper?”

Bard chuckled as he stirred his bowl of batter. “I’ll have to crank up one of the boys’ metal CDs while I scrape the woodwork. That ought to approximate the din of our normal state of affairs.”

“Oy,” Thran winced. “I do not know how they listen to some of that. So loud, and no discernible tune. And the dancing is nothing more than jumping up and down.”

“Our parents said the same thing about our favorite stuff.”

“As I recall, my parents liked Tchaikovsky, if not Stravinsky.”

“Only a ballet dancer would say that,” Bard shook his head, smiling.

“Likely. What do you make?”

“That cake Legolas said he liked. Applesauce raisin cake.”

Thran’s sniff was appreciative. “The spices smell wonderful. The whole house will smell wonderful when it bakes.”

“And then I’ll ruin it all when I pull out the paint stripper.” Bard poured the stuff in his bowl into a pair of loaf pans. “At least the stuff I use doesn’t smell much. I’ll see how far I get today. There must be eight or nine coats of paint on that trim in Legolas’s room.”
“It will not withstand the patience of Bard, renovator extraordinaire. Remember to eat lunch, please?”

“You do the same,” Bard shot him a look as he put the pans in the oven. “Do you want to take something with you? Some salad, at least?”

Thran opened the refrigerator. “Do we have any chicken breast left?”

Bard set the oven timer. “Enough for a day or two. It’s on the second shelf, in the oblong bin with the red top.”

Thran pulled out the correct bin and the box of spinach. “Then I will make a little something. I expect to be at the studio until at least three. There is a partner class in the afternoon. I want to make sure that my upper body strength has not deteriorated.”

“After watching you at your yoga, I’d hardly think so, but if you want to do something more strenuous, I can introduce you to my chin up bar.”

Thran looked up from making his salad to eye him, slowly breaking into a sly smile. “And where is this chin up bar?”

“Out in the barn. I have to get back to it myself, to get back into shape to work metal.”

Humming, Thran edged close enough to Bard for his hand to stray over Bard’s backside. “Will you give me a personal demonstration of this chin up bar of yours? It would be a most entrancing sight.”

“Maybe I could entice you into doing a few. Good training for the lifting of ballerinas.”

“Perhaps so. Though ballerinas do not weigh as much as I do. They merely feel as if they do.”

“You make it look effortless, I’m sure.”

“I try very hard to do so. Now, I have a few minutes before I must leave, and the cake is in the oven. Please, show me this chin up bar.”

“It’s just a rafter in the barn, angel,” Bard said, trying to ignore the hand that still stroked up and down his back.

“I want to see it,” Thran purred. “Please, lyubov moya?”

“You bastard,” Bard shivered as Thran’s touch sent a jolt of arousal through his body. “Gods, I am so owned. Let me get the key.”

Leading the way to the mudroom, Bard pulled his boots on, grabbed the key off its hook, and armed his way into his coat. Beside him, Thran chortled in triumph as he pulled on his coat, linking arms with him as they took the few steps from house to barn. Bard unlocked the side door rather than the main sliders, and flipped on the overhead lamps to flood the space with light.

“It’s in the back,” Bard explained, leading the way through his sculptures towards his workshop. “See? Up there.”

Thran peered up towards the roof. Above a big wooden crate was the cross piece that Bard indicated. Thran’s expression was thoughtful as he considered the rafter, though a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what he thought about. Hmm... what if Bard twitted his lover a little, gave him something to think about on his drive into the city?
Work gloves were on the bench behind his anvil, so he tossed them on top of the larger crate. Then he shifted a smaller crate beside the bigger one, and climbed up. When he stood atop the bigger, one, he peeled off his coat, then his flannel, and pulled the hem of his Henley free from his jeans.

“What are you doing, lyubov moya?” Thran asked.

“This is what you came to see, isn’t it? Not the rafter, but me on the rafter.”

“It is freezing, Bard!”

“Believe me, this’ll get me warm fast, as if you looking at me won’t.”

Bard pulled his Henley off over his head to stand bare chested in the cold, and donned his work gloves. Gods, he hoped he still could do these. It’d been last fall since he’d done any. The cold air on his skin stung like a thousand needles, so he didn’t take too long rolling his shoulders and shaking his arms to limber them. He jumped up, fingers finding the familiar grooves, and heaved upwards. Damn, how had this gotten to be so hard? He got his chin above the rafter, and lowered slowly. The second was a little easier, and the third easier still. He found the rhythm of breathing he remembered, and flexed up for a fourth. His muscles burned now, but he’d be damned if he wouldn’t do that fifth one before he let go. Lats and triceps blazed in conflagration, but he managed to just graze the top of the rafter with his chin, then fought to ease his arms straight again. He dropped to the crate, chest heaving.

Gods, he was so out of shape!

“Not...” my best, he was about to say, but stopped when he met Thran’s eyes. His angel had his lower lip between his teeth, and the most predatory look that Bard had ever seen on a man’s face. Bard should have been embarrassed at how much he savored that look, but he wasn’t.

*Remember last night. No shame.*

“...bad,” he finished. He dropped his gloves on top of the box, and sketched a cocky bow like one he’d seen Errol Flynn offer in an ancient black and white pirate swashbuckler epic. He picked up his shirts and coat and clambered down the boxes to the ground. He didn’t get his shirts on before Thran put hands behind his head, pulling him into a hard kiss.

“If it were any warmer,” Thran breathed, before consuming him in another kiss, “I would strip the rest of you bare and bang you right here until we both scream. That was evil.”

“Mmm,” Brad murmured, ridiculously pleased to have gotten such an ardent reaction out of Thran. “Maybe I’ll have to do a few more of those. Just to keep my angel interested in the earthier aspects of life.”

“That was not earthy,” Thran dove in for a third kiss. “That was hot.”

With a snort of laughter, Bard kissed Thran back, but couldn’t suppress a shiver. “Glad it was. But I’m not. Let me put my shirt back on.”

“Oh, gods, of course,” Thran let go at once, but he couldn’t keep from running a finger down Bard’s chest as Bard pulled his Henley over his head. “I am sorry, Bard. You drove every thought of sense out of my head.”

“I noticed,” Bard grinned, hustling back into his flannel, then his coat.

“Surely you can find a rafter in the front of the barn where you can do those. It would be more
convenient to have a place out of the middle of your workshop, and I could see you from the ballroom as you did them. I would savor that more than you could imagine.”

“And neither of us would get any work done,” Bard observed with a snicker. “Gods, that’s funny.”

“Why is it funny that I want to ogle you when you do something so divine?” Thran held his hands out in protest.

Bard locked the barn door behind them and cast Thran a look as they returned to the house. “Because you’re not the first to want to.”

“No?”

Bard shook his head. “I used to do my chin ups at the front of the barn, because it is more convenient. I could leave the crates in place that way, and didn’t have to shift them out of the way when I worked. But Daphne caught me at them one morning, and neither of us got anything done for quite a few days until I almost missed the deadline for a commission, so into the back of the barn I went.”

“She was a most discerning woman. I like her more now that I know we share the same excellent taste in men.”

“She would’ve liked you, too.”

Bard hung up his coat in the mudroom, and shed his boots. In anticipation of his imminent departure, Thran kept his coat and boots on and followed Bard back to the kitchen. As they entered, the aroma of Bard’s cake had both sniffing appreciatively.

“How did you meet Daphne?” Thran asked as Bard rinsed the cake batter bowl and utensils in the sink. Thran opened the dishwasher and put the rinsed items inside as Bard handed them to him.

“At a party in art school,” Bard confessed, smiling wryly. “I’ve never been much for such things, but a bunch of buddies dragged me along for moral support as they tried to score with some woman or another. Such things tended to be well fueled – mostly beer, but that was far from the only thing. Someone passed around a joint, so I had a toke to be sociable. I had to drive home that night, and I don’t like getting high – it makes me dizzy – so I didn’t hold it, but I let it out slowly so no one would think I’d wasted the toke. Thirty seconds later, this woman comes up to me and tells me that watching the smoke curl out of my mouth that slowly was the most sensual thing she’d ever seen. That was Daphne.”

Cocking his head, Thran gave him a speculative look. “Yes, I can imagine that. You would look mysterious and dangerous, yes. The bad boy so many women like. And so many men, too.”

“You are very desirable, lyubov moya,” Thran purred. He closed the dishwasher and drew Bard back against his chest. “Even without smoke.”

Bard put his hands atop Thran’s and savored the feel of his lover’s solid presence behind him. “What
“When I came to the school of dance from Latvia, so she came from Moscow.” Thran’s voice was thoughtful. “She was always there with me, and we were the best of friends. We told each other everything. She was the first I told that I thought I was gay. She laughed and said she was lesbian, and so we had one more thing in common. Then she grew so tall, and so did I, and our bodies moved in similar ways. As you have heard me say, we were a striking couple, and very compatible as dancers. So we were paired professionally at a very young age. We were just nineteen when we were married, and just twenty when Legolas was born. We were seen to be the ideal couple, yes?”

“So you’re thirty-four.”

“I am. You are older than I, by a little.”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Your birthday is in May. The second.”

“And yours is in October. Also the second.” Bard exhaled. “Libra and Taurus. Very auspicious for gay men.”

Thran slid him around to give him a surprised, skeptical look. “Astrology? Gay astrology? Please say no, my saint.”

“Easily. Daphne was big into it, though, so I learned a bit just through osmosis. She used to do Tarot, too, but I never understood any of that. She had a bohemian soul.” Bard exhaled again, enjoying the feel of Thran against him. “You’d better head out, Thran. Give yourself time to warm up well before your class.”

“Yes, I must go.” Thran kissed Bard’s temple. “I think you for the demonstration. It will keep me most warm as I drive to class.”

“Good. After you spend all day with so many beautiful dancers, I’ve got to give you some incentive to come home.”

“Tcha,” Thran scoffed, squeezing Bard’s shoulders. “I have every incentive to come home to you, our children, and our beautiful home. So please, lyubov moya, remember to eat lunch, and I will see you this afternoon, likely just before our children come home.”

“Okay, angel. Dance well.”

Thran gave Bard one more kiss, then released him to pick up his bag. “I will. And I wish you victory against the woodwork.”

He stowed his lunch in his bag, zipped it shut, and slung it over his shoulder.

“Give my regards to Monsieur LePied, and my thanks for letting me observe.”

“I will. Until later, lyubov moya.”

“Until later, cariad.”

One more quick kiss, and Thran headed out through the mudroom.

As the door fell shut behind Thran, unfamiliar silence fell over the house. Bard leaned against the kitchen counter by the sink, letting that silence sink into him, but it didn’t last long. The over timer
dinged softly; Legolas’s cake was done. Bard eased the two pans out of the oven and onto the stovetop grill plate, letting them cool while he found a platter and a knife. He loosened the cakes in their pans, upended them on the platter, and extracted the cakes. He filled the empty pans with water to soak, then fired up Thran’s computer to look up the number of the county offices.

He called the number listed to ask about making an appointment tomorrow for their marriage ceremony, but the woman he talked to confirmed that he couldn’t make a reservation, but appreciated him letting her know that they’d appear around three o’clock. Next, he called the Japanese restaurant and made a reservation for six at five o’clock. If they arrived earlier than that, though, the restaurant assured him that it would be no problem. He stuck his mobile back in his pocket, satisfied that he’d arranged what he could for tomorrow.

Time to face the woodwork.

He dismantled Legolas’s bed and reassembled it in the children’s study, and shoved the rest of the furniture out onto the landing and then into the study after the bed. Now that the room was empty, he was ready to start its renovation.

Despite what Bard had told Thran, the silence that permeated the house was welcome. Bard spread his drop cloths and assembled his collection of paper towel rolls, putty knives, dental tools for fine crevices, steel wool, the big container of stripper, and a big plastic trashcan. He set to.

There was no getting around it – stripping woodwork was a messy, tedious, time-consuming task, with few shortcuts. So Bard started with the crown molding that required the tiring effort of working over his head, for getting that out of the way first would make the rest seem a little easier. Still, it was a long three hours before he’d scrubbed and scraped the detailed molding down to bare wood. He managed one of the windows in an hour, for the molding wasn’t so intricately carved.

His mobile chimed. Pulling off his glove, he fished it out of his pocket. Thran. His heart jolted. Was everything all right?

The message displayed – a photo of Thran holding up his empty lunchbox.

*Have you had lunch yet? If not, why not?*

Chagrined, Bard checked the time – after noon, in fact close to one. He yanked his other glove off, capped the stripper, and collected all the scattered paper towels and shredded bits of steel wool that had missed the trashcan. A contender for the NBA, he wasn’t. He fastened downstairs, washed his hands, and stuck his head in the fridge. Ah, there was the small bin of chicken casserole left over from last night’s supper. He pulled out the dish, scooped out a big spoonful, and took a picture of himself and the dish with the bite taken out of it.

*Almost done.*

*You ran downstairs when you got my text and took a picture of the first thing you found in the refrigerator, didn’t you?*

*Guilty as charged. Thanks for reminding me. How is class?*

*Good. M. LePied sends you his regards, too.*

*Nice of him.*

*How is the woodwork?*
Crown molding, 1 window done. Think I can do door, 2nd window 2day. Baseboard molding have to wait til tmw.

No matter.

Doesn’t smell too bad so far.

Good. Must go back to class now. Eat more than that one bite!

I hear and obey LOL.

Love you, my saint.

Love you, too, my angel.

Bard put his mobile down, smiling as he put the spoonful of casserole back in the dish. He shoved it in the microwave, surveying the fridge for something else to follow it as it warmed. Nothing struck his fancy, so when the casserole was hot, he sat at the table to shovel it down in between sips of almond milk. A couple of clementines finished off his lunch, and he rinsed his dishes and the cake pans and put them in the dishwasher. Then it was back upstairs and more woodwork.

He’d gotten the second window and the doorframe done, and had just started the baseboard molding when footsteps echoed in the downstairs hall.

“Are you still upstairs?” Thran heralded.

“Still upstairs,” Bard confirmed, rolling to his feet. “How was class?”

“It was fine, even the partner class,” Thran called up the steps. “I will unpack my bag, and be up.”

“Okay,” Bard replied, putting his putty knife aside. He collected the scattered paper towels and steel wool bits as before, tossed them in the trashcan, and went back to scrape off the last bit of stripper he’d just slathered over the first section of the baseboard. After the first pass, he coated the next section to soften the paint while he wiped the first section a few more times. At least the baseboard wasn’t as ornate as the crown molding, so he got the worst of the mess off in long scraps with his putty knife. A few pokes with dental tools, then a good wipe with steel wool soaked in the stripper, got the rest out of the crevasses, and he could move on.

“The smell isn’t so bad as I expected,” Thran said, sticking his head into the room. He’d changed out of his dancewear at the studio, so he’d been comfortable driving home in his soft black jeans, long sweater, and supple trainers. “I should not touch the woodwork, then?”

“It’s washed down, all but the bottom that I haven’t done. Once I finish this, I’ll sand it all, then it’s ready for the primer. What time is it?”

“Nearly time for the children to come home.” Thran ventured in as Bard stood up. He came to offer Bard a kiss, then looked around at the cleaned trim. “So amazing. I had not realized that the woodwork was so detailed. All the paint smothered that groove completely, and the pieces in the corners above the doors are small leaves, not blobs.”

“Hence the reason to strip it. It’s a pain in the ass, but it looks so much better.”

“To be sure.” Thran nodded readily. “So you paint the stripper on, and then...?”

“You wait until the paint softens, scrape it off, paint on more if needed, scrape that off, pick out the
chips in the crevices with the dental tools, then make one last pass with steel wool soaked in stripper.
Wipe it down, and move to the next piece. Wash the whole thing down with water, then dry it off. It’s almost easier to replace the trim, but this is solid oak, and worth the effort. Some of the stuff downstairs is mahogany. It’d cost a fortune to replace it, if you could even find the stock to do so. So... scraping just costs elbow grease, and it gets you the beautiful millwork that was original to the house.”

“To look at the trim in Sigrid’s room shows how well your elbow grease pays off,” agreed Thran. “This does, too.”

“It’s worth it,” Bard exhaled. “I’ll scrape this last bit I’ve coated with the stripper, then be down to start supper.”

Thran watched closely as Bard cleaned off the next section, then recoated it to get the last bits of the remaining coats of paint, then painstakingly scraped the small grooves clear, then scrubbed gently with the soaked steel wool. As the last step, he wiped a wet sponge over the cleaned section to remove the last of the stripper. Thran came behind him with a towel to dry the cleaned section.

“I’ll be glad when this part is done,” Bard admitted as he tied off the trash bag and carried it downstairs to put in the outside garbage can. “Tedious, messy, and slow.”

“Just a little more left for tomorrow, and then things will progress faster,” Thran consoled, bringing the putty knives and dental tools downstairs to be washed.

“Good. Here, I’ll get these, Thran. Do you want to wash before supper? Have a soak? How did your partner class go?”

“Well, for the most part. I think I may have to resort to your chin up bar, though. I am sorer than I wish.”

Bard laughed. “I’m sorer, too, and it’s because I did those chin ups. It was worth it, though. I was well rewarded for every one of them.”

“So was I,” was Thran’s sly reply. “So I will help you with supper, and we will share a soak later, perhaps. Or at least a very hot shower.”

“Mmm,” Bard arched his eyebrows in anticipation. “Sounds wonderful.”

“Mmm,” Thran echoed, arching his eyebrows to mirror Bard’s expression. “What delight do you plan for us tonight?”

“Pork roast, in one of those bags. Steamed veg. Farro – that’s a whole grain, so it’s good for all of us. Whatever fruit’s in there. And Legolas’s cake – I have to make the icing. I’ll leave some for us without the icing.”

“It all sounds delicious.”

The tools were quickly washed, and by the time the children came in from the bus, the icing was going on the cake, and Thran had bowls of carrots, onions, peppers, and broccoli cut up for the steamer.

Legolas was jubilant, for he’d made his expected trip to the Gondors’ fencing studio with Killian and Tara. Bard had not seen the normally quiet boy so animated as words bubbled from him about the instructors, the facility, and the excitement of meeting Aragorn and Arwen personally after following their careers for so many years. Bain stayed by the table listening in rapt attention, and Sigrid took
over Thran’s station in front of the cutting board to chop the snow peas. Tilda brought a sheet of paper over to Bard.

“Would you sign this for me, Da? I need a drawing book for art, and the school will give me one if you sign this form.”

“Let me put the raspberry stuff on the roast, little doll, and I’ll take a look.”

“Let me help, too.”

“Okay. You know how to spread the preserves on the top. I’ll hold the bag open for you.”

Bard plopped a big spoonful of the stuff on the top. After Tilda made sure it covered the roast from one end to the other, Bard closed the bag and put the pan in the oven. He set the timer, and took the paper Tilda held out to him. Scanning quickly, he nodded as he got the gist of the text.

“So it’s for a sketchbook and the instruction book, too? That’s exciting.”

Tilda smiled proudly. “It’ll be neat to have my own sketchbook.”

“A nice one, too, as nice as any of mine.” He took the pen Tilda held out, signed the form, and handed it back to her.

“Really?” Tilda smiled in delight.

“Really. I’ll get you the money after supper, all right?”

“Okay.” She skipped away to put the form in her backpack.

Legolas, Bain, and Thran had gone into the sitting room to continue their discussion about Legolas’s fencing, so Sigrid leaned over the kitchen island.

“So tomorrow’s the big day,” she observed, giving Bard a smile. “Are you excited?”

Bard touched her nose with his index finger. “I’ve been excited about something every day for the last ten weeks. This has all been such a surprise.”

“A dream come true?” she teased as she opened a can of water chestnuts. “All of it has been, except for those few minutes in the park. Have you heard anything about that?”

Bard shook his head. “Just a couple of short calls from Inspector Oakland. Apparently it’s cut and dried. All of our stories matched, and the younger children with Lance Dunmont told the same story. So I hope it’ll blow over pretty soon.”

“Did anyone notice that they had at least one knife and a gun, and all we had was a soccer ball, a soccer ball net, a welder with a terrific left punch, and a really, really pissed ballet dancer?”

“Someone noticed,” Bard nodded, grinning at Sigrid’s acerbic tone. “Try not to worry about it. The gang saved face because we moved out, so I don’t expect anything more to come of it.”

Sigrid nodded. “So tomorrow... what’s the plan?”

“Thran and I will pick all of you up at school after your last academic period, and we’ll head to the county office. They wouldn’t take an appointment, so we’ll have to sit until they call us. When it’s our turn, they anoint us with sanctified root beer, sing the Hallelujah Chorus in Russian, Welsh, and English, sacrifice a block of consecrated tofu to the gods, and then turn us loose. After that, we have
a reservation at the Japanese steakhouse theatre of egg juggling.”

Giggling, Sigrid piled the sliced water chestnuts in the bowl with the snow peas and broccoli. “I wish they did all that. It’d be a lot more fun than what they’ll really do. Especially the sacrifice of the consecrated tofu. That’s all tofu is good for.”

“No argument here,” Bard grinned, as he put the farro on to cook, then piled the veg in the steamer.

Tilda came back into the kitchen, so the three of them laid out the flatware and glasses around the table, and got out the fruit to be cut up. Tilda got up on the stool and under Bard’s watchful eye, cut the strawberries into pieces. Before long, the roast was on the counter to rest while Bard steamed the veg, and in a few minutes everyone gathered around the table to eat. Of course there was more discussion of tomorrow’s ceremony, most of which centered on what the children wanted to wear.

“There is one more small thing to speak of,” Thran said, once Tilda had decided that she wanted to wear her favorite green sweater. “If we must wait very long for the officials to make our ceremony, we may find that we attract some unwanted attention when we leave the county building.”

Legolas knew what his father referred to, and Sigrid did, too. Bain didn’t, but when Legolas mimicked someone taking pictures, he got it. Tilda, however, looked at Bard with puzzlement.

“What kind of unwanted attention? It isn’t Lance Dunmont, is it?” she said anxiously.

“No, little doll, don’t worry about him. He won’t bother us anymore. What Thran means is that there might be some photographers outside the building, waiting to take pictures of us.”

Tilda cocked her head, still puzzled. “Why?”

“Because Thran is a very famous ballet dancer, little doll. He’s getting married tomorrow, and some people other than us care about that.”

“Oh,” Tilda shrugged, unimpressed. “Don’t they have anything else better to do?”

That brought snickers from around the table, Thran’s not the least of them. “One would think,” he agreed. “So I stopped on the way home from class today, and brought us the means to make the paparazzi a little more bearable, if any happen to appear.”

He got up, and soon reappeared with a bag. Bard was as mystified as the children, but laughed when he saw what Thran handed around the table. They planned how best to use Thran’s purchases, then it was time to clean up the remains of the meal. After everyone surveyed the progress in Legolas’s room, they returned to the kitchen table for homework. Bard ended up overseeing most of that, as Thran took the expected call from Aragorn Gondor about Legolas’s fencing. He reappeared briefly to ask if Bard was amenable to having the Gondors come for fencing and lunch Sunday afternoon, to which Bard quickly agreed.

The rest of the evening progressed quietly, and despite the children’s excitement over tomorrow’s occasion, they settled quickly. Tilda reminded Bard about the fee for her sketchbook, so he fetched the money for her to tuck into her backpack with the form. Once the children were in bed, Bard and Thran retreated gratefully to the shower, then the soaking tub.

“I’m paying the price for showing off like a peacock this morning,” Bard admitted, hunching down in the tub until the hot water covered his shoulders.

“I am as well for lifting so many ballerinas,” Thran agreed, copying Bard’s hunch. “Thank goodness I do not have a similar class tomorrow. I will need a day or so to loosen such tight
“I don’t think I’ll be hauling myself up and down in the barn tomorrow, either. No time, anyway. I’ve got a hot date with an angel at the county offices.”

“Do you?” Thran rumbled, sighing as the heat soaked into his shoulders. “I have similar plans. My hot date is with a saint at the same place. Perhaps we should go together.”

“With entourage. Or what’s the word for that these days?”

“Posse,” Thran murmured. “Eh, that is likely outdated, too. I rarely register such terms until they are already passé.”

They sat at opposite ends of the tub for long minutes, letting the warmth ease the rigors of the day. When they were well relaxed, Bard crawled out to dry his hair first so that he could warm the bed before Thran crawled in. Bard settled under the sheets while Thran applied the dryer, and before long the tall dancer came to nestle beside him.

“So just your morning class, and home by one?” Bard asked sleepily, wrapping himself around Thran to keep him from shivering.

“Just so,” Thran murmured. “Just time to wash and eat, then we are off to the school, and then to the county office.”

“Do you think we’ll have paparazzi to fend off, really?”

Thran sighed, and found Bard’s hand to stroke. “I hope not. I do not like the upset they might cause to the children. If we must wait for long, though, someone will call the press. But they are not allowed to touch, so merely smile and nod and keep moving. Keep Tilda close to you. She may find them frightening.”

“Your so-called armor will help.”

Thran’s snicker was sleepy. “I hope so. It will also help the children to smile.”

“Some smile,” Bard agreed, rubbing his lover’s arm. “So... tomorrow night, we’ll be legal.”

“I promise not to let it change the way I look at you.”

Bard rumbled an inquiry. “What does that mean?”

“I like you as my illicit lover who plays with me so deliciously because he wants to, not because he has to.”

Grinning, Bard insinuated his hand under Thran’s arm to stroke his abdomen. “Oh? You got pretty turned on when you were the sultan about to buy a not-very-cooperative slave.”

“I hope to get just as turned on when you are the sultan about to buy a not-very-cooperative slave. More so, because this time I have a bed to chain him to so that I can have him repeatedly at my leisure. In fact...”

“Save it for tomorrow, sultan. It’s late, and we have a long day ahead of us.”

“If I must.”

“Hmm. Sounds like I need to chain an exotic harem dancer to my bed and until he’s shown me every
variation on the Kama Sutra there is.”

“Tcha,” Thran snorted. “That is not a very interesting chronicle of such things. The Chinese, however, have several much more interesting variations –”

“Why am I not surprised that you know that?”

“It should be obvious that I am a connoisseur of more than ballet and yoga.”

“Showoff.”

“I do not brag if I speak the truth. Would you like me to prove it?”

Bard buried his nose in the crook of Thran’s neck, savoring the exotic smell of his lover, the silky touch of his hair, and the soft skin. “Only for the next seven lifetimes and then some, cariad.”

Elegant fingers found Bard’s right hand, and brought it to Thran’s lips to kiss its ring. “That lyubov moya, will be my delight.”

Bard found Thran’s left hand, and stroked the ring it bore. “Mine, too.”

Neither of them needed any further demonstration of affection for the night.

* * *

The morning was even more frantic than usual, because of the excitement of the afternoon’s impending visit to the county offices. Even the boys, usually so mopey through breakfast, were chattering back and forth. When Thran peeked into Sigrid’s room, she’d scattered clothes from one end of it to the other, which took doing, considering that none of Bard’s children had a lot of clothes. She’d finally settled on a blue sweater tunic with a darker blue skirt and blue leggings. Tilda had made her choice with less scattering, opting for a green knitted top, her favorite blue and green pinafore, blue leggings, and her favorite green hoodie over that. The boys had decided to dress similarly, in dark jeans and boots, and Mandarin collared shirts from Legolas’s closet. Bain wore blue; Legolas green.

“This must be a special occasion,” Thran teased at breakfast, tugging one of Legolas’s braids. Both were freshly dyed green.

“I wanted them to look good in case anyone takes a picture,” his son smirked. “I offered to help the girls do one for themselves, but they didn’t. Bain did, though.”

Bard stood at the stove ladling out porridge, but swiveled around when he heard Legolas’s comment. Bain hunched down a little at the table, then a little more as Bard came over to stand with arms akimbo to examine his son’s head. Bain’s hair was much darker than Legolas’s was, but Thran quickly spotted the streak from crown straight down the back – it was blue, however, not green.

“Hmm,” Bard said, meeting Thran’s eyes. Both of them struggled to control their smiles. “I’m glad you didn’t go green. The blue looks a lot better on you.”

Bain’s eyes bugged out, and Legolas couldn’t stifle his hilarity. “I told you your Da wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t,” Bard agreed, “But next time, ask first, so I can check that whatever chemicals you use
aren’t lethal. After that, as long as you clean up the bathroom, and stick to just a streak or two in something other than pink or chartreuse, I’m okay.”

“Can I do all of it in blue?” Bain asked.

“No. Finish your breakfast, lads. The bus’ll be here soon.”

“Maybe I should have done a blue streak, after all,” Sigrid shook her head as she headed upstairs with Tilda to brush her teeth.

“I thought Da wouldn’t like it, either,” Tilda agreed.

Bard watched them troop out of the kitchen with a chuckle. “If all I have to worry about is a streak or two of hair dye, I’ve gotten off easy.”

“Yes,” Thran nodded over his tea. “So far, we have both gotten off easily.”

“It won’t last,” was Bard’s prediction. He didn’t seem overly concerned about it, which was a good sign. His saint was finally easing some of his excessive worry. “They haven’t had a knock down, dragged out fight since the day you came down about your radiators, so they’re overdue. Put Legolas in the mix, and they’re really overdue. Blended families never get along so well as ours has so far.”

“Let us hope that we survive today in good form, then. After that, whatever comes will come.”

“True. Have you packed your lunch yet?”

“I thought that it would save time if I came straight home after class and eat here, before we pick up the children.”

“Likely it would. I’ll have something ready for us at one when you get here, then.”

“You look after us well.” Thran held up his teacup in salute as the children filtered back down to the kitchen. “So, children! Lunches into the backpacks, and on to meet the bus.”

“Here are the notes to excuse you from class before sport,” Bard said, handing them out. “Remember to give them to your teachers, so we’re not late to the county office. They’re not open but for so long, and if we’re late, we don’t get married, and then we don’t get to see the egg juggling.”

“Okay, Da! Okay, Bard!” the children chorused, and the caravan through the mudroom and out to the bus stop commenced.

With the morning’s stir, they were a few minutes late out of the door, so the bus was already trundling up the road as they neared the stop. The children ran to catch up, and so Bard and Thran hastily completed the ritual about being off and leaving too, waved quickly to Rosie and the other parents, and hurried home. While Thran changed into his dance attire, Bard got set up to finish Legolas’s woodwork. Thran packed his clean towel, his extra shoes and tights and leggings, and braided his hair. He came into Legolas’s room to find Bard already painting stripper over the base molding of the wall he’d started yesterday.

“I am off and am leaving, too, lyubov moya,” Thran grinned as Bard looked up with paintbrush in hand. “I will text you when I leave to come home, so have your mobile with you.”

“I will. I hope I’ll be done this by the time you get here. I’m ready to do something else that isn’t as messy.”
“I am sure. So I will dance, and you will strip paint, and soon we will be together again.”

Bard stood, holding his paintbrush well away from Thran as he gave him a kiss. “So we will. Dance well, and come home soon.”

Thran tugged a lock of Bard’s unruly hair. “Until then.”

It was hard to leave when such a warm smile on Bard’s face beckoned him to dally, but it was his role to dance this morning, and so Thran took himself downstairs to collect his bag and his coat and his boots, and he was soon heading for the highway. Traffic was its usual congested self as he approached the city, but the annoyance of that soon dropped away as he parked outside the studio and began his familiar routine. To chat with the other dancers, to arrange his things by the barre, all were familiar and comforting. Still, even those didn’t quiet all of his anticipation for the afternoon’s festivities. Not for the first time, he missed Vileria’s strong presence beside him at the barre. She had been his best friend for over twenty years, and even seven years after her death, he still missed her. How he would have loved to tell her of his saint and his new life with him. She would have been happy for him, and would have been glad that their son was no longer in boarding school, but with a family, among friends. She would have loved Clan Ffyrnig as much as he did.

How glad he’d been when Bard had suggested they add a remembrance to Vileria and Daphne in their house. Legolas was not the only one who missed Vileria, and Sigrid and Bain were not the only ones who missed Daphne. Remembering them was like asking them to watch over their blended family, and to be happy for them, and that was nothing but an added blessing to everything they had so far.

Monsieur LePied arrived, and Thran gave himself to class as he always did. It was good to dissipate yesterday’s exertion in partner class with familiar movements, and it also helped him burn off his impatience for his upcoming marriage. Yet he remained silent, keeping his expression serene, burning off his energy in his jetés and pirouettes and arabesques. He put so much energy into his moves that at the end of class his shoulders and thighs were achier than usual. He bid his friends, colleagues, and Monsieur LePied good-bye, and headed right to his SUV without changing. He remembered to text Bard that he was on his way, received a brief acknowledgement in return, and then headed home.

Forty-five minutes, later, he pulled up to the house, grabbed his bag, and dashed inside. “Bard?” he shouted. “I am back!”

“Upstairs!” came back Bard’s baritone. “Almost done!”

Thran pulled off his coat, left it on the washer rather than hang it up, kicked off his trainers, and ran upstairs. “Is there anything I can help with?”

“I’ve just got this one little bit to go. If you swipe the rest with the sponge and water, that’d be a big help. Put on something crummy so it doesn’t get on your dance stuff.”

“I fly to the closet,” Thran replied, and did just that. It was a relief to get out of tight dance belt and sweaty tights, even if their replacement was a pair of Bard’s rattiest jeans. They were too big in the waist for him, but he found a belt to tighten them, then found a crummy tee shirt and old socks, and scampered back to Legolas’s room. Bard pointed him to the box of disposable surgical gloves, then showed him how to rinse the remaining stripper off the cleaned woodwork. By the time he’d rinsed all of the base molding, Bard had scraped the last bit free of paint. He plied the dental tools to clean out the narrowest crevices, did another swipe with stripper-soaked steel wool, then Thran rinsed that.

“Done!” Bard announced with relief, and capped the stripper. Thran helped him gather up the used
paper towels and bits of steel wool, then wash the putty knife and dental tools. They left the tools to dry in the children’s bathroom, then dashed into their own bathroom to shave and scrub. They were both foul.

“If it’s bad luck to see the groom before the ceremony, then we’re in trouble,” Bard quipped as they got into the shower. “Because I’m seeing just about all of the groom there is to see right now.”

“Consider it an enticement for what comes later,” Thran said, eyes shut as he rinsed shampoo from his hair.

“I don’t need one,” Bard replied. “Not more of one, anyway. I’m already wired enough.”

“So am I. Even the dance did not entrance this morning as it usually does. I thought very often about how wonderful it is that this afternoon we will be married.”

“That same thought made stripping woodwork seem to take a lot longer than usual,” Bard said, stroking Thran’s back. “I’m done.”

“As am I.”

They toweled off. Thran dried his hair, and then helped Bard dry his. They dashed downstairs to eat the lunch Bard had made for them, then got dressed. There was some discussion about what to wear, but nothing that compared to what the children, especially Sigrid, had required. Since all the clothes Thran had bought Bard at the mall were comfortable and well fitting, Bard let Thran choose his things first, and then Bard matched his clothes to Thran’s. They grabbed Thran’s bag of props, got into the SUV, and set off for the Imladris Academy.

All four children were waiting for their fathers in the school office when they arrived, so they reached the county office just after two-thirty. Sigrid took possession of the bag of props. Bard and Tilda led the way, followed by the two boys, then Thran with Sigrid beside him. Bard spoke to the woman at the window, who pointed him to a bench to the left. Two couples already sat on the bench, so Bard, Thran, and the children filed to the far end of the bench. There was just room for Sigrid and Tilda to sit down, so the boys sat on the floor, and Bard and Thran stood beside them.

A doorway opened, a man came out, and gestured to the couple seated at the rightmost end of the bench. When the couple disappeared with the man through the doorway, everyone slid over, and now all of the children had space to sit down.

After so much anticipation throughout the day, to suddenly have to sit and wait was like being about to step onto the stage to dance, then have to wait for some inexplicable delay. The same tension was in Bard’s eyes, and all of the children were fidgety. When Bain and Legolas became too energetic in their poking and prodding of each other, he and Thran separated them, putting Tilda and Sigrid between them. Tilda reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a book, but even that wasn’t the calming influence it normally would be. On top of it, the woman behind the counter kept looking at them with a frown, and the couple beside them didn’t look too sanguine either, so Thran wracked his brains for something that would distract the children.

“Perhaps I could take the boys for a walk around the building?” he murmured to Bard. “How long do you think we must wait?”

“The clerk on the phone said the ceremony takes twenty minutes. So the first couple just went in, and there’s one more ahead of us, so we’ve got maybe thirty or forty minutes to wait.”

“Is there anything in the building that the children could look at to distract them?”
“Not much, and we can’t use our mobiles to get us all back here in case we misjudge the time. Wait, I’ve got an idea. Tilda, would you let me borrow your book? I’ll read it aloud so we all can listen to the story while we wait. In fact, we can all take turns reading. How about that?”

The boys were less than interested, but Bard sat on the floor against the wall opposite the bench and began to read. It was Tilda’s copy of *The Hobbit* from school, which all of the children had read, but even the boys settled as Bard began the tale of the small, sheltered hobbit and the wizard and dwarves who had descended upon him. Thran sat beside Bard, and soon Tilda climbed into his lap to listen, which captivated him completely. Even the other couple began to listen to the story, and by the time their turn came to venture through the door, they seemed sorry to go. The book went around among them, each reading a few paragraphs before passing the book along. When Tilda’s turn came, Thran held the book for her, turning the page as directed, then he read the next part before handing the book to Sigrid. They got through several pages before the door opened for them.

“Next?”

Bain handed the book back to Tilda, who put it back in her coat pocket, then they all trooped through the door.

The next fifteen minutes were the most mundane Thran could have imagined, barely more exciting than renewing a driver’s license at the Motor Vehicle Administration. The ceremony that had made him an American citizen had held much more excitement. But this one was no less momentous, despite the plain setting and the short routine. They handed over their marriage license and the fee for the ceremony to a clerk, who typed up the marriage certificate for them to give to the official who would perform their ceremony, and pointed them to another door.

Inside the door, they met the official who would perform their rite. The young man was almost as tall as Bard and as slender as Thran, though where Thran was clearly an athlete, Mr. Lindir was the slight, bookish short. He greeted them with a smile and shy efficiency, and took a few moments to chat with them before beginning the ceremony. He soon understood that Thran and Bard wanted to include the children in the ceremony as much as the standard form allowed, and so arranged Bard with Bain and Sigrid to either side of him and Tilda in front, and Legolas to Thran’s right.

He began the ceremony without preamble, reading with respect, without rushing, and took pains to include the children in his comments. Then he led them through their vows, Bard first, then Thran. For the exchange of rings, Bard took his off and handed it to Sigrid. It went from Sigrid to Bain and then to Tilda, who handed it to Legolas, who gave it at last to Thran, so that he put it back on Bard’s right hand with the blessing of all the children. Likewise, when Thran handed his ring to Legolas, it went to Tilda to Bain to Sigrid and at last to Bard, who put it back on Thran’s left hand with the children’s blessing. At the end, when all had been said, Thran and Bard exchanged a quick kiss. Mr. Lindir signed their certificate, placed it in a plain white envelope, and handed it to them with his kind congratulations. He was also kind enough to take a picture of the six of them with everyone’s mobiles before they left. The clerk who showed them out of the office echoed Mr. Lindir’s congratulations, and it was done.

The hall was empty when they re-emerged, so Thran took advantage of the relative privacy to hug Bard hard.

“I couldn’t be happier, lyubov moya.” The grin on his face was surely silly and sappy and foolish, and he didn’t care.

“Nor can I.” Bard hugged him just as hard back, and wore a similarly wide grin. “What a ten weeks it’s been, cariad. I can’t believe any of it. If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.”
“I don’t either.”

“How can we go eat now?” Bain, naturally, asked. “I am starving!”

“You're always hungry,” Legolas snickered.

“We can’t go yet,” Sigrid protested. “First I want to hug my Da and my Ada. You know you both owe me big time for being your excellent co-conspirator, don’t you?”

“We do, ma chère,” Thran laughed as Sigrid wrapped arms around him, squeezed hard, and planted a big smack on his cheek. She repeated the performance on her father, who hugged her tenderly and whispered in her ear. She swallowed hard, but was still smiling when she let her father go.

Tilda gave her father a hug and a kiss, then turned to Thran. He stooped down to her level. “Can I give you a hug, too, Thran?”

“I would be delighted, ma chère,” He enfolded her carefully in his arms, not squeezing too hard. But her arms tightened around him, and a prim kiss pressed against his cheek. “Oh, you are sweet to offer me a kiss, too, Tilda. It makes me very happy.”

“You’re welcome,” Tilda nodded with a smile.

“Can we please go eat now?” Bain repeated more impatiently.

“Let me shake your hand first,” Thran extended his. “I am glad we are all in Clan Ffyrnig together now.”

“So am I,” Bard agreed, offering his hand to Legolas. “Thanks for being such a good friend to Bain. You saved him from his sisters.”

“You got that right,” Bain said, shaking Thran’s hand. “So now can we go eat?”

“Bain’s been a good friend to me, too,” Legolas said as he shook Bard’s hand. “And I agree with him. Can we please go eat now?”

“Now we can go eat,” Bard agreed, sharing a laugh with Thran. “It’s only four, so we’re an hour early, but the restaurant said it didn’t matter if we were.”

They retraced their steps back to the front security checkpoint, where one of the officers waved to them as they headed out.

“Either of you Thran Oropherson?”

Thran stepped forward, searching the officer's uniform for his nameplate. “I am, Officer... Hardy. Is there some problem?”

The officer jerked his head towards the front door. “There’s a half dozen guys out there with cameras looking for you. They tried camping out in here, but we told ‘em they’d have to wait outside. Just thought you’d like to know you’ll have company when you walk outside.”

Thran looked around at his family – his family – with a smug smile. “Thank you, Officer Hardy. We came prepared for this. Clan Ffyrnig, it is time to put on our armor.”

Snickering, Sigrid held out the bag of props. Everyone donned one of the items in the bag, drawing the two officers on duty to laugh, but Tilda decided her disguise wasn’t complete yet. She dug in another pocket of her coat and pulled out a headband decorated with two antennae topped with big
yellow pompoms.

“Very fetching, little doll,” Bard complimented, taking her hand. “Everyone ready? Just keep walking, smile, and don’t say anything. In ten minutes, they’ll all be gone.”

Sigrid slipped her arm into Thran’s to take the lead. Bain and Legolas lined up behind them, and Bard and Tilda brought up the rear.

“Ready to mislead the press?” Sigrid cast him a conspiratorial look as she donned her armor.

“Always, ma chère. Armor on, Clan Ffyrnig! We go!”

They came out of the county office so briskly that several of the paparazzi were caught off guard. It wasn’t until they were some several steps down the sidewalk that Thran’s white hair gave them away, and came in pursuit. The howls of complaint had Sigrid giggling beside him.

“Mr. Oropherson! Mr. Oropherson! Is it true that you’ve just gotten married? What’s the young lady’s name, sir! Over here, Thran! Aw, come on, Mr. Oropherson, give us a break! Take off the Groucho glasses! Let us see the young lady! Sir, sir, are you the young lady’s father? Can you speak to us please? Are you excited about your daughter’s marriage to such an eminent ballet dancer? What about you, young man? Are you excited about your father’s marriage?”

Bard, Sigrid and Thran were laughing by that time, but Clan Ffyrnig held formation until they reached the SUV, where the children piled into the back seats. The paparazzi stayed back far enough to let Thran and Bard get into the front seat, and edged back as Thran maneuvered the SUV away from the curb. A half a block down they were out of sight.

“Okay, armor off,” Bard declared, pulling off his Groucho glasses with its huge fake nose, bushy eyebrows, and equally bushy mustache. “Everyone okay?”

“I’m fine, no problem, I’m all right, what a pain those guys are,” came from the children.

“They thought Thran married Sigrid?” Bain called from the back seat, snorting in derision. “They’re a right lot of fools, aren’t they?”

“I hadn’t expected that,” Thran admitted. “I mean no insult, Sigrid, but clearly, they are fools.”

“No offense taken,” Sigrid shook her head. “Although it’ll be a good story to tell Finn Durinson.”

That brought a raft of jibes, laughter, and snorts from the car’s occupants, not the least of which were from Sigrid.

“So are you married now?” Tilda asked from behind Thran.

“We are married now,” Bard assured her. “All signed, sworn, and sealed. For good.”

It had been a long time since Thran had heard anything that sounded so wonderful. He met Bard’s eyes with a contented smile.

“Yes,” he echoed. “For good.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint, with cherubs in tow, enjoy a show at their wedding feast.

Later on, an entirely different sort of wedding feast ensues.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is rated Triple E - Extremely Explicit Episode.

Never let it be said that readers can't convince me to add a little spice to the story. This is a lot of spice, and the ones to blame for it know who they are. We will all burn in someone's version of hell for this, but at least we'll all be there together, and so will all of our friends. It ought to make for quite a party. See you there!

The journey between the county office and the venue for their supper was far enough that none of the press followed them, so they were able to dash inside the Japanese restaurant without incident. Bain and Legolas were the first through the door, so excited were they to be initiated into the wonders of tableside cooking and showmanship. Thran held the door open for Bard to precede him, so Bard took Tilda's hand and drew her inside ahead of Sigrid and Thran. The boys were already jumping up and down at the hostess station, where a young Japanese attendant with spiky red and black hair, an equally bright red cap, and black chef's coat, pants, and clogs laughed at their excitement. Bard moved ahead to speak to her about their reservation. As promised, there was no issue about their early arrival, and they were led to a small dining room right away.

The main attraction of this restaurant was the cooking that took place in the center of the diners. In this small room, a wide cooktop sat in the middle with dining spaces for two arranged around three sides. The boys wanted the far corner, so Thran took the end seat next to Bain. Tilda sat beside Legolas, in the second corner with her sister. Bard took the other end beside Sigrid, across from Thran. The attendant – her chef's coat identified her as Cindy – handed menus around, bustled to bring pots of tea while they decided what they wanted, and complimented the boys about their dyed hair. She answered their questions about the menu, noted their choices, and went off to relay their order to the kitchen.

In just a few minutes, Cindy reappeared carrying a big cutting board full of vegetables, three bowls of various meats, and a huge bowl of steaming cooked rice. She would be their chef. As she set the bowls on the cart beside her and turned on the grill, Bain's face fell, and Legolas looked worried. Bard smothered a grin of anticipation. His son thought Cindy wouldn't give him the show he expected.

“Awww, why the long face?” Cindy put her arms akimbo and gave the boys an exaggerated frown. “Are you gonna give me a lotta trouble about eating your vegetables? Are you gonna tell me you don't like red pepper and purple onions and orange carrots? I mean, who doesn't like red pepper and purple onions and orange carrots? I bet your sisters like vegetables, right, girls?”
“I do,” Tilda said, leaning forward as Cindy squirted oil out of a squeeze bottle onto the grill, and pulled out a big cleaver.

“Sure, I do, too,” Sigrid seconded her sister.

“Of course you do! I like ‘em, too. Especially when I get to chop ‘em up!”

Cindy tossed her cleaver in the air with a little twist, caught it on the way down, and chopped the ends off all the vegetables on the cutting board. She threw the ends in a waste can underneath the griddle, then proceeded to make slivers and slices of the vegetables in a blur of motion.

“Whoa,” Bain breathed, starting to smile.

“Yeah,” Legolas agreed. “Wow!”

“See? I knew you liked vegetables!” Cindy grinned, scraping the vegetables onto the grill and stirring them into the hot peanut oil so that they sizzled. She took up the bowl of chicken and spread the pieces over the cutting board. “Now, I know you won’t tell me you don’t like chicken, will you?”

“I like chicken, and so does Thran!” Tilda said, getting into the spirit of things. “We all like chicken!”

“A little steak and shrimp, too?” Cindy grinned. “We need more cleavers for all of that, doncha think? Like, maybe three?” She pulled out the extra cleavers, but made another face. “Oh, now what? Two hands, three cleavers? That doesn’t come out even, does it? I guess I’ll have to put one down...”

“No!” Legolas and Bain and Sigrid protested. “Don’t put any of them down!”

“Don’t put any of them down? Geez, you guys! What am I supposed to do? I’ve gotta chop up all of this chicken, or you don’t get dinner! I gotta put one of them down!”

“Oh, don’t!” Tilda clapped your hands. “You can do it!”

“I can do what? What can I do?”

“Juggle!” all four children chorused.

“Juggle! You think I can juggle cleavers? Are you crazy? These big knives?”

“Juggle!” The children cheered, clapping.

“Wow, you’re a tough crowd! I dunno, though... I’ll try, I guess, but I don’t know how it’ll go...” Looking nervous, Cindy tossed the first cleaver up, then the second and third, but her hands never hesitated, and the knives went around in an impressive flash of blades to great applause. Every few rounds, she juggled two knives in one hand while using the third knife to slice a piece of the chicken.

“You are very good!” Thran clapped, laughing. “Most excellent!”

“Thank you!” Cindy said, the knives still going around and chopping. “You are a discerning diner!”

“He dances with knives, so he knows with he’s talking about!” Bain bragged, drawing Cindy to smile a little wider.

“Then your compliment is high praise, indeed. Thank you! So I think we have enough chicken.” She
caught the cleavers, scraped the chicken onto the cooktop, stirred it around, then dumped the bowl of meat onto the cutting board. She repeated the same juggle of knives to chop up the meat, scraped it onto the grill, and added the shrimp beside it. “So, are we good for meat, now?”

“We’re good!” The children cheered, even Sigrid, laughing.

“Okay!” She put the first cleaver down, caught the last two, and put them aside. “So we’ve got veggies, we’ve got chicken and steak and shrimp... what else do we need?”

“Rice!” Tilda cheered.

“And eggs! You have to juggle the eggs!” Bain yelled, jumping up and down in his seat, making Bard laugh.

“Juggle eggs? Boy, you are a really tough crowd! I juggled three cleavers for you, didn’t I?”

“That was for Bain and Legolas,” Tilda said with a big grin. “Juggling the eggs is for Sigrid and me!”

“You got it, girl!” Cindy cheered, reaching under the counter for a bowl of eggs. “Okay, let’s do eggs! How many eggs do we need? Two?”

“No, more!” Tilda replied with a vigorous shake of her head.

“Three?”

“More!” Bain and Legolas protested.

“More?” Cindy looked flustered. “I’ve got only four eggs in here, guys! You want me to juggle all four of them?”

“Yes!”

“But there’s a problem. I can juggle only three things at a time. That’s my limit. I can’t do any more than three. So I’ll just have to get rid of one of these eggs, I guess –”

Cindy tossed the egg high, eyeballed it once, and caught it in her cap, to great applause. Then she tossed up the other three eggs, spinning them around and around, then let one smash onto the cooktop. She juggled the two eggs in one hand as she picked the shell off the cooktop.

“Oops! Good thing I still have one more egg left, isn’t it?” She snatched the egg out of her hat, spun the three eggs around a few more times before catching one in her hat again. She cracked the remaining two over the cooktop at the same time, one in each hand, then tilted her head forward to tip the last egg onto the cooktop. She cleaned away the shells, stirred the four eggs around to cook them quickly, and dumped the cooked rice over the eggs. A splash of soy sauce, a sprinkle of chopped green onions, and the rice was ready. She stirred everything else around to keep it cooking evenly, and finished her performance off with an exaggerated bow to great applause.

“Amazing!” Legolas breathed, jostling Bain. “That was just so cool!”

“Yeah, you were amazing!” Bain agreed, clapping. “How long did it take you to learn that?”

“Oh, about fourteen thousand eggs,” she laughed. “My mom hated me!”

“But the children love you,” Bard laughed. “Show Cindy how much you liked her cooking, all!”
Cindy received another round of enthusiastic applause, which brought a big smile to her face. “You are the best! So, who wants some of this great food?”

She plated the cooked food, and everyone dug in with great enthusiasm. Because they’d come in so early, Cindy lingered to talk to Thran and Bard about knife juggling and how enthusiastic the children were. She showed Tilda how to hold the chopsticks, giving her a big smile when Tilda figured out how to pick up a round of carrot. The boys persuaded her to juggle a trio of the light chopsticks, which she managed easily. She topped that by juggling a chopstick, a carrot, and a cleaver, which impressed Bard as much as anything else she’d done – it was no small feat to juggle three such differently shaped and weighted objects.

Despite all the laughing, it didn’t take long before all of the food had disappeared, and Cindy presented them with a big platter of different ice creams. Bard tried a little of each flavor – green tea, orange, coconut, and cinnamon. Even the boys were full when the ice cream was gone. In addition to the large tip they left, Thran and Bard made sure to compliment the restaurant manager on Cindy’s skills.

The ride home was well animated as everyone marveled over Cindy’s juggling. Bard was just as impressed at her skill at managing young boys who had thought the appearance of a girl meant they’d miss the show they expected. Thran further gilded her performance by talking about how hard he’d worked to master knives for his dancing.

“Can you juggle knives like Cindy did, Thran?” Tilda asked.

“I can juggle batons, so in theory, perhaps so,” Thran considered. “But I think I should leave such things to the experts at the grill. They are much better practiced than I!”

“I thought she was stellar!” Sigrid said. “You didn’t think she’d be able to do anything, did you, Bain? But she set you right.”

“She was amazing,” Bain admitted without rancor.

“I liked how she chopped up everything while she juggled,” Legolas said. “It’d be cool to learn how to do that.”

“Stick to fencing, please,” Thran asked. “Do not decide to borrow Bard’s kitchen knives for anything other than to sedately chop the vegetables.”

That brought groans of disappointment from the boys and laughter from everyone else. The boys continued to discuss the nuances of Cindy’s expertise until they came into the house.

“All right, Clan Ffyrnig, it’s still a school night, so go brush your teeth, and then get out your homework,” Bard directed. “Time to pay the piper for the fun supper.”

That met with little enthusiasm, but soon enough everyone had settled around the kitchen table to fill out worksheets, make trigonometric and algebraic calculations, study maps, and write essays. Bard put on the kettle for more tea, and he and Thran went upstairs to change out of their good clothes. Thran pulled on leggings and long sweater, but Bard pulled on the old jeans and tee shirt that Thran had worn earlier.

“Why those?” Thran looked at him askance.

“They smell like you,” Bard admitted.

“I was rank from the dance when I put them on.”
Bard shrugged, grinning. “I like knowing you had these on before me.”

Thran rolled his eyes, but didn’t say any more. They returned to the sitting room to enjoy their hot drinks while the children worked. It was sweet to sit side by side, to admire the ring on his right hand as he stroked Thran’s thigh, just as sweet as it was to admire the ring on Thran’s left hand as he stroked Bard’s thigh. As the implications of the day’s events sank in, a smile grew on his face. It was just a Thursday night, and yet it was so much more.

Lips brushed on his temple, and long, pale fingers tightened on his thigh.

“I feel it, too,” Thran whispered.

“I hope it’s not indigestion,” Bard whispered back. “You’re not used to ice cream, angel.”

Thran’s laughter was breathy. “I do not think my happiness is the result of indigestion, lyubov moya. But if so, then the next time we are at the market, we must get more of the coconut ice cream. It was delicious.”

“The cinnamon was good, too. In fact, they were all good. Did you try just the coconut?”

“Of course I tried them all – a mouthful of each, then a little more of the one I liked the best.”

“So you had... what? A huge quarter cup, all told?”

“I do not need a lot of ice cream,” Thran sniffed the steam of his tea, humming in appreciation, before he took another sip.

“That’s just as well. The children ate triple what they needed.”

“Fuel for the homework. It goes quietly, I think.”

“Quiet and children is never a good sign,” Bard cast Thran a look as he sat forward on the sofa to look towards the kitchen. “Everything all right in there? You’re very quiet.”

“We’re fine,” Sigrid’s voice came back. “Everybody’s working on essays.”

“Okay,” Bard called, sitting back. “Til, how’re you coming along?”

“I need to work on my French words. Thran, tu peux me demander mes mots?”

Thran and Bard looked at each other in surprise. Apparently Tilda had learned some French very quickly.

“Certainement, ma petite,” Thran replied. “Passe-moi ta liste et je vais t’interroger sur ton vocabulaire.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up when Tilda trotted into the sitting room with a piece of poster board in her hand, and he looked at Thran in surprise.

“I said, ‘would you ask me my words, and Thran said, ‘pass me your list, and I’ll ask you your words,’” Tilda replied with a mischievous smile.

“I think someone has had a little help, yes?” Thran scrutinized Tilda with amusement.

“Peut-être,” she shrugged. “Eh, Legolas, Bain, et Sigrid, ils m’ont aidé.”
Legolas, Bain and Sigrid helped you,” Thran translated.

“Yes. They helped me with this, too.” Tilda looked back to the kitchen. “*Clan Ffyrnig, ici!*”

The older children came in from the kitchen as Tilda turned the poster board around and held it up for Bard and Thran. It was an elaborate, brightly colored, hand-drawn picture that said Happy Wedding Day across the top. Underneath was a drawing of the house, with Clan Ffyrnig written over the door, and six figures in front of it. Names were neatly printed underneath each figure, but under Thran’s figure were printed, Ada, Thran, and Father, while under Bard’s figure were printed Da and Bard.

“We couldn’t find a good card in the shops, so we made this instead,” Tilda explained.

“This is twice as wonderful as a card from any shop,” Thran said as he regarded the poster in amazement. Pointing to the tallest dark-haired figure, rather than the one with the long white hair, he said, “This is me, yes?”

“No!” Tilda scolded. “That’s Da! You’re the one with the long white hair, silly Thran!”

“Oh, so I am,” Thran put a hand to his heart and bowed abjectly. “I am so sorry. Please, may I give you a hug for such a wonderful picture? For you drew it, yes?”

“Sigrid thought about what we should draw, Tilda drew it, and Bain and I thought of what each of the figures should include so you’d know who gave it to you,” Legolas explained. “Then we all filled in the colors.”

“Yeah, see there, Legs has the bow and sword, and I’ve got the soccer balls,” Bain explained as Tilda gave Thran a hug. “Til’s got the paint palette and book, and Sig’s got the running shoes and the pencil. Da, you’re beside Hope the Lope, and Thran, you’re beside your ballet barre.”

“This is great,” Bard said quietly, giving Tilda a big hug after Thran. “Just great. It’s the best present you could have given us. We’re going to get a frame for it and hang it somewhere. And when I get enough of the house fixed, I’ll make us a sign that says Clan Ffyrnig on it, and we’ll put it over the front door just as you’ve drawn it.”

Bard got up to hug all of the children, gratified when he got an embrace and big smile from Legolas. They propped the poster over the mantle until such time as they’d find a frame for it.

“I hate to ask this after your so kind gift,” Thran asked with a grimace, “but have any of you done your homework, or have you completed your masterpiece instead?”

“Tilda’s done,” Sigrid assured them. “I’m almost done. I think Legolas and Bain are not too far from done, either.”

“But I really do need help with my French words,” Tilda looked up at Thran.

“So bring me the real list this time, and we shall review them,” Thran smiled.

“And the rest of you, try to finish quickly so you can cycle through the shower,” Bard said gruffly, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

“May I go up now?” Sigrid asked. “I want to wash my hair, and it can dry while I do this last government assignment.”

“Fine,” Bard nodded. “Go.”
As the children scattered, Thran put an arm around Bard’s shoulders and brushed a kiss on his hair. “They are something, our Clan Ffyrnig.”

The lump grew larger in Bard’s throat, but he nodded without hesitation. “Like nothing before or after.”

Tilda went through her list of French vocabulary three times before the lump in Bard’s throat went down.

* * *

Despite the children’s extracurricular drawing of posters, homework and showers progressed at a good pace, and soon the children were in bed, leaving Bard and Thran to themselves. When Bard came into the bedroom after telling Bain and Legolas goodnight, Thran had already changed out of his leggings and sweater into the silk Mandarin robe that so suited him. Bard sighed as his long, elegant husband swathed in pale grey gossamer silk enfolded Bard in his arms and pressed a kiss on his ear.

“My sweet husband,” Thran whispered, stroking Bard’s hair.

Bard nestled Thran against him, cradling Thran’s buttocks in his hands, burying his nose in the crease of Thran’s neck where it joined his shoulder. He breathed in to get his fill of Thran’s scent. “Oh, yes. How do we celebrate, cariad? We shared the traditional wedding night pleasures the first night we moved in.”

Thran hummed suggestively. “We did. But now we are legal.”

“I thought it was the illicit that turned you on.”

“It is,” Thran admitted, threading his fingers through Bard’s hair, stroking the nape of his neck, tugging the long hair there gently from roots to ends, over and over, touches both calming and arousing. “So... perhaps we should balance our observance of tradition with something... less traditional, and... more illicit.”

“What do you have in mind?” Bard murmured, stroking Thran’s lips, drawing his fingers back when Thran nipped at them.

“I was very... accommodating when we christened the kitchen, lyubov moya,” Thran purred.

Something about the way Thran caressed the word accommodating sent a stir of arousal through Bard. “Very.”

“How... accommodating can you be tonight?”

The fingers stroking his hair had strayed from back to front, tracing down his ribs, not touching his nipples, but drawing Bard’s tee shirt over them enough that they tingled.

“That, you bastard, depends on what you want me to accommodate.”

Lips nibbled his ear. A breathy whisper raised the hackles on the back of his neck. Fingers caressed his ribs, pulling his tee shirt back and forth over his nipples. “Yesterday morning...”
“Mmm... w-what about... yes-yesterday morning...”

“When I asked you to show me your chin up bar...”

“You didn’t ask me,” Bard swallowed as his nipples hardened under Thran’s teasing. “You teased me into it, just like you’re doing now. So tell me what you want this time.”

“You showed me your chin up bar because you said I owned you. What that did to me... such a fire it lit in me. I cannot resist it. I want to own you tonight.”

Bard swallowed hard as his body flooded with heat and his loins spasmed with arousal. Thran would not be any more merciful than he’d been when he’d teased Thran to within an inch of his endurance in the kitchen – probably less so. Oh, gods, I am so screwed...

“I feel you tremble already,” that breathy voice coaxed. “You want it. You want me to own you.”

“Remember what I told you I’d do to you in the ballroom.”

Thran grinned, a most predatory expression. “I look forward to it more than I should admit. Tonight, let me offer you even more incentive to make a truly overwhelming game of it.”

“We still have our trigger word?” Bard whispered, his body already betraying him – skin in gooseflesh, loins aching, every nerve ending alive and awake.

“Always, lyubov moya. That will always be inviolate. There will never be coercion, pain, disrespect between us. Only love.”

Bard shut his eyes. Why did his body lust to relinquish control to an angel who would turn into a devil as soon as he consented to his own desecration?

“You own me. Take what you want.”

The hands in his hair tightened, and the lips near his ear drew back, baring teeth to nip, but the voice that whispered in his ear remained as soft as Thran’s silk robe.

“If I own you, then you are property. Property does not wear clothes. Strip now.”

As soon as Bard pulled off his tee shirt, Thran’s hand was wound in the back of his hair, holding him at the scruff of his neck as he fumbled to unhook his belt, unbutton and unzip his jeans, and shimmy them down over his hips. He stepped out of them, toed off his socks, and stood naked in Thran’s grasp.

“Property does not stand in my presence. Down.”

The pressure on his nape urged him down, so Bard sank to his knees. The fingers in his hair loosened to stroke the strands over and over in that same compelling rhythm. Shutting his eyes, Bard soaked up the caresses, letting the slow touches lull him. He nosed Thran’s robe open until he could nestle against his bare legs, rubbing his cheek against the inside of Thran’s knee.

“Property does not touch me until I allow it.”

“I know what you like,” Bard whispered, still rubbing his cheek against Thran’s leg, higher this time, against Thran’s inner thigh. “The harem talks. They whisper in the shadows about what the pale mandarin wants, what he craves. I listened. I know what you want, what you crave. I can give it to you.”
“Shut your eyes.”

“They already are.”

“Stay.”

Thran moved away from him. Bard bit his lip, wondering what Thran was about, but he stayed where he was, blind and unmoving.

“Property does not speak, does not presume. You have done both. Do you know what happens to property so bold?”

Bard shook his head.

A rustle at his back, then at his nape, and something went over his head to settle around his neck – the worn leather belt from his jeans, looped like a choke chain through the buckle. Thran drew it snugly against his skin, but not tightly.

“It is leashed. If that is not enough, it can also be gagged, blindfolded, and bound. I hope that will not be necessary, especially the first. I prefer to make better use of your mouth. Do you understand?”

Bard nodded.

“Good. Come.”

Thran tugged on Bard’s leash, leading him to the chair in the corner of the room. Thran sat down, then drew Bard to curl on the floor between his knees. Fingers stroked his hair again.

“Stroke my leg as you just did.”

Bard rubbed his cheek against Thran’s leg, taking care not to rub too hard. After a few strokes, he dared to press his lips against the inside of Thran’s knee, then when that didn’t earn him a reprimand, he drew his teeth lightly down Thran’s calf, barely nipping at it, then brushing his lips against the places he nibbled. The belt tightened around his neck, drawing him up. As fingers went under his chin, tilting his face up, he lowered his eyes, keeping his gaze on the silk robe beneath him.

“Good. You know something of the proper deference. Loosen my robe.”

Bard fumbled to free the small monkey’s paw buttons from their loops down the front of Thran’s robe. He couldn’t concentrate with Thran’s fingers caressing his scalp, then teasing a lock free to slide it through his fingers, over and over in time to his heartbeat. Before he was through all the buttons, his hair was in his face, brushing against his forehead and cheekbones, a feathery touch no less arousing than Thran’s fingers. The slivers of pale, pale skin peeking from under silvery grey silk were another tease that made his mouth water so much that he had to swallow. When he finally breeched the last button, slippery fabric slid to either side of Thran’s body, forcing him to swallow again. That lean, muscled body was something he was forbidden to touch until commanded, yet it lay before him, elegant and compelling. He was only inches from Thran’s cock nestled in its nest of white hair.

The belt tightened until it was too short for him to sink back to the floor, and Thran wrapped the end around the wooden arm of the chair to tether him in place. As soon as a hand wound in into his hair at the base of his neck, Bard didn’t need words to know what Thran wanted. He lowered his head to nuzzle the long cock before him, kissing and licking and nipping before engulfing all of it in his mouth. He lavished all of his attention on his lover, edging his hands up to stroke Thran’s inner thighs, his groins, his abdomen, then to fondle his balls. As Thran grew hard and erect, he wound
both hands in Bard’s hair to position him as he wanted, and Bard employed everything he’d learned
from Thran’s uninhibited display of a few nights ago to please him. Soon enough, Thran no longer
sat languidly with Bard’s face buried in his crotch, but was coiled tightly, hands clenched in Bard’s
hair. All at once Thran tore the belt free of the chair arm and jerked him back. Thran stood before
him and dragged him back into position. Bard steadied himself with hands on Thran’s buttocks as
Thran resumed his hold on Bard’s hair and plunged his cock into Bard’s mouth, working in short,
uncontrolled thrusts to bring himself to release.

Bard swallowed everything Thran gave him, humming as his lover swayed in the depths of his
climax, steadying him until the flood had passed. He let Thran’s spent cock slip out of his mouth,
pressed kisses on his thighs and groins, and massaged his buttocks and hamstrings. Thran backed up
the two steps he needed to lie back on the bed, savoring his release with a long exhale. He still held
the end of the belt loosely in his hand, so Bard sank to his heels, but otherwise didn’t move, no
matter how badly he wanted to climb atop the pale body that had teased him so.

In a minute or two, Thran raised himself up on one elbow. His robe was off one shoulder, and the
soft fabric veiled only part of his body. His hair was still smooth, without disarray – how Bard
wanted to twine his hands in it, ruin its elegant smoothness, make his lover cry out in another release.
Thran’s lips curved in a sly smile. His lover wasn’t through yet, then. Indeed, no sooner had Thran
smiled but the belt tightened, drawing Bard to the end of the bed. Thran shifted until he reclined at
the foot of the bed, with Barn crouched on the floor near his head.

“You did well,” Thran murmured, stroking Bard’s hair again. “Perhaps I should reward you. Would
you like that?”

Bard nodded, daring to look up into Thran’s eyes. Fingers cupped his chin, and lips descended to
give him a deep, deep kiss, full of tongue and nipping teeth. The fingers cradling his chin traced
down his neck, and found one of his nipples. They caressed and pinched and rolled, sending one
hard jolt of pleasure after another through him. He couldn’t resist a shiver, a soft moan.

“I did not give you permission to speak.”

Those insistent fingers kept teasing, teasing, teasing, and the tongue deep in his mouth was too much
a reminder of the cock that had preceded it. He couldn’t suppress another moan.

“My property cannot control itself, it seems. Do you want more? Tell me.”

“The pale mandarin’s property craves everything the pale mandarin deigns to give it.”

“Two paces back. Sit on your heels. Eyes down.”

When Bard had arranged himself as ordered, Thran rose from the bed to circle him, letting the belt
loosen, then drape over his back. As wired as he was, even that touch felt electric, and he shut his
eyes, trying to calm himself. He’d barely succeeded when the hem of Thran’s robe fell over his back,
jacking him back up as highly as before. Fingers teased through his hair again, this time pulling his
head up.

“Widen your knees. Hands up.”

He was all but offering himself to whatever would come. What would it be? A stroke down the
back, a caress across the cheek, another kiss? He didn’t expect the hand that gathered his balls and
hefted them as if to weigh them. Before he flinched, the leash pulled his head up for Thran to
swallow him in a kiss. Thran released his balls only to rub at their base until his cock strained erect.
Fingers traced over his balls and up his cock, but there was no further touch. He moaned in
frustration, drawing breathy laughter as Thran folded down behind him, thighs pressing against his hips, his silk robe brushing Bard’s shoulders like the wings of a predatory bird against downed prey. Hands went around his ribs, finding his nipples and kneading them hard, and a chest rubbed across his back. Already Thran’s cock was rising, pressing against his tailbone with increasing urgency.

“Property that cannot hold still can be bound into compliance,” Thran said when Bard flinched. “Is that what you want? Speak.”

“No,” Bard whispered. “No. I’ll be good. Isn’t leashing me enough?”

“Not if my property cannot control itself. I still have much to do. I am a benevolent mandarin – if binding my property aids its stamina, I will oblige until I have had all that I want of it. Is this so unpleasant?”

Bard shook his head, trying to swallow the hitch in his breathing that Thran’s fingers drew out of him.

“Tell me. Tell me how good it feels.”

“It’s divine. It’s sweet and it’s fire and it’s so, so good... that’s why I can’t hold still, why I gasp. You’re so good, I can’t help but enjoy the gifts from a pale mandarin.”

“Ah, such a sweet answer. Perhaps I should offer you a little more. Would you like that?”

Bard nodded.

“Tell me what you would like.”

“Take me.”

The kiss pressed against Bard’s nape turned into bared teeth that traced down his spine. “You haven’t even earned the right to touch my bed yet. Do you want to? Or should I send you back to the harem for the guards to enjoy? Decide.”

“Tell me what you want. I’ll give you anything... everything.”

“Property cannot give me what is already mine. You told me to take, and I will. Try again.”

“Waste me on the harem guards if you want. But why give them a pleasure you’d deny yourself?”

The hands on him slipped away, but the memory of their caresses made him tremble anyway. The belt around his neck pulled his head forward, forcing him onto his hands and knees, and seconds later, Thran was sliding inside him, well slicked and as hard as if he hadn’t already gone. The leash kept his head down as Thran eased deeply inside with a sigh, then pulled him back to seat him firmly in Thran’s lap. Bard tried to hold still, his eyes slitted shut when Thran resumed that devastating stroking of his hair. His tangled hair was everywhere, in his eyes, brushing his shoulders, mingling with the silky white hair that fell over his chest when Thran pressed a kiss on his shoulder. How easy it was to relax under that barrage of light strokes – until Thran flexed deeply inside him, sending a jolt of wild urgency rushing through him. Over and over, Thran soothed and petted him until he eased, only to stroke him inside, sometimes deeply, sometimes only a little, until Bard trembled with anticipation and his cock was as hard as it could be. When Thran brushed fingers against his cock, nothing more, Bard’s breath caught in a gasp.

“Still. Silent. Or I will bind you.”
At the next trace of fingers over his nipples, Bard couldn’t swallow a whimper. The sensation was so intense, yet too little to quench the fire Thran had stoked in him. Soft lips burrowed through his hair to nibble his ear, and the fingers on his nipples massaged without mercy, jackng Bard’s arousal that much higher.

“Not enough? Is this not enough for my property?”

“Oh, gods, oh gods, you’re going to take me – ”

The fingers teasing his nipples raked down his flanks to dig into his hips, and the body behind him turned hard and urgent as it stroked him so deeply inside. Bard grabbed for his cock, anything to end this aching need for release, as the thrusting within him grew faster, more compelling. But hands yanked his away and forced him forward onto hands and knees so that Thran could work into him even more deeply. In seconds, Thran was off again, grinding against his hips as he wrung out every last drop.

Before Bard could make the most of Thran’s collapse atop him, the leash tightened, holding him just inches off the floor. Panting, Thran lay over Bard until he softened and drew out. The sudden emptiness left Bard trembling, aching, desperate for release.

“Not a word,” Thran rasped, biting Bard’s shoulder. “Not a word. I am not through my play with such a delicious morsel.”

Oh, gods, would Thran work him over a third time? Or would he take mercy on him and see to his release quickly? It wouldn’t take much to carry him over, just a hand on his leaking cock, or better a pair of lips to suck him off, whether fast or slow. As Thran eased off him, Bard tried to catch a glimpse of his lover, hoping to see satisfaction enough to end his teasing. But Thran left him on the floor as he lay face up on the end of the bed, stretching as he enjoyed his release, one hand dangling over the edge of the bed with leash in hand, the other stroking his abdomen with the same teasing fingers he’d employed to overcome Bard. Oh, gods, was the bastard still not done with him? What else was left to take from him?

There were only two answers to that question, neither of which would end Bard’s teasing. If he moved fast enough, he could straddle Thran and use his greater weight to pin him to the bed while Bard put himself out of his misery. But the crouch Thran had kept him in wasn’t the easiest to get out of with any speed, and Thran had him off balance with the leash before he’d gotten off his hands. He tossed a towel onto the floor in front of Bard’s nose.

“Clean yourself off.”

Bard swiped the sweat from his face, and Thran’s essence off his thighs.

“Are you blind to everything else but your own need yet? Thran whispered, smiling. “Or do you still have something left for me to take?”

Bard was nearly as blind as Thran teased him of being, but he wouldn’t let the devil who owned him know that. “If you think you’ve had all of me, then I’m disappointed. I thought you had more imagination than that.”

“Ah, perhaps not quite blind yet. Very few do so well. Up.”

The leash tightened, drawing Bard to crawl into bed. He stayed crouched on his knees, but Thran wasn’t content with that.

“You’ve already shown me what you can do on your knees. Show me what you can do on your
back.”

Oh gods, he’d guessed right about what Thran still wanted from him. He lay in the middle of the bed as Thran watched him from the end, the shoulders of his robe down around his elbows, still elegant, hardly a hair out of place despite climaxing twice and teasing Bard so mercilessly that he felt as if he’d run for miles. Thran finally shed his silk robe to settle naked between Bard’s legs, regarding Bard as if deciding where to resume his teasing. Just when Bard drew breath to speak, Thran’s head dipped low, and he licked the end of Bard’s cock, making it leap to full attention again. Twice more he did that, until Bard wanted to bury it anywhere he could put it. A moan forced its way out of his throat, and he reached for the lean body that tormented him so. But pale hands knotted in his leash, keeping him pinned flat, and Thran leaned over him to take his throat in his teeth. When Bard forced himself still, lips caressed his ear.

“Have you forgotten? I own you. I will tease you for another week if I choose to, and you will lie here like the property you are and not lift anything other than your cock. Hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Then say it.”

“You own me, body and soul. You own me.”

“Very good. You’ve earned a little more of my grace.”

It was coming now, Bard was sure of it. He was almost at his limit, his cock hard and aching, his balls almost too sore to touch, and every nerve ending on fire. Thran would either suck him off, or pin him, and whichever it was, Bard would bless it. He’d never felt such need, such drive, such frustration. So when Thran sat back upright and anchored the end of the belt under his knee, Bard was sure he was about to be opened wide to take Thran one more time. But instead, Thran had his hands full of lubricant, slicking himself, then taking himself in hand to stroke himself back to full length. There was nothing subtle about how Thran worked himself, all hard, fast jerky movements of his hips. Was the bastard going to take himself and make Bard watch? Gods, the agony couldn’t get any worse –

Just as Bard thought Thran was about to bring himself to release, he shoved Bard’s knees wide and up, positioned himself at the right angle, and slid inside Bard again. The white body over his shuddered at the intensity, and white hair fell over him in a cloud. More of the slow, deep thrusts in and pulls out wound Bard as tightly as a bowstring, and he gasped, clawing the sheets for purchase. Watching Thran writhing consumed above him, milking every nuance and subtlety out of each thrust, made his driving urgency worse, but it was not enough to send him over the edge. As if he knew that, Thran slowed, smiling down on him like a devil. Slippery hands found his nipples to tease, and a tongue found his mouth to penetrate him as deeply as a cock did his depths. He gasped as palms dragged over his nipples again.

“You are so beautiful when you are nothing but want and desire. I almost cannot bear to end such sweet delirium,” Thran’s soft voice whispered, as he finally – finally! – took Bard’s cock in a slippery hand. “But you have given me everything else, so there is nothing left for me to take. So give me the last of you. Give me all of you.”

Thran stroked him within and without very slowly, then faster, and finally with such compulsion that Bard’s back arched uncontrollably, and everything exploded – cock erupting, balls aching, every muscle spasming as release crashed down on him. As he convulsed, so Thran did within him, sending another deluge of pleasure rushing through him. How many seconds passed as the flood swept him beyond thought, he didn’t know.
When he could think again, the belt was gone from his neck, and Thran lay nestled beside him, his silky head on his shoulder, and his arm across his chest, stroking his arm softly. Bard’s breath calmed from its rough panting, and he felt the soft silk of the sheets under his hands again.

“I think I’m dead,” Bard whispered. It was barely an audible sound. “If I’m not, I should be.”

“I think I am, too.” Thran said. He sounded like he’d run for miles. He looked up, smiling without apology. “You are a lot to possess.”

“I hope you’ve possessed enough for a while. You teased me to within an inch of my life, you bastard.”

“I did. I enjoyed it more than you can imagine. I hope you did, too.”

“I think ‘enjoy’ is too mild a word to describe what it’s like to die by the merest fractions of an inch over the course of an hour.”

“I have never seen or felt such an intense climax as yours before.”

“Neither have I. I don’t think I can move.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do. I’m covered with you, me, and more lube than an all-night bathhouse. I’m stuck to the sheets.”

Thran snickered.

“What’re you laughing about? And what the hell, Thran! I’m taking away those vitamins I’ve been feeding you. Three times in an hour?!”

Thran kept snickering. “I outdid myself. I will likely not make it to class tomorrow. But it was worth it. You were a delight, to indulge me so thoroughly. Thank you.”

Grimacing, Bard exhaled. “I am so owned. So owned.”

“I would not worry, lyubov moaya. I am so owned, too. We both know this is true. And I love you for it.”

Bard rubbed his husband’s arm. “Eh, we both are. So help pry me off the sheets and get me into the shower.”

“I hear and obey, my saint and master,” Thran said humbly, and they went into the shower together.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

After their marriage, the lives of an angel and a saint find direction toward the future.

Chapter Notes

I don't own the rights to "Spirited Away." It's just one of my favorite movies.

After last night’s carnal excesses, Friday morning came in a blur. How Bard clambered out of bed so easily was beyond Thran; likely because his husband had expended himself only once last night. It had been Thran who’d overindulged, which had left him drained. His balls didn’t exactly hurt, but he had no interest in exercising them just yet, either. He grinned; if one had to wake up in such a state, at least it was for due cause. He stayed buried in the sheets and blankets without moving while Bard was in the bathroom, though he managed a single wave of the hand when Bard came out.

“How are your balls, angel?” Bard murmured, smiling as he sat on the side of the bed to brush a strand of hair out of Thran’s eyes. “Need to take the edge off?”

Thran groaned softly, drawing a faint chuckle from his husband. “Even for you, lyubov moya, I could not manage a thing. What is the term? AFO?”

“Imagine that. Sleep it off. I’ve got the children covered.”

“No, I will be down in a moment. But you will be my savior if you put water on for tea when you reach the kitchen.”

“I’ve got your back. What kind of tea?”

“I think the lemon ginger.”

“Okay. See you in a bit.”

Bard stroked Thran’s shoulder and leaned over to brush a kiss on his hair, then padded downstairs to start the children’s lunches and the communal porridge. The warm bedding and the complete lack of tension in Thran’s body sent him drifting for a bit, but eventually he dragged himself back to consciousness and fumbled out of bed. Shivering, he pulled on warm Henley, leggings, thick socks, and thicker sweater before shuffling into the bathroom to tend to necessities. As he surveyed himself in the mirror, he grinned at the faint circles under his eyes. Gods, no matter how dissipated he looked this morning, last night had been worth it. How Bard’s eyes had closed and his head had gone back to better savor Thran’s touch on his skin, his hair... how his breath had stuttered when Thran stroked his nipples... how he’d had trembled each time Thran had paused his caresses, anticipating Thran’s next touch... how he’d gasped when Thran had licked his straining cock...

Despite last night’s exertions, his cock stirred. How had such a mild, patient, gentle man turned
Thran into such a glutton in the bedroom? He washed his face and combed his hair, setting aside his musings about the pleasures of owning a certain metal sculptor to concentrate on the morning routine.

He came downstairs to the kitchen, where Bard pointed to the big mug of hot lemon-ginger tea waiting for him on the kitchen island.

“Slava bogam,” Thran breathed, wrapping cold hands around the mug and inhaling the fragrant steam. “Mmm. You are truly a saint. What do you make for the children’s lunches today?”

“We’re scraping the bottom of the barrel, given all the festivities this week. I hope Legolas likes peanut butter.”

“Yes, but I do not know whether he prefers it with jelly or not. What are our choices?”

“Tilda likes hers on soda crackers instead of bread, no jelly, banana on the side. Sigrid likes hers on wheat bread with raisins instead of jelly. Bain likes his on wheat bread with banana, grape jelly, or that chocolate hazelnut stuff, but we don’t have any of that. So Legs has options.”

“I will go ask him, so that it does not slow down the assembly line.”

“He’ll be down in a minute, so I can wait. Sit down and have your porridge. You had a hard night’s work.”

“It was not work,” Thran said, stroking Bard’s hip as he walked by him to stand before the cutting board where vegetables awaited. “Carrots and peppers for each?”

“Carrots are already peeled; they just need cutting up. A handful apiece.”

Thran chopped and packaged vegetable sticks into twists of waxed paper while Bard assembled Tilda’s crackers and Sigrid’s sandwich. This morning, the boys were down first, so Bain chose grape jelly over banana, and wheat bread rather than crackers.

“Wheat bread for me, please. Do we have any other kind of jelly?” Legolas asked, looking in the refrigerator. “What’s this? Oooh, blackberry! Can I have that instead of grape?”

“Hand it here,” Bard stuck out his hand, and Legolas put the jar into it. “One or two, Legs?”

“Two, please.”

“Two for me, too, Da,” Bain looked up from his porridge.

“I’ve already got both of yours done,” Bard assured his son, finishing Legolas’s two sandwiches with a few swipes of the knife. “What fruit, you two?”

“Pear for me,” Bain called.

“Clementine for me. I’ll get them. Tilda will want one, too, won’t she?”

“Sigrid, too, please. Thanks, Legs. Where are the girls this morning?”

“I’m right here,” Tilda announced, carrying her backpack. “Has anyone seen my History book?”

Bain craned his neck from the table. “Is that it in the solarium?”

“Thanks, Bain.”
“Where’s Sigrid?” Bard asked. “She’s going to be late.”

“She’s primping,” Bain snorted.

“For what?” Bard asked, stacking cookies on waxed paper.

“Not what, who. Finn Durinson, of course,” Bain snorted again.

“Ah, our fan of Russian hockey forwards makes an appearance today, then?” Thran asked, putting sandwiches and ice packs into lunch bags.

“He’s staying the weekend with Kíllian,” Legolas explained as he sat beside Bain with his bowl of porridge. “He’s coming out this afternoon. I think he might meet Kíllian and Tara after sport, so I guess Sigrid thinks she might see him then. I expect him to arrive with Kíllian and Tara Sunday when they come to fence with the Gondors here.”

Bard looked up. “Six of us, the Gondors, Finn, Kíllian, and Tara... that’s eleven. I’d better put a big pot of soup on for us, then.”

“Can you make that Indian chicken with the rice?” Bain asked.

“Sure. Is that good for everyone else?”

Amid murmurs of agreement, Sigrid bounced into the kitchen; her face was much brighter than it usually was on an early school morning. She wore the teal blue sweater tunic Bard had given her for Christmas over her blue jeans, her dark hair was pulled back into a pretty French braid, and she wore the blue beaded necklace Tilda had given her for Christmas. And... was that mascara on her eyelashes? A subtle twinkle of eye shadow on her eyelids? Thran smothered his smile, waiting to see what Bard had to say about his daughter’s efforts.

“Morning, all,” she said breathlessly, hurrying to dish up a bowl of porridge. “Sorry I’m late, Da.”

“I hear Finn will make an appearance this afternoon,” Bard observed, folding his packets of cookies and handing them to Thran to put in the lunch bags.

“Yeah, the boys made a big deal about it,” she said casually. “I likely won’t see him even if he gets to the school before the end of sport. We’re having a our first indoor track meet this afternoon, so I’ll be in the gym.”

Bard looked up. “You are? With another school? Can parents come?”

“This one’s just a practice to sort everyone out, so there won’t be anything to see. The first real meet is next week. It’d be neat if you came to that.”

“I’d like to. What day?”

“Wednesday.”

“I’ll be there,” Bard nodded.

“So if you’re going to be all hot and sweaty in the gym,” Bain needled, “how come you had to clog up the bathroom with all the primping?”

Sigrid ignored him in such a pointed fashion that Thran smothered a snicker.

“You look nice, Sig,” Bard said mildly, fixing Bain with a quelling stare.
“Thanks, Da. I have a presentation to do in English class. I want to look nice, because it’s to help us prepare for the college interviews that start next month.”

That gave Bard pause, and he looked at Thran in veiled surprise. “Um... college interviews?”

Sigrid nodded. “The guidance office has all kinds of programs and information about colleges, so I’m looking at lots of different ones. And there’s a lot of financial aid information, too. So I’m looking all of that, too... just to see what’s possible, what’s available, that kind of thing.”

Sigrid didn’t quite look at Bard with a pleading expression, but its intent was easy to divine. Thran put the next packet of cookies in a lunch bag.

“Your Da and I have talked about our good fortune that all of you are enrolled in such an excellent school. I am glad that you take advantage of what it offers, Sigrid. I am sure that it will help you find a good college that suits you. Perhaps in some kind of writing?”

Sigrid gave him a big smile. “There are a lot of fields where I could use my writing. I’ve read about being a museum curator, or an archeologist, or a science editor. There are a lot of other cool things, too.”

“We can go on college visits when the time comes,” Bard offered. “I can’t spring for an Ivy League or anything like that, but there are a lot of other possibilities. When you find the right school, we’ll make it happen.”

“I don’t want anything Ivy League, anyway,” Sigrid shook her head. “Something more practical and pragmatic. Oh, gods, look at the time! We’re going to be late!”

“Brush your teeth!” Bard shouted, as four children hurried to down the last bite of breakfast and dash upstairs. Thran hastily stuffed paper napkins into the lunch bags, closed them, and held them out as the children hurried back into the kitchen to collect their things. He and Bard pulled on boots and coats and gloves against the cold for the morning escort to the bus stop, then he and Bard waved as the bus pulled away. They had a couple of minutes’ chat with Rosie about their progress on the house, then headed back home.

“College already,” Bard murmured, as he shrugged off his coat and stepped out of his boots in the mudroom. “At least I’m in a better spot to make it happen now. In few months, I’ll be back to the metal, and I’ll be able to pay for a good school for Sig.”

“We already have enough money to pay for all the children to go to college, if they choose to,” Thran reassured Bard. “In a year, we will have even more, because you will have commissions by then.”

Bard gave Thran a grateful smile. “Thanks for saying that about the commissions. I hope I’ll be well back to the barn by then, and the market will be in the mood for my stuff.”

“Have you considered a talk with those art reps we’ve heard mentioned, Shire Hills?” Thran took the bowl of porridge that Bard handed him, and followed his husband to the kitchen table to eat. “Perhaps if you would talk to them now, they could start to work for you, so that when you are through what you think is necessary here in the house, you can begin work with an eye to what they have to say?”

“I have, and I will. A few more weeks here first. But it won’t be long.” Bard brought his tea to the table, and passed Thran the bottle of multivitamins, albeit with a rueful grin. “After last night, I don’t know whether I should keep giving you these.”
Thran snatched the bottle and clutched it to his chest as if it were filled with gold. “After last night, I will always take my vitamins. You were delicious. Besides, it will help me survive today’s class.”

“I thought you were skipping class today,” Bard gave him a concerned look. “Will you be all right?”

Thran waved a dismissive hand, then shook out a vitamin for himself and another for Bard. They both downed the vitamins with a few swallows of tea. “The rigors of schooling my husband are a delight, and far from the grind of a rigorous rehearsal schedule. I will be fine. Even if I were exhausted, I would still go today. My auditions begin next Tuesday, and it would not be proper if I skip a class so close to them. To skip class would not help me to prepare for them, either.”

“How many auditions do you have lined up so far?”

“Four. The first one is not one I seriously consider, but it will be good practice for the ones that follow. Two would be very nice positions, both with respected companies, if traditional. The fourth does not pay as well as the others, and is a much riskier proposition. But it is the one I have the most interest in.”

Bard put his elbows on his table to give Thran his full regard. “What about that one appeals to you?”

“Several things. First, there is a choreographer who works extensively with this company. I would like very much to work with him. He is from Montreal, and far from traditional. Some of his work is disturbing. All of it is difficult, both for the level of technique and the dramatic demands placed on the dancers. His choreography and my body suit each other very well. I have not worked with him before, but I sense that we could make each other’s career memorable if we collaborated. So of course that is a great attraction, despite the challenge.”

“Of course it is. Any good artist wants to stretch, to do something unexpected and new. What else?”

Thran sighed. “I am at the height of my physical abilities now. But I am realistic, Bard. I have perhaps only another six or seven years before my body can no longer perform at such a level. It is wise to consider now what to do once I no longer dance as well as I want. This company is only recently established, and it needs more financial backing. I consider if I should follow my fellow Latvian compatriot, the great Baryshnikov, and become a ballet director. If this choreographer and I make a good season, then perhaps we can make more than that.”

“You’re thinking about investing in this company, then.”

Thran nodded. “I want to see the financials first, of course. But I do consider it. I have already made inquiries.”

Bard nodded and didn’t ask more questions; if he had, Thran couldn’t have answered many of them. The inimitable Mr. Nori had not yet completed his examination of such things yet, but he’d report back when he’d done his usual thorough investigation.

“I do have one more reason.” Thran spooned up his porridge, then swallowed. “It is a purely selfish one, I admit. This small company is not in the city, but on the outskirts. It would mean a shorter commute, and a more pleasant one by far, so that I am not so much on the road. And if I choose to conduct master classes, I could conduct them there as well as here.”

“What do you think your chances are with all of these auditions?”

“I am strong, and fully healed. I am well respected, and known as a hard worker. I am happy and settled in my life with you and our children. So while a sure thing does not exist, while I cannot predict if I will match the needs of the companies who hold the auditions, I think I will have more
Bard nodded over his tea. “Then whatever you choose to do, cariad, I support. Make the most of whatever comes. I had an idea about that, by the way. We should visit the village chamber of commerce to see what their plans are. Maybe your idea about conducting master classes here would appeal to them. When I was in art school, the faculty and students worked with a nearby music school to put on public shows a few times a year. It pulled in people interested in both music and arts, so the art students made a few dollars selling artwork, and the music students got performance experience as well as gig money. It helped both schools more doing it together than separately. Maybe when you hold your master classes, some of the restaurants might want to offer deals, or the galleries might want to offer special discounts for attendees or observers or whatever, so everyone does a little better.”

“I like that,” Thran nodded vigorously. “All of the arts would support each other. Let us find out more about that.”

“Rosie will know. I’ll talk to her.”

“Good. We should have them to supper soon, too. But now, I must go to class.”

“And I’m off to Legolas’s room to paint. No more woodwork for a while!”

“Excellent!” Thran applauded. “I will be home near one, so after lunch, I want to help, if that would speed things.”

Bard snuck his hand across the table to curl his fingers around Thran’s. “I’m always glad to have company and whatever help you want to offer. But your auditions and dance prep come first for you right now. Painting and such comes second.”

“What you do does not matter less than my dance, lyubov moya.”

“You’re right. In the long run, it doesn’t. I finally got that in my head. I figured out that one of the many wonderful things about us is how well we complement each other. You’re the businessman for us. I run the house for us. You dance; I renovate, and will work metal before long. We both see to the children. We both play a lot of roles as we build our house of dreams. Right now, it’s important that you dance for our family, and I renovate. That’ll get us to the day when I’ll work metal for our family, too. It balances out.”


Bard laughed. “It’s tŷ o freuddwydion in Welsh.”

“Gods!” Thran winced, laughing. “Russian is hard enough to pronounce. I cannot imagine even how to spell such a thing as your Welsh.”

“It’s a jawbreaker,” Bard admitted. “The spelling’s worse. What do you expect for a language where W is a vowel? I think we’d better stick to your Russian. That sounds manageable. Dom Mechty?”

“Just so.”

“So let’s get you to the class, and me to the paint.”

They cleaned up the remains of breakfast together, then went upstairs to dress for their respective endeavors. In a few minutes, Thran was in his dance attire and had his bag packed for class. Bard
was in his painting clothes, ready to banish Legolas’s dingy walls and ceiling behind a coating of primer, but he walked downstairs to see Thran off. He offered a hug and a kiss goodbye to keep Thran warm on his journey, then headed back upstairs.

The commute into the city was typical of a rainy Friday morning – chaotic and snarled – but Thran paid it no mind. Bard had finally, finally realized his worth in the family he and Thran had forged, and that was no small blessing. His saint might never relax enough to take the having of money for granted, but at last he understood and believed that his contributions were just as important as Thran’s. The inconvenience of too many cars on the slippery roads could not ruin Thran’s elation about Bard’s new confidence.

Class was not as difficult as Thran had expected after spending last night in decadent celebration of his marriage. Once he fell into the ebb and flow of the movements, his body regained its vigor, and he enjoyed the work without concern. Afterwards, he shared a little of the gossip that pervaded the dancers’ world. Monsieur LePied’s class drew attendees from several ballet companies, and so the gossip was meatier than it was among dancers from a single company, so he had a sense of the state of several of them. Two were the companies with which he had auditions lined up in a week or so. There was also a little talk about the outré choreographer that so interested Thran, but he gave it little heed. He had heard enough of the silliness that had pervaded the gossip about him over the years to recognize the lack of facts when he heard it.

He changed out of his dance belt and tights for the drive home; soft jeans and regular underthings were always more comfortable than constricting practice wear. He drove carefully through the icy rain, but still made it home before one. He shed his coat and boots in the mudroom, calling to let Bard know he was back.

“Still upstairs!” Bard returned, so Thran washed out his water bottle and left it to dry in the kitchen before heading up.

“How is the painting – oh, I see for myself! So much brighter!” Thran looked around the room, impressed at what a difference plain white primer made. “It will soon be finished!”

“The ceiling’s done,” Bard said, leaning down from his ladder to give Thran a kiss. “The walls are primed, and I’m almost done priming the woodwork. Maybe I can get the two coats of wall paint on tonight, and do the woodwork tomorrow morning. I’ll sand and wax the floor tomorrow afternoon, and that’ll let Legolas move back in here tomorrow night.”

“That is very aggressive,” Thran looked around at the large room.

“We have a lot to do. If I can get the children’s rooms done soon, it’ll be better for them. They won’t mind living in a construction site so much once their private spaces are done.”

“I will help this afternoon,” Thran said firmly. “But for now, we need lunch. Are you at a point where you can stop now?”

“I have that strip of woodwork to go,” Bard pointed to the baseboard molding on the wall opposite the door. “Paint looks bad if you stop in the middle of a wall, so I’ll finish before I clean up.”

“Then I will assemble a good lunch for us. Tell me what is for supper, so that I choose something else.”

“It’s Friday, so I thought I’d make pizza for the children. I used to do that most Friday school nights as a treat for the children, plus pizza’s cheap to make compared to meat. I’ll mix up the dough after lunch, and it can rise while we paint. I can do a stir fry for you and me with chicken and vegetables,
if you don’t want pizza.”

“I would love to have the pizza, but as next week holds so many auditions, I will hold firm to my usual fare. I am sorry to put you to so much work, lyubov moya. I will have pizza once the auditions are over to celebrate.”

“Stir fry’s easy, angel. I’ll show you tonight, so you can make it for yourself. We always have that stuff in the fridge, so you’ll be all set.”

“Another cooking lesson – most welcome!” Thran grinned. “So I will find our lunch while you finish the trim.”

“Righto,” Bard agreed, and took up his brush again while Thran headed to the kitchen. He put on the kettle to simmer so that it’d be hot when they were ready for tea after lunch, then contemplated the choice of things for lunch. There was salad, of course, and chicken breast, of course, and while Bard would be happy with that, perhaps there was something a little more interesting he could make for his saint. He perused the pantry, and found a bottle of Thai peanut sauce. Could he use that to approximate the chicken satay he liked so much? The label listed a brief and unhelpful recipe about how to cook the chicken, but Thran’s chicken was already cooked, so could he just make the sauce? Or was the sauce all right to use out of the bottle, and needed only to be warmed? Bard would make quick work of it, but Thran wasn’t well versed enough to fathom it. At least the sauce didn’t have a lot of fat calories or too much sodium – Bard was careful about both of those – so he took it out to ask Bard.

He rummaged for the cooked chicken breast, the lettuce, the carrots, the peppers, and had everything on the counter when Bard came down with his brushes to wash in the mudroom.

“What are we having?” Bard asked as he went by.

“I hope we will have chicken to dip in peanut sauce. But perhaps I need a cooking lesson now to know if that is possible.”

“Okay, I’ll put the brushes in to soak and be right there.”

When Bard came back from cleaning his brushes, Thran showed him the bottle and explained what he hoped to make, and was gratified when Bard nodded. “That’s a good idea. We can cut up the chicken and heat it up, heat up the sauce as is, and we’ll be set. It’d be nice to have something warm on such a cold day.”

They divided up the tasks – Bard chopped the chicken and vegetables, and guided Thran through the rest so that he sorted out how to do them. Learning to cook, or at least make peanut sauce, was easy when the teacher was as easy-going as Bard was. The result was warm and far superior to plain, unadorned, cold chicken on dull salad.

Despite the warmth of chicken and tea, neither Thran nor Bard lingered over lunch. Bard was anxious to get as far as he could on Legolas’s room, so he and Thran quickly mixed up the pizza dough for tonight’s supper, then headed upstairs. Bard found another pair of his old construction pants and an equally old flannel for Thran to wear, for he had nothing so battered. Thran didn’t have any work boots, either, so he put on his hiking boots instead.

“We need to get you some good work boots, angel,” Bard commented, as he sat atop the ladder to cut the green paint in around the woodwork and windows. “You need the cushioning so standing isn’t so tiring, and you need the steel toes for protection.”
“We will add them to our list,” Thran said, admiring how Bard’s steady hands laid on the paint neatly, without smears on the woodwork.

“We need to add the list to our list,” Bard gave him a wry smile. “We still don’t have a place in the kitchen to write things down.”

“What about that paint I read about in the mail circular? It makes a wall into a chalkboard? We could paint the center panel of the pantry door with it, perhaps?”

“That’s a good idea. We can see what it says on the can the next time we’re at the homeowners’ mecca.”

The painting went quickly with the two of them working at it, Bard doing the edges that required a steady hand, and Thran rolling the rest where it didn’t matter if he were not as exact. In a couple of hours, they’d gone around the room once, then started again for the second coat. By the time the children came home from school, they had finished two of the four walls. The promise of Friday night pizza and no homework excited the children, so they were happy to entertain themselves until Thran and Bard finished the remaining two walls. By seven-thirty, Bard set the boys to cleaning the brushes, while Thran got the girls to help make the pizza. By the time the boys had finished the brushes, Bard had the toppings set out and the dough ready to be flattened. Each of the children patted out enough dough to fill half a cookie sheet, and chose toppings. As the pizza baked, Bard and Thran made their stir-fry, and soon everyone sat down to a late supper. Sigrid described how her presentation had gone, and the other children were full of conversation about their day. They were all settling into school well, and each of them was making new friends. It was good to hear so much laughter and animation around the table.

After supper, Sigrid retreated to the shower, then her room to talk to Finn on her mobile. Bain and Legolas opted for a video game, and Tilda crawled between Bard and Thran to watch Spirited Away yet again. Bard told him that this was one of Tilda’s favorites, and he watched with her in equal fascination as the tale unfolded of a small girl’s adventures in the bathhouse of the spirits. It had the same surreal sense of the fantastic as the tales he’d heard as a small child in Russia.

Bard was nearly asleep as the film ended, so Thran let his husband drowse undisturbed as he went upstairs with Tilda. He urged her into the shower, then checked on the boys in the children’s study. They had Legolas’s computer hooked up to one of the game consoles and were absorbed in some sort of mayhem – a post-apocalyptic disaster, most likely. He interrupted them briefly to tell them that Tilda was in the shower, and that they should follow her. He also explained Bard’s plans to paint the woodwork and sand the floor in Legolas’s room starting early tomorrow morning. Legolas was excited at the prospect of moving into his refinished room tomorrow, but Thran cautioned him of how much remained to be done, and how hard Bard was working to finish it. In time, Tilda exited the shower, so Thran tucked her in with Mr. Bun while Bain had his turn in the shower. Once Tilda was settled, Thran spent a few minutes talking with Legolas about the fencing they’d planned for Sunday. When Bain returned, Legolas headed for the shower, so Bain explained the game he and Legolas had been playing. Thran had a go, but he wasn’t very good at it, and by the time Legolas returned, Bain had killed Thran’s avatar three times in the space of fifteen minutes.

“I make a poor zombie killer,” Thran held up his hands and shrugged. “When this zombie apocalypse comes, we will have to rely on the expertise of both of you, I fear. Though perhaps I can be useful with the cutting off of heads. That is how one kills a zombie, yes?”

“That’s one way, but you can’t let them scratch you, or you turn into a zombie, too,” Bain explained, and then he and Legolas launched into a discussion of the best way to cut the head off a zombie without getting scratched, which was entirely too bloodthirsty for Thran’s preference. Laughing, he
told the boys to finish their game in the next few minutes.

“There will still be zombies to kill tomorrow, I am sure, so sleep now. Remember that Bard will begin work on the woodwork tomorrow early, so that the paint dries in time to allow him to finish the floor in the afternoon.”

“Yes, Father, yes, Thran,” the boys replied.

“Now, I will bring Bard to wish you good night.”

He stuck his head in Sigrid’s room, where she still talked with Finn, and mouthed that it was time to retire. She nodded, so Thran returned to the sitting room. He sat beside his husband and put a light hand on Bard’s thigh to rouse him.

“The children are ready for sleep, lyubov moyo,” he said, when Bard stirred.

“I think I’m ahead of them,” Bard grinned sheepishly. “What time is it?”

“Nearly eleven.”

Bard winced. “I fell asleep for longer than a few minutes, then. I’ll head upstairs to tell everyone goodnight. Tilda’s probably already asleep.”

“I tucked her in with Mr. Bun. The boys settle. Sigrid likely still talks with the hockey fan.”

Bard snickered. “They’re funny. We’ll see how Sunday goes. I hope the Gondors aren’t put off at the state of the place.”

“The state of the place improves by the hour. Do not concern yourself.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s shoulder in appreciation, and heaved himself off the sofa. “Let’s settle the clan, then I’m for bed in short order after them. I have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“It will all get done, lyubov moyo. Do not worry.”

They headed upstairs, bid the children goodnight, and were soon in the shower. Thran sent Bard to bed while he dried his hair; by the time he came out of the bathroom, Bard was nearly asleep again, stirring only a little when Thran sat on the side of the bed. Smiling, Thran curled carefully around him without rousing him, and settled comfortably under the covers.

Last night, Thran had owned his saint. Tonight, it was his privilege to treasure him.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

While the saint labors, the cherubs stage a riot. How will an angel cope?

After the storm, royal guests grace Clan Ffyrnig's ballroom for a round of fencing.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

Eh bien, mon affamé de fils = All right, my hungry son (French)

The morning was still quiet when Bard ventured into Legolas’s room to paint the woodwork. Thran had opted to practice his barre in the ballroom this morning to save the hour and a half commute to and from the city, so he’d have more time to help Bard get ready for tomorrow’s fencing extravaganza. The house would benefit from general tidying and sweeping to make it more presentable for guests, and there was cooking and baking that Bard wanted to do in addition to finishing Legolas’s room. So after seeing Thran off to the ballroom, Bard downed a quick bowl of porridge and brought his tea upstairs.

He started on the baseboard trim first, so it would be dry by the time he wanted to work on the floor this afternoon. The house was quiet and serene as he wielded his brush, and he took pains to be just as quiet so as not to disturb the children as they slept. When Thran came upstairs with bowl of porridge in hand, he’d completed the baseboard and the crown moldings, which just left around the doors and windows to do. He kept working as Thran sat with him as he ate his porridge, then disappeared into the bathroom to clean up from his exertions at the barre. At last he finished the first coat of gloss white on all of the woodwork. Without pause, he launched into the second coat for the base molding and managed to get through that before the children got up. It was just as well; he was too hungry to keep going. He headed downstairs to fix their breakfasts and to get something for himself. To his surprise, it was lunchtime, so he put on a big kettle of dirty rice with sausage, and set out a platter of veg and hummus for everyone to nibble on while the rice simmered. There was still enough chicken breast, so he warmed that with the last of the peanut sauce to accompany a good spinach and veg salad for Thran. When everything was ready, he was grateful to sink into his chair and attack a bowl of the concoction in minutes, barely tasting it, relieved to quiet the gnawing in his stomach. He finally slowed down to eat a couple of clementines.

“You know the routine this afternoon, all,” he said, as he brought out the last of the cookies and passed them down the table. He’d have to make some more tomorrow to carry them into the next week. The children groaned, drawing his grin. “That’s right, homework. We have guests coming tomorrow for lunch and fencing, so get your work done beforehand. That way, if you want to enjoy the company a little longer, you don’t have to say no because you’ve got work to do.”

Did Sigrid’s eyes brighten just the least little bit? Tomorrow, he’d take a gander at her and Finn to
gauge just how serious this budding romance was.

“I will be the homework help today,” Thran said from the other end of the table. “Bard works hard to finish Legolas’s room, so we will see to the cleanup here, and then to the homework. So, what wonders of the world will we look at today?”

Thran waved his hand at Bard, so he headed back upstairs to finish the woodwork.

Two hours later, he was through the crown molding, window trim, and door molding. He’d clean the brushes and then head back up to start on the floor. Thank the gods all that took was mineral spirits, extra fine steel wool, and then paste wax –

The bag of extra fine steel wool had only one wad left. He’d have to make a quick trip to the homeowners’ mecca for more.

Bard sighed, but out of steel wool was out of steel wool. It wouldn’t be so bad – while he was out, he’d stop at the market to get enough chicken for tomorrow’s lunch so it could marinate all night in the Indian seasonings the children liked so much. He ducked into the bedroom, stuffed his wallet and keys into his jeans pockets, grabbed the paintbrushes, and headed downstairs.

The older children were still at the kitchen table, working on their homework. Thran was in the sitting room with Tilda. Shoes off, Thran sat on the rug in a wide side split, leaning forward on his elbows as he looked at Bard’s book about Islamic tessellations. Tilda sat on the other side of the book with a pad of paper, drawing shapes like the tessellations in the book.

“You make that look comfortable,” Bard ran a hand through his hair.

Thran looked up with a smile. “It is. Tilda and I think we should make a mosaic like one of these for the solarium. And do you know she does a very good almost split?”

“Yeah, I do!” Tilda smiled, sticking her legs out to the side like Thran’s. She didn’t have quite the hundred-eighty degree angle that Thran had, but it was respectable. Bard’s hamstrings ached in sympathy, but neither Tilda nor Thran showed any discomfort. “We’ve invented a new yoga pose. It’s called Road Kill Asana.”

She flopped forward, lying flat on the floor between her outstretched legs. Thran flopped forward as well, drawing Bard’s appreciative laugh. “You both look like road kill, you do. At least you smell better.”

Tilda giggled. “That’s good. I don’t want to smell like that!”

“Can you wrangle things here a little longer, Thran?” Bard asked. “I’m out of the steel wool I need to finish the floor, and I need to hit the market so we have enough chicken for tomorrow.”

“We are quite fine here,” Thran sat back up. “The painting is done, then.”

“All done. The floor won’t take too long once I have the steel wool.”

“That is wonderful. I will see to things here, and you get what you need.”

“Okay. Little doll, be your own sweet self, and I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Okay, Da.” Tilda got up to kiss Bard’s cheek, and Thran got up after her. They trailed him into the kitchen, where Sigrid was helping Bain and Legolas with a math problem.
“Off to get more steel wool for the floor, and chicken for lunch tomorrow. Anyone need anything else at the market while I’m there?”

“Milk,” both Bain and Legolas chorused.

“And orange juice,” Legolas amended.

“Oatmeal,” Sigrid added.

“Pickles?” Tilda asked in a hopeful voice. “And bread.”

Bard grinned ruefully as he gave Thran his regard. “Anything for you, angel?”

Thran colored; it was the first time Bard had used his pet name around the children, and the term met with some surreptitious wide eyes and smothered smiles, especially from Legolas. “I regret to say that we could use a little more broccoli.”

“Maybe I’ll just do the week’s shopping,” Bard decided. “All right, back soon. How’s the homework going? Almost done?”

“I’m done,” Tilda announced; the other children were almost through.

“Okay, keep plugging away. Be good for Thran.”

As Bard pulled on his coat and headed out to the truck, he didn’t suppress a wide grin. How long would it take before one of the children made a crack about living with an angel in the house?

* * *

Homework resumed when Bard headed out on his errands. Thran went back to the sitting room with Tilda, and the three older children went back to their studies. Whatever math question the boys had, it was a vexing one, because Sigrid explained it patiently more than once. Algebra, Sigrid’s favorite trigonometry, geometry – none of them made sense to Thran. He was very good with the math of finance, and had recently discovered that he was nimble enough to resize a recipe, but as he’d never studied the higher forms, they were beyond him. He listened as Sigrid explained the problem once again.

“That’s why they give you two equations,” Sigrid pointed out. “Two variables, two equations. So you juggle one of the equations around to put x on one side and y on the other, then you substitute the value for x into the second equation, then solve for y. That gives you a number. Then you put the number back in the first equation in place of the y, so you can get a number for x.”

“Easy for you to say,” Bain muttered.

“But why do you have to put the x on one side and the y on the other? There’s a two that way,” Legolas groaned.

“So you move the two on the other side, and just leave the x.”

“Like this?”

“No,” Sigrid replied. Her voice had gotten sharper. “That’s a multiply. It’s a multiply on the x side,
so you have to divide both sides by the two, so it’s a divide on the y side.”

“But –”

“This is dumb,” Bain groaned. “You don’t make any sense, Sig.”

“I make perfect sense. It’s you two who don’t make any sense. You aren’t thinking about the problem.”

Legolas tsked. “I’m going upstairs. Maybe if I stare at it a while in my room, it’ll make sense. Oh – I forgot. I can’t go in my room. Ugh. It takes a long time to finish a room.”

“Da’s working on it as hard as he can,” Sigrid bridled. “He can’t work any harder.”

“Yeah, Legs, he’s working pretty hard,” Bain added reluctantly. “He did your room before mine and Til’s, didn’t he?”

Tilda pushed her drawing paper aside and trotted into the kitchen. “It isn’t fair that my Da is working so hard on your room first, and you don’t even appreciate it!”

“I wasn’t criticizing!” Legolas protested. “And he didn’t do my room first! He did Sigrid’s first, and then the study!”

“I did a lot of my room myself!” Sigrid flared.

“Yeah, but you didn’t give us a chance to sort out whose room went first.” Bain retorted, drawing Thran’s wince. “You just went ahead and did it, Sig. That wasn’t fair, either.”

“At least I did something, Bain! You and Legs just want Da to do it all for you!”

“What’re you yelling at us for?” Bain shot back. “Tilda doesn’t do much, either, and no one thinks anything about that!”

Tilda was indignant. “That’s not fair, Bain! I clean my room better than you do, and I help with the dishes –”

“Oh, so you admit you and Legs don’t do anything!” Sigrid yelled, her temper finally in full ire. “All the two of you do is boop and beep all night on that stupid game –”

“It’s not stupid!” Legolas protested angrily. “And it’s not all night –”

“Hey! Sigrid, you interrupted me!” Tilda stamped.

Thran scrambled to his feet. The fracas was escalating, and it was time to put his rudimentary parenting skills to work. He swept into the kitchen, arms akimbo.

“Stop! Stop this instant! All of you!”

“Father, she said that I –”

“Silence!” Thran barked, his best Prince of Ice glare at full intensity. As he skewered each of the children with that look, they subsided with abashed looks at the table or the floor, rather than at him or each other.

“Such a fuss you make about so many things!” he growled into the silence, hands gesticulating. “And so much you leave me to sort out, things you should already know. Bain and Legolas, Sigrid
was kind to try to help you with the math. It is not her fault that math is not so easy to understand, so be glad she tries to help you.

“Legolas, I am sure you meant no criticism of the one who is the heart of our family. He works very hard, so hard that he wears himself out to see to us. Recall that and be more tactful when you speak of his efforts to those who love him.

“Sigrid, you were kind to help the boys, and yes, you did much of the work on your room. But appreciate that others wait for their turns, too.

“Tilda, it is good of you to speak up for your Da, and for you to help in many ways. But it does not help to add shouts to an argument already underway. It is to pour gasoline onto the fire, yes?

“So all of you said things you did not mean because you were angry, and all of you were not so kind as you could be to each other. To make the apology to one another is something you all must do. Now, please.”

He waited, arms folded over his chest. Who would make the first move?

After many seconds, Sigrid heaved a sigh. It was only a little theatrical, and more to cover up her embarrassment than anything else. “I’m sorry I interrupted you, Tilda. And I’m sorry I snapped at you, Legolas, and you, too, Bain.”

No one else moved, until Legolas glanced up. Thran turned the full force of his glare on his son, who gulped.

“I’m – I’m sorry, all of you. Your Da works very hard, and I just meant that it was a lot of work that he had to do on my room, and that it took a long time to do it all. I wasn’t criticizing him because there’s so much work. I wasn’t.”

Murmurs went among the other three children, varying degrees of acceptance.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Legolas,” Tilda ventured. “I thought you were mad at Da.”

“I wasn’t. I really wasn’t. I... just didn’t think.”

“I didn’t think, either,” Sigrid said. “About my room, I mean. I just was excited to be here, and I thought I was helping to do as much of it as I could... I wasn’t trying to make the rest of you wait.”

Bain was the last one, and his expression was as chastened as everyone else’s when he looked around. “I’m sorry I added to the mess, too. Da works hard for all of us. I just don’t understand this math, and I took it out on everyone. I’m sorry, all.”

“Very nice,” Thran nodded, as the children uncoiled. “So we have restored harmony, and I can be the benevolent angel again instead of the devil, yes?” That got him four surprised looks. “But there is a core to this that would be good to discuss.”

“What’s that?” Legolas’s brow wrinkled.

“You all said how hard Bard works for us. Have you noticed all he does for us, how hard he does more than paint and sand and all such things? The food he cooks, the laundry he washes and dries, the shopping he does, even now? He is our saint, gladly so, without complaint. He works harder than any of us, and now he works not only to finish your room, Legolas, but also to make the preparations for tomorrow’s fencing and lunch for us. That is something that we all should help with. So, finish the homework quickly, and then we will divide up the things that we can do to help the heart of our
family. What is left for you to do? Tilda, I know you are done already.”

“I’m done, too,” Sigrid confirmed.

“Just this math for Bain and me,” Legolas added.

“Then here is my direction – Sigrid, be so good as to write out all the steps for a problem similar to
the one in the boys’ assignment. Boys, you will follow these steps to see if they solve your difficult
problem. Then we will plan our attack to prepare for tomorrow.”

“Yes, Ada, yes, Thran, yes, Father,” went around the table.

While Sigrid worked with the boys, Thran and Tilda went into the sitting room to tidy, dust, and
vacuum. By the time they were done, Sigrid’s painstaking, step-by-step explanation had finally
registered, and Bain and Legolas were able to complete their worksheets. While the older children
packed their things away, Thran considered what they should do next.

Renovation? No, that was best left to Bard – Thran was prudent enough to stick only to tasks he
understood. So he had the children marshal the mountain of laundry, sort it, and get the first load in
the washer. He sent the boys into the main room to tidy the remaining boxes there, then to sweep all
the floors on the lower level, including the ballroom. Tilda watered the plants in the solarium, swept
the solarium floor, turned on the dishwasher, and tidied her room. After tidying her room, Sigrid
offered to bake a cake for tomorrow’s lunch, so she began that while Thran put away things in the
kitchen. Sigrid gave him another cooking lesson, explaining about greasing pans and preheating the
oven, then he swept the floor while she washed and wiped the baking things. When the boys were
through with the sweeping, they went upstairs to tidy their rooms. By the time Bard clattered into the
mudroom laden with bags, things were well in hand, and the house smelled of pastry.

“I’m back!” Bard called, carting several bags of groceries in both arms into the kitchen. “Oh, you’re
right here, Thran. Mmm, something smells good.”

Thran nodded as he took some of the bags from Bard to set them on the kitchen island. “Welcome
home, lyubov moya. Are there more things to come inside?”

“More groceries. I did the week’s shopping since we were low on so many things. Where are the
children?”

Thran’s grin was likely smug. “They do penance. There was a small... meltdown, but all is resolved.
They have started the laundry, made the cake for tomorrow, and cleaned the downstairs. They tidy
their rooms now.”

Bard hesitated as he put bags on the island. “A meltdown? About what? It must have been epic, if
they’re doing laundry, baking, and cleaning.”

“Nothing of consequence. For now, merely enjoy the fruits of their regret.”

He gave Bard a wink as he went to the kitchen doorway that led to the central hall. “Children, Bard
is home! Please come to help with the groceries!”

He was well pleased when all of the children came quickly, Bain and Legolas to bring in the rest of
the groceries, Sigrid to take her cake out of the oven, and Tilda to climb onto the stool at the end of
the island to help unpack the bags. Bard watched all of this bustle with a bemused expression, but
wisely didn’t protest or question. He merely leaned over the cake pan to sniff.

“Smells good, Sig. What kind did you make?”
“Marble, chocolate and orange.” She slid a sheepish expression at Thran. “The boys and Tilda like that.”

Thran gave her a wink, which Bard noticed but let pass without comment.

“I like that kind, too. Chocolate icing?”

“Of course. Is there any other kind?”

“No,” Bain wheezed, heaving three heavy bags on the island. “Smells good, Sig!”

“It does,” Legolas was quick to second, coming behind Bain with the last of the bags. “We got all the bags out of the back, Bard. Were there any more?”

“Just the steel wool and the small can of paint in the front seat,” Bard asked, eyeing Thran at Legolas’s conciliatory tone.

“I’ll get them,” Legolas scampered out.

“Lock it when you come in, please,” Bard called, which met with a wave in reply.

“Now, we unload the groceries,” Thran directed, as Legolas came back inside with the bag from the homeowners’ mecca. It held enough steel wool for an entire ballet corps, and a small can of the chalkboard paint that Thran had read about. “And after that, Bard, the troops will help you with Legolas’s floor to finish it quickly, so that you have a well deserved rest before supper.” He looked around at the children. “Yes?”

Trading more sheepish looks, the children nodded quickly. “Yes, Thran, yes, Ada, yes, Father.”

Thran gestured as if he were a ballet master directing the corps. “Eh bien, mes enfants. Commençons!”

Tilda looked at the others, saw that they were unpacking the groceries, and leaned towards Legolas to whisper. “What does that mean? Commençons?”

“We begin,” Legolas whispered back. Tilda’s mouth made a silent O, and she took the box of oatmeal from him to take into the pantry without further delay.

Bard put both hands over his mouth, fighting hard not to laugh. “Um, you’ve got things well in hand, then.”

“We do. So upstairs with you. I shall bring nos enfants upstairs shortly, yes? So that they can help?”

“Um, that sounds good,” Bard nodded. “I’ll... just hang up my coat and take off my boots, and I’ll get the floor set up for our troops.”

He disappeared into the mudroom, returned to grab the packages of steel wool, and hurried upstairs. Thran followed him into the central hall in time to see him standing beside Hope the Lope, consumed in silent laughter. At the sound of Thran’s soft footstep, he turned.

“Oh, ye gods and little fishhooks!” he whispered in a strangled tone, trying to control his hilarity. “What did they do?”

“Nothing of consequence, my saint. They sniped at each other because the math is a frustration, and their attention span is short. I did not have to glare but the once. And then they were reminded of how much you do for us, and so I took advantage of their realization to prepare the house for
tomorrow. Now, we will help you finish Legolas’s floor, and then all will be ready for a rest until supper.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Bard wiped tears of helpless laughter from his eyes. “Nothing like a trial by fire to find out whether you’ve got the chops to be a good parent, or if you’re just a doormat.”

Thran arched a single eyebrow at his husband. “I have been called many things, but doormat has never been one of them.”

“I believe it,” Bard breathed. He leaned in for a quick kiss, then headed upstairs.

Thran headed back to the kitchen, smiling. No doormat, indeed.

* * *

Bard’s hilarity calmed as he gathered up the drop cloths on Legolas’s floor, folding them to be ready for the next room. Thran’s troops came up shortly, and Bard showed everyone how to lightly scrub a section of floor with steel wool dipped in mineral spirits, then wipe off the residue, then rub in the paste wax with a cloth, then buff the wax until it gleamed. With six of them working at it, it was done quickly, and they all stood back to admire the reclaimed room. The walls were a yellower green than the one that Sigrid had chosen for her room, but it looked just as good with the white ceiling and trim, and the cleaned and polished oak floor. Legolas was eager to move his things out of the children’s study and back into his room, so with everyone’s help the room was his again in a few more minutes. He had a nice rug from his room in Thran’s apartment, and comfortable linens, so as the indirect afternoon light streamed in through the two big windows, the room was ready to welcome Legolas back.

“So can mine be next, Da?” Bain asked, even before Legolas had the last of his things out of the children’s study.

“Tcha,” Thran tsked, looking up from the floor where he was plugging in the lamp beside Legolas’s bed. “Let your Da have two deep breaths before you put him to work again.”

“Maybe I should work on the children’s bathroom first,” Bard pretended to muse. “It needs a lot of work.”

“No, no!” Tilda and Bain chorused, drawing laughter. “Our rooms first!”

“Why can’t my room be next?” Tilda said, appealing to Bard. “Why Bain’s?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Bard replied, looking at his youngest children. “It’s true, someone has to go next, and someone has to wait until last. So I am prepared to offer a prize to whoever goes last.”

“A prize? What kind of prize?” Bain demanded.

“Tilda, if you go last, you can choose three books from the used bookstore in the village. Bain, if you go last, you can choose two used video games from the game store.”

“Sweet!” Bain looked gleefully at Legolas. “I could get that alien zombie game we wanted, Legs!”
“Three books? Any kind I want?” Tilda bit her lip, sorely tempted. “Some of those fairytale ones? Or maybe some books about drawing?”

“Those would be nice,” Bard agreed. “Any takers?”

“I’ll go last,” Tilda decided. “Your room can be next, Bain.”

“Okay, Bain, your room will be next. Thanks, Til. Next weekend, we’ll go to the bookstore for you to choose your books.”

If Bain looked disappointed about not getting the video games, at least he was pleased that he’d have a refinished room before next weekend. Tilda smiled, thinking about the fun she’d have choosing her books.

It wasn’t quite time for supper yet, so Sigrid iced her cake, and Bard mixed up the marinade for the Indian chicken, filling the biggest bowl in the kitchen with the pieces to stash in the fridge overnight. He had a brief rest in the sitting room with Tilda and Thran looking at the tessellation book, considering whether they could make one out of tile for the solarium. But soon enough, it was time for supper. Thran helped Bard bake pork chops with herbs, mash potatoes, and steam their usual wide variety of vegetables.

After supper, Sigrid retreated for more conversation with Finn. Tilda wanted to draw more of the tessellations from Bard’s book, so she curled in Bard’s chair to draw while the boys, Thran, and he watched the Bruins - Maple Leafs hockey game on television. Anticipating tomorrow’s guests, Bard and Thran made sure the children cycled through the shower early. Because tomorrow was one of the rare days that Thran would not spend the morning at the barre, they planned a good breakfast that would carry them through the first rounds of fencing, with a late lunch at two.

When Bard crawled into bed with Thran near midnight, he snuggled into his angel’s embrace with a glad sigh. Despite the help that Thran had mustered to help him complete Legolas’s floor, he was tired. Still, he wasn’t too tired to savor a little conversation with his husband.

“So tell me what happened when I went shopping this afternoon.”

“It was only as I said, my saint. Math was a confusion, Sigrid tried to help, the boys vented at her, she vented back. The melee expanded so that Tilda felt obligated to defend her honor, and so I swept in as the angel of justice to calm the waters.”

Bard snickered sleepily. “A mixed metaphor if ever I heard one.”

“I dispensed the storm, regardless of the metaphor,” Thran waved a hand in dismissal. “Afterwards, I provided the means to for them to dispense their chagrin.”

“Did you gesticulate?”

Thran waved his hand again. “I was emphatic. What is this gesticulate?”

“It’s what you do when you get excited. You wave your hands, your accent gets a lot deeper, and you talk fast. It’s endearing.”

Thran sniffed. “The children did not seem to think so.”

“They wouldn’t. But I would. When you made such a fuss about my stitches, it was because you cared about me. I loved you for it, but it was still funny.”
“You have a perverse sense of humor.”

“I also have excellent taste in husbands.”

A snort of laughter was soft against his hair. “You certainly do. And so do I.”

Bard grinned. “Then we’re both happy, aren’t we?”

“So we are.” Lips pressed kiss against his hair. “It is something to marvel, every day that passes.”

Stroking Thran’s chest, Bard closed his eyes and savored the warmth of the long, elegant body that lay beside him. “May it always be so.”

The arms that tightened around him proved that Thran was of like mind.

* * *

Sunday could have been a holiday. Rather than labor at the barre or in class, Thran had the rare delight to indulge with Bard before rising. When they did finally clamber out of bed, Bard put together a delicious breakfast – cinnamon raisin muffins, a pair of egg puffs with various toppings, and fruit – that he was glad to devour as eagerly as the children. All was cleaned up by the time the first of their guests came to call.

Thran was not surprised that the trio of Finn, Killian, and Tara appeared earlier than expected. Finn’s pleasure at seeing Sigrid again was just as clear as Sigrid’s was to see him. Finn wasn’t in his hockey jersey this morning; he looked handsome in a blue flannel shirt and hoodie over his blue jeans and black boots, his long blond locks topped with a slouchy knitted hat. Sigrid, too, had dressed up, resorting to her blue Christmas sweater, leggings, and boots, but her dark hair was loose about her shoulders. They greeted each other with more bright eyes and smiles than words, sliding furtive glances at each other when they thought no one watched them. But someone did – it was funny to watch Bard give his daughter’s beau a more than casual once-over. Their oldest child would not be a child much longer, and while Bard was pleased to see her blossom, he was still the protective father. There would not be any disappearing into the barn for this pair – they had to make do with the sitting room or the solarium as the site of their conversation.

Tara and Killian were a delight. She was very tall, very slender, and very beautiful, with long, red hair that fell nearly to her hips, and clear green eyes. She bore herself like a fencer, balanced and alert, but with a quiet sense of humor and a gravity that was beyond her fourteen years. She was a devoted fencer, and spoke well of the Gondors to Thran. In contrast, Killian was a year younger and several inches shorter than his girlfriend, dark eyed, with curly black hair only partially corralled in a messy knot atop his head, leaving many strands to fall in his eyes. He had a small hoop earring in one ear that completed the image of him as the dashing Irishman. He was always laughing, always smiling mischievously, with many a funny story to tell, most of which seemed to reveal both his lack of regard for his own safety, and his willingness to laugh at himself. If Thran had to guess, he expected Tara to be the cool, cerebral fencer, and Killian the fiery, impulsive one.

Legolas, Killian, and Tara were still sprawled on the floor of the ballroom to chat when the Gondors arrived. Thran knew both by reputation only, having seen Aragorn compete in the championship he and Legolas had attended a few years ago. He’d never seen Arwen fence in person, though he and Legolas had seen several of her matches on the Internet. As Bard led them into the ballroom, the pair
seemed so down to earth, both soft spoken, though the wide smile on Aragorn’s face to see the three young fencers spoke volumes about his passion for his sport, as well the teaching of it. Bard brought his children and Finn into the ballroom for introductions, and set down a big basket of muffins and a pitcher of juice for everyone to enjoy as they limbered for the fencing. Thran and Legolas had already eaten muffins at breakfast, but that didn’t stop Legolas from helping himself to several as he warmed up. He helped himself to two more just before he pulled on his mask.

“These are different, Father,” Legolas shrugged, as if that explained everything. “This one is orange cranberry, and this one is corn onion. They’re both good.”

“Eh bien, mon affamé de fils,” Thran shook his head. “En garde.”

They were the first pair to square off, and Thran was glad to begin with an opponent he knew well. He was likely the poorest fencer on the floor, though that did not concern him. Two of the other five were among the best in the world, and the other three were much younger. Perhaps he could best three of those five with his experience, but he didn’t expect to have any such luck against the Gondors.

The next two hours were among the most enjoyable he’d had while fencing. The Gondors were both superb fencers, but their further skill was their teaching. Invariably, when a touch was scored, one or the other explained all the whys and wherefores about it. Even when the touch was against them, they made the same study, and often revisited the blow to see how to defend against or further press the attack. Kilian was a saber fencer, rather than an épée, but he willingly took up either blade as requested. He was very fast, had good instincts, and soaked up everything Aragorn and Arwen had to tell him. As he expected, Tara was a less impulsive, more thinking fighter, but she had an instinct about her opponent that made it very hard to score against her.

When Arwen paired Legolas, Thran put up his blade to watch. He was proud of his son’s skill, but even more of how fast he applied all he learned. When Legolas managed to score once against her, she complimented him warmly, and explained to the other fencers how he’d gotten past her guard. Legolas retired for the next pair flushed at his accomplishment, reddening at Thran’s praise.

The children were not the only ones to benefit from the Gondors’ instruction. When Thran fenced against the young fencers, he held his own respectfully. Against the Gondors, however, he had a much harder time – the only advantage he had was his height, for he was six inches taller than Aragorn, and eight inches taller than Arwen. Even his longer reach gave him little advantage. Still, no matter how many times the Gondors scored against him, he was pleased to fare as well as he did against such skilled opponents, and to take the lessons they offered.

Everyone was well exercised and well ready for lunch by two o’clock. The aroma of Indian spiced chicken and jasmine rice had tantalized them for half an hour, so when Bard stuck his head into the ballroom to say that lunch was ready, the irrepressible Kilian yelped in delight. Tara rolled her eyes, but she didn’t resist when Kilian pulled her after Bard into the kitchen. The feast that awaited them was a massive pot of rice, an equally massive pot of spiced chicken simmered so long in its spices that it had turned bright orange, and salad. On the table, warm naan awaited them.

By crowding close, everyone managed to fit around the kitchen table. How Kilian managed to laugh so much and tell so many stories while he inhaled so much food was laughable.

“He’s quite the scamp, our Kilian,” Aragorn said quietly to Thran. “But he has a good heart, and he is a very good fencer. He’s an even better archer.”

“So Legolas tells me,” Thran murmured. “That is a big change for Legolas. At his previous school, he was not welcome because of his age. His older teammates resented him for taking a place they
thought belonged to one of the older members."

“I gathered as much,” Aragorn nodded. “Your son is quiet, but not only because that is his nature. He was careful not to say too much at first, I thought likely because he waited to see how a new student would fare with the others.”

“He mentioned early on that Tara and Killian made him most welcome. You have taught them well.”

“They have welcoming personalities that came before my teaching. It was Tara who spoke to me of what she thought Legolas’s previous experience might have been.”

“Then Legolas and I both owe her a debt of gratitude.”

“Your son is very skilled. If he were old enough, he would be qualified to try for a spot on the Olympic team he seeks, though I think it would be a long shot. When he is old enough, I hope he will be even more qualified, and his chances will be much higher. Would you consider allowing him to train more extensively than twice a week? Arwen and I hold a Saturday session for those who seek more advanced training. He would be a welcome addition.”

“I will speak to Legolas, but I expect that he would be eager to join you. He has enjoyed his lessons with you so far. He trained for three years with Seamus Finn, who nurtured him well. His instructor this year, however, was not a good fit, and Legolas was discouraged.”

“Ludwig Schroeder, I believe,” Aragorn nodded. “I’m aware of him, and I well understand why Legolas didn’t take to him. Legolas is well disciplined, and does not need to be told twice to do something. Master Finn was the perfect guide for him. Master Schroeder is... a more pedantic teacher. Not a style that suits a finesse fencer such as Legolas.”

“I will speak to Legolas, then. I know he will love to learn more, and I thank you for considering him.”

“You would be welcome at our session, too, if you are inclined, Thran,” Aragorn smiled. “You are very good for as little as you say you practice. If you would like to sharpen your skills, you would be welcome.”

Thran’s smile was gratified. “I thank you for the compliment. Perhaps as the rigors of my dancing allow, I will do so. The day is not far off when Legolas’s épée will best mine. Perhaps your classes will help me to delay it a little, but nothing will for long.”

“He has the potential to be excellent,” Aragorn shrugged. “I know you are proud of him. You have reason to be.”

“I do,” Thran replied simply. “He is my treasure.”

As Aragorn got up to help himself to more of the chicken, Thran’s smile was broad. Life had grown better every day since he and his family had begun their new life in this house. Today’s triumph, however, to know his son was valued and appreciated for his talents where before he had not, was one of the best.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

The angel fences, the saint draws, and another room receives its christening. Which one will it be?

Chapter Notes

This isn't a very explicit chapter, but a nicely warm one nevertheless :-).}

Bard was pleased to see everyone enjoy his bountiful lunch. Despite the crowded quarters around the kitchen table, it was replete with laughter and animated discussion as well as good food. Kíllian, the short, stocky rascal who had a romantic Irish glamour about him, kept everyone laughing with one funny story after another. If the group got back to fencing after lunch, Bard intended to pull out his sketchpad and capture the boy in action; fencing was one of the few things Kíllian was serious about, but even in the heat of action his spritely personality showed through.

He’d have no end of worthy subjects for his pencil, to be honest. Kíllian was the clown of the group, but Tara had a grace about her that reminded him of the ballerinas he’d watched in Thran’s ballet class. When she fenced, she was so balanced, so centered, rarely caught off-guard, a formidable warrior. At ease, however, Kíllian made her laugh until she lost her serious mien, and she seemed to be a more typical teenaged girl. If the way her eyes softened when she looked at him were any indication, she was very fond of the scamp. On the surface, Kíllian only seemed less bedazzled than his girlfriend, but Bard knew better. How many times had he looked after Thran in the same longing, infatuated way? He hoped he covered it better than a thirteen-year-old boy mooning over his tall girlfriend.

Finn was much more serious than his cousin, but he was two years older, and very much at pains to be on his good behavior, given his interest in Sigrid. He’d shaken Bard’s hand firmly, met his eyes directly, and was the face of courtesy. As if knowing Bard’s eye was on him, he’d been to content to sit with Sigrid to watch the fencing, though neither their attention nor conversation was often on the matches. As they sat together during lunch, it was funny to watch the boy so courteously ask Sigrid if she wanted more salad, or could he fetch her a little more chicken and rice, or perhaps a piece of the marble cake, and how good it was, and oh, you made it? Well, it was wonderful, his new favorite kind. Sigrid had always been a pragmatic girl, tough when she dealt with unsavory denizens of her old city school, and never one to suffer fools for long. To watch that formidable Amazon soften in the face of Finn’s old-fashioned courtesy was both charming and disconcerting. When Bard caught her eyes at lunch, she blushed just a little, but her smile was just as amused as his was, reminding him of her mother’s self-possession and confidence. Finn had no idea what he was up against if he hoped to pursue his eldest daughter.

The Gondors were no less interesting than the youths. Aragorn was likely a few years older than Bard, for silver strands already streaked his dark, wavy hair. He had a quiet, weighty dignity; when he looked at anyone, he gave them his complete attention and consideration, and his replies were
always considered and well thought out. His affection for his students was clear in how easily he
laughed with them, and how he delivered his instruction with respect as well as precision.

Aragorn was a different man when he looked at his wife, though. Arwen’s ethereal beauty was
warmer, earthier than Thran’s, but she had the same not-quite-of-this-world aura. When Aragorn’s
eyes fell on his lady, he seemed ten years younger, a medieval knight to her regal queen. She was a
fierce fencer, the full-fledged Amazonian queen that Tara might one day be, as focused as any fencer
could be. But she, too, changed when she regarded her husband. At the end of a match between
them, when they pulled off masks and shook hands, he bowed over her hand to kiss it, and she
offered him a gentle bow and a warm, affectionate smile.

Lunch lingered long over Sigrid’s cake and whatever ice cream was in the freezer, but eventually the
fencers returned to the ballroom for a few more bouts. When Bard pulled out his sketchbook and
pencils, Tilda came up with hers, drawing his smile, so they sat side by side to sketch. She chose to
draw just one picture, a pair of fencers facing each other in the classic beginning pose, one with
Tara’s red hair and Arwen’s blue shirt, and the other with Legolas’s blond hair and Aragorn’s red
and black sweater. While she concentrated on her single picture, Bard filled several pages with quick
sketches as he had during Monsieur LePied’s ballet class – here was Legolas, his blond hair flying
behind him like a horse’s tail as he lunged at Kíllian; and there was Kíllian leaping backwards,
suspended above the floor in mid-leap, blade sweeping down to deflect Legolas’s. Thran stretched to
his fullest extension against Tara, looking as if he danced rather than fenced. Aragorn’s blade arced
forward, his other arm acting the counterweight... Sigrid and Finn by the window, their heads nearly
touching as he bent to hear something she said... Bain munching a second piece of cake, pointing at
Thran as he fled backwards under Arwen’s bold attack... Bain and Legolas standing side by side to
watch Tara and Kíllian’s match... Tilda sitting beside him, head bent over her pad...

Before he knew it, he’d filled the remaining pages of his sketchbook. He’d have to stop at the craft
store for a new supply, as this was his last one.

“How have you captured us all, lyubov moya?” Thran squatted beside him and Tilda as the other fencers
shed their jackets and stowed blades in their cases.

“I got some good sketches,” he allowed, flipping back through the pages. “I like this one of Kíllian.”

“That is him, without doubt,” Thran agreed, smiling at the minimal dash of lines that still clearly
conveyed the young fencer not in a match, but leaping just because he could in such a large open
space. “His exuberance is like no other’s.”

“Do you like my picture, too?” Tilda asked, holding her pad out to Thran.

“I do,” Thran nodded. “You have the grips on the épées just right.”

“Maybe you’d like some drawing classes, little doll?” Bard asked. “Or would you like to go a little
longer on your own?”

Tilda looked up expectantly. “Would you teach me?”

“Of course, if you’d like me to. The best thing you can do is practice, just as you’re doing now. And
I’ll get out my old schoolbooks for you. But when you’d like lessons from someone else, say the
word.”

Tilda dimpled at him. “Okay, Da. But I like you to show me just fine.”

Bard didn’t get a chance to bask in his daughter’s smile for long. Arwen came over for a look at
Tilda’s picture, then Bard’s sketches. She smiled at the one of Kíllian with Thran, but she also liked one of Tilda laughing at something Aragorn said to her.

“I have seen that same laughing smile on Aragorn’s face so often when he talks with our son, Eldarion,” Arwen confided, smiling fondly. “That is exactly the tilt of his head, and the way he stands. I see him in every line of your drawing, Bard. It is wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Bard nodded, running a hand through his hair – he had to stop that. Thran was right that he did it when he felt shy, which was invariably his reaction when someone complimented his work. It wasn’t that he lacked confidence in his abilities, but compliments usually made him feel exposed, as if his art had revealed a secret about himself he hadn’t intended. “It was fun to have so much to sketch.”

“Legolas has told us about your sculpture, and your plans to return to it after so long away. I look forward to seeing it.”

“It won’t be long,” Bard nodded, firmly keeping his hands on his sketchbook and not in his hair. “Once I get a little more of the house reclaimed, I’ll be back at it.”

Aragorn came to stand beside his wife. “This has been a wonderful afternoon, Bard, Thran. Thank you for hosting us, and I hope you’ll ask us back again. This is not just a beautiful place to fence, but a beautiful home, too.”

“You’re more than welcome anytime, with or without fencing equipment,” Bard smiled.

“I hope we’ll see you and Legolas on Saturdays,” Arwen added to Thran. “You are not as rusty as you think you are, Thran.”

“You are kind,” Thran put his hand over his heart and offered Arwen a little bow. “It would be my pleasure to come as my dancing allows, and of course Legolas will be there. He enjoys it so much. Thank you for today’s lessons from both of us.”

Kíllian, Tara, and Finn were also preparing to take their leave, so Thran, Bard, and the children walked everyone to the front door to say goodbye. Of course, Sigrid and Finn had great difficulty breaking off their conversation, much to the teasing delight of their mates. But eventually, Kíllian and Tara drew Finn to his car, and got in amid calls of farewell. Arwen and Aragorn were already in their car, and waved goodbye as they pulled out of the drive. Behind them, Finn started his car, turned it around to head of the driveway, but stopped long enough to roll down the window.

“Bye, Sigrid!” he called. “I’ll call you when I get home, all right?”

Sigrid reddened. “Just you finish your trig homework first, Finn Durinson! I’ve already done mine, and I’m not going to do yours, too!”

Tara and Kíllian found that hilarious, which meant that Finn was now blushing as much as Sigrid was. He mugged at their antics, and gave Sigrid a big smile and wave as he drove away.

“That was so much fun,” Legolas said regretfully, looking after the retreating car. “A lot of fun.”

Thran put an arm around his son’s shoulders and jostled him. “So it was. The Gondors are both excellent teachers and we have both been well schooled. I like them.”

“So do I, Father,” Legolas agreed as they walked back inside. “I can’t wait to join the Saturday class! I know I’ll learn so much. You don’t know what a relief it is to be done with Master Schroeder!”
Thran laughed as he shut the door behind them. “I think you give me a good idea, Legolas.”

“Bain and Tilda, thank you for being such good hosts for our guests today.” Bard said to his younger children. “It was nice of you to help them feel welcome, and to let Legolas enjoy his time with them, doing something he loves so much.”

“I enjoyed watching them,” Bain shrugged. “I’ve never seen any fencing before. Boy, Legs, the Gondors are so good! I can’t believe how fast they are!”

“I know!” Legolas agreed at once. “Did you see how fast Aragorn came after Kilian that one time?”

“When he jumped up to touch Kilian’s mask?” Bain said. “That was amazing!”

“Let’s get everything cleaned up, then we can take a rest,” Bard said. “Not that there’s much food to put away. I don’t guess anyone will want any supper, will they?”

“Da!” Bain looked aghast. “We just ate at two! We can’t go all night until breakfast without something!”

“Just checking,” Bard tousled Bain’s hair. “Come on, then. We’d better take stock and see what’s for supper. Maybe sandwiches.”

Later that night, after sandwiches and showers, after the children got reluctantly in bed in sad anticipation of the start of another school week, Bard sent Thran to shower while he filled the soaking tub. Once Thran settled in the hot water to savor the warmth, Bard followed him for his shower, and soon came out dripping.

“Join me?” Thran invited, holding out a hand.

“Are you sure? You look like you’re comfortable.”

“I am. I will also be comfortable when my saint enjoys the tub with me.”

“Behind you, or at the other end?”

“I am well able to cradle you, lyubov moya.”

“You look sore, angel. I’d rather you arrange yourself so that whatever hurts is under the water, and I’ll accommodate.”

“I am not sore, merely out of practice at fencing, and I worked hard at it today. I restore myself for the dance tomorrow.”

“So tell me what will help you restore yourself better.”

He got an appreciative smile and a slight wave of the hand from his husband. “If you insist, then behind.”

Bard eased behind Thran, and settled against the back of the tub with Thran nestled against his chest. “Mmm. Feels good. Okay for you?”

Thran sighed. “More than okay. I am warm, my saint is with me, and all is well. Thank you for hosting today, Bard. It was a delicious lunch, and a wonderful time. I have been to many parties that were not so finely arranged. You have a gift.”

Bard chuckled. “It’s called cooking in mass quantities for hungry athletes. They’ll eat just about
anything you put in front of them.”

“That was not just ‘anything’ you put in front of us. So delicious! I ate so much of the chicken that my hair will turn orange by tomorrow.”

“I hope not. It’d be like living with a giant cheese puff. I’d rather keep the pale angel.”

Thran’s quiet laughter was rich. “You are right. I would look ridiculous as a piece of junk food.”

“So what’s your agenda for tomorrow? Class in the city?”

“I think not. I must practice my performance piece for my Tuesday audition, and that is best done here.”

“Is that how a dancer auditions? Present a performance?”

“Group auditions generally have two parts. The first is a regular barre, so that those holding the auditions can get a sense of all of the auditioning dancers together – how each one moves, general attitude and demeanor, assessment of physical advantages and disadvantages one dance to the other, and so on. Then each dancer who auditions performs a piece.”

“What are you going to do for your piece?”

“I have two I prefer. One is part of the knife piece choreographed for me. It is technically precise as well as flashy, especially if I wield the knives. The other is more classical in form, though no less technical. While I am known as a theatrical dancer, I find it useful to perform something you might call ‘old school,’ more traditional, just to show that I can embody that precision, that restraint.”

Bard hummed. “When your auditions are done, I hope one day that you’ll let me watch you dance. I’ve seen you on the Internet, but it’s not the same as in person.”

“Of course. You have only to ask. You are always welcome when I am in the ballroom. I ask only that you understand that when I am there, it is my place to work, and I am very intense, very focused. The outside world does not intrude.”

“It’ll be the same when I work metal,” Bard stroked Thran’s shoulder. “I’ll respect your workplace as you will mine. Would it bother you if I come in to sketch now and again?”

“No, as long as you understand that I may ignore you.”

“Of course.”

“If you would like to watch my practice tomorrow at some point, I do not mind. I expected to have you on call for part of it, anyway, when I use the knives.”

“You don’t look like you’ve ever had trouble with them,” Bard grinned. “Not a scar anywhere on you.”

“I expect no trouble tomorrow, either. It is just the practice that someone is on call when such things are in use.”

“I’ll be your backup.”

“As you always are,” Thran murmured comfortably, rubbing Bard’s knee under the water. “I am a very fortunate angel.”
“What time is your audition Tuesday?”

“One. It is in the city.”

“And this is the one you’re not all that interested in?”

“That is so. But it will prepare me mentally for the ones on Thursday, Friday, and next Monday.”

“Which one is the risky one, the one you want?”

“That is next Monday. I think I will do something not usually done before that one.”

“What’s that?”

“You know already that it is not the company so much that interests me, yes?”

“You said it was the choreographer.”

Thran nodded. “So I think I will contact him and see if we can arrange to meet beforehand. Would you mind if I ask him to meet here?”

“Of course not. I can make you lunch or something, if that’d help.”

“I thought I would suggest that this choreographer and I attempt a short collaboration, to see if we are compatible. There is no point tying myself to a company with more risk and less compensation if we are not.”

“Do you think he’d agree?”

Thran shrugged. “If he does not, then that is its own answer. But he is likely as aware of my reputation and credentials as I am of his, and if he is intrigued, then perhaps he will.”

“You don’t seem worried.”

“Such things are the nature of the dance. I will call him tomorrow, in hopes that we can meet before my second and third auditions. I will make no more or less effort in those, regardless of what this choreographer does. But I prefer to go into them knowing how I feel about the fourth one.”

“Makes sense.”

“What is your plan for tomorrow? Bain’s room?”

“Bain’s room,” Bard confirmed. “Thank all the gods, the woodwork in his room and Tilda’s aren’t in the state that the stuff in Legolas’s room was. I can go right to primer and paint on both. So maybe I can get both done this week.”

“Progress as you see fit. It will all get done.”

“I can’t wait to get to our room. That icy blue will look much better than the current dingy white. I think we ought to move your white rug from the main room up here when I’m done, if not before. The children are hard on it.”

“You were wise to suggest that nice red rug you found in the secondhand shop for the sitting room rather than my white rug. We thought it would look nice in the main room, but the children like to play there when I am in the ballroom, and that has taken its toll, so yes, let us save it from further desecration.”
“I want to keep it nice enough for me to make love to you on it.”

Thran’s rumble of anticipation was considerably less sleepy than his previous murmur. “If I offer you two cents, would you take me downstairs and make love to me there now?”

Bard laughed. “I thought you were sore from fencing.”

“Warm water is a great restorative. Take advantage of it to take advantage of me.”

Bard snaked hands around Thran’s ribs to massage his groins, then either side of his cock. “Don’t mind if I do. You’re the perfect bath toy.”

“I am not.” Thran said weakly, trying to sit up, but Bard held him tightly around the ribs, and twined his legs around Thran’s to urge him to stay still.

“Yes, you are. Be good and I’ll make you squeak.”

“Gods, you have more limbs than an octopus.”

“I’m better than an octopus. I have hands.” Bard took Thran’s cock in hand and pressed a kiss against his neck. “I bet it doesn’t take me long to make a jellyfish out of you.”

Thran’s resistance melted, and he lay back against Bard with a silent moan. “Oh, gods, it won’t. That feels divine. I should be ashamed at how good that feels.”

“But you won’t because it feels so good. Besides, you know how much I crave such an easy lover. Just a quick little ambush, and you’re mine. Aren’t you?”

“I am. Gods, I am. Please, don’t stop.”

“Owned in the bath.”

“I am. Oh, gods, Bard, you’re too good – I can’t – you have to –”

“I have to what, angel?”

“I can’t – oh, suka blyad, you know me too well, and I’m – you’re –” Thran growled in arousal as Bard’s insistent hands consumed him, winding his body tight against Bards. “Oh, for all the gods, you are the worst bastard!”

“Your favorite kind. Come on, angel. Show me how much you like being owned in the bath.”

“Oy, ty grebannyy huiesos, ty zastavlyayesh’ menya konchit –” Thran gasped. His head went back as Bard’s teasing sent him spasming into release. Bard stroked his cock until the height of his orgasm had passed, then massaged his abdomen, his groins, his hips, as he came down from that height.

Thran lay limp and unresisting against Bard’s chest. “I am no longer safe in this tub when you are in it with me.”

Chuckling, Bard rubbed down Thran’s flanks to his groins and back up again until the dancer hummed in enjoyment. “You don’t seem too worried. Good thing – it’s too good a trick for me to give up. Can I get you a towel?”

Thran hummed in agreement, and sat forward for Bard to clamber out. He took the towel that Bard handed him, standing to dry off while Bard did the same. It always took him longer to dry than Thran, because he had so much more body hair, so it was no surprise when Thran finished first. As
usual, Thran dried his hair while Bard finished toweling, then turned the dryer on Bard's. As Thran stowed the dryer, Bard ran both hands through his hair, combing it through with his fingers. He shut his eyes, savoring the sense of warm, clean, and dry... oh, someone just as warm, clean, and dry eased him close, nestling his back against a lean, sculpted chest. Of course, long, elegant hands circled his ribs just as his had circled Thran’s, and descended to his crotch with no less insistence.

“That was very nice, lyubov moya,” Thran teased, turning Bard towards the mirror. “So nice that I will reward you in kind. What is the term? See you, and raise you?”

“What do you call this? King Neptune’s revenge?”

“A welder had me this way in a grotty apartment building in New York City. You will have to ask him what he called it.”

“Gods, you pick up guys in the seamiest places. You and your taste for the illicit.”

“Always. In my own defense, the welder was deliciously talented. Let us see if I live up to his teaching.”

Thran took less time to bring Bard to release. That likely had something to do with how turned on he’d gotten taking Thran in the bath, and more to do with the pleasure of watching Thran in the mirror make quick work of him. There was something about his angel’s sly smile that never failed to send a jolt through his loins. He followed Thran to bed well satisfied.

“So, another room christened.” Thran stretched luxuriously against the pillows, veiled only in grey silk from the waist down as Bard got in beside him.

“Keep doing that, and I’ll christen you again in this one,” Bard growled.

“Once tonight is enough for me, lyubov moya. I must be serious about my auditions this week, or I will not be back at the dance as I should.”

“Just do a little of that eye fuck thing. They’ll offer you anything you want.”

Thran’s snicker was half muffled in his pillow. “Most of what that would get me would be unsavory. I will save that tactic for you only.”

“Then I’m one lucky man. Porridge with me in the morning, or eggs?”

“Porridge with you will be very nice. Then we see to the children, and then I go to the ballroom, and you go to Bain’s room. So we will work.”

Long arms drew Bard to rest his head on a pale shoulder, and stretch an arm across a pale chest. He stroked the braid of white hair that lay against Thran’s chest, as silky as the cashmere blankets. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and drew Thran close.

“Garu di, cariad.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya, zoloto moyo.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

As the angel prepares for auditions, he reveals the secrets of the dance to his saint. Whether the dance that follows is just good clean fun is open to interpretation.

Chapter Notes

Yet another explicit chapter. Our gorgeous guys are taking full advantage of an empty house to celebrate their recent marriage.

Thran carried the hinged wooden box he kept in the bottom drawer of his dresser downstairs, snared his mug of tea, and ventured into the ballroom. The children had left for school, and it was not yet seven-thirty. The ballroom was still cool, though the sound of the furnace revealed that it would soon be warmer. He put the box on the garden bench, took up the wide mop to run back and forth over the floor to remove the dust and grit from yesterday’s fencing extravaganza, then headed to the sitting room to peruse the orderly stacks of CDs. Ah, there were his three audition CDs in the third stack. He then came into the main hall to call up to Bard, already at work on Bain’s room.

“Lyubov moya, where is the portable CD player? It is not in the sitting room.”

“I think it’s in one of the boxes still in the main room,” Bard called downstairs. “Do you want me to look?”

“No, I will. Thank you!”

Thran scanned the boxes still remaining in the main room, all of them lined up against the inner wall opposite the fireplace. He found the CD player in the third of the boxes, along with another stack of CDs. He carried the box into the sitting room, unpacked the CDs, and put them by those already arranged on their shelves; someone could add them to the stacks later. The flattened box went into the mudroom to be recycled; the CD player came with him to the ballroom. The device was old, likely something Bard had picked up at a secondhand shop for next to nothing, then cleaned and repaired, but it worked just as well as anything more modern. Thran plugged it in, arranged it on the table in front of the garden bench, and was gratified to see the display lights appear. He slipped in one of his CDs, pressed Play, and sipped his tea before the music started. Ah, there began the lyrical strains of Chopin, a lone piano playing one of his favorite waltzes, the first of several on this long practice CD. This was not his audition music, but he let the CD play nevertheless; it would suit as he warmed up.

He put down his mug, letting the music coax him not to the barre, but across the floor in a triplet of steps, a simple turn, and then back in another triplet, but he was too wise to do much more than that before a proper warmup. He had another sip of tea, took himself to the barre, and gave himself to the gradual stretches and extensions, limbering joints, warming cold muscles. It felt good to move, to coax his sleepy body into the alertness and refinement it needed to properly embrace the dance. The
rigors of yesterday’s fencing had not done any harm; in fact they had helped to build Thran’s endurance back to what it would need to be once he began work with a company. That brought a smile to his face as he continued to warm up.

He’d cycled through the Chopin CD before he’d completed his warmup, so he let it repeat as he moved away from the barre and began his steps and turns. He went back to the simple triplet of steps that went so well with the waltz, taking advantage of the ballroom’s length to fully extend into his stride. When he neared the fireplace, he spun in a double turn, then went back to the triples to return to the other end –

Bard leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed over his chest as he watched.

Thran hadn’t heard Bard approach, because his husband had taken his work boots off in deference to keeping the ballroom floor clean. The smile tracing Bard’s lips was small, but affectionate and admiring. Thran kept dancing, offering his own smile as he stopped in front of his husband.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, my saint?”

Bard gave a light tug to Thran’s braid. “Nice music, beautiful dancer... thought I’d indulge myself with a quick look.”

In return, Thran tugged a lock of hair that’d escaped the messy knot at the back of Bard’s head. “Chopin is very nice music. His waltzes are my favorites.” He cocked an ear towards the CD player, and offered his hand. "It is a waltz that plays now."

Bard looked away smiling, then looked back and presented his hand with a bow. “Yes, I know how to waltz. So...?”

Laughing, Thran put Bard’s hand on his waist, and put his own on Bard’s shoulder. “So let us dance.”

Bard took his hand on Thran’s waist as the tacit invitation to lead that Thran had intended, and so swept them around the ballroom slowly at first, then with more speed as he got the sense of how they moved together. He was a graceful man, and would make a good dancer with a few lessons, which Thran intended to provide, if only to enhance their pleasure of gliding around their ballroom together. How romantic would it be to do so on some spring evening, with the windows open to capture in the breeze, and candlelight and fireflies to gild them as they swept around and around? To waltz with his husband this first time in the full light of the sun was no less romantic, because Bard’s warm hand was firmly at his waist, his other supported Thran’s hand, and his warm brown eyes were full of quiet pleasure.

When the waltz ended, Bard drew them to a stop beside Thran’s barre. The next piece of music began, but they remained by the barre. Bard released Thran’s hand, but his other hand remained at Thran’s waist.

“That first morning...” Bard murmured.

“Yes?”

“That pose... it was an arabesque.”

Thran traced a single rond de jambe à terre with his left leg, then arched it up into the arabesque à la hauteur, Bard’s right hand still on his waist.

“How do I hold you properly?”
Thran moved Bard’s right hand from his waist to rest on his right ribs, then guided Bard’s left hand to wrap over and around his raised left leg. “A simple fish dive lift, yes? Center yourself to my right leg. Then...

Bard settled Thran’s body against his, supporting and cradling it. “Then?”

“Lean back onto your left leg, and bend forward just to tip me forward and down, and I curl my standing leg.”

“Like this?” Bard tipped him just a little forward. Bard’s arms were strong around him, without tremor, so Thran curled his standing leg into a parallel passé, arched his back, stretched his left arm back and his right arm forward, and gave himself to the lift.

“Come out of it the same way as you went into it.”

Bard did, making sure that Thran was grounded before he shifted his hands, but it was not to release him, only draw him closer.

“Once more, with feeling?” Bard asked softly.

“As you wish.”

Strong arms settled their hold again, dipped him a little deeper, held him a little closer. It was just the simplest of fish dives, but it was lyubov yego who held him, who took him off the ground and kept him safe while he flew. When Bard eased him upright, his knees quivered. When Bard eased away, his heart quivered, too.

“Don’t.” he whispered, as he put a hand on Bard’s arm.

Bard found Thran’s left hand, and drew it up to kiss its wedding ring before enfolding him in his arms. “You know I’m yours, angel. It took me too long to find you, so I’m not about to let you go now.”

“Nor I you. So...”

Bard kissed him. “So... I came in here to finish what we started that Saturday after Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, lyubov moya, I want you to. Please.”

Bard stroked his cheek. “But now that I’m here, I realize that what I came to do isn’t right. It’s not right at all.”

Thran blinked. “Is it not? Why not? This is not a church, merely a ballroom!”

Bard looked around the ballroom, his lips quirking in sly anticipation. “It’s not merely a ballroom, Thran. It’s our ballroom. Christening it deserves drama. It needs candles flickering at night, and exotic perfume, and a dangerous liaison.”

Thran’s disappointment melted in the face of intrigue. Had his sense of adventure kindled the same in Bard, or had his merely awakened what had always been in Bard’s heart, albeit buried for too long? Either delighted him. “And how do you plan to make this dangerous liaison, my theatrical saint?”

Brad smiled. “I’m going to make a date with the angel who seduced me, for midnight tomorrow night. I’m going to entice him to sneak down here with me at the witching hour, and I’ll light a few candles, maybe find a bottle of wine and a little chocolate, and then I’m going to make love to him.
on his favorite white rug in front of those windows, under the stars.”

Thran’s grin was probably utterly besotted as he followed Bard’s pointing finger to regard the expanse of windows behind the garden bench, but he didn’t care. “And this is what you call a dangerous liaison?”

Bard’s grin went a little lopsided. “There are four children in the house, Thran. If they catch us, we’d scar them for life, which I grant you isn’t as erotic as illicit lovers trying to avoid an angry spouse. But it has the potential to raise an even bigger hue and cry.”

Thran dissolved into silent laughter. “Oh, Bard, that is all too true. It will add quite the frisson of danger. Do we have candles?”

“We have candles. I keep a few boxes around in case the power goes out.”

“We have plenty of wine and chocolate.”

“And we have a white rug. So...” Bard got down on one knee, grinning. “Do we have a date?”

Thran pursed his lips. “If you do not get up, I will think of something else for you to have, and in short order.”

“Then say yes.”

“Yes. Many times yes.”

Bard got to his feet and enfolded Thran in his arms. “Then we both need to get back to work. And keep your fingers crossed about tomorrow night. We’ve been lucky so far with the children at night. Our luck’s bound to run out before long.”

Thran’s arms went around Bard’s shoulders, and he threaded his hands through Bard’s hair. “I think it will hold long enough for me to indulge in a kiss with my husband.”

The lips that kissed him back were warm; the body that nestled against his was solid and strong; and the soft, Welsh-accented words that caressed his ears were full of love. When Bard eased away with a smile, his warmth, strength, and love lingered long after he slipped back upstairs to continue their renovation. That gave Thran something to smile about as he resumed his dancing in the sunlit ballroom.

Tomorrow night, candles would replace the sunlight, the discipline of ballet and yoga would give way to unrestrained passion, and the pas de deux that ensued would be an erotic one. How delicious that would be, and not just for those moments. That passion would be in his thoughts every time he danced here thereafter.

What could be more wonderful?

* * *

Primer went on two of Bain’s walls before Bard stopped smiling about making a date with an angel. Not just a run-of-the-mill, dinner and coffee date, but one at midnight, in a ballroom, on a furry white rug, in full view of the stars above. With candlelight.
Gods, let all the children stay firmly asleep! Paying back an angel for seducing him the Saturday after Thanksgiving did not need the reality of being a parent to intrude on it. Not that he could complain; so far, no one had gotten sick, Thran had handled the sole meltdown admirably, nothing in the house had broken, the renovation had gone quickly, and the children had settled into their new school faster than he’d expected. How had he ended up living in a fairytale?

He set to his painting with renewed focus. Bain’s ceiling was done, and the primer was proceeding quickly. Depending on how soon Thran needed him as a spotter when he wielded his knives, he might get at least one coat of paint on the walls this afternoon. If he could get both on, then tomorrow he’d do woodwork and floor, and Bain’s room would be settled. He liked the soft blue Bain had chosen, slightly less grey than what he and Thran had chosen for their room, not as turquoise as the bright blue that would transform the children’s bathroom. Maybe by next week he could get to his and Thran’s room. Their room was bigger, and would take longer, and there was the closet to wrangle as well; that would be a soft white with just a hint of blush in it that only he would know was there. Daphne had taught him that – an imperceptible rosy tinge to walls and lighting made anyone look better naked. Imagining how Thran’s pale skin would glow with that faint blush on the walls and a similarly-tinted silk Fortuny shade on the overhead light got him through the third wall of primer with a smile.

He’d started on the fourth wall when Thran came upstairs. His brow had a faint sheen of sweat on it, and his shirt between his pectorals was damp, but he looked invigorated rather than winded. He had an old, long sweater wrapped around him, and another wrapped around his waist to keep his back warm, and fingerless gloves.

“How is the primer?” he asked, sticking his head inside Bain’s room to look around. “Ah, so much brighter already! I have worked on my traditional audition piece several times, and would like to work with the knives, once you can take a break. Or if you need a longer time, I will work on it after lunch.”

“I won’t be long, maybe another half hour? Is that too long?”

Thran shook his head. “No, that will be fine. I prefer to work now rather than after lunch, so that I do not have to warm up so much again. I will stay warm with simple things until you are done.”

“I’ll be quick.”

Thran gave him an amused smile. “I will tell you what a certain artist repeats to me as a mantra – ‘do it right the first time, or do it over.’”

Bard laughed. “My father had a saying that fits. ‘Take your time, but hurry.’ It made me laugh every time he said it.”

Thran laughed, too. “Which was one to follow? The care, or the speed?”

Bard shrugged as he rolled primer on the bottom third of the wall. “It depended on the moment, to be honest. So go stay warm, and I’ll take my time up here, then hurry down in a few minutes.”

With a flourish of the hand, Thran made a graceful bow. “So it shall be done, lyubov moya.”

The tall dancer disappeared, so Bard applied himself to the primer, taking pains to put it on the wall with all due care, but as quickly as possible. He didn’t want Thran to cool down too much to apply himself well to his practice. The easy part was to roll the primer over the walls quickly; he took more time to cut in the primer around the moldings. In about twenty minutes, he was done, so capped the primer, and carted his brushes downstairs to soak. He left his boots in the mudroom, washed his
hands, and came into the ballroom still drying them.

“I started a little without you,” Thran confessed, standing in the middle of the ballroom floor well swaddled in legwarmers, a thick, long-sleeved shirt, a sleeveless quilted vest, and a sweater tied around his ribs. He had a curved knife in each hand, each about eighteen inches long, bending and flexing his wrists as he rotated them.

“I’ve never seen knives like that before,” Bard said.

A shrug accompanied Thran’s chuckle. “There are no others like these. They are loosely based on a much longer Mongol cavalry sword, but they have no practical counterpart. They are only props for my dance, even though they are properly forged and balanced.”

“May I see one?”

With a flick of his wrists, Thran reversed both of the knives in his grip and held the hilts out to Bard. They were not flimsy prop implements, but real knives, no matter how dull the single cutting edges. Each blade was a polished, undecorated expanse of elegant, silvery steel, slightly tapering to its point. Each curved gracefully more than a katana, less than a Malay kris; the hilt curved slightly in the opposite direction. Braided leather wrapped each hilt, providing a nonslippery grip. The weighting was precise, as well, for Bard was able to balance each on one finger at the hilt.

“They’re beautiful pieces,” Bard nodded. He waited for Thran to slip off both of his sweaters and his fleece vest before handing back the blades. “They suit you – elegant and beautiful.”

Thran offered him a smile and slight bow. “You are gracious. So, there is nothing you need do, only be nearby as insurance.”

“Should I bring down the medical kit, in case?” Bard offered.

Thran shook his head and held up his hands, indicating his long-sleeved shirt. “I do not think I will need it. I wear this when I practice with the knives. It has a thin lining of Kevlar, so it is a little stiff, but it is wise for me to wear it now after so long away from the knives.”

Bard nodded. “Okay.”

“So if you will press Play on the CD player, then Repeat, I will begin. If you want to just watch, or sketch, I do not mind.”

“I filled my last sketchpad at the fencing. I need to get some new ones.”

“We will do so at once,” Thran said as he walked to the middle of the room, knives in hand. “You have come back to yourself, and I do not want that to stop.”

Bard looked up from the CD player. “I don’t want that to stop, either. I’ll pick some up the next time we’re out. But right now, I’ll enjoy just watching you dance. Say when.”

“When,” Thran nodded in reply, taking his stance.

The music started, nothing but a single building dissonant chord, angry and threatening, followed by a breathless silence, then another chord that was even more malignant. The music that followed was a deep glowering rage, but beautiful and compelling even as it rose. Strings swirled above the darkness like birds driven in the storm, but rather than lightening the mood, they only reinforced it, as lightning did the sound of thunder. Through it all, Thran was the sinister magician that conjured the storm, but if the music was heavy, he was anything but. How he hung in the air as long as he did,
Bard couldn’t fathom. Nor could he fathom how the knives in his hands defied gravity to levitate a time or two, or flashed so brightly in mere sunlight. His feet seemed to move in a blur at times, and the precision with which he placed each step, each hand, without tremble or hesitation, made Bard’s jaw drop. This was the first time he’d seen his angel at his best, and it seemed hardly human – angelic, indeed, but one from the depths of hell, not heaven.

The music stopped, then began again. Thran repeated his performance with the same precision, but the impression was very different. The first time, Thran had been a sinister magician. This time, he was something worse, full of more than human malice and hate. The third time, he was different yet again, more sensual, more rounded in his movements. The fourth time, he changed yet again to something less overtly passionate and more controlled, colder, yet even more compelling.

When the music ended this time, Thran pointed to the CD player, so Bard hastened to pause the music.

“You did the same steps each time, but you were different each time. Completely different,” Bard marveled. “It was amazing. And the music – what is it? Very dramatic!”

Thran came to stand with him by the CD player. “Thank you, lyubov moya. Yes, I like the music very much. Of course it is dramatic – it is Russian! It is the first two minutes of Prokofiev’s Dance of the Knights from his Romeo and Juliet. And yes, I danced a different role each time. Please, tell me who I seemed to be each time.”

“The first time, you were an evil sorcerer casting a spell, seriously malevolent. But the next time, you were even worse – you were the ruler of Hell, enforcing damnation on the dead. The third time, you were a goddess scorned in love, plotting revenge. But the last time... that was chilling. You were Death collecting souls in the middle of a battlefield, with the sounds of the wind and the screams of the dying all around you.”

Thran’s smile was pleased. “Ah, Bard, you are a poet as well as an artist. So vivid are your words!”

“My words? Your dancing, cariad. It was brilliant each time. So did I guess close to what you intended?”

Thran nodded. “You put names to the characters where I merely set my intent, but they match well. The first time through, I wanted mostly to resume my familiarity with the knives, but still convey malice. The second time, I intensified the malice. The third, I added the feminine softness to the malice, always a fascinating combination. And the fourth, I set aside the malice, the masculine, and the feminine to convey inevitability in the storm. But I very much like the images you gave name to, especially the last one. Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield. So apt a name. Perhaps if this choreographer and I can come to an understanding, we can make something of that.”

“Maybe you’ve been away from your knives for a while, but you were brilliant with them. Just stellar.”

“I thank you, lyubov moya,” Thran nodded. “We will see if I use them in any of my auditions. It is still an effective piece if I do not wield them. Tomorrow, I will likely do the Chopin piece. But if the mysterious choreographer and I suit each other, I will do Prokofiev with the knives on Monday. Now, I will cool down, and then I will be ready for lunch.”

“Before you cool down, would you show me your Chopin piece?”

“Of course. I am still well warm for it. First, I put away the knives.”
Thran wiped his knives carefully, then stowed them in a beautiful wooden box, replete with carving on the outside, green velvet lining on the inside, and padded inserts under the velvet to hold the knives snugly. A small silver plate on the outside of the box was engraved with several lines of Cyrillic characters.

“What does the inscription say?” Bard asked, as Thran closed the box.

“The top line is Tanets Klinkov, or Dance of the Blades. That is the name of the dance made for me, and for which these knives were made. The second is my birth name, Thran Mrachnyylesavich Orophersky. The third is Mariinsky Ballet, and the fourth is the date of my first public performance of Tanets Klinkov.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “Thran Marach...”

Thran grinned. “It is a great mouthful, yes? Thran Mrachnyylesavich Orophersky. Thran, son of Mrachnyyles - which means the murky forest, if you can believe the silliness of my father’s parents - from the family of Oropher. In either case, it is a lot to ask Americans to pronounce, so when I came to this country, I changed it to the simpler Thran Lesavich Oropherson – Thran, son of the forest, from the family of Oropher.”

“Did you change Legolas’s name, too?”

Thran nodded. “Only a little. Vileria and I, we were not very conventional, either. Her name was Vileria Mikhailova Borodina. So we named our son Legolas Thranovich Orophersky-Borodin – Legolas, son of Thran, from the families of Oropher and Borodin – to remember both of his parents. So I changed his last name as I had changed mine, Oropherson-Borodin, but kept his matronymic name unchanged so that he had something of his mother with him always. So, the Chopin.”

Thran took out the Prokofiev CD, replaced it with another, and cued it to Track 4. He stripped down to a single practice shirt, and took his place on the floor. At his nod, Bard started the music. This was a completely different performance, more of what Bard envisioned as typical ballet. It was very controlled and precise, but with the lightness that Bard was beginning to recognize as a distinctive part of Thran’s dancing. He made hardly a sound on the wooden floor even during his leaps and turns, and his attitude was spritely and inviting, well suited to appealing to a traditional panel of ballet judges. Thran performed it perfectly, his command and control of his body all the more remarkable because of how natural and unconscious it seemed to be. It was two minutes of bright elegance that drew Bard to applaud softly.

“You make that look just as wonderful – so light, so effortless. I’ll bet that lightness is one of your trademarks, isn’t it?”

Without false modesty, Thran shrugged assent as he pulled on one of his soft sweaters. “I worked very hard to achieve that. It is not easy for someone as tall and weighty as I am, but worth the effort.”

“You’re hardly weighty, given your height,” Bard observed. “I’m three inches shorter, but I probably weigh as much as you do.”

“You are much more muscular than I,” Thran amended. “Deliciously so. What those muscles did to me when you did your chin ups.... or when you ride me from the top... Mmm.”

Thran’s eyes slid sideways to give Bard a look up and down, and a small smile traced his lips. Gods, it was that smile that invariably presaged Thran’s most ardent arousal, the smile that revealed that Bard was about to be lunch. How was it possible for his Russian bastard of a husband to turn from
work to lust on a dime? The thought of teasing it along made his loins stir in anticipation as he turned off the CD player, then gave Thran a long look, pursing his lips as he admired his husband’s body. “You’re incorrigible, angel.”

“I am,” he purred, eyes narrowing as he came towards Bard.

“Um, so... how long do you need to cool down?” Bard said lightly, backing up towards the main room. “I can see to lunch in the meantime. Something warm? Soup? Chicken with salad? What appeals to you?”

Thran followed right behind. He peeled off his sweater, then rubbed his hands on his hips. “My saint, in bed, on his back, begging for me. Mere food pales in comparison.”

Bard kept backing up, through the main room, across the main hall, and into the dining room. “You do know that starvation increases a man’s sex drive, don’t you? Yet another reason why you need to eat more. As in lunch?”

“That does not make me the least bit inclined to eat, at least not food, and all the more predatory. If you intend to run, you should do so now. But I encourage you to pick an unchristened room as your refuge, because wherever I catch you, I will have you.”

Bard held up his hands. “No lubricant down here, angel.”

“If you continue to back up, you will end up in the kitchen, where the pantry holds the coconut oil. When I reach for it, you can take that moment to run if you truly want to, but I will come after you immediately after. So, the dining room, perhaps? The sitting room? The main room? I doubt you will get any farther than that.”

“I thought you had to cool down. For your audition.”

Thran grinned. “I have one more dance in me before I need worry about that.”

They circled to the kitchen, and Thran went right to the pantry to grab the coconut oil. Before he could grab it, Bard dodged out into the main hall again, laughing when his sock-clad feet slipped as he tried to turn back to the dining room. Whooping like a Cossack, Thran came darting after him, his dance shoes offering much better traction on the wood floor. Swearing through his laughter, Bard ducked Thran’s arm and made it through the dining room and back into the kitchen, but he couldn’t make the tight turn back towards the hall. He dodged through the sitting room, trying to make it into the hall, but his socks undid him again and he couldn’t hold the tight turn. Thran tackled him as he tried to keep his balance, winding arms around his waist and heaving him off his feet with a triumphant yell.

“Oh, you unholy fucker, Thran!” Bard tried to pry Thran’s arms from around him, but his chortling lover refused to let go, instead carting him to the wider of the two sofas and wrestling him down onto it. He straddled Bard’s chest to yank and grab at Bard’s jeans, swiftly breaching belt buckle and button and zipper with an urgency that fired an equal one in Bard. In seconds, an eager mouth engulfed his cock, sucking greedily.

“Holy hell!” Bard swore as his cock sat up and took notice of the attention Thran lavished on it. “You damned vampire, you greedy cocksucker...!”

That drew only a nasty hum of laughter from Thran, which felt so good vibrating through his body. All Bard wanted to do was to close his eyes and let Thran have all of him, whatever he chose to do. But if he did that, before long all Thran would have to do was look at him, and he’d be stripping
himself bare in anticipation... was that a bad thing?

Maybe he could make it a better thing. He stopped struggling, shut his eyes, and enjoyed Thran doing his worst. At his apparent concession to the inevitable, Thran settled to his pleasure, drawing closer, closer, finally close enough for Bard to get his arms around Thran’s waist. From there, it took just a second to loosen the belt that kept Thran’s tights snug, then peel tights and dance belt down, revealing his stiffening cock. Two could play Thran’s game, and Bard gave himself to it without hesitation. Above him, Thran moaned a garbled curse while Bard kissed and sucked and nipped, so Bard wound his arms around Thran, refusing to let him pull away. From the sounds that drew from his husband, Thran found Bard’s escalation irresistible, so he applied himself with as much urgency as Thran did. Which of them would have the other first?

It was too close to call. Thran might have spasmed first, but to feel the dancer’s exquisite body bucking from his ministrations was too erotic to ignore, and Bard followed right after him, arching against Thran’s body. When he fell back against the sofa panting, the straining body atop him slid off to the floor. Bard opened his eyes to see Thran sitting on the floor by the sofa, head back against Bard’s stomach, eyes shut, breathing hard, a satisfied smile on his face as he dragged a forearm across his mouth.

Gods, when such an elegant creature revealed his pleasure with such a profane, decadent gesture, Bard was lost. He wasn’t sure how he managed it, but somehow he slithered close enough to engulf Thran’s lips in a rough kiss. When they came up for air, they were both laughing.

“Oh, lyubov moya, what will we do when the children are not in school during the summer?” Thran mourned.

“Send them to summer camp,” Bard exhaled.

“There are such things?”

“There are.”

“We must find out.”

“We will. Now, have you had enough of me to get you through lunch?”

Thran’s grin was wicked. “You are very hard to resist. The only reason I have not already dragged your very sweet ass up to bed is because I want tomorrow night’s date to be memorable. So I restrain myself.”

Bard guffawed. “You do, do you?”

“Of course,” Thran shrugged in that oh-so-Russian way he had. “I am less interested in quantity of sex than in quality.”

“We’ve had plenty of both.”

Thran hummed appreciatively. He looked down at himself, and shook his head. “I am foul. I need a shower.”

“Soap doesn’t wash the filth out of your brain, cariad. And if it did, I’d never let you near the stuff.”

A snicker was an apt answer. “Nor would I get near it. But as it does not, let us indulge in enough to clean the skin, if not the libido, and then we can have lunch.”
Bard clambered off the sofa, hitched his jeans up, and offered Thran his hand. Thran let Bard pull him to his feet, then drew up his dancer’s belt and tights with a sly smile.

“I like this new twist on lunch,” Thran murmured as they headed upstairs.

“What, dessert before the main course?” Bard teased.

“Mmm,” Thran stroked his back softly, drawing Bard’s shiver. “You are the perfect sweet, whether you are the first course or the last.”

Bard didn’t suppress his grin. Gods, it was fun letting his husband turn him into a hedonist.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

The angel auditions, scores a find, and dallies with a saint in the ballroom. 'Nuff said.

Chapter Notes

Yes, it's another Explicit Chapter. Enjoy!

Thran settled himself for the drive into the city. He was early, considering that his audition was not until one, but even during the week traffic could be difficult around lunchtime. It would not do to arrive late, not even for an elite dancer. One of the ways Thran had become an elite dancer was to extend full courtesy and respect to the companies he worked with, whether as a member or as one who auditioned. Do one’s research, prepare properly, dress properly, be on time, treat other dancers and dance masters with respect, and so on and so forth. Thran approached such things now just as he had as a student and junior dancer – without ego. One could always learn, always improve, always grow. That was how one became an elite dancer. It was also how one stayed an elite dancer.

Consequently, he rarely had to employ his formidable Prince of Ice glare against other dancers or masters; his respect met with the same from others. There had been that one choreographer who had demanded that he stop looking so much taller than his partner – what an idiotic thing that had been; if the choreographer had wanted a shorter dancer, he should have ensured that the company had chosen one. For the most part, it was only ignorant ballet critics who merited his glare – ah, yes, also the occasional child in the middle of a meltdown. At least the latter gave Thran something to snicker about. He and Bard were well blessed to have such wonderful children who rarely needed an icy glare to settle them.

He settled to his usual audition routine, concentrating on the drive, taking his time. That was why he always left so early, so that even unexpected traffic didn’t make him rush. The trip took however long it took.

The brief, disconcerting conversation he’d had this morning with Irmo Lórien, the choreographer who so interested him, intruded briefly on his thoughts, but he set it aside. There would be time to consider the ramifications of that conversation later. Right now, his audition took precedence, and he let nothing interfere with that.

When he arrived at the ballet studio, he made sure he had his keys and bag, locked the SUV, and found the correct entrance. He notified the woman waiting at the desk of who he was and why he was there, thanked her for her directions to the changing room and correct studio, and made his way to the former. He was already dressed in most of the traditional audition attire – black tights and white top – but he changed his socks and boots for ballet shoes, wrapped his braid around his head, and topped it with his usual white scarf. He had on the usual layers of sweaters and leggings and scarf, but he expected to shed most of those during the first part of the barre warmup. He repacked everything in his bag, put his towel and water bottle on top, and made sure all was well arranged.
This was not neatness for neatness’s sake, or merely to present a professional appearance; as Thran tidied his things, so he also mentally put everything aside but the coming audition.

As he expected, only a few dancers had preceded him into the studio. He chose a spot in the middle of the wall where he had a good view of the rest of the room. He had no need to take a spot in the middle at the portable barre; his height would make him visible wherever he stood. He put down his bag, got out his towel and water bottle and put them to hand, then began his slow preparation. Gentle rolls of ankles and wrists and neck, slow stretches, and gradual elongations were the order of the moment. Thran gave himself to them with unwavering focus, using them as a calming meditation as the room gradually filled. When the dance master and audition panel came in, there were perhaps fifteen other dancers in attendance, all male.

The barre began after only a few short words. Thran stripped off his leggings and all but one of his sweaters; even at the beginning of the barre, the panel wanted to see musculature, movement, control, form. Fortunately, the studio was warm enough that Thran was not overly concerned with being chilled. He concentrated on the movements as they came, without hurry, without anxiety. An audition was a performance, as far as Thran was concerned, and he had never suffered from nerves about performing. In this part of today’s performance, he projected calm, control, refinement, balance, serenity.

The single time the dance master spoke to him, asking for him to repeat a movement and hold it a second longer, he did so as directed, and made the expected response thanking the master. In this case, the comment meant little, only to see if he observed the correct courtesy.

The floor work was what he had expected. This dance master was not the easiest to hear, and occasionally mistook one term for another, but he had known that before he arrived, and so listened hard to divine what she wanted out of the dancers. He emerged from that portion unscathed, though two or three of the other dancers had gotten confused in one section, and he had had to dodge quickly out of the way of one to avoid a collision. The other dancer was red-faced, but Thran was quick to assure him that no harm had been done.

The solo pieces were next. As expected, Thran’s was near the end, so he retired to the sidelines to stretch unobtrusively, keeping his muscles carefully warm and limber for the twenty minutes or so that he would have to wait to do his two-minute piece. He maintained the proper decorum – applauding for each dancer, not lounging, not making a spectacle of himself – until it was his turn to dance.

When the moment arrived, he presented his music on both CD and thumb drive, took his place in the middle of the floor, and relaxed into his breath. He signaled his readiness, and waited for the music to begin.

As the strains of Chopin’s lovely waltz began, he flowed into it easily, letting it rise and fall in his body, infuse his muscles, guide his steps and turns and leaps. Each gesture of his fingers was crisp, and each arch of his neck was balanced. He played a little to the three judges, making eye contact and smiling as if he enjoyed the dance – he did. When the music fell silent, he held the ending pose a second longer, then offered his bow and made his exit.

Was the applause that followed his dance a bit more than that for the other dancers? If so, he was gratified; if not, it was of no consequence.

Only one dancer remained to follow him, so in just a few minutes, the audition was over. There were the usual words of thank you, we appreciate your attendance and attention, we’ll be in touch, and so forth. Thran spoke to the dancers he knew and those he didn’t who spoke to him, then ducked into the changing room to exchange dancer’s belt and tights for more comfortable underthings and soft
jeans for the ride home. Another dancer or two spoke to him as they changed, and he made friendly, innocuous conversation as they left the studio. A short, brisk walk brought him back to his SUV, and he got inside for the drive home.

Before Thran pulled into traffic, he turned on the GPS. It was after three, nearing rush hour, so he checked if any backups had already piled up. Yes, there was one on his most direct route to the highway. He preferred to detour through one of the myriad residential neighborhoods, rather than sit and wait along the direct route.

Strategy decided, Thran maneuvered onto the street, cutting away from the main route a block before the backup began. He passed row after row of brownstones, most renovated into palatial oases over the past several years. That reminded him of Steffen, his grotty apartment building, and his illusions of similar grandeur. His old apartment building could have made a similar transformation, if Steffen’s penchant for miserliness hadn’t prevented him from taking the pains such a transformation required. His treatment of Bard still angered him, but he pushed it aside. That was months in the past, and his saint was nearly whole again. Gods, how quick любовь yego was to play now, whether with their children, in the kitchen, or in bed with Thran. Yesterday’s tussle where they clattered through the house, whooping and laughing like boys, ultimately to drive each other into ecstasy on the sitting room sofa, had been a delight. And tonight, at midnight, they would creep downstairs to court in the ballroom like a pair of clandestine Victorian lovers amid candles and wine, then tempt each other to passion savored between soft fur and twinkling starlight –

What was that sitting out on the sidewalk not three houses ahead?

The narrow, wobbly, paint-scarred table was nothing to speak of alone, if nicely shaped, but was that a marble top propped up on the steps behind? And a small carved stool beside it? The carving looked like horses...

Thran had heard tales of how city people put their unwanted furniture on the sidewalk for the refuse companies to haul away. Supposedly, it happened often enough to be a cliché, but Thran had never seen it in action. He double parked beside the table, jammed on the brakes, and flipped on his hazard flashers. By the time a broad-shouldered young man reappeared with bits of a broken étagère and a slender younger woman with another small stool, Thran was beside the table. The pair was likely brother and sister, for both had similar features and the same wavy brown hair that drifted wildly in the gusty breeze.

“Do you get rid of this?” he asked, he hoped in typical New Yorker directness.

The young man glowered. “Oh, yeah. My uncle tried to move it yesterday, and all hell broke loose. The leg fell out, the top fell off, and bam! Busted his foot just like that,” the young man snapped his fingers. “Rohan, he was pissed! First thing he says when he gets home from the hospital is dump the table. So see ya, busted table. You want it, it’s yours.”

“He’s taking the table, Eo?” the young woman called.

“Yeah, Wyn, he’s taking the table.”

“Good! Take it quick, before Uncle Theo changes his mind! Do you want these stools, too?” Wyn called, pointing to the stool she held.

“Whatever you have, I will take,” he nodded, already opening the back seat of the SUV and flipping the seats down. “Would you grab the other end of the top?”

“Sure thing, pal.” Eo grabbed the other end of the marble, and they laid it in the back of the SUV.
The table went in on top – yes, the leg fell off as soon as they picked it up, but Bard could surely fix that. Wyn passed him the two stools, both of them with the charming carved horses, as if they’d originally come from some rustic Old World cottage, and he put them in after the table. The étagère didn’t appeal to Thran, but he tossed the bits in the back all the same. Tilda might like to repaint it and put toys on it. He hopped back into the SUV with a wave and a shout of thanks, blithely ignored the beeping horns behind him, and drove off.

Even if Bard couldn’t fix the table, the marble top – an unusual black veined in green and white – looked whole except for one back corner that had chipped off, maybe when it had inflicted the broken foot on Uncle Theo. Maybe for the solarium?

His stop didn’t delay him long, so he managed to avoid most of the rest of the traffic waiting to get on the highway. In a few minutes, the slowdown faded, and the rest of the trip home was at speed, so fast that he had little time to think about Irmo Lórien.

He skipped into the mudroom, scrubbing the soles of his boots on the mat before he hurried inside. “Bard? I am back! Can you come down? I have a surprise!”

“Be right down, Thran! Two minutes!”

“All right!” Thran came into the kitchen and got himself a glass of water while he waited for Bard. In perhaps three minutes, Bard clattered down the stairs, wiping his hands on a rag as he came into the kitchen.

“Welcome back, angel,” Bard smiled, giving him a quick kiss. “How was your audition? What’s the surprise?”

“Audition later; surprise first. It is in the SUV. I hope it is a good one. Get your coat and help me carry it all inside!”

Smiling, Bard followed closely as Thran hurried through the mudroom and outside. “It must be a good one, as excited as you are.”

“You tell me,” Thran replied, opening the back of the SUV and waving proudly at the contents. “A marble-topped table, a pair of interesting stools, and an étagère. The latter is not much, but they were nice to give me the rest, so I thought we could burn it if we did not want it for anything else.”

Thran explained how he’d come across the brother and sister discarding the bits of étagère, stools, and broken table. When Bard got a good look at the marble top, he rubbed it with approval.

“This is beautiful, Thran! The two stools are cute for the children –”

“Yes! I thought they could go in the bathrooms upstairs?”

“I thought the same thing. And the étagère might suit –”

“Tilda,” they both said at the same time, drawing laughter.

“Yes, exactly so, our Tilda for her toys perhaps. And I liked the marble. Solarium? Under the windows, to hold plants that like the sun?”

“Just the tick,” Bard nodded. “The table probably just needs regluing, which won’t be hard to do.”

“I had hoped not. So my surprise is a good one, after all.”
“A most excellent one! You made quite a score.”

“My luck has run quite high ever since the week before Thanksgiving.”

“Gods, that’s so true for both of us,” Bard replied with conviction. “So, upstairs with the stools?”

“Yes. I thought the most battered one we could paint in the same blue as the children’s bathroom, as it is just wood, and the other one would look nice in silver for our bathroom.”

“The blue paint will work well. It’s a high gloss, so it’d protect the wood against moisture. I still have some of the pearlescent paint from our bathroom, also high gloss, so maybe that as the bottom coat of the other one, then some silver rubbed into the carving to bring it out? That’d match how I want to refinish our bed.”

“Perfect,” Thran agreed, as they came downstairs for the next load. They piled the pieces of the étagère next to the bed frame in the main room, then they brought the table and its top. Once Bard had a better look at the table, he discovered that the leg that had come out was nearly cracked through.

“That’s not hard to fix,” was Bard’s opinion. “A little glue, a couple of clamps, and it’ll be fine. Then we can refinish the whole thing, reglue all the legs, and it’ll look great. I expect to refinish the fainting couch, so we can make them match.”

“In your book of Islamic tessellations, there are some beautiful carved wooden screens,” Thran said. “Perhaps we can find something like them in a shop, and we will be well on our way to making our own mystical pavilion.”

“A salvage shop might have something like that,” Bard replied. “That would look great.”

“A salvage shop? What is that?”

“It’s a place that sells bits and bobs of architecture – doors, windows, wooden screens like the ones you want, finials, all sorts of things. A lot of times, stuff from demolition sites ends up in the salvage shops so they can go into other houses. They’re fun places to visit. That’s where the pocket doors and the end panels outside our bedroom came from. They were for a big parlor or sitting room or something. Daphne and I got one of the local carpenters to put it in for us. Daphne did a mural for him in exchange, so we both got a deal. I love the stained glass.”

“They are beautiful,” Thran agreed. “So let us go to such a place to look for wooden screens for the solarium.”

“Of course, when we get there. Bedrooms first.”

“Of course,” Thran agreed. “And the Majorelle blue must be part of our solarium, too.”

“Absolutely.” Bard straightened from his study of the broken leg. “While we’re here, let’s move your white rug out and put it in the ballroom.”

Thran hummed in anticipation. “Oh, do you reconsider when we will christen the ballroom? Now, perhaps?”

Laughing, Bard stooped by one end of the rug, indicating for Thran to kneel next to him so they could roll up the rug. “Furl your wings, greedy angel. Moving this isn’t something I want to do at midnight, as it’s heavy. Tell me how your audition went.”
“Exactly as I expected,” Thran shrugged, picking up his end of the rolled-up rug. “Suka blyad, you are right. This is a very heavy rug.”

“No shit. You're ready on your end?”

“Ready.”

They hauled the rug into the ballroom and let it down with a thunk by the windows. Then they moved the garden furniture further out into the ballroom so they could unroll the rug under the windows.

“Very nice,” purred Thran, arching his eyebrows at Bard.

“It is,” Bard grinned back. “Save it for tonight, okay?”

“As you wish. I will distract myself to tell you of my audition, and you will show me Bain’s room.”

“Righto. Come on.”

They headed upstairs, Bard listening and nodding as Thran described his afternoon.

“So what do you think your chances are, even if you don’t want this one?”

“Reasonably good, assuming I am the type of dancer they want. Not everyone wants one so tall, so pale, so whatever. More importantly to me, it was good practice for the next three. I am well settled, in good form, so I am very pleased. And I found us some nice castoffs.”

“Indeed you did,” Bard affirmed.

“And you are through the painting!” Thran admired the clean blue walls and bright woodwork to go with Bain’s mural of planets that went around the room just under the crown molding. “It is restored!”

“Almost done,” Bard nodded. “I’d just cleaned up the painting things before you came home, so I’m going to mix up supper, then see if I can get through the floor tonight. Even if Bain doesn’t move his stuff tonight, I can tomorrow, and get on with Tilda’s.”

“What delight do you prepare for us tonight, svyatoy moy?”

“Beef stroganoff over noodles, and our usual collection of steamed veg. I can marinate chicken breast for you if you don’t want the beef.”

“There is sour cream in the beef, yes?”

“There is,” Bard nodded, opening the refrigerator. “Two cups in the whole potful, so not a lot in one serving.”

“I love stroganoff,” Thran said wistfully. “Perhaps one serving will not kill me.”

“I can make farro or brown rice instead of the noodles for you, so you get a whole grain rather than a simple carb.”

“I would like that,” Thran nodded in gratitude, taking the things Bard handed him from the refrigerator and putting them on the kitchen island. “The farro is very good.”

“Farro it is. Are you headed to the barre, or are you done for the day?”
Thran considered, finally smiling when Bard closed the refrigerator door and gave him an inquiring look. “That depends on what happens at the witching hour, as a certain welder calls it. Until then, I will help you in the kitchen, and then I will help you with the floor. The children will be here in an hour, and perhaps they can help us finish before supper.”

“We’ll see how much homework they have, but if they chip in, we’ll be done soon.”

“To the pots, then!” Thran exhorted, as Bard dug out their biggest pot – Bard called it a Dutch oven – and set it on the stove. Bard cut up onions as Thran browned small pieces of beef in olive oil, then they added the onions and different spices, and set the resulting mixture to simmer until supper. All they would have to do to ready the mixture would be to stir in the sour cream. Then they headed upstairs to work on the floor. As they donned surgical gloves and soaked steel wool in mineral spirits, Thran looked over at Bard.

“I do have one other thing to report about today.”

Bard looked up from the floor. “What’s that?”

“I talked to the choreographer this morning. Irmo Lórien.”

Bard sat up. “You did? How’d that go?”

“He will come here tomorrow. Ten a.m.”

“You sound like... you’re not sure how you feel about it.”

Perhaps I am not. He was very brusque.”

Bard’s hum was apprehensive. “But he agreed to come out here.”

“Very quickly. I hardly had to say three sentences. So I do not know what to think of it.”

Bard returned to his careful scrubbing. “Hmm. Quick agreement, but short. I don’t know what to think of it, either. Is he coming just to talk, or to try a quick collaboration?”

“I do not know. Once I spoke those three sentences – Hello, this is Thran Oropherson, I am very interested in your work, do you have time to discuss a possible collaboration – he cut me off to ask where we could meet. I suggested here, he agreed, again, quickly and shortly. I gave him our address, and he hung up.”

Bard thought about that in silence for some moments as he scrubbed. “I guess... I’d hope that because he agreed so fast means he’s interested in whatever you have to say.”

“I hope so. I did not think about it much this morning, as I concentrated on my audition, and on the way home I was excited about my treasures. So now is the first deep consideration I give it. I will hope as you do, that his brevity signaled his interest.”

“Anything you want me to do for you tomorrow morning? Make tea and crumpets? Stay upstairs and play the hired contractor? Hang around and glower like your bodyguard?”

Thran snickered as he rubbed his steel wool over a particularly sticky piece of stained, built-up floor wax. “If I need any of those things, I will signal you. You are kind to offer.”

Their conversation turned to inconsequential things as they worked on the floor. By the time the children came home, they were halfway through the first step. Sigrid was excused to study for a big
trigonometry test tomorrow, but the other three children pulled on gloves and helped to finish the cleaning. The paste wax went on much faster, and they finished not much later than their usual time to begin supper preparation. Bain and Legolas were excused from supper prep to move Bain’s things from the children’s study back into his room. Thran was gratified when Bain threw arms around his father.

“It looks great, Da. I know how hard you worked to get it all done. Just... thanks.”

Bard wrapped arms around Bain with a tender smile. “Glad to do it, boyo. Hope you enjoy it.”

“I will. Legs and I’ll get everything moved, and I’ll get right to my homework as soon as supper’s over.”

“I appreciate that, Bain. Thran and I’ll start supper now. We’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“Okay, Da. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Legolas, thanks for helping with the floor, and for helping Bain move his stuff.”

“Welcome, Bard. Bain’s room looks great.”

“Thanks. See you two in a bit.”

As Thran, Bard, and Tilda went downstairs to the kitchen, Bard ruffled Tilda’s hair. “Thank you for helping with the floor, too, little doll. It helped me get Bain’s room finished, so tomorrow I can start on yours.”

“Goodie!” Tilda clapped her hands in enthusiasm. “Today is Tuesday, so maybe by Friday mine will be done, too?”

“That’s my plan,” Bard nodded. “Saturday we’ll go to the bookstore for you to pick out your three books. You’ve been very patient.”

“I can’t wait,” Tilda smiled. “I love going to the bookstore. Maybe we can go to the cheese shop, too, Thran?”

“I want to go to the craft store, too,” Bard said. “I filled the last of my sketchbooks, so I need some new ones.”

“Legolas and I plan to go to the Gondors’ fencing session, too. Also, I am sure there must be something we need at the homeowners’ mecca,” Thran added as Bard put on the farro to cook, then a large pot of water to boil for the children’s noodles. Thran set the steamer pot on another burner, found the steamer rack, and decided what vegetables he’d steam for the meal. “We have rounds to make, then.”

“No doubt,” Bard said wryly. “Since we finished Bain’s floor, maybe while the children work on their homework tonight, I’ll paint the chalk paint on the pantry door. It’ll take a couple of coats, but since it’s only that big central panel, it won’t take long. Til, you can put out the flatware and glasses to get us ready for supper.”

“Yes, Da. I’m excited that you’ll start on my room tomorrow. It’ll all be yellow!”

“A sunny color for my sunny little doll,” Bard grinned. “Nice and bright.”

Tilda, Bard, and Thran worked together to get supper ready. Tilda brought Bard the packages of egg
noodles to dump into the boiling water, and Thran piled the vegetables in the steamer. In a few minutes, Bard stirred the sour cream into the stroganoff while Thran and Tilda washed grapes for the fruit bowl. The older children came down in response to Bard’s call to supper, and everyone soon set to.

Conversation was brisk as everyone talked about the day’s events. The children asked Thran about his audition. Legolas and Thran talked about their plan to attend the Gondors’ fencing class on Saturday morning. Tilda was excited about going to the bookstore. Bain talked about soccer. Sigrid was preoccupied about her trigonometry test tomorrow, but she did rouse long enough to mention that today’s mail had included a course catalog from the local rec council.

“I looked through it, Da, and they’re offering an upholstery class. I can get school credit for it if I take it, and maybe I can learn how to redo those chairs we got at the second-hand shop for the study. If you took it, too, you could do the fainting couch.”

“They all need refinishing first, but the class sounds like a good idea,” Bard nodded. “How long is the class?”

“Just six weeks, one night a week. I’m willing to clean up the chairs. They’re not in too bad a shape.”

“It wouldn’t take long to strip one or two,” Bard mused. “The wood’s a nice fruitwood that would look good just stripped and oiled. If you can do that, that’d be a great project. When does the class start?”

“The next one’s not until the beginning of March, so I have time. If I figure out the stripping stuff well enough, maybe I can help you with the fainting couch.”

“We’ll put it on the list,” Bard agreed. “That’d be fun to do together. Oh, one thing, all. That white rug in the main room has taken a beating from all the running back and forth, so it’s now in the ballroom until I get our bedroom redone. So please stay off it. It’s not meant to withstand the epic battles of Clan Ffyrig.”

“But it feels like a big, fuzzy bear,” Tilda protested. “I like to read on it.”

“It doesn’t like all the dirt,” Bard replied. “So we’ll take it easy on it from now on.”

“Yes, Da, yes, Bard,” the children agreed, albeit with varying degrees of acceptance.

“Okay, all. We’re a bit later tonight, so let’s clean up and get to the homework. Thran and I’ll clean up the dishes once we get the table cleared off, so you all bring in your plates, then get your books.”

Cleanup and homework commenced. While the children worked, Bard and Thran tidied the kitchen, then taped off the part of the pantry door they would paint with the chalk paint. The first coat went on quickly, and they added chalk to their running list of things to purchase so that they’d have the means to use their new list once the paint cured.

“Can we have colored chalk?” Tilda called from the kitchen table.

“We can look for it when we go to the craft store for my sketch pads,” Bard called back. “Why use white when we can have colors?”

“Just don’t get pink,” Bain muttered, drawing Legolas’s snicker. “Why don’t they make bright red chalk?”
“They do,” Bard answered, giving Thran a wry look as he smoothed on the second coat of paint. “It’s called artist’s chalk and it goes on paper, not lists for the market. Too expensive.”

“Blue, at least?” Bain asked.

“We’ll see what’s for sale. How’s the homework coming?”

“Two more problems for me,” Legolas said.

“I have to finish coloring my map,” Tilda replied.

“All done but studying for the test,” Sigrid said. “I’m for the shower, then I’ll review my notes some more.”

“The last part of my essay, that’s it,” was Bain’s answer.

“That is good,” Thran nodded, capping the paint. “Try to finish soon, so you are ready to shower once Sigrid is finished.”

“I’m done,” Legolas said, scribbling the last answer in his math workbook. “Archery tomorrow, Father. Fencing Thursday.”

“I know you look forward to both, synok,” Thran smiled as Legolas gathered his school things to put back in his backpack. “Ah, put your lunch bag on the island, please.”

“Yes, Father,” Legolas said. “It’s still strange to have a lunch bag. And so much better to have our lunches than the ones they served in my boarding school. Does anyone really eat creamed spinach?”

Bain, Tilda, and Bard all made disgusted noises. “Nasty,” Bain gulped, shaking his head. “Really, really nasty. Okay, my essay’s done. My lunch bag’s already on the island next to Sig’s, Da.”

“Thanks. Til, how’s your map coming?”

“Just the last part to color.”

Legolas zipped his backpack closed. “Bain and I are packed. May we play a game while we wait for the shower?”

“As long as one of you gets into the shower as soon as Sigrid is done,” Thran cautioned.

“Okay, we will,” Legolas assured his father, then he and Bain raced upstairs. In a few minutes, Tilda was satisfied with her map, so put the colored pencils back in the communal bin, and packed her papers and books away. Soon she, too, headed upstairs to get ready for bed. Thran and Bard followed, Thran to check that Legolas had gotten into the shower as he’d promised, and Bard to see if Bain needed any further help to arrange his room. All was well in hand, so Thran had another go at the zombie apocalypse game with Bain. He improved over his first effort; Bain managed to kill his avatar only once before Legolas returned from the shower. Tilda and Bain followed in short order, and soon the three younger children were settled in bed. Sigrid pleaded for a few more minutes so she could talk to Finn, but in an hour she, too, turned out the light, leaving Bard and Thran to themselves just after eleven o’clock.

“I’ll get in the shower, then I have a few things to do downstairs,” Bard said as he took off his flannel.

“I will follow you when you’re done. Do you want me to dress a certain way?”
Bard stopped, considering, then wandered into their closet to contemplate Thran’s racks of clothes. “May I?”

Following him in, Thran waved a hand. “Of course.”

Bard sorted through the racks slowly, arching an eyebrow when he got to the low-slung, black leather pants that laced up the back as well as the front, and the black satin jacket that went with them. Thran shrugged and offered a sly smile. “A costume party. Vileria and I went as rock stars. The heavy boots and small, round, black glasses were fun. So much jangling jewelry, not so much.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t wear anything under the jacket, either.”

“Of course not.”

“And you had half the party chasing you all night. Both sexes, and everything in between and beyond.”

“I was not the only one so pursued,” Thran grinned.

“Oh, the other half chased Vileria, yes?”

Thran shrugged, conceding the accuracy of Bard’s guess. “She did not wear anything under her jacket, either. I admit she outdid me in that regard.”

Bard snickered appreciatively. “I would’ve had you in the nearest coat closet.”

“I would have let you. I’ll let you tonight, if you like.”

“Hmm. Tempting, but not tonight. Tonight I’ve got a date with an angel, not a rock star.”

Bard kept sorting until he got to something at the back of the rack. He held it up on its hanger, a long kimono in pale sage green cotton, figured with white cranes around the bottom edge. He looked an inquiry at Thran.

“I bought it when I performed in Japan. It is a humble thing made for tourists, not nearly so fancy as the best of such things, but I think it is very beautiful.”

“Is it okay for you to wear it? It’s not artwork, or too fragile to wear, or...?”

“It is just a cotton kimono, a beautiful thing to wear. Not fragile, not artwork. I like it very much.”

“It is beautiful. Something an angel would wear. Would you be warm enough in it?”

“I will bring a blanket from our bed, in case I get cold.”

“I left the heat up, but I’ll take one down in case we want it. You come down when you’re through your shower, and I’ll have everything ready.”

Thran nodded. “Thank you. So, into the shower with you, and I will follow.”

Bard hung up the kimono, and ran a hand over Thran’s arm as he headed into the bathroom. Once the shower began to run, Thran made himself comfortable on the bed with Bard’s Islamic tessellation book. When Bard came out, clean and dry, Thran ducked into the bathroom without looking at his husband much, not wanting the sight of that muscled, naked body to arouse him too soon. He shaved, stripped off, washed, and dried, then carried his clothes into the closet to toss them in the hamper. He shrugged into the cotton kimono and warm socks, shivering a little until the cool fabric
warmed against his body, then ventured out of the bedroom. He drew the pocket doors closed behind him softly, and listened for a moment – good, none of the children stirred – before he padded downstairs.

As he threaded his way between the boxes and bits of furniture to either side of the main room, the open door at the far end was open, and a faint, flickering light beckoned him forward. Thran wrapped his kimono tighter around him, and ventured into the ballroom.

The source of the flickering light was a silver hurricane candlestick placed on the garden table, its etched crystal glass shielding a white taper. Beside the candle was a silver tray holding a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a small plate of chocolates. Bard stood in front of the window, his hands thrust in the front pockets of his jeans, looking up at the sky. His Henley was untucked, and his sleeves were pushed up towards his elbows. Socks kept his feet warm, and his hair was loose over his shoulders. He turned when he heard Thran come in, his lips curving up into a warm smile.

“The angel appears.”

“How could I resist a saint’s promise of wine and chocolate gilded in candlelight? I know of nothing so bewitching.”

Bard came to him, took his left hand to kiss his wedding ring, then drew him into the room. “I do.”

As Bard led him to the window, Thran reached out to stroke Bard’s tousled hair. “What is that?”

Bard pointed up to the sky visible through the windows. “You under the starlight. You look more like an angel than ever. Do you know how wonderful it is to be here with you?”

“I know how much I love to be here with you. There is no part of my life that I have loved more.”

“It’s all such a fairytale. Poor welder meets angel, magic ensues.”

“Oh, lyubov moya, that is not the whole story. You do not start it soon enough.”

“I don’t?”

Thran shook his head. “Pour us a little wine, and I will tell it to you.”

Bard poured both glasses one quarter full, handed one to Thran, and they settled side by side on the furry rug by the windows. Even though the ballroom was warm enough, Bard had one of the soft blankets from their bed to hand, and he unfurled it around Thran’s shoulders, offering more welcome warmth. As he settled beside Thran, he put the plate of chocolates before them and nestled close under the blanket. They shared a sip, and Bard took one of the chocolates.

“They’re all orange or coconut or coffee crèmes. The boys ate everything else.”

Thran chose a coconut crème. “I am surprised that Legolas left a single coconut crème in the box. He has an unerring radar to ferret out any within a half kilometer radius.”

Bard snickered. “That’s Bain and the caramels. I like the orange crèmes. So tell me a story, angel.”

“Once there were two men who lived far, far apart from each other. One danced so well that he became an angel who attracted the patronage of a great emperor, and so went to school to dance for the glory of the state. The other was so kind and good and caring that he became a saint, and he made his way in the world to become a gifted sculptor.
“But tragedy struck both the angel and the saint, and they were left only with their children to treasure and care for. Both sacrificed and labored to do so, and while their children were well cared for, they were not. The angel was able to dance, but was away from his son. The saint was with his children, but away from his art, so neither was whole. What was more, both were alone and bereft.

“So alone and bereft were they that the very elements themselves took pity on them, and conspired like celestial matchmakers to bring the two together. One day, the rain and the wind and the cold harried the angel so badly that he flew into a rage, and cast about for anyone who could bring warmth and comfort back to him. The first person he met was the poor saint, who worked his magic to warm the angel. But in warming the angel’s body, he also warmed the angel’s heart, and in gratitude, the angel warmed the saint’s heart.

“So they were restored, but that was not the only magic done that rainy night. In the days that followed, both the angel and the saint realized that their hearts had come to beat as one, and with each beat, they were drawn closer together. Both were wise enough to know how foolish it was to resist such magic, and so they embraced it and each other, and were grateful for all the good that the magic brought them. And so they prospered.”

Bard smiled as he leaned his head on Thran’s shoulder. “You’re right. I didn’t tell the whole story.”

“It is hard sometimes to know all the parts of the story when one lives in it.”

Bard set his wineglass back on the table behind them. “No matter what came before, I know everything here is all I could ask of it.”

“I feel no differently.”

“I won’t thank you for saving my life, cariad. I’d lost most of it long before I met you. But I will thank you for giving it back to me. I could never have done this on my own.”

“Nor I, lyubov moya. We had to find each other to be whole, and so we did, and so we are.”

Bard’s smile was tender, but it slid into something more intent as he bent in to kiss Thran’s lips. The slight taste of wine on Bard’s lips, then the stronger taste of chocolate, enhanced the allure of the kiss, and Thran shut his eyes to better savor it. This was the first time that he and Bard had kissed this way, not rushing through it to get to more explicit pleasures, but lingering, letting the soft brush of lips against lips, then lips against skin as Bard caressed his cheek, his jaw, his throat, calm and soothe and entice all at once. They paused to sip the last bit of the wine in their glasses, then set them aside, and then Bard enfolded Thran in his arms to kiss thoroughly. Fingers scrubbed through his hair, then threaded it through it from top to bottom with exquisite care, soothing and calming and caressing. Thran kissed back with equal ardor, his hands full of those tangled curls that always looked as if Bard had just risen from bed. Under the blanket, warm hands slipped between the folds of his kimono, stroking so slowly, so lightly, such a featherweight touch. It was so sweet to succumb to the urges those touches roused in him, to slip out of his cotton wrapping and lie back on soft fur, to let cashmere fall over him, making a cocoon for him and the velveted body that lay beside him, still stroking and kissing. He was so lost in the bliss of those touches that he couldn’t say exactly when Bard shed his Henley and jeans, but that only added the warmth of more skin against his, cradling and comforting. There was no hurry, no rush towards more than the touches –

The body next to his stiffened, stilled, shocking him out of his ease.

“What?”

“Someone’s up.”
Thran swallowed a curse, but Bard was already grabbing for jeans, for Henley, before Thran even sat up. He scrabbled for his kimono, but it was tangled in the blanket that had covered him. Bard pulled him upright, stuffing the blanket, his kimono, his socks, and his wine glass in his hands, then grabbed the second wine glass and blew out the candle.

“I’ll head whoever off in the kitchen. Hide in the hall closet if you have to.”

Thran smothered a titter at the absurdity of racing through his own house naked to hide from a child. Shouldn’t it be the reverse? No matter. He dodged the obstacles in the main room after Bard, then stuttered to a stop in the central hall while Bard flitted straight on, heading through the dining room and on to the kitchen. As he fumbled through the folds of cotton and cashmere to feel along the wall for the closet doorknob, he desperately tried not to drop his wine glass.

Gods. Being a parent should not be such an exercise in absurdity.

* * *

Bard managed to slow down in the dining room so that he came into the kitchen slowly, but his heart was still pounding. He stuck his head around the corner – yes, the fridge door was open, and two bare feet showed below it.

“Bain?”

Plastic clattered as a bin hit the floor, accompanied by a smothered exclamation. Bain’s head appeared around the door. “Da! Gods, you scared me!”

“It’s midnight, Bain. You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I’m hungry, Da. I can’t sleep when my stomach is growling so much.”

Bard switched on the task light on top of the oven hood to its dimmest section. “Get something, then. No sugar. Have some peanuts, or cheese, or crackers.”

“Can I have a peanut butter sandwich?”

“That’s fine. Then you need to get back to bed.”

“Okay.” Bain got out the jar of peanut butter and the bread, and sleepily made himself a sandwich. “What’re you doing still up?”

“Making the rounds, just like I do every night. Making sure everything’s snug, and ready for tomorrow.”

“What’s that?” Bain nodded at Bard’s glass.

“It was red wine. A sip’s nice when I look at the stars at night.”

“Where’s Thran?”

“Getting ready for his meeting with the choreographer tomorrow. He should be asleep by now.”

“What’s a choreographer?” Bain asked, munching his sandwich.
Bard leaned his elbows on the kitchen island beside his son. “A person who creates the steps the dancers do in a ballet. This one’s a very good one, and Thran is quite interested in working with him. The maestro will be here tomorrow at ten, so keep your fingers crossed that he and Thran hit it off.”

“Okay.” Bain stuffed in the last bite of his sandwich, then leaned against Bard. “Um, Da? Thanks again for fixing up my room. It’s great. I really like it.”

Smiling, Bard put an arm around Bain’s shoulders and held him close. “I’m glad it turned out so well. Thanks for helping with the floor.”

“Wellcome.”

“So, stomach not growling any more?”

“It’s good.”

“Okay. Brush your teeth before you get back into bed. I’ll clean up down here. Morning’s just six hours away.”

“Ugh,” Bain grimaced, but squeezed Bard once before he eased away. “See you then, Da.”

“Sleep well, boyo.”

Bain padded back upstairs. Bard stayed where he was, putting away the bread and peanut butter, washing the knife and returning it to the cutlery drawer, then wiping up the crumbs. He came out into the central hall to listen for Bain to finish in the bathroom, then pad back to his room. When the door shut, he exhaled.

Gods. Being a parent should not be such an exercise in absurdity.

* * *

Thran bit down on the cuff of his sock, trying to keep his teeth from chattering as he cowered in the coat closet. He was freezing, but the murmur of voices was too close by for him to risk wrapping the blanket or his kimono around himself. What if he knocked one of the hangers onto the floor? What if he dropped his wineglass? If he thought it was uncomfortable to shiver in the closet naked with an armload of blanket and an empty wineglass, how much worse would it be if one of the children opened the door and found him in the closet naked with an armload of blanket and an empty wineglass? He clamped teeth down on the sock and waited. Gods, how long did it take for Bard to send whichever child back to bed?

He stilled when the voices drew closer, then footsteps padded through the hall and upstairs. Silence fell.

Heavier, slower footsteps ventured into the hall. That must be Bard, but Thran didn’t move, other than to pull the sock out of his mouth when the knob turned. Bard peeked in, drawing a relieved exhale from Thran.

“Which one was it?” Thran whispered.

“Bain. Too hungry to sleep. He had a peanut butter sandwich and should be good for the rest of the
night."

"Thank the gods. Let me out. I am frozen!"

"I’m sorry, angel. Looks like we had a dangerous liaison after all."

Thran grinned as he wrapped the blanket tightly around his shoulders and pulled Bard back towards the ballroom. "We have had the danger, yes, and may that be the end of it. Now let us have the liaison."

Bard came willingly, relighting the single candle before he drew Thran down, returning them to their nest of white fur beneath them and grey cashmere above, to slowly warm each other. This time, Thran got to ease Bard out of his shirt, savoring the shadowed torso of his husband in the candlelight. As Bard eased his jeans off, the slow unveiling coaxed a near silent hum of anticipation from Thran.

"My beautiful saint," he breathed, stroking the hair on Bard’s chest. "So beautiful."

Bard leaned in for another kiss. "That first morning, when you were at the barre, you didn’t seem human. I still thought of you as a dream, and I hardly believed you’d ever be more than that. So when you held that pose, and you said, ‘How many of these must I do,’ I thought I was hearing things, or seeing things – it couldn’t be that you wanted me."

"I wanted you very badly. You had something in your eyes that captured me, something that was more than just the two of us teasing each other. It was so electric, so deep. It still is. You look at me like that, and I am lost."

Bard nuzzled a kiss on Thran’s temple. "It’s the opposite for me. When you look at me like that, I find everything I ever want."

"Then look at me like that now, and when I lose myself, make love to me so that I find my way back to you, back home."

Bard pressed a kiss on his forehead, then stroked his hair away from his face until it lay around him like a corona. He eased atop Thran, still kissing, still stroking, his touches still light and slow, but this time those touches only teased Thran into wanting more. As lips kissed down his throat and across his clavicle, as a tongue found first one nipple, then the other, to entice and arouse, Thran’s body tensed, yearning for more. The wavy hair that fell in Bard’s eyes teased every time it tickled Thran’s chest, then his abdomen, then his thighs as Bard’s eyes teased every time it tickled Thran’s chest, then his abdomen, then his thighs as Bard’s mouth surrounded his cock with slippery warmth. But he had hardly gasped at that escalation when Bard’s cock eased inside him, slick and hard. He stretched wide under Bard, eager for the pleasure that spasmed through him with each stroke.

"You’re beautiful in starlight, angel," Bard whispered, his breath warm on Thran’s chest as he nuzzled his nipples. "So pale, so ethereal, so perfect. I love you so much."

"So good, so good," Thran whispered, hands clutching on Bard’s thighs each time they flexed. The movements were slow, infinitely slow, as Bard sought to prolong Thran’s rising. Thran gave himself to it, letting Bard have all of him, offering no resistance each time Bard’s cock filled him. When Bard settled into him as deeply as he could go, Thran pulled him forward, so that he could fill his hands with Bard’s taut buttocks. As he massaged and kneaded, those movements sent small spasms of pleasure through him. He brought his knees up and out so that Bard’s arms pressed them flat against the furry rug, and he was stretched open as wide as his body would go. Now when Bard stroked him, each tiny bit in or out was exquisite, hardly bearable. When the intensity rose to more than he could bear, he pulled Bard hard into him.
“Take me now. Oh, gods, Bard, make me yours. I cannot bear it any longer.”

Bard stroked hard and deep, and in three strokes, climax ripped through Thran with a power that left him helpless to resist it. Bard stayed in deep to intensify Thran’s orgasm, but he didn’t follow Thran in release. When he eased out, he was still hard and erect.

“Oh, lyubov moya, I am sorry,” Thran whispered when he could talk again. “I wanted to take you with me. I am sorry I could not.”

“That wasn’t your fault, cariad,” Bard whispered, as he lay beside Thran. “That was me being greedy. I hope I didn’t ruin it for you.”

Thran rolled onto his side, stroking Bard’s chest. “It was divine. But what is this greedy?”

“I wanted to watch you go. I wanted to see you lost in the moment. It was a gift.”

“So much that you did not let yourself go after me?”

“In part, yes.”

“And... what is the other part?”

“The saint wanted to take his angel to heaven. I hope he did.”

“Very much so.”

“But there’s this welder who wants to take a dancer at the barre, to thank the dancer for seducing the welder that first day.”

Thran grinned. He’d just had the most spectacular orgasm, yet already his loins were stirring at the thought of another. “The angel is happy in heaven with his saint. The dancer, however, is very tired of waiting for his welder. When will he appear?”

“The welder’s content to wait until the dancer’s ready. But it won’t take much to tease him along.”

“No?” Thran stretched luxuriously. “Let us see.”

He rolled over, staying on his hands and knees only long enough to brush a kiss on Bard’s lips. As soon as Bard arched up to kiss him back, Thran pulled away, smiling coyly. He stood, padded to the barre, and ran his hands along it, keeping his back to Bard. All he had to do was shake his hair back over his shoulders to brush down his back, then turn slightly towards Bard to look at him from under his lashes, and Bard was behind him. Hands grasped the barre on either side of him, caging him between a muscular body and the barre. Thran pressed his hips back against Bard, rubbing and teasing the cock that was still erect. Hands moved from the barre to Thran’s hips.

“You teased me until I couldn’t see that morning,” Bard whispered, his mouth at Thran’s ear.

Thran rubbed his cheek against Bard’s. “I did. I told you how badly I wanted you. I want you just as badly now. Finish what I started on that Saturday.”

Bard’s cock slid back inside him, drawing his silent gasp. He was still sensitive from his orgasm, but Bard was slow and gentle, wrapping his arms around Thran’s waist and pressing him against the barre to keep them close. To further the stretch, Thran brought his left foot up to the barre, lengthening out until both legs were stretched straight and wide, with Bard deeply within. He leaned over the barre, eyes shut as the wide stretch and the cock within him irresistibly flooded his body.
“Hold me tightly against you,” he pleaded. “So tightly that I will never escape.”

The cock within settled deeper, and the arms around his waist coiled tighter. Arching his back, he stretched arms over his head and back, pulling his back against Bard’s chest to clasp his hands behind Bard’s nape. Now he was truly caught, not just an ethereal dancer in the clutches of a welder, but a butterfly in the grasp of a mantis. When one of the arms shifted around him to take his cock in hand, he bit back a cry.

“Oh, gods, you have all of me!” he pleaded. “I have nothing left!”

“Yes, you do,” the soft voice whispered in his ears. “Come for me. Give me all of you, and I’ll give you all of me.”

“Take me, then. Take us both.”

The slow stroking inside grew faster, deeper, harder. The profound stretch made it impossible for him to resist, leaving him wide open to whatever Bard would do. As the sensation intensified, Thran spasmed hard, unable to hold back a cry. A hand groped for his mouth, stifling him, and that last fillip sent him roaring into release, with every nerve ending aflame. Within him, Bard released, his body bucking hard against him, arms tightening around him hard, keeping him pinned until his lover was through with him.

In seconds, exhaustion flooded Thran. His arms fell nervelessly away from Bard, groping for the barre to take his weight as he sagged over it. Bard slipped out of him but continued to hold him gently, not letting him fall. He managed to get his leg off the barre and his foot back on the floor without straining a muscle, but leaned over the barre as he caught his breath. There was a faint sheen of sweat over his skin, and as his body cooled from its passion, he shivered.

“Are you steady on your feet?” Bard asked. At Thran’s weary nod, Bard moved away, then returned with a towel to pat his back dry, then to wipe the essence from his thighs. His kimono came to rest over his back, and he managed to get his arms in the sleeves before the cashmere blanket went around his shoulders. Bard eased him down on the garden bench.

“Give me a minute to destroy the evidence, and I’ll get you upstairs,” Bard asked, stroking Thran’s hair over his shoulders.

“I will help you,” Thran said, but Bard urged him to stay on the bench.

“I’ve got it, angel. A welder can clean up after himself.”

Bard cleaned up what spills they’d made, then took the wineglasses and their accouterments into the kitchen to clean and put away. In a few minutes, he was back, blowing out the candle and putting it on the mantle at the other end of the room. He drew Thran up, and together they went upstairs to clean up and settle into bed. Thran was thoroughly chilled by then, but he had no complaints as Bard wrapped around to warm him under the covers. His sigh was long and contented.

“It’s almost one,” Bard murmured in his ear. “I’ll wrangle the children tomorrow morning. You stay in bed so you’re rested for your meeting with the choreographer.”

“That is not fair to you,” Thran protested sleepily.

“That is not fair to you,” Thran protested sleepily.

“It won’t kill me, and I want you to be at your best for the choreographer. That’s more important to me than a couple hours of sleep.”
“You lost enough sleep to that grotty Steffen. I will not let you lose any more.”

“This is for a good cause. Besides, if I’m that tired tomorrow afternoon, you’ll just have to put me to bed for a nap.”

Thran grinned despite his sleepiness. “Mmm, I am sorely tempted. I concede this much – I will see how I feel when the alarm goes off in the morning.”

“Okay. Though I’ll take it as a slight of honor if my ministrations don’t send the beautiful hero of the fairytale into a deep sleep for at least eight hours, if not a hundred years.”

A chuckle. “You were quite thorough. Deliciously so.”

“I’m relieved I didn’t snap you in two like a wishbone the second time.”

“That was exquisite. So intense. So extreme.”

“You, in a nutshell.”

“You love to do me that way.”

“I do, and I did. Now go to sleep. I have to get up in five hours.”

“Next time, the witching hour should be on a weekend.”

“Good idea. Now hush.”

“Not yet. I must do something first.” Thran rolled over to face his husband, and drew him close for a long, deep kiss. “That is to thank my husband for being gentle saint, muscular welder, rebellious property, loving husband, and perfect fairytale consort. I love all of them.”

Bard didn’t laugh at Thran’s whimsy. He offered an equally loving kiss in return, and snuggled them together. “They’re all yours, angel. Always.”

They settled quickly. Thran remembered only a pair of breaths before sleep took him.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The cherubs give the saint a hard time, and the angel meets a choreographer.

Bard managed to wake just before the alarm went off at six. He wanted Thran to sleep in this morning so that he’d be well rested when Irmo Lórien arrived at ten. He rolled out of bed stealthily, switched off the alarm, grabbed the clothes he’d put by the bed last night, and let himself out of the bedroom as silently as the pocket doors would let him. He took one look back at Thran to assure himself that his husband stayed buried in the covers and unmoving, then eased the door shut behind him. He ducked into the children’s bathroom to tend to necessities and dress, then padded downstairs.

Gods, what a rendezvous he’d had with an angel last night. He hardly registered putting on the daily porridge and teakettle, setting the crock of raisins and the sugar and cinnamon on the table, then laying out sheets of waxed paper and bread for the children’s sandwiches. He was too preoccupied with recalling each slow caress, each nuanced kiss, each whispered endearment. Thran was so open with his passion, so unashamed of everything they did, so inventive, so careful to make sure that Bard savored everything as much as he did. That rising at the barre... gods, how had Thran put himself into that split, trusting that Bard would hold him safely, both within and without? He’d given every bit of his exquisite body to Bard to devour, but in doing so he’d consumed Bard, plunging them both into the deepest ecstasy. How had he ended up with such a glorious man?

“Morning, Da.”

Bard started out of his reverie. He blinked, found Sigrid smiling slyly at him.

“Um, morning, Sig.”

“Where’s Thran?”

“Sleeping. That choreographer’s coming at ten. I wanted him to be well rested.”

“Oh.” The look his eldest daughter gave him was knowing, full of suppressed laughter. Heat crept into Bard’s cheeks, but he kept his expression neutral as Sigrid held his eyes. “You look a little ragged this morning, Da. And you do know you’re putting mustard on Legolas’s peanut butter sandwich, right?”

Bard jerked his gaze down at the kitchen island, and found that Sigrid hadn’t exaggerated. The slice of bread that would top Legolas’s sandwich was slathered with bright yellow mustard. “Oh. Shit.”

“Here.” Sigrid swapped the mustardy bread for a plain one further down the line. “Now the mustard will go with my chicken, cheese, and lettuce, and the plain one’s ready for Legolas’s blackberry jelly.”

Bard grumbled at his lapse, drawing a snicker from his daughter, quickly smothered. “Maybe you ought to go to bed earlier. Or maybe you did, and –”

Bard cleared his throat in warning. “I know you’d really like to see Finn the next time he visits
Killian, so it’d be a shame if you were grounded that weekend.”

Sigrid made a pout. “That’s no way to treat your excellent co-conspirator.”

“My excellent co-conspirator needs to eat her breakfast and let me get on with making lunches.”

“Have it your way.” Sigrid gave him a reproachful look as she came around the island to scoop up a bowl of porridge. She sat at the table, added raisins and cinnamon, and started to eat. “I’m just glad to see you happy, you know. You are, aren’t you?”

Bard gave his irrepressible daughter a look, but she looked back without apology. When that same sly smile tugged at her lips, he couldn’t keep a chagrined one off his face. He gave into it, and offered a bit of a nod as he slathered blackberry jelly on Legolas’s sandwich.

“Good. You’re allowed. Das are people, too.”

Bard snorted as he finished Legolas’s sandwich and moved on to Bain’s. “Thank you... I think.”

“They are. Even when they look ragged out.”

Sigrid was openly snickering now, which drew a half-hearted glare from Bard. As footsteps clattered on the stairs, signaling the arrival of the boys, he muttered, “Cut it out, Sig.”

“Yes, Da,” she offered, schooling her face into something less teasing.

“Morning, lads,” he offered Legolas and Bain as they came into the kitchen. “Porridge is hot. Either of you want tea?”

“I do,” Bain replied, dishing up his porridge. “Can I have the oolong?”

“Juice for me,” Legolas said, sticking his head in the fridge. “I’ll get it.”

“Thanks, Legolas. Water’s already hot, Bain.”

“I’ve got it, Da.”

“Okay. What time is your track meet today, Sigrid?”

“You remembered!” Sigrid said, gratified. “Three-thirty. In the gymnasium. So you’ll come?”

“That’s my plan. Morning, Tilda. Porridge for you?”

“Yes, please. May I have apple instead of raisins? Where’s Thran?”

“I’ll cut one up for you. Just half?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll eat the other half,” Legolas offered. His brow wrinkled. “Is Father all right?”

“He’s fine, Legs. That choreographer’s coming this morning, so I told him to sleep in a little longer to make sure he’s at his best in case he ends up dancing for him. Keep your fingers crossed for him, everyone. Here’s your apple, Tilda. Legs, do you want the rest sliced?”

“The half is fine, thank you. Oh, you cored it – thanks!”

“My pleasure.” Bard got ice packs out of the freezer, put them in the lunch bags, then put the
sandwiches atop them. Pears and clementines went in after, then the packets of cookies. “Okay, lunches are ready.”

“Make sure you eat, too, Da,” Sigrid prodded him as she brought her empty bowl to the sink to rinse. “Here, I’ll dish it up for you.”

“Gods, Sig, that’s enough for three,” he said when she handed him the bowl.

“You work hard enough for three, so eat it,” she fussed.

“Yeah, Da,” Tilda echoed from the table.

Bard sat next to her, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “I seem to have acquired two yentas this morning.”

“What’s a yenta?” Bain asked, shoving the raisin crock towards Bard. “Are you okay, Da? You look a little ragged.”

“Make that three,” Bard shook his head in resignation as he mixed raisins into his porridge.

“I hope you aren’t catching a cold,” Legolas frowned over his porridge. “You work very hard, Bard. It’s easy to catch a cold when you work so hard.”

Sigrid laughed at Bard’s exasperated look. “Dead to rights, Da, four times over.”

“I’m fine. And I appreciate you all looking out for me. But the only thing you need to worry about right now is getting ready in time to make the school bus. So chop, chop, everyone.”

Bain headed upstairs with his sister. “I still don’t know what a yenta is,” he murmured.

“It’s a nice way of calling someone a nag,” Sigrid returned, drawing Bard’s grin. He dug into his porridge still smiling.

He just had time to shovel down Sigrid’s mountain of porridge before the children were ready to leave for the bus. To his surprise, a spritely Thran trailed behind them, dressed in jeans and Henley.

“Of course I am up,” he shrugged, after kissing Bard good morning. “I want to see the children off, and wish them to do their best, just like always.”

“You just made it, then,” Bard handed Thran his coat. “You’ve all got your lunches? Bain, zip your backpack before your lunch falls out.”

Clan Ffyrnig pulled on boots, shoes, and coats, then trooped out of the mudroom. Rosie and her four children were already at the bus stop, so Bard brought up the questions he had about who to contact in the village about the local chamber of commerce. It was no surprise that Rosie and Sam were on the board, so Thran and Bard made plans to talk to her once Thran knew more about what company he would be with, and whether he wanted to supplement that effort with master classes. Rosie was enthusiastic about the possibilities, and promised to check back with them in another week or so.

“That’d be great, Rosie,” Bard nodded with a big smile. “We want to have you over soon, too. I’ve got a few more rooms to go, but it won’t be long.”

“You know us, Bard. Informal to the max,” Rosie grinned. “A pot of soup, a loaf of bread, and we’re happy.”

“Well... maybe next week, then?” Bard asked, looking at Thran, who nodded at once. “Friday,
Saturday, or Sunday?”

“I’ll talk to Sam, and we’ll get back to you. We’ll talk food when I do. We’ll make a feast!”

“You know Clan Ffyrnig well,” Thran laughed. “It will be a festive time.”

“Oh course!” Rosie agreed, grinning. “Okay, you lot! The bus is here!”

“We’re off, and we’re leaving, too!” Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda shouted, hurrying to queue up with the other children.

“Do your best, just like always!” Bard and Thran chorused in return, waving.

“I’ll see you at three-thirty, Sig!” Bard added.

The children waved back as the bus pulled away, and Bard and Thran waved to the other parents before they headed home.

“What is at three-thirty, lyubov moya?” Thran asked as they walked.

“Sigrid’s track meet. If you come along, you could watch Legolas’s archery.”

“I had forgotten about the track meet. Yes, I would like to go, too, to see both Sigrid and Legolas. We need more than the chalkboard list, yes? A place to put all the schedules.”

“Maybe a cork board where we can pin things. There’s room on the end of that line of upper cabinets. I’ll paint it white to match the cabinet, so it’ll fit right in.”

“The perfect idea. So let us put it on the list for the homeowners’ mecca.” Thran opened the door to let them in, and they shed coats and boots in the mudroom. When he glanced at Bard, his smile was small, but wicked. “You look like you spent last night doing exactly what we did last night.”

When Bard exhaled it was partly in resignation, partly in exasperation. “You’re the fifth person to tell me so this morning.”

Thran laughed as they came into the kitchen. “Am I?”

“Eh, the second in so many words. The other three just said I looked ragged, needed to eat more, and not work so hard.”

“Oh, my poor saint,” Thran snickered, enjoying Bard’s exasperation all too much. “Let me guess – our Sigrid knew exactly, Bain said you needed to eat more, Tilda said you looked ragged, and Legolas said you should not work so hard.”

“Half right. Bain said I looked ragged, and Tilda said I needed to eat more.” Bard turned on the burner under the teakettle. “Are you going back to bed, or do you want breakfast?”

“Since you will not get your nap this afternoon, I should take you back to bed with me,” Thran mused as Bard set the porridge pot back on the stove to warm. “But that would lead to more exertion of the sort that we enjoyed last night rather than sleep, so perhaps that is not the best idea. I should do a short barre this morning in preparation for Irmo Lórien, at any rate. Then you can go back to bed for another hour, yes?”

“I’m up now, and I might as well stay up. I’ll get started on Tilda’s room before the mysterious Mr. Lórien appears.” Bard stirred the porridge, got a bowl out of the cupboard, and filled it for Thran. As he handed his husband the bowl, Bard snorted. “You look like you spent the night innocently asleep,
and you were the one who got off twice to my once. And gods, how you got off, you fucker. There’s no justice.”

Thran took his bowl to the table with a smug grin. “I keep a portrait in the closet, well hidden.”

“Ha, ha, Dorian Gray.” Bard filled two teacups and brought them to the table.

“Perhaps we should let a day or two go pass before we indulge in such... energetic delight next.”

“We may have to, anyway. You’ve got the choreographer, then two auditions, then fencing, then another audition. You’re liable to be the one looking ragged in a day or two.”

Thran hummed as he ate his porridge, conceding the possibility, but gave Bard a regretful look. “We have been married less than a week, lyubov moya, and have not allowed ourselves a honeymoon. And now even more things intrude so that we cannot fuck ourselves blind. I have always wanted to do that at least once in my life.”

Bard guffawed. “Listen to you!”

“If I do, then I will tell myself to skip my barre, drag my husband back to bed, fuck him thoroughly, and then meet this choreographer as the dissipated primo danseur he might think I am.” As Thran swallowed a spoonful of porridge, his eyes lingered on Bard. He hummed, smiling. “Oh, my sweet saint, it bears no contemplation.”

Laughing, Bard nearly choked on his tea. “What’s gotten into you?”

“You, last night. Gods, how do you do this to me? All I do is think about you and what we do, and I want more of it. Do not make me beg!”

“That choreographer’s going to show up in two hours, and –”

“And so we waste time! The longer you think about why we should not do this, the less time we have to do this. So do you come upstairs with me or not?”

Bard cradled his chin in his hand to regard his amorous husband. “I don’t believe you. You just got through explaining why we shouldn’t, and even you don’t listen to it.”

“Is there a reason why I should listen to such poor advice?” Thran scooped up the last of his porridge, drank down his tea, and looked at Bard from under his long lashes. “I go upstairs. But before I do, I offer you a little incentive not to listen, either.”

He stood up, kept his eyes on Bard as he pulled his Henley over his head. He tossed it at Bard, draping it over his head. When Bard pulled it off, he was confronted with Thran’s broad shoulders, lean ribs, and narrow waist. White hair fell loose from its braid over a sculpted chest like a caress, and below it, black jeans gloved narrow hips. Tight black jeans. Unbelted, tight black jeans, low on narrow, muscled hips...

Unbidden, Thran’s black leather pants came to mind...

As Thran retreated towards the main hall, with each step those jeans loosened and slipped one inch off one muscled hip, then the other, back and forth, with as much finesse as any stripper could have displayed. White hair stroked pale skin in a feathery caress. When Thran stood silhouetted in profile at the end of the hall, he slid his jeans off rounded buttocks and down long, elegant legs. Once he stepped out of them, he cast another look at Bard before he straightened and disappeared, dragging his jeans behind him.
Bard sat there, thinking of every reason why he shouldn’t climb into bed after a lascivious ballet – no, exotic – dancer: Tilda’s room, choreographer, painting, broken bathroom tile, floor refinishing...

Two seconds later, with a curse under his breath and a rueful grin on his face, he toed off his socks, and shoved his chair away from the table. He’d stripped off his Henley before he reached the foot of the stairs.

“You’d better be in bed, you bastard!” he yelled up the stairs, taking them two at a time. When he came onto the landing, the pocket doors to their bedroom were open, and Thran was posed as provocatively as any pinup in the middle of the bed, his white hair tousled out of its usual pristine smoothness, in his eyes, over his chest, onto the sheets.

“Of course I am in bed,” he purred. “Where else does one go to be decadent in the morning, while the rest of the world rushes about to do proper things?”

Bard shucked off his jeans and dove into bed after Thran with a growl. “You are going to be the death of me, you fucker!”

“I hope so,” Thran grinned, as he pulled Bard into his arms, them flipped him onto his stomach with Thran on top. “I promise you it will be a long, slow, lingering death, achieved through constant and frequent indulgences over a lifetime.”

Bard grinned as Thran set to doing his worst – or was that his best? In either case, Bard wasn’t about to stop him. There were worse ways to die, and no better way to live.

* * *

Bard didn’t last long under Thran’s concerted efforts, and it didn’t take much to coax him to sleep in Thran’s arms afterwards. Thran was content to drowse with Bard curled against his belly; his poor saint needed to sleep, but not just because of last night’s late exertions. Bard worked very hard on the renovations of their house, but also to see to everything their family needed, from meals to homework help to laundry. Once the children’s rooms were finished, Thran would see to it that Bard took more time to restore himself, no matter how hard it would be to coax Bard to do it.

When he woke fully, it was after nine. Bard remained solidly asleep for a little longer, then his breathing changed. He shifted the slightest bit under Thran’s arm draped softly around his ribs, as if he didn’t want to rouse just yet.

“Feel better, my saint?” Thran asked drowsily, stroking his husband’s ribs.

“Always, angel. I don’t want to get up, but I guess we’d better. Your Mr. Lórien will be here within the hour.”

“I know what time it is. I would have woken you in a few minutes if you had not roused. I enjoyed to hold you while you slept.”

Bard’s hand tightened on Thran’s. “I enjoyed sleeping in the arms of an angel. And getting pillaged by an angel, too.”

“I did not pillage,” Thran protested comfortably. “I merely provided the means to coax you to sleep for a little. You needed it.”
So everyone in the house has told me. So let me get up and wash some semblance of sense into my body before this choreographer tells me I look ragged, too.”

Thran chuckled. “We will get up, yes. And tonight we will go to bed earlier than we did last night. And try not to indulge. It is difficult not to, after so long without. And you are delicious, which does not encourage me to abstain.”

“Here’s something that might help. We’ll play a game.”

As Bard sat up on the edge of the bed, Thran opened his eyes to regard him with interest. “What sort of game, lyubov moya?”

“A game to plan our next indulgence.” Bard leaned back to stroke Thran’s hair. “Every time we pass each other between now and then, we’ll take turns to add something about what will happen then. When, where, a piece of clothing, a role, a line...”

Thran bit his bottom lip, his arousal already piqued. “An intriguing game, indeed. So I will start it. Friday.”

Bard nodded. “Okay. Then for my turn... first, when is your audition Friday?”

“Ten in the morning. In the city. I should be back by two.”

Bard nodded. “Then I’ll say... three in the afternoon. If you don’t get home in time, then after the children go to bed.”

Thran sat up. “And so now we must go about our day, and not add to the game until we come together again, yes?”

Bard nodded. “That’ll let us stretch it out.”

Thran hummed. “I make no promises about what such a buildup will do to me over two days.”

Bard got up and headed to the bathroom. “I won’t, either. But it might mean we get to sleep earlier tonight. We both need it, even if you don’t look like it.”

Thran laughed as he got up, too. “True. For now, let us prepare for our guest.”

They washed, then Thran considered the closet as Bard went downstairs to tidy up the kitchen before Irmo Lórien arrived. Thran opted for his usual black velvet jeans and warm socks, then came out onto the landing to pull on the shirt Bard pitched up the stairs to him. He retreated long enough to pull on a long tunic sweater over the Henley before heading for Tilda’s room. He helped Bard move their youngest child’s things into the children’s study so that Bard would have open space as he painted ceiling, walls, and woodwork. They were just spreading the drop cloths over the floor when a knock sounded at the front door.

Bard and Thran looked at each other, then headed down the stairs together. Bard pulled open the door to reveal the man on their front porch.

“Irmo Lórien,” the man said in a clipped, French-accented voice. He was perhaps five-eight, with a barrel chest and huge hands, bald but for the grey stubble that cast a horizontal shadow from one ear, around the back of his skull, to the other ear. His thoughtful eyes were deep-sunk in an expressive, mobile face, and so dark that their pupils were indistinguishable from their irises. His skin was either deeply tanned or naturally swarthy, the color of dried tobacco. Despite his accent, was he Spanish, Persian, Turkish, something more exotic than French Canadian? He was nicely if casually dressed in
dark grey work pants, sturdy brogues, and puffy, deep amethyst down jacket, with a muted purple and grey scarf looped around his neck.

Thran stepped forward to extend his hand. “Thran Oropherson. This is my husband, Bard Bowman. Welcome to our home. Please come in.”

Irmo shook hands with Thran, then with Bard. He had a firm grip, and his carriage was assured as he came inside. After Bard hung up Irmo’s coat in the coat closet, Thran led him to the sitting room to sit down; Bard stayed in the kitchen to make tea.

“I was elated when you called,” Irmo began without waiting for Thran to speak. “Although I am sure you didn’t think so.”

“You were short,” Thran agreed without rancor. “Perhaps I called at an inopportune moment, or perhaps not. I am less interested in the reason for your terseness than I am about whether you seriously consider a collaboration between us.”

“But such a thing is obvious, is it not?” Irmo shrugged, frowning as if Thran were a slow child. “I have wondered why you had not called long before now.”

Thran cocked his head. “Ah. Perhaps I am unaware of some injury that you have suffered, one that left you unable to call me.”

Irmo’s laugh was rich and unrestrained. “Ah, you are no fool, then. Good, good. Yes, you are right; I should have called you some months ago. But there was your injury, and the questions about which company you would end up joining, and so I decided to wait and see. I took your call as a good sign that your injury was no more, and that you had not yet settled on a company. Several are interested in you. Which ones interest you?”

Bard came in with a tray of tea things, put it on the table between the sofas, and gave Thran a wink that Irmo couldn’t see before silently disappearing.

“That may depend on the outcome of this conversation.” Thran leaned forward to pour one of the small Japanese cups of tea full, and offered it to Irmo. The choreographer leaned forward to take the small cup, then Thran poured his own. “I do not like to be coy, Irmo. I gauge you to be just as blunt. So I will say that I am interested in your choreography. The subjects, the way your dancers move, the deep emotional content, all appeal to me. They fit very naturally with the kind of dancer I am. They go in directions that interest me as an artist. If we can establish a rapport between us, we will make something unique. I want to explore the potential for that before I settle on a company.”

Irmo sipped his tea, nodding. “I am no less fond of anything other than brutal directness. In that, my reputation is correct. When I learned you had begun to audition, I made it my business to find out which companies you intended to see. I was disappointed that you wasted your time with the company you saw yesterday – you would be wasted on them. But I expected you wanted a warmup audition before you made serious applications elsewhere. I was pleased to see you scheduled an audition with UltraViolet, the company I work with so extensively.”

Irmo sipped the last of his tea and held out his cup for more. Thran refilled it, then his own.

“There are considerations before I choose a company.” Thran set the teapot back on the tray. “To dance memorably, to leave my mark on the body of work, of course. But I have my family to think of, as well as my future. UltraViolet Ballet is a new, struggling company. It cannot compete for compensation and exposure as can other companies I consider. It also needs capital, and soon, I suspect, direction. The risk inherent in such things does not interest me if a position within it is
relegated to traditional roles, traditional approaches, traditional choreographies."

“It needs an angel, to be sure,” Irmo shrugged, unconcerned. “I myself have not allied with it for many of the same reasons, though I have no family to concern me. So far, the company has attracted solid talent, most of it young, and all willing to try new things. But it does not have a prima or a primo who interests me, who would entice me into being more than what they call guest choreographer. I know of your work, of course, and have seen video of you. You are an interesting and talented dancer. None other interests me so much. So perhaps there is mutual interest between us, enough to see if we can work together. We both have large personalities. Neither of us suffers fools well. But neither of us are fools. We may mesh well, or we may not. We will have to see.”

Thran put his teacup on the tray and stood up. “Then I would like to show you something. If you would follow me?”

“Of course, of course.”

Thran led Irmo through the house to the main room. Pausing by the door to the ballroom, he looked back at the choreographer. “If you would remove your shoes, please?”

Irmo looked at him askance, but did as requested. Thran opened the door to the ballroom, and let Irmo inside.

“Oh, mon Dieu, c’est magnifique! I understand about the shoes now.” Irmo’s dark eyes lit up as he took in the expansive space. “C’est formidable!”

“C’est ça,” Thran agreed, smiling. “So I propose we try a little something, if you are so inclined, to see whether we mesh well, or not.”

“Mais oui, certainement,” Irmo nodded at once, rubbing his hands. “Let’s do it.”

“I will change into something I can dance in, and return shortly. Will you excuse me?”

“Go, go!” Irmo shook his hands at Thran, still staring up at the ceiling, down at the fireplace, and around at the worn herringbone wood floor. Thran smothered a grin and headed upstairs.

“How’s he look?” Bard whispered from atop his ladder when Thran stuck his head into Tilda’s room. He was partway through painting the ceiling.

“Very direct, very pointed, very refreshing. So we will be in the ballroom. You will likely hear music at some point.”

Bard climbed down from the ladder and followed Thran into the bedroom to talk to him while he changed into his dance attire. “Will you do your Knight’s March piece for him?”

“Perhaps. I have to warm properly, and we will talk throughout, so we will see.”

Bard snared Thran for a quick kiss before he headed back downstairs. “I’ve got my fingers crossed for you, cariad.”

Thran kissed Bard back with a smile. “Thank you, lyubov moya.”

He returned to the ballroom. “I have not been at the barre this morning, so that is a good place for us to start.”

Irmo nodded. “Good, yes. First, the basics.”
Thran acted as both ballet master and dancer, calling out the steps and moves, some of which Irmo did with him – no surprise there; the choreographer had danced himself for many years – and some of which Irmo watched Thran perform with a critical eye. At frequent intervals, the choreographer questioned a position, or asked for a different sequence, or asked what would happen if the position were changed just this much or that much. When Thran was well warmed, he did longer sequences, gauging what it would be like to have such a man craft dances with him. When Irmo asked if Thran had any complete sequences he could dance, Thran told him of the two audition pieces he had prepared. Irmo was silent through the Chopin piece, but spoke up at once as soon as the piano music faded.

“Very traditional, but not unexpected for you,” he shrugged. “You are seen as such an extreme, oui? So it is smart of you to craft such a piece to show how disciplined you are. Your footwork is quite precise, and your balance is superb. It is very nice. But it is...”

“Traditional,” Thran agreed.

“So show me something untraditional.”

Thran allowed himself a pleased smile. “Of course. You will excuse me while I call Bard to spot.”

“Why? What do you need a spotter for?”

“The knives, of course,” Thran shrugged, imitating Irmo’s dismissive gesture, drawing a bark of laughter from the choreographer.

“Ah, so you have the little joke, then,” Irmo laughed. “Call him, then.”

Thran snickered as he went to the bottom of the stairs to call up to Bard. “Lyubov moya, may I interrupt you for a little while?”

“Just finished the ceiling,” Bard called down. “Let me cap the paint and put the brushes in to soak, and I’ll be right down.”

Thran waited for the few seconds it took Bard to clatter downstairs, still smiling. Bard caught the expression as he came beside his husband. “What’s up? Is it going well?”

“So far, so good. I want you to spot, that is all.”

“Knives?” Thran nodded. “All right. Be a second.”

Thran headed back to the ballroom, where Bard joined him as he opened his knife box and took out the two blades.

“I will dance this twice. The first time, I will be traditional. The second time, I will not.”

Bard had positioned himself by the CD player, and started the music at Thran’s nod. The first time through, he suffused his dancing with all of the malevolence he could, almost over-emoting. He held the final pose for three seconds, took his beginning stance again, and nodded to Bard to restart the music. This time, he danced the role that Bard had named, Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield, with dispassionate, inevitable, inexorable control. He let his hands fall, knives gracefully dipping to cut the final skein of human existence, and shut his eyes.

When he straightened, his first sight was of Bard, his hand over his mouth, keeping all reaction within, but his eyes were shining, and he nodded once, wholehearted approval. Thran swung his gaze to Irmo, who stood stock still.
“Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield,” Thran said.

For some seconds, Irmo said nothing, did not move. But Thran kept his regard calm, confident, until Irmo nodded. It was not a theatrical gesture, but surprisingly humble.

“Yes. It was. You were. I have not seen the like,”

Thran offered a slight bow. “Thank you.”

“So that is how you want to dance.”

With a slight smile, Thran shook his head. “No. That is only the start of how I want to dance. Is that something that intrigues you?”

Irmo smiled. “Ah, mon ami, it very much does. I think you and I have much to talk about.”

Thran glanced at Bard, silent but grinning widely. He offered a quick wink in celebration.

“I think we do. So, where would you like to begin?”
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint spend the afternoon attending sporting events, and their game grows more interesting as Round Two ends and Round Three begins.

Chapter Notes

Here's a HUGE THANK YOU to rhosgobelrabbit96, who sent me a whole lot of proofreading corrections, and which greatly cleaned up my tale. YOU ARE AWESOME! ❤

Fellow writers, when folks care enough about your stuff to help you fix it, that's the biggest gift in the world, and you are blessed. So thank you to everyone who has been so nice to me! I love you guys!

I still don't own any rights to "The Secret Garden." It's just one of my favorite books, as it is one of Tilda's.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was all Bard could do to hold still and silent while Thran danced for Irmo Lórien. The first time through was stunning enough, just for the sheer crash of the seething music and the magnificent body that interpreted it. But the second was far more powerful – Thran’s restraint and inevitability as Death were the unexpected, yet perfect, counterpoint to the harsh music. Still, even with such a restrained performance, Thran left no question as to the consummate height of his abilities. Would Irmo be as impressed as he was?

The small choreographer made no move, but there was an eager alertness to his pose, and he didn’t blink at all during Thran’s second run-through. Those alone were enough to reveal the intensity of his reaction. Bard had to put a hand over his mouth to keep from chortling at how firmly Thran had hooked his prey.

He had to put a hand over his mouth to keep his jaw from dropping, too. The beauty, the grace, the divine skill that suffused his angel’s dancing was overwhelming.

He left Thran and Irmo in the ballroom to continue their discussion. He hadn’t gotten halfway to the stairs before the dialogue had switched to French, bouncing rapid-fire between the two. Something amazing had happened, and Bard went back to Tilda’s room content to let it ferment on its own. Soon enough, Thran would be back hard at work, and Bard wanted to be through all of the essential house renovations so he could be the backbone of the family they needed. He was musing on the implications of that when Thran called to him from the main hall.

“Bard, Irmo bids us adieu.”

“Be right down,” Bard called, putting down his roller and grabbing a rag to wipe his hands. He came
down the stairs to find Thran holding Irmo’s coat for him to slip on.

“We will be in touch, of course,” Irmo said, smiling. “I am excited at the possibilities we’ve discussed. And I will see you Monday at your audition. You should save yourself some effort and cancel your auditions tomorrow and Friday, as they are of no consequence. Take the time to prepare for Monday, though I am already convinced by what you showed me today.”

Thran chuckled. “I will observe the politenesses, to be sure. And I will be pleased to see you on Monday. I am glad you agreed to meet this morning to discuss. Thank you.”

Irmo waved a hand. “It was inevitable, to be sure. And now we have set the future in motion. Bard, I am pleased to have met you. I am sure we will meet again very soon.”

Bard leaned forward to shake Irmo’s hand. “I expect we will. Thran’s a spectacular dancer. He needs spectacular dances to perform.”


The choreographer crossed the porch, went down the stairs, and headed to his car without a look back. When he’d pulled out of the drive, Thran shut the door and gave Bard a speculative look.

“I think something wonderful has begun, lyubov moya ,” he murmured, smiling.

“I thought so, too,” Bard agreed. “What time is it? Close to lunchtime?”

Thran pulled out his mobile. “ Zut alors, oui . After one. Are you at a stopping point?”

“Almost. Let me get the wall done, and we’ll eat.”

“I will come with you. Perhaps I can help with something.”

Bard had almost finished priming the third wall of Tilda’s room, so he hurried to do the last bit while Thran picked up the bits of detritus he’d generated and put them in the trashcan. Bard capped the primer, and they brought the brushes down to wash them in the mudroom. Then they scrounged for lunch, and brought a collection of things to the table to eat.

“So what’s the next step, angel?” Bard asked, taking a huge bite of his chicken sandwich.

“I will attend my auditions tomorrow and Friday, despite Irmo’s suggestion,” Thran replied, helping himself to chicken. “That is the polite thing to do. I have accepted the auditions, and it would be neither kind nor professional to skip them at this late date. They will be good warmups, and give me a current view of both companies, which is always useful information. And I will speak to Mr. Nori about some things. There is still much to sort out. But for now, I will simply savor the morning and how well it went. Something was in the air.”

Bard paused in his chewing. Something in the air.... He grinned as he swallowed his bite, drawing Thran to raise his eyebrow.

“That look you give me is most devious. Does it have something to do with our game?”

Bard nodded once, still smiling perversely.

Thran held up his hands in puzzlement. “What, then?”

“You went first for Round One. So I get to go first for Round Two.”
Thran nodded. “That is fair. And so what is your addition to the game?”

“Pheromones.”

Thran looked blank. “Fero - what?”

Bard shook his head. “That’s all I’ll say. Pheromones.”

Thran looked mystified. “You must tell me how to spell it, so I can look it up.”

“P-H-E-R-O-M-O-N-E-S.”

“Ah. P-H, not F. I will research, and return with a counter offer.”

“Okay. Meanwhile, I’ll try to get the last wall of Tilda’s room primed. I won’t get much more than that done before it’s time for Sigrid’s track meet.”

“You haven’t finished your lunch,” Thran protested. “We have an agreement, yes? Never do we skip the meals!”

“I’ll take it up with me,” Bard assured his husband. “Believe me, I’m an old hand at painting with one hand and eating a sandwich with the other.”

Thran snorted. “Then I will do the same thing so that we finish that wall so that you finish a proper lunch. You do not eat enough!”

“Neither do you,” Bard said seriously. “And it’s a problem.”

“What, that I do not eat enough?” Thran looked affronted.

“No, no, *cariad,*” Bard hastened to assure Thran. “We both have the problem, not just you. I was thinking about it just before Irmo left.”

Thran’s brow cleared, and he speared another mouthful of chicken. “What did you think about?”

“That we need to watch out for each other, that’s all. You’ll dance fulltime and then some very soon. I expect you to be away for long hours, especially if you end up dancing for Irmo. You’re both very intense, and getting either of you to stop will not be easy. It’ll be even harder to get the two of you together to stop. So I need to get a lot of the renovation done so I can cover more of the home stuff for us. The children rely on us, and we can’t neglect care of ourselves. That means we both need to make an effort to eat well.”

Thran unwound completely at Bard’s summary. “You are right, *lyubov moya.* I have not ever had to worry about such things before. In Russia, Vileria and I had someone to look after Legolas, and someone else to look after our flat, and yet someone else to look after both us, and of course we both danced, so the rigors did not seem so extreme because we both endured them. But that is no longer true, and it is you and I who must see to these things now, as well as to all of our children. Perhaps we should hire someone to help us?”

“We may want to at some point, but I still want to keep working on the house myself,” Bard admitted. “Getting the second floor done will go a long way to getting us ready for whatever comes after that. So we can take stock again after that point. But regardless, we need to promise ourselves to eat what we should. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Thran replied without hesitation. “So let us take the five minutes we need to eat our lunch.
together now, and then we will see to Tilda’s wall. With two of us, it will not take so long.”

Bard nodded. “You’re right. So eat up.”

They finished their meals, even taking time to finish off their main courses with fruit. They carried their tea upstairs to tackle the last of Tilda’s walls with primer, and in a little over an hour they were finished. They had just time to clean all the brushes and tidy the room before it was time to head to the school for Sigrid’s track meet.

“We should take the SUV,” Thran suggested, as they got their coats. “Then we can bring the children home with us, so they do not have to ride the bus home.”

“And maybe we can get them started on homework early, and have supper a little earlier, which means we might get to bed earlier,” Bard agreed, not really expecting any of that to happen, and the look Thran shot him looked no more sanguine. They shared a commiserating laugh, then climbed into the SUV and headed for the Imladris Academy.

In a few minutes, Thran pulled into the school parking lot. A bus from another school was parked there already, and as they walked to the gymnasium, they spotted athletes in red and white uniforms as well as in Imladris blue and gold. They made their way to the bleachers, and found seats in the top row that gave them a good view of the proceedings.

“I have never been to a track meet before,” Thran confessed, looking around with interest. “Is it all footraces?”

“A lot of it is,” Bard replied. “Relays, and solo races, of course. Maybe hurdles? I should have asked Sigrid.”

“Look, there she is,” Thran pointed. “Do we wave to her?”

“That’s probably not cool,” Bard grinned. “But I’m going to, anyway.”

“Ah, she looks this way,” Thran said, waving. “Tcha, she does not see us.”

“I’ll get her attention.” Bard whistled shrilly, just a short note, but when Sigrid looked around, he whistled again. She spotted them, and sent them a grin as she waved back.

“That is a convenient skill to have, to whistle so loudly,” Thran grinned, wide-eyed as he pretended to clean out his ear with a finger. “Good for track meets as well as to call city taxi cabs.”

Bard chuckled. “It’s just the tick to let the troops know I’m here.”

“How does a track meet work? How do we know when Sigrid will run?”

Bard craned his neck. “Maybe there’s a schedule somewhere. If you want to go watch Legolas’s archery, I can hold the fort here.”

“I would like to see Legolas, yes, and speak to Mr. Faramir to see how he thinks Legolas progresses. But first, let us see if we can find a schedule for Sigrid’s meet.”

They left the bleachers to walk around a bit, and found a student who had a stack of schedules. Fortunately, Sigrid was in one of the earlier relay events, so they returned to the bleachers to wait. A voice heralded them, and they found Sam Gamgee climbing up to join them. His oldest son, Frodo, a sixth grader, was also running, so they enjoyed a few minutes together while they waited for their children’s races to begin. They decided next Friday night would be a good time to get their
respective clans together for a simple supper of soup and bread. By the time they’d worked out the
details, Sigrid’s relay was ready to start.

“Look how fast she is!” Thran marveled, as Sigrid took the baton from the second runner on her
team, and raced around the track four times before handing off to the anchor runner. The Imladris
team came in just a few feet ahead of the other team, which drew Bard to whistle in celebration.
Beside them, Sam whistled, too, so Thran joined in, much to Bard’s delight. It was cute to see his
elegant husband create as much racket as everyone else, and look elated to do so.

The checked their schedule, and found that Sigrid had one more event in about fifteen minutes, so
they stayed in the bleachers talking to Sam for most of that time. Sam left before Sigrid’s race so that
he could move to the other side of the gymnasium to watch Frodo’s jumping event, but in just a few
minutes more, Sigrid lined up with another four girls for the start of her race. She would have to
circle the track a dozen times. Each time she ran by them, Bard and Thran yelled loud
couragement, especially in the second half of the race, when one of the girls on the other team
pulled ahead by a sizeable margin. Sigrid ran with determination, and slowly pulled ahead of the
other two girls, and began to close the gap between her and the girl in front. Over the last two laps,
she pulled within just a body length of the leader, but ran out of room just before she overhauled her.
Still, she made a strong finish, and looked elated despite her second-place finish. Bard and Thran
cheered and clapped loudly for her, which she rewarded with a huge smile when she looked towards
them in the bleachers. They threaded their way over to congratulate her.

“That was great, Sig!” Bard put an arm around her to hug hard. “Another half lap, and you would
have caught her!”

“As swift as a deer!” Thran added, grinning.

“The girl ahead of me was the deer!” Sigrid laughed. “I was trying to be the wolf behind, but I ran
out of room before I pulled her in.”

“Something to work on next time,” Bard offered. “Do you get to run again? I didn’t see your name
on any of the other races.”

“I might end up subbing for one of the girls in the four hundred,” she replied. “Lily pulled a muscle
in the relay. But I won’t know for a half hour.”

“Thran wants to go watch Legolas’s archery for a bit, so I’ll go with him, and we’ll check back in
about twenty minutes, then.”

“That’d be great, Da. I’m so glad you two came!”

“I have never been to a track meet before, so now I am more educated,” Thran grinned. “So, until a
little later, ma chère.”

“We’ll be back in a bit, sweetness,” Bard called, as Sigrid headed back to rejoin her teammates. She
waved in reply, so Bard and his husband made their way out of the gymnasium and headed for the
fields outside. They spotted the group of archery students off to the left, so they angled that way, and
soon drew close enough to spot Legolas among the group. Just beyond him were Killian and Tara.
All three were at the line, shooting as they sighted in on their marks. When Legolas let his arrow fly,
it landed as close to the exact center of the target as was possible, drawing Thran to hum in
satisfaction.

“He’s amazing,” Bard complimented. “Our own Robin Hood.”
“Indeed,” Thran nodded, pleased. “Do you know our own Robin Hood wears trusy with archers on them for mojo?”

Bard snickered. “If you mean have I noticed that Legolas’s boxers have Cupid, Hawkeye, and Robin Hood on them, then yes, I have. What did you call them? Trusy?”

“Trusy,” Thran nodded, grinning. “I have not asked how he acquired them. It was not my doing.”

“Every boy needs some secrets,” Bard grinned. “We’ll just leave his underpants alone.”

“Agreed.”

They watched quietly from the side for a while. As this was just practice, there were no other parents in attendance, but eventually Mr. Faramir came over to them to say hello and exchange a few words. The instructor was highly complimentary of Legolas’s skills, which pleased Bard almost as much as it did Thran. As they two talked, Bard watched the children working on their skills, and was amazed at how focused the irrepressible Kíllian was. When he was at the line, he was entirely calm, in his zone. He sent arrow after arrow at the target, none of them ever more than an inch or two from the center of the targets. Legolas might be the older and more practiced of the two, but Kíllian had the better instinctive affinity for his weapon. So interesting was he to watch that Bard almost forgot to notice Tara’s efforts further on. She was a tall and graceful archer who embodied a quiet fierceness, and was well worth watching. All three of the young archers gave truth to what Legolas had told his family around the supper table so often – on any given day, any of them had the potential to outdo the others.

When the archers called a hold to clear the targets of arrows, Legolas spotted them. Once he’d cleared his target, he trotted up to Bard and his father to say hello. He was pleased to see them both, and happy he’d shot well. Thran told him where the SUV was parked and that they would soon return to the gymnasium for the rest of Sigrid’s track meet, so that Legolas would not race to meet the school bus after his archery practice. He promised to stop by the gymnasium when he was done, so Thran and Bard waved a short goodbye to him and headed off to the soccer field where Bard had spotted Bain. They stopped there only briefly, long enough to pass on the same information about where they were, before heading back to the gymnasium.

“So the only one we have not found is our Tilda,” Thran said, looking across the fields. “Do you think she might be inside for her sport today?”

“The track meet’s taking up the gymnasium,” Bard replied. “I don’t know where she might be. Maybe she already got on the bus and went home. But she knew we were going to be here today, so I don’t know where she is.”

“Perhaps we should check the SUV to see if she waits for us there,” Thran suggested.

“Good idea.”

They walked briskly around the gymnasium to the parking lot, and there beside the SUV was Tilda, looking teary. Bard’s heart leaped into his mouth, and he was quick to wave and call to her. She ran to them quickly.

“What’s the matter, little doll?” Bard hurried forward to meet her.

“I couldn’t find you in the gym, so I came out here, and I still couldn’t find you, and I got worried that something had happened,” she gulped. “The early bus had already left, and I was afraid the late one had too, so I didn’t know what to do.”
Bard stooped down beside her, and so did Thran. The tall dancer rubbed her back in comfort, and Bard took her hands. “We went over to see Legolas at the archery targets, that’s all. I’m sorry, Tilda. We were just about to go back inside the gym. Here, let’s put your backpack in the SUV, and we’ll go see if Sigrid’s going to run again. Bain and Legolas will be here soon, too, so you would’ve found someone before too long.”

“I know. I just...”

Bard’s jaw tightened. It seemed that Tilda was still a little skittish because of the altercation in the park on Christmas Day.

“You just didn’t like not being able to find anyone. That’s sometimes a little scary, I know.”

She nodded. “I’m glad I found someone.”

“We wouldn’t have left you,” Bard assured her. “You’ve got your mobile, right? You have all our numbers so you always have five other people to call, plus Elanor Gamgee’s Mam. So you’ll always have someone to find you.”

Tilda swallowed, but looked a little more reassured. “I remember now. Next time, I won’t be so worried.”

“It’s okay, Til. New stuff is often scary the first time.”

“Even for you and Thran?”

Bard nodded. “Even for us.”

Tilda looked from Bard to Thran, who nodded soberly. “Of course, ma chère. For example, do you know that today is the first time I have seen a track meet? I had no idea what to expect. But I had Bard and our friend Mr. Sam to explain it to me. It is much easier to do new things with others, I think. Come, we will put your backpack in the SUV, and then we will go back to the track meet. I can explain it to you, if you like, just as you explained the parades to me.”

That got a smile out of Tilda. “Okay. That’d be good.”

Behind Tilda’s back, Bard gave his husband a thumbs up, so after stowing Tilda’s things in the SUV, they walked back together to the gymnasium. They were just in time to see Sigrid line up for the four hundred-meter run, and in the excitement, Tilda forgot her apprehension and yelled shrilly as her sister managed to get a nose ahead of the same girl who’d held her off in the eight hundred-meter run.

“Did you see that?” Tilda shouted, jumping up and down. “Sigrid won!”

“She sure did!” Bard clapped loudly and whistled, and so did Thran. “Great run, Sig!”

There was only one more race left in the meet, so Tilda, Thran, and Bard stayed near the door until the last runners had completed their circuit, the teams had had their final words, and Sigrid collected her things to go home. She was still elated about her win, and almost danced out of the gymnasium and out into the parking lot. Legolas and Bain were both waiting at the SUV, so everyone piled in to make the trip home.

That evening after supper, as Thran and Bard sat in the sitting room to be near at hand if the children needed homework help, Bard leaned back against the sofa and rubbed his husband’s thigh.
“Tilda’s still a little skittish because of that day in the park,” he murmured softly.

Thran’s long fingers laid against the back of Bard’s hand. “She is. I was worried for her.”

“Once she’s through her homework and had her shower, I want to spend a little time with her upstairs. She’s in the children’s study tonight, which is unfamiliar, so I want to help her settle as much as I can.”

“Of course. However I can help, I will. I can be the first line of homework help down here. As long as they ask me only questions about French or perhaps English, I will be fine. They are all ahead of me in the maths and the sciences.”

“I’m right there with you,” Bard agreed with a wry grin. “From what Sam and Rosie tell me, we’re not alone. It seems that every generation adds just enough new stuff to keep parents in a constant state of ignorance.”

Thran snickered. “Perhaps that is so. At any rate, I shall muddle through as best I can while you see to our Tilda. I do not like to see her frightened so much.”

Soon enough, Tilda finished her work, and Bard headed upstairs with her so he’d be ready to read with her once she’d showered. As he waited for her to cycle through the bathroom, he sat on her bed, looking around the children’s study. Even at night, the apricot walls were warm, and the children had filled the shelves of their desks with colorful books and a few trinkets. It would be good to finish Tilda’s room, just so the children could settle into using their study. But it’d be only another day or two before that would come about. Then they could look for a table to offer room to work puzzles or play games, and the sanctuary would be complete.

Tilda came in from her shower, and settled beside Bard with their old favorite, The Secret Garden. But they ended up talking about one thing or another rather than reading. As the older children began to come upstairs, Tilda looked up to Bard.

“How much is left on my room, Da?”

“It’s my plan to get all the yellow done tomorrow, little doll. If I can get started on the woodwork, too, I will, but likely that’ll happen Friday. Then there’s just the floor. I hope you and your brothers and sister will help with that, so Friday night you’ll be back in your room.”

“That’ll be nice,” Tilda agreed, looking around. “It’s kind of different in here.”

“A little,” Bard allowed. I might find out that for myself when I paint our room, too, now that I think about it. It’s a lot faster and easier to paint when I don’t have to go around a lot of furniture.”

Tilda nodded. “It’s not so bad. And it’s just two days.”

“Just two days,” Bard agreed. “You’ve got Mr. Bun and all your toys with you. And you know that if you want, you can knock on my door and I’ll come in with you.”

“Okay,” she agreed firmly. Bard was proud of her for being so brave about something she wasn’t quite comfortable with. “It’s just two days.”

“There’s lots of books in here to read, too,” he teased lightly. “You can turn on the light and read if you want, but it’d be better if you try to sleep. Otherwise you’ll be awfully sleepy during the rest of school this week.”

“Can I put my nightlight in here?”
“Sure can. I already moved it. See, it’s right there on the wall.”

“Good. Then I’m all set.”

“You are. Okay, little doll, it’s time for you and Mr. Bun to get tucked in.”

Bard saw his daughter and her toys – there were three or four more than usual tonight – well snuggled under the covers, kissed her goodnight, and make sure her nightlight was lit.

“Sleep well, Til. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay, Da. Love you.”

“Love you, too, little doll.”

Before long, the rest of the children followed Tilda to their rest, and Bard came downstairs to find Thran. He’d just entered the kitchen when a burst of incredulous laughter, quickly smothered, came from the sitting room. When Bard stuck his head in, he found his husband on the sofa with his computer cradled in his lap.

“What’s so funny?” Bard queried, brow wrinkling to see Thran with both his hands over his mouth, consumed with amusement.

“Oh, lyubov moya, the things I learn! There is no limit to the outrageousness I find. So I have the answer to your start to Round Two of our game, as well as how I will start Round Three.”

“Okay,” Bard put his hands akimbo. “Do your worst.”

“You tell me ‘Pheromones,’ yes? So I counter with ‘The King’s Bitch.’ And I start Round Three with ‘The Spoils of War.’”

Bard’s eyebrows had likely ascended into his hairline. “ ‘The King’s Bitch?’ ‘The Spoils of War?’ What in the name of hell does that mean? They sound like the titles of a couple of bad romance novels.”

Thran dissolved into laughter. “Tomorrow, when I am at my audition, you can look these things up for yourself. I will say no more until you counter with your addition to Round Three.”

“I have the feeling this game has just veered into a little more than I’d expected,” Bard shook his head.

“Things should always deliver more than expected,” Thran grinned, hugging his arms around his shoulders. “This will be fun.”

“So show me what you looked up,” Bard asked, coming to sit next to Thran, but Thran had already wiped his search engine, and closed his laptop before Bard saw anything but the desktop.

“I will not. You make your own discoveries tomorrow. But I admit that I cannot wait to hear your counter, or to start Round Four.”

Thran’s glee was infectious, and as they went upstairs to shower and get into bed, Bard couldn’t resist a grin. “I hope I live up to your expectations, angel.”

“I have the utmost faith in you, my saint,” Thran grinned, linking his arm with Bard’s.

The last sound in Bard’s ears before he fell asleep was Thran’s snicker. Gods, what had he gotten
himself into this time?

Chapter End Notes

For those enterprising readers who are curious about Thran's entries in Rounds Two and Three of the game, you won't find anything on the web about either that pertains to this story. Just trying to save you a little time :-) as you wait for the next chapter. Soon more will be revealed!
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Two of the cherubs misbehave, invoking the wrath of an angel and a saint. Auditions and renovations proceed, and so does a certain game.

I don't hold any rights to the Candyland game. I only remember it fondly.

Chapter Notes

To all of you reading along,

On March 11, 2016, the hit count for this story passed 10,000! This is amazing, and you all made it happen. Thank you so much for sticking with me, our gorgeous guys, and a quartet of cherubs!

!!!!!❤️ ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

Thran’s amusement at the results of his Internet searching faded as he enfolded Bard in his arms and they settled for sleep. How blissful was it to lie here so comforted and cocooned? He hoped that when Bard made his own Internet searches, he remembered this comfortable cocoon and planned accordingly. If he didn’t, then Thran would, regardless of the scenario they devised. It was something they both needed.

The simple enjoyment of skin against skin was one of the best things to savor about winter. Thran was never one to care for hot weather, particularly given how careful he had to be to protect his pale skin and eyes, but to ruin the sensuousness of skin against skin with sticky sweat made summer all that much more annoying. Vileria used to tease him that he was the only Russian who wanted to be sent to Siberia.

She would approve of how and where he lived now, and would love to see how happy Legolas was. He would mention their idea to add a remembrance of Vileria and Daphne in the house to Bard again. It would make him happy to include a small reminder of their wives, the mothers of their children, in the happiness he enjoyed here with his family.

He drifted off, happy to fall asleep bathed in Bard’s scent, which made him smile about pheromones again. But he didn’t stay asleep for long – a persistent tapping roused him. Bard was already grabbing the tee shirt and flannel pants he kept at the side of the bed.

“Da?”

That was Tilda’s wavering voice, so Thran reached down for his leggings and shirt and sleepily pulled them on as Bard went to the door and opened it.

“I’m here, little doll. What’s wrong? Did you have a bad dream?”
“No-o-o-o.” Her reply was uneven, and she went right into Bard’s arms. “There’s a weird noise in the study. I’m scared.”

“Okay, let’s look.”

Thran tucked himself under the covers, but he kept his clothes on in case the outcome of Bard’s investigation was not reassuring. He shut his eyes, and drifted off enough that he didn’t know how much time had passed when Bard came back into the room. Thran roused to find that the pocket doors to their room were still open, and Bard didn’t undress before he got back into bed.

“She is reassured?” he mumbled sleepily.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Bard murmured back. “I didn’t hear anything, but I’d give less than even odds that she goes back to sleep for long.”

“Let her stay here with us, then,” Thran offered. “Legolas did not sleep well for a long time after Vileria died. It comforted him to stay with me.”

“I was about to ask if you’d mind if it came to that, so thank you, cariad. Keep your fingers crossed.”

Thran had almost drifted off again before Tilda returned with Mr. Bun and another toy in her arms.

“Da, I heard the weird noise again.”

“That’s okay, Tilda. You can stay with us for a while. Do you need to stop in the bathroom?”

“Will you stand at the door?”

“Of course, little doll.” Bard clambered out of bed, and went to his daughter. “Here, I’ll hold Mr. Bun and Lollybear for you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Bard disappeared to wait for Tilda to visit the bathroom, then drew her into the bedroom. “Okay, hop in. Do you want to sleep in the middle between Thran and me, or on the edge?”

“In the middle. Hi, Thran,” Tilda ventured, climbing into bed. “There’s a scary noise in the study.”

“Hi, Tilda. I do not like scary noises, either. But you can stay here with us. I will keep away any scary noises for you on this side, and your Da will keep away any scary noises for you on that side.”

“Good,” Tilda said with a little gulp. Bard got in beside her, and put Mr. Bun and Lollybear in Tilda’s arms. She clutched them and crowded hard against Thran’s chest. She reached out to pull Bard in just as close. “Closer.”

As Bard snuggled in, a host of emotions went through Thran. To have their youngest child trust him enough to huddle against him was an honor. To smell the scent of Tilda’s hair, overlaid with just the faintest dusty tinge of her well-loved toys, was to recall how frightened Legolas had been many nights, waking up in tears as he dreamed about the explosion that had killed his mother. To witness yet another example of how tender Bard was with his children made him love his husband even more, if that were possible.

If he were honest, however, the scent of Tilda’s hair sparked a reminder of the game he and Bard had begun. He couldn’t wait to see what Bard would do with pheromones.
Despite Tilda’s scare and subsequent arrival in bed, Bard fell asleep quickly. Tilda didn’t rouse, and he hoped Thran wasn’t kept awake for long. When the alarm went off at six, he hurried into the bathroom. To his relief, Tilda was just rousing when he returned. Thran was awake and murmured softly to Tilda, retrieving Mr. Bun from atop the pillow to hand to her.

“Is it morning?” Tilda asked sleepily, as Bard sat on the side of the bed.

“It’s morning,” Bard assured her. “Let’s get you to the bathroom, and then you can put your clothes on for school.”

“Oh, it’s not the weekend, then,” Tilda said. “It’s just Thursday.”

“Thursday it is,” Bard agreed. “Did you wish Thran a good morning?”

She nodded. “He found Mr. Bun for me. Sometimes Mr. Bun likes to wander at night.”

“He’s still got a lot of the house to explore, I think. He’s interested to find out all the special nooks and crannies.”

Nodding, Tilda rolled over and sat up, then crawled back to press a kiss on Thran’s cheek as he lay drowsing. His eyes lit up, and he smiled as if he’d been given a gift.

“That is a very nice good morning kiss, Tilda. Thank you.”

“Welcome. Thank you for keeping away the noises with Da.”

“It was my pleasure. Now, I will find my clothes, too, and see you in the kitchen in a minute to make lunches.”

“Okay.”

Bard offered Thran an appreciative smile for his graceful morning welcome to Tilda, and to congratulate him that Tilda felt so comfortable with him. Then he shepherded Tilda to the bathroom, and into the children’s study to find school clothes for the day. He heard Thran head downstairs, so by the time he and Tilda followed him down, the teakettle was warming, the porridge was simmering, and the fruit bowl was filled. Bard started the sandwich assembly line, and before long the morning had returned to its normal routine.

Sigrid soon appeared, yawning, but her eyebrows went up to see Tilda already at the table. Before she got her porridge, she came to give Thran and Bard a morning hug as they finished making the lunches.

“Til’s okay?” Sig murmured when she gave him his hug.

Bard put an arm around Sigrid to return her hug, and put his mouth close to her ear. “Scary noises in the study last night. She spent the night with us.”

Sigrid made a silent O with her mouth, but didn’t say anything as she got her bowl of porridge from the pot. She went to the table to sit beside her sister as Bain and Legolas clattered in.
“Morning, Legs; morning synok; morning, Bain,” Bard and Thran greeted their sons as they filled their porridge bowls and came to the table.

“Morning,” the boys responded, queuing for their porridge. Legolas ducked into the fridge for his juice, Bain made his tea, and both boys carried their breakfasts to the table.

“Morning, Til,” Sigrid wished her sister. “Everything okay this morning?”

Tilda nodded solemnly. “But there was a scary noise in the study last night.”

The faintest ripple of something went between Legolas and Bain. No one else noticed it, but Bard had been a parent too long not to. His gaze sharpened, looking between them, and it was the slightest twitch of Legolas’s lips that gave them away.

“Maybe Legolas and Bain heard the same noise,” he said mildly. “Let’s ask them.”

“That’s a good idea,” Tilda looked up, brightening, not sensing that the undercurrent between the boys had taken a guilty turn. Bard slid his eyes to Thran, who was trying to puzzle out what Bard meant, alerting him that something was up. “Did you hear it, Bain? It was a thumping sort of noise. In the wall. I thought it was a big rat or something.”

“A rat? There aren’t any rats in the walls, Til –” Sigrid scoffed, but quickly broke off when Bard shot her a look. “Oh, but you heard something, right?”

Tilda nodded vigorously. “I didn’t see anything, even when I turned on the light. But it was still scary.”

“Bain? Legolas? Do you have any idea about what made the noise that scared Tilda?”

“I don’t know,” Bain ventured, but Legolas’s ears turned red, and he didn’t look up from his porridge bowl.

“Bain, Legolas, the sitting room,” Bard said very quietly. “Now.”

Thran reinforced the quiet command with one of his Prince of Ice glares, and both boys shuffled out of their chairs. As they went into the sitting room as ordered, Bard gave the girls a reassuring look.

“Carry on with your breakfasts, girls. We’ll be back in a minute.”

“Yes, Da,” they replied, and Bard headed after the boys with Thran at his shoulder. They found the boys sitting hunched on one of the sofas, whispering. The whispering stopped when Bard and Thran sat side by side on the facing sofa.

“Yes?” Bard asked, with a firm look at both of the boys.

“It wasn’t much, Da,” Bain said with an innocent expression. “We – I just bumped the wall, that’s all. It was an accident.”

“You’re both already grounded for two days, Bain. If you don’t want to be grounded for more, tell me the real story.”

“Two days?” Legolas blurted, eyes wide. “Starting when? Does that mean I’ll miss fencing on Saturday?”

“It does,” Thran growled, his eyes hard and icy. “Our Tilda is still easily frightened after what happened in the park Christmas Day. She was already worried to sleep in a strange room. You were
most cruel to scare her still more. In fact, if both of you do not make a complete confession this
moment, we will ground you for more than two days, and confiscate a certain zombie apocalypse
game for far longer. Now, speak.”

“It was my idea,” Bain stammered, looking at Legolas with embarrassment. “I don’t want Legolas to
miss his fencing for my dumb idea.”

“He will not miss his fencing for your dumb idea,” Thran replied, still glaring at Legolas. “He will
miss his fencing because he took part in your dumb idea. Now, speak.”

“I thought it would be funny to rap on the wall at Tilda, that’s all,” Baid confessed with a
shamefaced look. “I didn’t think she’d get scared. I didn’t.”

“Well, she did,” Bard took up where Thran had left off. “And I don’t think you just need to tell us
about rapping on the walls. Which one of you snuck into the other’s room, and why?”

“We were in Bain’s room,” Legolas admitted. “We wanted to play the zombie apocalypse game for a
while longer. And then Bain... and me, too... we rapped on the wall to see if Tilda would hear it.”

“So Legolas snuck into Bain’s room, you played video games long after bedtime on a school night,
and you tried to scare Tilda. Just for the record, how many days have you been sneaking into Bain’s
room to play after bedtime?”

“Just last night and the night before,” both boys hurried to explain.

“So two days. How are either of you still awake?” Thran frowned. “I think the zombie apocalypse
will take a week’s rest, yes?”

“At least,” Bard nodded. “And you’re both grounded for three days. You also need to apologize to
Tilda, and do something to make up for scaring her. If you do anything like this again, the penalty
will be double. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Da; yes, Bard,” the boys replied in subdued murmurs.

“Back to the kitchen, then.”

They all trooped back to the kitchen, where Tilda and Sigrid looked up in inquiry. As they sat down,
Bard met Tilda’s eyes.

“Tilda, the boys have something to tell you.”

“I’m sorry that I scared you,” Legolas said, swallowing. “I didn’t think that rapping on the wall
would scare you, and I’m very sorry that it did.”

“Me, too, Tilda,” Bain continued. “It was stupid, and I’m sorry I did it.”

“I was really scared!” Tilda said angrily. “I thought it was a rat, and it would bite me!”

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Til, I really didn’t,” Bain pleaded, wincing at his sister’s anger. “I’m
sorry.”

“I am, too,” Legolas repeated.

“The boys owe you something more than an apology, Tilda,” Thran said. “Perhaps there is
something you would like them to do for you?”
“Would they?” Tilda eyed them with both speculation and eagerness. “Maybe play one of my games with me?”

“Oh, no,” Bain muttered. “Not Candyland again.”

“How about they play games with you a half-dozen times apiece?” Bard sent a quelling look at his son. “Or you could ask them to read with you, or help with your homework.”

“Really? And they’ll do it?” Tilda asked with a hopeful look towards the boys.

“They’ll do it,” Bard nodded, and under their fathers’ pointed looks, both boys nodded in agreement. “So think about what you want to ask them to do, and we’ll decide at supper. Right now, you’ve got to get ready for school, and Thran’s got to get ready for his audition.”

The impending trip to the bus ended any further discussion about the nights’ transgressions, and the morning routine resumed once again.

As Bard and Thran walked home from the bus stop, Bard asked, “Did you sleep at all after Tilda came in?”

He nodded. “Our bed is large enough that the little one did not keep me awake for long. She does not thrash as Legolas did when he was small.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was concerned that you’d be ragged out for your audition this morning, so I’m glad you’re not.”

“I am fine.” The tall dancer turned to Bard. “How did you know that the boys were the culprits responsible for Tilda’s noise last night?”

Bard laughed wryly. “A father’s instinct. Yours will be up to snuff before long. It was Legolas who gave it away, if you want to know for next time. He hasn’t had as much practice holding a poker face as the other three have. And his ears turned bright red as soon as I looked at him.”

“Ah,” Thran nodded sagely. “I noticed the red ears, but was still puzzled about the reason for them when you sorted out the cause. I will learn soon, as you say. But I liked how we supported each other, Bard. I have heard it said that parents must present a unified front to misbehaving children, and now I know what that means. It was a good lesson for me.”

“We did well, all round,” Bard agreed. “The Prince of Ice glare was perfect. I hope you never look at me like that. I’d melt.”

Thran linked arms with Bard. “I like to melt you, but I have better ways to do so. I cannot wait until the next time I have that privilege.”

“Not until Friday,” Bard grinned. “Meanwhile, you need to get to your audition, and I need to paint. I won’t be able to get Tilda’s room done completely today, but I want to get the yellow paint done, anyway. And since we have a couple of grounded children this weekend, I just might put them to work.”

“A good way to burn off so much creative energy,” Thran agreed. “What will you have them do?”

“There’s a lot of stuff in the yard they could clean up – sticks out of the trees, and such. That reminds me – we can’t use the fireplaces until I get in a chimney sweep. Are you okay with me calling one today? It’d be nice to use the fireplace in the sitting room, especially. I like a fire, and then there’s popcorn, marshmallows, and so forth.”
“Of course; that would be wonderful,” Thran nodded at once. “I have never had a fireplace before. Or toasted a marshmallow. I would like to.”

“Marshmallows don’t taste like much, but they’re fun to make,” Bard admitted as they left their coats in the mudroom. “I like the toasted part best. I’ll show you how to toast them twice to get more toasted part than goo.”

“It sounds like fun,” Thran agreed, hanging up his coat and slipping off his boots. “But now, I must hurry. My audition is at nine-thirty, and I do not want to appear late or frazzled.”

“Go get yourself ready, angel,” Bard pointed Thran towards the stairs. “There’s not much to sort out down here, and then I’ll lay about with a paintbrush.”

The caress of long, elegant fingers across his back sent a shiver down Bard’s spine as Thran went past him to head upstairs. He busied himself washing out the porridge pot and putting away the leftover fruit and raisins. Since Thran would be home in time for lunch, he put a couple of chicken breasts in water to simmer, so that they’d be done whenever Thran got home. It would take only a few minutes more to add sliced vegetables and spices to give them a fresh, warm lunch whenever they chose to have it.

“I am ready,” Thran called, reappearing in the kitchen in his tights and practice top. He pulled on leggings and a pair of sweaters over top, and filled his water bottle from the tap and placed it in his bag. “Or as our children are so fond to say, I am off, and I leave, too.”

Snickering, Bard gave Thran a goodbye kiss. “And as we’re so fond of saying, do your best today, just like always. I hope you nail it, even if it’s ultimately not the position you want.”

“I will do my best, for there is no point to do less,” Thran shrugged, heading to the mudroom with Bard trailing behind him. He pulled on his boots, let Bard help him with his coat, and collected the keys to the SUV from the row of hooks. “I will text you when I am about to start for home.”

“That’d be good. I’m making soup for lunch, so I’ll know when to add the veg.”

“Perfect,” Thran nodded. He gave Bard one last kiss. “Now, I go. I should see you near one, I think.”

Bard nodded. “Knock ‘em dead, angel.”

With a smile, Thran headed out, and Bard shut the door behind him with a smile.

He gave Thran ten minutes to make his way away, then Bard opened his husband’s laptop on the kitchen table. When he’d accessed the web, he typed T-H-E – K-I-N-G-‘S – B-I-T-C-H into the search engine.

Before long, he was reading a very strange short story on a site hosting fiction works of dubious merit. The erotic graphics of the site’s home page alone reeked of overkill. It didn’t take long before he echoed Thran’s incredulous laughter, but he kept reading. When he’d finished, he read it a second time. Despite the lurid and improbable premise, it wasn’t hard to see what had drawn his husband to such a thing. Nor did he have to search for The Spoils of War. He knew exactly what idea Thran intended for their game, and which part each of them would play. He wiped the search history as Thran had taught him to do, and made sure everything was shut down completely before he closed the laptop. Then he considered as he started painting. If he put aside the more ridiculous elements of the plot, what remained was tempting. Very tempting, indeed.

There was no question which of them would be the bitch – that suited Thran to a tee. So just what
sort of king would Bard choose to be? What was a good counter to Thran’s start to Round Three, The Spoils of War? And how should he begin Round Four?

He arranged for a chimney sweep to come out tomorrow morning, and got through two walls before the answers came to him. This time, his laugh wasn’t incredulous, but full of anticipation.

Friday afternoon was looking better and better.

* * *

Thran’s audition proceeded as he expected. The best part about it was the surge of delight that swept over him to be back at the dance he so loved. This company was well respected, more open-minded than many, and if it offered him a position, he’d be sorely tempted to accept it, despite the long commute he’d endure six days a week. He had worked with this ballet master once before, and got along well with her. The choice of roles tended more to the extravagant ones he preferred, and the compensation was among the best. He didn’t have to feign excitement as he chatted with others taking part, and he saw several dancers he knew moving to and fro. This would be a good, challenging yet comfortable position that would please him for some time. So despite his eagerness about his Monday audition with the UltraViolet Ballet, he had mixed feelings as he drove home.

It did him no harm to wait until early next week to decide anything. He still had two auditions left, and it would take some days before any of the companies got back to him with offers or rejections. So he let his mind consider everything that had happened in both auditions as well as his meeting with Irmo Lórrien as he drove home.

“Bard, I am back!” he called as he came in the mudroom door.

“Welcome home! I’m upstairs!” came the reply, so Thran shed his coat and boots and went to join his husband.

“Did everything go well?” Bard asked with some concern as he climbed off his ladder. “I checked my mobile, thinking I missed your text, but I didn’t get one.”

“Tcha,” Thran tsked, annoyed at himself. “My apologies, lyubov moya. All went so well during my audition that I was distracted, and I forgot to text you that I was on my way home. Such a nice color for our Tilda! And all four walls done!”

“Just the first coat,” Bard amended. “Still, that’s good progress. I should have the second coat done this afternoon. I’ll still have the woodwork to do tomorrow, so we may have a small guest with us tonight. But she’ll have her own room back tomorrow night.”

“We will manage,” Thran shrugged, unconcerned. “So it looks as if my arrival comes at the right moment for us to make lunch, yes?”

“Yes,” Bard agreed wholeheartedly. “I’m starved. Do you want to shower and change first while I add the veg?”

“I will help you this afternoon,” Thran demurred. “So there is no point for me to wash but so much now. So I will change into work clothes, and help with the soup and the rest of lunch, and tell you about my audition.”
“Good, I want to hear how it went, and what was different about it compared to the other one.” Bard gathered up his roller and brush and followed Thran out of Tilda’s room. “I’ll wash up the brushes, and see you in the kitchen.”

“I hear and obey, my saint,” Thran agreed, and ducked into the closet to find the old pair of jeans and shirt that he wore to paint in. In a few minutes, he was chopping vegetables for the soup, and Bard was mixing biscuit dough. As they worked, he described his audition and how good it felt to get back to his art.

“Soon you will feel the same excitement, perhaps,” Thran ventured, “when you begin to work your metal again.”

“I already feel that way working on the house, but I will even more so when I get back to sculpting and such,” Bard agreed. “I have a mess out in the barn – I haven’t been able to work there for over eight years, and it needs a good cleaning. Some of my equipment needs a good cleaning and checking, too, so I have lots to do. But my acetylene torch is still out there and in good repair, so I can work on smaller pieces right away. But we’ve got a few rooms to get through first.”

“It all comes along well,” Thran insisted. “The second floor becomes more beautiful each day.”

“It does. Our room will take a bit longer, I think. It’s bigger, and there’s the closet, and that special blue paint might be harder to apply than the regular kind. I want to look on the web to see if any of the DIY sites have any tips about putting it on.”

“DIY?” Thran repeated.

“Do It Yourself,” Bard explained. “That’s me, in a nutshell.”

“You do better work than many professionals,” Thran assured him. “And you are much less messy.”

“It’s always easier to do a better job when it’s your house,” Bard grinned. “Oh, by the way... to end Round Three, to counter ‘The Spoils of War,’ I offer you this: ‘The Garret is a Prison Cell.’”

“Oooh,” Thran grinned in anticipation. “I like that one. And how do you propose to begin Round Four?”

Bard gave him a long, considering stare and a sly smile. “‘The Bitch is Naked.’”

Thran’s grin was entirely too wide. “Oh, tcha, that is too easy, as I intended to be. Try again.”

“Oh, you’ve already claimed the role, have you?”

“It fits me. You cannot deny it.”

“And then some.”

“So leave the trappings, or lack of them, perhaps, to me.”

“On your head be it. All right, let me think... um, how about this? ‘The Bitch’s Children are Portents for the King.’ Do you like that better?”

“Ah, that one is very good! It addresses the one part of the role I admit I found difficult to understand, as I do not want to deliver children myself, nor does such a thing make sense to me, even in a story. But portents.... oooh, yes, that is perfection!”

“And do you have a counter now, or do you need to consider?”
“The rules of our game were that we must wait until our next meeting for my answer. I want to think about it, besides.”

“That’s fine.” The oven timer dinged, so Bard took out their biscuits. “How’s the soup?”

“Ready, though the carrots are still a little crisp. As I like them that way, it is no hardship for me to eat it now.”

“I’m fine with that, too. Butter or honey with your biscuit?”

“Mmm,” Thran considered. “Perhaps honey. I have not tried them that way yet.”

“Righto. I’ll get the honey while you dish up the soup.”

They sat down to lunch, and they talked about Thran’s auditions and Bard’s metal through two bowls apiece. It was a simple thing, to have a good meal with his saint, to see Bard’s rejuvenated spirit shine through his eyes, to laugh and talk about anything and everything, but it was a treasure, nevertheless. Nothing would please him more than if his life with his saint were always so blessed.

After lunch, work continued on Tilda’s room. By now, Thran had learned he was most helpful if he plied the roller to cover the walls evenly while Bard did the more exacting work around the woodwork. He recalled how much time Sigrid had spent to apply painter’s tape around the trim to keep from streaking paint in places it didn’t belong, such as wall paint on the trim, or trim paint on the walls. Bard had such a steady, careful hand that he didn’t have to tape much. Perhaps it was his artist’s training that gave him that skill. He got Bard to talk about his time in art school, the different kinds of training he’d received, and why he’d chosen to work in metal as opposed to oils or ceramics.

“I do work in clay some of the time,” Bard said, as he sat atop the ladder to paint between the crown molding and the window frame. “When I work on Rahmiel, I’ll do the models in clay first, small ones first, then larger ones. That lets me play around with the proportions and the positioning before I get to the metal.”

“You will cast that piece, yes?”

Bard nodded. “That’s right. I make the clay model, then I make what’s called the mother mold of it. It’s made out of something flexible, either polyurethane or silicon rubber. I use the mother mold to make a ceramic mold, which takes a lot of steps, but that ceramic mold is what I use to actually cast the metal.”

“How many pieces can you make from the ceramic mold?”

“Just the one. It’s the lost wax method, and the ceramic mold is destroyed to free the cast metal piece. If I want to make another one, I have to go back to my mother mold and make another ceramic one.”

“So each piece is different.”

“That’s right. One of a kind.”

“Is the piece solid, then?”

“Some small ones can be. But larger ones are usually done in pieces that I weld together after they’re cast. There’s a lot of finishing to do so the seams disappear. After that, all I’ve got is a raw metal piece. The patina goes on after.”
“You can do all this in the barn?”

“I can do small pieces out there, start to finish. The bigger ones, I can do the armature and clay, even make the mother molds, but I have to contract the casting out. I don’t have the capacity to cast a life-size piece, for example, unless I did it in very small pieces, and that’s not productive. That’s why I need commissions, so I can afford to get big pieces cast.”

“Hope the Lope is a cast piece, yes?”

Bard nodded again, then climbed off the ladder to move it over for the next piece of wall. “But the stair balusters are smithed, and so is Alexander's Downfall, the knot sculpture. And the Ring Thing. The trunk of the pine tree is cast and welded together, and the needles are forged and smithed.”

“And yet the needles move in the breeze,” Thran marveled. “It looks so lifelike even though it is made of hard metal.”

Bard smiled at Thran’s praise. “That one was the devil to get the needles right. The first three or four tries didn’t work out, but when I finally got it right, it was something special. I just had to keep at it.”

“It will look beautiful in our Japanese garden. Perhaps with small stone lanterns nearby?”

“That would look good at night, with the lanterns lit. I wonder if there are lanterns with solar cells in them so that they’d light every night, without us having to put candles in them?”

“I do not know.” Thran eyed the swath he’d just rolled, and rerolled down the middle to smooth out a bubble. “We will add it to our list. I would like the lanterns to light themselves each night as if by magic, without waiting for us to do so. A garden designer might know if there is such a thing, yes?”

“True. We can ask Sam about it.” Bard climbed down from the ladder. “I’ve got the top done on this wall. I’ll do down the corner if you want the ladder.”

“I will use the ladder. And I think I have the counter to end Round Four, my saint.”

Bard paused in his painting. “Oh? What sparked that?”

“The idea of things that seem to happen by magic, without conscious thought. Once a solar cell stores enough energy, it makes a light appear in the dark regardless, yes?”

Bard nodded. “So what’s your counter?”

“’The Bitch Does Not Choose the King.’ ”

Bard was thoughtful as he repeated Thran’s counter to himself under his breath. “Hmm. That’s... interesting.”

“Acceptable?” Thran asked, looking down from the ladder at his husband.

Bard considered it in silence as he painted the corner between the two walls from top to bottom. Thran concentrated on his roller while Bard thought; he covered half the wall between window and corner before a curious smile crossed Bard’s face. He paused in his rolling to regard Bard with an arched eyebrow.

“I can live with that,” Bard nodded at last. He slid his gaze to met Thran’s eyes. “The question is whether you can or not.”

Thran went back to his rolling with an arch grin. “It will be delirious to find out, will it not?”
Bard snorted as he turned back to the wall. “You’re going to kill us both.”

That might be true, if anticipation didn’t do so first.
Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint share a little sweetness and a lot of labor. Afterwards, they reward themselves with a little fantasy. The game is afoot!

Chapter Notes

The guys venture into a little alpha/omega dynamics in their fantasy, so if this isn't your thing, be advised.

J.K. Rowling still owns all the rights to "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." I just enjoy it!

Dinky Farm isn't a real game. I just made it up :-)

Translation Notes:

Braw = fine (Scottish)

Bard and Thran worked steadily to finish the second coat of paint on Tilda’s walls. It was a big help to have someone else working with him, so that as soon as he cut in the paint around all the woodwork, Thran rolled paint on the rest of the wall immediately, which kept the edges from looking streaky. Thran was a good soul to work so diligently; Bard still hadn’t gotten used to how such an eminent and gifted dancer was happy to learn, much less do, painting and scrubbing and so many other mundane things, without ego or reluctance. That as much as anything revealed how much Thran loved the family they’d made, and wanted to contribute more than money.

Money... for an instant, Bard’s old worries resurfaced, but he sternly banished them. Thran had no issues about money, and since he was currently the one with the money, if he had no issues, then Bard shouldn’t, either. He would continue to do his part by doing as much work on the house himself as he could, and keeping a careful eye on what money he spent. The amount he’d saved just in painting costs alone so far was substantial, and until he got back to his metal, that would be his contribution.

It was after four when they finished the wall paint. Bard decided to go right into the woodwork, concentrating on the baseboard so that it would be well dry in time to work on the floor tomorrow. After last night, he didn’t want to delay Tilda’s return to her room. He gave even odds as to whether she’d stay in the children’s study all night as it was, and the best thing to help settle her was to get her back into more familiar surroundings. To speed things along, Thran taped off the floor so that Bard could prime faster, though he still had to be careful along the top edge. He didn’t want to tape the freshly painted wall and risk the tape peeling off any of the yellow that would require him to go back later and retouch. He got all of the baseboard molding done before the children clattered in from
school. Tilda came right upstairs to see how her room was progressing, and was excited to see the walls done.

“It’s nice and bright, and it matches my mural,” she said, looking around. “Just woodwork and floor left!”

“That’s right,” Bard smiled, smoothing one last brushful of paint on the baseboard, then straightening. “If all goes well, I’ll finish the paint tomorrow. I’ll need help with the floor, though.”

“Everyone will help,” Tilda nodded firmly. “We all helped in the other rooms, so we’ll help in mine.”

“Good enough,” Bard nodded. “Thran did a lot of your walls, too, little doll. That got us through a lot faster.”

“Thank you, Thran,” Tilda looked up at Thran shyly. “Is it okay... if I call you Ada, like Sigrid does?”

Thran stooped beside Tilda. “I would be very honored if you did, but only if you want to.”

She nodded. “I want to. You helped me not to be scared last night. And you go to the cheese shop with me. Both of those are nice.”

“You make me very happy, Tilda. I would like to give you a hug. May I?”

She nodded, smiling. A lump grew in Bard’s throat when his tall and elegant husband put long arms around Tilda and hugged her close. She snuck arms around Thran’s ribs and hugged him just as close.

“You are moya malen’kaya kukla,” Thran murmured, rubbing her back. “My little doll.”

Tilda looked at Thran with considering eyes. “It takes a lot of words to say ‘little doll’ in Russian.”

Thran grinned, but there was no disguising his pride. “So it does. So perhaps I should just call you Kukla. That means doll. Or Russian doll is Russkaya Kukla. Which one do you like?”

“Russkaya Kukla is funny. I like that. Or Kukla, like the puppet. I liked Kukla best.”

“He is a very old puppet, but very cute, like you,” Thran nodded. “I watched videos of him when Legolas was little, to help him learn English. He was my favorite, too. So we are agreed, then. Now we will clean up, and then your Da will organize us for our supper, yes?”

“Okay,” Tilda nodded. “See you downstairs in a minute, Da and Ada.”

Tilda trotted out. Thran got to his feet, and had to swallow hard when he met Bard’s eyes. Smiling, Bard put his arms around Thran.

“She got you, didn’t she?”

“Oh, she most certainly did. I am quite overwhelmed.”

Thran buried his nose in the crook of Bard’s neck, and Bard rubbed his husband’s back slowly. “You earned it, cariad. Children don’t lie about their affections. Thank you for looking out for my children so well.”

It was a moment before Thran spoke. “You look out for Legolas, too.”
“I do. I hope he’ll come to trust me the way Sig and Til trust you. But he’s still learning how to be in a family yet. Believe it or not, his little escapade last night is a good sign that he’s coming out of his shell. He’ll warm up to me in time.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s an odd thing about children. Girls warm up to their fathers, and give their mothers hell. Boys warm up to their mothers, and give their fathers hell. Same sex rivalry, I suppose. So Bain and Legolas will be slower to give us an inch than the girls.”

Thran eased out of Bard’s arms, tightening his hands on Bard’s shoulders before letting him go. “As you say. When the zombie apocalypse game is out of the penalty box, I will try it again with Bain, to help him get to know me. We must find something like that for you and Legolas to do.”

“I’m not very good with those games,” Bard admitted. “I never had much time to play with Bain when I was the night super. But I could give it another go. Maybe there’s one that we could play four players in teams.”

“We will ask. Then you and I will learn together. We are done here for now, yes? Do you want me to take the brushes downstairs to wash?”

“I’ve got the paint capped, so we can clean up. Oh, the chimney sweep is coming tomorrow morning.”

“Good. If all goes well, perhaps this weekend we can have a fire.”

Bard grinned. “You mean, one after whatever we get into tomorrow afternoon?”

Thran made a purring sound as they headed downstairs. “Perhaps one not so hot as that, lyubov moya. We do not want to burn down the house.”

“We’ll need to put the boys to work in the yard. We’ll have enough wood to make a fire only after they clean up the back yard.”

“Do we have marshmallows? Popcorn?”

“We’ll put them on the list for Saturday’s rounds,” Bard said as they came into the kitchen.

“So we will plan for the fire on Saturday,” Thran suggested. “Welcome home, Legolas, Bain, and Sigrid! How was school today?”

“Hi, children!” Bard echoed. “I’m just washing out the brushes, then I’ll be back.”

The afterschool bustle clattered on as the children talked about their day, unloaded lunch bags, and sorted through papers around the kitchen table. It wasn’t long before Bard joined them, checking that no one had permission slips or information cards that he or Thran needed to fill out. Once everyone had sorted out what homework needed to be done and Thran had brought out the cheese and crackers and fruit, Bard looked to Tilda.

“Tilda, have you thought about what you’d like Legolas and Bain to do in apology for last night?”

The boys immediately sobered, casting glum looks at each other. Sigrid smothered a smile, but Tilda gave Bard a solemn nod. “I would like Legolas to read with me six times, and help me with my French words six times. And I would like Bain to play Dinky Farm with me six times.”
“No, Tilda, not Dinky Farm!” Bain shouted, but between Bard’s stern look and Thran’s icy glare, he quickly lowered his voice. “Oh, Da, please, not Dinky Farm. That’s so lame.”

“I like it,” Tilda said stubbornly.

“Da, no!” Bain pleaded.

“I’m fine with your choices, Til,” Bard decided, looking to Thran. Bain was crestfallen when Thran nodded his approval. “But you’ll have to wait for a week for the game, Tilda, as gaming’s off limits to the boys for a week.”

“That’s okay,” Tilda nodded.

“Good enough. What do you think, Thran?”

“How long does a game of this Dinky Farm take to play?”

“About an hour.”

“Then Legolas, to be fair, you will read with Tilda at least half an hour each time, and help her with her French words at least half an hour each time. Of course, you may take more time with either, as you prefer.”

“Yes, Father,” Legolas answered. Bard smothered a grin; Legolas was learning to recognize that protesting gained him only more penance to pay.

“Then so it will be,” Thran held up his hands to signal an end to the matter. “So, Captain Bard, what are your orders for supper tonight?”

“Grilled hamburgers and chicken tonight?” When that met with a chorus of enthusiasm, they settled who wanted what, and preparations began. While Bard put rice with lime and cilantro on to steam, Thran and Sigrid prepped veg for the steamer, Legolas shaped hamburgers, and Bain laid the table. The hamburgers and chicken went on the grill, with the veg shortly thereafter, and soon the family was assembling sandwiches and spooning rice and veg. Now that last night’s shenanigans had been addressed, the conversation returned to its usual lively banter replete with laughter. Cleanup commenced quickly, then homework. Everyone finished early enough that Bard headed upstairs to continue with his painting. He got through the door and window frames before the children began to cycle through their showers.

“Only the top molding remains?” Thran asked, as he came in to look around.

“That’s it. If I start early tomorrow morning, I should be able to get the rest done before lunch. I’ll have to get the sweeps started, too, but they won’t need me once I show them the three fireplaces.”

“Will they be here after lunch?” Thran asked innocently, but a crooked smile on his lips gave away the reason for his question, drawing an equally perverse smile from Bard.

“They promised to be done by noon,” Bard assured his husband. “So your doom in the garret is set.”

Thran’s chuckle was low. “I certainly hope so. Oh, which room did you mean to choose, lyubov moya? The empty one, or the one with your poor bed in it?”

“The empty one. I’m still hoping for a game of starving artist and his model in the other one.”

“Oooh, another delight to anticipate,” Thran’s pale hand sketched a caress over Bard’s chest, then
lower. “But I cannot imagine that one yet. Tomorrow’s delight beckons first.”

“Do you need another round, or are we set as is?”

Thran shook his head as he added a kiss on Bard’s ear to the tracings of his hand. “I would not want to limit either of us too much.”

“Stop it, you bastard,” Bard breathed, backing away a step, before his cock got too interested in Thran’s teasing. “Keep it for tomorrow.”

“If you insist,” Thran grinned without apology. “If I cannot tease the painter, then perhaps the painter will explain what this Dinky Farm is that Bain hates so much.”

Bard capped the paint can, and carried his brush downstairs to wash out, Thran trailing behind him. “It’s a fun little game, to be honest. Each player gets a plot of land, and you have to build up a small farm with different crops and animals. Tilda can play it by herself, but it’s also got a multiplayer mode where you can barter with other players. You can trade your produce for seeds to get crops you don’t have, or a beehive that gives you honey to trade, or eggs that turn into chickens. When you get enough produce, you open a farm stand, and then you get money that you can use to buy more things for your farm, or put in the bank. The goal is to try to build a better farm than the other players. It’s for younger children, so it’s not that complicated, but I like it better than zombie apocalypse.”

Thran hummed as he tore off a couple of paper towels for Bard to blot his rinsed paintbrush. “That one sounds useful – how to make something more out of what one starts with.”

“The only red stuff you make is when you turn the strawberry crop into jam,” Bard grinned.

“Which makes it unacceptable to a teenaged boy, of course,” Thran shook his head.

“Of course. What time is your audition tomorrow?”

“Nine a.m. I will be up early tomorrow, also. I will have to leave just after seven to make sure I arrive on time.”

“Then I’ll handle the bus stop duties. Porridge for you?”

“But no tea, please.”

“I well understand. Do you want to throw anything in the washer tonight, or do you have enough clean stuff for tomorrow?”

“I am well supplied. I will pack my things tonight to make sure I am ready to leave on time tomorrow.”

Bard took the paper towels Thran had ready. “In another week, I hope things will be a bit more settled. I’ll have most of the second floor done, and you’ll know more about where the dance will take you. I feel bad for leaving you with all of the homework duty.”

“No more than I do to leave you with the bus duty. We know we both work to better our lives together, and we will come to our rhythm soon. It is much work, yes, but it is exciting all the same. Each day brings us closer to less preparation and rehearsal, and more polished performance.”

“That’s a good way to look at it,” Bard conceded. “All right, everything’s clean and ready for me to start tomorrow.”
“Then let us check our children, and make sure they make good progress tonight.”

They headed upstairs, to find Legolas reading from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* to Tilda. He had not read any of the series, and he looked so interested in the story that the penance of reading to her for three hours would likely not be much of one. That bothered Bard not one bit. Bain was just finishing his shower, and when he heard what Legolas was reading, he came into the children’s study to listen. Sigrid was in her room, on her mobile talking to Finn. It was still early, but Bard took advantage of the quiet to shave and shower so that he’d get to bed early. He took Thran’s place in the study to listen as Legolas read, snuggling Tilda on his lap atop her bed. Thran rejoined them when he was clean and dry, and listened until it was time for bed.

“Oh, it’s just two more pages until the end of the chapter,” Legolas protested, which drew a smile from both Bard and Thran.

“Then let’s go until the end of the chapter,” Bard agreed. When the two pages were done, Legolas closed the book with regret.

“This is a good story,” he admitted.

“It is,” Tilda nodded. “We have all of them. You can read them yourself if you want, after your three hours.”

“I want to. Thanks, Tilda.”

“Thank you for reading to me.”

“Thank you for reading to all of us,” Thran added. “I want to read these for myself, too.”

“When we get to the one with the Russian school in it, Durmstrang, will you read those characters?” Tilda asked. “You can do the right accent.”

“He could do the French characters, too, or Legolas can,” Bain added. “Remember? Beauxbatons is the French school.”

“That’s right!” Tilda exclaimed. “I forgot. That would be fun.”

“We could read in the sitting room around the fireplace,” Bard commented. “The chimney sweeps are coming tomorrow. If they can get the fireplaces up to snuff, and if the boys get enough stuff cleaned up from the yard, then Saturday we can have a fire while we read. We can show Legolas and Thran how to toast marshmallows, too.”

“Marshmallows?” Sigrid asked, coming across the landing to the study. “Who’s got marshmallows?”

“We might, on Saturday,” Tilda told her.

“Chimney sweeps are coming tomorrow,” Bard reiterated. “So maybe the fireplaces will be ready to use.”

“Sweet!” Sigrid grinned. “Better put marshmallows on the Saturday list.”

“Already noted,” Bard assured her. “Now, time for bed, all. Thran’s got an early audition, and I’m starting on Tilda’s woodwork early, hoping to get her room done tomorrow. You want to finish the week strong, too, so let’s get to it.”

“Yes, Da; Yes, Bard,” the children replied, and soon Bard was the only one in the children’s study.
Tilda returned from the bathroom in time to see Bard turn on her nightlight, and she got into bed without apparent concern.

“I don’t think you’ll hear any thumping tonight,” Bard smiled.

Tilda dimpled. “If I do, I’ll know who it is. Maybe I can get a few more hours of Dinky Farm and reading out of it.”

Bard laughed as he hugged her. “That’s the right attitude, little doll. But if you need to, you know you can come get me.”

“I liked staying with you and Ada. I felt safe.”

“I’m glad. I’ll do my best to get the rest of the paint done in your room, so tomorrow you and Mr. Bun and the rest of your toys will be back where you belong.”

“Where’s Lollybear?”

“Right here. And Tigerstripe, Pickles the Cat, and Nell the Nelephant.”

“Good. I’m set, then.”

“Okay. Thran will be here in a minute to say goodnight.”

“I am here.” Thran squatted beside Tilda’s bed. “Goodnight, Russkaya Kukla. May you have good dreams.”

Tilda held out her arms, so Thran hugged her and brushed a kiss on her forehead. With a big smile, Tilda snuggled under the covers with her arms full of toys. “Goodnight, Ada. You sleep well, too.”

“Thank you, Kukla. I will.”

“Night, Da.”

“Night, Tilda. Sleep well.”

Bard turned out the light, and closed the door. Bain was next, and Bard was gratified that his son didn’t try to wriggle out of his assignment to play Dinky Farm with Tilda. The youth bade a cheerful goodnight to Bard and Thran, so their next stop was Legolas’s room, where the goodnights were just as pleasant. Sigrid was just getting off the phone with Finn, so hugged both her parents, and wished them a good night. Bard and Thran made their rounds to ensure that all was ready for tomorrow in the kitchen, the doors were locked, and the lights were off. Then they retired to their sanctuary.

“We still sleep like puppies,” Bard observed, as Thran nestled close, his head on Bard’s shoulder and his arm across Bard’s chest.

Thran hummed in comfort as he adjusted his position. “I like being warm and close. Tilda is right – it is easy to feel safe when nestled so close.”

Bard grinned in the dark. “I’ll remember that tomorrow afternoon.”

“That is entirely the point of tomorrow,” Thran yawned.

“It’s not entirely the point of tomorrow,” Bard murmured, stroking Thran’s arm.

“Is it not?”
“You like being shameless.”

“You like me when I am, and react quite delightfully in turn. So if acting shamelessly rewards me so well, why would I not relish the chance to indulge us both?”

Bard’s loins stirred obviously enough to draw Thran’s low chuckle. “Gods, I want to indulge us both right now.”

“Save yourself for tomorrow. I quite look forward to it, and to take the edge off now will lessen the urgency tomorrow. The bitch must yearn for his king.”

“The things the king has to do for the good of his people,” Bard sighed, pressing a kiss onto the hair of his husband.

“You suffer mightily.”

“I do. So if I must suffer tonight without indulging, it’s better if I do it asleep.”

“Indeed. Settle yourself, and tomorrow will be here soon enough. We both have labors to undertake before the afternoon is ours.”

Bard stroked Thran’s back and drew the covers a little tighter around him, keeping the cool night air away from the exquisite body that chilled so quickly. “Garu di, cariad.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya, zoloto moyo.”

Bard closed his eyes, and savored Thran’s warmth as sleep descended upon him.

* * *

It seemed as if Bard had only closed his eyes a moment ago before the alarm sounded. He reached over to shut it off, and allowed himself only a deep sigh before he sat up. There would be no dawdling in bed this morning, not with Thran’s audition, the arrival of the chimney sweeps, and his painting to fill the morning. Such a busy morning would find its reward this afternoon, if all got done, so he offered Thran his usual good morning kiss and then headed into the bathroom. Necessities dealt with, he dressed quickly as Thran followed him into the bathroom, then he headed downstairs to begin Friday morning’s prep for the children. Tea, porridge, lunches all got underway. Thran was down soon after in his dance attire to eat his breakfast at once rather than later, in deference to his impending audition. His bag of gear for the audition was already packed and waiting, so he helped Bard finish the children’s lunches while the children ate their breakfasts. Bard downed his porridge, then it was time to see everyone off; Thran would leave to drive into the city as the children left for the bus stop. The children all wished Thran well, and Bard hugged his husband firmly beside the SUV.

“Do your best, just like always,” he wished Thran, smiling. “Even if that means you leave the other dancers and the master stunned and amazed.”

“I will,” Thran grinned, hugging Bard back. “Goodbye, children! I will see you this afternoon, and then it will be the weekend!”

“Bye, Father; bye, Ada!” the children chorused, and waved with Bard as Thran headed out. Once he
had pulled out into the lane, the children and Bard walked to the bus stop, and in just a few minutes they bade Bard farewell as the bus lumbered on its trek to school. After a quick goodbye to the other parents, Bard trotted back home. As soon as he got in, he turned up the heat on the third floor, and swept the floor of the empty garret room clean. It was a cheerless little room at the moment, all grey plaster walls; raw, unfinished woodwork; and scuffed, scraped pine floorboards – perfect to act as a bleak prison cell. There was nothing left to do to prepare it for this afternoon, so he trotted downstairs to Tilda’s room. He had painting to finish!

He finished the first coat on the crown molding, and started on the final coat of the baseboard. He got that done and around the first window before a bang on the door signaled the arrival of a single tradesman from Glittering Caves Chimney Sweeps and Fireplace Construction. The sweep was a short, squat, bear of a man, with a thick, grizzled beard and mane of ginger hair, deep brown eyes, and a company shirt emblazoned with his name, Gimli. Bard showed him the three fireplaces – sitting room, main room, and ballroom – and Gimli set up his tools and equipment without further ado.

“‘T is a good thing your ballroom and the main room don’t have rugs I have to worry about,” the sweep said. “Looks like you’ve got debris in at least one of them, probably some beastie’s nest. I think the one in the sitting room’s braw, but I’ll pull back the rug just in case.”

“I’ll help you move it out of the way,” Bard offered, and so that’s where the sweep started. Once the sitting room rug and furniture had been moved back, Bard left Gimli to his cleaning, and hastened back to his painting. Around the windows proceeded, then around the door, and finally the crown molding again. He was almost through when Gimli shouted upstairs that he was done, so Bard hurried downstairs.

“I was right; looks like you had a brace of raccoons in the big ballroom chimney at some point, but they’ve moved on, so I cleaned out all of that. Keep your flue vents closed until you can get yourself some sturdy chimney caps from the local hardware store. Those are just what you need to keep the beasties from crawling in. I’ll write on your invoice what size caps you need.”

“That’s kind of you,” Bard thanked him. “They’re all sound, then?”

“Aye, they’re in good shape, one and all. I added a bit of caulk to the one in the main room, so wait two days before you use that one. But the ballroom one is braw, and so is the one in the sitting room.”

“Good. The children were hoping to toast marshmallows tomorrow night,” Bard grinned.

“How many bairns?”

“Four, from ten to sixteen. And they all like marshmallows.”

“Not the thing for me,” the short man grinned, stroking his wiry beard. “Hard to get that lot of sticky out of my whiskers.”

“I can understand that,” Bard conceded. “They’re too sweet for me, but you can’t tell children that anything is too sweet.”

“True, true,” the sweep laughed. “Especially the wee bairns. All right, Mr. Bowman; here’s your invoice. I can take a check or a credit card.”

Bard dug his wallet out of his back pocket, pulled out the credit card Thran had given him, and handed it over. He got it back with a receipt, and the sweep bid him a smiling farewell. As soon as
the door was closed, Bard raced back upstairs to finish the last of Tilda’s woodwork. It was going on eleven-thirty when he finally finished. He capped the paint, folded the drop cloths, collected the detritus, and mopped the floor. Only the floor cleaning and waxing was left to do, and he’d set Clan Ffyrnig on that this evening.

Right now, though, he had a few things to do before his afternoon rendezvous. He trotted out to the barn, retrieved an old wicker basket that had once held laundry, and hauled himself up and down in as many chin-ups as he could manage. He brought the basket back inside, stowed it in the pantry, then sank down on the floor for a few pushups. By the time he couldn’t do any more, he was rank. Good – Thran wanted pheromones; he’d give him pheromones. Panting, he sank into one of the kitchen chairs, propped his feet up on one of the others, and shut his eyes while he caught his breath. All that remained was for Thran to get home.

In barely fifteen minutes, the door from the outside to the mudroom opened.

“I’m in the kitchen,” Bard called. He barely had time to wipe the anticipatory smile off his face before Thran came in. His husband had shed his coat, and he carried his bag of dance things. “How was your audition?”

“Quite vigorous,” Thran replied, bending over to kiss Bard as he stayed slumped in his chair. “Exciting, and quite positive. It would be a good position, without doubt.”

“Which audition piece did you do?”

“Both of them,” Thran said with satisfaction. “I asked which style they preferred, and they wanted to see both. So I did the knives first – though not Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield, I admit – and then the Chopin. They were very impressed. Depending on which companies offer me a position, it may be very hard to choose between them.”

“An enviable position to be in,” Bard observed, as Thran took a large glass from the cabinet and filled it from the sink. Before he could take a drink, though, Bard prowled out of his chair and came to take the glass from him. “Before you guzzle that down, I want to make sure that you’re well after such a rigorous audition. No pulled muscles, no pain, no exhaustion?”

“I am fine,” Thran frowned, regarding his glass of water in Bard’s hand. “I am very thirsty, though, and well ready for lunch. It was a vigorous morning, to be sure. So you may safely give me my glass of water back.”

“Uh-uh.” Bard poured the water out into the sink. “What I will give you is ten minutes to get yourself up to the garret. I want my bitch to be... needy.”

Thran’s eyebrows went up as he looked between Bard and the empty glass. He licked his lips, but those same lips curved up into a perverse expression. “You are rank.”

Bard smiled. “So are you.”

“Ah. Pheromones. You do not want to waste time, it seems.”

“I don’t.”

Silently laughing, Thran took up his bag to go upstairs. “I hear and obey, my king.”

“In ten minutes, we’ll see whether you do or not.”

Thran disappeared. When Bard heard his footsteps on the stairs, he glanced at the oven clock, got the
wicker basket, and set about filling it with enough food and water to make a substantial lunch for two—chicken breast, grapes, cheese, half a small loaf of uncut brown bread, and a big carafe of water. He didn’t need plates, utensils, or napkins, but he did snare a battered metal measuring cup. When his ten minutes were almost up, he started upstairs. Thran was nowhere in sight, so he had already taken himself up to the garret. Bard stripped off everything but his jeans, and rummaged through Thran’s clothes until he found a Japanese haori in black. He armed his way into that, but left it hanging open to leave his chest bare. He took one of the blankets off the bed, folded it up, and draped it over his shoulder. Then he took up his basket and headed upstairs.

The door to the empty room was closed. Thran was behind it, waiting for him. As Bard grasped the doorknob, a jolt of anticipation went up his spine before he pushed his way inside. The game was about to begin.

* * *

The seer was huddled in the far corner. He had long white hair, smooth and silky at some point, but bedraggled and ragged now, and a pale, emaciated, birdlike body that was like nothing human the king had ever seen—of course not; seers were rare, unseen by most, even a king of the line. He was naked but for a necklace around his neck, nothing more than a thin chain that held an amulet, but that was the way he’d been found in the dead king’s private chambers.

The cell was rank with the seer’s pheromones—a fertile, frantic wallow of desperation.

The king kicked the door shut behind him, dropped the blanket to the floor, and set the basket on top. Then he crouched down on his heels, close enough to touch the seer. He reached out to trace a single finger along the instep of the seer’s long, elegant foot. The seer flinched away, but as tightly as he’d wedged himself into the corner, there was little room for him to retreat.

“Look at me.”

The seer met his eyes only a second before they flitted away.

“They told me you were beautiful. They were right. Even after two days in here, you’re still beautiful.”

The seer looked up again warily, but stayed in his tight coil.

“You’re hungry, too. Thirsty. Cold. Probably haven’t slept much. Why do you think I’d treat you like that?”

The seer gave a tentative shake of his head.

“Because you’re a seer. A mage. A shaman. One who foretells for the line of kings.”

The seer swallowed and looked away.

“You’re a rare commodity. Valuable. That’s why no one despoiled you when you were captured. I wanted you intact.”

“I am no good to you.” The seer’s voice was whispery. “I cannot see for you. Only my king.”
“My sages tell me that’s not exactly true.”

“Yes, it is. I see only for my king. Where is he? I belong with him.”

“That’s... problematic.”

“What is problematic? I belong with my king. Take me to him. Where is he?”

“His head’s decorating a pike up on the ramparts. I can’t speak for the rest of him. Still want to be with him?”

The seer swallowed, and his eyes flitted around the room, looking for an escape that was not there. The king smiled in anticipation. “I brought water, food, a blanket. It’d feel good to ease your thirst, your hunger, your shivering, yes?”

The seer swallowed hard again, and his eyes stayed to the basket.

“I thought so. All you have to do is answer my questions. Every time you do, you earn a sip of water, a bite of food, a warm blanket. Not so hard, no?”

The seer’s expression couldn’t be more desperate, so the king reached back for a carafe of water and a tin cup. He poured a couple of mouthfuls into the cup and held it out. “The first one is free.”

The seer looked at it, then reached a tentative hand out to take the cup, but the king wouldn’t let him have it.

“I’ll hold the cup for you, pretty bird. All you have to do is sip.”

The seer shifted, finally leaning forward to take the sip eagerly, but it wasn’t much. As he drank, the king caught the amulet he wore. The seer flinched, but the king held fast to the amulet. It was silver, shaped and carved like an eye.

“I’m not interested in hurting you, pretty bird. Just answer my questions. You are a seer, yes? You wear the seer’s eye.”

The seer stared at the cup as he nodded. The king let go of the amulet, poured a larger sip of water in the cup, and held it out. “Come on. I know you’re thirsty.”

When the seer edged closer to drink the water, the king stroked his hair. The seer didn’t flinch as badly as he had when the king had touched his foot.

“They call you Brego’s Bitch. The king’s bitch.”

The seer’s nod earned him another sip of water, and another caress.

“You’re the one who sees the king’s path to victory on the battlefield.”

His nod gained him another sip of water, as well as another caress. This time, he didn’t flinch at all.

“Your portents are supposed to be infallible, yet Brego lost today. What happened?”

The seer looked away. “My king did not ask me to see today for him. I do not know why.”

The king reached into the basket and got out a slab of chicken. He tore off a chunk and held it up.
“Come on. You must be starving after two days without food.”

The seer leaned forward to take the morsel from the king’s fingers. As he chewed, the king continued to stroke his hair. It wasn’t long before the seer’s breath caught as the gentle caresses soothed him. The king offered him another mouthful of chicken, and this time he stroked the seer’s cheek and shoulder.

“Maybe he thought victory was so close that he didn’t have to ask his bitch. Did you see it? Foretell it? The rout of King Brego’s army?”

A shake of the head. “Neither. I am kept away.”

The king offered another bite of chicken. The seer took it eagerly, giving into his hunger. “Away from what?”

The seer shrugged. “All but my king.”

“Why?”

“I see better that way.”

The king reached into the basket, took out a small cluster of grapes, and fed them to the seer one at a time. “How does it happen, your seeing? Does it come to you unbidden, or do you search for one thing or another?”

“I do not direct it. I see what I am shown, when my king... asks.”

The king held out a bit of brown bread, but this time, when the seer opened his mouth, he didn’t hold the morsel out so far, so the seer had to slide closer to take it. He didn’t retreat, but stayed at the king’s knee to wait for the next morsel.

“Oh, your king has to ask? Do you make him beg?”

“It does not work that way. I cannot see until my king... asks.”

This time, when the seer nibbled the bread from the king’s fingers, the king cradled the seer’s chin in his hand. When the seer tried to flinch away, the king held tight. “That’s the second time you hesitated about your king... asking. Tell me how he asks you to see for him.”

The seer’s eyes grew wide, then shut. “It is not something for those who are not kings.”

“I’m the king who put your Brego’s head on a pike, pretty bird.”

“The ability to kill does not make you a king.”

“No, but being of the line does. I know you smell it on me. A seer knows a king’s pheromones.”

“You are no king!”

The king slid back out of the seer’s reach, and took up the carafe with a shrug. “There’s not much water left. If I drink it all, it’ll be another two days before I come back.”

He tilted the carafe up and took a deep drink.

The seer lurched forward, not daring to touch the king, but his hand hovered over the king’s knee as if he wanted to. “Please! I will not last another two days!”
The king paused. “Likely not. So do you admit that I’m from the line, or not?”

The seer gulped. “Yes. Yes. Your scent is from the line.”

“Excellent. We’re making progress.” The king filled the tin cup nearly full and held it out. The seer lurched forward and grabbed the king’s hand with both of his, drinking quickly, but not quickly enough to avoid the king’s hand stroking his fingers, his arm, his shoulder. When the cup was empty, the seer stayed crouched by the king’s leg, his eyes shut as he drank in the caresses.

“This feels good?”

The seer’s eyes remained shut. His nod was reluctant, but it was a nod nevertheless. The king moved away from the seer to sit against the wall. He patted the floor between his knees. “Come.”

The seer shook his head frantically, so the king took up the carafe to drink again, which got a near silent whimper from the seer.

“Come. Or the water’s gone, and so am I.”

The seer crawled between the king’s legs. He curled into a knot as if he tried not to touch the king, but when the king tipped the carafe towards him, the seer drank from it eagerly, deeply, until it was almost empty. While he drank, the king stroked his back, his thigh, his ribs, just light, slow caresses that would flood the seer with endorphins. The seer’s head went back, his breath caught, and his eyes fluttered closed as the sensations pulsed through him. The king set the carafe aside, then pulled the basket close.

“That’s better. It feels so good when a king of the line touches you. You can’t resist it.”

The seer hummed softly, as if the king’s touch had entranced him.

“Tell me how your king asks for your portents.”

“We join.”

“As in... sex.”

“Join one to the other.”

The king offered more chicken, and the seer took the morsel without conscious thought, chewing slowly, eyes still shut.

“So if I want a portent from you, I... join with you.”

The seer shook his head dreamily. “It will do you no good. I see only for my king. I am attuned only to him.”

The king stopped his gentle stroking and stretched his fingers around the seer’s neck. He only rested his hand there, without tightening his grasp, but the implied threat was obvious, and the seer stilled. His eyes were wide and unblinking.

“Brego’s dead. Have I wasted my time to keep you whole for the past two days? Should I put your head beside his?”

With an effort, the seer shook himself out of his reverie, and tried to make a brave face. “I belong with my king.”
“So you do, and so I intend. There’s just the matter of how to break your bond with Brego, and set a new one with me.”

“That does not happen,” the seer replied, but he sounded tentative.

“I’m not stupid, pretty bird. Seers are rare, and their powers are too great, too valuable to sacrifice when a king dies. Seers pass from one king to the next like the treasures they are.”

Swallowing, the seer tried to pull away, but the king took hold of his amulet to hold him close, and continued his slow, gentle stroking with his other hand until the seer’s resistance melted with a soft moan. In reward, the king released his hand on the seer’s amulet.

“The reason I isolated you here for two days wasn’t just to deny you food and water. I wanted you starved for pheromones, too. They’re what bind a seer to a king, aren’t they?”

“You lie,” the seer whispered, but his voice was shaky.

“Do I? After just two days away from Brego, your body craves a king’s pheromones so badly that it’s pumping out its own, telling anyone of the line within range that a receptive bitch is near. The scent is overwhelming. So here I am, rank and reeking of just what you crave, and you’re already melting. In an hour, your old bond will be so weak that you’ll be half mine without either of us doing anything else. But I don’t want just half of you. I’ve got a kingdom to care for, and unlike your dead bastard king, I want to do a good job of it. So tell me how I strip Brego’s bond from you and replace it with mine, so that I have all of you. I’m not a cruel master unless provoked, and I’d prefer to be gentle with you, but it’s your choice.”

The seer trembled in the king’s arms. His trembling worsened when the king eased him against his chest and put arms around him. “Pretty bird, you’ll die if I leave you here for another two days. Alone, cold, starving, thirsty, and not the least trace of the pheromones you need.”

“It... calls for... three parts,” the seer said faintly, curling tighter against the king’s chest and wrapping arms around him. He rubbed his cheek against the king’s chest.

“Three parts.”


The king stroked and petted. “Good, pretty bird. You deserve a reward.”

He pulled the blanket within reach, and settled it around the seer in his arms. The seer heaved a shuddering sigh of pleasure, pulling the blanket tightly around them as he snuggled more deeply into the king’s embrace.

“Mmm,” the seer breathed. “So warm, so warm...”

“It feels good to be so warm in my arms, doesn’t it? Are you still hungry?”

The seer nodded. So the king fed them both little bits of food, making sure to keep stroking and touching and caressing the seer under the blanket as they ate. He wouldn’t let the seer take the food from his own hands, insisting that the seer take each bit only from his fingers, so that he’d look to him for every need, every pleasure. When the food was gone, he kept stroking and touching, but now he began more erotic touches, stroking a nipple, or tracing a finger down the seer’s abdomen, as he sought to make the seer his own. The first time he touched the seer’s crotch, the seer whimpered and tried to close his legs, but the king was firm, stroking until the seer relaxed under his touch. Before long, the seer’s legs fell open without encouragement, and the king could do as he pleased. In
The seer’s fingers strayed to the king’s chest and stroked gently, as if he weren’t sure what reaction he’d get.

“That’s right, pretty bird. I’m not going to hurt you. I want to treasure you, protect you, like the jewel you are.”

“It hurts,” the seer whispered. “I do not want it to.”

“What hurts, pretty bird? How do I hurt you?”

“The old bond. It fights against you. It does not want to let me go.”

“Tell me how to break it, so it doesn’t hurt you.”

“Open. I am not open.”

“What opens you?”

“Remain gentle, and it will happen on its own. The pheromones shift, and I cannot resist them. When I present, you will know what to do. I must not release, only you.”

“Why only me?”

“Because my release would strengthen the old bond. Open first, then cleanse. Not until attuning does my release strengthen a new bond.”

“I understand, pretty bird. So pale, so graceful, so beautiful a thing you are. A cold cell isn’t the place for you. Think of how warm you’d be in my bed, in my arms. All you have to do is help me break your old bond, and I’ll take you there.”

The seer lay in the king’s arms, soaking up his caresses and body heat, and before long, hiscock stiffened enough that he moaned. His back began to arch, and he nuzzled the king’s chest, nosing for his nipples, then suckling eagerly when he found them. The king teased himself with the seer’s caresses for some seconds, but kept stroking and rousing the seer. He was soon rewarded when pale fingers fumbled to unfasten his breeches. As warm lips descended on his cock, the king pulled away the blanket to savor the sight of the seer’s pale, naked body crouched over him. Somewhere in the tangle of disarrayed white hair that flowed over the king’s hips and onto the floor, the seer’s eager mouth sucked and nibbled and kissed the king’s cock. The seer’s amulet dangled low enough that it occasionally trailed against the king’s balls, adding more arousal to the eager sucking mouth that had such a firm grip on him.

The king reached for the basket, found the jar of oil, and scooped some out. He urged the seer away, who moaned in distress until he saw the king’s erect cock. He sank to the floor, crouching on his elbows and knees, his head abjectly low, his white hair puddled on the floor around him. The king rubbed the oil in his hands, liquefying it, and let the seer see him massage the oil along the length of his cock.


“Not so fast. I don’t want to hurt you.” He rubbed his slicked hands over the seer’s buttocks, massaging and kneading until the seer moaned. When his hands traced between the seer’s buttocks, slicking opening and balls, the seer spasmed, his back arching, his head up and back, his breath coming in short, frantic pants. The king moved behind him, letting his cock rub against the seer to tease him. When he finally slid inside – so, so warm, and tight – the seer shoved his hips back against the king’s thighs with a mewling cry of want. The king wrapped his arms around the seer’s waist and
leaned over him, pressing his chest against the seer’s back. He wound one hand in the hair at the base of the seer’s nape, keeping the seer’s head up and his back arched as the king stroked him. The seer reacted as if he were a feral animal giving himself mindlessly to the rut, widening his knees, rocking back against the king’s thighs. With such an eager, unresisting partner, it didn’t take the king long to stroke himself to release, but he pulled out before he spent himself inside the seer, instead spilling over the seer’s back. He sighed in satisfaction as he rubbed his essence over the seer’s back, balls, and still erect cock.

“You’re well opened now, pretty bird,” the king said, pulling up his breeches. “And well anointed with my scent. That’ll remind you who you belong to when I take you out of here.”

The king grabbed the blanket and the basket in one hand, and pulled open the door. He bent down to take the seer’s amulet in his fist, drawing him up. “Come.”

The seer got to his feet, and followed docilely as the seer led him from the cell to his private chambers. At sight of the immense bed, the seer jerked towards it, but the king drew him up short. He put down the basket, and tossed the blanket on the bed.

“Not yet, pretty bird. Even after two days, you still stink too much of Brego for me to let you into my bed. You need a bath. Once you’re properly stripped of his stench, you’ll take to me all the faster.”

The seer didn’t resist when the king pulled him into the bathroom. The king stripped, and guided the seer into the bath, where he thoroughly washed him, fondling and caressing as he went. The seer’s cock was still hard through most of it, even when the king washed himself. Once they were clean and dry, the king drew the seer close by his amulet, still stroking and petting as he carefully combed the seer’s silky hair smooth. He was such a beautiful creature, so pale, so smooth, so exotic, and he trembled under the king’s hands. Even after the hot bath, his slender body cooled fast. Such a creature likely remained swaddled in bed most of the time to stay warm, and ready for whenever he was needed.

“It’s been a long time since you haven’t been covered in a king’s scent,” the king whispered in the seer’s ear as he combed. “Even worse, you’re opened and cleansed now, unclaimed, ripe to rebond. The urge must be so strong, so hard to resist. Can you smell your pheromones, calling to me? They’re nothing but desperation. Nothing but lust.”

The seer swallowed. “I... oh, gods...”

“Tell me, pretty bird. It’d be awful to go back to that cell so naked, so open, and no way to save yourself.”

“No! You know I am defenseless. I am open, and clean. If a king does not claim me, I will die. I will die.”

“Good. Your choices are clear, then. Will it be my bed, or your old cell?”

The seer bolted out of the bathroom and dove into bed, burrowing under the covers in a flurry of arms and legs. The king let him settle in, swaddling himself in the sheets and blankets, while he leisurely combed his wet hair and dried more thoroughly. When the sound of the seer rooting around in the covers calmed, he came into the bedroom, made sure the oil was within reach, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Enough pheromones for you, pretty bird?”

“No,” came a distressed whisper. “Please.”
The king stroked the top of the seer’s hair, the only part of him that was visible. At his touch, the seer wormed his way to the king’s side, snaking a hand out from under the sheets and blankets to stroke his ribs. “Please. Please. Do not make me suffer. Claim me.”

As the king thought about where to start, his cock stiffened. He slathered himself with oil before he got into bed, then slid between the sheets to lie on his side. He pulled the seer back against his chest and eased his cock inside the seer before the seer could gasp.

“Mmm,” the king sighed, wrapping arms around the seer’s waist to keep him close. “You’re so tight, and even after a bath you smell like a bitch in heat. It’s maddening. But a quick rut isn’t the best way to attune a seer, is it?”

“Take me now,” the seer whispered, arching back against the king to take him in deeper.

“A quick rut leaves you too much power. Drawing it out gives it all to me. It’s best to keep you well aroused throughout, but not aroused enough to release, until you’re so soaked in my pheromones that you can’t think about anyone else. By the time you do release, my pheromones aren’t the only thing you’ll be soaked in. Once you’re well fucked, body and soul, you’ll be mine, body and soul.”

The king dragged his palms over the seer’s nipples, earning a soft moan. At that soft sound, the king rolled the seer to his belly, covered him as any stud covered a receptive bitch, and stroked himself almost to release before easing them back on their sides. How good it was to wind his arms around that delectable morsel to remain deeply seated, caressing every part of the seer he could reach while his cock calmed into almost softness. He rolled back atop the seer, winding arms and legs around his prize as he thrust himself back to hardness. He lost count of how many times he did that before he smelled the change in the seer’s pheromones from mindless lust to submission to the one who mastered him. Only then did he release deep inside the seer. Even when he slipped out, he held them tightly together, possessive of his prize so recently won. He fell into a doze, vaguely registering the seer rearranging them until the king lay on his back and the seer curled around him, soaking up his warmth. At some point, he woke to feel hands slicking his cock again, and stroking him back to erection. He rolled over, groping to pin the seer beneath him without ever opening his eyes, stroking, then resting against the seer’s chest, stroking again only enough to keep himself inside. The seer was panting, whimpering in frustration as the king slowed again. The king nuzzled one nipple and stroked the other with his fingers until the seer was frantic.

“Attuned yet, pretty bird? Or should I spill inside you again, then rest until I’m ready to take you again?”

“I am yours, my king. Please, please, let me release to set the bond. I die like this.”

“I want a strong bond. I want a bitch who knows whom he belongs to.”

“You have all of me. Please, I beg you. Make me yours now, before I die.”

“On your head be it, pretty bird.” The king pulled out, rolled the seer to his elbows and knees, wormed atop him, and eased his cock back in. He leaned far over the seer, biting just where the seer’s neck met his shoulder to hold them close, then took the seer’s balls in one hand and his cock in hand to stroke him. He teased the seer along until he was sure his own orgasm was imminent, then mercilessly drove the seer to release. The tight spasms around his cock were enough to set him off, and he let himself go with a gasp and a growl. This one felt like it came from the depths of his very existence. He collapsed atop the seer without the energy to heave himself off. When he finally softened, he managed to roll off, but still pulled the seer tightly against his chest.

“The king’s bitch is mine. My bitch.”
“From now until death.”

“What prophesy did our bonding show you?”

The seer shifted, submissive as he curled around the king’s body, deliciously close and warm, and utterly devoted. “That you will be a good king to me and all your people. You will live a long life, your lands will be fruitful and peaceful, and your enemies will vanish before you.”

The king chuckled and stroked his arm. “If I won’t be going to war again, then, what will my pretty bird have to foretell?”

The seer stroked the king’s chest softly. “Even a king needs someone to love him without reservation. I will always be that one. So, my king, close your eyes, and sleep. You are safe with your seer, now and forever more.”

The king might rule his kingdom and his seer, but he obeyed those soft words.

* * *

Thran smiled as Bard fell asleep. Their game had been a delicious one, and he was well teased, well fucked, well loved. Who knew his quiet, down-to-earth husband would take to a little fantasy so well? He made a delicious king – utterly seductive with his stroking and caressing and soft words, still the gentlest of souls, but ruthless about getting what he wanted. He’d outdone himself. The hardest part had been to resist Bard for as long as he had. But he’d managed, if only to encourage Bard to feel safe playing such a game with him. Now his saint was well asleep beside him, with a faint smile on his lips. Thran snuggled him close – gods, how he loved body warmth! – and closed his eyes.

Maybe Bard would consider a rematch in the not too distant future. He wondered what sort of seer Bard might make. The possibilities made him smile as he drifted off.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint take a breather from their games to enjoy a lot of domestic bliss.

The soft strains of Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” roused Thran from his drowsing. Warm and relaxed, he lay with his head on Bard’s shoulder and his arm across Bard’s dark-velveted chest. The soft, mysterious music brought a smile to his lips as Bard stirred, then stretched an arm out towards the clock radio, intending to switch it off.

“Leave it on, lyubov moya,” Thran asked softly, rubbing Bard’s chest slowly. “It is beautiful music to wake up to.”

“It is,” Bard murmured, rolling over to wrap an arm around Thran. “Mmm, you’re warm, and I feel so relaxed.”

Thran grinned. “I must tease you into what hockey players call a hat trick more often.”

Bard’s laughter rumbled up from the depths of his chest. “Gods, that was fun.”

“It was. You were a brilliant king. I am your seer now and forevermore, and anything else you want me to be. So gentle and yet ruthless you were.”

“You were... so many things. Alien, vulnerable, mystical, blind in the throes of rapture, abject slave... all of them so real. Maybe you should think about becoming an actor when you don’t want to dance any more.”

“I suppose it would not be so different from the acting I do when I dance,” Thran murmured comfortably. “For now, though, I reserve my performances for our enjoyment, because it is easy to act with you. I trust you, and we have fun together. You made such a good story for our game! I liked it very much. I knew what to do to add to it very clearly.”

“I liked the part you added about opening, cleansing, and attuning. That was so much more fun than just telling the king to ask the seer if he wanted to join the team.”

Laughing, Thran stroked Bard’s hair. “I had a king eager to do anything for his kingdom. How could I not take advantage?”

“The power behind the throne, to be sure.”

“It was you behind me, as well as atop me, astride me, and in me,” Thran purred, his hands tracing over Bard’s chest. “You can indulge me in those ways anytime you choose.”

“Don’t start, you bastard,” Bard pleaded. “You fucked me dry.”

“I didn’t fuck you. It was you who fucked me, and quite deliriously, three times.”

“A technicality. I’m still dry.”
Thran sighed. “This is the problem to be married to such a delicious husband. I cannot get enough of you.”

“I appreciate that, especially since I have the same problem. But even if I had a drop left in me, we’d have to hold off. I set the alarm for four o’clock, and the children will be home from school any minute.”

“Oh, gods, so they will.” Thran sighed gustily. “Then your ass must wait for its pillaging a while longer.”

“I’ll soldier on somehow,” Bard grinned, sitting up. “Gods, we pillaged the sheets again. Come on, we’ve mere seconds to clean up the mess before we’re inundated with curious children.”

They climbed out of bed, quickly cleaned up and dressed, and managed to get the bed stripped and remade without interruption. Thran ran upstairs to make sure the garret was cleaned up while Bard ran downstairs to throw a load of sheets into the washer – that was the third set this week, which gave Thran something to smile about as he brought Bard’s wicker basket downstairs. There were only a few grapes and meager remnants of brown bread and cheese left, so he wolfed most of it down as Bard returned from the mudroom.

“Here,” Thran said, holding out the last bit of cheese to Bard. “Consume the last of the evidence of our delicious misbehavior. Where does the basket go?”

“Out in the barn. But we can use it in the sitting room to hold wood for the fire, so just set it in there.”

“I shall.” Thran disappeared momentarily to put the basket by the sitting room fireplace, then returned. “We embroiled ourselves so quickly in our game that I did not get to ask about the fireplaces and Tilda’s room.”

“The chimneys have been duly swept. The one in the main room needed some new caulk, so we can use that one in two days. The others are ready now. We just need wood, and of course the children’s marshmallows. I want to give the andirons in the sitting room a good scrape and scrub before we use them, too. That’s for tomorrow.”

“And the paint is done?”

Bard nodded. “Done. I say we put the children to work on the floor with us before supper, and then we can get Tilda back where she belongs.”

“That is a good idea. If we all help, it should not take so long. That will also be the end of the efforts for their sanctuaries, so your pace of renovation will not have to be so incessant.”

“I’ll still push to get their bathroom and our room done. Then I can start to relax a bit more.”

“I will hold you to that,” Thran brushed a hand over Bard’s back. “You work so hard for us all. Come, let us put the sitting room rug and furniture back in place while we wait for the children.”

They’d just set the rug straight when the children clattered in from the mudroom, eager to see what their fathers were up to. As they helped Thran and Bard put the furniture back, Bard divulged the plan for a fire tomorrow night once wood and treats had been acquired. Tilda was eager to get started on her floor, so the plate of cheese and crackers came out with the fruit bowl, and duly accompanied the floor refinishers upstairs. The children changed out of their good school clothes into grubbier play clothes, then talked about the events at school today as they worked. Thran added a summary of his audition, and Bard described the chimney sweep and the pile of raccoon bedding that had come out
of the ballroom chimney. In an hour, the floor had been cleaned and waxed, then everyone helped Tilda move her things back into her room. She set Mr. Bun on her pillow with a big smile.

“It’s all done!” Tilda grinned, looking around. “It’s so pretty now!”

“All but the window sashes,” Bard nodded, happy to see his daughter so enthused. “But January’s not the time to pull them out to strip and reglaze. I’ll wait for July for that.”

“That is a hard job?” Thran asked, moving to the window to contemplate the sash.

“Pain in the ass,” Bard shook his head. “Tedious beyond belief. And we’ve got a lot of windows to do. It’ll take me weeks, I’m afraid. We have to decide what color to paint the outside of the house first.”

“Black!” Bain teased as he stripped off his surgical gloves. “With a bright red roof!”

“The grey roof’s brand new, doofus,” Sigrid scoffed. “Da’s not going to paint that anything. And think how hot the house will get if the outside of it’s black!”

“I like it the color it is,” Tilda said. “White.”

“There aren’t very many shutters,” Legolas noted. “They're green. But... not a very... nice green?”

“It’s not at all, Legs,” Bard laughed in agreement. “Washed out, bilious, and all around ugly. I was thinking black ones would look sharp.”

“And a red door!” Tilda offered. “A bright red door.”

“Cranberry,” Sigrid amended. “A deep red, not a tomato red. With Clan Ffyrnig painted on it.”

“And a Welsh dragon,” Bain added.


“Wow, that would be cool,” Bain agreed. “Yeah, Da – a dragon and a double-headed eagle.”

Thran nodded as they trooped downstairs to get ready for supper. “That does sound very nice, children. I like it.”

“So do I,” Bard said. “I know what a Welsh red dragon looks like, but not a Russian double-headed eagle. So we’ll find pictures and I’ll sketch something out. Then we’ll see if any of the locals would like to work a trade – a door design for something we can do.”

“Is that how artists work? In trade?” Thran asked.

“Among ourselves, some of the time. It can mean that the artists doing the trade all get works they can showcase in their portfolios to attract more commissions or sales. And everyone tends to put in a little more work than they might for a straight fee. So it works out all around.”

“We can look for pictures after supper,” Tilda suggested, looking up at Legolas. “Maybe while we read?”

Legolas smiled. “Yes, I’d like to read some more tonight, Tilda. I want to know what happens to Harry next.”
“So do I,” Thran admitted with an exaggerated shrug. “But now, I am hungry. What is for supper tonight?”

The clan set to a supper of chicken Parmesan with noodles, green beans, and kale, with blueberries for the fruit course. As good as the feast was, no one dawdled, because the children wanted to continue on with reading aloud. Once the kitchen was clean and all was put away for the morning, they retired to the sitting room with tea and various desserts to begin their reading.

While Legolas read, Thran and Bard made their list for tomorrow’s errands, and Sigrid scanned her laptop for pictures of Welsh dragons and Russian double-headed eagles. At the end of the chapter, everyone conferred about which pictures they liked best, and Sigrid disappeared upstairs to print pictures of their choices. Bard would have to wait until tomorrow to make any sketches, as he was still out of sketchbooks.

“Then make sure the craft store is on our errand list,” Thran directed. “We forgot to add that. Sketchbooks. And chalk.”

“And a corkboard,” Sigrid added as she came down with the pictures in her hand. “And I hate to say it, but I’m almost out of printer toner.”

“Got it,” Bard scribbled. “The bookstore for Tilda’s books. Marshmallows. I’d better put graham crackers and chocolate bars on the list, too. Someone’s sure to ask for s’mores.”

“S’mores?” Thran questioned. “What is such a thing?”

“Gooey and sweet,” Bard warned Thran with a grimace.

“Yeah, they’re great!” Bain assured Thran. “Have you had them before, Legs?”

“Some of the boys at boarding school had those breakfast toaster pastries with that name. They tasted like sweet cardboard. Is that what they are?”

“Ew,” Tilda grimaced. “Those aren’t real s’mores, Legolas. First you have to toast a marshmallow over the fire, and then you stick it onto half of a graham cracker. Then you smush it flat with a piece of chocolate bar, and then you top that with the other half of the graham cracker. Then you eat it. They’re so good!”

“I think perhaps I will try only a small bite,” Thran said dubiously. “They sound much too sweet for me.”

“Whatever you don’t eat, I’m sure you’ll have any number of children clamoring for the rest of it,” Bard assured him. “So let’s talk about tomorrow. It’d be better to run our errands in the morning before the shops get too busy. Then in the afternoon, we’ve got a couple of grounded lads who need to do some yard work. We can’t have a fire until you two collect some wood for us. And you’ve all got homework. So we’ve got a busy day ahead of us. What would you like for tomorrow’s breakfast?”

The decision was for Egg Puff and Bard’s special Nirvana muffins, so Sigrid headed upstairs to talk to Finn. Legolas offered to read some more, so he, Tilda, and Bain stayed in the sitting room. Thran wanted to hear the story, too, but Bard left them to head up to the attic for a few minutes, soon reappearing with a set of fireplace tools. They were black iron, and clearly Bard's work - the graceful handles were a variation on the main stairway balusters as well as the andirons. He placed the rack of tools at the side of the hearth, ready for tomorrow, then rejoined Thran and the children to listen to the story. After they’d read another chapter, the children started on their baths, and soon after that,
Bard and Thran saw the children into bed. Tilda was especially happy, for she was back in her own room.

“It’s so nice, Da and Ada,” she said, bouncing Mr. Bun on her stomach. “I can’t wait to wake up tomorrow and see how bright it looks in the sun. Like a big daffodil, maybe.”

“Maybe,” Bard chuckled. “It’d be nice to plant some daffodils this color in the fall, wouldn’t it?”

Tilda nodded. “I like the small ones with the white petals and the orange cups, too. Not just the yellow ones.”

“We’ll do different kinds, then. But for now, tuck in, and you and Mr. Bun get ready to see the sun tomorrow morning.”


Smiling, Thran collected his hug from his small Russian doll. “Goodnight, Russkaya Kukla. Goodnight, Mr. Bun. Sleep well.”

The boys were both quick to settle, but Sigrid was still talking to Finn on her mobile. When Bard and Thran stuck their heads in the door, she looked up with hopeful eyes.

“Is it okay if Finn comes out tomorrow afternoon? Just to hang with us for a while?”

“That’s fine with me,” Bard nodded, smiling. “You’d better warn him, though. He might get roped into some yard work.”

Sigrid grinned in gratitude. “He won’t mind. Thanks, Da!”

“Welcome. Don’t stay up too late, sweetness. Breakfast’s at nine.”


“Goodnight, Sigrid,” Thran offered her a hug, and Bard after him, and they closed the door on the happy teenager.

As they pulled the pocket doors of their room closed behind them, Bard grinned. “Finn has no idea what he’s in for with my fierce girl.”

Thran walked into the closet to shed his clothes, also grinning. “No, he does not. But he seems a most courteous and kind sort.”

“So he does.” Bard followed Thran into the closet. “We’ll see how they sort out.”

As they clambered into bed together, Thran was happy to wrap his arms around his saint and nestle him against his chest. They rested quietly for a few moments, letting the night settle over them like another blanket.

“I have a confession to make, lyubov moyya,” Thran murmured.

“Oh?” Bard replied sleepily as he rubbed Thran’s arm draped over his ribs.

“I have fallen in love with a woman.”

A chuckle. “Have you? Which one, Sigrid or Tilda?”
“Well... they are both very sweet. But it is the smallest one who has ensnared me most.”

Another chuckle. “If I have to share you with a woman, at least it’s Tilda. She’s very easy to fall in love with.”

“I am quite hopelessly smitten.”

“I forgive you. Even an angel has no defense against Tilda.”

“None at all. I am grateful that you brought her into my life. As well as our fierce Sigrid and our enthusiastic Bain. Thank you.”

“Thank you for our reading Legolas. I think he’s smitten with Tilda, too.”

“Just so. What do you think the chances are that he will read a mere three hours to her? Or even just six?”

“Zero,” Bard exhaled.

“Agreed.” Thran shifted, and stroked Bard’s hair, drawing a hum of contentment from Bard. “I am very happy.”

“Gods, so am I. So am I. Every day is better than the one before.”

Thran kissed Bard’s hair. “It is.”

“Thank the gods for Steffen and his grotty radiators.”

Thran snickered. “I would prefer to thank him for nothing, but you are right. Sleep well, svatoy moy.”

“Sleep well, fy angylis.”

As Thran fell asleep, he smiled. The pheromones of lust were wonderful, but even they didn’t compare to the pheromones of domestic bliss.

* * *

Thran was the first one up the next morning. Bard lay beside him, solidly asleep, drawing a silent hum of appreciation from Thran; his husband was a beautiful man, even asleep, dark curls in his eyes and trailing down his neck as if they’d been disarranged during lovemaking. He grinned to see Bard so deep in slumber, mute testimony to the thoroughness of the lovemaking he’d indulged in yesterday. Oh, gods, what an adventure that had been! He slipped out of bed with stealthy care, not wanting to disturb Bard’s slumber. Thran wanted many repeats of yesterday’s excesses, and making sure Bard was well rested would help see that come about.

Padding to the bathroom, he shut the door quietly, turned on the light, and tended to necessities. He found his brush, unwound his hair from the braid he usually wore to bed, and carefully untangled the strands –

What was that on his shoulder? The faintest red mark at the junction of his shoulder and neck? He rummaged through the drawers, pulled out the hand mirror, and angled it to get a better look in the
mirror over the sink –

“Suka blyad,” he swore softly when he got a clear view of the mark. “Ty grebanyy huiesos. Chert, ty grebanyy huiesos...”

He tossed the mirror back into the drawer, shoved the drawer shut, and came out of the bathroom to glare at his husband so blissfully asleep. “Ty grebanyy huiesos!”

Bard’s lips curved up, though his eyes stayed shut. “You saw it, did you?”

“You bit me! And you left a mark!” Thran grabbed one of the pillows and thwacked Bard hard, making him double up.

“Hey, that’s no way for an omega seer to treat his alpha king!” Bard chortled. “It’s just a little mark, just enough to let everyone know you’re mine.”

“Oy, idi k chertu, sukin syn!” Thran thwacked Bard with the pillow over and over again. “I have an audition Monday, sukin syn! I will kill you!”

Bard wrapped his arms around his head and curled into a ball until Thran had thoroughly vented his spleen with the pillow. He hurled it at Bard and stamped back into the bathroom to look at the mark again. Bard came in behind him, looking properly penitent.

“I’m sorry, cariad,” he offered softly. “I didn’t think I bit down that hard.”

Bard offered a soft kiss on the mark, making enough pleading puppy eyes that Thran offered a grudging smile. Brightening, Bard bared his teeth and pretended to bear down on the mark, but Thran elbowed him away.

“Do not dare, ty grebanyy huiesos. Or I will give you another reason to think I work for the Russian mafia.”

“Gods, I don’t need another one; I already know you do. I’m sorry about the mark, Thran. It’s just red, not bruised, so it’ll fade before Monday. Here, I’ll put some arnica on it. That helps bruises.” Under Thran’s glare, Bard rummaged in the drawers for a small tube of ointment and smeared a generous fingerful of the stuff over the red mark. “I promise, this’ll help. Every couple of hours, I’ll put some more on it. It’ll fade.”

“If it does not, your ass is mine for the next week, however often I want it. I will make you suffer like the worst omega, face down, on the bottom, and I will not let you go a single time.”

“Mmm,” Bard grinned, “I don’t know whether to look forward to that, or remind you that your turn will come after.”


“And what exactly does that mean, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“You fucking cocksucker.”

Bard snickered. “I may be a fucking cocksucker, but you have to admit I’m a very good fucking cocksucker.”

“You are. I just...”

“I know, angel. I’m sorry. It was the heat of the moment.”
Thran gave another grudging smile. “It was a very nice heat of the moment. The seer was well attuned.”

“And sweet. ‘Even a king needs someone to love him without reservation. I will always be that one.’ I was very touched.”

“I will always be that one.”

“As long as I remember not to bite.” Bard kissed the mark on Thran’s shoulder again, then wrapped his arms around Thran’s ribs. “Considering the king had to fight a war and chop off the head of a rival king just to get his seer in a prison cell, you didn’t come out of it too badly.”

Thran turned around to nestle them chest to chest. He offered Bard a kiss on the ear. “You are my champion. The old king was not nearly so good as the new one is.”

“Your champion needs to go down to the kitchen and start muffins.”

“Ahh, the Nirvana muffins,” Thran recalled, as they went into the bedroom closet to find clothes. “What is a Nirvana muffin?”

“Lots of fruit and spices. I vary the basic muffin recipe I use every time I make them, and the children and I really liked this one. I didn’t think Kama Sutra muffins was the right name for them, given the curious nature of my children, so I settled for Nirvana muffins instead.”

“So they have an Indian influence,” Thran surmised, pulling his jeans up over his underwear.

“The spices remind me of Asia – cinnamon, cardamom, allspice, nutmeg, and mace. There’s a little orange in them, too, though sometimes I put in rosewater instead of the orange.”

Thran hummed in anticipation. “They will be the perfect thing to serve in the solarium when we have restored that room. With hot spiced tea.”

“That’ll be a fun room to do,” Bard admitted, arming his way into his Henley. He stooped to pull on socks. “It’ll be a while, though. Bedrooms and bathrooms and the kitchen floor come first.”

“All will come in its turn.” Thran slipped his soft red flannel shirt on over his thermal. “We need a stool in here, lyubov moya.”

“Maybe we should move that stool you got with the marble table in here.”

“That will do for now, yes. So, to the muffins.”

They headed downstairs, where Bard showed Thran the wonders of spiced muffins full of chopped apricots, raisins, and cranberries. The children arrived in short order, surely drawn by the wonderful scent of the muffins, then the tempting smells of frothy Egg Puffs topped with various combinations of cheese, onions, chives, and ham. Everyone was well fed as they piled into Thran’s SUV for the round of errands.

The craft store gained them a corkboard and packet of pins, chalk for the market list – no pink, as per Bain’s request – and six new sketchpads for Bard. The office supply store provided Sigrid’s new printer toner cartridges; the hardware store supplied items to help with the house’s continuing reclamation. The used bookstore took a long time, as everyone found something to entice them. Tilda chose a collection of Andrew Lang’s fairytales, a drawing tutorial, and a book about Russia. Thran found a coffee table book about the Taj Mahal, and another about the Alhambra.
Another lengthy stop was at the architectural remnants center. While the rest of the family perused the collection of finials, screens, panels, and grates, Bard picked through a few boxes of chipped tiles with Thran for replacements to match the floor of the children’s bathroom. There were no exact matches, and all were littered with bits of old grout and mastic, but as the amount Bard needed was small, he filled a bag with a collection of bits and bobs.

“What do you do with these?” Thran asked doubtfully, picking up a hexagonal tile in an unattractive salmon pink. He made a face, imagining an entire floor made of such a dubious color. “They do not look auspicious.”

“They don’t. I’ll have to chip off the old mortar and cut them to size, but I don’t need many. It’s just to replace the crumbled ones behind the toilet, so they won’t show much, which means that no one will notice that they don’t exactly match the old ones. I’d rather they don’t match than replace the whole thing. That’d be a pain, and I like the old floor.”

“So do I,” Thran agreed. “So, now that you have the tile, do you think we might look to see if we can find some screens for the solarium?”

“We’re here, so let’s look,” Bard nodded. “At least we’ll get an idea of what’s available and sizes and costs.”

They didn’t find any of the carved wooden screens like what Thran had seen in Bard’s art book, but they did find an old doorframe shaped in a Moroccan arch that they could put on the wall and flank with lattice. There was another small carved panel that would fit on another wall, and Sigrid and Legolas found a small round brass tray with an elephant etched on it that would make a nice side table. In talking to the owner, they described the kind of wooden screens they were interested in, and she promised to make some inquiries for them. They made arrangements to have Bard bring his truck to pick up the doorframe next week, then headed to the SUV with the wooden panel and the brass tray.

After a quick stop in Tilda and Thran’s favorite cheese shop, they headed for the market to stock the refrigerator with more than marshmallows, and headed came home with the SUV laden. They hadn’t even carried the bags into the house before Finn arrived with a shout and a wave, and he willingly pitched in to tote groceries and renovation supplies. After putting everything away and a quick lunch of sandwiches and salads, Bard and Tilda mixed up the children’s favorite gelatin/fruit salad, and Thran, Bain, and Legolas helped chop vegetables for tonight’s soup. Finn helped Sigrid mix up orange slices, pecans, and dates with a rosewater dressing. Then everyone trouped outside to survey the yard.

Even though Tilda and Sigrid weren’t technically required to help with the cleanup, everyone was glad to get outside, and Finn wouldn’t stray from Sigrid’s side. He was a big help hauling bits of a broken tree down with Bain and Legolas while Bard cleaned up the sitting room andirons, and then bracing the tree bits for Bard to cut up with a chain saw. Thran was not about to get near such a thing, but as he wielded a rake beside Tilda he kept a close eye on Bard. His husband wasn’t a dancer, but he had his own earthy assurance, and handled his tools and the heavy branches with confidence and ease. More than once, Thran’s loins twitched as he watched Bard work, imagining how compelling a vision his husband would be in the summer when not encumbered with so many heavy clothes. How would Thran resist? He was almost sorry when the last of the broken limbs were cut into lengths for the fireplace and stacked near to hand. While the boys fetched the wicker basket from the sitting room to fill with small sticks for kindling, he helped Bard repair the wire mesh that made up the compost heap so that they could pile dead leaves and other plant detritus in it. The place looked well groomed after two hours’ work.
With so many hands to help, Bard was persuaded to haul his pine tree sculpture out with the dolly and place it on the terrace outside the solarium window. Tilda stayed well back, but everyone else helped tie the piece onto the bed of the dolly. While Finn, Bard, and Thran tugged it along, Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid made sure it stayed solidly on the dolly. Guided by so many hands, the pine tree inched its way from the barn, over the lawn, and finally onto the stone terrace. The animated discussion about the exact placement of the piece was involved and made Thran smile, but finally the precisely correct spot was determined, and Bard set about setting long, heavy anchor bolts that would keep the piece firmly in place. One more piece of the house was now reclaimed.

In putting away all the tools, Bain pointed out the chin-up bar to Finn, and so of course that got a workout. Bard had improved; today he did ten rather than the five he’d done for Thran not long ago. Legolas and Bain both did a respectable five, and Finn managed eight. Legolas gave his father a hopeful look.

“Would you try, Father?” he encouraged. “You’re very strong; you can do these much more easily than I can.”

“I have an audition Monday, Legolas,” Thran said, “but I will try one carefully. I do not want to ruin my chances with the UltraViolet Ballet.”

Thran took off his coat and clambered up atop the box, despite Bard’s concerned look. “I will be careful, lyubov moya.”

“Why does he have to be so careful?” Finn asked Sigrid quietly.

“Because he’s just about the world’s best ballet dancer, that’s all,” Sigrid said casually. “He’s a national treasure.”

Thran refused to give way to his amusement at such a ridiculous claim, or at how proud Legolas looked to overhear Sigrid’s words, but he winked at Bard. “Come, toss me your gloves.”

Bard shook his head, but tossed them up anyway. Thran pulled them on, and reached up to grasp the rafter. He pulled up gently; when nothing hurt, he increased the force, and up he went. Three were all he ventured, despite his pride wanting to do at least as many as the younger boys. But remaining loose for his audition was more important, and so he stopped there. He was not breathing hard, nor had he strained, so he had acquitted himself well for his first effort.

“That is enough for today,” he said, looking down at Legolas. “Today, synok, it is you who upholds the honor of the Russian half of Clan Ffyrnig.”

“Oh, Ada, you made it look a lot easier than anyone but Da,” Sigrid observed, drawing a wry grin from Finn. “So the Russian half has every reason to be just as proud as the Welsh half.”

“You still do the best Scorpion,” Tilda nodded. “None of us can do that. At least I think we can’t. Can you do it, Legolas?”

“Not as well as Father,” Legolas shook his head. “I can manage the arm balance, but I can’t get my feet quite to my head.”

“Wait, what?” Finn repeated, eyebrows raised. “You put your feet on your head... how?”

“Maybe Father will do it for you when we go inside,” Legolas promised, as they left the barn. “He does it better than I do.”

“He’s really good at it,” Sigrid assured Finn as they came out of the barn.
“And he fences,” Finn shook his head. “And your Da makes sculpture and fixes houses. Tilda
draws, Bain plays soccer, and Legs fences and does archery. And you’re really smart at everything,
Sig. What have I gotten myself into?”

“You have no idea!” Thran and Bard chorused, drawing a laugh from everyone, Finn included.

“I guess I didn’t,” Finn admitted, holding up his hands. “But now that I do, it’s great!”

Everyone helped to collect enough wood and kindling to lay their fire for the evening, then trooped
inside, glad for a rest. Once he took his boots off, Thran sketched a reasonable Scorpion for Finn in
the middle of the sitting room floor, then he and Bard got Bain, Legolas, and Tilda started on their
homework at the kitchen table, leaving Finn and Sigrid to enjoy the sitting room in relative privacy.
Thran and Bard settled at the table to help with homework questions as they arose, and when Tilda
was finished hers, she and Bard began to look through the drawing book she’d gotten from the used
bookstore. It was fun to watch his husband and their youngest child talk about drawing, and Bard
fetched one of his new sketchbooks to show Tilda a few things. As shaded spheres appeared on the
page for Tilda to copy, or small cubes, Thran decided that he would urge Bard to put aside the
renovation at least once a week so that he could pursue his art. Even as fast as Bard worked, it would
be months before everything was finished to his husband’s high standards, and that meant it would
be just as long before Bard turned his hand to his metal again. But if Thran could persuade him to
devote just one day in seven to the pleasure of his art, then that would be all to the good. Perhaps he
could help him clean up his workshop, or ask what sort of clay he needed to begin his modeling of
Rahmiel. Yes, Bard was happy working on the house, but he’d be happier when he was an artist of
more than plaster, paint, and woodwork again, too, and that would make Thran equally happy.

As the sun faded, the boys finished their homework, and Bard put the finishing touches on supper.
Biscuits came out of the oven, gelatin/fruit salad went onto a platter, honey and jam sat beside the
butter on the table, and soup waited in the big Dutch oven on the stove. They squeezed Finn in
between Sigrid and Tilda, and everyone set to with appetite.

Of course, after supper the children clamored to light the fire so that the coals could burn down to
make the s’mores. Legolas read more of Harry Potter while they waited, finishing the chapter in time
to catch a hockey game on TV. Hockey was about the only thing that could distract Finn from
Sigrid, but she joined him to argue the merits of Columbus versus Boston with Bain and Legolas as
the game proceeded.

When the coals were ready, Bain scampered upstairs to fetch four wire coat hangers, which the
children unwound and stretched into long wires. Bard commandeered two for himself and Thran,
while Tilda and Legolas took the other two. Sigrid and Finn fetched the graham crackers, chocolate
bars, and marshmallows, then the first wave of marshmallows went on to toast.

“How does this double toasting work?” Thran asked Bard, as he held his marshmallow over the
coals.

“First you toast it until it’s as brown as you want. If you’re as impatient as Bain, you just light it on
fire,” Bard grinned, doing just that. Amid the children’s groans – Bain excepted; he cheered – he
pulled the flaming candy out of the fire and blew it out. “You let it cool a second, then you carefully
pull the toasted part off the rest of the marshmallow, like this.” He did so, and popped it into his
mouth. “You eat that part, and then you put the rest of the marshmallow back on the fire to toast. So
you get two for the price of one.”

Thran studied his marshmallow. “Ah. So mine is now toasted enough, so I take it out, skin it just so,
and then toast the rest again.” He chewed the toasted part experimentally. “Very sweet, as you said.
But the toasting is nice.”
“This is how you make a s’more,” Tilda went on, pulling her marshmallow off the fire. She pulled the whole thing off her wire, and carefully put it on half a graham cracker, topped it with the chocolate, and added the top cracker. She took a big, gooey bite. “Mmm!”

Bard had started his second marshmallow, which he let toast to a golden brown. He made a s’more out of it, and offered it to Thran. “Have at.”

Thran took a small bite, but the way the cracker broke gave him more to fumble into his mouth than he expected, and his fingers were sticky by the time he crammed a full half of it in. It was just as gooey and sweet as he expected, but a single bite was not too much. He gave the rest of it back to Bard, who wolfed it down.

“Good, right?” Tilda grinned, stuffing the rest of hers in her mouth. “Do you like it, Legolas?”

“Mmm,” Legolas managed, grinning at the mess. “You’re right, Tilda. It’s stellar.”

“I’ve had my quota,” Bard said, holding up his wire. “Sigrid? Finn? Do you want a turn?”

“Absolutely,” Sigrid reached for the wire. “Let me at the coals!”

Thran gave his wire to Finn, and once Tilda’s next treat was well toasted, she gave her wire to Bain. Bard and Thran turned over the hearth to the children to watch the next period of the hockey game.

“You are right, lyubov moywa,” Thran murmured, watching the children as they assembled their treats. “It is very sweet.”

Bard caught the double meaning that Thran had intended, and grinned. “It is. Nothing quite like it, is there?”

“No,” Thran shook his head. “Nothing like it at all.”
The angel and the saint have a cornucopia of things to share, from Russian nalivka before the fire to waffles for breakfast. Conversation is just as varied, and the cherubs have some thinking to do about their pasts - do they embrace it as their fathers suggest, or are old memories still too tender? A certain cherub with long blond hair and green braids finds that to be a very hard question to answer. And what do the angel and the saint plan for their next game?

Finn bade Clan Ffyrnig goodbye after the hockey game ended, and the night wound down to a sleepy close. Once the children were through baths and had settled into bed, Bard and Thran returned downstairs to enjoy the remains of the fire. The television was off, the lights were low, and the only sound was the quiet crackle of the fire as it ebbed. Bard leaned back against the sofa to enjoy the dance of the flames as Thran busied himself in the kitchen. When the tall dancer came into the sitting room, he carried two small glasses filled with a deep red liquid. He handed one to Bard before he sat down beside him.

“What’s this, cariad?” Bard asked, sitting up to take the tiny glass.

“Nalivka,” Thran replied, settling next to Bard. “Russian liqueur made of vodka and cherries, not too sweet. I had forgotten I had this. But the deep red coals of our fire reminded me of it, and I thought we might enjoy a small sip before we go to bed.”

Bard ventured a taste. “Hmm. I’ve never tasted anything like this. I can taste the vodka, but the cherries really come through.”

Thran sipped his. “So they do. The best vodka, the best ripe fruit, and only the least amount of sugar make the best nalivka, and this is a very nice one. It is a pleasure to have a small taste of it with you by the fire.”

“Gods,” Bard exhaled, rubbing Thran’s thigh. “Can it get any better? Less than two months ago, I was rotting away in a grotty apartment struggling to care for my children, and you were alone in your sterile aerie three floors above. Now I’m married to an angel, we’re here, our house is becoming a beautiful sanctuary, and our children are with us, happy and safe.”

Thran drew Bard back against his chest and put his arm around Bard’s ribs. “It is wonderful. I cannot be happier, at least not until tomorrow, when I will be happier still.”

Smiling, Bard sipped his nalivka. “I should be the one cradling you, angel. The heat’s down for the night, and even with the fire, it’s cool. Are you warm enough?”

“I am fine, Bard. You look after me well.”

“It’s my pleasure. I never want this to end.”

“We will have many years to enjoy each other, my saint.”

“I hope so. It’ll take thirty or forty years before I stop acting like such a sap.”
Thran rubbed Bard’s arm slowly. “I am Russian. I dance romantic Russian ballet. I married a fellow artist. Emotion is in my blood, so there is no such thing as sap between us. Only mutual delight in each other.”

Bard hummed in contentment. “I like your story better. No sap; only delight.”

Thran’s hand tightened on his shoulder briefly before it resumed its slow stroking.

Bard let his head fall back against his husband’s chest, silent as they watched the fire die together, warming the minutes with tiny tastes of the nalivka until the embers vanished into ash. Thran got up to wash their glasses and put them away, while Bard stirred the ashes until they were barely warm and closed the fireplace flue.

He and Thran made their usual rounds of the house together before heading upstairs. Tonight, both of them were happy to share the warmth of the shower, dry, and help each other into bed. They settled into each other’s arms, Thran shivering briefly until the bedding warmed around him. There seemed to be no need for words to follow what had been spoken in front of the fire, so they kissed, cuddled briefly, and let sleep draw near.

Despite how sleepy Bard was, he still had a lump in his throat. He’d need a lifetime to tell his angel just how much he loved him, and how much he treasured the life they were building together. Maybe when he began work on Rahmiel, the sculpture that would be his first piece after so long away, he could convey some of what he felt in it. Thran deserved no less.

Their love didn’t, either.

* * *

Bard dug out the waffle iron for Sunday’s breakfast. It’d been too long since he’d made the crisp delights for the children, and neither Thran nor Legolas had had homemade waffles before. Legolas had previously sampled store-bought things, but Bard had never thought the limp, often simultaneously burned and frozen things that came out of toasters compared well with the crisp warmth of a real waffle. They were easy to mix and bake, though it was hard to keep up with demand when the waffle iron produced only four at a time. While the first batch baked, the children rummaged for butter, honey, and various jellies to top them, and Bard stirred some scrambled eggs for Thran. The elegant dancer sat at the end of the table to survey the children as they wolfed their way through their treats. Legolas decided after one bite that the toaster version of a waffle bore no comparison to this, and he and Bain accounted for four waffles apiece. Even Tilda had two, as did her sister. The last batch of four appeared in a lull of the children’s consumption, so Thran took one and Bard claimed the other three. When Bard finally sat down to his breakfast, however, the children were ready to bolt from the table.

“Wait, mes petits,” Thran held up his hands to draw the children’s attention. “Before you leave such a delicious breakfast, we must talk of several things.”

Bard paused as he slathered his waffles with butter and honey. “What’s on your mind, Thran?”

“I want to talk about things we do today. Tomorrow begins a new week of school and dancing and renovation, so today we should pause and prepare. Laundry, yes? We all need clean clothes. So we will do that today. And we need to tidy and clean. Rooms, bathrooms, and so on. So we will divide
these things up so that none of it takes very long.”

Bard grinned when the boys groaned. “That’s a good idea, Thran. We need to get on a regular schedule of such things, anyway. We’ll rotate the chores each week, so who wants to start off with what?”

Bard worked through most of his waffles before that was settled, but before long they had a list of chores, what needed to be done, and an equitable division of the work, and everyone knew what they would do today. But chores were not the only things Thran wanted to talk about.

“So we are settled in the chores. Now, I bring up a more serious subject. Bard and I have wondered if you would like to make a small remembrance in our house for your mothers.”

All of the children sobered, and regarded Thran with mixed expressions. Sigrid and Bain both glanced at Bard, though neither spoke. Bard nodded to Thran, encouraging him to continue.

“They were dear to all of us, and I am sure they would be pleased to know how well and happy you are. Bard and I thought you would like to have the comfort of their memory, but only if it would be so. Perhaps a picture or two? I do not think it is fair to press anyone to decide this without reflection, so we will save discussion for another day. But would you like to consider this?”

Sigrid and Bain were quick to express their willingness, but Bard had never doubted that they would. It was Tilda and Legolas whose reactions Bard was more interested to see. Tilda didn’t remember her mother, and had much less invested in her memory than her older siblings. Legolas, however, had much more invested, because he’d lost his mother so horrifically. Thran had told him how badly Legolas had suffered over long weeks and months, and how many weeks and months Thran had not danced to remain beside his son. Would a photograph bring back those terrible memories of her murder?

“What if we give it a few days, and talk about it together on say... Wednesday? Or next weekend? What do you think?” Bard asked.

“Wednesday,” Sigrid and Bain said. Tilda and Legolas said nothing, but Legolas’s expression was pensive. He murmured something in Russian to Thran, who murmured something else back.

“What are they saying?” Tilda whispered to Bard.

“I don’t know, little doll, but it’s okay. They just need to be private for a minute, so we’ll respect that.”

“Okay,” Tilda whispered back.

“We will talk on Wednesday, then,” Thran offered. “Is that all right with you, too, Tilda?”

The little girl nodded. “It’s okay.”

“Then we will leave that for now. So there is just one more thing to talk about today.”

“What?” the children chorused, but Bard had no more idea than they did. Thran leaned forward over his plate to give Bard a mischievous smile.

“I would like us to gang up on our Bard.”

“Everything,” Thran grinned back. “And that is exactly the point. You do everything for us, yes? The renovation, you feed us so well, you keep us organized and well prepared. But we can spare one day each week for you to come back to your art. You need to draw, to play in the barn, to plan your return to your metal. Children, I say that on Sundays, Bard will not do any renovation, but will work on his art instead. We will practice what he has taught us about cooking for supper, and he will eat what we make, rather than we will eat what he makes.”

“Yeah!” Bain agreed enthusiastically. “Yeah, Da! You can weld out in the barn again! Legs, you wouldn’t believe how cool that is! Sparks go everywhere!”

“But there’s still a lot to do!” Bard protested. “I don’t want to make everyone live in a construction zone even longer than we will –”

“It’ll all get done, Da,” Sigrid interrupted. “Really, it will! Look, the kitchen is all done but the floor, and all our rooms are done, and you’ll be done in your room soon, and we have the children’s study, and the sitting room is livable, to so we’ll get by. It’s already better than the grotty apartment we spent years in, so another month or two here won’t bother us a bit. So I say Ada’s right – no renovation for you on Sundays!”

“Yeah, Da,” Tilda said, stoutly supporting her sister and brother.

“That seems fair to me, too,” Legolas nodded, smiling. “I learned how to make bangers and mash at boarding school from an English boy, so I can make that one night.”

“So the vote is five for, and one against, so the pro-artist vote carries,” Thran declared triumphantly. “See, I remember from my citizenship classes. We have had a successful vote.”

The children clapped, especially when Bard pretended to cringe in defeat. “If you insist. I guess I’ll have to spend the day puttering out in the barn.”

“Or you may draw, or go to the art supply store to get clay for your sculpture models. Whatever you choose.”

“I’ll think about it while we start on our chores,” Bard replied. “Has everyone had enough waffles?”

Everyone had. Cleanup commenced, and then the clan scattered to work their way through the chores. By dint of everyone’s effort, everything but the laundry was finished by lunchtime. After a quick smorgasbord lunch to finish off the week’s leftovers, everyone headed for the mudroom to put on boots and coats and gloves and go outside for a little air. A casual tour around the yard eventually evolved into a brisk game of soccer, after which Bard got the keys to the barn and opened the bay.

Eight years ago, when he’d closed the doors on this place, he’d wondered if he’d ever work here seriously again; now that moment had come, it seemed unreal, even foreign. There was so much to do to return this abandoned place to a working studio!

A good first step was cleaning. He climbed up on the crates under the chin-up bar with a broom to sweep away as many cobwebs as he could reach, then Bain, Legolas, and Thran helped him move the crates around until he’d cleaned the rest of the rafters. He left the crates under a rafter in the front of the barn, which opened the space near his workbenches and tools. Leaving the boys to determine which of them could do the most chin-ups, he mulled the next step.

Tilda and Sigrid took up brooms to sweep off the workbenches, the anvil, the fire bed, and the walls. Thran found a push broom to send the dust on the floor billowing out of the front bay in sneeze-inducing clouds. It was only a perfunctory cleaning, but Bard felt heartened as the afternoon waned
because the house’s reclamation had extended to include the barn.

Supper was simple hamburgers, beans, steamed veg, and fruit salad, because the children had taken Thran’s prohibition on Bard’s cooking seriously, much to his amusement. How long would that last? Still, he sat in the sitting room with his sketchbook while supper preparations ensued. In was impossible to concentrate on sketching anything, though, as he had to try his best not to get up and plunge into the fray when one person or another popped in to ask him a steady stream of questions.

“Da, where’s the minced onion?”

“Lyubov moya, where is the vegetable peeler?”

“Da, do we have any flaked coconut?”

“Bard, do I turn the oven on bake or broil to warm the buns? Broil? Um, high or low?”

“Da, how soon do I turn the veggies on before the hamburgers are done?”

“Bard, can you put a glass bowl in the microwave for the beans? Or do they go in a pan on the stove?”

“Da, do we have a cheese knife?”

When Bard heard the clatter of a pan falling on the floor, he could no longer help himself, and got up from the sofa to stick his head in. Five faces turned to regard him, then five voices raised to protest his appearance.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was all right when the pan dropped,” he held up his hands.

“We’re good, Da,” Bain pushed him back towards the sitting room. “No worries.”

“Easy for you to say,” Bard replied.

“Five more minutes, then we’re done, Da,” Sigrid called. “Control yourself until then!”

In five minutes, he was called to the table, and despite all the questions, supper was well put together, well presented, and quite edible. Bard made sure to compliment all around for their efforts.

“Did you draw anything while we made supper?” Tilda asked.

Bard gave her a sheepish grin. “I didn’t, little doll. I was too busy listening to what you were all doing and trying not to interrupt.”

“We will get better each week,” Thran waved a hand as he cut up his hamburger – small, bunless, and cheeseless – into small bites. “You will not have so much to listen to next week.”

Bard expected that he would, but he merely smiled.

* * *

After supper, the usual Sunday night flurry began to track down lunch bags, repack backpacks, and check for last minute assignments, and the last of the mountain of clean laundry appeared out of the
dryer. They just had time for half a chapter of Harry Potter before it was time to wash and get ready for bed. Bain raced Sigrid to get into the shower first, and when the losing Sigrid flounced into her room, leaving Bain to chortle at his victory, Legolas followed Thran into the bedroom he shared with Bard.

“You are quiet tonight, synok,” Thran ventured, as he dumped the basket of laundry out on the bed. As this was mostly the children’s clothing, he beckoned to Legolas to pick his things out of the pile.

“I think about Maman,” Legolas admitted, looking at his thermal shirt in his hands.

Thran gave Legolas his full regard as he sat on the bed. “What do you think of?”

Legolas said nothing for a long moment, but eventually came to sit beside his father. When he finally spoke, it was in Russian, and soft, as if he didn’t want to be overheard. “I still miss her so much.”

“How could you not?” Thran replied in the same language. He put a long arm around his son’s broad shoulders. “She was very dear to you, and she loved you very much.”

“But it’s been a long time, Father. Why do I still miss her so much?”

Thran couldn’t reply before Bard appeared at the door with another basket of laundry, but he didn’t need Thran’s warning look to know that his appearance was inopportune. He disappeared into Sigrid’s room with the basket, leaving the bedroom to Thran and Legolas.

“Because it is normal to miss someone you love so much, especially when they are lost to you too soon. You may miss her for a very long time, just as you love her – even when you are seventy, or eighty, or ninety. It will still be normal to feel so, even then. But it is also normal that we learn to go on without her, even though that is sometimes very hard. That is why I spoke as I did at lunch today, Legolas. I do not ever want you to think that because we live here, and I am married to Bard, that you must forget Maman. Nor should Sigrid and Bain and Tilda forget their Mam, nor Bard his Daphne, nor I my Vileria. Even though your mothers are not with us, they are still part of us, and I would welcome a remembrance of them, but only if that would not make you and the other children sad.”

Legolas looked at the shirt still in his hands, but he didn’t speak. Likely he didn’t know what to say, because he didn’t yet know how he felt. Thran let the silence stand as he rubbed his son’s arm in comfort.

“Do you... still have our album?”

“Of course. Would you like me to get it out?”

At Legolas’s nod, Thran stooped by the lowest drawer in his dresser, opened it, and took out a cloth-wrapped bundle. He put it on the bed beside Legolas, and unwrapped the soft wrappings to reveal an ornately tooled, leather bound photograph album. As he sat beside the album, Legolas regarded it with a regretful expression, and after some seconds, he opened it.

The first several pages held pictures of Thran as a young boy, most of them dancing pictures. There was only a single picture of Thran’s mother, and only two of his father, but Thran had stared at them too long to feel much more than a vague connection to the black and white images revealed in the pictures. The next several pages contained more dancing pictures, and gradually a skinny, dark-headed Thran gave way to a skinny, white-headed Thran. Then appeared pictures of a young Thran beside an equally skinny, dark-headed girl with sharp cheekbones, a wide smile, and expressive eyes. Vileria had been so alive and bubbly then, before an awakening sexuality had clashed with
official disfavor. Watching her struggle under such a burden had prepared Thran when his own sexuality had made itself known. He and Vileria had grown even closer after that, both because they understood each other’s burden, and because that friendship diverted at least some part of the official machine’s censure. When they had been urged to marry, they had agreed with more relief than anything else. Both had pursued careful relationships with others without resentment or censure, even laughing about providing each other cover when the official eye turned their way.

The pictures that followed celebrated ballet triumphs, parties, casual outings together, then the happy surprise of Legolas’s conception, revealed in Vileria’s blossoming figure. Legolas paused over many pictures of proud parents with their tiny son, for both Thran and Vileria had enthusiastically welcomed Legolas. The turning of pages slowed now; while pictures still celebrated ballet triumphs and premieres and openings and spectacular jetés, more celebrated two doting parents and the growing son they cherished, and Legolas looked long at them.

One of the last pictures taken before Vileria’s death showed her snuggled in an overlarge, ruby red sweater, her hands clasped under her chin. Her smile was wide and laughing. Her dark eyes were beautifully made up without looking overdone, and her expression was gleeful and unstudied, yet wise. She was a beautiful waif, mischievous clown, evanescent sprite. Despite his happiness with Bard, Thran found it impossible to look at that picture without a surge of aching loss, but another picture taken at the same session was the one that held Legolas’s eyes. It showed Legolas standing with a tiny bow and arrow in his hands as he beamed at the camera, with Thran and Vileria stooping beside him, their arms around him and their cheeks pressed to his. Father and mother were young, seemingly happy and without care, and the love for each other and their son was palpable.

Legolas didn’t move, but Thran heard the hitch in his throat. Whether Legolas reached out to his father first, or Thran enveloped his son in his arms first, didn’t matter. What did was that Legolas had someone to hold him.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Legolas whispered. “I wish I didn’t miss her so much.”

“There is nothing to apologize for, Legolas,” Thran replied just as softly. “She was your mother, and she loved you without reservation. I loved her, too. Very much. Nothing will ever change that, nor will I forget her just because my life is different now. She is part of you, of me, and she always will be.”

“You mean that, even though you’re married to Bard?”

“Of course! Bard still loves his Daphne, too, you know. That does not change what we feel for each other, just as what we feel for each other does not change what we felt for Vileria and Daphne. So if you would feel comforted to have a picture of your mother, or several if you like, then we will have them. Would you like to take the album and put it in your room? You can look at it anytime you like, and when you are ready, you can choose something to display. I think our Tilda and Bain and Sigrid would like to see your mother, just as perhaps you would like to see their mother. Your mothers made you, Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda what you are.”

“I would like to look at the album, Father. Thank you.”

“Look at it all you like. Whatever you decide on Wednesday, even if you decide that you would like more time to consider, that will be fine. I want whatever would make you happiest.”

“What if the other children want a picture but I don’t, or if I want one and they don’t?”

“Then that is what we will do. Nothing is forever, Legolas. To display or not display a picture today does not dictate what happens tomorrow.”
“That makes me feel better. I don’t want to do something that the other children don’t want, and then they’ll think I want them to do what I do.”

“We will accommodate whatever each of you decides. Have no worries about that.”

“Do you think... if we did display some, could we have a shelf with a vase? Maman loved flowers, and so sometimes I could put some with her picture?”

“She would love that. If you decide on a picture, we will have a place for flowers near it.”

Legolas’s arms tightened around his father. “Okay. Thank you, Father.”

“You are the best son. I love you very much.”

“I love you, too, Papa.”

Legolas had not called him that for a long time. Thran’s throat tightened until he had to swallow, but he made no notice of it other than to stroke Legolas’s long blond hair. He gave a gentle tug on one of the small green braids. “I think that Sigrid and Bain and even Tilda are through their showers now. So see to yours, and then it will be time for bed.”

Legolas eased away from Thran. His eyes were damp, but Thran made no notice of them, either, only smiling fondly at his son. He took up the photograph album, and handed it to Legolas. The boy cradled it in his arms and offered a smile as he carried it to his room.

Perhaps the next time that Legolas looked at the pictures of his mother, he would find a little more peace.

* * *

After Bard said goodnight to Bain, he came into the bedroom to find Thran sorting through his pile of clean clothes.

“Is Legolas all right?” he murmured softly.

Thran nodded. “I think so. He still misses his mother very much. I told him that Vileria is still his mother, just as Daphne is the mother of your children, and that we will always love them both. What you and I have now does not change that.”

“Of course not,” Bard agreed. “I just said the same thing to Bain. Sigrid already knows it, and Tilda doesn’t remember much about her mother, so she’s not as emotionally invested in her mother as our other children are. But Bain needed the same reassurance as Legs did. So if they compare notes, I hope they’ll see that they heard the same thing from both of us.”

“I hope so, too. I find that I would like to display a picture for myself. Looking at our old album... despite the state, despite that we were both gay, Vileria and I had many happy times. The pictures show that.”

“I promised Bain and Sigrid I’d get out our box of pictures for them to look through. Daphne and I had a lot of happy times, too. There’s one picture in particular I’d like to see again.”

“We will see them all, before long,” Thran surmised. “That will be all to the good. We will bring the
past into the present, and both will be welcome in our house.”

Bard hummed in agreement, then exchanged his pensive expression for a more overt smile as he regarded the pile of dancer’s belts, tights, and tops that covered Thran’s side of the bed. He moved to the much smaller heap on his side of the bed, all of it workpants, shirts, socks, and underwear. “I had no idea dancers went through so many clothes.”

“The pile will be much larger when I begin work with a company,” Thran warned him. “ Likely two sets a day, if not more.”

Bard whistled. “Too much to leave it all for the weekend. Twice a week, at least, we toss stuff in the washer. When’s your audition with UltraViolet tomorrow?”

“That question has an interesting answer,” Thran replied.

Bard paused as he folded up a tee shirt. “Why?”

“I do not know. A dancer I know well emailed me early this morning that he hoped he’d see me at the UltraViolet audition on Wednesday.”

“Wednesday? I thought it was Monday. Did they move it?”

“My very question. I also received an email from the inimitable Mr. Nori to inform me about this Wednesday audition, since he is aware that my audition is Monday.”

“You’ve mentioned Mr. Nori before. Who is he?”

“Someone whose business advice and discretion I make regular use of. A most discreet individual.”

“Let me guess – he works for the Russian mafia, too.”

Thran smiled, but made no comment about Mr. Nori’s ties to the Russian underworld. Did that speak volumes, or what?

“What did you do?”

“I emailed Irmo to reconfirm the date and time of my audition. I received a reply just before I came upstairs with Legolas. Irmo confirmed that he would see me tomorrow at one.”

“So what’s going on?”

“I do not know,” Thran shrugged. “It is not typical for auditions to be on two days, unless there are separate auditions for different types of dancers. But that does not seem to be the case this time. I will attend tomorrow as I planned, but I expect something unexpected, whatever it may be.”

Bard carried his stack of Henleys to hang up into the closet. “ Do you think Irmo’s up to something?”

“Most assuredly, for all that he is not the director or the ballet master. He is known to push to get what he wants, and as persuasive as he can be, it is the rare person who can tell him no with any authority. I could flatter myself and think that he wants to see me alone, with the ballet company officials in tow, to try to snare me for UltraViolet right then. But if that is the case, I will not sign anything tomorrow, no matter how persuasive he is. There is courtesy to show the other companies, and I want to weigh the offers fairly, both for our family and myself. On the other hand, perhaps he wishes to tell me in private that UltraViolet has no interest in me, but he wants to plan a venture between us, and UltraViolet will hold its real audition with other dancers on Wednesday. There is no
way to know until tomorrow comes. What is your plan tomorrow? The children’s bath?”

Bard nodded. “Paint first, then regrout the wall tile. Add the extra towel bars. Patch the floor. It’ll be two or three days at least, I expect, then it’s our room’s turn. Would you prefer I do the closet first, or out here first?”

“It does not matter to me, but it would be nice to see our room transform, yes?”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll move a lot of our stuff out of here to make it easier to paint, but I’ll keep the bed in place. We’ll just have to be careful at night to remember we’re not hard up against the outside wall, and leave a clear path to the bathroom so neither of us trips in the dark.”

“We will manage,” Thran said without concern. “There, my things are put away, and I have packed my bag for tomorrow’s audition. I am ready for a hot shower. Not the soaking tub tonight, I think. I will save that for tomorrow. I expect that I will need it after my audition.”

Bard hummed, conceding the likelihood that Thran was right. “Do you mind company in the shower?”

“Not at all,” Thran assured him, as he shed his clothes. “I will start, and you join me as you are ready.”

“I will.”

Bard put the rest of his clothes away, and joined Thran just as his husband finished washing his hair. As he expected, his husband offered his usual kiss of welcome and caresses as he scrubbed himself clean, but he seemed more thoughtful than playful tonight. He was likely preoccupied about the irregularities that might surround his audition tomorrow, so Bard didn’t intrude. He washed thoroughly, dried while Thran saw to his hair, and then turned the dryer on himself long enough to get the worst of the damp out of it. He climbed into bed and eased his shivering husband against his chest to warm him.

“I’ll bet you’re not a fan of too much air conditioning in the summer,” Bard teased as Thran crowded close.

“ Enough that we snuggle in bed comfortably is nice, but no Arctic gale,” Thran agreed. “I feel claustrophobic when the house is closed too tightly in nice weather.”

“I don’t like it, either.” Bard tucked the blankets around Thran’s shoulders snugly. “And so another week begins.”

Thran hummed comfortably. “Perhaps we should plan our next game. The artist’s garret awaits us.”

Bard grinned. “And I’m supposed to get to sleep mulling all the possibilities of that? You’re cruel, angel.”

Bard felt Thran’s smile, even if he didn’t see it. “I do not mean to be.”

“Same rules as last time?”

“Let us seed the game first before we consider whether we need rounds again. We know the place. The time will be during the day when the children are at school. Because I was the bottom in the empty garret, perhaps you can be this time, unless you have a strong preference otherwise. You know I am happy with either.”
“You are. So am I. So the top is yours. Power, or not?”

“Oh, lyubov moya, after playing the seer to your king, I will gladly take the power this time. I hope I can bring as much delight to the role as you did.”

“Do you want to be the artist, too?” Bard snickered.

Thran snickered in kind. “I will not deny you that.”

“If I’m the artist, and I end up on the bottom, then you’d better be a rich patron who decides to take liberties with his impoverished portraitist, or the angel who rewards a mortal artist’s efforts with a liaison, or the landlord who takes out his rent in trade.”

“Mmm, so many possibilities,” Thran rumbled deep in his throat.

“I wonder if I can draw erotic images while engaging in them at the same time?”

Thran’s fingers traced over a nipple, making Bard twitch. “Perhaps I will be an oversexed ballet dancer who wants a provocative portrait of himself, and decides that his artist is too tempting not to sample along the way. That would be no game, though. Merely my usual state of being when confronted with my irresistible husband.”

Bard snickered again. “I’d better keep that sketchbook under our bed to keep the children blissfully ignorant to the dissipation of their fathers.”

“I think so. Though I warn you – having it under our bed will only lure me to look at it, and that will provoke me to visit more of the most depraved acts upon you.”

Bard bit Thran’s ear. “You might get a few of those visited on you in return. But not tonight; save them for the garret. Say... Wednesday? Oh, no, not then; Sigrid’s got another track meet. Tuesday, or Thursday?”

“Tuesday, assuming something does not arise about my auditions. We must take advantage of ourselves while we can, my saint. As you said, soon I will be back at work, and our times to indulge here during the day may be rare.”

“Tuesday, it is. Need rounds?”

Thran shook his head. “I have quite enough delicious things to consider as a demanding ballet dancer. Do you prefer me pushy, or seductive?”

“Oh, I go for seductive any day. You’re very good at that.”

“So we are agreed,” Thran said, snuggling closer.

“I just have one question for you,” Bard enticed.

“What is that?”

“Which do you think an oversexed ballet dancer would prefer – chocolate syrup, or sweetened whipped cream?”

Thran looked up at him. “What do you intend to do with those?”

“Why don’t you think about it between now and Tuesday?”
“Suka blyad,” Thran growled. “How am I to sleep with such a question before me?”

Bard grinned. “I’m sure you’ll manage it, cariad. Sleep well.”

Thran’s answer was another growl. It wasn’t a very sleepy one, either.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

The angel's audition is on with UltraViolet Ballet... or is it? Will the Prince of Ice need to make an appearance? Afterwards, the saint offers a hint of an interesting financial transaction for tomorrow's game.

Chapter Notes

Our ballet master, Abebe, is named in honor of Abebe Bikila, the great Ethiopian distance runner who won the 1960 and 1964 Olympic marathons. For the former, he set a world record, and he did it barefoot. For the latter, he successfully defended his previous title just 40 days after suffering appendicitis, and he set another world's record. He also single-handedly began East Africa's dominance in distance running. What an amazing runner!

Thran set off for his audition with more than his typical anticipation of such things, because he did not expect this to be a typical audition. Just what Irmo had in store for him he didn’t know, and he didn’t spend time in speculation. Whatever it was, he would soon discover. For now, his purpose was to reach the UltraViolet Ballet studio safely and calmly, in balance, and ready to react to whatever he was presented.

At least he didn’t have a long drive to make. The studio where UVB conducted its practices and auditions was not in the city; it was just barely beyond the outskirts of Greenwood Dale on the Lake, perhaps twenty minutes from the house. It was by far the most convenient practice location of the four companies he’d considered, but the length of a commute was far from the most important aspect of choosing the direction of his career for the next several years. In fact, it was almost the least important aspect. But considering it put him the right frame of mind – he would weigh everything, from the least detail to the biggest.

The studio appeared before him ahead on the left in an industrial park that seemed recently built. The building seemed to be neither one thing nor the other, but that did not concern him; as long as the practice space inside was well equipped and tailored to dancers, it did not matter that it was indistinguishable from the medical lab equipment builder next door. Several cars dotted the lot outside the front door, so others had preceded him, though who those others were remained unknown. Perhaps other dancers; the makes and models of the cars were not expensive ones, and several contained what Thran called dancers’ detritus – stray sweaters, extra dancer’s shoes, and so on. The building displayed no large sign, though the distinctive UVB logo was stenciled on the glass front door. He parked the SUV, got his bag of things, and headed inside.

A small if attractive lobby with a receptionist’s station greeted him. A pair of ballerinas looked up from behind the station, their eyes widening as they recognized him.

“I'll tell them,” one of the girls told the other, and hurried down a hallway. The other gave Thran a
smile full of suppressed excitement.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Oropherson. It’s so exciting to see you!”

“Good afternoon,” Thran replied, smiling. “I am flattered.”

“Everyone’s ready for you, Mr. Oropherson. The studio’s straight ahead. The men’s dressing room is down the hall, then right before you get to the studio doors.”

“Thank you,” Thran replied, and continued on. Already this was no ordinary audition – who was this everyone who was ready for him? Usually in an audition, it was he who should be ready for the panel and the ballet master, not the other way around. He stopped in the dressing room, took off his coat and folded it neatly over his bag, and tended to necessities. Something told him he would not be given an instant, not even to piss, once he walked onto the studio floor.

As he left the dressing room and headed back to the doors that led to the studio, he took a marshaling breath, straightened to his tallest, and squared his shoulders. He would not sweep into the studio – that would be arrogant and presumptuous. But he would make an entrance, nevertheless. The question was not whether an audience awaited, only what sort.

As he came through the door, he swept the space quickly with a glance. Ah, this was not an audition at all, was it? The dancers arrayed around the room were the members of the company, male and female, perhaps thirty all told – all ethnicities, from several traditions, from very classical and contemporary ballet, both of which Thran danced, to a smattering of others, likely modern and perhaps ethnic/urban. An interesting mix, but what did that mean for a company to have so few dancers across so many traditions? They were arrayed around the room just as dancers were before the start of every morning barre, stretching, chatting softly, sewing ribbons on pointe shoes, wrapping sweaters around slender midriffs. All that paused, however, at Thran’s appearance. There was an expectation, an excitement, as well as close scrutiny, from every dancer, regardless of tradition. What had Thran gotten himself into?

“Ah! Thran!” Irmo heralded.

To the left by the piano stood a cluster of people – Irmo; a trim, black man with greying hair and attired in dancer’s garb; an equally trim, middle-aged Asian woman in business clothes; a young woman with short blond hair and a bundle of music sheets under her arm; and another man dressed in such an eccentric mélange of things that he could be a homeless vagabond as easily as an artist. So... Irmo, ballet master, artistic director, and pianist. That left the eccentric, who was likely not a choreographer, as Irmo was not the type to suffer another in the same room with him. Perhaps set designer? Costumier? Why would either be present at an audition, even an unusual one?

“Bonjour, bonjour!” Irmo welcomed Thran, beckoning him closer. “Thran, let me introduce Lettie Jenkins, the artistic director of UltraViolet Ballet, and Siobhan Turner, pianist. Also Abebe Lançot, UltraViolet Ballet’s ballet master, and Rada Brown, costumier.”

Thran shook hands with everyone, offered polite greetings, then gave Irmo an amused look. “Ah. The traditional audition is on Wednesday, then. It only remains for you to reveal what kind of audition I am here for today.”

If everyone but Irmo looked startled, the choreographer was unconcerned. “But of course this is not an audition, Thran. That should be obvious, yes?”

Thran chuckled. “Of course, I see now. This is your regular company class, yes? My apologies – I interrupt. And you have my condolences, Irmo. It seems that the same illness that would not let you
call me to arrange a meeting has struck again, so that you were unable to call me to inform me of
today’s adventure. Perhaps you would prefer I come back on Wednesday with the other dancers,
yes? I will see if my schedule is still open for that time, and will attend if I do not have a previous
engagement.” He offered a nod to those with Irmo. “It was good to meet you. Again, my apologies
that I interrupt.”

He made his unhurried way back towards the door. Which of the group would chase after him? How
close to the door would he get before someone spoke? Or would they wait until he left the studio, so
as not to say anything in front of the company?

He got through the studio doors, and headed down the hall to the lobby. Ah, well. No matter how
promising things had seemed last Wednesday, it was better to know now, before he invested any
emotional or financial resources, that Irmo was too scattered to make a successful collaboration –

“Mr. Oropherson?”

That was Lettie Jenkins, the artistic director, who pursued him. He paused to look back at her, but
only halfway, as if he still might continue on his way out of the studio.

“I am so sorry for the confusion, Mr. Oropherson. I had no idea that Irmo wouldn’t have called you
to explain the change in our plans. I should have called you myself, and it reflects badly on
UltraViolet Ballet that I didn’t. I apologize to you, both for my lapse, and for wasting your valuable
time. May I offer you an explanation for your trouble, at least?”

The poor woman looked so abashed that Thran winced in sympathy. This was Irmo’s doing, likely
not intentional, but visionaries were often blind to the efforts others had to put into making their
visions real. He turned to fully face Lettie, and offered a commiserating smile. “Of course. Perhaps I
am not the only one surprised this afternoon.”

“You’re not,” Lettie said frankly. “Irmo is a brilliant choreographer, but he’s not the best in
explaining the leaps of intuition that make him brilliant to lesser mortals.”

“So I have learned myself,” Thran nodded. “So what did he plan for today, and what should I have
known before I arrived?”

“You really impressed Irmo last week when you met with him,” Lettie admitted. “He came to us
more excited than I’ve ever seen him, convinced that you were the only one we needed to look at for
our principal male dancer. He was so sure that he insisted we make today’s meeting a working
session with the company to see how the chemistry between you and our dancers developed. There
is another audition on Wednesday, to satisfy our board that we’d have something in place if you
didn’t choose to talk with us further after today. Irmo insisted that he would explain this to you – he
was quite adamant. But...”

Thran hummed in sympathy. “Irmo is right about my interest in working with him. But it is only fair
to tell you that I have auditioned with several other companies, and I have not yet made a decision as
to which company I plan to join. With your company, there are other considerations beyond the
dance, of course. Depending on how this chemistry goes, we would need to discuss those other
considerations. But I must tell you, if I choose to work with UltraViolet, we must have no more
surprises. Such things do not make the best of any of us.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Lettie nodded, sighing. “Frankly, you’re the first person who’s had the
gravitas to challenge Irmo. We need a little more of that. If you’d consider continuing with today’s
plan for a working session, and you do decide to work with us after that, I will personally see to it
that you’re fully aware of everything from then on.”
Thran considered. There was no reason yet to dismiss UltraViolet, for Lettie’s attitude was not
desperation, but embarrassment; she cared about her company, and was pained that Irmo’s lapse had
reflected badly on it. And he was prepared for class, whether as part of a traditional audition or not,
and he had already invested the time to travel here. So he lost nothing to take part in a working class,
and it would reflect well on him that he had been forbearing. So he offered another small smile.

“I am pleased to work with your company today. Let us see what we can make together.”

Lettie’s smile was relieved and gratified. “I appreciate your courtesy, Mr. Oropherson.”

“And I appreciate your honesty. I prefer to start off on that foot always.”

“So do I.”

Thran and Lettie walked back into the studio side by side. Again, the before-class stir stilled, and a
few dancers murmured among themselves as Thran and Lettie rejoined Abebe, Irmo, Siobhan, and
Rada by the piano.

“I explained the plan for this afternoon with Mr. Oropherson,” Lettie told the others quietly. “He’s
graciously agreed to join us despite our confusion. I’m sure we all appreciate his patience with us,
and with our lapse. I’m also sure we’ll all take pains not to let any more surprises creep into the
proceedings.”

She directed a pointed look to Irmo, who only smiled. Thran was not encouraged at his dismissive
stance, so he looked directly at the choreographer. He didn’t indulge in his Prince of Ice stare, but
Legolas had endured his unwavering regard before and understood its seriousness.

“I thank UltraViolet for that consideration. Irmo, if I might have a brief word?”

“Of course.”

Thran and Irmo stepped off to the side. Thran turned his back to the rest of the room, and put more
steel in his regard of the choreographer.

“You want to take me to task, then?” Irmo smiled.

“I do. You and I may make wonderful dances together, Irmo. But we will not do so unless you
understand that surprises do not engender trust or rapport with anyone. I am no exception. You have
been rude twice, the second time to others as well as me. It must stop if you want UltraViolet or me
to trust in your visions. What is said about the great American game? Three strikes, and you are
out?”

Irmo frowned. “But this collaboration is fate, Thran. You know this.”

“Right now, you want this collaboration more than I.”

Irmo’s eyes widened. “How can you feel so?”

“Because the rapport we need to make the most of us requires openness and honesty. If you cannot
trust me enough to be open and honest with your plans, say so now, before either of us invests
anything more.”

Irmo said nothing, as if he didn’t quite believe what Thran said.

With a shrug, Thran straightened. “Then this is your loss. Call me if you ever get to a point where
you can offer such a collaboration, and perhaps we will talk again.”

“No, wait...” Irmo spread his hands slightly. “You are right, Thran. I will have to find the words. Sometimes, that is very hard, to explain. My brain, it runs so fast and so hard... it comes off as rudeness when I don’t intend it to. I merely try to keep up with what’s in here.” He waved his hand at his head.

“I have heard others say similar things,” Thran allowed. “But your visions are too large to bring to life without help, you understand? You must agree to speak as best you can to those who can help you make the visions, or your visions will never come to life.”

“You are right, you are right.” Irmo shook his head. “I can only say that I will do my best. I will try. But when the brain races, it will not be easy.”

“Honestly said. So, do we dance now?”

Irmo’s smile reappeared, if a bit more chagrined. “We do. The company is most excited to have you here.”

“And I am glad to be here, as long as there are no more surprises for anyone. Yes?”

“Yes,” Irmo nodded.

As Thran went back to the ballet master, he wondered how many times he’d have to give this same talk to Irmo, and how long it would take to prove whether such an investment was worth the effort. At least he still had three other companies to fall back on, if he decided Irmo was too high maintenance.

* * *

Class sorted itself out in short order. Thran took his place with the other dancers to begin the familiar sequence – only to find that not all of it was the familiar sequence. Thran had trained in both classical and contemporary ballet traditions, so was well familiar with steps and combinations used in both. He was not as familiar with modern traditions, so was interested to see what others brought from those. He was good-natured about not being as proficient in those, putting a more balletic than urban flavor into his steps, but Abebe was a good instructor to show him how to alter a position. There was a little partnering practice, which Thran enjoyed; the dancer he was paired with to do a Latin-infused sequence was shy, but very capable. When Irmo asked if she would loose her long hair out of the traditional bun, and for Thran to unwrap his braid as well, then repeat the sequence, the long locks flailing around them added a wilder, more sensual take on the steps.

“Again, with feeling,” Irmo called, smiling.

Thran quirked an eyebrow at Deela, and offered her his hand. “Let us make love together, then, ma petite.”

Her smile was a little wider as she put her hand in his. “I’ll follow your lead, Mr. Oropherson.”

“Thran, ma petite,” he grinned, drawing her hand up to kiss. “For the next two minutes, we are the closest of lovers.”
And off he swept her in time to a rhumba on the piano. Deela was still shy, but not as much, and it was a good pairing, fun when their hair intertwined and got in their eyes. If it had been Vileria dancing with him, she would have turned that tangling into a torrid affair, stroking the white hair out of Thran’s eyes with a seductive sweep that would have made him melt. The tiny Charisse would have done so sweetly, capturing him with her innocence. Deela did not compare to either of them, but it was a charming moment, all the same. When they came to a halt in the last pose, it was Thran who brushed the hair tenderly out of Deela’s eyes, turning the moment into devotion rather than lust.

“Well done!” Abebe nodded, and waved to the next couple to take their place.

Thran brushed another kiss on Deela’s hand, drawing a dimpled smile from her, then walked with her off to the side. Irmo ventured near, beckoning to Thran.

“May I prevail upon you to do your Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield?” he asked softly, when Thran had moved away from Deela. “Both the traditional way, and your way? I want the dancers to see the difference between emotion and collection.”

“I am well warmed,” Thran nodded. “I had expected to perform it today, so I am happy to do so. I have only to rebraid my hair.”

“Can you do it with your hair loose?” Irmo asked.

Thran considered. “Yes.”

“Then please, I ask you to do so. And please, dance it your way second. So that they are left with the correct impression.”

Thran smothered a smile. Perhaps he’d already made an impression – he’d gotten two pleases out of Irmo. “Of course. Do you have a machine to play the music? I have it on CD and thumb drive.”

“We do. Give me the CD, and I will take care of it.”

Thran got the CD from his bag and handed it to Irmo. “Track four.”

Irmo nodded, and moved away. Thran turned back to watch the other dancers, clapping when they were done.

When all the dancers were through the rhumba, Abebe gestured to Thran. “Mr. Oropherson came prepared for an audition, so he’s offered to perform his piece for us. He’ll do it twice; once in the traditional style, and once in a more personal style. Mr. Oropherson, the floor is yours.”

When Thran walked out with his knives, a murmur went around the room. Thran shook his loose hair over his shoulders, took his stance, and waited for the music.

The first time through, he pushed the rage and the fury, and learned where he needed to twist just a bit more to keep his hair from blinding him. He received enthusiastic applause, to which he bowed with a smile, took another two breaths, and then nodded to the pianist who ran the CD player. This time, the dance would be his.

As the first two powerful, dissonant chords blared, Thran thought about the control and inevitability that Bard had seen in his performance, and focused on that. His loose hair added a bit more wildness to the piece, or perhaps something more primeval. He went with that, making Death ancient, merciless, dispassionate, layered past human understanding. He ended this version in a different way, rising to his full height, knives at his side, sweeping the other dancers with his unblinking gaze. As the last note faded, he tilted his head, as if Death considered which soul He would collect next. It
was a decidedly chilling moment, even for him – his skin flexed in gooseflesh from head to toe.

He broke the pose, offered his bow, and went to put his knives back in their box.

“Oh, gods,” someone whispered, just barely on the edge of Thran’s hearing, then more than casual applause broke out. He looked back at the company with a smile, and offered another bow, his hand to his heart.

“I think the only thing that can follow that is to stand down,” Abebe murmured, turning to Thran and offering his own bow. “That was magnificent. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome. Thank you for the patience to sit through it twice.”

As he took his place back at the barre to cool down, one of the ballerinas he passed leaned towards her neighbor. “I’d watch him do that forever and never get tired of it.”

“Neither would I,” sighed the other.

Thran smothered a smile as he rebraided his hair to stay out of his way as he cooled. In years to come, when he could no longer dance, such comments might ease his loss, or they might not. Today, however, they satisfied him. He had made the impression he wanted.

* * *

The class wound down, and Thran chatted with the other dancers as they made preparations to leave. Abebe spoke to him to offer his appreciation for Thran’s participation, and Lettie also came up to him. She offered him a small business card.

“I’d like to call you tomorrow, if that’d be convenient,” she asked.

“Of course. I have recently moved, but if you have another card, I will write down my number for you.”

She passed him a second card and a pen, and he quickly noted his name and number on it before handing it back to her. “I appreciate it. I hope tomorrow we can discuss a few things without so much Sturm und Drang swirling around us.”

He grinned. “But that is the nature of ballet, yes? Lots of Sturm und Drang.”

“Behind the scenes, I’d prefer a little less where that’s possible,” she admitted, laughing. “Again, I appreciate your patience with us, and the chance to talk further tomorrow.”

“Of course. I look forward to your call. Until tomorrow, then.”

“Until tomorrow.”

Irmo waited for him in the lobby, and fell into step with him as he walked out of the building and into the parking lot. “Great things have begun.”

Thran chuckled. “Perhaps. A great deal remains to be determined and settled. And I have three other companies to consider.”
“None of them are worth your time, Thran, I assure you.”

“Perhaps not. The coming days will tell.”

“Thran.” A hand fell on his arm, urging him to slow. “Believe me. We must do this together. We will change everything.”

“I see the chance of that as well as you, Irmo. I would like to take that chance as much as you. I believe we can take my Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield and make it only the first scene in a new ballet that will be unlike anything seen before. I want to see that happen. But we need more than your vision and my dancing. We need a solid corps, where UltraViolet is only the germ of one. We need a principal ballerina. We need backers, promoters, so much more. You must keep all the other things we need in mind, and you must support them, as you demand them to support your vision. No primos here, yes? Many together. Or this will not work.”

Irmo’s hand tightened on his arm before it slipped away. “You are right, of course. So right that it is infuriating. But that is my burden, not yours. The vision is very clear, and of course it is to create the rest of our ballet about Death on the battlefield and beyond. It is so clear to me. The vision is impatient, however, and hard to control. Thank the gods that you have the practicality that I do not. And you are not afraid to cross me. So... I will try, and you must continue to cross me. And then we will make this ballet.”

Thran nodded. “We will see. We will be in touch, I am sure.”

“Without doubt.” Irmo extended his hand. “It won’t be long.”

“Until later, then,” Thran shook hands. “À la prochaine.”

“A la prochaine.”

Thran drove home, trying not to think about the afternoon’s events. Better he let things settle for now, then consider them later when a little distance and a hard dose of reason would help him sort through the myriad impressions.

He grinned at himself in the rear view mirror. Of course the whole enterprise would be mad, impractical, and unreasonable. But so had been the beginning of his affair with a welder, and how well had that turned out?

* * *

Bard spent the afternoon as he’d spent the morning – on a ladder in the children’s bathroom. In the morning, he’d scraped paint, spackled, and sanded, then begun to prime the prepped walls. In the afternoon, he finished priming, and got the finished coat of gloss white paint on the ceiling. The woodwork needed stripping around the window and door, but at least there was no crown molding or baseboard molding. Tile covered the walls from the floor to halfway up, so the painting would take less time, too. The white wall tile was in decent shape, though the grout was discolored; he’d have to grind that out and replace it. But it would be nice to do something other than painting, so he set to stripping the woodwork with a will. If he could get that done before the children came home, he’d be happy.

He’d finished the window and half of the doorframe by the time the children clattered in. He shouted...
down a greeting, and the thump of feet on the steps heralded the arrival of four bouncing children.

“Welcome home, all!” he greeted, wiping his hands on a rag. “How was school today?”

“A pain,” Sigrid groused, looking up at the ceiling. “That Mr. Saur is a menace. I’ve got another boring government paper to write on the ramifications of some legal case no one’s ever heard of. Dull, dull, dull!”

“I got new French words,” Tilda said. “Legolas, they’re all about food this week.”

“Then they won’t take you long to learn,” Legolas smiled. “You’ve got a good memory, Tilda. Bard, the ceiling is so much brighter now. It’s a big difference.”

“Yeah, now I can see that many more zits,” Bain snarked. “Gee, thanks, Da!”

“You’re welcome,” Bard chuckled.

“Where is Papa?” Legolas asked. “Isn’t he home from his audition yet?”

“No, he’s not,” Bard replied, “but I’m not too surprised. This one was with Irmo, that choreographer who was here last week, and I thought it might run late. Do you all want a snack while we wait for him?”

“Snack!” was the unanimous decision, so Bard made sure the stripper container was closed, and he’d scraped all the softened paint off, before they all headed downstairs. He washed his hands as the children unpacked their lunch bags and sorted through their papers for anything he or Thran had to cover. Tilda had a field trip notice, so Bard found a pen and signed that so that Tilda could put it back in her backpack. Bain and Legolas had the same order slip for a new workbook for their pre-algebra class, so Bard raided the household cash stash for the money they needed, and signed Bain’s slip.

“Is it okay if I sign yours, too, Legs, or do you want to wait for your Papa to do it?”

“I am here,” Thran said, coming into the mudroom. “What do you need?”

“Legs and Bain are getting new math workbooks,” Bard explained. “I’ve given them the money; just sign Legolas’s form, and he’ll be set.”

“Of course,” Thran came into the kitchen to give Legolas a hug. “Hello, synok, children, Bard! Where is the pen?”

Legolas handed it to him as the other children greeted Thran.

“How was your audition?” Bard asked as Thran sorted out the form for Legolas and returned it to him. “Was there any drama about it, as you expected?”

“Of course,” Thran grinned. “So much that I am quite hungry. Do we eat early, or have a snack now?”

“The children wanted snacks, but the chili’s ready, and the cornbread takes only twenty minutes, so we can have supper now if you want.”

“I am very hungry,” Thran confessed. “Supper, please?”

“I’ll marshal the troops.” Bard scanned the children. “Let’s feed the hungry dancer, all.”
Bard mixed the cornbread and put it in the oven while the children set the table, made salad, and prepared fruit. Thran sprinted upstairs to change out of his dance things and into soft leggings, Henley, and sweater, and soon they sat down to supper. As hungry as everyone was, it was no surprise that the only sounds that broke the silence for some minutes were chewing and the clink of flatware against bowls and plates. Thran’s audition must have been strenuous; Bard didn’t have to encourage him to have two big bowls of chili, salad, his favorite raspberries, and a human-sized slice of cornbread with butter.

“I needed every mouthful of that,” Thran sighed, sitting back in his chair. “Thank you, Bard!”

“What’s for dessert?” Legolas asked. “Any cake?”

“Just for you, Legolas, we have cake,” Bard replied. “Chocolate peanut butter chip.”

A chorus of eager hums from more than Legolas met that announcement, so it took no encouragement to get the table cleaned off and the cake plates out. Even Thran was persuaded to have a slice. It had no icing, but that didn’t deter Legolas from having a huge slab, and Bain, Sigrid, and Tilda were no less enthusiastic. When all was said and done, half of the confection was devoured. Bard poured hot water to brew tea in the big teapot while they cleaned up the dishes, then the children settled with their tea and homework around the kitchen table while Thran and Bard retired to the sitting room.

Bard listened as Thran described the initial turmoil surrounding his audition, then the subsequent abeyance. “How long do you think that’ll last?”

Thran shrugged. “Perhaps not long, perhaps longer than I expect. I will be interested to see what the artistic director says to me tomorrow when she calls.”

Bard mulled. “I don’t know, Thran. I’m not trying to tell you what to do. But this whole thing seems dodgy to me.”

Thran nodded. “It is dodgy. Mr. Nori has taken many very hard looks at this from several aspects. The initial signs are not good. The company is underfunded, lacks a home venue, and is very small. The dancers are all well skilled, and some are well able to do solo work. But there are no principal-quality dancers. Even if I join them, it needs other principals, especially a ballerina.”

“Those are the cons,” Bard nodded. “What are the pros?”

“An erratic choreographer with the ability to dream. A very skilled ballet master. An honest, devoted artistic director. And me, if I join them.”

“Do they have any works they can perform?”

“A few chestnuts. They need new works, to be sure. That is one thing I hope you will help me with.”

“Me?” Bard’s eyebrows shot up nearly to his hairline. “I don’t know a thing about ballets.”

“No, but you know how to make a good story. The story of the seer and the king was very good. You came up with the name for my performance piece, Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield. What can you make of that, to make a complete tale?”

Bard’s initial reaction was to say that he couldn’t make anything out of it. But the denial died on his lips as soon as he thought that. Hadn’t he told Sigrid back in the apartment that he’d never been good in history class, because he liked his stories better? And hadn’t he come up with some interesting
twists he hoped to try when he and Thran had their game in the artist’s garret? He owed Thran so much – he could at least try to think of something.

“I’ll... think about it. Can I have a few days? Maybe we can toss a few ideas around about it?”

Thran nodded. “Of course. I will not decide to work with a company for a few more days, if at all. Much needs to be worked out, and I want you to be part of my decision.”

“I want what will make you happy,” Bard shrugged. “Whatever that is, I’ll support it.”

“I want what will make us all happy, lyubov moya.”

“So do I, long term. If the short term offers some things that aren’t that easy, but it’s only for a while, then I’m fine with that, too.”

“We will see what the next week brings, then,” Thran rubbed Bard’s knee slowly and sipped his tea. "For the moment, though, I am free to do as I like tomorrow, so our game can go forward without hindrance.”

The look on Thran’s face was sly, which enticed a similar expression to twitch at Bard’s lips. “It can, can it? Then I have one thing to add to it.”

Thran’s eyes slid to his. “Do you?”

Bard nodded. He let his smile wax a bit more. “Tell the bored, oversexed ballet dancer that he’d better bring cash. The kind of artist he’s going to see doesn’t take credit cards.”

Thran’s eyes widened, and he smothered a delighted snicker. “Oooh. Perhaps the bored, oversexed ballet dancer might not be the top, after all.”

“I give it even odds.”

Thran didn’t have a chance to reply, as Tilda came in with her French words. That suited Bard. Teasing Thran was as incendiary as pouring gasoline on a fire. Between now and tomorrow afternoon, Bard intended to pour just as much gasoline on his husband’s fire as he could. The resulting conflagration would offer the perfect way to consume them both.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

While the angel spends his morning on the phone dealing with the hard realities of business, the saint muses about myths and legends. What can they make of the saint's musings?

“I hate to point this out, cariad,” Bard said, as he and Thran snuggled into bed that night.

“What, lyubov moya?” Thran replied sleepily, snuggling against Bard’s chest.

“You won’t be able to exact revenge for me biting you. I looked when we were in the shower tonight. Not a sign of a mark on your perfect skin.”

Thran’s hum was disappointed. “Suka blyad. I had forgotten, but you are right. No mark.” His sigh was exaggerated mock annoyance. “I will have to think of some other way to have my way with you.”

“What, you haven’t thought about tomorrow?”

“Oh, I have thought quite a lot about tomorrow. This artist who takes only cash... I am intrigued. We shall see if the bored, oversexed dancer can find something to do with his cash.”

Bard grinned. “I hope we will. When does the dancer want the artist to be ready?”

“I suspect that I will be on the phone most of the morning, but I hope to do my barre and yoga before that. So we will have the school drill for the children and breakfast. Then I will go to the ballroom and you will renovate, and we will see what happens after that. Perhaps an early lunch, then we will go adventuring?”

“Sounds good.”

“How much money should the dancer bring?”

“Not much. Tens and twenties. The artist’s counterculture.”

“Counterculture? What is that?”

Bard rubbed Thran’s shoulder slowly as he smiled. “The dancer will find out tomorrow.”

Thran’s growl rumbled through Bard’s chest. “You fight dirty.”

“I learned from one of the best.”

Thran chuckled low in his throat. “And little did I realize what delight I would give us both when I began.”

“So go to sleep. You won’t enjoy tomorrow nearly as much if you’re tired.”

“How am I to sleep, imagining this artist who awaits his dancer?”
“Do you need to take the edge off?”

“No. I want to save all for tomorrow.”

“Then you’ll have to find some other way to fall asleep.”

Thran grumbled. “Then rub my hip, the way you do so deliciously.”

“Here?”

“A little lower. Ah. Yes. There. Slowly. What that does to me…”

“I hope it puts you to sleep.”

“It relaxes me. There must be nerves there that you soothe so well. Mmm. Yes. Like that. So good.”

Bard rubbed slowly. Gradually Thran’s breathing deepened, and his body relaxed against Bard’s. The dancer sighed, stroking Bard’s shoulder and arm in the same slow, gentle strokes that he enjoyed so much. It was only a few minutes before Thran squeezed his shoulder with light fingers.

“Ya lyublyu tebya, zoloto moyo,” Thran breathed softly.

“Garu di.”

Neither of them stayed awake for long after that.

* * *

The morning progressed smoothly. It was good to see how quickly the family had come to a rhythm so that all awoke to calm and quiet, the children had a good breakfast, and Bard and Thran worked well together to make the children’s lunches and have their own porridge. The trip out to the bus stop was brisk, for the temperature had fallen even lower last night, and all of the children were eager to jump around to generate a little heat. Rosie was at the bus stop, so she and Bard talked about their upcoming soup supper on Friday. They decided to make an afternoon of it, making their concoctions in the afternoon together in Bard’s kitchen, which would give the eight children time to play together outside. The sitting room fireplace could offer a warm greeting to everyone when they came inside, and after supper marshmallows and popcorn would make an appearance. Bard would make chicken vegetable soup and carrot ginger soup, and Rosie would make potato bacon cheese soup and mushroom bisque. Various appetizers and desserts would also appear.

“We will never eat so much food on Friday,” Thran murmured as he and Bard returned to the house. “Four kinds of soup?”

“Don’t count on leftovers,” Bard cautioned him as they shed their coats in the mudroom. “I thought Legolas might want to ask Kíllian and Tara to come, and Sigrid might want to ask Finn. Sam and Rosie’s children are closer to Tilda’s age, and the older children would have some their own age to be with. That’d make fifteen people. You haven’t seen how much food this lot will go through. It’ll all be delicious; both Rosie and Sam are good cooks. Sam makes beer on the side, too, so I expect some of that’ll make an appearance. It’ll probably be in Rosie’s potato bacon cheese soup, too. That’s nothing but decadence in a bowl.”
“I will ask Legolas. This will be a big gathering,” Thran said, looking around the kitchen. “I look forward to it. But now, I must go to the barre. I will take my mobile with me so that I will hear it if Lettie Jenkins calls early.”

“I’ll haul myself up to the children’s bathroom. I’m almost through stripping the woodwork. Then I’ll grind out the old wall grout. Better I do that before I paint any of the rest, so the grit flying around doesn’t end up in the new paint.”

“It will be exciting when the paint goes on,” Thran’s eyes widened. “That deep turquoise will turn it into a jewel.”

“I think so, too. Then the floor and the towel bars, and we’ll be in business. Oh, we’ll need to cycle the children through our shower tonight because of the grout. So hide your expensive soap, or certain small folks will be tempted to sample.”

“I will do that,” Thran laughed ruefully. He kissed Bard quickly. “Now. To the barre. I will see you shortly, my saint.”

“Happy yoga, angel. See you soon.”

Thran collected his mobile and a fresh cup of tea, and took himself off to the ballroom. Bard got his own tea and a couple of things from the fridge, and headed upstairs. Before he started work on the bathroom, he headed up to the room on the third floor where later today an artist and a dancer would tempt each other. He opened the window long enough to stash his couple of items from the fridge between the window and the storm window, then closed it. He swept the floor, made sure his old bed had enough linen to make it comfortable, then pulled open the access hatch to the attic.

Against the attic wall by one of the chimneys was the huge mirror in an ornate, gilded frame that had come with the house. Bard had contacted the previous owner when he’d found it in the attic, for the frame alone was substantial, if in need of repair, but Jerry had been too harried by creditors to want to bother with it, and had told Bard to keep it. Bard and Daphne had left it in place, hoping to use it in the main room once they’d renovated it, because Bard had liked the old wood and gesso frame. He and Daphne had never gotten far enough in their renovations to use it, but as elaborate as the frame was, it was fitting that its first appearance in the house would be to reflect an outrageous ballet dancer.

Bard wiped the mirror clean, wrestled it out of the attic, and got it into the room. The mirror looked even more massive propped up against the eight-foot wall, for it was only inches shorter than that. He carted up a couple of chairs from the children’s study, and a couple of sketchbooks and a handful of pencils from the sitting room. He went back into the attic to fetch an old wooden fruit crate that had also been in the house when he’d first bought it. A handful of things went atop the crate, then he shut the access hatch with a smile of anticipation.

Back in the bathroom, he set aside his thoughts of what the afternoon might bring to consider Thran’s request for a story that might become a ballet. What made a good theatrical story? Death was already in the mix for this tale, so as Bard finished stripping the woodwork, he thought about all the treatments that Death had gotten in the films and plays he’d seen, in the books and poems he’d read. Death was always the victor, no matter the valor of the hero, the sweetness of the heroine – oh, that was something this tale needed, a heroine, but back to the inevitability of Death. That always won. Everyone knew it, everyone expected it, every tale embodied it.

Thran would dance the role of Death – that much was certain. His dance with the knives proved that he had the skill, the temperament, and the presence to handle that. He was an exceptional dancer, and he would bring exceptional power to anything he danced. He would be just as inevitable a power as
Death itself.

Unbidden, Thran as the beleaguered seer, compelled to abject submission because of another inevitability, the biology of pheromones, came to mind. The same dancer who danced Death so compellingly had cowered on the floor, pathetically pleading for a king to mount him, to take him like an animal, because that was the only way to save his life. He’d been no less convincing as the seer as he had been as Death.

What bested Death? What could bring Death as low as the seer? Or lower?

He thought about that as he finished stripping the woodwork, and started to grind out old grout. He also thought about what made a good spectacle, because what was the point of a small tale when it was about Death, and its star was Thran? A proper spectacle had lots of action, angst, a hero, a villain, a brave girl whom everyone adored, a love triangle, a little treachery, a seeming doom, and a last minute rescue.

So, again... what bested Death?

That occupied Bard through three and a half walls of grout.

Years ago, there had been some film, play, book... something...

A film. A film with a tag line that had nearly crushed him.

He’d never seen it. In fact, he’d refused even to find out what it was about, merely because of that devastating tag line. Gods, how badly had he wished that he’d never heard it? Daphne had not been dead long, and he’d been barely able to function to keep body and soul together for the children. Just when he’d thought he couldn’t sink any lower, he’d had to leave this house for a grotty apartment to care for the children. Then a three-word tag line from a film he’d never heard of had echoed everywhere until he dreamed about it at night. It had been a condemnation, an accusation, a punishment, a surety that he’d never recover, never get over Daphne’s death, never move past it. It had snuffed all hope, and spirited all expectation of future recovery out of reach.

Three words had done that. Just three words.

Love Never Dies.

He’d never be free of his grief, his despair, his emptiness.

Yet... ten years on, long after he’d given up everything of himself, an angry angel had appeared to give him everything he’d needed and more – salve for his grief, love for the future, happiness for them both that grew every day. Now those three words held nothing but promise, and rather than doom, they had become anticipation, full of the hope he’d longed for.

Love Never Dies.

By the time Bard finished the fourth wall, he knew what would make the core of Thran’s ballet. Death would be the star, but Death would not be the victor. Death would fall to Love.

As Bard vacuumed away all the grout dust, he smiled behind his filter mask. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad storyteller, after all.

Once the dusty remnants of old grout were vacuumed, wiped, and vacuumed again, Bard let the air clear while he contemplated his next step. It would make sense to paint first, so that splatters didn’t stain the new grout. It took only twenty minutes to prime the bare woodwork. He put the ladder in
the corner, poured the bright turquoise paint into the roller pan, and climbed up to start the wall over the door. He worked quickly yet neatly, and had the first wall cut in and filled in short order.

“Oh, my saint, the color is luscious!” Thran exclaimed, coming into the bathroom to look up at the walls. “With the white walls and fixtures, it is just the small jewel box I thought it would be.”

“I like it, too.” Bard looked at the wall with a critical eye, smiling. “It may need a third coat to get the coverage perfect, but it won’t be like painting one of the children’s rooms. The paint has to cover only half as much wall in here.”

“How many coats it takes, it will be worth it.”

“It will. Did you get through your barre and yoga before your mobile rang?”

“For the most part, yes. Lettie does not need to know that I finished my cooling poses while I talked to her.”

“How did your conversation with her go?”

Thran rolled his eyes and gestured with his hands. “Which one? I have spent hours with the phone pressed to my ear. First with her, then Mr. Nori, then her again, and then both of them together. Then her and the dance master. Then all of them together. It was a marathon.”

“It must be good if you talked so long, I’d think?”

Thran rolled his eyes again. “It is not yet clear. This is a mad venture, Bard. Quite mad. It still may not come together.”

“I notice you didn’t mention Irmo.”

“With reason. He has no head for the things we talked about – logistics and practicalities and financing and personnel... the list of things Irmo has no head for is long. We all agree that he has great vision, and we all agree that as difficult as making this come to pass, something amazing will result. But... there is much to do. We do not even have a tale to tell yet.”

“I... might have something about that,” Bard offered tentatively. “It’s just a start, but... eh, maybe it is, maybe it isn’t.”

Thran’s eyes sharpened. “I would like to hear what you have thought of, lyubov moya.”

“What time is it? Are you off the mobile for a bit? If it’s lunchtime, I can tell you over lunch.”

Thran fished his mobile from the pocket of his thick sweater. “Eleven-twenty,” he offered. “Time for an early lunch?”

“I’ll clean out the paint tray, wash the brushes, and we’ll eat.”

“Give me the roller. I will wash it while you do the paint tray.”

Bard handed it over. Thran disappeared downstairs with the roller; Bard soon followed with the empty paint tray and brush. It was funny to come into the mudroom to see Thran in his tights and top, sweater discarded as he scrubbed the roller vigorously in the laundry sink. When he was done, Bard took care of the brush and tray, and they left everything to dry.

“What do you feel like for lunch?” Bard asked, sticking his head in the fridge. “Chicken and salad, of course, leftover chili – not much of that – enough cheese to choke a dairy, and... the tail end of last
week’s meat loaf.”

“Chili or chicken, whatever we have most of,” Thran said, bringing out plates and cups. "Tea?"

“Always good,” Bard agreed. “There’s enough chili for two, but that’s it.”

“Something warm is always my preference.”

“Chili it is.” Bard brought out the container, scraped the contents into a bowl, and stuck it in the microwave.

“So tell me about what you considered for our story.”

Bard described what he thought the ballet should include – spectacle, romance, angst, and so on. Thran listened attentively, nodding along the way.

“All good things,” Thran agreed. “So...?”

Bard got the bowl of chili from the microwave, and nudged it towards Thran to take what he wanted. Of course, Thran didn’t take enough, so Bard plopped one more big spoonful into his bowl before Thran could carry it to the table. At Thran’s look, Bard shrugged.

“I can’t eat all of the rest myself, angel, and it’s not enough to put back in the fridge. And you need the nourishment.”

“How you fuss, my saint,” Thran shook his head, but he left what Bard had added to his bowl and carried it to the table. Bard snared the fruit bowl and carried it with his chili after Thran. “So we need spectacle, a winsome heroine, Death incarnate, other things. And what did you come up with?”

“This needs to include something new. What’s always true about Death? It’s inevitable. But what if it’s not? What if something conquered Death?”

Thran’s eyebrows went up. “I like that.”

“I do, too, and not just because it’s different – because you can pull it off. I’ve seen you become Death. I’ve seen you become a wretched seer forced to the lowest low, too, just as believably. Imagine what the reaction will be when first you make Death invincible, and then you make Him fall?”

Thran’s eyes met Bard’s. They were sober, measuring. “What will make Death fall?”

“Love.”

“Good. A basic, elemental theme,” Thran nodded slowly. “And does Death fall in love, or does it come upon Him as love between others, and in either case how does that kill Him?”

“I haven’t gotten very far on that, but... suppose there’s a war. That’d make a good rousing start to things, a big fight. And when it’s over, Death comes down to collect the souls of the dead. So the big battle first, then a silence, then your dance. At the end, He sees people coming to the battlefield to search for their kin, and He sees a girl looking for her brother or sweetheart or something, and He falls in love with her in an instant. And just as He is about to take the soul of one of the dead soldiers, the girl spots the dead man as the one she’s looked for, but he’s not quite dead, and so Death has to back off. He watches the girl tend to her soldier, not interfering, but He remembers the girl. That’s as far as I’ve gotten.”
“It is a good start!” Thran nodded, eyes bright. “It has much to recommend it. And perhaps I can take it a little farther.”

“Do. What comes next?”

Thran spooned up his chili as he thought. “Ah. We must have the poor soldier recover, so that he and his beloved – for of course they must be deeply in love – can dance a pas de deux that shows how deeply they are in love, how devoted they are. Then there must be a second battle, and the poor soldier does not survive this one, and so Death comes to collect his soul, and the soldier’s beloved is left to wail and mourn. When the soldier is brought to the Underworld, there must be a dance with the corps to show the shadowy land of the dead. Of course, the soldier’s beloved must grieve so piteously for him that she desperately comes to the court of the underworld to sue for his return.”

“That sounds great. Some good dances with everyone, then some solos, and some pairs, all mixed together. Um, please don’t make this like so many operas where it takes forever to say anything and everyone’s sick of it all before the first intermission.”

Thran burst out laughing as he reached for a cluster of grapes from the fruit bowl. “Ah. You are not an aficionado of the opera.”

“Daphne cured me of that. In art school, she bought tickets for us on our student cards to see all four operas of Wagner’s Ring Cycle. Seventeen hours over four days, it was. I never wanted to see another opera again.”

Thran kept laughing. “Oh, lyubov moya, that was a hard introduction to opera. Only the most enthusiastic of opera lovers can endure The Ring of the Nibelung in its entirety in such a concentrated dose.”

Bard gave a pained grin. “It was like drinking from a fire hose – lots of screaming, a dumb story, and way too long. I know, I know, I’m a barbarian who doesn’t appreciate German opera. I learned a long time after that some operas weren’t anything like Wagner, and weren’t half bad. Carmen is good. No screaming, a story that makes sense, and not nearly so long.”

“So we will keep it in mind to make a succinct ballet so that barbarians will enjoy it, too,” Thran grinned. He took another spoonful of chili. “So if our winsome heroine comes to the court of the underworld to sue for her soldier’s soul, what will be Death’s response?”

Bard thought as he ate another two spoons full of chili. “Hmm. If Death is in love with the heroine, then maybe He says she can have her soldier back, but only if.... hmm. Only if what? Only if she stays in the underworld with Death? Wasn’t there a myth about a goddess who had to stay with Hades because she ate pomegranate seeds?”

“Persephone, yes,” Thran nodded.

“So the brave heroine agrees because she would rather see her soldier returned to life than dead in the underworld. Then you could have a dance about how much Death loves the heroine, maybe showers her with gifts and luxuries, but all she has sees is the memory of her soldier, and she doesn’t so much reject Death as just not see Him.”

“Oooh, that is very good!” Thran agreed. “I like that very much! What an interesting pas de deux that would make. So the heroine is in the underworld, Death is in the underworld, but the soldier is in the land of the living. But he loves the heroine as much as she loves him, yes? So he despair and grieves and mourns just as much, and so he comes to the court of the underworld to undo the pact.”
“To which Death says, no deal, because you still live,” Bard added excitedly. “And the soldier says what about when I die? Will you still hold my beloved?”

“And Death says no, He cannot hold her after the soldier’s death, so the soldier –”

“Kills himself,” they both chorused.

“Of course!” Thran said excitedly. “Right in the court, he stabs himself, and there he falls. And so as Death stoops to take his soul, He banishes the heroine from the court, and just as the gates to the underworld close, she –”

“Yes! She picks up the soldier’s knife and stabs herself, and then runs into the underworld just as the gates close.”

“Yes! And then there will be a wonderful pas de trois, as Death tries to lure the soul of the heroine away from the soul of the soldier, but He cannot because –”


Thran nodded. “So it does not. Their souls are bound together too strongly, and resist even the pull of Death. Thus Death falls defeated. Then perhaps the other gods take pity on the two lovers, and turn them into stars in the sky – twin stars that can never be separated, and will always be together.”

Bard nodded, gratified that his germ of an idea had grown into such a tale. “What do you think? It’s certainly theatrical enough.”

“Without doubt. And it will suit Irmo. He will make this into something amazing.”

“Does UltraViolet have dancers who can do the soldier and the heroine?”

“There is one male soloist I think would be up to the challenge. No ballerina, unfortunately. Do you remember Charisse, who so admired your sketch of her? She would be perfect for it. She is so small that it would further reinforce the difference between the mortal heroine and the immortal Death. We have danced together before, and it would be a good pairing. But I do not know the state of her contract, nor whether we could arrange with her company for her to be on loan to UltraViolet for the time it would take to mount this ballet. But we have a story that has merit to it. That is more than we had a moment ago.”

Thran savored his satisfaction a moment longer, then turned an affectionate look on Bard. “Thank you, lyubov moya.”

Bard felt heat in his cheeks. “Glad it helped.”

“So... are you through your lunch now?” Thran asked innocently, but the warmth in his eyes had already begun to turn from affection to something far from innocent.

“Maybe,” Bard plucked a grape from the fruit bowl and munched casually. “I might like a few more of these.”

“I cannot hold the bored, oversexed dancer in check much longer,” Thran warned. “His attention span is very short.”

“I guess I’d better clean up the dishes, then,” Bard wiggled his eyebrows at his husband. He carried his empty bowl and glass to the sink. “I wouldn’t want that attention span to drift too far off.”
“I will see to the dishes,” Thran said, bringing his dishes behind Bard. “You will dress the artist. Call down when the artist is on his way to his garret, then I will dress the dancer, and be up shortly after.”

Bard put a hand over Thran’s buttock and squeezed gently. “I love you when you’re... eager.”

Thran snickered. “Then you must love me very much right now. Go.”

“I hear and obey, my angel.”

Thran eyed him up and down as Bard headed out of the kitchen. “Before long, I hope so.”

Laughing, Bard left his husband in the kitchen and took the stairs up to their bedroom two at a time. He brushed his teeth. He dug through his dresser for the pair of rings he rarely wore anymore, and got one of them in each earlobe without too much pain. Off came his renovation clothes, and on went a pair of battered jeans he wore out in the barn and a flannel shirt so limp, frayed, and faded from repeated washings that it was hard to tell that it had once been plaid. He rolled the sleeves up sketchily past his elbows, and left the top two buttons undone. Heavily scarred leather belt, wallet on a chain in the back pocket, steel-toed boots, a couple of hemp bracelets on his right wrist, an old ratty scarf looped around his neck, a battered ring with a wolf’s head on it on his right hand where his wedding ring should be. A handful of Thran’s hair goop kept his hair back out of his eyes, though how long that would last gave Bard something to lick his lips about.

“Elvis has left the building!” he called down the stairs, and headed upstairs when Thran laughed.

He let himself into the room, pulled the whipped cream and chocolate syrup out of the window, and set them down by his chair. He lit the trio of candles, then the incense, then his cigarette. He sat down, tilted his chair back against the grey plaster wall, and waited.

* * *

“Elvis has left the building!” Bard shouted down the stairs.

Thran laughed, then drained the last of his tea before he headed upstairs. Yes, his saint was gone, replaced with what Thran did not know. But he had his own transformation to make. He brushed his teeth, then ducked into the closet to strip off his clothing. When he was naked, he took the leather pants that had drawn such a long look from Bard, shimmied into them, and pulled the laces tight. They rode so low on his hips that the only reason he’d never been arrested for public nudity was the whiteness of his pubic hair. He bypassed the satin jacket, and perused Bard’s clothes until he found a black tee shirt emblazoned with the sinister logo of some nihilistic band. Heavy motorcycle boots added another couple of inches to his height, and small round dark glasses made him look as if he’d stepped out of the pages of a Japanese manga. He left off most of the junky jewelry that went with the rock star costume, but on consideration, he put the silver dog chain around his neck. It might look very nice around the neck of an artist.

He came out into the bedroom to bend and stretch, letting the leather pants conform to his body. He wanted them to be a supple second skin that left nothing to the imagination. When they were warm, he came out of the bedroom and headed up the stairs.

The bored, oversexed dancer was about to meet a dodgy counterculture artist.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

The game's afoot! In this corner, an oversexed dancer who isn't what he seems; in that corner, an artist with a secret. This will be a dirty fight.

Chapter Notes

A head's up... in this game, our guys get a little sleazy, a little rough, and talk a lot of trash. Be warned. There be neither saints nor angels here.

Yes, I know... I will burn in hell for this. But I'm already there, so...

The door before Thran was battered, unlabeled, and far from inspiring. What else did he expect in this scuzzy part of town? If the rest of the coven hadn’t been so insistent that he’d find the perfect cure for his boredom here, he would have turned on his heel, found Sergei, and coaxed him into... something. At least that would take enough of his edge off that he could look for something more satisfying. But here he was.

He banged on the door.

“It’s open.”

Thran swept through the door, then stuttered to a stop when he saw how small the room was – nothing more than an attic garret. Greying and dinged plaster walls; bare, scuffed pine floor. It was midnight outside, but it was one full of garish neon and glaring streetlights. In here, the glare was mostly blocked behind dusty green cotton draperies. What light came in was further filtered through limp, browning lace curtains, and three guttering candles in mismatched silver candlesticks cast darting shadows on the walls. Two filmy windows, one on the wall facing him, and one on the wall to his left –

Movement drew his eye, but it was his reflection that gazed back at him. In the corner of the room, between the two windows, leaned a huge, fly-spotted mirror in an ornate yet battered gilt frame. In front of the mirror was an empty chair, also battered with frayed upholstery. A narrow bed, more cot than anything else, was lengthwise against the wall to his left. To his right was a fruit crate pulled out of some ancient rubbish heap, and another dilapidated chair –

Oh, my. That chair was occupied. Well occupied.

Where to begin to describe this beauty? Perhaps at the bottom - scuffed, brutal boots, scruffy jeans that were likely filthy, one foot on the fruit crate, the other on the floor, legs tantalizingly wide, chair tilted back against the wall. Equally filthy shirt open at the neck, revealing a chest temptingly covered in dark hair, though a ratty blue scarf looped around the neck obscured more of that than Thran preferred. Mmm, hunky body, well endowed under the ratty jeans. Strong forearms – oh, gods, hemp bracelets and chunky ring and a chained wallet, such delicious, clichéd tokens of the rough boys he
liked to subdue.

Maybe the coven had been right. The body had possibilities. What about the face?

The face was beautiful, with warm brown eyes and a scruffy beard, framed in a cascade of tangled brown hair – and earrings? Oh, gods, how enticing was that? A small ring pierced each earlobe, part forbidden exotic, part biker, complete tease. And did this vision... smoke?

It wasn’t a joint, though it looked like one. The smell was wrong. Some sort of herbal thing, though only gods knew what was in it. Hints of vanilla, perhaps... hard to tell in the swirl of patchouli that hazed the air. The artist wasn’t stoned; in fact, he looked at him with coolly assessing eyes and an amused smile. In his lap was a sketchpad; in his hand, a pencil that darted over the paper.

Not a drawing appeared anywhere in the room.

“Where is the art?” Thran demanded.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what kind of art you want.”

“What kind is there?”

The artist shrugged. “If you want your art in a glass, there’s a bar two doors down. If you want ink under your skin or a ring in your cock, that’s next door. If you want to explore the dichotomy between the gods and humanity with your choice of partners, that’s next door, too, one flight up.”

His voice was soft, Welsh accented, and completely at ease, as if Thran’s staying or going was immaterial.

“What about you? What kind of art do you do?”

The artist held up his pencil.

“Show me something.”

The artist took a drag on his cigarette as he held up his sketchpad. There was a distinctive picture of Thran standing in the doorway, from top of long white hair and black glasses, to bottom of heavy motorcycle boots, and everything in between. So few lines, but him without mistake – those few lines revealed the carriage of the dancer he’d been long ago, as well as his arrogance and impatience. He flicked his gaze to the artist’s face; he got another small, assured smile, but this one was veiled in tendrils of smoke that curled from his mouth and nose.

His boredom vanished with the last caress of the smoke.

“That is very good.”

The artist nodded once in appreciation.

“Show me more.”

“Forty dollars gets you an hour’s worth.”

“That is not much for something that good.”
Another single nod. “I’m not in it for the money.”

“What are you in it for?”

A little wider smile. “One thing or another.”

Thran dug into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out a handful of bills. He peeled off a pair of twenties, folded the rest back into his pocket, and held the twenties out between his index and middle fingers. The artist put his chair back on the floor, leaned forward to take the bills, and stuffed them in the front pocket of his jeans. He moved with deliberation, no wasted effort, but the hint of lean ribs and abs made Thran’s loins tighten in anticipation. Yes, this was a morsel worth pursuing. It would be a slow pursuit, but all the sweeter once he teased this artist out of his blasé calm.

The artist pointed to the chair. “Have a seat. Or not. Up to you. If you like to look at yourself, there’s the mirror.”

Thran angled the chair towards the artist, who took a last drag on his cigarette, and stubbed the butt out on the fruit crate. Thran preened a little at his reflection, shaking his hair over his shoulders, then turned around to perch on the chair, legs wide, hands leaning on the seat of the chair in front of his crotch. He didn’t need to look back at himself in the mirror to know when he’d arched his back just the amount, because the artist’s lips curved the merest hair and smoke curled around him again.

“Do you want a lot of quick sketches, or fewer detailed ones?”

“You showed me a quick one. Show me a detailed one.”

“Full on, or just torso?”

“Full on.”

The artist nodded, unperturbed and unmoved at Thran’s brusque reply. His eyes were already on his sketchpad, glancing up at Thran in a dispassionate way as he worked. It wasn’t Thran’s habit to remain still or silent for long, but he made a game of it, imagining the artist undressing him with each glance, then caressing him, then trembling under the touches Thran gave in return. It was an arousing way to spend the five minutes it took the artist to finish his sketch. He turned around his sketchpad to show the image to Thran.

More lines revealed more details, all of them dead accurate – his lean body, his unnaturally pale skin, the faint sheen of his leather pants, the gleam of the silver dog chain around his neck. There was enough predatory sexual tension in the picture to make Thran’s loins clench again, but the artist was unmoved.

“That is very good, too. You are very good. Too good to work next to a brothel and a tat parlor.”

Another smile. “As I said, I’m not in it for the money. Though that’s not bad.”

“Oh?”

“I get a lot of traffic. They start at the bar and work their way down. The tat parlor cuts me a commission if I do an ink design for someone. The meat palace cuts me another if I refer them. The clock’s ticking, friend. Take another pose.”

“What kind of pose?”

“Up to you. You pose, I draw.”
“Do I have to stay in the chair?”

The artist shook his head. “Chair, floor, against the wall, on the bed... whatever you want. I’ll slide the bed over if you want it in front of the mirror.”

Thran sat backwards in the chair and looked over his shoulder at the artist. “Tell me about the people who come here.”

“A fair number of them do, once they loosen up.”

What a tease, to utter such a line with a complete lack of heat, only factual amusement as he drew his pencil over the paper! Thran’s tongue traced along the bottom of his top lip. “If they have the balls to come here, I would think they would be loose enough.”

“Some,” the artist nodded, looking at his sketchbook. “Repeat traffic know what they want to see. Kids, though... some have to... screw up their courage.”

“Screw up their courage?”

“They make a night of it. Out to do something that’d shock their parents. Get a drink at the bar on a fake ID, get a tat, then they come here to see how far they’ll go. Maybe just pose, maybe flash a little skin. Other things.”

“Such as?”

An amused smile. “Girls make out with each other, maybe show their tits, maybe play with each other. Boys make out, flash a little cock, maybe a few hand jobs, maybe a little oral.” He looked up at Thran. “Does that tell you what you want to know?”

“What do I want to know?”

“What kind of art you want.”

“Tell me how many work up to do more than caresses and hand jobs.”

“More than you’d think.”

“Do they fuck for you?”

“They fuck for themselves.”

“Quite an eyeful.”

The artist bit his lower lip. This time, his smile was sly, not so blasé. “It’s their forty dollars. I don’t judge.”

Thran merely nodded, but inside, a wolf licked his chops. “Ah. You like to watch.”

The artist’s smile widened the slightest bit as he studied his sketchpad. He held up the pad to show the finished piece, another good one. “Next pose.”

“Suggest one.”

“Look at yourself in the mirror. Put your hand on the frame. Yes, like that. Um, maybe like you’re pushing against the frame. Good. Hold that.”
This one took longer, so when the artist indicated that he was done, Thran came to look at it. It was a complex piece for as fast as it had been sketched, showing both Thran and the room around him, as well as his mirror image and the reflected room. It was a moody piece, and unclear at first glance which was the reflection.

“I like this one very much. Very much, indeed.”

“Next pose.”

“Suggest another one.”

The artist’s gaze flickered, furtive as it scanned him up and down. “Do you strip?”

“If you mean take my clothes off, yes. If you mean perform, only for my lovers.”

“Lucky lovers.”

“No luckier than yours.”

Did that smile last a second longer? “Do you want artistic? Character study? You’d make a good Vargas boy.”

“The last one.”

He bit his lip again, and shifted a bit on his chair. Thran was as focused on those faint movements as any hawk intent on prey. “Ditch the shirt and the glasses.”

Thran pulled his tee shirt off, tilted his head as he took off his black glasses, and stared down at the artist without embarrassment.

“Put the glasses on the stool. Then put the shirt around the back of your neck, like a towel. Pull your hair over one shoulder. Good. Put most of your weight on one foot, and bend your other leg a little. Then look at me.”


Thran shook out his hair, slid one hip forward, and looked at the artist as if he was the boy for him. The artist grinned a little wider.

“Nice eye fuck. Keep it.”

The artist drew with assurance, his eyes lingering a bit longer as he sketched. “Okay. Now do arrogance, insolence, I don’t give a shit.”

Thran laughed, shook out his hair again, and gave the artist what he wanted.

“Perfect. You’re a natural. Try menace.”

The tee shirt came off Thran’s neck to dangle in one hand like a flail, and Thran thought about soccer hooligans, angry drunks, gang face offs.

“Want to try something... racier?”

“Such as?”
“You’re a dancer.”
Thran smiled. “At one time... many lifetimes ago... yes.”

“Flexible.”
Thran nodded again.

“Stand in profile to the mirror. Lean over. Oh, nice, that; chest down on your thighs. Arch your back. More. Yeah, like that. Stick your ass out. Shift your left foot forward a hair and bend your left knee, just a little. Now look at me. Hmm. Put your right hand on your calf, like you’re rubbing it. Put your left hand on the floor, palm up. Curl your fingers in a little. Yeah. That’s good. I can do that. But you could make it hotter if you want.”

“How much hotter?”

“Let the leather slide just a hair off your ass.”
Thran straightened. “I can unlace the front, or I can unlace the back.”

The tip of a tongue traced along a lower lip. “The front’s fine... for now.”

Thran loosened the front lacings of his leather pants, then resumed his forward bend. “Enough?”

“Almost.”
Thran shifted, but made sure his pants didn’t slide down any more. “Fix it.”

The artist hesitated, but got up, took the back of Thran’s pants, and tugged them farther off Thran’s glutes. Did his fingers linger just a second too long against Thran’s skin?

“Perfect. Don’t move.” The artist resumed his chair. “Okay, look at me. Bite your lower lip. Think about what your girlfriend would say if she saw you like this.”

“I don’t do girls.”

“My mistake, and their loss. So think about what your boyfriend would say.”
Thran grinned. “I have a lot of lovers. They all say I’m a bastard.”

“I don’t doubt it. You could have anyone you wanted, looking like this.”

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I see something I want to fuck.”

“Okay. Got it.”

Thran straightened – then froze as the artist held up his hand.

“Hold that. Don’t move anything but your arms. Stretch up, like you just got up.”

“I can always get up when I see something I want.”

The artist’s eyes met his, assessing. “You’re a prick tease, are you? Then have at. Look at me like a prick tease.”

With his prey in sight, that was no challenge. Thran clasped his hands behind his head, flexed abdominals and lats, and didn’t bother to look at what showed through the laces of his pants. The
artist’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and his eyes spent more time caressing Thran’s body than looking at his sketchpad. When his pencil stopped moving, though, his eyes still lingered on Thran. Inside, Thran crowed – he was closing in. He dropped his pose, stooped beside the artist’s chair to look at his sketchpad.

“Delicious,” Thran purred, for the picture was nothing less. The predatory stare, the arrogant, come-hither stance, the forward-thrust hips, the dangling dog chain, and yes, the cock barely contained behind breached leather lacings. Thran laughed at the details the artist had added to his sketch – dark, shadowed eyes, as if smudged with the kohl from a dancer’s theatrical makeup box; and nipple rings, each with a small bead dangling. “You have made me a proper slut.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” the artist countered. “As if I can’t tell.”

“You draw me well that way. How else would you like me to pose? Nude?”

“It-it’s your forty dollars,” the artist replied, trying not to look at the chest just inches from his cheek.

“So it is. Show me what you can do with it.”

The artist silently pointed to the chair in front of the mirror. Thran rose, but only to kick the chair aside. He held his pants up with one hand; with the other, he grasped the end of the bedframe to pull it in front of the mirror. He leaned over, in profile so the artist had a clear view of him as he unzipped his boots. Straightening, he toed them off, then made a spectacle of himself as he slid his pants off. The artist’s pencil danced over the pages, keeping up with Thran as he postured and preened in front of the mirror, in front of the artist. When he draped himself across the cot like an odalisque, he had the artist’s rhythm, knowing when to move to the next pose. When he saw the artist swallow hard, it was time to pounce.

He rose from the bed, and came to regard the sketchbook. He didn’t need to look at the artist to see what he’d kindled inside him.

“These are all very good. So good. How much of my forty dollars do I have left?”

“Um, you’ve still got half.”

“Good. Now I will tell you what pose I want next.”

“Shoot.”

“I want one of you. Draw me a picture of the artist who looks at his models with such eager eyes.”

The artist’s eyes met his. “I draw whoever comes in here, not me.”

“You said my forty dollars bought any pose I wanted. I want a pose of you.”

The artist swallowed hard again. To encourage him, Thran let his hand stray to the artist’s tangled hair, stroking the back of it, just at the nape. A shiver rippled through the artist’s body, but he nodded.

“The customer’s always right,” he tried to joke. “All right. What pose do you want?”

“As you are now, sketching as you sit.”

The pencil flickered over the page, swiftly revealing the artist with his foot up on the stool, the other on the floor, sketchpad on his knee, head bent over the page as he drew. “There you are.”
“It’s good. So good I want another. Sit on the bed, and look at yourself in the mirror. Draw that.”

The artist got up, perched on the end of the bed, looked out at himself, and drew another double image, showing himself sitting on the bed from the back, and his image reflected in the mirror. He was almost done when Thran came behind him, unwinding the scarf from the artist’s neck, then reaching around to unbutton another of his shirt buttons. He yanked the back collar of the shirt hard enough to bare the artist’s shoulders.

“Draw it again. Just what you see in the mirror.”

Thran knelt behind the artist and slid his hands around the artist’s ribs, reaching for more shirt buttons. He nuzzled the crease where the artist’s shoulder met his neck, grinning when the artist gasped.

“Draw what you see. Do it.”

Somehow the artist managed to keep sketching, despite the tickle of Thran’s breath on his neck. Thran savored the musky scent, for the artist was just as grimy as he looked, spiking Thran’s arousal. It was all he could do not to bite, claw, savage. But his prey wasn’t quite hooked yet. It was worth restraining himself to make sure his prey was completely, hopelessly snared. He’d know as soon as the artist’s pencil stopped moving.

When it did, Thran looked over the artist’s shoulder, first at the sketchpad. Oh, yes, the game was his – there was the artist with Thran’s hands on him, white hair drifting over his deliciously hairy chest, his head back as Thran’s touches ensnared him, eyes shut, lips parted in a soundless gasp. A flush of adrenaline raced through Thran’s body from head to toe.

“I thought so,” Thran whispered. “You love to look. That is why you are here. Because you love to look at what happens right in front of you, and again in the mirror. Do they ask you to join them?”

“I don’t fuck my customers,” the artist protested, but it was weak.

“I suppose you tell them you make love to them, then. Girls, or boys? Perhaps both. Perhaps at the same time.”

“I tell the girls I’m gay. I tell the boys I’m straight.”

“Both are a lie, then. Good. I am neither girl nor boy.”

“Gods, no. I can’t – ”

“You pay them to let you watch with your drawings. That is the real reason you are here – so you can watch strangers kiss, fondle, bang off, suck each other off, fuck in front of you. Tell me I lie.”

The artist’s fingers tightened on his pencil, but he didn’t speak.

“I thought so. Very well. I will give you something better to look at. Just look in the mirror.”

He had the artist’s shirt off before the man could gasp, then filled his hand full of tangled hair. He bent over the artist to kiss him hard, full of tongue, greedy and demanding. The artist’s pencil fell on the floor, then his sketchbook tumbled off his lap as Thran swarmed over him, fist tightening in his hair so he couldn’t pull away as Thran bit at his throat, his shoulders, his pectorals – oh, gods, how the body he savaged spasmed when he bit at nipples already hard and erect! Gasping moans only urged him to suckle harder. When the artist fell back on his elbows, Thran straddled him, tightening his knees against hard thighs and hips.
“Do you watch?” he whispered, leaning over the artist until his long white hair brushed against the artist’s chest, face, lips. “Do you like what you see? My hands all over you?”

“Oh, gods, yes, yes,” the artist croaked.

“Tell me. Tell me what you like.”

“Your hair in my face, your hand in my hair, your ass in my lap – ”

“My ass is not all you are about to have in your lap.” Thran ripped through the buttons on the artist’s filthy jeans, clawed them off his hips, and slid off the bed to bury his face in the artist’s crotch. Gods, he was rank – how long since this beauty had bathed? The musky scent spiked Thran higher as he nosed the artist’s cock out. It was already too stiff to envelope in his mouth, but Thran took as much as he could, savoring how it twitched with each lick, each bite. Thran relented only long enough to retrieve pencil and sketchbook.

“Draw everything you see,” he pushed the artist’s tools into his hands. “Do it. Draw everything you see me do to you.”

“Oh, gods, you royal bastard – ”

Thran chuckled deep in his throat as he buried his face in the artist’s crotch again. A second later, the sketchbook fell open across his back as the artist struggled to drag his pencil across the paper, but he was too entranced at how expertly Thran worked his cock for that to last long. When the sketchbook slid to the floor and the artist fell back to his elbows again moaning, Thran kept sucking, but worked the dog chain off his neck. When it was free, he pushed the artist flat on the bed, straddled him, and had the chain around his neck before the artist knew what was happening.

“I hope you can draw from memory,” Thran whispered leaning close to nip at one of the artist’s earrings. “I want a picture of what comes next. Where is the lube?”

“I don’t – it’s not – ”

“You provide your customers every encouragement. Chocolate sauce, whipped cream... I do not need a child’s enticements. Tell me where the lube is, or you will not enjoy the next part so much as you might.”

“Under the pillow.”

Thran lunged for it. When he had it in hand, he jerked the chain around the artist’s neck, pulling him upright. A hand in his hair pulled him to the side of the bed farthest from the mirror, then down on his knees, then face down across the bed. Thran opened the lube one handed, slicked his aching cock, then dragged the artist’s grotty jeans down to his knees. When he muscled behind the artist and leaned over him, his mouth watered.

“Do you like what you see?” he breathed, pulling the artist up by his hair so that he saw their reflection in the mirror. His cock rubbed against the artist’s back, teasing both of them. “Do you feel the anticipation, the urge, to know that I will fuck you like a dog? An animal?”

“Oh, gods, oh, gods, fuck me, I can’t stand it, I want to watch you fuck me, oh, gods – ”

“You are such a pretty thing, on your knees, begging...”

“Fuck me, you bastard, just do it!”
“Bastard?” Thran laughed softly. “If I am a bastard, then what are you? A bitch in heat, begging for a
proper fucking? Let us see if I can give you one.”

Thran slid inside without resistance. The artist was ready for him, open and receptive. It was too hard
to resist a moan of pleasure, so Thran didn’t. He worked himself in as deeply as he could, then eased
out just a little at a time, a little at a time, then slid all the way back in. The artist gasped underneath
him, exciting him into repeating the slow inching out, and the much faster slide in.

“Oh, gods, you’re going to split me in two,” the artist gasped. “Gods, do it. Split me in two. I want
you in as deep as you can fuck me. Deeper.”

“Greedy, greedy,” Thran teased, then pushed in deeper until the artist gasped. “Like this?”

“Gods, yes! Like that.”

“Look in the mirror. Tell me what you see.”

“A pale vampire with his cock up my ass, loving every minute of it.”

“That is not all you see. Tell me about the bitch in heat with the pale vampire’s cock up his ass. Will
you draw yourself this way, serviced on your knees, a chain around your neck?”

“I’ll draw anything you want, you fucker. Anything you want.”

Thran bit at one of the rings that dangled so temptingly from the artist’s earlobe. “What do you want?
Tell me what you want me to do to you, so that you have a picture of it to look at when you are
alone at night.”

“Jerk me off like this, in front of the mirror.”

“Oh, that will be delicious, to fuck you and jerk you off at the same time. Which will haunt you
more? Shall I be the angel and do it slowly, gently, or shall I stay the vampire and rip it out of you
until you scream?”

“I go home to an angel. I come here to tempt the vampire.”

Grinning, Thran pulled the artist against his chest by his hair, then slid his hand around the artist’s
neck. He wound his other hand around the artist’s cock, already as hard as it could get, and squeezed
it until the artist gasped. “Mmm, such a handful, so hard, as muscled as the rest of you. Almost I am
tempted to indulge myself with it. How good it would feel to let it slide inside me, to fill me so
completely. But no, it is too hard to resist the bitch under me, in hand, so tight around my cock so
deeply inside him, who so sweetly begs me to desecrate him. Such a sweet morsel...”

Thran ran his lips softly against the artist’s neck, a sharp contrast to how hard and fast he worked the
artist’s cock. He was no gentler with his thrusting. When the artist groped to grab the arm around his
neck, it wasn’t to push him away, but to drive himself back against Thran, his breath coming harsh
and rough as his climax built.

“Do you watch yourself in the mirror? Good. Savor what it looks like to be driven so hard, taken to
your depths. Do you like what you see?”

“Yes. Yes. Oh, gods, yes!”

Thran pushed the artist’s head forward, so that he stared into the mirror. “Then watch me make you
come, my sweet bitch. Burn it in your thoughts, so that when you lie here alone at night, you come
again just to remember when a vampire consumed you.”

The artist erupted under Thran’s concentrated attack, crying out as if he’d been stabbed. Thran grinned at the metaphor – oh, he’d stabbed the artist, well and good. How tempting it would be to let himself follow the artist in release, but instead, he pulled out as soon as the artist convulsed, wrestled him face up onto the bed, and fell upon him, shoving the artist’s knees apart, diving back into him, sending him into hard spasms of pleasure. A few more strokes, and the artist wailed underneath him, wrapping arms around him, whether in desperation or ecstasy Thran neither knew nor cared. It was that final, clench of orgasm around his cock, that rattling, gasping breath, that finally gave Thran what he craved – complete, total consumption.

Thran savored the sight of the artist’s oblivious face beneath him, the feel of the bucking body straining beneath him, the sound of those soft cries, the smell of the artist’s release smeared across both of their torsos.

Only one sense remained before he let himself release.

He found the artist’s nipple and suckled it, adding the salty taste of the artist’s body to the other sensations he so coveted.

So sweet was his release, bathed in the essences of prey ruined and consumed. So, so sweet.

He lay atop the artist for long minutes, a hunting bird mantling the fruits of his pursuit, until every scrap of sensation had faded. He raised himself up on his elbows, kissed the lips of the artist still consumed beneath him, then sat up on his heels astride the artist’s torso. Yes, a pretty sight, so pretty that Thran couldn’t resist running a hand from throat to navel and below. The spent cock under his hand was unresisting, and he rubbed it slowly up and down, up and down, but only until it stirred. When he felt the artist’s heat rise again, he stopped, and rose from the bed.

“Don’t. Gods, don’t leave.”

Thran looked back at the artist lying on the poor bed. “It is better to leave those I consume wanting more. That is why they all call me a bastard. I do not mind, because they all call me something else when I come back.”

The artist groaned, drawing Thran’s sly smile.

“Did I give you enough to look at?”

“No. Not nearly enough.”

“Ah. You must wait for another visit. My forty dollars are long since spent.”

“Wait. Let me give you something for all you gave me.”

“Keep the forty dollars.”

“No, not that.” The artist sat up, shaking his hair out of his face. “Something else. Please.”

Thran bent for his pants. “You have nothing I want that you have not already given me.”

“Yes, I do.” The artist was at his back, fingers tracing down his spine. “Yes, I do.”

When Thran turned to face him, the artist’s arms went around his hips, tightening and lifting until he hung in the artist’s arms. He carried Thran to the wall that faced the mirror and pressed him against
the gritty plaster. Rough hands dragged his legs up to circle the artist’s waist, opening him. Strong arms lifted him higher, then lowered him onto the artist’s cock.

“Now you look in the mirror,” the artist whispered. “What do you see this time?”

The mirror showed Thran trapped naked between the wall and the artist’s heavier body, his pale arms and legs wound around the artist still clad in filthy jeans and heavy boots. There was no sight of nipples, cocks, balls, fucking. But the rapid flex and bow of the artist’s hips, Thran’s body twitching under the artist’s ministrations, and Thran’s ravaged expression all revealed what the mirror didn’t show.

“Utter bliss,” Thran whispered. “Draw this one for me. So that when I lie alone at night, I come again just to remember when an artist fucked me so completely.”

“I haven’t fucked you completely yet.”

“You will,” Thran kissed the artist’s forehead. “You will, because you want to see me consumed, as I consumed you.”

“Yes, I will. Pinned against the wall, a sexual vampire trapped between heaven and hell.”

“Well pinned I am. Gods, you fill me more than I can resist.”

“Do you want to?”

“No. It is too exquisite a pleasure. Have your way with me.”

The artist didn’t nuzzle Thran’s nipples – he nipped, bit, suckled, kneaded with his tongue until Thran was delirious. The only thing that kept him from throwing his head back and shutting his eyes was the lure of what the mirror revealed in front of him. To watch the artist’s hips thrust over and over and over into him, to twitch when the artist licked first one nipple, then the other, to savor the play of muscles across the artist’s bare back and shoulders as he held Thran suspended... it was impossible to look away. With each thrust in, the pleasure was so extreme that he whimpered.

“That’s what I want to hear,” the artist whispered. “A vampire begging for one more thrust, one more stroke. The sound I can’t resist.”

Thran gasped. Gods, he was so close, so close... “Oh, gods... I will – you have me, you bastard, oh gods –”

“Then come. Come for me.”

“I will, when you fuck me like you mean it.”

A growl, three more hard thrusts that shook Thran to his core, and then everything erupted into uncontrolled pleasure. His moan rose into a shriek, and he had all he could do to cling to the artist who consumed him. But strong arms held him until he was limp and spent, then carried him swiftly to the bed. He was laid down, then the artist pressed atop him to stroke himself to release – four strokes more were all he needed. In contrast to Thran’s orgasm, the artist’s was quieter, but no less consuming.

“Now we’ve both had something to look at,” the artist breathed into his ear, easing off to lie beside him on the narrow bed.

Thran savored the last of his release, stretched, and turned to wrap himself around the artist, kissing
him slowly and thoroughly. He sat up, stroked the artist’s hair, his fingers trailing down the artists’
shoulder, his arm, his hand, his fingers.

“So we have.” Thran stood up, pulled on his pants, his shirt, his boots. As he put on his black
glasses, he looked back at the artist, still lying on the bed, gazing at him with such hunger on his face
that Thran smiled. Yes, he’d be back to this one, and before much more time passed. He collected
the artist’s sketchbook lying abandoned on the floor. “You will fill more pages another time, I think.”

“I will. I want to. So I hope you come... again.”

Thran laughed softly. “Until then.”

He took himself outside the unmarked door, smiling. It would be a day or two before his boredom
returned. When it did, he knew where to come... again.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint take a breather to recover from their game, and the cherubs come to a decision.

Bard lay exhausted and aching on his old bed for long minutes after Thran’s vampire had let himself out of the room. Gods, what that bastard had done to him, teasing him for over an hour with his seductive posing, his effortless ease at carrying off a persona, his willingness to improvise to keep their game going, and then to thoroughly possess him... On the other hand, how much fun had it been to egg his husband on with a lot of trash talk from a far-from-savory voyeur artist? Thran had a taste for the raw and gritty that was so easy to feed, and the result was enough to make Bard’s cock stir even after he’d been so roundly fucked.

Gods, to watch Thran in the mirror, hacking away at him without mercy... to imagine what Thran’s reflection had looked like only minutes later, pinned to the wall while Bard returned the favor...

His cock stirred again. But the rest of him was sore, drained, and more than content to merely savor what had gotten him into such a state.

If they weren’t careful, he and Thran would drive each other into exhaustion and oblivion.

He grinned. There were no better ways to go.

Bard revived enough to sit up. His shirt was in a heap on the floor, so he snared it, wiped the mixed essences off his chest and abdomen, and pulled up his jeans. He straightened the linens on the bed and pushed it back against the wall, opened the window to clear out the scent of incense, herbal cigarettes, and candles, and got the mirror and crate back in the attic. It took a couple of trips to haul all the stuff downstairs that he’d used to set his stage, but finally he came back downstairs for the last time. He ventured into the bedroom to find Thran naked and stretched out flat on the bed, his arms over his head and his eyes shut. He lay on one of the bath towels, mute testimony to how trashed he was. Another was laid out beside him, ready for Bard. Smiling, Bard pulled the forty dollars out of his jeans pocket and put it on Thran’s dresser. Then he ducked into the closet to strip off his boots and jeans, returned to sat gingerly beside Thran, and lay back.

“You’re a vampire and a hooligan, but you’re a considerate one.”

Thran’s lips curved up, but his eyes stayed shut. “Oh, lyubov moy, such delicious prey you were, then such a ravisher. If I think long about how much I loved to watch you fuck me so hard in your mirror, I will come again.”

Bard enjoyed a pleased smile as they lay there together for some seconds.

“I have never paid for sex before.”

Bard’s laughter was quiet. “You still haven’t. You paid for art. Actually, you didn’t do that, either. Your forty dollars are on your dresser.”

“Then I suppose I must give your sketchbook back. I do not want to.”
“A present from me to you.”
“An incomplete one.”
“How so?”
“It has so many blank pages. Promise me you will fill them all.”
“I will.”
“Then I accept. When you are done, such a pillow book we will have.”

Bard’s exhale was both anticipatory and marshaling. “Gods, cariad. We don’t need any more incentive to have at each other.”
“There is no such thing as too much incentive.”
Bard considered. “No, there isn’t. But I have to admit... right now, I’m sore.”
Thran’s smile widened into a grin. “So am I. But I regret nothing.”
“Shower.”
“Mmm. Yes.”

Bard sat up, offered his husband a hand, and pulled him up beside him. Thran’s arm went around Bard’s shoulders, and he leaned close to kiss the point where jaw met neck, then Bard’s lips. Bard kissed back slowly, then got both of them to their feet and into the bathroom.

“What time is it?” Thran asked, winding his hair into a tail and pinning it to the top of his head. “Do we have time to soak in the tub before the children come home?”

Bard checked the clock radio in the bedroom, returning to turn on the tub taps, then got into the shower cabinet with Thran to savor hot water. “Two-forty-seven. Time enough for a short soak.”

“Mmm,” Thran shut his eyes as hot water hit his chest. “Then I will wash quickly and soak, even if only for a short time. You, however, need a thorough scrub. How did you get so rank?”

With a laugh, Bard let the hot water soak into him. “I thought you liked the way I smelled.”
“Gods, I do. Such a turn on! But I have no intention to let anyone else know how much I enjoy your scent on me. Pheromones, indeed. Even when you are rank.”
“I spent the morning renovating, remember? Much more honest work than what a certain dodgy artist did.”

“He was dodgy. Delectably so. But his sketches take my breath away. Such a spare style, but so much life do you put in every line, every curve, every shadow. When you talk to Shire Hills, I hope you show some to them – no, of course not our personal ones, my saint. Other ones, such as of the fencing, or my barre work. I would not be surprised if you could not make a name for yourself with them as well as your metal. You are a double threat.”
“I’m glad you like them. It took me a long time to get to a style I liked. One of my art school classmates was a woman from China. Her work was mostly abstract, a lot of mixed media. She put this little line of squiggles in the corner of one of her pieces that intrigued me. When I asked her about it, she rolled her eyes like Sigrid does so well, and said it was, and I quote, ‘a bourgeois
example of Chinese calligraphy.’ So I looked it up. It turns out that there are lots of kinds of Chinese calligraphy. There was a cursive form popular around 100 BCE that was very loose, very expressive, very mobile, that I liked. It was all about being in the movement, in the moment. So I started to try to catch the movement in the moment each time I sketched.”

“You do that so well. Even when you act the dodgy artist, that comes through.” Thran grinned evilly. “Even your porn is beautiful.”

“Erotica,” Bard protested, laughing. “It’s called erotica when it’s drawn nicely.”

Thran snorted. “I do not care what you call a drawing of how you fuck me against the wall of the garret, as long as you draw it. That one is mine.”

Bard grinned. “You might have to model for it again to make sure I get your expression right.”

Thran snickered. “Such a hard task that will be. I am done. Into the tub I go.”

“Be there in a minute.”

Once Thran was out, Bard scrubbed his hair, and then joined Thran in the steaming tub. “Oh, gods, this feels good!”

“Then come, lie back in the arms of a vampire,” Thran beckoned, settling Bard between his legs, against his chest.

“Gods, what a vampire you made, too,” Bard sighed. “That tee shirt never looked so menacing.”

“And you, lyubov moya!” Thran’s long fingers gently touched one of the earrings in Bard’s ear. “I love these. Will you keep them?”

“Depends. If they help me seduce a certain elegant ballet dancer into a dalliance with a welder, hell, yes.”

“Even without the earrings, you are so much more than mere welder, husband. But I do like them.”

“I need a haircut to pull them off. Otherwise, I look like a straggly biker.”

“You look like no such thing. But I plan to visit my stylist soon. Come with me, and she will do her magic for us both.”

“Maybe I will.” Bard allowed himself a sly smile. “If I get a haircut, what about some rings for you?”

Thran snorted. “Through my nipples, with little beads? The very thought makes me cringe. Such things must confine themselves to your drawings. They will not get near my body.”

“Good,” Bard admitted, dropping his teasing. “I don’t want anything on you that gets in the way of my tongue.”

Thran’s head went back to rest against the lip of the tub. “Stop. I am too sore to properly respond to such provocation.” He looked over at the mirror, smiling at their reflection, and rubbed Bard’s shoulders with both hands. “Even so, I still regret nothing. Our games have been the most fun.”

“They have. We don’t many rooms left. Main room, dining room, solarium. Does the mudroom count?”

Thran’s chest shook with laughter. “Do you suggest that we follow our gritty adventure in the garret
“Maybe we can skip that one,” Bard smirked. “It’ll be a while before we can christen the main room; it’s full of detritus. The solarium needs work to make it the harem paradise we want. Dining room... hmm. There’s a dull room.”

“It is far from dull in the afternoon, when the sun is most beautiful there. We will have a picnic and make dessert of each other on a beautiful Oushak rug in the sun.”

“We don’t have an Oushak rug.”

“We will, one day. Or perhaps an Aubusson, in pale sage greens to match the paint you plan for that room.”

“On the list it goes.”

“I want to add a room to our list.”

“Please, not the cellar. It’s too grim down there for sex, even with an angel.”

“No, not the cellar. Outside. I have made love outside only once. Have you?”

“Only once. It wasn’t much. Too many mosquitos.”

Thran laughed. “We must do it in the spring when it is just warm enough, but before the vicious creatures erupt from their noxious pools. We will sneak out to the gazebo and make love like furtive creatures of the night.”

“Oh, like teenagers.”

“We are too experienced to grope each other like teenagers. You will lean against the railing, and I will come behind to rock you to ecstasy. That will be a good way to celebrate a soft spring night.”

“Gods, angel. An hour ago you were a predator who ate me for lunch. Now you want to have romantic picnics and teenaged sex in the gazebo.”

Thran’s grin was unapologetic. “Yet another way I am versatile.”

“How did I get so lucky?” Bard sighed, rubbing Thran’s thigh. “I’m ready to get out. I need to get some more paint on the children’s bathroom walls.”

“You fuss that I work so hard, but you are no better,” Thran protested, wrapping his arms around Bard’s shoulders when he went to get up. “Stay warm with me a while longer.”

“The longer it takes me to get the children’s bathroom painted, the longer they’ll shower in here,” Bard reminded Thran. “Remember to hide your good soap when you get out of the tub.”

Thran released Bard’s shoulders. “Chert, you are right. All right, I will get out, too. I will help with the paint.”

“What about all the calls you made this morning? Won’t UltraViolet Ballet want to talk with you more this afternoon?”

Thran’s smile was sly as he took the towel Bard handed him and began to dry off. “Likely they will, but our game was too important to be interrupted. I told them I had another engagement this afternoon, and would not be available to take their calls under any circumstances. So I am yours until...”
tomorrow, when I expect even more calls to ensue.”

Bard tensed, and he paused in his drying. “We could have put it off, angel. I didn’t want to jeopardize your dancing –”

“Stop.” Thran wrapped his towel around Bard’s shoulders and drew him close. “How long will it take before you realize how much I love you, and that no telephone call will ever tempt me away from our time together?”

Bard’s old insecurities skittered through in his thoughts, but he gritted his teeth and swallowed them down. “It’s... sometimes hard to believe that we have so much together, that’s all.”

“You turn to deal with the telephone calls is not long off, my saint. Once our house is only a little further along, your art will take precedence, and you will be at work again. When that happens, you will remember the dancer who loves you, as I remember the artist who loves me, and you will treasure our time together as much as I do.”

“I already do,” Bard offered Thran a chagrined smile. “I don’t think that will ever be a problem. But if it is, then you remind me of this conversation.”

“So I will,” Thran nodded. “So, to the paint - no. First, move the expensive soap!”

Laughing, Bard finished drying off and went into the closet to pull on painting clothes. He padded into the children’s bathroom to move their collection of soaps and shampooos into their fathers’ shower cabinet, while Thran stashed his in the linen closet. Then he and Thran set to painting the next wall of the children’s bathroom. They needed two ladders for this part, but they made good progress, finishing two walls before the children came home from school. Sigrid and Legolas were put in charge of setting out the day’s snacks so that Bard and Thran could put the first coat of paint on the fourth wall, then it was time to sort through the children’s backpacks and assess the night’s homework. Bard asked about Sigrid’s track meet tomorrow, but it was at another school, and the team planned to go out for pizza afterwards, so Sigrid needed only a ride home from school once the team returned. She’d call Bard once the team left the restaurant.

“Don’t forget our box of photographs, Da,” Bain reminded Bard as they met in the kitchen to start supper. “So we can look at them and decide what we want to say tomorrow.”

“I’ll find it right now,” Bard agreed. “I think it’s in one of the boxes left in the main room.”

“Let’s go see!” Tilda beckoned, and she and her siblings hastened out of the kitchen and into the main room. Each one looked in one of the cartons still stacked against the walls.

“I’ve got it,” Sigrid called, unearthing a battered, somewhat squashed box from her carton. It suddenly bent in the middle, and would have spilled its contents if Bain hadn’t dived forward to catch the edge.

“I’ve got this side, Sig. Let’s take it into the kitchen.”

As Bain had most of the box cradled in his arms, Sigrid let her side go, and followed Bain into the kitchen with Tilda and Bard. The boy plunked the box onto the table where Legolas still sorted through his books and papers.

“We need a new box, that’s clear,” Sigrid observed, as a few photographs slid out of the broken box onto the table.

“Look at this one,” Bain exclaimed, picking up the top one. “Remember this, Sig? When we built
that lopsided snowman in the front yard?”

Sigrid slid close to her brother to peer at the old picture. “That was probably the world’s most lopsided snowman ever built anywhere,” she agreed, giggling.

“I want to see!” Tilda exclaimed, crowding between her siblings. “I remember this picture!”

“You were only two,” Bain scoffed. “How could you remember?”

“It’s not that long ago,” Tilda refuted.

As far as Bard was concerned, it was a lifetime ago. That picture had been taken after Daphne’s death, just weeks before he’d had to move the children out of the house and into the city so that he’d be closer to more construction jobs. He held silence, for he’d kept his devastation from his children about that for ten years, and now that they were back in this house, there was no point in mentioning it. But Thran suspected something of what he felt, because his husband’s sympathetic hand came to rest on his back.

“Look at this one,” Sigrid commented, holding up another picture. “This was when Mam and Da brought you home from hospital when you were born, Tilda.”

“Here’s one of Mam and Da and me,” Tilda held up a third. “When I started to walk.”

“Or how about this one?” Bain hooted, holding up one from Bard’s college days. It had been taken at an outdoor concert, and Bard sat cross legged on the grass with Daphne sprawled in his lap, laughing. “Where did Mam get those goofy shoes?”

“They were all the rage that year,” Bard said mildly, taking that one from Bain to look at it. Thran bent close to look at it – of course, Thran had never seen a picture of Daphne. He handed it to Thran, all too aware that Legolas had sidled to his father’s side, wanting to see the picture, too.

“Your Mam was very pretty,” Legolas said softly, tentatively, as if he weren’t sure what response he’d get. Bard was surprised that the boy had commented at all.

“She was,” Bain said without concern. “Sig looks a lot like her. She’s just about as stubborn, too.”

“Do you have a picture of your Mam, Legolas?” Tilda asked. “Do you look like her?”

Oh, gods, Legolas had still, and Bard didn’t know if he’d say anything at all. The other children still, too, when they realized how silent Legolas was. The youth looked up at Thran.

“Eto budet bespokoit’ tebya, yesli by ya pokazal im nashi fotografii, Papa?” Legolas said softly, with a swallow at the end.

“Konechno, net, synok,” Thran replied softly. “Eto tebe reshat’.”

Legolas hesitated, but then eased away to disappear towards the center hall.

Tilda looked up at Thran, a troubled look on her face. “Did I say something wrong about Legolas’s Mam, Ada?”

“You said nothing wrong, Tilda,” Thran said quietly. “Legolas asked if I minded if he brought our album of photographs downstairs so that he could show you a picture of his mother. He has missed her very much. I told him that of course I would not mind, if he would like to show you one, if that would not make him too sad.”
“What happened?” Tilda asked, frowning. “Did something bad happen, like to our Mam?”

Legolas returned with a large, ornate album in his arms in time to hear Tilda’s question. He stilled again beside his father, his arms tightened around the album, and he looked up at Thran with a lost expression.

“Tilda.” Bard put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Maybe Legolas isn’t ready to talk about it. Some things take a long time to settle, and it’s courtesy not to pry where we shouldn’t, or to put him on the spot like this.”

“Oh,” Tilda said, her face clearing. “I’m sorry, Legolas, if anything bad happened to your Mam, and for asking about it.”

“I’m sorry, too, Legs,” Sigrid was quick to murmur.

Bain didn’t speak, but he swallowed, and gave Legolas a grimace. Maybe Legolas had revealed some part of the story to him, maybe during one of the many rounds of zombie apocalypse.

“Thank you... Tilda, Sigrid,” Legolas ventured, his voice little above a whisper. He stared at the floor. “My mother... died at the train station. There was... a bomb. I was with her.”

“Oh, ye gods,” Sigrid breathed, her eyes wide. “I am so sorry, Legolas.”

“I am, too, Legolas,” Tilda said, her expression stricken. “I’m sorry I made you think about it. I’m sorry.”

“Were you hurt, too?” Sigrid asked.

Legolas shook his head, but it was not a very sure expression. “Physically... not very much. But I just... I got lost for a while.”

Sigrid and Tilda both looked like they were about to cry, and Bain looked almost as miserable. “You don’t have to talk about it,” Sigrid said. “It’s okay if you don’t, and okay if you don’t want to show us a picture, either, or put one up. I felt like that for a long time after Mam died. We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want. Whatever makes you feel better.”

“That’s... kind of you,” Legolas held the album tightly against his chest. “It is. All of you have been kind, right from the start. At first, I thought you were just being polite, or... something. But you’ve never acted like the kids at my boarding school... and then we fought the druggie gang together... we play zombie apocalypse, and you asked me to read, or about French... you don’t make fun of me if I do something better or worse than you... you fixed up my room... everyone makes so much good food together, and Papa is so happy. Maman would like all of these things, and she’d like that I’m happy. So... I liked the picture of your Mam laughing. It reminded me of one I have of my Maman laughing, too. I’d like to show it to you, if you’d like to see it.”

“I do, Legolas,” Tilda piped up, but she bit her lip when Bard touched her arm. “But only if you want to show us.”

Legolas put down the album, and everyone gathered around the kitchen table as he opened it. The first pages showed pictures of Thran as a child, and Legolas would have passed over them quickly if the other children hadn’t oohed and aahed over the landmarks of St. Petersburg, including the Vaganova Dance Academy. Legolas eased a bit as he named the various sights, and even smiled when the children giggled over the pictures of his father as a dark-haired youth. Thran’s hair had begun to whiten when he had been perhaps twelve, so even as a young teenager he was instantly identifiable. When the first picture of Vileria appeared, Tilda and Sigrid quickly pointed to it.
“Oh, this must be your Maman,” Sigrid guessed. “She is so beautiful. And you do look like her, Legolas. Look how long her hair is!”

“We had a competition to see who could grow the longest hair, she and I,” Thran smiled, looking down at the picture. “She won, of course. But I did not mind. She had very beautiful hair, nearly black, and very dark eyes. Once my hair turned mostly white, when we went out together, she dressed all in black, and I all in white.”

“I’ll bet you stopped traffic,” Sigrid grinned. “Oh, gods, you did! Look at this!”

She pointed to a photograph on the next page that showed a young Thran and Vileria at some official event, both smiling broadly. Her dress looked vaguely as if it were a modern take on the American Roaring Twenties in heavily beaded black satin; his tuxedo was white, from the same period, complete with top hat.

“A costume party,” Thran explained. “Fifteen years ago, just before we learned that Legolas would join us.”

“Wow,” Bain nodded, looking over Sigrid’s shoulder. “Your Mam really was beautiful, Legs.”

“She was very beautiful,” Thran agreed, rubbing his son’s shoulder. “I would like to see another picture of your Mam, Bain. Perhaps you can show us another one?”

Bain rummaged through the pictures in the box. “They’re all mixed up, I’m afraid. But I’ll find one.”

“We should put them in a book like Ada and Legolas have,” Sigrid suggested. “It’d be a good way to keep them nice, rather than being jammed in this rag of a box.”

“Easier to look at, too,” Bard agreed, writing on the chalkboard. “Photo album. It’s on the list.”

“That one,” Sigrid said to Bain, pointing to the one he held. “That’s the one I like of Mam.”

Bain held up a picture of Daphne in an old blue tee shirt at the easel, her brow furrowed in concentration as she worked on her canvas. She held her paintbrush in midair like a conductor’s baton, momentarily at rest while she considered her design.

“Where’s the one that goes with it?” Bain asked.

Sigrid rooted through the box, quickly holding up another photograph. It had been taken a moment after the first one, when Daphne had realized that Bard had taken the first picture and had looked over at him with a fond, private smile. That picture had captured her best – beautiful, immersed in her art, loving, so aware and alive. Despite how happy he was now, seeing that particular picture again after so long sent loss stabbing through Bard anew, knotting his throat as the pale shadow of those first days after her death returned. They’d been full of numb despair as he’d struggled to cope with three small, frightened children when all he’d wanted to do was crawl into the grave after his wife. It must have showed on his face, because Thran rubbed his back again. Swallowing, Bard took a deep breath. Gods, how long would that picture of Daphne continue to make him ache? And what would Thran think of him mourning his dead wife?

“This is the one of Maman laughing,” Legolas said, looking from Bard down at the page in his album. He turned the book around and tilted it up so everyone could see his mother in a loose ruby red sweater, with her hands clasped under her chin, gleefully laughing. No drawing Bard could make would ever embody all of the life and spirit of that photograph.

Sigrid took the picture of her mother from Bain, put it beside Vileria’s. Though the two photographs
revealed far different expressions, both revealed a similar strength of spirit.

“They were both beautiful,” Sigrid said softly.

A murmur, whether agreement, acknowledgement, or acceptance, went around the table. Legolas looked at his father.

“I don’t have to wait until tomorrow, if you all don’t want to,” Legolas said, swallowing. “If the three of you want to put up a picture of your Mam, then I would like to put this one up of my Maman, too.”

Tilda, Bain, and Sigrid exchanged looks. Tilda was first to nod, then Bain, then Sigrid.

“We’d like to, too, Legolas. But only if you want to.”

“I do.” Legolas swallowed again, but he looked at his father, who smiled encouragement. “Yes. I do want to.”

“Sweet,” Bain ventured a smile. “Where are we going to put them?”

“We thought you’d like to choose the place,” Bard replied. “You could put them in the children’s study, which I’d bet your Mams would like. Or in here, by the table, because we’re here so much of the time –” that brought a laugh, even from Legolas, “– or in the main room, or maybe you all have another idea.”

“We don’t go in the main room,” Sigrid said. “At least not yet. We’d never see the pictures if we put them in there.”

The other children agreed. “Mam would like the solarium,” Bain offered. “Did your Mam like plants, Legolas?”

“I don’t know,” Legolas looked at Thran. “She loved flowers... but I don’t know about plants. She didn’t dislike them, I don’t think.”

“Wait – the sun might fade the pictures in the solarium,” Bain amended.

“Would it?” Tilda asked, frowning.

“Yeah, remember what happens to newspaper when it stays outside too long?” Bain reminded Tilda. “It turns all yellow and brittle.”

“I like the children’s study,” Sigrid said. “There’s that wall beside the door that has room for the pictures, and it doesn’t get the morning sun too long. Or if we got a long, thin table to put by the balustrade on the bedroom landing, we could put them there.”

“I like our study, too,” Legolas offered. “I think Maman would like to see us there together. And there’s room for a shelf.”

“A shelf?” Sigrid looked blank. “Oh, you mean to put the pictures on the shelf, not the wall?”

“I thought... because Maman loved flowers, if there were a shelf, there would be room for a vase of flowers near the pictures.”

“I like that!” Tilda brightened, and Sigrid nodded vigorously. “I don’t remember if Mam liked flowers, but I do. It would be nice to have them to look at with the pictures.”
“It sounds like we have a plan,” Bard said. “Sig, Bain, Til, why don’t we put our pictures in the sitting room, so we can look through them in the next few days? We’ll pick the ones we want to go with Legolas’s, and get copies made on acid-free paper so they don’t fade. Then we’ll find some frames and a piece of wood, or a small table for the shelf, and then we can put everything on the wall in your study.”

“Will you put your pictures in the sitting room, too, Legolas?” Sigrid asked. “I’d love to see the ones of Saint Petersburg again.”

“Is that all right, Papa?” Legolas looked at Thran.

“Of course. I know you will all take good care of them, yes? To look at them would be nice for me, too.”

“Sig, Bain, Til, please look at Legolas and Thran’s book only when they’re with you, okay? That’s a very special book, so we want to keep it nice.”

“Okay, Da,” the children agreed.

“Let us set aside the pictures for now,” Thran said. “It is time for supper, and then homework.”

That met with a groan, but the children hastened to collect the scattered Bowman photographs back into the tattered box, and then it went into the sitting room with the Oropherson album. The clan reassembled to prepare, devour, and clean up supper, then homework commenced. As the children arranged their books and papers, Thran explained about them having to shower in their fathers’ bathroom for the next two days.

“Sweet!” Bain pumped his fist. “The soaking tub!”

“Just the shower, Bain,” Bard nixed that hope. “There are six of us to cycle through one shower tonight, so the tub’s not part of the plan.”

With a groan, Bain slumped over his stack of books with a morose expression, drawing a smothered chuckle from Thran. “It’s not fair, Da! We’ve been here three weeks, and I haven’t gotten to use it once!”

“You’ll have a turn once the upstairs is finished,” Bard countered. “Remember whom the tub’s for. Thran gets first shot at it when he’s worked his hardest, so that he stays healthy.”

“I’d rather try it in the summer,” Tilda said thoughtfully. “When it’s hot. I’d put a lot of ice cubes in it and get cool.”

That brought a round of laughter.

“Oh, one more thing, before you start,” Bard remembered. “We’re having the Gamgees over for soup and such this Friday. Legolas and Bain, maybe you’d like to ask Tara and Kíllian to come, and Sigrid, maybe you’d like to ask Finn? Rosie’s coming over after lunch so we can start all of the soups, but if we’ve got more people coming, I want to make sure we make enough food. Would you all give your friends a call and let me know by tomorrow if they plan to come?”

“I’ll talk to Finn tonight,” Sigrid assured her father.

“You talk to Finn every night,” Bain smirked, rolling his eyes.

“What, haven’t you gotten up your nerve to call Angelica Crofton yet?” Sigrid shot back calmly, her
eyes on her computer screen. “Why don’t you call her, Bain? Ask her to come over for soup and such?”

Bain reddened. “Nah. I don’t need to talk to Angelica. Geez!”

Thran smothered another chuckle as the children settled to their homework, but he gave free rein to it as he and Bard retreated to the sitting room.

“Our children are so funny, lyubov moya.”

Bard shared his husband’s surreptitious laughter. “You have no idea. Legolas is still staying out of the fray, but before long, he’ll snark just as well as the rest of them.”

“I am proud of my son,” Thran sobered, looking pensive. “It has been hard for him since Vileria’s death. He has not wanted to look at our pictures often before now. So I am glad that changes. I think when the rest of the children asked him so many questions, he began to see beyond his loss.”

“I hope so,” Bard murmured. He opened the battered box of photographs to take out the one of Daphne smiling at him before her canvas. “I hope you understand that no matter how hard this one is for me to look at, it doesn’t change anything about how I feel about you.”

“Of course not,” Thran looped his arm around Bard’s shoulders to pull him close. “The one of Vileria in the red sweater... she gave it to me to remind me of how much she loved me. I loved her, too, just as you loved your Daphne. What we have does not change that, just as that does not change what we have.”

Bard leaned into his husband’s embrace. “This remembrance isn’t just for the children, then. It’s for all of us. I think that would make Daphne and Vileria very happy.”

Thran rubbed Bard’s shoulder. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

When Bard looked at the photograph in his hand, Daphne’s smile seemed to wax a little brighter, as if to agree with Thran. He smiled back, and felt a little of his loss ease.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

The cherubs receive a surprise, and the angel and the saint discuss many things, large and small. It is the pause before new endeavours begin.

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to the Hellboy comics or films. But I do love that troll market!

“I just realized something,” Bard said to Thran as they slumped together on the sitting room sofa. “Our hawk-eyed child missed my earrings.”

“I give her a pass,” Thran said comfortably. “The photographs were an engrossing topic, and have brought us a good resolution. There will be time for her to see the addition to her father’s ears. Would you like a taste of nalivka?”

“If you do.”

“I would. I will go to bed earlier tonight, given the day’s delicious exertions, and what will likely be a long effort tomorrow.”

“On your mobile?”

“Assuredly. And I expect to hear from one or more of the companies for which I auditioned. The next several days will likely see me with my mobile glued to my ear.”

“I’ll keep on with the house. If you need me, just ask.”

“I will,” Thran chuckled, patting Bard’s thigh. “I will pour us a drop of nalivka.”

“I’ll put in a load of laundry. I have some evidence to destroy, and the hamper’s getting full besides.”

“I spent a long time this afternoon cleaning leather of the same evidence.”

“Why? You didn’t have those pants on for long.”

“I put them on to make my exit. It left its marks.”

Bard snickered. “I’ll bet it did. We’re a messy pair. So, back in a tick.”

Bard headed upstairs with a couple of the laundry baskets, so Thran went into the kitchen to check on the children, and to pour two tiny glasses of the Russian liqueur he was fond of. When Bard came down with the collected laundry, he helped his husband sort and start a load of clothes. Then they returned to the sitting room to enjoy their drinks.
“Anybody mind music?” Bard called into the kitchen.

“As long as it’s not singing,” Sigrid called back. “I can’t concentrate to write when it’s singing.”

“I can’t, either,” Legolas agreed.

“No singing it is, then,” Bard agreed, looking to Thran. “Any preferences, cariad?”

“Something not too rousing, for the children,” he shrugged. “Other than that, I leave it to you.”

“I liked that Vaughn Williams you played the other day.”

“Perfect.”

Bard sorted through their collection of CDs, eventually selecting one and loading it into the portable CD player. Like the rest of Bard’s things, the player was second hand, something Bard had cleaned up and refurbished. None of the children had one of the small media devices like the one Legolas had, and the two older children’s laptops weren’t the fanciest or newest. As the sounds of soft classical music began, Thran again reflected on how hard Bard had worked to care for his children for so long with so few resources other than endurance. Tonight was little different; it was close to eight o’clock, and Bard had started laundry.

“Pork chops for supper tomorrow?” Bard asked, as he looked up from the CD player. “I’ll get them out of the freezer so they’ll be thawed in time. I’ll bake them rather than fry them, so they won’t have a lot of oil.”

“That sounds good,” Thran agreed, and Bard headed off to the kitchen to dig the chops out of the freezer. Sounds of rummaging ensued, then Tilda had a question about her arithmetic. Bard was visible through the doorway to the kitchen stooping by Tilda’s chair to answer her question.

“Da... you’ve got... earrings?”

Thran smothered a giggle at the incredulous tone in Bain’s voice.

“No! Does he?” Sigrid gasped. “Gods, Da, you do! You’ve got earrings! Ye gods and little fishhooks, Da! What brought this on?”

“I used to wear these all the time,” Bard replied in the mild tone that meant he was both amused and exasperated.

“Yeah, but Da!” Sigrid exclaimed. Thran couldn’t tell whether Sigrid was outraged or approving, so he set his small glass on the table before the sofa and got up to lean against the doorway to the kitchen.

“But what?” Tilda looked up from her paper, leaning backwards to get a better view of the ring in Bard’s ear. She touched it gently. “Is there one in your other ear, too, Da?”

Bard turned his head so his youngest child could see his other ear.

“There is. I like them.”

“Has Ada seen them?” Sigrid asked.

“Ada has seen,” Thran replied, drawing all of the children’s eyes. “I like them, too.”

“Can I get one?” Bain, naturally, asked eagerly.
“Not until you’re sixteen,” Bard replied with a wry look at Thran.

“What about me, Papa?” Legolas looked at his father with bright eyes.

“Are you sixteen?” Thran asked. “Only our Sigrid is old enough for such things. They must be taken care of carefully to heal, and with all of your sports and activities, it would be an effort to see to them. Not until you are old enough to do those things without reminders from your fathers will we consider it.”

“Are you going to get earrings, too, Ada?” Tilda asked.

Grinning, Thran shook his head. “No, Kukla. Your Da does them justice for us both. Sigrid, has your Da finally moved you beyond speech?”

“Are you going to wear them all the time, Da?” Sigrid asked, still gaping at her father.

Bard grinned. “Not when I work in the barn. But I may wear them a bit more often than I expected, considering the reaction I got from you.”

“Da,” Sigrid scoffed, rolling her eyes. “You look like some kind of biker or something.”

Bard slid a suppressed look of hilarity to Thran, who had all he could do not to think of what else Bard had looked like earlier this afternoon. Then he ran a hand through his hair. “About that. I’m going to get a haircut. Tidy up a bit.”

“Really?” Tilda asked.

“When?” Sigrid continued, looking skeptical.

“In the next few days. I want to finish your bathroom and get started on our room. So around that.”

“I hope I recognize you,” Tilda pondered, looking dubious.

“I think you will,” Bard tapped her nose. “So, you get back to homework, and I’ll get back to the laundry.”

When Thran followed Bard into the mudroom, he found him silently giving into his mirth as he leaned against the washer. He looked up, still laughing.

“I guess you’d better call your hair magician,” he whispered.

Snickering, Thran opened the dryer and motioned for Bard to toss in the wet clothes. “As soon as they open tomorrow, lyubov moya.”

The rest of the evening passed without further stir, though the children’s showers took longer than expected given the novelty of bathing in their father’s domain. When at last all four were settled in bed, Thran prepared to rinse off the remnants of paint that the afternoon’s efforts had brought. He stripped off his clothes and came into the bathroom, only to find his equally naked husband looking up at the ceiling.

“What is it?”

Bard pointed to the handheld showerhead. “I’m guessing Bain.”

When Thran looked up, he realized the ceiling was dripping. “Ah. Our children still enjoy bath toys.”
“So does at least one of their fathers,” Bard replied, taking Thran’s hand and pulling him towards the
shower. “Even just for a quick rinse.”

It was good to have someone to wash his back, stroke a hand across his buttock, hand him a towel,
dry off the small place he’d missed on his shoulder. It was even better to have such a warm body to
slide between the sheets with him, to warm the cold bedding with him. He snuggled against Bard’s
chest with a hum of contentment. He thought back about today’s game, and then the previous one
between seer and king. He would not like to live the life of an omega, bound by immutable physical
drives to submit to the domination of others, without regard to anything other than biological need.
But the feeling of warmth, of security, of peace that his seer had felt when bound to his king
resonated on some level. Perhaps it was because it was a pale reflection of what Thran felt wrapped
around his husband in bed, the two of them well swaddled in soft silk and cashmere. Here, there was
only love, affection, tenderness.

As if he understood the timbre of Thran’s thoughts, Bard pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair, and eased
him close with a sigh.

What a gift it was to fall asleep amid such comfort.

* * *

The children’s breakfasts and lunch preparation passed smoothly. The only deviation was that Sigrid
let Bard know that Finn would come to the soup and such gathering Friday. Legolas and Bain would
see Killian and Tara later today, and let their fathers know this afternoon what they learned. When
they headed to the bus stop, Bard let Rosie know they might have a few more guests, so they
considered what other soups to make.

Once back in the house, Thran headed immediately to the ballroom to get through as much of his
morning routine as he could before his mobile began to chirp, and Bard hurried to start another load
of laundry, then continue his painting. Thran didn’t want the portable CD player today, so Bard took
it upstairs to play the music he’d played last night, Thran’s collection of Vaughn William’s orchestral
works. The various pieces seemed to speed his work a bit, and he finished the second coat of
turquoise without much effort. He hoped the second coat would be enough to properly cover the
walls, as he wouldn’t be able to recoat it for several hours. But the time wouldn’t be wasted; he got
the tube of tile grout and started in on the walls. In contrast to the paint, he didn’t have to be quite so
painstaking, so he made rapid progress.

When that was done, he fetched the bag of tiles he’d gotten at the architectural remnant shop, and
spilled them out on the bathroom floor to see which pieces were best to replace the roughly two
square feet of broken tile behind and around the toilet. The floor tiles had been broken when he and
Daphne had bought the house, and Bard had never figured out how they’d gotten that way. There
was no water damage, which he’d confirmed when the plumbers had replaced all the pipes before
Christmas. He’d taken advantage of the plumbers’ work when they’d removed the old toilet to chisel
out the ruined tiles and prepare the subfloor for their replacements. Before he could set the
replacements, however, he had to clean and maybe shape them to make a smooth fit – a tedious task.

It didn’t take long to discover that his replacements were almost the right size, just a hair smaller, but
not enough to worry about. The gaps between them would not be very noticeable behind the toilet,
and not too wide that the floor would suffer. Bard counted out how many tiles he thought he’d need,
added a few extra, and headed out to the barn. It would be much easier to clamp each tile in the
heavy vise on the workbench and scrape off each edge carefully with a file, than to try to do so by hand.

When he passed through the kitchen, he left Thran a note that he was out in the barn. He jockeyed another load of laundry through the washer and dryer, then armed his way into his coat, tucked his long hair under a knitted hat – gods, it really was longer than he realized, and badly in need of the trim Thran had suggested – and grabbed the barn door key to head outside.

Switching on the lights in his workroom, Bard found a couple of steel files and some rags, and set to work. The rags kept the sides of the vice from marring the tiles, and the steel files made quick work of the old grout and mastic. It was a pain to shift the little tiles every few seconds, but doing so steadied the tiles so that he had only to make a pass or two on each edge with the file. He’d worked through about forty of the little tiles before the door opened.

“Bard?” Thran heralded.

“In the back, angel,” Bard replied.

“Ah, the floor tiles,” Thran commented as he approached. He picked up one of the cleaned ones. “They look so much better!”

“Good thing,” Bard exhaled, filing the tile currently clamped in the vise. “Not my favorite chore, but it’s what’s needed to finish the floor.”

Thran watched intently as Bard patiently filed a side of the tile, repositioned it in the vise, then repeated the steps until all six sides and the back were clean. Bard dropped the cleaned tile in the bucket he’d set out on the workbench, then took up the next one.

“How many tiles will you need?” Thran asked.

“A hundred, maybe a few more.”

“So many!” Thran grimaced. “So much work for such a small space!”

“It’s still better than replacing the rest of the floor,” Bard assured him. “This is a pain, but chiseling out the entire floor, then getting down to a surface to put new tile on, if not replacing the whole subfloor... agony.”

“Agony,” Thran agreed, grimacing. “So if it takes you two minutes to clean each small tile, and you need one hundred of them, then that’s two hundred minutes, or about three and a half hours minimum to clean enough tiles.”

Bard’s grimace matched Thran’s. “Maybe I’ll get faster after I’ve done a few more, but yes, you’re right about how long it’ll take.”

Thran looked in the bucket of finished tiles. “Perhaps you have half of what you need so far, so you have made good progress.”

“Enough that I’m ready to take a break. Is it lunchtime yet?”

“It is. My ear is already sore from all the calls, so I am ready for a break, too.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice.”

Bard handed the bucket of finished tiles to Thran to carry back to the house, and they made a quick
lunch together while Thran summarized the gist of his calls this morning. Most were with UltraViolet, trying to reach consensus about what was needed to get the ballet about Death off the ground. Thran had emailed a summary of the story he and Bard had put together to the principals, and Bard was gratified that it had met with unanimous enthusiasm. The maze of details that needed to be worked out was formidable, but that was not the only topic of Thran’s calls and emails. Two of the other companies with which Thran had auditioned had responded with offers of a contract.

“I’m not surprised,” was Bard’s comment as he reached for a clementine. “The only question is whether either of them can distract you from your Death ballet.”

“Both are good offers,” Thran admitted. “Principal in both cases.”

“Are either of them with the company you auditioned with first, the one you weren’t that interested in?”

Thran shook his head. “I almost expect them not to offer me a contract, because I am not the type of dancer they want. They would be happier with a dancer less... how do I say without arrogance? Less... different.”

“Meaning that you in that company would be like mixing a firebird with a lot of mud skippers.”

Thran nodded without ego. “You exaggerate, but your sense is correct. It is a question of style, and they are smaller, quieter, more introspective. I can be those things, but I would prefer not to be only those things.”

“So the other two established companies offered you contracts as principal dancer. I remember you said the second one you auditioned with was well worth a look.”

Thran nodded again. “In almost any other situation, I would gladly accept a contract with them. But...”

“The chance to do something amazing is not any other situation.”

“No. It is not.”

Thran sounded so wistful that Bard reached his right hand across the table, beckoning for Thran’s left hand. When Thran offered it, Bard squeezed it gently. “I looked on the Internet. It said that the typical contract for a ballet dancer is for thirty or forty weeks, more or less a year. Something amazing doesn’t come around often. So if you take a chance on something amazing and it doesn’t work out, in a year, you can go back to something more traditional.”

Thran smiled. “You understand how hard the muse pulls any artist towards the amazing. You understand the risk, too – joy if you can embody what the muse sends you, and despair if you cannot, like what I imagine it is for you and your Rahmiel. This ballet will be amazing if many people can embody what the muse has sent us with our story. But I want you to know this – this ballet is a much riskier proposition than your sculpture, because of how much effort it needs to make it live.”

Bard kept a steady hold on Thran’s hand. “How much riskier?”

“It will need money, and a hard rein on Irmo. UltraViolet’s current finances cannot come close to what will be needed. The hard rein on Irmo will fall heavily on me because he does not intimidate me, but it will fall on others as well.”

“Where would the money come from?”
“Much of it would come from me at first, but there would also be a concerted effort to interest other investors. We would need to heavily promote what we are doing. Fortunately, we have a solid story. If we can get Irmo to produce bits of choreography early, we could film them for promotion, both to raise money and to build interest among donors and the press. We need costumes, a performance venue, and more dancers, especially a female principal. I have already spoken to Charisse, and she is interested. Many more things will we need. Much of the promotion would likely involve me, both in the parts we film, but also to personally talk to the press, the investors, and so forth. Then there is the rehearsal for the ballet itself, which would be arduous.

“I do not minimize the cost of this to you, Bard. It would put as much on your shoulders as mine. For some weeks, I would not be here when you need me, and you would manage four children and our house alone. That would be a great deal for us both to sacrifice, and for our children, as well. So before I chase what the muse dangles before me, I want you to know that such a chase is not only risky because of the money.”

Bard caught Thran’s wedding ring between his thumb and index finger. “How long does it take to bring a ballet to the stage? Are we talking about three months, or two years?”

“The coming winter season would give us nine months, but that would cost a great deal of money, and we would compete with productions from better known companies for audience as well as publicity. On the other hand, we could try to be ready in time for the summer season, something only a few ballet companies do. This would cost much less, but give us only six months at most. That is to complete the choreography, costumes, rehearsals, staging, everything.”

“So if you could do it in six months, then that’s what you’d prefer.”

Thran nodded. “Of course. Less money, but a much more challenging proposition.”

Bard continued to play with Thran’s ring. “I managed three children and two jobs in a grotty apartment alone for a long time, so managing four children in our house won’t be so bad. And there’s an advantage to a summer season that you might not know about.”

“Yes?”

“Summer’s a much busier tourist season for an artist colony. People go on vacation, the weather is nice to encourage people to get out, and so on. It used to be that Greenwood Dale on the Lake had several summer shows and such to make the most of the tourist trade. Why don’t we talk to Rosie and Sam, and see if there’s anything like that planned for this summer? If you could time something to go with a festival, that might give your ballet a bigger audience, and maybe some of the ballet publicity could tie in with something the artist colony plans. It could be a big draw for both the ballet and the artists.”

“That is a good idea,” Thran agreed. “But we must see what kind of venue might be available. UVB has no home stage.”

“I can call Rosie tonight and ask,” Bard offered. “How long can you take before you have to make a decision?”

“A few more days.”

“Then let me talk to Rosie. If we can do something this summer, then I’m game. If you and the others at UVB can keep Irmo focused, this ballet will make you, him, and UVB.”

“I think it will, too. But it would be a very difficult six months. I know I ask a lot of you. I do not
want to ruin my marriage or our lives here in pursuit of this.”

“I don’t want to, either. But... not following the something amazing can eat at you if you turn away. I
don’t want that for you or me, either. Let’s talk to Rosie, learn a bit more, and see what that brings
us.”

Thran’s smile was grateful. “I am grateful that you understand, and are willing to see if we can make
this a bit more auspicious.”

“The only thing I ask, cariad, is that you don’t risk the house. That’s not negotiable.”

“Agreed. Our home is in your name, and I will never ask you to risk it.”

Something in Thran’s face nagged at Bard. He hesitated to ask, but an inquiring look from Thran
pushed him into speaking.

“I don’t want you to ruin your finances for this, either. So... is that a possibility?”

Several emotions flitted across Thran’s face, which didn’t ease Bard’s concern. In fact, he tensed.
Thran picked up on that immediately, and smiled guiltily. Guilt was such a foreign expression for
Thran that Bard tensed even more.

“Maybe I like this something amazing less than I thought, Thran. How much money do you think
this will cost?”

“Enough that you will no longer worry about the expenses needed to renovate a house,” Thran
admitted. “And if it all comes to naught, it will be painful. But it will not be fatal, and it will not ruin
me. I will still be able to dance, and you will still be a working artist, and the house will still be paid
for, and the children will still be well cared for. So please do not worry about the amounts involved.”

“Is there anything I could do to help? I have no idea how to put on a ballet, but I could sketch things
for you, or do a bit of design for promo pieces, or anything like that.”

“Only if you accept payment for such things.”

“I will, the same way you accepted payment for all I’ve spent on the house – with sincere thanks,
and an eye to the future.”

Thran’s rueful smile conceded to the success of Bard’s gambit. “You are a quick study, my saint.”

“It’d be nice to have a way to contribute.”

“Tcha, you have so many ways to do so already!” Thran snorted, smiling. “You paint and scrub and
file and repair and arrange and cook and organize and so many other things, yes? I cannot do any of
these things, or draw, or design, or make metal.”

“As a certain pale, ethereal, beautiful dancer keeps telling me, it all evens out.”

“Yes! I hope you have finally come to believe that, and do not say so just to twit me. It does even
out, lyubov moya, and it has, and it will continue to do so. Oh, before I forget, I called my hair stylist.
She can see us Friday at nine. It is in the city, but if we leave once the children meet the bus, we
should get there in plenty of time. Is that comfortable for you?”

“As long as she doesn’t try to give me one of those shaved pate haircuts. I don’t want to go from
biker to convict in one easy session.”
Thran laughed. “Rowan will do no such thing. She will ask you what you like, and offer suggestions if you like. Whatever you decide, she will do her magic.”

With a marshaling breath, Bard said, “Okay. And I don’t have to keep the earrings just because they’re a fun way to twit Sigrid.”

“Wear them on Friday. Rowan will see you with and without, and help you decide if you want her to. She is that most rare of hairdressers – one who listens, as well as one who knows.”

“What does she do for you? Not cut your hair, obviously.”

“She does, but only to keep it well groomed. She sees that it stays icy white, and well cared for, and glossy. It is more work than you think just to keep it so.”

“Simple’s always harder,” Bard agreed. “Ask any tailor, or any artist. You can get away with a lot more mistakes or bobbles if you’re doing a Hieronymus Bosch than a Piet Mondrian. Oh, that reminds me. You might want to look at some of Bosch’s works to see if that brand of demonic weirdness would help the look of your ballet. He did some visions of Hell that are downright terrifying.”

“I will,” Thran nodded. “Though that raises an interesting point – does our Death live in Hell, as in a place for demons, or the Underworld, as in a place for all of the dead?”

“Hmm... you’re right about the distinction.”

“Did you have one or the other in mind when you made our tale?”

“I thought more of the Underworld, to be honest. Our tale about Death falling in love doesn’t need any moral judgment about if He’s the devil or not.”

“I agree. That would give us many interesting things to show in the scenes in the Underworld – here are the rich, and here are the good, and there are the poor, the sick, and the evil. A more interesting place, I think.”

“I’d still look at Bosch’s work, just to see what variety he packs into each piece. And look at the Hellboy films. The second one has a troll market that’s amazing. And that reminds me of something else.”

“We are fuller of conversation today than lunch,” Thran chuckled. “What else are you reminded of?”

“Money – no, don’t get excited, this is a good thing about money. You said UVB doesn’t have a venue of its own. How much studio practice space does it have? Enough to work on a full-scale ballet?”

“It will be very tight,” Thran conceded, nibbling a grape.

“Then I suggest that I put off painting our bedroom and work on the ballroom instead. You could use it for practice space. That’d save renting more space, and it’d let you save a forty-minute commute there and back to UVB’s studio.”

“But what about our bedroom? I looked forward to that very much.”

“I hit a snag on that. That fancy sueded paint I showed you?” Thran nodded. “I looked online about it. Not easy. It’d take at least a week and a lot of coats to do it. Even after that, many folks weren’t happy with the results, so much so that most homeowners’ meccas don’t carry it anymore. So I think
we ought to reconsider.”

Thran hummed. “I trust your judgment, lyubov moya. I do like the blue-grey color you showed me, so if we keep that, I am happy.”

“I looked at Venetian plaster, but that’s labor-intensive, too, and it doesn’t come in the blue we like. So I thought I could paint it the blue we like, and then later we can add some silver stenciling go with the bed.”

Thran brightened. “Oooh, I like that. Stenciling... is that hard?”

“Very easy, for what we’d want. Reasonably fast, too.”

“So I thought I could paint it the blue we like, and then later we can add some silver stenciling go with the bed.”

Thran brightened. “Oooh, I like that. Stenciling... is that hard?”

“Then I like that idea. So... if the blue-grey paint is the same kind as what you have used on the children’s bedrooms, then perhaps you can still do our bedroom next, and then the ballroom?”

“As long as painting the bedroom first wouldn’t delay you from using the ballroom.”

“We are still far away from practicing in earnest, so I think we have those few days to paint our nest. When the days become long and arduous, I think a serene place to retreat would be a comfort.”

“That’s a good point. So in and around all your mobile calls, think about what color you’d like the ballroom to be, and what kind of chandeliers to hang. There’s places for three big ones.”

“I will consider it. But for now, I must get ready for the afternoon’s calls. Many more await.”

Bard and Thran cleaned up their few dishes from lunch, and went upstairs to brush their teeth. Afterwards, Thran surveyed the children’s bathroom with Bard.

“No, I think the two coats of paint is enough, yes?” Thran considered, looking at the walls. “And the tile looks so much cleaner with the new grout. Only the few tiles in the corner remain.”

“And the extra hooks and towel racks. That won’t take long. The children will be back in here tomorrow. That’s good, considering how many guests we have coming tomorrow. We’ll need more than the toilet downstairs for that crowd. That’s another room I need to get to soon. The floor’s got to be redone completely, and the walls... eh, I might as well just say it – the whole thing needs close to a complete gut, all but the plaster.”

“It will all come in time,” Thran advised. “Just look at how much you have done so far – four bedrooms, a study, a bath, and a kitchen. The rest will soon follow, and then we will live in a palace. In fact, we already do.”

“A shabby one, but one steadily improving. Thank you for being so patient.”

“Your turn comes,” Thran exhaled. He put arms around Bard. “You will have to be very patient if we do this ballet, far more patient than I have had to be. I hope I will not ask too much of you.”

“The ballet will come in time, too, or it won’t,” Bard pressed a kiss on Thran’s temple. “Just don’t forget me in the excitement, and it’ll all work out, whichever way it goes.”

“I will not forget, lyubov moya,” Thran vowed firmly. “But if ever you think I do, please, do not suffer that in silence. We will survive anything, as long as we are together, as long as we speak to each other.”

“As long as we make love frequently, too,” Bard gave Thran’s buttock a playful squeeze.
“Suka blyad, yes,” Thran breathed. “Always that. Oh, you are such a bastard, to mention such a delicious thing mere minutes before I must plug my mobile into my ear rather than my cock somewhere else.”

Just at that moment, Thran’s mobile chimed downstairs.

“Sukin syn!” Thran growled, drawing Bard’s laughter. “Almost I think you planned that.”

“I’m not that good, angel,” Bard snickered. “But I won’t complain. You’re always an animal in bed after you’ve been teased a little.”

Thran headed downstairs, but not before he gave Bard a glowering look. “You may regret that you said that before long.”

“No, I won’t.” With a grin, Bard folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorjamb to the bathroom to watch Thran head downstairs. “I absolutely won’t.”

Thran’s frown slid into a smile, full of affection as well as anticipation. “Nor will I, my saint. Until later.”

“You know where I’ll be.”

Thran disappeared to chase after his chiming mobile. Bard eased away from the doorjamb, and went into the children’s bathroom to see how many of the small floor tiles he needed to clean before he could begin to patch the floor. Eh, maybe another fifty or so. He dumped the cleaned ones in a pile in the corner, then took the bucket with him back out to the barn. As he clamped the next small tile in the vise, he smiled at Thran’s enthusiasm for how often they enjoyed each other.

It’d be a cold day in Hell before he’d let anything dim his angel’s enthusiasm for that – or his own.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

While a saint pushes hard to turn a construction site into a home, an angel swears at his mobile... and also supplicates the gods.

Chapter Notes

Sigrid's track teammate, Jesse, is an homage to the Jesse on my son's track team who was a math genius (and still is), and as generous as the day is long. He taught a lot of children about math, and a few adults about grace.

In another hour, Bard scraped the last white, hexagonal bathroom floor tile he hoped he’d ever have to clean in his life. What a fiddly, tedious, annoying chore! On top of it, it was cold enough that his fingers ached. He counted the tiles one last time – yes, he’d finished another sixty – and scooped them back in their plastic bucket to bring into the house. He put away the files, swept up the scattered bits of grout and mastic that he’d filed off the tiles, and gladly locked the barn door behind him. As he came inside, he heard Thran’s voice in the sitting room, still on his mobile, so he didn’t interrupt, instead heading upstairs to the children’s bathroom. Gods, how good did it feel to wash his hands under hot water, as much to warm them as clean them? Now he could feel his fingers again. He removed the toilet; none of the replacement tiles needed to go under it, but with it out of the way, it was much easier for him to arrange the cleaned tiles in place. Yes, he’d cleaned enough, they fit the space, and the color matched the rest of the floor well – one would have to look closely to see the slightly creamier hue.

Bard removed the tiles from the vacant place to spread the mastic. In contrast to the hours it had taken Bard to clean the tiles, it took less than fifteen minutes to set them in place. He had a few to cut on the edge, so hauled the wet saw outside of the solarium to make the cuts, hoping the racket didn’t disturb Thran’s calls too much. A handful was all he needed, so he hurried upstairs to set those last few in place. Thanks to modern plumbing connections, he needed only another fifteen minutes to reseat the toilet.

Another piece of the bathroom was done.

He looked around in satisfaction as he cleaned up the construction debris. Once he hung hooks on the back of the door for the children’s robes, and two extra towel bars, he’d done all he could for today. Tomorrow, he’d grout the small part of the floor, give one last polish to the wall tile, and the children’s bathroom would be finished.

Checking his mobile, Bard found that he still had two hours before Bain, Legolas, and Tilda would be home, so he headed downstairs to toss more laundry into the washer. There was still one wall of the kitchen to paint, so he got the ladder, brushes, and drop cloths, and set to with a will. Bit by bit, everything was coming together.

“I have never seen anyone perched on a ladder, so hard at work, who looked so happy,” Thran’s
voice penetrated Bard’s reverie.

He turned a broad smile on his husband. “I am happy. This finishes the kitchen, all but the floor. The children’s bathroom is finished but for that little bit of grout work. Tomorrow, I’ll get paint for our room and set to. It’s good to see progress.” The dryer buzzer sounded, drawing Bard’s chuckle. “Including laundry. Though in this house, that’s a rarity. There’s always laundry to do.”

“I will get the laundry,” Thran waved. “You have become the superhero with the cape, Bard. Able to renovate large houses with a single bound, faster than a New York minute, more powerful than the force of four children and a dancer to generate laundry. Is there more to put in the dryer?”

“The washer’s got your stuff in it, so that needs hanging up. If you get that, I’ll wrangle the dryer stuff and put another load in.”

“Please, allow me the luxury to hide from my mobile for a few minutes,” Thran held up his hands. “I can claim that I did not hear it over the noise of the washer. You finish the wall, which looks quite nice, if I may say so.”

“I thank you. It’ll feel good to have one public room finished when we have guests on Friday,” Bard replied. “We’ll need to catch the children when they come in to tell them the paint’s wet, or they’ll discover it in some fashion that calls for paint remover.”

Thran chuckled. “Perhaps I should tape a sign to the mudroom door.”

“Good idea.”

Thran disappeared into the mudroom to deal with the laundry, so Bard resumed his painting. He had only a little more to do, so finished the last bit of trim before Thran reappeared. Bard carried his brushes into the mudroom to find the laundry well in hand – folded clothes atop the dryer, another load in the washer, and Thran’s dance attire festooning the laundry line.

“The domestic dancer,” Bard shook his head.

“How can I not be?” Thran shrugged. “You do so much that I must look for ways to help.”

“You do plenty,” Bard assured him. “We both do. That’s a sign of a good marriage – both partners do whatever needs doing, and no one keeps score. Of course, I’m the lucky one of the pair.”

Thran paused in hanging up a pair of tights. “How so?”

Bard dumped his brushes in the laundry sink and started to rinse them. “Not many people in the world can say that their scruffy laundry is done by the world’s most elite dancer.”

Thran snorted with laughter. “No more than can say that their endless laundry is done by an elite metal sculptor. And do not try to tell me that you are not an elite metal sculptor. The Internet will call you a liar. And do not try to tell me that the Internet speaks of ten years ago. Soon the Internet will say the same thing of you again. To help with that, I would like to respectfully suggest that on Sunday, your day devoted to your art, you go to the art supply store and buy the clay you need to begin your model of Rahmiel.”

“ ‘Respectfully suggest?’” Bard gave Thran an incredulous look. “Why so formal, angel?”

Thran resumed the hanging up of laundry. “It means that I do not presume to know that what you need is clay, and what you plan to work on is Rahmiel. If you choose to work on something else, that is your prerogative. What I want most is for you to be happy to work on your art, whatever
aspect of it you choose.”

Bard wiped off his cleaned brush, and set the roller up against the edge of the laundry sink to dry. He wiped his hands dry before he gave Thran his full regard. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine.” Thran hung up the last of his dance things to dry. The expression he turned on Bard, however, was pale apprehension. “Everything is fine now. I want it to stay that way, and I want you to know that I want it to stay that way.”

Bard reached out to give Thran’s braid a gentle tub. “Hmm, let me guess. Something came up this afternoon during your calls, because you’re more worried than you were before. But you still want to sign with UltraViolet Ballet.”

“Now you add divination of thoughts to your list of talents.” Thran leaned back against the dryer, crossed his arms over his chest, and sighed. “Yes, the enormity... increases.”

“If you were still in your apartment, with Legolas in boarding school, would you sign with UltraViolet and try to pull off this ballet?”

“Yes,” Thran said without hesitation, but his tone was guilty.

“Then sign with UltraViolet.”

“Bard...” Thran shut his eyes. “The lure of the artistic challenge is clear, and so is my lust to take it. But I have a family now... a husband, four children... you will all suffer because of what I will do to make this ballet. What will happen when I live like a troll in a ballet studio? Will you forget you have a husband, or Legolas a father, because I am not here? What will you do when I become so tired that I snap at you for no reason? What if I do not come home one night? What will you think when I let this madness go that far?”

Bard put his arms around Thran. “Do you remember our trigger word? The word we hold in reserve so that neither of us has to do something we don’t want to do when we play?”

Thran nodded. “Sanctuary. That is our trigger word when we play.”

“We’ll give ourselves another one, except this one means everything is still okay. Even when we have no time together to do more than pass in the hall, even when you’re pulled in seven directions, or I am, we’ll still have time to say that word, and we’ll know that all is well.”

Thran smiled. “That is a good plan. So what shall we choose as this new trigger word?”

“How about ‘I love you?’”

Snickering, Thran insinuated his fingers in Bard’s hair and brushed a kiss on Bard’s lips. “Oh, lyubov moya, you are a gem. Of course that is the right thing to say.”

“I don’t know how much hell will come in the next six months. But I’ve been in the depths, Thran. Ten years of no hope that life would ever get better, that I’d ever care well enough for my children, that I’d ever get back to my art, or back here – I know in a way I hope you never do. So even if the next six months are hell, we‘ll still have more than I did for a long time, starting with each other, so we’ll get through it. I want to see you dance Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield, and Death Defeated by Love, and everything in between. If joining UltraViolet and making this ballet is what you burn to do, then you have to do it, or you will always regret it. I’ll back you however I can.”

Thran looked deeply into Bard’s eyes. “Would you do something this mad?”
“I did. We got married, didn’t we?”

“This is not the same. This is to battle a hydra. So many heads, and so few to chop them off. So I ask you again – would you do something this mad for your art?”

Bard’s nod was firm, and his regard was unblinking. “In a heartbeat, without hesitation.”

Swallowing hard, Thran wrapped arms around Bard and pulled him close. “I do not deserve you.”

“Yes, you do, just as much as I deserve you. Now we’d better stop, or our children will tease us about being sappy.”

“Let them.” Thran didn’t release Bard from his embrace. “They have no appreciation of the undeserved gifts that life bestows.”

Bard chuckled, rubbing Thran’s back. “So does this mean you’ve decided?”

For a long moment, Thran held Bard without moving, without speaking. But as Bard knew he would, Thran eased them apart to regard him with serious grey eyes. “I have. I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve got guilt covered for both of us, remember? You’re the angel, the one who flies. Say yes to UltraViolet, and don’t look down.”

Thran’s serious expression crumbled into a rueful chuckle. “Have you considered a career as a motivational speaker?”

“Only to an angel,” Bard snickered. “Come on. We’ve got just time to parcel out the clean laundry before most of Clan Ffyrnig gets off the bus.”

“Ah, I remember,” Thran observed, as he and Bard carried laundry baskets full of clean clothes upstairs. “Our Sigrid has the away track meet today.”

“I thought I’d stop at the homeowners’ mecca when I pick her up and get the paint for our room. If you trust the lads to hold down the fort while we’re gone, you can come with me and weigh in on the color.”

“We will see once the children come home. They will have to start homework without us if I go.”

“We won’t be gone that long. We’ll be home in time to make sure everyone does all the stuff they’d rather not do.”

“Then I would like to go, if only to get away from the mobile again. Tcha, so many calls!”

Downstairs, the door banged, signaling the sound of arriving children. Bard’s eyes met Thran’s, and both sprinted for the stairs.

“Ware the kitchen wall near the fridge!” Bard shouted as he ran downstairs. “Wet paint!”

He sprinted into the kitchen to see Bain’s hand poised over the fridge door, just ready to open it. Legolas looked up guiltily, his hand smudged with white paint.

“Too late,” he murmured with a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Legs,” Bard assured him. “Easy to fix – just a little smudge. Wash your hand so you don’t get the paint on your clothes. Welcome home, Bain, Tilda.”
“Hi, Da,” the two children chorused. “Wow, Da, you painted the kitchen, too?”

“I finished most of your bathroom earlier, Bain, so I thought I’d finish the kitchen, too.”

“Ooh, the bathroom is finished?” Tilda brightened, taking the clementine Legolas passed her. “Everything?”

“All but the grout in the floor, little doll. You have to shower in our bathroom tonight while the wall grout cures, but tomorrow you’ll be back in yours. New hooks and towel racks, wall grout, and paint are all done.”

“Your Da has worked very hard today,” Thran said, giving Legolas a warm hug. “Much more than I. All I have done today is my barre and yoga, and then held my mobile to my ear.”

“I had the easy jobs,” Bard teased, brush in hand as he dabbed away the small smear Legolas’s hand had left in the wet paint. “It’s Thran who had to spend all day trying to herd a bunch of cats. How was your day?”

The children chatted about school as Bard tidied up his painting supplies. Once Tilda helped him fold up the drop cloth, preparations began for supper. Farro, steamed veg, mixed fruit, and corn muffins supplemented the pork chops, all of which were quickly devoured. After cleanup, Bard and Thran settled the children to their homework. When Bard’s mobile signaled Sigrid’s impending arrival at the school, all was well enough in hand that Thran decided to come along.

“Legolas has the bridge until we get back,” Bard decreed with a salute to the youth. “Ensigns Bain and Tilda, stand by Lieutenant Legolas until Co-captains Bard and Thran return with Lieutenant Sigrid.”

Legolas’s grin was gleeful as he returned a salute to his father and Bard. “Aye-aye, Cap’ns.”

“Aye-aye,” Bain and Tilda seconded with identical salutes, so Bard and Thran headed out in Bard’s truck smiling.

Sigrid was waiting for them in the parking lot of the Imladris Academy when Bard pulled in. Spotting them, she hefted her backpack and sports bag, waved an enthusiastic goodbye to her teammates, and climbed into the back seat of the truck with excited hellos.

“How was the track meet?” Thran asked.

“Long, but a lot of fun. I had a lot of time between races, so I got a lot of my homework done. It’s neat, Da and Ada – a lot of kids on the team work on their homework, too, and they help each other if someone gets stuck. One of the seniors, Jesse, is a math genius, and really nice, and he helps anyone who asks. Another one, Avril, had Mr. Saur last year, and she told me about the big spring project he always does, so I’m ready for it. The kids in my old school never did that. Such an improvement!”

“I’m glad, Sig,” Bard smiled, relieved yet again for the affirmation that their precipitous move had not distressed the children for long. “How did your races go?”

“I was first in the four hundred again, which was nice. The surprise was the eight hundred. I expected to finish about third, because the other schools had two or three really good runners. But I won that one, too! And we got a good solid second in the mile relay. So we did well. The boys did, too. So well, we ate a dozen pizzas! That’s a lot for twenty kids.”

“Not as many as I would’ve expected,” Bard teased. “Be glad Bain and Legs weren’t along to help
“That would’ve accounted for at least three or four more, right there,” Sigrid agreed. “Where are we going?”

“I have to stop at the homeowners’ mecca for more paint,” Bard explained. “Maybe you and Thran can come up with something for the ballroom.”


Bard winced at Thran’s smothered chuckle. “Um, I don’t think so, Sig. Thran’s probably going to have his new company in there to practice a lot, so let’s go for something less frilly, okay?”

“So you signed with UltraViolet?” Sigrid bounced on the back seat. “And you’re going to do the Death ballet? That’ll be so cool, Ada!”

“I expect to sign tomorrow, yes,” Thran agreed, glancing sideways at Bard with a smile. “And yes, I will try to do the Death ballet.”

“Then let’s go pick out paint!” Sigrid clapped her hands, as they pulled into the parking lot.

Selecting the two colors of blue to make the subtly mottled finish for the bedroom took little time, but all three looked at the dizzying array of colors without seeing anything that struck them for the ballroom. Sigrid pulled at her bottom lip consideringly.

“Divide and conquer,” Sigrid murmured. “That’s what they told us in history class. So... do we want a warm color, or a cool one?”

“The windows let in light just from the north and south,” Bard said slowly. “So that’s more of a colder light than not. A warm color would help to offset that. Nothing too bright, though, Thran? A warm but calm color?”

Thran nodded. “Yes, warm to encourage ease, but calm not to overexcite.”

“So not too bright,” Bard said as he perused the racks of samples.

“What do all those beautiful palaces in Russia look like, Ada?” Sigrid asked.

“All very much too opulent, ma chère,” Thran shook his head and grimaced. “Very busy and overdone with golden scrolls and ugly cherubs and so forth. Even worse than French palaces, which unfortunately are nothing like the very charming French countryside. It would be much nicer if our ballroom were more like the countryside than the palace.”

“What about this one?” Sigrid pulled out one of the sample chips. “This one looks like cream. It’d look nice with white trim. No, not this one.” She stuffed the chip back in its slot and pulled out a nearby one. “This one. It’s a bit deeper, and – oh, look, it’s called Provence Crème. It’s karma, right? What about this one?”

Bard and Thran bent over the small chip. “I like it,” Thran agreed.

“So do I,” Bard agreed. “Let’s look at it under the light box.”

They held the small chip under the store light box that simulated daylight, and put a chip beside it of the bright white Bard used for all the woodwork. All three agreed that it looked warm and serene under all of the lights, and offered a good contrast to the white trim.
“What about the ceiling?” Bard asked. “All white? The same cream? A darker or lighter one? Something else entirely?”

“I once saw a palace as a small child where the walls and ceiling were the same color, and all the plaster work and trim was white.” Thran grinned in reminiscence. “I liked that one, as any small boy would, because it looked like a cake covered in icing roses.”

“A cake?” Sigrid laughed. “I can see that. It’d be cool to dance in a ballroom that looks like a fancy wedding cake.”

“So the same color on the ceiling and walls, and white on the trim. Maybe a satin finish on the ceiling and walls to reflect the light from the chandeliers? And gloss white trim?”

Thran and Sigrid looked at each other, smiling. “I like it,” Thran nodded.

“I like it, too, Ada. It’ll make you look even more like an angel.”

“Oh-oh,” Bard nudged his blushing husband. “She’s on to you, cariad.”

Sigrid tsked. “Um, Da.... didn’t you mutter something about an angel all of three minutes after you met Ada?”

“If not before,” Bard admitted without apology. “So, Provence Crème paint?”

“So it shall be,” Thran nodded.

Before long, Bard, Thran, and Sigrid loaded four gallon cans of blue paint and five five-gallon buckets of cream paint into the truck and headed home. As Sigrid dashed upstairs to shower, Bard and Thran checked on the other children. Legolas and Tilda worked on Tilda’s French words in the sitting room, and Bain was still at the kitchen table to finish an essay for his English class. Sigrid joined Bain at the table to finish the last bits of her work. When they were done, Legolas was prevailed upon for the next chapter of Harry Potter. After they finished reading, Thran told the children about his decision to join UltraViolet and create the Death ballet. The children listened soberly as Thran warned them about how much time he expected this effort to take, and how absent he might be as efforts progressed.

“I want you to know this ahead of time, so that you are not surprised. You, especially, Legolas. But we will be together in our house, and Bard will make sure that we all have what we need. So I hope you understand why I pursue this.”

“Course,” Sigrid nodded. “It’s the chance to be different, to make something new, to not be the same as what everyone else is. We’ll be fine.” She looked to Legolas. “We’ve got your back, too, Legs. When you miss Ada too much, we’ll help you kidnap him for a day or two.”

Bain’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! And I’ll be glad to play more zombie apocalypse with you to compensate.”

“I’ll read Harry Potter to you,” Tilda offered. “And help you with your French words.”

“I’ll get you to fencing and such,” Bard said. “And I’m your go-to guy when you want an easy victory in any video game.”

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Bain muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes, earning laughter from everyone, Bard included.
“I’m not that bad,” Bard protested.

“Yes, you are,” Bain assured him.

Thran laughed. “It seems you will be in good hands, synok.”

“It does, Papa,” Legolas nodded with a gratified smile around the room. “We’re Clan Ffyrnig. We’ll be all right.”

* * *

Once all the children were in bed and Bard was through the shower, Thran washed off the day’s efforts, then settled into bed beside Bard.

“Told you,” Bard murmured sleepily as Thran snuggled close. “We’ll be fine.”

The lump was back in Thran’s throat. It had nothing to do with the arduous task he’d embark upon tomorrow. That brought him nothing but excitement, albeit leavened with resolve to muster all the force he needed to keep Irmo focused. The lump was because he knew better than Bard and the children how bringing this ballet to life would stress them. He wanted to do this ballet so badly that he tasted it, breathed it, felt it, smelled it. It would be so hard not to plunge into it without regard to anything else. In the depths of it, it would take all he had not to forget everything else, even his son, even his husband.

No matter how hard that urge grew, he could not let his drive to make Death rise, then fall, destroy his family’s faith in him, their regard for him. He could not let himself forget the five people who were more important than any ballet.

He promised himself that he would remember his saint Bard, his treasured son Legolas, his excellent co-conspirator Sigrid, his mischievous Bain, and his small Kukla Tilda.

What if he weren’t strong enough to keep that promise?

Oh, gods... please, make me strong enough.

* * *

Thursday saw Thran at the barre, then back on his mobile early. Bard set out some ground beef to thaw, then finished the bathroom grout, so that was one more room done. The next order of business was to haul all of the furniture out of his and Thran’s bedroom but the bed and into the children’s study. He draped the bed and the floor with drop cloths, and set to. On went the primer, both for walls and woodwork. This was a big room, but he finished before lunch, and started on the first coat of blue. He got two walls well mottled — they looked pretty scabby, but that would improve with the second coat — then downed a quick lunch with Thran. They didn’t quite wolf down their food in their underwear over the sink like stereotypical bachelors, but neither lingered — in fact, they mixed up a meatloaf while gulping down their meal. Afterwards, when Thran went back to his mobile, Bard finished the first mOTTled coat of blue and started on the second. This one went on with rags and
sponges to deepen the subtle gradation of color. When the children came home, he threw the meatloaf and six potatoes in the oven, delegated Sigrid to do the stir fry when the oven timer sounded, told her to rally the troops for supper without him, and ran back upstairs to paint and wipe and rub until he’d finished all four walls, no matter how much his shoulders and back ached from the constant strain of the day’s efforts.

When at last he came downstairs, everyone had finished eating, the kitchen was clean, and the children were around the table working on their homework. They looked up as he appeared with brushes in hand.

“Where’s Thran?”

“In the sitting room. Still on his mobile,” Sigrid replied.

“Did he eat?”

“Papa ate,” Legolas nodded. “We all said he had to, so he did.”

“Yeah, and now we have to tell you the same thing, Da,” Bain said.

“You won’t have to tell me twice,” Bard exhaled. “I’m starving, but the walls are done. Be careful when you shower, children; the paint’s still wet. I’ve just got the woodwork to do tomorrow – no, not tomorrow. In the morning, Thran and I are going to his hair stylist – ”

“Hair stylist?” Sigrid cut in.

“Hair stylist, yes,” Bard repeated, exhaling. “Hair cut, remember?”

“I remember,” Tilda nodded. “You promised that I’d still recognize you when you get home.”

“You will, little doll. When we get home, Rosie will come over to start soup. So Saturday I’ll do the woodwork.”

“So now sit down and eat,” Sigrid ordered, frowning at Bard.

“As soon as I wash the brushes,” Bard promised, crossing to the mudroom.

Sigrid got up from the table. “I’ll make you a plate.”

“Thanks, sweetness.”

“Is Ada going to get all of his hair cut off?” Tilda asked. “I hope not. I like it.”

“He’s not going to get all of his hair cut off. Just a trim,” Bard called from the mudroom. He washed the brushes quickly, impatient to get to his late supper. When they were finally done, he gladly sat at the kitchen table, where Sigrid put a warm plate in front of him. “Thanks, Sig.”

“Tea?”

“Please. Are there any homework questions I can answer?”

“We’re good so far,” Legolas replied. “Oh! Kíllian and Tara said they could come tomorrow. Tara’s mother is making a trifle. Kíllian said he’d bring cookies.”

Sigrid snorted. “I don’t think Finn will think to bring a thing.”
“That’s okay. We’ll have enough.” Bard shoveled in another bite. He was so hungry that even humble meatloaf tasted better than it ever had before. “I think we’d better add another kind of soup to the menu, though. Does everyone like ham and bean?”

“Mmm,” Tilda murmured, concentrating on her map worksheet. “I do.”

“Me, too,” Bain licked his lips.

“I like that, too,” Legolas added.

“I’d rather have potato leek,” Sigrid allowed, "but you're making carrot ginger, and I really like that, so ham and bean is fine.”

“Okay, ham and bean. Maybe some corn muffins to go with.”

The children weighed in on their choice of muffins, but shortly conversation lapsed as the children concentrated on their homework and Bard on his supper. He was so hungry that he went back for more meatloaf, then a slab of cake to finish with his tea. He cleaned up his dishes as Tilda went off to shower. Bard carried the last bit of his cake and his tea into the sitting room, where Thran was just getting off his mobile, muttering in Russian. Bard didn’t recognize this particular curse, but it was clear from Thran’s inflection that that’s what it was. Thran stabbed one last finger at his mobile, turning it off.

“I have had enough of this for two days, much less one,” he growled, dropping his mobile on the fruit crate between the sofas and glaring at it. “Suka blyad!”

Bard sat down next to him and offered his cake. “Have a treat for persevering.”

Thran took – for him – a huge bite of the cake and sat back to chew it with a glower.

“Long day?”

“Very.”

Bard leaned back against the sofa for another bite, and mutely held up the cake. His husband took another big bite, and they sat side by side to chew in silence. Bard sipped his tea, and held that out to Thran as well, who took a big drink. Once he swallowed, he heaved a long sigh.

“Feel better?”

Thran’s glower finally crumbled into a sheepish smile. “I do. It is very good cake. You are kind to share it.”

“That’s the beauty of being the adults in the house. We can go back for more.”

“I have had enough.” Another big sigh. “How goes the paint?”

“Walls are done.”

Thran blinked. “What, the primer and the first coat?”

“And the second coat. That’s why I just got down here; I was on a roll. Keep your fingers crossed that it’ll still look good in the morning.”

“All of it?” Thran gave Bard his full regard at last. “Gods, Bard, you must be exhausted!”
“Sore, yes. Exhausted, no,” Bard conceded. “I may avail myself of your tub once the children are in bed.”

“It is not my tub. It is our tub,” Thran corrected in an exasperated tone.

“Our tub, then. Regardless of whose tub it is, I’ll be glad to get into it. I’ll be even gladder that I don’t have to paint again until Saturday. Assuming we’re still on for tomorrow morning.”

“After the day I have had, I need tomorrow’s respite even more than before. I will not turn my mobile back on until we come home tomorrow.”

“Was it just a lot of details, or was Irmo being Irmo, or something else?”

“A lot of details, yes. Irmo being Irmo, yes. Something else, yes. But it progresses. Mr. Nori will earn a large sum this month.”

“This Mr. Nori of yours... is he your lawyer, or your Russian mafia minion?”

Thran’s grin finally took on a gleeful edge. “He is a most resourceful fellow. Investigator, expediter, facilitator.”

“Ah. The sort of person who’d have to kill us if we found out what he really does.”

Thran laughed. “He would think that very funny.”

“And he wouldn’t disagree with me, either, would he? Will I ever get to meet him?”

“Stranger things have happened. I myself have met him face to face only a few times. He is very expensive, and worth every penny.”

“So he looks out for your interests.”

“Very much so. That is part of the reason for my annoyance today. I drive a hard bargain, but he has convinced me that I am wise to do so. It makes no sense to take on the risks this entails without reaping the rewards if it succeeds.”

“What’s Mr. Nori telling you to push for?”

“A sizable piece of the gate, as it is called. So much bantering about money, and so far very little about dancing and our story. I am still not yet convinced that this has one shadow of a chance in any hell you can imagine, but on it goes. I have made my position clear, and will let them think about it in silence until Saturday. They will either accept or refuse. When they do, then I will either accept or refuse, and on we will go from there.”

Tilda stuck her head into the sitting room. “Can we come in and read? Legolas and I are through our showers, and Bain is almost done.”

“Of course,” Thran smiled, sitting up a little straighter. “It will be good to hear the next part of Harry’s adventures.”

The children came in, Harry’s adventures continued, and shortly Thursday drew to a sleepy close. Bard was glad to retreat upstairs, even if the bedroom was still a painting site. With Thran’s murmurs of admiration in his ears, he pulled off the drop cloths, left them folded up in a corner of the landing, and edged the bed and night tables back closer to the wall so that he and Thran could sleep in more or less their usual position.
How blissful was it to sink scrub off the day’s sweat, then soak his weary bones in the tub? He shut his eyes and let Thran massage his shoulders until a little of their stiffness eased.

“I just remembered,” he murmured lazily, eyes shut as Thran worked on his muscles. “I have to take the truck tomorrow morning. I have to pick up the doorway from the salvage shop, and I don’t think it’ll fit in your SUV.”

“Nor do I. Perhaps Mrs. Mathom will have news for us about screens.”

“Maybe so.”

“You are almost asleep, lyubov moya.”

“That’s what a massage from an angel does to me.”

“That’s what working so hard does to you. I still do not believe that you painted three coats on the bedroom walls in an afternoon.”

“Nine hours... three hours per coat – shit! I am such a scatterbrain!”

“What is this scatterbrain?” Thran’s hands paused on Bard’s shoulders.

“I didn’t paint the ceiling. I completely forgot about it.”

“It is no matter. You will get to it Saturday if you want, and no one will care or notice that your enthusiasm to smear blue paint on the walls happened first.”

“How could I have forgotten?”

“It happens. One works so hard, sometimes the mundane is forgotten in the lure of the exotic...” Thran’s hands tightened on Bard’s shoulders.

Bard sat up to look back at his husband. “What is it?”

Thran shook his head. “Nothing important, lyubov moya. Merely too much time on the mobile today. So many details, so many things to remember... I am sure that before long, I will forget many things. May they all be things as easy to recover from as painting a room out of your preferred sequence.”

Bard stroked Thran’s arm. “You’ll remember everything important, Thran.”

“I hope someone will tell me what things are important, so that I know what ones to concentrate on.”

“I can tell you that. You’re a dancer – the dancer of this ballet. No one can do that part but you. Almost everything else you can hire someone to help with. Don’t let them pull you in so many directions that it affects your dancing.”

Bard was rewarded with a warm smile. “You are right.”

“I am about this.”

“So you are. That means one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Mr. Nori will earn a very large sum this month.”
Bard’s chuckle was sympathetic as they got out of the tub and dried off. “Likely so.”

* * *

For the second night in a row, Thran wrapped himself around Bard a bit more closely. For the second night in a row, Thran’s appreciation of his husband’s warmth was tinged with sharp concern. This was what was important, to lie beside the love of his life and savor everything they had together. This was what he had to keep foremost in his thoughts –

What if the first scene of the Underworld were done on two levels, or perhaps three...?
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint indulge in a little personal grooming, after which delicious mayhem ensues. Afterwards, Clan Ffyrnig hosts its first party.

Chapter Notes

The writer admits to having tongue firmly in cheek for her references to a certain member of the Three Musketeers. Check my Tumblr blog (eldritchmage.tumblr.com) for some appropriate pictures!

"The most genial of beverages" is my nod to Elizabeth Peters, that most wonderful of mystery writers, and her intrepid heroine, Amelia Peabody. If you haven't read her books, you should. They're terrific!

Translation Notes:

krasavitsa = beautiful (Russian)

Both Thran and Bard were up early this morning, Thran to work through his barre and yoga, and Bard to wrangle children’s breakfasts, lunches, and bus stop. As soon as the children’s bus trundled out of sight, Bard waved goodbye to Rosie and hurried home. Thran had just finished a brief shower, and Bard joined him in the bedroom to dress. They had to head to the city quickly if they wanted to get to Thran’s hair stylist on time.

“I don’t suppose I should show up in work boots and grotty jeans and a seen-better-days tee shirt, should I?” Bard said facetiously, mulling his side of the closet.

“You would not look out of place,” Thran smiled, slipping his favorite black velvet jeans over his black silk underwear. “And Rowan will do her usual magic regardless of what you wear. But I suggest you wear something nicer.”

“So I don’t embarrass you?” Bard teased.

“So I am not tempted to ravish you while you dress,” Thran purred. His long glance sent a jolt of arousal through Bard. “Such a temptation you are in your work clothes.”

“Do you need to take the edge off, angel?”

“Of course I do. It has been three long days since the vampire visited his artist, and I have spent most of the time since then with a mobile plugged into my ear rather than your cock plugged into me. It would take very little to make me miss our moment with Rowan.”
“Maybe we can snatch time when we get home from the salvage center. Rosie won’t appear until we call her.”

Thran bent down to brush a kiss on Bard’s lips. “What game shall we play today, *lyubov moya*? Or would you prefer simple love between an angel and a saint?”

Bard gave a little growl of anticipation, grinning when he saw the light spark in Thran’s grey eyes. “Either way, you’d better tell Rowan not to spend too much time styling your pretty white hair, because I’m going to mess it up as soon as I can drag your pretty white ass into bed.”

“I will tell her to make you a beautiful sacrifice for my altar, because I intend to mess up more than your pretty brown hair as soon as I can drag your pretty brown ass into bed.”

Bard’s cock jolted half erect just at the sound of Thran’s silky voice. He winced and rearranged his underwear, drawing Thran’s anticipatory laughter. “Enough, you greedy bastard, or we’ll have to explain to the children why I didn’t get a haircut, our bedroom is so pillaged, and nothing got done around the house.”

“Then put on your clothes, and stop tempting me with the sight of your delicious, luscious, irresistible, bare chest,” Thran teased, arming his way into his black silk tee, then his usual long sweater. “Jeans are fine, and a tee shirt will allow Rowan to attend you easily. The salon is usually overwarm, so I will shed my sweater once we get there.”

Bard chose jeans, a blue tee, and a darker blue fleece pullover, so he’d be comfortable at the salon as well as when he loaded their arched doorway into the truck. Hiking boots in place, they grabbed coats and scarves and gloves, and set out.

Despite this being Friday, traffic wasn’t outrageous this morning. They made it into the city, parked, and walked into Thran’s salon with a few minutes to spare. Bard looked around with interest – he’d never been inside a fancy hair salon before, though this one looked to offer more than hair styling. As many men as women were being attended to – here was a manicurist, and there was a glimpse of a massage therapist coming out of a treatment room, and elsewhere were other stations that offered he had no idea what. Out of his league, he was, but he was more amused about that than intimidated. He’d been out of his league the night he’d had to bleed the radiators of a cold, wet, infuriated angel, too, and he’d come out of that with more riches than he’d ever imagined. Thran had spoken of his trips here with enjoyment, so he settled himself to appreciate a new experience.

Once Thran spoke to the receptionist, they shed their coats and sweaters, and retreated to the waiting area well stocked with comfortable chairs, stacks of newspapers and magazines, and a full service coffee bar, complete with pastries.

“Mmm, cappuccino,” Thran murmured, moving at once to the coffee bar. “It is very good, Bard, or do you devote yourself only to tea, that most genial of beverages?”

“Daphne loved espresso,” Bard confided. “Too bitter for me. But cappuccino’s got more sugar, doesn’t it?”

“And warm milk,” Thran said with enough lust in his voice that Bard snickered. “I love the warm, frothy milk.”

“Ah. Now I know what to get you for Christmas this year. An espresso machine.”

“Here.” Thran offered his cup – china, not plastic – to Bard for a sip. “If you like this, I will make one for you.”

“Ah. Café au lait for you, then. Just as nice. More sugar?”

“Just a little.”

Thran busied himself making the concoction, then passed it to Bard. “The pastries are very good, too.”

“I’ll have one if you will.”

“That is not fair. I want you to enjoy it all. I already know what the pastry tastes like.”

“One of these tiny pastries won’t kill you, Thran.”

“If I must, if only to see to your enjoyment. One of the nut pastries for me, I think. Or perhaps the raspberry.”

Bard chose a raspberry pastry. “Take a nut pastry for yourself. We’ll split them, so you have a bite of both.”

“An excellent plan, lyubov moya.” Thran nibbled a bit of his nut pastry, then offered the rest to Bard. “Mmm. Delicious.”

“Raspberry’s good, too. Open wide.”

They sat down to enjoy their remaining pastry. The pastry was light and buttery, and Bard enjoyed the treat between sips of his café au lait. Thran gave him a smile that was more relaxed than any expression he’d shown in the past two days, which eased Bard’s worry. As if Thran divined his thoughts, he sipped his cappuccino with relish.

“It is nice to be treated so well, yes? At home, you pamper me with tea and muffins, so I hope you enjoy a taste of what it is like to have such gifts bestowed on you.”

“I’m glad you like tea and muffins, angel.” Bard nibbled another edge of his pastry. “This is good, too.”

“Thran! Honey!”

Rowan wore the studio’s ubiquitous black pants and tunic, but they could not disguise the force of her personality. She was a sumptuously curved black woman, resplendent in shoulder-length grey dreadlocks and opulent southwestern animal fetish necklace and earrings in corals, turquoises, and creams. Her smile was warm and excited, and she approached with arms outstretched.

Grinning widely, Thran set aside his cup, rose from his chair, and met the woman’s outstretched arms with his own.

“Rowan! It is so nice to see you again!” Bard grinned as his tall husband bent down to the foot-shorter stylist to exchange the cliché of New York air kisses – no, his mistake; these kisses were the real thing. “You look well, krasavitsa.”

“Oh, honey, it’s good to see you, too.” Rowan patted Thran’s forearms with genuine affection in her sparkling brown eyes. “I’ve missed you. Where’ve you been hiding, lover?”

Thran turned to Bard. “With my husband. This is Bard. He is a very talented metal sculptor. Bard, this is my delightful friend and magician, Rowan.”
Rowan’s mouth made a silent O as she raked Bard with her glance, then looked back at Thran with admiration. “Oh, honey, I don’t blame you for hiding – he’s a dish! Hello, Bard. It’s a pleasure to meet the man who has snared my tall Russian boyfriend at last.”

Bard laughed as he shook Rowan’s hand firmly. “I’d apologize for that, except that I’m not sorry in the least.”

“I should hope not!” Rowan’s laugh was hearty. “It’s clear that you two agree with each other. So rare these days, isn’t it? The world needs more true love like yours.”

Bard reddened. “We’re still that obvious, then.”

“Oh, you’re still that obvious,” Rowan nodded, laughing at them both, for Thran had colored, too. “I love it! So what are we doing today, Thran?”

“My usual,” Thran shrugged. “As you recommend, of course.”

“Oh, you’re still that obvious,” Rowan nodded, laughing at them both, for Thran had colored, too. “I love it! So what are we doing today, Thran?”

“Of course,” Rowan winked. “And for you, Bard?”

Bard started to run his hand through his hair, but stopped himself before he got too far. It wouldn’t have worked, anyway; he’d wound it into a messy knot for the drive into the city, and it was still so arranged. His grimace was self-conscious. “I need a haircut, that’s obvious.”

Rowan nodded. “We’ll start there, then. Thran, I’ll have Marisa wash and whiten you while I talk to Bard. You know your way back.”

“Thank you, krasavitsa,” Thran bent to kiss Rowan’s cheek again, winked at Bard, and threaded his way through the salon.

As Thran retreated, Rowan patted Bard’s arm. “Come on, honey. Let’s talk.”

Rowan led him through the salon to her station, where she gestured him into the chair. Bard made himself comfortable while Rowan gave him a critical look. She eased his hair out of its knot, and arranged it on his shoulders, regarding him in the mirror.

“Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself, Bard? Any details you want to share about that gorgeous husband of yours are welcome, too.”

Rowan’s laugh was infectious, so Bard replied in kind. “He’s my angel,” Bard said without embarrassment. “But you already know that. So, um, about me... I have three children, and Thran has his son, and we live in a beautiful house that I’m renovating. I do metal sculpture, as Thran said, and he dances, and we’re very happy together.”

“You’re a busy man,” Rowan summarized. “You aren’t one to spend a lot of time looking after your hair.”

“I have other ways to spend my time,” Bard admitted. “The children are all busy, so I keep up with them. My art... working metal is hot, sweaty, and dirty. I’m behind a welding mask some of the time, or pounding away at an anvil by the furnace. Renovation’s messy, too, but I love both. What I look like then isn’t important. But when I go to the children’s school, or visit friends... or go to my art openings, or one of Thran’s performances...”

Rowan regarded him steadily, not rushing him, so Bard shrugged. When he didn’t speak, she said, “Thran’s a stunner. How do you feel about that?”
“He is. I love the way he looks, and I’m proud to be with him. But I don’t want to look like him, if that’s what you want to know, not that I could look like him, anyway. I’m happy to look like me. But I’d like to make that a little more... respectable me.”

Rowan laughed, and patted his arm. “We’re going to get along just fine, Bard. I think I can do you a bit better than just respectable. You’re right; Thran’s the rare peacock. But you’re just as gorgeous in your own way, and I can do a lot with that. Tell me about the earrings.”

Bard chuckled, and explained about Sigrid’s outrage, and how he didn’t wear them while working, but liked them for other situations.

“They suit you. Don’t do anything gaudier – leave gaudy to Thran. You’re the deep, quiet one, and subtlety works wonders for you. Now, how long do you like your hair?”

“It’s this long only because I had three children to take care of alone before Thran and I got married, and so never got around to doing anything about it. I don’t like the shaved convict look, so please, don’t do that.”

“It’d be a travesty to shave off such gorgeous hair.” Rowan gathered Bard’s hair in her hand and pulled it loosely back so that it looked shorter in the mirror. “Still, a lot of it’s damaged and needs to come off. I think you’d look better with it shorter, anyway. I can take a lot off, which would be easier to take care of, but leave you plenty to shake into your eyes when you want to tease your Russian dancer.”

Bard’s lips curved into a sly smile that made Rowan laugh outright. “Oh, my, honey; I’ll kiss you myself if you look like that for another five seconds.”

“Flatterer,” Bard riposted gallantly.

“If you don’t have enough hair to pull back in a tail, can you still keep it out of your way with a bandanna when you work?” Rowan grinned, regarding Bard’s reflection in the mirror as she held his hair back. “You’d break less of it that way, too.”

“I can do that. It’d actually give me a little padding under the welding mask.”

“It’s up to you, then. Do you trust me?”

Bard nodded, smiling. “I won’t argue with a magician.”

“Now you’re the flatterer. All right, Thran’s done his wash, so take out your earrings. You see where Thran’s sitting? Let Marisa give you a good wash and a deep condition, then we’ll get started.”

“Yes, madam,” Bard offered her a semi-serious bow, drawing her chuckle, and headed off for his wash. Thran passed by him with his hair wrapped in a towel covered with plastic wrap, smiling, so Marisa got him settled in Thran’s vacated chair, swathed him in a towel, and tilted him back to wash his hair. As the warm water splashed over him, Bard shut his eyes, and dared to relax as fingers worked soap through his hair. This was a distinctly unfamiliar experience, but a very pleasant one. It was easy to relax under the gentle scrubbing and warm rinsing. He was sorry it passed so quickly, but it wasn’t quite over. A thick goop went over his hair, then a towel like the one Thran had sported – it was hot, and felt wonderful – then plastic wrap. When he’d been properly wrapped, Marisa directed him to the plush chair beside Thran. He remembered to thank Marisa, and pass her tip to her as Thran had explained, before joining his husband.

“Do you enjoy yourself so far, lyubov moyu?” Thran murmured from his comfortable slump.
“I do. I like Rowan very much.”

Thran’s smile widened. “She is a jewel. What has she planned for you?”

“I’ll let it be a surprise.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t worry. She says I’ll be able to make you melt in under three seconds.”

“You do already that even when my eyes are shut. How does she plan to make me succumb any faster?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. And so will I.”

Thran hummed deep in his throat, then grinned. “Ah. Good. You leave it to her. You will not be disappointed. Nor will I, I am sure. So enjoy this comfortable chair, and relax while Marisa’s potion works its magic.”

Bard took that to mean that Thran wanted to savor, too, so he let their conversation lapse as he settled more deeply into his chair. In a few minutes, Marisa came to collect Thran, leaving Bard to himself. By the time Marisa came to fetch him, he was nearly asleep despite the café au lait he’d drunk. Marisa put him back in her chair to rinse the goop out of his hair, then sent him on to Rowan’s station. Thran was just rising from the chair, his beautiful hair resplendently white and silky. The ends had been subtly trimmed, and even the other stylists in the salon looked around to murmur. It brought a smile to Bard’s face to see his angel so effortlessly beautiful, so widely appreciated, and he met Thran’s eyes with delight.

“Wow,” he said simply, admiring the result of Rowan’s handiwork. “You’re good, Rowan. And you, angel, are beautiful.”

“In a little while, everyone will look at you and say the same thing,” Thran assured him. “I will indulge in another cappuccino while Rowan does her magic for you.”

Thran and Rowan exchanged more kisses, then he gave Bard a lingering look before taking himself back to the waiting area. Bard watched him go with an appreciative look.

“As I said, he’s a stunner,” Rowan shook her head. “He just might be the angel you say he is.”

“Oh, he is,” Bard nodded. “He very much is.”

“He says you’re a saint. So let’s turn you into one that an angel can’t help but worship. Have a seat.”

With a self-conscious chuckle, Bard sat.

Rowan swept a wrap around him, then hummed approvingly as she combed through his wet hair. “Much better after the conditioner. So here we go.”

Over the next thirty minutes, scissors snipped, fingers arranged, and razors trimmed. Every now and again, Rowan asked him to shake his hair, so she could see how it fell, then she’d snip and arrange and trim a little more. Eventually, she asked him to shake one more time.

“Oh, yes. I think we’ve got it.”

Bard snuck a look in the mirror, and was struck by how much of his hair was gone. Before, it had been many inches below his shoulders. Now, it was barely as long as his collar in the back, and far
shorter in the front. His sideburns had been shortened, too. But even wet, it was thick, wavy, beautifully shaped. With his beard tufts, he looked like a swashbuckler – pirate, buccaneer, musketeer – any of them romantic enough to make him smile. The things he could do with that in his games with Thran...

“Honey, you’re looking kissable again. I think you’re ready for the dryer.”

The dryer and Rowan’s deft fingers danced around his head. The assured touch was soothing, lulling, and at last Bard fully appreciated why so many women loved their hair salons. He shut his eyes to enjoy the sensations without the distractions of seeing so many people move to and fro. The next time Thran offered to dry his hair, he’d say yes before Thran finished asking. This was so, so wonderful...

“Give me your earrings, honey.”

Bard dug in his pocket and handed them over. Rowan slipped them in.

“Voila. See what you think.”

Bard opened his eyes as Rowan’s fingers ran through his hair once more, this time to stroke something silky through his hair.

“Gods,” Bard swallowed, looking in the mirror. Was that really his reflection staring back at him? He’d never looked so polished, so rakish... so good. “I look like Aramis in the Three Musketeers.”

Rowan’s throaty laugh was rich. “Honey, you look good enough to eat. Sit right there; I’m going to fetch your angel. I want the whole salon to see his face when he sees you. Stay cool, okay?”

Bard gave her a crooked grin. “Okay.”

“Keep looking in the mirror. When you see me, count two, then turn the chair around. Slowly. You’ll slay him.”

Bard couldn’t control an appreciative chuckle. “You’re evil, Rowan.”

“Yes, I am,” she gave him a mysterious, secretive smile. “So sue me.”

“I would never do that to a magician. Because you are one, without doubt.”

She grinned. “Let’s see what your angel thinks. Be right back.”

Snickering, Bard watched Rowan retreat in the mirror. In a few seconds, her reflection reappeared, so Bard counted two, then slowly toed the chair around, searching for Thran’s face.

When he found it, Thran’s eyes had widened. His lips parted, then closed as he gulped. If they’d been alone, Bard had no doubt that he would have been hauled off to bed and possessed in short order.

Maybe that would happen when they got home.

Or maybe he’d take the swashbuckler to heart, and haul Thran off to bed first.

Thinking of that found its way onto Bard’s face. Whatever his expression was, Thran bit his lower lip and clenched his hands at his sides. Savoring his husband’s speechlessness, Bard’s smile deepened as he casually leaned one elbow on the arm of the chair, touched a finger to his lips, then let his eyebrows drift up in inquiry.
“Ty zastavlyayesh' menya konchit, ty grebanyy huiesos,” Thran murmured prayerfully, but Bard had heard Thran swear in the throes of passion enough times to know that what he said was neither holy nor prayerful.

“That’s a good sign,” Bard flicked a glance at Rowan. “He’s swearing in Russian.”

“Oh, don’t I know it,” Rowan chortled. “Do I need to give you a head start out the back door?”

“You might have to,” Bard nodded. “He looks serious. What do you think, Thran? Can I walk out of here sedately, or will I have to sprint to the truck?”

“You might have to sprint, yes. Rowan, you exceed all expectations.”

“I thank you kindly,” Rowan nodded, but behind Thran’s back, she gave a fierce fist pump that brought a scattering of applause and surreptitious laughter from the other stylists. “Go pay the bill, honey, while I tell Bard how to take care of his new ’do.”

Thran went without a word, which led Bard to share a look of open hilarity with Rowan.

“So what do I need to do to keep the advantage over my angel?” Bard snickered, getting up from his chair.

“Not much,” Rowan shook her head. “I’ve cut it to fall into place. Just use a decent shampoo and conditioner, and not too hot with the dryer if you use one. A little finishing oil. Don’t use a brush, just your fingers to untangle those gorgeous waves. Shake your head now and then – that’ll drive him crazy. Then come back to see me in six weeks.”

“I will. This has been a treat.”

“For me, too. It’s about time someone took that angel’s breath away, so he knows what it’s like for the rest of us.”

Bard enveloped Rowan in a big hug, and kissed her cheek. “You’re a gem, Rowan.”

“Oh, my, this is the best part of my job – I get to kiss all the beautiful guys,” she grinned, squeezing Bard and pressing a firm kiss on his cheek. “I can’t wait until you come back to visit me, gorgeous.”

“Then we’ll both have something to look forward to. Oh, I don’t want to forget –” Bard dug into his pocket for the substantial tip he wanted to give Rowan. “Thank you. I like what you did, and the look on Thran’s face... priceless.”

“Oh, thank you so much, honey,” Rowan nodded, taking the money and patting his cheek. “I’ll see you again soon, Bard. This was so much fun!”

Bard waved goodbye, and rejoined Thran at the receptionist’s desk. They bid the receptionist goodbye, collected their sweaters and coats, and headed outside.

“Now,” Bard said, turning an assessing look on Thran, “I don’t feel like sprinting to the truck, so this will have to hold you until we get home.”

He pulled Thran into his arms, bent him backwards over one of them, and planted a thorough smack on Thran’s lips. It was a move straight out of the old Errol Flynn pirate films he liked so much. Before Thran could react, Bard swung him back upright, and headed down the sidewalk at a jaunty pace, grinning.
“Oooh! You – you are such a bastard!” Thran growled, and sprinted after him. “Just who in the hell do you think you are – in the middle of the public sidewalk, like some sort of bandit –”

“Bandit, pirate, musketeer... take your pick,” Bard grinned. “And you, my white-haired, silken-tressed beauty, are my latest conquest. A pretty one you are, too. Quite delectable.”

“Musketeer? Now that book, I have read. You are not the callow D’Artagnan. Which of the others are you, then?”

“I always had a preference for Aramis.”

Thran’s eyebrows went up. “Aramis? The one who wanted to be a priest?”

“When he wasn’t bedding the ladies, yes, among other things. I have no interest in the priesthood, but bedding pretty things is another story.”

Thran hummed, then turned a sly sidewise glance on Bard. “I would enjoy being bedded by a pirate. A beautiful, rakish one. For you are spectacularly so, my saint. I am quite undone at the sight of you.”

Bard grinned as he tucked Thran’s arm into the crook of his elbow. “Let’s get our doorway, then wreak a little swashbuckling havoc in bed.”

“Hurry. I am not sure how long I can wait.”

“Pray for no traffic, then.”

Once they reached the truck, Bard steered them out of the city and back on the highway. In forty-five minutes, they were back in Greenwood Dale on the Lake, loading their arched doorframe into the back of the truck. Mrs. Mathom said she had a lead to some carved screens that they might like, and would email them pictures as soon as she received them. They headed home to unload the doorframe into the solarium.

“It’ll look great against the wall,” Bard nodded, stepping back to admire the frame.

Hands circled him. “So will you. I want to strip you bare and have you right under that arch.”

“I’d let you, if this were June instead of January, but I won’t let the moment pass unnoticed. So... since you seemed to like this an hour ago...”

Bard gave Thran another of his swashbuckler kisses, adding a little groping to the caress of his lips. When he let Thran up, he grinned at Thran’s fractured Russian curses.

“Mmm. When an angel lets me kiss him like that not once but twice, he must want me to take further liberties, no matter how much he curses. So upstairs with you, my beauty. I want you in bed, on your back, with your beautiful white hair all over the pillows... a fit offering for a swashbuckling pirate intent on ravishment.”

As Thran backed into the sitting room, Bard followed, finally giving free rein to the sly smile that had first appeared in the salon. Thran bit his bottom lip. “Oh, gods, such a look, lyubov moya...”

“Do you want to find yourself stripped and ravished on the stairs?”

Thran snorted in laughter, finally turning tail and running for the main hall. With a chortle, Bard raced after him, taking the stairs two at a time as he pursued his husband. He found Thran in their
bedroom, frantically trying to unlace his hiking boots. Bard tore through his, kicked off his boots, stripped his fleece and tee, and tackled Thran just as he got his boots off, dragging him into bed to kiss him hard. Beneath him, Thran moaned as he kissed back eagerly, fingers running through Bard’s newly shorn hair.

“For all the gods, Bard!” Thran gasped, as Bard yanked him up enough to claw Thran’s sweater off his shoulders.

“Take it off.” Bard bit at Thran’s throat, shoving Thran’s sweater down to his wrists, then yanking his tee up. “Take it off!”

“I try, you greedy bastard! Give me a second!”

“No. Not a single one. It comes off now, or I rip it off.”

“Ty grebanyy huiesos, Bard! You are an animal!”

“No, I’m a pirate. The governor’s guards are after me, and I’ve no time to waste on niceties. I’m here to ravish, so ravish I will. Argh!”

Thran managed to free his arms from his sweater, so Bard yanked his tee farther up and left Thran to pull it the rest of the way off while he breached Thran’s jeans. A couple of jerks, and he had them and underpants completely off while Thran still struggled to get his tee off and his hair out of his face. Bard lunged to get the lubricant from his nightstand into hand, and by the time the black silk tee landed on the floor, his slicked hand was around Thran’s cock.

“That’s better,” Bard crooned. “So much better. Isn’t it?”

“You fucking bastard!” Thran spat, but his last word ended in a gasp as Bard stroked him. “Oh, gods... gods, Bard...”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You’re still a fucking bastard... mmm...” Thran’s eyes shut and his head went back as he lay back on his elbows to savor Bard’s attentions.

“That’s no way to address the pirate about to ravish you, my beauty. For ravish you I will, whether you act the reluctant if foul-mouthed virgin, or the eager wanton. Or should I stop like a gentleman, though I am far from one?”

“I don’t want you to stop,” Thran whispered, lowering himself flat on his back. As he looked up at Bard through lowered lashes, he stroked Bard’s flanks.

“The innocent would lie back and pray. The wanton would help me with my pants.”

Thran’s long fingers groped for Bard’s zipper, then eased his jeans down his hips. Bard let his lubricated fingers stray from Thran’s cock to his opening, rubbing and teasing until Thran whimpered with desire. When Thran was well lubricated, Bard stroked his cock to slick it, then rolled atop his conquest, kneeling pale legs wide so that he could slide his cock deeply within. He lay heavily atop Thran as he stroked until all resistance had melted. Shutting his eyes, he licked and kissed Thran’s throat, his collarbone, his nipples, baring his teeth against Thran’s neck just where it joined the underside of his jaw.

“That’s right,” Bard breathed, sliding his hands down Thran’s arms to catch his wrists and hold them wide. “Give a brigand his due.”
“Let me see you,” Thran whispered, his breath catching. “I want to watch you ravish me.”

Bard let Thran’s wrists go, and curled his knees under Thran’s hips. He pushed himself up on his hands, giving Thran a view of him hovering above.

“Gods, you are so beautiful,” Thran breathed. “Such an opportunist - you do not even bother to strip before you are at me, for the guards will soon be at the door, and you will have to flee through the window. So brazen, yet too beautiful to resist. I can deny you nothing, not even my body.”

“Your body is mine, whether the guards come to the door or not. Even if they haul me away and do their worst, I’ll always be the brigand who stripped you, tamed you, and ravished you in your own bed.”

“Then do it properly,” Thran pleaded, hands on Bard’s hips to stop his stroking. He eased Bard out, then slid up to lean amidst the pillows, long legs spread, hands grasping the headboard. “Now I am a proper sacrifice for a pirate. Take me this way, so when the guards come through the door, they will see what you do to me, and how much their treasure revels to become pirate booty.”

Bard let his eyes caress the trembling, panting creature offering himself, and he licked his lips in anticipation. He stood up to peel off his jeans, but his eyes never left what waited for him against the headboard. He stalked Thran on hands and knees from the end of the bed, brushing a light kiss on Thran’s lips as he cradled his balls gently. Fingers slipped back to rub Thran’s opening, even slipped inside to make Thran’s breath catch.

“You know what I’m here to do, my beauty. Ravish you and then flee.”

“I want you to. I want you to take me. I don’t care about anything else.”

“I won’t stay, no matter how much you beg me. I’m here only to ruin you.”

“I don’t care. Ruin me, six times over.”

Bard leaned both arms on the headboard. “Open wide, pretty one. I like a wanton beneath me.”

Thran’s legs splayed wide without shame, and his eyes strayed to Bard’s cock. With an arch of his back, Bard brought his cock to bear, and eased inside without resistance. Thran sucked in his breath as Bard seated himself deeply within, and now his eyes were on Bard’s face as he stroked.

“Oh, wanton you are, for all you look like an angel. A prize, indeed, well worth the risk. I haven’t bedded such a prize in a long time. And not an innocent one, either. Methinks you like a pirate’s cock.”

“So much,” Thran moaned. “I cannot bear how good it feels.”

“Do you love me, my poor ruined beauty?”

“I love you, even as you ruin me.”

“Will you miss me when I leave you?”

“For all of my life. As I pine away, I will pray to be ruined again.”

“Then ruin you, I will. When I’m gone and your guards find you, they’ll find you covered in your own seed and know this was no ravishment, but the coupling of an unchaste wanton and the pirate he welcomed into his bed.”
“I’m every bit the wanton you think I am. Ruin me now. Do it.”

“As you wish.” Bard consumed Thran’s lips with a kiss, his tongue thrusting and probing as thoroughly as his cock did below. Gods, the double penetration was nearly his undoing, for Thran’s mouth was soft and yielding, accepting of his rough caresses, and he kept his legs wide, letting Bard thrust into him without resistance. Groping for Thran’s cock, Bard stroked it hard and fast, savoring Thran’s mewing cries as he submitted to all that Bard did. He purposely held himself back just to watch Thran erupt into orgasm beneath him, crying out as he released.

“So sweet, to watch how your body betrays you. Ruination indeed. It lacks only the pirate’s final coup de grace.”

Bard gave himself to his climax, working the whimpering body beneath him. He fell atop the pale angel to swallow him in one last kiss as his spasms shook him.

“Oh, yes,” he growled deep in his chest, nestling himself atop Thran, kissing his throat, shoulders, chest. His final kiss on Thran’s lips was slow, tender as he eased out. He slipped into the bathroom to wash and resume his underpants and jeans. When he came back into the bedroom, Thran still lay in disarray in the middle of the bed, every inch the ravaged prize. Bard leaned over to snag his shirt and fleece, then sat on the bed to stroke Thran’s flank.

“Well worth the ride. Remember me well after I’m gone, my beauty.”

Thran reached out to him with a soft pleading moan. Bard took his hand, drew it up to his lips to brush a cavalier kiss on the back of it, then stood. He threw his shirt over his shoulder, and shook his hair back into place, grinning when Thran bit his lip and swallowed another moan. He offered an Errol Flynn bow, then strode out of the bedroom.

Gods. He felt wonderful.

* * *

Bard’s footsteps faded down the stairs. Thran heaved a luxurious sigh, stretching. Gods, he’d been well fucked, and by the most beautiful creature who walked the earth. That muscular body, that meaty cock that filled him so completely, those warm brown eyes that turned devilish without warning... and now that beautiful hair. Rowan had done herself proud, for she’d started with a beautiful man and made him incandescent. The way he shook it into his eyes, or looked through it at Thran with the most delicious intention... Bard had even carried himself differently, with a hint of a swagger, though that was likely part of their game of pirate and booty. Those small, silver rings gleaming in his ears... Thran moaned in pleasure.

It wouldn’t be long before the pirate would serve a proper sentence for taking such blatant liberties with his infatuated spoils of war. Thran would make sure that none of the sentence was suspended, and it was all served at hard labor.

Plotting his revenge gave Thran something to smile about as he cleaned himself up, dressed, and remade the bed. He tossed Bard’s discarded hiking boots into the closet, then his own, and padded downstairs.

Bard was in the kitchen, rummaging in the refrigerator for lunch. He stuck his head around the door to give Thran a look. That long, slow sly smile... gods, it was all Thran could do not to envelope his
husband into a kiss right then and there –

Why on earth did he resist such an urge, when there was no reason to?

Thran circled the kitchen island until he stood beside Bard in front of the open refrigerator, and insinuated a hand in the hair at Bard’s nape. He bent down for a slow kiss, one that Bard quickly reciprocated, nestling Thran’s buttocks in his hands and easing him close. In contrast to their pirate fantasy, this caress was slow, sensuous.

“Ya lyublyu tebya, zoloto moyo,” Thran breathed, filling his hands with Bard’s hair. “Svayatoy moy, lyubov moya.”

Bard hummed deep in his throat, and his hand strayed to stroke Thran’s buttock. “You’re welcome.”

Thran snickered. “And well laid. If I had known a simple haircut would unleash such a beast, I would have hustled you there long ago.”

“It wasn’t a simple haircut. Rowan is a high priestess of her art.”

Thran nodded as he ran his fingers through Bard’s hair. “Assuredly. I do not think anyone could duplicate what she did for you, for it was for you alone.”

“It passed the dancer test with flying colors,” Bard agreed. “Just the Sigrid and Tilda tests to go.”

Thran snickered again. “We will see in due time. For now, let us have lunch, and call the intrepid Rosie to begin our soups.”

Lunch was consumed quickly, and Thran ran upstairs to brush his teeth while Bard called Rosie. He was just putting down his mobile when Thran reappeared in the kitchen.

“Is Rosie on her way?”

“She needs mule service to haul some things, so I told her we’d walk over. It’ll be worth the trip, angel. Her house was beautiful ten years ago, so I imagine it’s even more spectacular now. She’s got a lot of her stained glass in place. I thought you’d like to see it.”

“I would,” Thran agreed.

“I’ll brush my teeth, then we can head over. They’re just down the lane.”

In a few minutes, Thran and his husband headed across the back yard. There was a broken garden gate in the far corner, which Bard propped open to ease their return trip. They crossed the grounds of the house beside them to come to a low, sprawling house that seemed to have been added on to over many years. Wide garden beds swathed in pine straw wreathed the house, drawing Bard’s comment.

“All those beds will be full of flowers come June,” he pointed. “You won’t believe the difference. And the wisteria around the gazebo will have flowers as long as your arm. Incredible.”

“I cannot wait to see it. Ah, there is Rosie - she waves to us.”

Indeed, the short woman with a profusion of blond curls had opened the door to the screened porch to wave at them. “Hi, Bard! Hi, Thran! Come on in!”

They ducked onto the porch, walked past the stacks of covered lawn furniture, and into a warm and inviting kitchen. Thran breathed in appreciatively, for the air was scented with orange and cinnamon – of course, for the counter held racks of cooling buns.
“You’ve been busy all morning,” Bard smiled, looking at the buns.

“I took the morning off to cook for tonight, so I figured I might as well get some of the weekend baking done, too,” she grinned. “Wow, Bard – you got quite a haircut! You look great!”

Thran kept all enjoyment of what had followed that haircut off his face, but he was glad to see Bard’s gratified pleasure at Rosie’s compliment.

“Thanks, Rosie,” Bard gave her a smile. “It’s about time that I cleaned up my act.”

“Just in time for your next artist’s opening, hint, hint,” Rosie poked, giving Thran a conspiratorial look. “I hope you’re not letting Bard spend all of his life working on the house, Thran. We want him back in the barn!”

“The children and I have decreed that he must spend Sundays working on only his art,” Thran assured her. “He has gotten so much done on the house that we are comfortable, so yes, we want him back in the barn, too. He will not be completely himself until he is working his metal again.”

“That’s right!” Rosie put her hands on her hips and smiled fondly at Bard. “I like your husband even more, Bard. He’s got his head screwed on right!”

“He does,” Bard gave Thran a smile. “I’ve told Thran about your art, too, Rosie. Would you show him some of your pieces? You had some beautiful ones the last time I was here, and I’m sure you’ve added more, and I’d love to see them, too.”

“Aw, you’re sweet to remember,” Rosie tilted her head to smile her gratitude at Bard. “Sure, this place is full of stuff, if you’d like to see it.”

“Do you still have the one I liked so much?”

“I finally sold that one, Bard, about five years ago. But I’ve got another similar one. Come on, I’ll give you and Thran the grand tour.”

Sam and Rosie’s house wasn’t the biggest, and it wasn’t the neatest, given the four small children who lived there, but it was a charming blend of worn, homey comfort and sparkling stained glass. Rosie’s specialties were two extremes – detailed, floral-inspired mandalas; and edgy, modern pieces. The mandalas were exciting with brilliant colors; the modern pieces tended to be much more subdued and subtle. Thran particularly liked one of the modern ones in shades of clear and smoky glass, with small touches of blue.

“You need to call Shire Hills, Bard,” Rosie urged. “I know you say you haven’t started on anything yet, but you’ve still got those pieces in the barn. Get to know the Shire Hills folks now, so you’ll have them on hand when you do start casting and forging.”

“The barn’s still a mess, Rosie,” Bard said. “I’ve just started cleaning it out. It’ll still be a while yet. But I will call them. In the mean time, we’ve got another venture cooking, and we wanted to run some of it by you.”

“Oh?” Rosie gave them a sharp, inquisitive look. “What’s up?”

As they helped Rosie pack up her pots and bags of provisions, Thran and Bard explained about the ballet they wanted to bring to life, and whether it made sense to link it to any of the village’s summer festival plans, to the benefit of both. Rosie’s eyes grew brighter and more excited the more they talked.
“Yes, this would be perfect to pair with one of the summer festivals!” she exclaimed as they walked back to Bard and Thran’s house. “We’ve got one tentatively set for the middle of July that would be great. We’ve done it for the previous six years, and gotten more visitors each time. Music venues and some short plays as well as the usual art openings and fairs. We even had a poetry slam last year. But we haven’t done any dance yet. This would be a great addition!”

“Is there a venue nearby big enough to hold a ballet?” Thran asked. “This will be a full two or three acts, not merely a small exhibition.”

“And it’ll be a world premiere, too,” Bard grinned with a teasing look at Thran. “Featuring one of the world’s best in an original production.”

A small knot of worry formed in Thran’s stomach. So many details that would go into that premiere, that original production, a production that so far had only a list of scenes, an eccentric choreographer, and a very small corps de ballet...

“I don’t know whether you’ve seen anything there yet, given how recently your children started at the Imladris Academy, but they’ve got a beautiful auditorium, and it’s got light and sound equipment. I’ll bet you signed on to do some work with the school to ease your tuition, right?”

Bard and Thran nodded.

“Then talk to Headmaster L’Eärendil about it. Maybe you could use the school auditorium. You might want to offer a summer workshop to some of the older students to help you work on the production. They’d pay for the workshop and would get experience, and you’d get their labor.”

“That might answer several needs.” Thran set down his bags of Rosie’s provisions on the kitchen island. “I will talk to Headmaster L’Eärendil first thing on Monday.”

Rosie heaved her pot of soup stock onto the stove. “Wow, Bard! This is wonderful! You’ve done a boatload of work! Can I have a tour?”

“Sure,” Bard nodded. “We’ve got a ways to go, but it’s coming along.”

“Bard amazes me at how fast he works, and how beautiful are the results,” Thran added, smiling.

“He’s quite a craftsman, as well as an artist,” Rosie nodded. “We had some great times in this house, Thran. I can’t tell you how happy I am that we’ll soon have more, starting tonight.”

Bard and Thran took Rosie around to see the work Bard had done so far, and Thran was pleased at how profusely she oohed and aahed over everything. She was especially interested in their plans for the solarium.

“You have to show this to Sam when he gets here,” Rosie told them. “He’ll have all sorts of ideas about which plants would work for you. And have him take a look at the window glazing. He’s been to several workshops about greenhouse design and repair, and at least one of them talked about how to make old ones a bit more weathertight.”

“I will,” Bard assured her.

Before long, they were back in the kitchen to work. Thran enjoyed the afternoon concocting all sorts of delicious things. Bard added two kinds of muffins to the buns Rosie had brought, and Thran chopped mounds of vegetables and meats for the various soups. He was introduced to the novelty of a many-layered Mexican dip that the children apparently adored to scarf down on tortilla chips, as well as a peppery cheese dip. Before long, five big pots simmered on the stove – Bard’s chicken
vegetable, carrot ginger, and ham and bean soups; and Rosie’s potato bacon cheese and mushroom bisque soups. A board of cheeses with crackers was ready, and a huge bowl of fruit salad chilled in the refrigerator.

At just after four-thirty, the mudroom door banged open, signaling the arrival of the youngest members of Clan Ffyrnig.

“Hi, Miss Rosie!” Bain greeted. “Sweet, you made that cheese soup!”

“Uh-uh, wait until the party starts!” Rosie gestured with her ladle as if she were fencing. “You’ll hold for a few more minutes, I hope!”

“We saw Mr. Sam,” Tilda piped up. “He said to tell you that he’ll be along with everyone in a few minutes.”

“Tara and Kíllian and Finn will be a bit later, but they’re on their way,” Legolas reported.

Sigrid, however, had a determined light in her eyes as she came through the door, looking for her father in the press of people. Ah, she wanted to see her father’s transformation. It was sheer perversity that made Thran intercept her.

“Ah, ma chère!” he greeted. “And how are you this afternoon? Ready for the weekend?”

“Where’s Da, Ada? What happened this morning? Did he get a haircut after all?”

Thran heaved a sigh and contrived to look resigned. “Ah. So he did. I am desolate.”

Her eyes grew round. “What happened? Did he shave it all off? I thought he said he didn’t like that!”

“It is a sad thing.”

“No! He didn’t! Da! You didn’t!”

Bard appeared from the pantry. “I didn’t what?”

Sigrid’s glance raked her father and then glared at Thran. “You are a rat, Ada! You said you were desolate!”

“But I am, ma chère, for I am no longer the most handsome man in the house. For he is very handsome, is he not?”

Bard had to endure his eldest daughter walking around him not once, but twice. “Oooh, Ada, you are such a rat!”

Bard eyed Thran laughing, and Sigrid glaring. “Did you tell her I was a mess, cariad?”

“I did not.”

“No, but you implied it hard enough!” Sigrid snorted. “You are such a rat!”

“So I am a rat,” Thran shrugged, grinning. “But what of your Da? He is not a rat in the least, is he?”

“No, he’s not.” Sigrid glared at her father again, then her lips slid into a crooked smile. “You look great, Da. Even the earrings. Really great.”

“Thanks, Sig,” Bard offered a small smile. “Where’s Tilda? Or hasn’t she recognized me yet?”
“Til!” Sigrid called. “Did you see Da? He got all his hair cut off!”

“That’s right!” Bain looked away from the plate of dip he’d been drooling over. “Wow, Da, you really did! You’re practically bald!”

“He is not!” was Tilda’s stout reply as she regarded her father with her usual consideration. “You still have lots of hair, Da. I like it.”

“So do you still recognize me?”

Tilda dimpled as she nodded. “You look nice.”

“Thank you, little doll,” Bard tapped Tilda’s nose. “How was school today?”

The conversation veered off into the usual week’s end of school snippets, but the prospect of the impending soup and such were too much of a draw for anyone to want to think about school for very long. In a few minutes, Sam arrived with Elanor, Frodo, Rose, and Merry in tow, and a box full of his bottled beer. Finn arrived shortly thereafter, saying that Killian and Tara would be along soon. Contrary to Sigrid’s prediction, he had a box full of cupcakes to add to the party. Not fifteen minutes later, a knock on the front door sent Thran out into the main hall to open it. There stood Killian with a plastic bin of homemade chocolate cookies and Tara with a bowl of some kind of layered dessert, and behind them their parents. Thran had met both sets of parents only briefly at Legolas’s first Saturday fencing class, so he was quick to ask them in.

“Please, we have plenty of soup if you would like to join us,” he offered.

All four agreed, so the party was soon in full swing. With close to twenty people, people were soon gathered around the kitchen table, the dining room table, and the sitting room. Bain, Legolas, Finn, and Sigrid got a good fire going in the sitting room fireplace. Tara and Killian’s parents fit in easily for the short time that they were there, for they had tickets to share a movie in the village, and would return to pick up their children later. When they left, the initial ravenous rush of children to the various pots and plates had slowed to a dull roar, so the youths gathered in the sitting room, leaving the kitchen to the adults and younger children. It was nice to see Bard catch up with his old friends, and Tilda was happy to have a few children her age to talk to.

How different this was from the parties Thran had attended over the years of his ballet career. This one was so much less studied, and very much louder with all the children laughing and giggling. The youths began to toast marshmallows, and were so generous making treats for the smaller children that Rosie laughingly asked them to stop. Thran ate some of every kind of soup, and agreed with Bard that Rosie’s cheesy bacon concoction was wonderful, from the crusty toasted cheese bread that went at the bottom of the bowl and the soup itself layered on top, to the sprinkles of bacon, chives, and cheese that finished it. He even sampled Tara’s trifle, a decadent combination of sponge cake, raspberry jam, and creamy custard.

He refused to think about how many barres he’d have to do to maintain his leanness if he ate like this more than once a month, small portions notwithstanding. If only he still had the metabolism of his son and his friends, who descended upon the kitchen at nine o’clock to satisfy Round Two of their hunger. They scarfed down what remained of all of the appetizers and desserts, and most of the muffins and soup.

“I told you we wouldn’t have many leftovers,” Bard shook his head as Thran contemplated the scattered dishes. “They might’ve licked the dishes clean if we’d let them.”

“Don’t say that out loud,” Sam leaned closer to them as he brought an empty platter to the sink for
washing. “I caught Merry doing just that the other day. Ketchup from his sandwich. He loves the stuff.”

Bard laughed as he took the plate from Sam and put it in the sink. “At least it wasn’t mayonnaise.”

“Or mustard. Or horseradish. He loves that, too. I can’t get him to touch a green bean, but he’ll eat horseradish by the spoonful.”


“Go figure,” Bard agreed, soaping the platter. “Dishtowels are in the drawer beside you, Sam.”

Rosie and Thran began to ferry the rest of the dirty dishes to the sink to make their way into the dishwasher or the washing sink. By the time Tara and Killian’s parents returned, the dishwasher was running, Rosie’s things were stowed in their bags, and only a few remnants remained of the enormous spread of food. Finn took his leave with his mates, making a point to thank Bard and Thran for inviting him, and that he hoped to see them again soon.

Sam and Rosie departed with their brood soon after. Sam wanted to take a look at the solarium in the light to see what needed to be done, if anything, and he promised to email pictures of solar powered lanterns for the Japanese garden they had planned. He and Rosie also wanted to talk more about the possible addition of Thran’s ballet to the village’s July arts festival, so they would visit again in a day or two. They waved an enthusiastic goodbye with their children, and set off across the back yard with torches in hand.

The fire had burned down to a soft flame when Bard and Thran finally sat down. As quiet descended, the children calmed from their excitement, and were glad to start the cycle of showers. Tilda crawled in between her fathers to wait her turn, happy for the respite.

“Did you get enough to eat, Kukla?” Thran asked with a smile, as his small doll burped quietly beside him.

She nodded. “I had three kinds of soup, two muffins, a lot of Mexican and cheese dip, and some trifle. And a cupcake. And five s’mores.”

Thran’s laugh was incredulous. “And you have not exploded yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“I’d better be careful when I hug you goodnight, little doll,” Bard mused. “Or you just might.”

“I hope not. That’d hurt.”

“It would.”

“Frodo ate five s’mores, too. Merry ate six.”

“Did he put horseradish on them?” Thran snickered. “Or ketchup?”

Tilda gave Thran an alarmed expression. “Ugh.”

“Apparently he likes them on everything else,” Bard explained. “That’s what his Da said.”

“He tried the Mexican dip because he thought the sour cream was mayonnaise. He wouldn’t eat any more when he found out it wasn’t.”
“I’m sure you hated that,” Bard smiled down at her.

Tilda shook her head vigorously. “I ate it for him. I love Mexican dip.”

“I’m done!” Bain yelled from upstairs.

“Your turn,” Bard gave Tilda a gentle poke. “Brush your teeth, too.”


“I will come up to tell you goodnight soon, Russkaya Kukla.”

“Okay.”

Thran hummed when Tilda had gone upstairs. “I hope the Gamgees do not spend the night awake to deal with the consequences of too many s’mores in small stomachs.”

Bard grunted. “Children can eat almost anything, so I expect they’ll be all right. Some of the things they eat, like horseradish on a spoon, might choke the mortals among us, but not them.”

The children were too tired to read tonight, and none of them took long to finish their wash. Thran and Bard went upstairs to tuck them in bed, and Thran came back downstairs to watch the fire while Bard showered. His husband returned in his sleep pants and Henley to sit beside him and enjoy the last embers of the fire. When it was finally out, both of them were yawning. They padded upstairs, and Bard settled into bed while Thran rinsed quickly. The bed was nicely warmed when he returned from the bathroom, and he settled with Bard into their usual tangle of arms and legs. He was grateful to shut his eyes after such a busy day.

“At least we’ll have a few muffins to toast for breakfast tomorrow,” Bard murmured sleepily. Tonight, it was he who lay with his head on Thran’s shoulder and his arm across Thran’s chest. This allowed Thran to run his fingers through his husband’s newly shortened hair, which brought a smile to his lips as he thought about exacting revenge for his husband’s earlier piracy. “Do you and Legolas plan to fence tomorrow?”

“I do,” Thran sighed, stroking Bard’s hair. “I should answer my mobile instead, but this may be the last time I can go with Legolas for some time. I relish that time with my son.”

“I’m glad,” Bard sighed, snuggling closer. “It was good to see Sam and Rosie tonight, too. And spend a little time with Kíllian and Tara’s parents. I’ve missed being part of a community. Our apartment building was never that.”

“It was only a place to sleep,” Thran agreed. “This is a much nicer community, as well as a much nicer place to sleep.”

“What, you’re not going to exact payment for what a pirate did to you this morning?”

“I will,” Thran grinned, still playing with Bard’s hair. “But I want to make a proper job of it, and both of us are too tired for that tonight. For now, let us fall asleep like puppies, as you put it. My revenge will be sweeter if I give you a day or two to anticipate it.”

Bard’s chuckle was low. “I love you, angel. Pale as snow, with a heart as dark as the devil’s.”

“Guilty of both, and shamelessly so. Consider it a mark of my deep love for you.”

Chuckling, Bard stroked Thran’s shoulder, and nuzzled a kiss on Thran’s chest.

“Spokoynoy nochiu,” Thran replied. “Ya lyublyu tebya.”
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

After so many happy days, a Ghost of Christmas Past looms for an angel, a saint, and a choir of cherubs.

Bard got up at eight the next morning to make sure that Thran and Legolas had a good breakfast before they headed out to fence at the Gondor’s academy. They had enough muffins left from last night to supplement a mountain of scrambled eggs, most of which Legolas scarfed down as if he hadn’t eaten in a week. Bard was used to this, given Bain’s voracious appetite, but Thran still found it a spectacle.

“Don’t neglect your breakfast just because you’re in awe of Legolas’s appetite,” Bard nudged Thran, who sat with his chin cradled in his hand as he watched his son wolf down his plateful.

Thran sighed as he returned his attention to his plate, where the remains of a single plain muffin without butter and two scrambled eggs lay waiting. He made short work of the eggs, and went back to his contemplation of Legolas’s voracity as he took up the rest of his muffin. “I am not sure I ever ate like you, synok. Given that you are as lean as the proverbial rail, I can only think that you are completely hollow inside.”

Legolas grinned, unabashed at his father’s observation. “We’ll be fencing all morning, Papa. I’ll burn it off, and so will you. Have some more eggs, at least. They’re protein.”

Thran gave Bard an exasperated look. “You have infected Legolas with your concern about what I eat.”

“I’ll gladly infect everyone in the house with that,” Bard returned with a smile, plopping another spoonful of eggs on Thran’s plate from the serving bowl. “I want as many people as possible looking out for you.”

Thran’s exasperation faded into a fond if reluctant smile, leading Bard to wink at Legolas. At Legolas’s giggle, Thran caught the undercurrent between them and shook his head. “It is a conspiracy.”

“I don’t care what you call it, as long as you eat enough that you don’t get any leaner. You have a lot of dancing coming up, regardless of where you sign.”

“I suppose after we fence I will be forced to turn on my mobile again,” Thran grumped. He took up a forkful of eggs and chewed. “I will likely find it glued to my ear all afternoon again.”

“It’ll be less talking and more dancing soon, I hope,” Bard consoled, finishing his muffin. “What would the two of you like for lunch today?”

“What are we having for supper?” Legolas asked.

Bard pointed to the oven where a pan of chicken breasts already roasted. “A big chicken casserole. Tomorrow, I’ve got a lamb roast prepped for the clan to put in, since I’m not allowed to cook for some strange reason.”
“Mmm,” Legolas brightened. “Do we have mint jelly for the lamb?”

“Wouldn’t have lamb without it.”

“Could we make pizza tomorrow for lunch?”

“Sure. Bain and Sigrid know how to make the dough.”

“Then Papa, do you like jambalaya? That would make a good hot lunch today. It looks bitter out.”

“It does,” Thran agreed. “It would not surprise me if we have snow today. I like the jambalaya, too, if perhaps it could have chicken in it, too?”

Bard nodded. “I’ve got extra chicken in the oven for you, angel, so I can put some in the jambalaya. You’ll be home about one?”

“Unless you have anything you want us to pick up on the way home.”

“I’ve got plenty here to keep me busy. Ceiling and woodwork in our room this morning.”

“Then let us finish our breakfast and go, Legolas. I am eager to fence this morning.”

“Me, too, Papa.” Legolas scarfed down the rest of his eggs, then carried his plate to the sink to rinse it and put it in the dishwasher. “I’ll be ready in a moment.”

Bard soon saw his husband and tall son out to the SUV, fencing cases in hand, waved a farewell, and headed back inside at a trot. Legolas was right – it was bitter out, even for late January, and the overcast sky threatened snow before the day was out, which was all the more reason to stay inside and get the last of the painting done in the bedroom. He took the roasted chicken out of the oven and set it in the fridge to cool for tonight’s supper casserole, then headed upstairs. His children were all still asleep, and Bard hoped he could get most of the ceiling done before they woke. Out came the drop cloth, down went the paint pan and the roller, and in came the ladder. He set to.

After so much practice, Bard covered the ceiling in less than two hours, so that was one more thing out of the way. Tilda finally roused, and he roused the other two children up as well so they could have breakfast and get started on their homework. While they ate, he put together the casserole for tonight’s supper –

His mobile chimed. He pulled it out of his pocket, wondering if it were Thran, but it wasn’t Thran’s name that came up on the tiny screen.

It was the New York City police department.

“Hello?”

“Bard Bowman?”

“Speaking,” he said, as three sets of eyes looked up from the kitchen table.

“Björn Björnsson. I’m with the New York City Prosecutor’s Office. You’re a hard man to catch up to, Mr. Bowman.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. Björnsson?” Bard ventured cautiously, but his children knew him too well and exchanged worried looks.

“It’s urgent that I talk to you and Thran Oropherson about some aspects of what happened on
Christmas Day.”

Bard’s eyes strayed to the children. “Give me a minute, okay?”

He put his mobile to his chest, blocking the speaker. “You all keep on with your homework.”

“What is it, Da?” Sigrid demanded. “Is something wrong with Ada? With Legolas?”

“They’re fine, Sig.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know that anything’s wrong. I’ll find out, okay? Just hold tight while I talk.”

He ducked out to the main hall and ran upstairs before Sigrid or the other children could ask more.

“Go ahead, Mr. Björnsson,” Bard murmured, once he’d ducked into the bedroom and shut the doors.

“The case against Angelo Orker has distressed him enough that his lawyers have suggested a plea bargain. I’d like to discuss what that means to you, Mr. Oropherson, and most importantly, your children, as soon as possible.”

Bard thought fast. “I see. What do you need?”

“If you can call upon me in my office in the city, that would be ideal.”

“Have you talked to Mr. Oropherson?”

A gruff grunt. “He’s even harder to track down than you are, Mr. Bowman.”

“I’ll let him know you want to talk to him. When do you want to talk to us?”

“The sooner the better, ideally.”

“Do you need to talk to our children?”

“No.”

“All right. Is Monday morning soon enough?”

“Tomorrow would be better, but I understand that your children are with you, so Monday would accommodate them better.”

“I appreciate that, Mr. Björnsson. Let me contact Mr. Oropherson, and I’ll call you back.”

Mr. Björnsson gave Bard his contact information, and hung up. Bard stuffed his mobile back into his pocket, and swallowed.

What was a plea bargain?

He headed downstairs, and ducked through the kitchen, not looking at his children as he passed into the sitting room. He found Thran’s laptop, and sat on the sofa to open the search engine.


“Da?” Sigrid queried, coming in from the kitchen. Tilda and Bain trailed after her.
"I don’t know yet, Sig,” Bard shook his head.

“At least tell us what it’s about,” Bain asked. His arm went around Tilda, who looked at Bard with unblinking eyes.

The computer screen rolled, and Bard scanned it quickly. Ah – a plea bargain was an offer for a defendant to accept a lesser charge so as to avoid a more serious one. Accepting a plea bargain avoided a lengthy trial. Okay, he understood the rudiments of that. The next thing he did was type in Björn Björnsson’s name into the search engine. He got the usual list of social media entries, but nothing definite. So next he typed in New York City Prosecutor’s Office, but that didn’t list any names. So he pulled out his mobile and typed the number listed on the Prosecutor’s Office’s web page. When it connected, an operator asked how to direct his call.

“Björn Björnsson, please.”

“One moment, please.”

Bard waited, holding a hand up at his children’s impatience.

“Björnsson,” came the same gruff voice that Bard had talked to earlier.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Mr. Björnsson,” Bard said. “It’s Bard Bowman again. I just wanted to confirm that you were really with the Prosecutor’s Office.”

A silence met Bard’s honesty, but a grunt eventually reached Bard’s ear. “I understand your caution, Mr. Bowman. Now that you have, can I expect you and Mr. Oropherson on Monday?”

“I’ve yet to talk to him, but I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. I apologize for my interruption.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

Bard ended the call.

“Are you going to tell us what this is about now?” Sigrid demanded.

“What’s a prosecutor?” Tilda asked tentatively.

“It’s the cops,” Bain said lowly. “It’s about that day at the park.”

“It is,” Bard nodded. “And I don’t know what it’s about, so don’t worry about anything yet. They just want to talk to us, that’s all.”

“What, all of us?” Bain asked.

“Do we have to see Lance Dunmont?” Tilda gulped.

“Hold on, children,” Bard held up his hands. “Let’s stay calm. Yes, this is about what happened at the park. That was the prosecutor who’s trying to make sure that the people at the park are punished for what they did. They just want to talk to Thran and me about what’s happened since Christmas Day, that’s all.”

“What about Lance Dunmont?” Tilda quavered.

Bard beckoned, and Tilda came to sit beside Bard, cuddling close. “I don’t know what the prosecutor will tell us, but he wants to see just Thran and me, not any of you. And none of you have to see any of those people. Once Thran gets home with Legolas, we’ll talk to the prosecutor again,
and then we’ll know more about what’s happening.”

Sigrid and Bain exchanged looks, and beside him Tilda looked back and forth between her siblings. Bard squeezed her shoulders. “How much homework do you have left? Let’s think about that, and not worry about something unknown.”

“I’m finished everything,” Tilda said quietly.

“I’ve got half of an essay left,” Bain continued.

“I’m working on my French report,” finished Sigrid.

“Okay. You can help me with lunch, little doll,” Bard looked to Tilda. “It’s after noon, so Thran and Legs will be home soon. I’m making jambalaya.”

“Okay, Da,” the children murmured, as everyone went back into the kitchen. The older children settled at the table again, and Tilda collected her papers and folders to put her work away. Bard kept an eye on everyone as he got out the Dutch ovens for the jambalaya. He’d make two batches, a big one with two kinds of sausage, and a smaller one with mostly chicken for Thran. Once Tilda put her school things together, Bard put her to work, collecting olive oil, onions, and the bag of rice from the pantry, then the peppers, sausages, and chicken from the fridge. He chopped the veg while Tilda carefully poured oil into the two Dutch ovens, then she stirred the veg in the hot oil with a handful of frozen okra bits while he chopped sausage and chicken. Keeping Tilda busy helped ease her apprehension, and soon the aromatic smell of sautéing veg and meat filled the kitchen. Bard held the big bag of rice for Tilda to measure out the right amount into each pot, then he added water and Creole spices. Soon both pots were covered to simmer until the rice was ready. Tilda chose fruit for the big bowl that went on the table, and she arranged cheeses on a cutting board and got the boxes of crackers.

“I’m done, Da,” Sigrid said, closing her laptop.

“Another five minutes and I’ll be done, too, Bain added. “Smells good, Da.”

“It does,” Legolas said, coming through the mudroom into the kitchen, with his father close behind. “I’m starving!”

“Bain’s almost through his essay, so we’ll eat after that,” Bard said, patting Legolas’s arm in greeting and brushing a kiss on Thran’s lips. “How was the fencing?”

“I had a blast,” Legolas confessed with a big smile on his face. “Lady Arwen is wonderful! She and Tara had a spectacular saber match today that brought down the house, and Lord Aragorn did the same with Killian at épée. I can’t believe that Killian actually scored twice against him, could you Papa? They were amazing. And Papa and I had a good long one, too.”

“Who won that one?” Bain asked eagerly.

“Papa,” Legolas admitted. “But not by much.”

“ Barely is a more apt description,” Thran shrugged. “In another month, I expect our situations to be reversed.”

“The police department called,” Tilda blurted.

Bard winced at how fast the genial mood in the kitchen turned wary, apprehensive, nervous. Thran’s eyes skewered Bard’s.
“Everyone, calm down,” Bard said firmly, before anyone said anything. “Yes, they called, and no, I don’t know exactly what for. Let’s have our lunch, and then Thran and I will call the gentleman back, and we’ll find out what’s what.”

“But Da—” Sigrid protested.

“It’s not fair to hide what’s going on from us,” Bain added.

“You’re right,” Bard agreed. “It’s not. But until I know what’s going on, I can’t tell you what’s going on. So Bain, finish your essay, and Sigrid and Tilda and I will get the rest of lunch ready while Thran and Legolas but their blades away and change their clothes.”

“Does that mean you’ll tell us what’s going on at some point?”

“When I find that out, your Papa and I will decide. If this is just a request for us to fill out a lot of paperwork, then there’ll be nothing to tell, will there?”

The children exchanged glances, but their shrugs conceded the truth of Bard’s observation.

“Why don’t Tilda and I get the rest of lunch ready, and you and Ada call the guy back?” Sigrid pressed. “I’m not sure I can eat lunch with this hanging over us.”

The rest of the children nodded, so Bard nodded. “That’ll work. I hope it won’t take long.”

“I’ll put the blades away, Papa,” Legolas offered. “I’d rather you and Bard find out, too.”

“So we will,” Thran nodded. “We will call from upstairs so I may change my clothes.”

Thran led the way out of the kitchen. As soon as Bard was sure they were out of earshot of the children, he leaned close to Thran and told him about the prosecutor who’d called.

“What did he want?” Thran asked lowly as they came in to the bedroom.

“Do you know what a plea bargain is?”

Thran’s eyes turned icy, but he nodded.

“It sounds as if Angelo’s side wants one. That’s all he said. I checked on the Internet to find out what one is, but I don’t know what the offer is. I called the police department back to confirm that Mr. Björn Björnsson really is with the prosecutor’s office. He wants to see us without the children to talk about whatever Angelo’s side is up to. That’s what we’re to call him back about – when to see him.”

“When do they want to see us?”

“The sooner the better, it seems. But he did acknowledge that we have the children to see to, and grudgingly agreed that Monday would suit.”

Thran hummed. His expression was forbidding; his posture, coiled. “The children are right,” he said at last, pulling out his mobile and handing it to Bard. “We can put my mobile on speaker when we call. Better we call now and find out what this is about than wait.”

Thran peeled off his fencing shirt and pants while Bard dialed the number of the prosecutor’s office. By the time he pulled on Henley, jeans, and warm socks, Bard had Mr. Björnsson on the line.

“Björnsson.”
“Hello, Mr. Björnsson. This is Bard Bowman again. I have Thran Oropherson here. We’re on a speaker phone, so we can both hear you.”

“I appreciate you calling me back so quickly,” Mr. Björnsson said. “I’ve been trying to reach both of you for several days.”

“Bard tells me that the other party has offered a plea bargain,” Thran said grimly.

“I think we’re close to that,” the prosecutor replied. “It’s important that I speak face to face with you and your attorney about what that plea bargain might be, and what the ramifications are about accepting it or not accepting it are.”

“You said you don’t need to speak with our children,” Bard wanted to clarify.

“That’s right. We have detailed statements from all of them, and in most cases there’s no need to involve them in further discussions. When is it possible for you to come into the office?”

“I assume the negotiations with our attackers remains fluid,” Thran said. “Would an earlier appearance hasten a conclusion to that negotiation?”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. This was an aspect of Thran he hadn’t seen before – focused, intense, and merciless.

“It would certainly encourage a conclusion, if I were clear about what paths of negotiation you’re comfortable with.”

“I will call our lawyer, and see what his schedule is. If we can come in today or tomorrow, would that help?”

“I can accommodate almost any time tomorrow, or after three today.”

“Then let me see what is possible, and we will call you back.”

“I appreciate your quick attention to this. I look forward to your call, Mr. Oropherson.”

“I, too. Goodbye.”

Thran reached for his mobile to end the call, but immediately made another call. Bard didn’t have to guess who he was calling – sure enough, in seconds, the call connected.

“Mr. Nori, please. Thran Oropherson.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Bard smiled, wishing a certain Angelo Orker could see the ruthless expression on his angel’s face. All Thran needed was a sword to embody the Archangel Michael at his most devastating.

“Mr. Nori. Good afternoon. I have just received a call from the New York City Prosecutor’s Office about a potential plea bargain. I assume you are aware of this.”

Apparently the answer was an affirmative.

“The prosecutor’s name is Björn Björnsson. He has asked to see my husband, my lawyer, and me so that we may encourage this negotiation to an appropriate end. What is your availability today and tomorrow?”

Thran listened for a few seconds. “One moment.” He looked at Bard. “If you are not comfortable
leaving the children here this afternoon, perhaps we may call upon Rosie to host them for a few
hours?”

Bard nodded. “I’ll give her a call now.”

Bard pulled out his mobile to call Rosie as he went out onto the landing. Sam answered, and Bard
explained that he and Thran needed to tend to something immediately, and would he mind if the
children stayed with them for the rest of the afternoon. Sam was quick to agree, so Bard thanked him
and disconnected. He went back into the bedroom, giving Thran a thumbs-up.

“The children are set.”

Thran nodded. “Yes, we are available this afternoon. Three-thirty? Yes, that is fine. I appreciate your
quick response. Yes, until then. Goodbye.”

Thran disconnected the call, and turned a chilling look on Bard. “It seems that you are about to meet
the elusive Mr. Nori sooner than I expected.”

Glad that Thran’s glare was not directed at him, Bard mustered a smile. “That’s something, then.
Let’s have lunch, then we’ll see the children over to Sam and Rosie’s, and be off.”

Thran nodded, but he didn’t speak as he stood up. Bard caught his arm.

“Is that glare just on general principles, or is there something about this I haven’t figured out?
Because if you go downstairs looking like that, you’ll scare the stuffing out of our children.”

Thran met Bard’s eyes, registered his observation, and made a visible effort to relax his angry
posture. “I am sorry, lyubov moya. To think about what happened on Christmas Day still enrages
me. I do not like the idea that I am about to negotiate with such filth. But you are right that we must
offer a kinder face to our children, who are already on edge, especially our Kukla.”

Bard nodded. “Tilda’s still scared of Lance Dunmont. He was the first thing she mentioned when the
prosecutor called.”

“I do not want to frighten her more,” Thran murmured, but he sounded as if he were telling himself
that rather than Bard. “I will hold my glares until we are safely on the road, so that I neither frighten
our family, nor reveal my fury to the prosecutor.”

“Okay,” Bard nodded. “Let’s feed the clan, then.”

“I will call our Mr. Björnsson back and tell him when we will arrive.”

Thran redialed the prosecutor’s number, was quickly connected, and told Mr. Björnsson when they
would appear. The man thanked him in a few words, and Thran disconnected the call.

“Now, let us eat.”

Bard gave Thran a frank look. “See that you do. You don’t when things get tense, but this afternoon,
you have to, if only to reassure the children.”

Thran sighed, then finally eased his focused glare into a reluctant smile. “You are right. I will do my
best. But it has always been hard for me to eat when I am worried.”

“I understand. But we don’t know if we should worry yet, and if so, what about. So try to let it go
until we know more. Or I’ll pull a long face about making a whole pot of jambalaya with chicken just for you, and now you won’t eat it.”

With a chagrined chuckle, Thran went with Bard down the stairs. “That is a very dirty tactic, lyubov moya.”

“Whatever works, cariad. I promise not to insist that you eat any dessert, just a good lunch.”

“Thank you.”

Four sets of worried eyes greeted them as they returned to the kitchen, so Bard was glad that at least he and Thran were smiling. That defused a little of the children’s tension, but not enough that all of them didn’t erupt into anxious questions.

“We still don’t know much,” Bard held up his hands. “Let’s get our plates, and then we’ll tell you what little we know.”

The children queued up to the stove obediently. Anxious they might be, but no one shied from filling his or her plate. Bard let Thran go ahead of him and made sure the tall dancer put a good portion on his plate before he filled his own. As Bard sat down, he couldn’t resist a smile at the expectant faces that met his.

“Thran and I will meet the prosecutor this afternoon, so that we don’t drag this out,” Bard began. “We still don’t know much, other than there might be a plea bargain coming from Angelo’s lawyer.”

“What’s a plea bargain?” Bain asked, and Tilda looked no less curious.

“I know what it is,” Sigrid volunteered. “We studied it in government class. It’s an offer to accept a lesser offense in order to avoid a bigger one. New York calls stuff like what happened to us violent felonies. They’re divided into a bunch of classes – A, B, C, D, and E. Class A violent felonies are the worst ones, like murder in the first degree. If you’re convicted of one of those, it’s usually an automatic life sentence without chance of parole. Angelo pulled a gun and shot at us, and he hit Da, so I could see him getting slapped with a charge of attempted first-degree murder. Lots of the other stuff he did are Class B violent felonies, like first-degree aggravated assault with a deadly weapon – he had a knife as well as a gun. The sentence for a Class B felony varies, but it’s usually five to twenty-five years, unless the prosecutor decides that because Mr. D was there, then it’s ten to thirty years. Angelo might want to offer to plead to the Class B and hope he gets off with a lesser sentence, rather than risk getting slapped with the Class A charge. Unless he’s got a prior felony conviction, which means the sentences are longer.”

Bard gaped at his daughter, and at the end of the table so did Thran. Sigrid gave them both an exasperated look. “Ye gods, you two! What did you expect? That I’d just sit at home and worry about what was going on? I found us movers, didn’t I? I can read my government textbooks and the Internet about this, too.”

“I would have liked to know what you found out,” Bard said mildly.

“I figured you’d already looked, and didn’t want to worry us, so I kept quiet, too. But Bain and Legs knew.” Sigrid’s eyes fell on her sister. “I didn’t say anything to you, Til, because I didn’t want you to worry.”

“I don’t want to, either,” the little girl admitted. “But I didn’t really understand a lot of what you just said, anyway. I just don’t want to see Lance Dunmont ever again. He tried to hurt Legolas.”

Her eyes darkened and she looked at her lap. Legolas’s face pinched. “He tried, Kukla, but he didn’t
hurt me. You should’ve seen your sister. She hurt him, badly enough that he’s the one who’s scared now. We’re Clan Ffyrnig, and nothing he ever wants to see again.”

“I hope so,” Tilda said softly.

“Thanks, Legolas,” Bard wished the youth, who nodded back. “Is there anything else your research told you about a plea bargain that we need to know about, Sig?”

Despite the humorous yet resigned tone of Bard’s question, Sigrid didn’t smile. Instead, she nodded. “There is. It’s not just Angelo who might be spared something if we accept a plea bargain. We might, too. A plea bargain means the case doesn’t go to trial, either before a judge or a jury. It’s done. Angelo will want that because if we have a good prosecutor who makes enough noise about Angelo being armed and shooting at children, a judge and jury will bury him. And we might not want the case to go to trial, because if Angelo’s got a good lawyer, he’ll put us all on the witness stand and harass us. He can try all he wants with me, but...”

She cut her eyes to Tilda, but didn’t say anything else.

“You mean he’ll – ”

“Try to harass me, yeah,” Sigrid cut her brother off with a warning look. Bain understood at once, and smothered anything else.

“Oh – um, I’d like to see him try that,” Legolas tried to cover for Bain, with a quick look.

“It’s something to think about,” Bard nodded. Thran sat at the other end of the table, his posture tight again, so Bard cleared his throat to draw his husband’s attention. He pointedly picked up his spoon. “I called Mr. Sam and Miss Rosie, and we’ll take you over there after lunch while we’re gone. You all know the usual rules about behaving yourself, and making nice with the other children. I know they’re all mostly younger than you, but I’m sure they’d love it if you play games with them, or read with them. We should be back before supper.”

“Oh, Da, okay, Bard,” went around the table, and finally everyone began their lunch. Bard made an effort to ask Legolas about the morning’s fencing, so the atmosphere soon eased as his excitement about the various matches and instruction came through. By the time lunch was done, the children were calmer. Tilda offered to bring her Dinky Farm game to play with some of the children, and Bain collected his soccer ball so that he, Legolas, and Sigrid might entice some of the others out for a match.

“I don’t think that you’ll get to play soccer today,” Bard said, looking out of the kitchen window as they got on coats and hats. “It’s snowing.”

“Really?” Tilda peered out, smiling. “Maybe we can make a snowman.”

“Maybe so. Come on, everyone. Let’s get you to Rosie and Sam’s.”

They piled into Thran’s SUV, made the quick hop to Sam and Rosie’s, and Sam let them in with a big smile and wave. As the children came inside, Bard took Sam aside to explain in a few words where he and Thran were going. Sam’s smile faded into concern as Bard told him what had happened on Christmas Day.

“Oh, that’s horrible!” Sam exclaimed lowly.

Bard nodded. “I’m telling you only in case one of them says something about where we’re off to. Sigrid’s got a firm grip on it, and the boys do mostly. But Tilda’s still shaken up. If she brings it up,
just be positive. We don’t know what’s up yet; that’s what we’re going to find out. So no worries.”

Sam nodded. “Got it. We’ll keep them busy until you come home.”

“Thanks, Sam. If it gets late, I’ve got a big chicken casserole in the fridge for supper. Help yourself.”

“I will. Why don’t you give me a call when you’re on your way home?”

“Good idea. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“Righto. Good luck. I’ll fill Rosie in.”

“Okay. See you soon, I hope.”

Bard and Thran headed back to the SUV, and silently made their way down the lane to the highway. As Bard snuck a look at Thran, he winced at the formidable glare that had returned to his husband’s face – it was as focused as a laser. If only it were one – it had only to draw a bead on Angelo and his minions, and they’d all be burnt to ashes. But it was wishful thinking to hope that their Christmas Day melee would end so easily.

The meeting that awaited them might reveal a different end, but it wasn’t likely to be such an easy one.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint spend the afternoon in the New York City prosecutor's office, and a certain ginger-haired mover and shaker does his thing.

Chapter Notes

For once, I have taken artistic liberties to navigate our gorgeous guys through the maze of criminal prosecutions. The laws and procedures are dizzying to understand, and I have played very fast and even looser with them both. This is by no means an accurate portrayal of what happens in a real criminal case, so please forgive my blatant misrepresentation in order to move my story forward.

All I can say is don't commit a crime. You don't want to experience any of this first hand.

Thran drove in silence, for once grateful that traffic was heavy enough that he had to concentrate on maneuvering the SUV amidst the other vehicles. That kept him from focusing on his rage. Those suk in syn drug gang thugs had attacked his children, had attacked and nearly killed his saint, his husband, had actually laid hands on his Legolas, and now they had the audacity to want to strike a deal with him? To weasel out of everything they had coming to them, everything they deserved? It would be a frigid day in the Underworld of any culture before he –

“Thran, take it easy. We'll get there in plenty of time.”

That was Bard’s soft voice, not alarmed, not pressing, but still...

The speedometer read ninety.

His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

Thran took his foot off the gas pedal at once, and forced himself to loosen his grip.

“Thank you,” he managed to say quietly, but his voice was more snarl than anything else. “It would not do to be stopped for a traffic violation on the way to the police station.”

Bard rubbed Thran’s thigh in commiseration. “No, it wouldn’t.”

“I am sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re upset.”

Thran didn’t insult Bard by trying to deny the obvious. “I am.”

“About what specifically?”
It took a lot of effort for Thran to swallow the multitude of curses that came to mind. “After what they did... now they try to negotiate out of payment for what they did.”

“We can’t jump the gun, Thran. We don’t know what they want. Given all the stuff they’re likely to be charged with, I’m not sure they’ll be able to negotiate their way out of much.”

Thran hummed in concession. “I hope not.”

“I hope not, too. But it’d be better for us if we go in with a bit more stoicism to hear what Mr. Björnsson has to tell us.”

“I will do my best.”

“I know you will. If it helps, try to be calm for our children. We want what’s best for Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda, and starting off stoic will help us get that.”

“That is a good way to look at it. For I cannot be calm when I think about how that fucking thug shot you.”

“Then don’t think about it. I’m fine, I’m here, I didn’t even have to go to hospital. Please, cariad. Just don’t think about it. Pretend this is just another dance performance, and do what you do to calm any pre-performance jitters.”

“I do not have pre-performance jitters. Not like this.”

“Okay, then focus on your breath like you do in your yoga. Relax in the pose – isn’t that what you always tell me?”

Thran took several breaths as Bard suggested. “This is one of those rare times when it is not good to be Russian.”

Bard smothered a chuckle. “You do have the look of Arkhangel Mikhail about you. We’re almost there, so it won’t be long before we know what’s what.”

Thran only hummed in reply, but he was grateful to his husband for trying to ease his fury. Bard was right; walking into this so clearly enraged would only give his enemies something to exploit. Better that he remained the Prince of Ice, rather than the Balrog of Moria.

* * *

Before long, Thran and Bard had parked and passed inside the building housing the city prosecutors’ offices. Bard quickly moved ahead to ask the officer at the reception desk for the way to Mr. Björnsson’s office. Thankfully, Thran let him; his angel was still working to school his face into something resembling anything but fury. Bard didn’t blame him in the least, but it wouldn’t help them if his husband acted the divo today. The prosecutor’s office likely wanted to help them make the best case they could, so they didn’t need to antagonize them from the start. Bard thanked the officer on duty, and drew Thran to the elevator, which took them up several floors. As they stepped out, Bard pointed left, so they headed that way. This was a busy place, full of people coming and going, and voices at a constant buzz. It seemed to be a maze of cubicles until they came to the far wall and a row of glass-walled offices. A tall, blond man in an impeccable business suit stood outside in the small waiting area, a trim briefcase on the floor by his ankle.
“Ah,” Thran said, recognizing the man. “Kell.”

“Thran,” the man nodded, shaking Thran’s hand.

“Kell, this is Bard Bowman,” Thran nodded to Bard. “Bard, this is Celeborn Lothlori, our lawyer.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up, but he leaned forward to shake Kell’s hand firmly. “Nice to meet you.”

“Is Mr. Nori here, too?” Thran asked.

Kell nodded. “He’s having a conversation with the defense attorney.”

“Ah.”

Bard looked back and forth between his husband and this high-powered lawyer with the imposing air and the inscrutable face. Watching them was like watching kabuki, another arcane ritual full of nuance and subtlety – Bard had no idea what was really going on under the posturing.

“Mr. Björnsson’s taking a call. He’ll be with us in a few minutes.”

“Do we know where we stand at this moment?”

Kell stooped down to take a sheet of paper out of his briefcase. He passed it to Thran, who barely looked at it before he passed it to Bard. It was a list of charges facing Angelo Orker and his associate, Feldman Snaga.

It was a very long list.

That was good, right?

When it was clear that Thran and Kell intended to continue to talk in cryptic code, Bard concentrated on the list in his hands.

Class A violent felony, attempted murder with a deadly weapon in the second degree against a police officer, two counts.

Class B violent felony, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon in the second degree against a police officer, two counts.

Class B violent felony, attempted murder in the second degree with a deadly weapon, two counts.

Class D violent felony, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon in the second degree, six counts...

The words blurred on the page after that. Bard’s mouth dried and his hands clenched as he picked out words here and there – felony possession of illegal firearms, resisting arrest, misdemeanor possession of illegal substances and controlled substances, misdemeanor assault, prior convictions for Class C and D violent felonies, prior convictions for drug offenses and money laundering....

Gods... how narrow Clan Fl闫ng’s escape had been! So, so many things could have gone so, so wrong in the park that day...

He couldn’t think about what could have happened to Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda if Angelo’s bullet had struck him three inches to the right. Or what would have happened to Legolas if it had struck Thran instead. Or what would have happened to Angelo and his minions if he’d hit one of the children. Bard would have taken all of them apart bare-handed, even the children, without thinking twice.
He sat down in the nearest chair, shut his eyes, and breathed, unspeakably thankful that he still could.

After several breaths, his dizziness cleared. Just as he got up to rejoin Thran and Kell, the door to Björnsson’s office opened, revealing the prosecutor. He once had been as blond as Kell, but his stiff, close-cropped hair was mostly steel grey now, and he had clear, pale blue eyes. He wore a good quality, well fitting dark blue suit, the jacket of which was draped on the back of his desk chair. He wore small gold cufflinks in the French cuffs of his laundry-pressed, plain white shirt, and a blue paisley tie. He looked like the kind of attorney who’d be comfortable in a courtroom arguing his case. His manner was weighty, deliberate, reminding Bard of a Swedish émigré welder he’d worked with a year ago. Gundar had told Bard about his homeland where sun was rare in winter, ice and snow were deep, and seas were dark and rough. He thought New York winters were mild, laughing in amusement at the trouble natives had with the occasional deep snowfalls. Mr. Björnsson had the same patience born of physical harshness, though his was likely born of too much knowledge of human harshness than any amount of snow, ice, and darkness.

“Mr. Bowman? Mr. Oropherson?”

“I’m Bard Bowman,” Bard extended his hand. As he expected, Mr. Björnsson’s handshake was firm and heavy.

“Thran Oropherson,” Thran seconded, also extending his hand for Mr. Björnsson to shake.

The prosecutor nodded to each of them, then Kell. “Good to see you again, Kell. Come in and have a seat.”

Kell waved Bard and Thran in ahead of him, and stationed himself at the door after he shut it behind them. Mr. Björnsson sat behind his desk, leaned back, and gave both Bard and Thran a look.

“Just to bring us all onto the same page, I’ll summarize where we are at the moment,” he began.

“You likely know that both Mr. Orker and Mr. Snaga were arraigned the day of the incident. The three minors were released since none of them had any prior record, and because your children had taken them out of the scuffle, they weren’t part of what Mr. Orker and Mr. Snaga did after that. Because both Mr. Orker and Mr. Snaga had prior convictions, bail was denied to both of them, and they’ve been sitting in our semi-palatial city jail ever since. You’re aware of the backup of cases we have in the city, so we’re just now getting to this one. I’ve read all of the reports, including the statements from you and your four children, and I’ve had a long chat with Sergeant Fundin about what took place. I’ve got a pretty clear picture of what happened, so I won’t ask either of you to go through that again. Mr. Bowman, I take it that you recovered well from your injuries suffered in the incident?”

Bard nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. So let's talk about why I asked you here. Mr. Lothlori has advised you of the list of charges that might potentially come to bear against the defendants, I hope.”

Bard and Thran both nodded.

“I’ll be blunt. The worst charges, the Class A and B violent felonies, are courtesy of Sergeant Fundin, as he was part of the incident. Violent felony charges are more severe when a police officer is present. The Class D charges are solid, given the thankfully minor injuries you sustained, Mr. Bowman. The misdemeanor charges are against one of the three minors, and, compared to the other charges, inconsequential. Illegal firearm charges are reasonably serious. So we have a couple of paths we can take through this.”
“Go ahead,” Bard said, before Thran could say he didn’t want to negotiate.

“My job is to determine which charges we have the best case for, because we want a conviction. I feel reasonably confident that we can make charges for the Class A and B violent felonies stick, as well as charges for the Class D violent felonies directed against you and your children. Both the defendants have prior records, so we’ve also got some leverage under the persistent violent felon laws.”

“That’s good, right?” Bard asked, looking at Thran, Kell, Mr. Björnsson. “That you have a solid case?”

Mr. Björnsson nodded. “There is a downside, though. We can have the most ironclad case in the city, but it won’t speed the time to trial. Orker’s a thug, we’ve seen him before, but he’s got a pit bull of a lawyer, and he knows every delaying tactic, every angle to play. He’s harsh on witnesses on the stand, too. If we bring this to trial, understand that he will delay as long as possible, and he will put you and your children on the stand and tear at you like a wolf. Part of the reason he’ll want to delay the trial as long as possible is so that you and your children become less sure of your stories, and he’ll try to pick them apart to muddy the waters for the judge or jury.”

“So his lawyer will have the legal right to assault our children,” Thran growled.

Mr. Björnsson met Thran’s formidable glare with an unemotional nod. He’d answered this same question uncounted times before, and was used to weathering such outrage. “In a word, yes.”

“You mentioned a plea bargain,” Bard said, so he didn’t have to think about some sleazy lawyer humiliating Tilda to tears.

Mr. Björnsson nodded again. “Despite Mr. Orker’s pit bull lawyer, he still runs a very high risk of being convicted of a Class A violent felony against a police officer. There’s not much that can rattle Sergeant Fundin, so delaying tactics won’t shake him. Orker’s concerned enough that his lawyer’s offered to plead guilty to some of the lesser charges in return for dismissal of the Class A and B felonies.”

“What does that mean?” Bard asked quickly.

“It means that they offer to serve only a few years for only part of what they did, rather than the much longer time they should,” Thran snarled.
“It does mean they won’t face life imprisonment for the Class A felonies,” Mr. Björnsson nodded.

“What is the sentence for Class D felonies?” Thran asked.

“Five to seven years.”

“What about their prior records?” Bard asked. “Does that add anything?”

“Five to seven is with the prior records,” Mr. Björnsson replied dispassionately.

Thran’s face reddened in fury. “And how long must they serve before they are eligible for parole?”

“If they get the full seven years, then approximately four years.”

Thran swallowed a curse. “How long a sentence is possible for conviction of a Class B felony?

“Ten to thirty. The Class B felony is against a policeman, which adds five years to the regular sentence. Given their priors, they’d likely get towards the higher end of the sentence.”

“And for a Class A-1 felony?”

“Life imprisonment without chance of parole.”

“My husband’s life is worth more than four years. No, I will not accept a plea bargain that rewards attempted murder with little more than a slap on the wrist!” Thran snarled.

“Thran, take it easy,” Bard pleaded. “Think about the children, and the time it’d take to put this behind us –”

“I do not care!” Thran spat. “Oh, yes, perhaps it seems wise to call an end to today’s problem and agree to this deal with a devil, but what of four years from now, when these bastards are out again? What?”

The question hung in the air like a vulture looming over prey.

After long seconds, Kell opened the door of the office and slipped out. He disappeared, leaving Bard try to calm Thran down and Mr. Björnsson to watch him without comment. Eventually, the prosecutor began a detailed lecture on what would be involved to bring their case to trial, and which charges offered the best chances of conviction. All Bard could think about was this supposed pit bull defense attorney trying to make fools out of his children. Sigrid would give him a fit, but the boys weren’t likely to offer much of a challenge, and poor, trusting Tilda...

After ten minutes, Kell slipped back in the office. His face was as inscrutable as before, but his bearing was lighter.

“I have a new proposal,” Kell said.

“What is it?” Thran asked flatly.

“If we’d agree to drop the Class A violent felonies, the defendants will plead guilty to all of the rest.”

Bard’s jaw fell open. “Did I hear you right? They’ll plead guilty to everything else, even the Class B charges, if we drop the Class A-1 charges?”

Kell nodded once. “I recommend you accept that one, and quickly. Mr. Orker was not happy about that, but he agreed. I can’t say how long he’ll agree to that.”
“That’s ten to thirty, maybe near the higher end,” Bard reiterated. “And we don’t go to trial, it’s a done deal, and we don’t have to put the children in the witness box?”

Mr. Björnsson nodded.

Thran looked slightly mollified, but still considering.

“Thran, think about the children. It’s a better deal. I’m okay with it.”

Thran took a long moment, but eventually he nodded. “So be it. Not ideal, but better. So let us do so quickly.”

Mr. Björnsson stood up. “I’ll be right back, then, if you’re sure that’s what you want to do.”

Both Thransson and Bard nodded.

An hour later, it was done, and Mr. Björnsson escorted Bard and Thran out of his office with the first smile he’d evinced since they’d met him. He was satisfied, then, maybe even a little elated, in a very quiet way. He asked Kell to stay behind a moment, so Thran and Bard waited for the lawyer in the small waiting area outside of Mr. Björnsson’s office. Despite it being close to five o’clock on a Saturday, just as many people came and went through the maze of offices.

“At least it’s over, at least for however many years Orker and Snaga spend in prison,” Bard murmured.

Thran hummed. He’d calmed down now that the situation had resolved itself. He wasn’t happy about having to accept a plea bargain, but Bard was glad enough for both of them that a lengthy trial wasn’t in their future, and their children would not be subjected to a horrific grilling.

“I suppose so, lyubov moya,” he murmured softly. “I hope our Mr. D will not be angry at us for dismissing some of the charges related to his involvement.”

“At least they’re going away for longer than five to seven.”

Thran hummed again, still not completely reconciled. Bard looked back at Mr. Björnsson’s office, where Kell murmured too lowly for him to make out any of the words. When he turned around to face Thran again, he registered the same small, ginger-haired man who’d spoken to Kell earlier as he passed through the maze. Even at this distance, Bard could tell that he was dressed in a very expensive suit, with sizeable gold nugget cufflinks and natty silk tie. His beard was neatly trimmed, and his ginger hair was clubbed in a thick tail. He looked towards Bard and Thran, nodding once before he moved on. When Thran nodded back, Bard raised his eyebrows at Thran.

“Mr. Nori?”

Thran nodded.

“A man of few words.”

For the first time this afternoon, Thran’s lips curved up in a perverse smile. It was not a pleasant expression.

“On the contrary, Bard. I suspect that his words had much to do today with our favorable outcome.”

Bard watched the ginger-haired man disappear into the maze. “We won’t find out a thing about what he said, will we?”
As Kell finally reappeared from Mr. Björnsson’s office, Thran shook his head. “It is likely better that we do not. But rest assured that they were all to our benefit.”

“It’s good to know that the Russian mafia is looking out for us.”

Thran and Kell exchanged inscrutable glances, but neither of them disputed Bard’s semi-serious jest. Maybe it was just as well Bard didn’t know more about Mr. Nori’s machinations undertaken on his behalf. Still, he wished he could have been a fly sitting on the shoulder of Mr. Nori’s expensive suit all afternoon.

* * *

“They won’t take it, Bolger. They know what they’ve got against your client, and they’re not about to let him go with just a conviction for five to seven.”

“They’re fucking stupid not to. You know what I’ll put their kids through on the stand. They’ll piss themselves and sob like infants when I’m done with them.”

“They fought off your client, didn’t they? You won’t bully them.”

“I bet I can bully the little girl. Tell them that.”

Nori shrugged. “I’ll tell them. But they won’t buy it.”

He turned his back on the hulking attorney without haste, without concern. He threaded through the maze of cubicles and people rushing back and forth until he reached Björnsson’s office. Kell appeared at his rap.

“What’s the deal?” Kell murmured.

“Drop the Class A and B, they’ll plead guilty to the rest.”

“The kids’ misdemeanors, too?”

The kids’ charges are immaterial. Not part of the conversation.”

Kell nodded. “What do you think?”

“I’m not done with him. I’ve got a good piece left to stuff down his craw. Don’t ask. What about Thran and his boy?”

“Don’t knock Bard. He’s the only one keeping a lid on our Russian rocket.”

Nori’s smile was amused. “Didn’t know anyone could do that.”

“He can. Still, Thran’s pretty pissed about only a five to seven.”

“As expected. All right, enough time’s passed that I can go back and hit Bolger with the big one. This won’t take long.”

Kell went back into Björnsson’s office, and Nori made his leisurely way back to the hall where
Bolger paced. At sight of him, Bolger stopped his pacing and waited for Nori to get closer.

“They took it, right? Smart of them.”

Nori shook his head. “They didn’t. They’re talking to Björnsson now about asking for a jury trial, and whether they can put the little girl on first, to set the proper tone for the jury to understand just what kind of people shoot at children in a public park over a soccer ball they didn’t even ask your runners to return.”

Bolger’s nostrils flared just like a bull facing a matador. The metaphor made Nori smile. This bull didn’t have horns long enough to gore him.

“They’re stupid if they try that.”

“The guy with the white hair’s Russian. Do I have to say any more? Besides, the Class A-1 means you put Fundin on the stand. Remember what happened the last time you tried that? Got Orker his first prior, didn’t it?”

Bolger ground his teeth. “You don’t have the case you think you do.”

Nori dropped his genial smile and casual stance. “You’re right, I don’t. I’ve got a better one. You ask your clients to explain the sudden disappearance of Lance Dunmont, eh? Maybe he’s off visiting his grandmother in the armpit of the Southern US of A, and maybe he’s taking a more permanent vacation. Your client couldn’t let a runner who’d fucked up so badly go without making an example of him, could he? How’d you like that to come out in your client’s trial? Something about serious bodily harm to a minor? Interested?”

Bolger’s fury shone in his eyes, but Nori’s shrewd words had struck even closer to home than Nori expected. He didn’t allow himself a smile of triumph.

“You tell your client that the prosecution will drop the A-1 charges, but only if he and his boy plead guilty to everything else. Everything else, or they’ll go to trial. Let’s see if you mauling a bunch of kids on the stand convinces the jury that your client might have done a little child mauling of his own, in addition to everything else.”

Bolger turned on his heel and retreated, likely to see his client. Nori remained in the hall patiently. Ten minutes later, Bolger was back.

“Drop the A-1 charges. Guilty to the rest.”

Nori nodded. “Pleasure doing business with you. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

Bolger spat obscenities as he retreated, drawing Nori’s smile. He retraced his steps to Björnsson’s office, met Kell approaching him halfway, delivered the goods, and made his way away.

He loved his job.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

When an angel struggles to reach acceptance, a saint's patience and love lead the way to redemption.

“I’m calling the children,” Bard said, as soon as Thran unlocked the SUV and they climbed inside.

Thran didn’t speak. He was still furious with the vermin who had attacked his family. But as Bard had reminded him, the vermin had agreed to plead guilty to all of the charges filed against them for what they’d done to his family. The one they escaped was only the worst of the offenses that applied to Mr. D, not all of them. It was likely that both would be imprisoned for years, even if eventually they were eligible for parole.

Still...

He would have a private conversation with Mr. Nori.

He would make note of the exact sentence Angelo and his minion received.

He would attend any parole hearing and have his say.

He would hope that Angelo and his minion met with an... unfavorable reception in prison. It would be poetic justice if Angelo met a bigger thug with an axe to grind, and guards who were negligent about watching what happened in dark corners of the prison.

He brooded over that for a while.

Eventually, he registered that Bard had made his call to their children, and now regarded him in silence, patiently waiting for him to emerge from his funk.

“Forgive me.”

Bard shook his head. “You’re allowed. If you’d rather take the rest of the trip home to sort things out, I can drive.”

“I can drive.”

“Of course you can. But if you’d rather be with your thoughts than deal with traffic and snow, I don’t mind.”

Snow? Ah, yes, snow – it had fallen steadily while they’d been ensconced in Mr. Björnsson’s office, and he’d walked unaware through almost four inches of it to reach the SUV. Sighing, Thran shook the melting snow off his hair and coat, started the SUV, and pulled away from the curb. “I appreciate your offer, but better I think of something else, even traffic and snow. I envy you. How do you reach resolution so quickly?”

Bard was silent for a long moment. “You’re hotter than me by nature, without doubt. But... with all respect, cariad, I think the big difference in our reactions is because I’ve been poor, and you never
Thran blinked in surprise, and glanced at Bard as they waited at a red traffic light. His husband stared straight ahead, as reflective as he usually was. “I do not understand. This is about money?”

Bard shook his head. “Not directly... rather, the power one wields in life, I suppose. You’ve been an elite all your life, Thran, maybe not used to being treated with less than consideration, of not being someone special and rare and valued. Most of the world isn’t so lucky – you have to stand in line, wait your turn, try to make your way in a world that doesn’t know, value, or care about you. Crimes end up being a double assault – first by the wrongdoers, and then by the legal system, but if you’re a nobody without power, you take it, because that’s all you get.

“We came out of this much better, because you had the power to bring Mr. Nori to broker the deal, and Kell to shepherd us through the rest. Consequently, Angelo will pay for most of what he did, we avoided a long and nasty trial, and we spared the children. Those are gifts above and beyond what we would've had to settle for, if you hadn’t had the power to make them so.”

Bard’s voice was considered, without heat or resentment, merely stating what would have been blindingly obvious if Thran had ever thought about it before. He swallowed, not knowing what to say.

“Shit happens, Thran. That’s not just a trite saying – it really does, and we can’t stop it. Getting out of shit is never easy, and always messy. But we got out of ours without much trouble, without much mess. I think about that, rather than what happened in the park, that’s all.”

“You offer a different perspective,” Thran said at last. “You are right that I wish that day in the park had never happened, which is foolish because that did happen, and my wishes do not change that. You are also right that we have put most of it aside better than what you tell me is typical, which is a great deal to be grateful for.”

Bard nodded. “That’s my take on it.”

Thran made the turn onto the highway, which settled him, because it meant he was headed home. The snowfall intensified, so he turned up the windshield wipers to compensate. “I will try to remember that.”

“It’ll be easier when we get home – when you see Legolas, and know that neither he, nor Tilda, nor Bain, nor Sigrid will have to face a lawyer every bit as vicious as Angelo himself, and not be able to hit back.”

Bard was right. When they pulled up in front of Sam and Rosie’s house, the children spilled out despite the falling snow. Thran’s heart thumped hard when Legolas ran to him and threw a hug around him. Bard had Tilda in his arms, and Bain and Sigrid on either side. The two older children dragged Bard over to Thran, and the six of them scrummed together as the snow fell.

“What happened?” Sigrid breathed as they held each other close.

“It all came out okay,” Bard murmured. “We’ll talk when we get home. But don’t worry. It came out okay.”

“I’m glad,” was Tilda’s breathy reply.

“Come in out of the snow, all of you!” Rosie beckoned from the door. “Come on! Supper’s hot, and you all look like you need it!”
“All okay?” Sam asked lowly as they came in, and Bard nodded.

“It’s okay. Later. I don’t want to upset the small ones.”

“Course,” Sam nodded, taking Bard’s coat, then Thran’s. “Just as long as it came out okay for you, I’m happy.”

They piled into the house, where the toothsome aromas of chicken casserole and warm bread greeted them. Sam and Rosie had availed themselves of Bard’s casserole, and had added one of their own, plus salad and bread, to make sure that a substantial supper was ready for them. Everyone squeezed around the big kitchen table to eat, though that meant Sam and Bard had small Gamgee children on their laps to make room. Tilda wasn’t so small, but she slithered into Thran’s lap without asking, which Thran found comforting. As Tilda was left-handed as her father was, she and Thran sorted out how to keep from tangling utensils quite well, and helped each other to bites of things. Legolas was beside him, and he and Tilda made sure that Thran had more than enough to eat. On some days, that would have been annoying. Today, it was a blessing, and a reminder that Bard was right about sparing their children.

With twelve hungry people at the table, supper didn’t last long. Rosie brought out a huge coconut cake, which delighted Legolas. He plopped a plate bearing an immense slab in front of his father, took a huge bite for himself, and insisted that Thran have a forkful as well. When Tilda leaned forward with her mouth open, Legolas popped in a big bite, which made Tilda laugh so hard that some of the cake fell out of her mouth. Bain thought that was hilarious, and laughed so hard that he choked on his mouthful, which caused Bard and Merry to smack their hands on Bain’s back.

As everyone laughed, Thran appreciated Bard’s perspective more. Angelo and his minion might not disappear into a prison for the rest of their lives, but they would for perhaps decades. In return, his children had recovered from their Christmas Day scare, and would not have to revisit it again in a hostile courtroom.

By the time they thanked Sam and Rosie profusely for their hosting and piled into the SUV for the hop home, Thran felt more reconciled.

Of course, as soon they came into their house, the three older children clamored to know what had happened at the courthouse. Tilda was quiet, but she remained in the kitchen while Bard made tea for everyone, not wanting to venture away from the rest of them. Bard brought the big teapot to the table, and everyone took one of the Japanese teacups as he explained what the result of the afternoon’s negotiation was. He did so in his usual quiet fashion, stressing that there would be no trial, and the case would go straight to sentencing, which meant Angelo and Snaga would go straight to jail, and would not bother them again.

“What about Lance Dunmont?” Tilda asked.

“He won’t bother us, either, Tilda,” Bard assured her. “We’re not in the city anymore, he doesn’t know where we are, and after what Legs, Sig, and Bain put him through, he doesn’t ever want to see any of us again.”

“Really?” Tilda asked in a hopeful voice.

“I broke his foot, Tilda,” Sigrid nodded firmly. “And Bain and Legs smacked him hard for messing with me. We trashed him. He won’t dare come near us, ever again.”

“You got that right,” Bain seconded.
“Absolutely,” Legolas chimed in.

“Good,” Tilda heaved a relieved sigh. “Good. I’m so glad.”

“So am I,” Thran finally spoke. “We are done with them, Kukla. Done.”

When Bard’s eyes met his, Thran’s rage calmed still more because Tilda’s relief was so profound. Bard was right – their good fortune was not perfection, but it was good enough.

* * *

Thran was not surprised that Bard soon nudged the children past the excitement about their fathers’ visit to the city prosecutor’s office by asking Legolas to continue their Harry Potter reading. After their chapter was done, Bain and Legolas had permission to resume their zombie apocalypse adventures, but surprisingly, Bain generously offered to play Tilda’s Dinky Farm game with her. Legolas offered to play, too, so a happy Tilda explained the rules to Legolas, and the three of them were soon embroiled in a game. Sigrid headed upstairs to shower and talk to Finn as she usually did, and the evening soon wound down.

“It’s not that bad a game,” Thran overheard Legolas admit to Bain when they headed upstairs to bed.

“I guess not,” Bain murmured back. “But don’t tell Til that, or we’ll never get to play zombie apocalypse!”

The boys shared a rueful snicker as they separated.

Bard came upstairs soon after, and they bid the children goodnight. Thran had already stripped and gotten into the shower for a hot scrub when Bard padded in.

“Care for company, angel?”

“Always. Today especially.”

When Bard let himself into the shower cabinet, Thran drew him into the warmth of hot water and his embrace. For some moments, he was glad merely to hold his husband against his chest.

“You’ve had a hard day, angel.”

Thran stroked the back of Bard’s head. “It is not easy to be reminded of all I could have lost on Christmas Day.”

“It wasn’t the way I would have wanted things to go, but it came out all right, and look what it did for us after. We moved here sooner than we thought. We’re here with our children, and they’re happy and in a good school, Legolas especially. We’re married. Our house is coming along. You’re about to do something amazing with UltraViolet, and I’m getting back to being an artist. All of those are sterling.”

Thran hummed a concession. “Wales breeds eternal optimists. Russia breeds something else entirely.”

Bard’s fingers traced down Thran’s spine. “What, exactly?”
“Difficulty.”

Lips brushed against his neck. “Some of what we went through today was difficult. But that’s not how I’d characterize a certain Russian I know.”

Thran shut his eyes to better savor the touches against his skin. “I...”

A soapy washcloth stroked his back slowly. “Let me remind you of what you are to me, Thran – cariad, my husband, my angel.”

“Oh, lyubov moya...”

Bard soothed soap over his body, tending him as if he were a treasure. He even washed Thran’s hair as carefully as Thran did – typical of the attention Bard paid to everything. When he was clean, Bard sent him out to dry his hair while he washed. Thran turned the dryer on Bard when he got out, and when they were both dry, Bard led him to bed. He enfolded Thran in his arms to stroke and kiss slowly, helping Thran to settle, to calm. When Thran let all of his breath out in one long sigh, Bard eased atop him, still stroking and kissing, proving without words how much he cherished Thran.

“Zoloto moyo...”


Slowly, one inch at a time, Bard eased down Thran’s body under the covers, but his goal was no longer to relax, but to arouse. How delicious was it to be swaddled in such softness, then to have his cock descend into the blissful warmth of Bard’s mouth? He was soothed and savored, coddled and coaxed, roused and rewarded, until everything but his husband’s worship faded. When Bard slid into him, one miniscule bit at a time, Thran was past thinking, past worry, past anything but physical sensation. He let Bard’s ministrations draw his body into rising as they would, accepting the profound gift he was given with the enjoyment it deserved, without resistance. Under such devoted attention, it took very little time to sweep him away; as he rose, he clung to Bard, gasping and shuddering, until he was drained. Bard’s release was quiet, and he eased out carefully, taking pains not to disturb Thran. He padded to the bathroom to wash, returning with a washcloth and towel to gently clean the signs of their indulgence from Thran. He soon slipped back into bed to enfold Thran in his arms again.

“I am the most loved of difficult Russians, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered, brushing a kiss on Bard’s jaw.

“The most loved of angels. Don’t let anything make you lose sight of that.”

“How do I reward such a gift?”

“Accept it as freely as I offered it, that’s all.”

“May I offer you anything in return?”

Bard rubbed Thran’s arm slowly. “Tomorrow is soon enough, or the next day, or whenever. Tonight’s on me.”

“I am very blessed.”

Bard’s chuckle was nearly silent. “You are, and so am I. And that’s the most important thing.”

Thran swallowed the lump in his throat, and vowed to remember Bard’s soft voice when he next
thought about the stupidity of drug gangs.
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

After a little snowy sojourn, the arts finally resume their rightful places in the lives of an angel and a saint. And does one more old friend finally make his cameo?

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

Akh, chto, chert voz'imi = oh, what the hell (Russian)

When Bard woke Sunday morning, he was doubly glad that last night he’d eased Thran from yesterday’s brooding. First, he’d hated to see his angel so consumed, and was relieved that he’d helped Thran put yesterday’s upset aside as soon as possible. Second, he wouldn’t have had the chance to ease him this morning, because Thran’s mobile was chiming.

As Thran whuffled into his pillow and groped for his mobile on the night stand, Bard laid odds that it was Irmo calling, or someone else associated with UltraViolet Ballet. Mumbling a greeting, Thran curled back into bed to listen. Bard drew him against his chest and held him comfortably.

“Of course I am still in bed,” Thran grumbled in a distinctly grumpy voice, drawing Bard’s smile.

“With your hunky lover,” he murmured in the pale ear that didn’t have a mobile pressed to it. “I could moan, if you’d like me to help you drive home your point.”

“Hush,” Thran mouthed, but his lips curved in a smile. “It is barely seven o’clock on a Sunday morning, Irmo. Where else would a dissipated ballet dancer be?”

A muffled string of words indicated that Irmo had several ideas of where else Thran could be.

“No, I have not talked to Lettie or Abebe since last week. I have been... occupied with other matters. As far as I know, they and their sponsors still debate the last offer I made them.”

More excited words followed. Thran gave a silent groan, but settled himself to listen with a resigned pat on the arm Bard had wrapped around his ribs. Bard pressed a kiss on his husband’s ear, and got up to tend to necessities in the bathroom. He rinsed his face, ran a razor over his cheeks, gave into the urge to run his hands through his hair – his new ’do, as Rowan had called it, still delighted him – and came out of the bathroom to find Thran comfortably propped up on the pillows against the headboard, his white hair twining over his chest and one arm flung wide as he talked on his mobile.

Angel, indeed – gods, for two cents, Bard would snatch that angel’s mobile from him and bed him summarily. He resisted the temptation and turned to dig out clean clothes – only to remember that his dresser was in the children’s study. The children weren’t up yet, so he ducked naked into the study to grab clean underwear, tee, and socks, pulling them on as he came back into the bedroom for jeans. When Thran disappeared into the bathroom, still debating Irmo, Bard looked around the bedroom,
which was still more construction site than he’d hoped. He’d finished the ceiling yesterday, but the woodwork still needed to be painted, and the floor still needed to be done. Was it worth bucking Thran and the children about Sunday being reserved for his art and lobby to finish it today, or should he just wait until tomorrow?

There were only eight inches of snow on the ground, which wouldn’t preclude him from going to the art supply store for clay. There was still a lot to do in the barn to clean and organize. So he could find art-related things to do without problem. And it would be fun to give Tilda another drawing lesson. Either way, he’d find something worthwhile to do.

“Bard?”

Bard stuck his head out of the closet as he pulled on his jeans. “Yes?”

Thran was back in bed, but his mobile was pressed into the sheets, blocking the speaker. “Irmo is desperate to work on his choreography. I confess that after yesterday’s wrangle, it would be good to dance more than my barre this morning. Would you mind if he and I work in the ballroom this afternoon?”

“Of course not. Just give me time to feed you a substantial breakfast.”

Thran gave him a fond but resigned look. “Why am I not surprised? Of course, breakfast would be wonderful.”

Thran went back to his mobile, exchanged a few more words, and ended the call. He put his mobile on the nightside table and sank back into the pillows.

“And so it begins,” he said to the ceiling.

Grinning, Bard leaned against the closet doorjamb to take a long look at the pale body sprawled over grey silk sheets. “Egg Puff, pancakes, waffles, scrambled eggs, muffins, French toast, regular toast... what sounds good?”

Thran heaved a sigh as he considered Bard. “My choice would be to spend the morning in bed, where I reward the care I received last night from a compassionate and gentle saint. Do you think...?”

Bard circled the bed to his side, left his clothes on the floor, and slid under the covers, where he was enfolded in Thran’s arms. “What I think is that it’s too early to get up yet.”

Thran snuggled him close, silently chuckling. “Only in one sense.”

“Mmm.” Bard shut his eyes to better savor the feel of Thran’s body under his roving hands. “True. It’s never too early to get a rise out of my angel.”

“Oh, my... yes...” Thran murmured.

They spent a most entrancing hour alternating between drowsing and decadence before they were willing to concede that it might be time for breakfast.

“I’m sorry Irmo had no sense of boundaries this morning, but the hour after he called was sweet,” Bard murmured, burying his nose in Thran’s hair to nuzzle his ear.

Thran rolled over to wrap arms around Bard’s neck and kiss him thoroughly. “The best kind of sweet. Nothing to add to the bones.”
“That reminds me,” Bard kissed back with equal fervor. “I want to get us a bathroom scale. Not to make you worry if you gain weight, but to help you make sure you don’t lose weight.”

Thran gave him a puzzled look. “Why, lyubov moya? I have not had such a problem before.”

Bard hesitated. This ballet was Thran’s business, and Bard knew next to nothing about it. But he’d seen yesterday how consumed his husband could be over things he felt strongly about. If there was anything Thran felt strongly about, it was making this ballet. “Would you humor me about this, angel? Please? I... have a feeling that this ballet will be such an effort that you won’t have time to think about so many things. It’ll give me peace of mind, that you’ll have something to help remind you eat enough – to stay strong so you can make this ballet everything you want it to be.”

Bard brushed another kiss on his husband’s lips to reinforce that he had only the best of intentions. Thran kissed back, and shrugged a concession.

“If it will ease you, then of course. This effort asks much of you as well as me, and I want to reassure you about it as I can.”

“Thank you, angel. It will. Now, speaking of eating, it’s time for breakfast. What would you like?”

“I would like to know what you would make for yourself to eat, if a finicky ballet dancer were not your concern.”

Bard grinned at the humor in Thran’s voice. “Hmm. Not porridge; that’s for the weekdays. Egg Puff with cheese and onions, a side of rye toast with honey, a rasher of crispy bacon, and four cups of that café au lait you made for me last week at Rowan’s.”

“All of that?” Thran’s eyes widened.

“Maybe,” Bard teased. “But we don’t have any bacon, and we don’t have any coffee, so I’ll settle for the Egg Puff and toast with tea. Might I tempt a finicky ballet dancer with any of that?”

“I think you might.”

“Shave, if you want. I’ll get started, and it’ll be in the works when you come downstairs.”

“I hear and obey, my saint,” Thran smiled and stroked Bard’s cheek as they pushed back the covers.

Bard resumed his clothes and padded downstairs to rummage in the kitchen. By the time Thran joined him, he had the Egg Puff in the oven and the toaster loaded. They sat down to a good breakfast shortly thereafter, enjoying the view of the snow outside the kitchen window.

“I can’t wait to get to our solarium,” Bard commented, munching his toast. “Imagine how decadent it will be when it’s snowy outside, but we’ll have our version of Morocco inside. The fountain will work, the walls will be painted, our archway will be cleaned up and finished, and maybe we’ll have screens like those you saw. And the plants.”

“Our hidden treasure,” Thran hummed. He gave Bard a sideways look and smiled. “I cannot wait to see what royalty lounges in such a place. Perhaps he would like a devoted attendant.”

“I’ll dictate that the palace handyman must reglue all the joints in the fainting couch so it can provide sustained lounging for two,” Bard grinned. “It’s too bad we have to consider the sensibilities of our children, or I’d make us an Indian temple carving for the wall, to look down upon us with a blessing – incentive, as if we need it.”
“Oooh, one of those temple carvings,” Thran’s eyes widened. “It is such a pity we cannot indulge in one. They are beautiful.”

“They are,” Bard agreed. “We’ll have to wait until the children go to college for that, though.”

“I suppose so.” Thran put the last bite of his Egg Puff into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “At least you can sketch some studies for such a thing. I would be glad to model for them.”

“I bet you would. If I make too many sculptures of that, I’ll become the Robert Mapplethorpe of sculptors.”

“I would not mind.” Thran gave him another slow smile. “But perhaps it would be wise to wait until our children are grown for that, too.”

“Likely so. All right, I’m done. I’m for the snow shovel so we’ve got a clear path to the driveway and the lane. There’s not enough snow to keep the children out of school tomorrow, so I’ll need to shovel sooner or later today.”

“Do you have two so I can help?”

“I think so. It won’t take long. I bet we’ll finish before any of the children wake up.”

Bard pulled on a heavy sweater, hat, gloves, and boots, as shoveling was too sweaty a task for him to put on his new coat. Thran didn’t have anything ratty enough for such a chore, so he borrowed one of Bard’s old sweaters, and tucked his white hair under one of Legolas’s slouchy knitted hats. As they dug out the snow shovels and brooms from the barn, Bard grinned to see such an elite dancer look so down-to-earth... except that Thran didn’t look very down-to-earth, even clad in Bard’s worst castoffs; Thran remained beautiful and elegant no matter what he wore.

As they cleaned off the front and side porches with brooms, Bard told Thran how a fellow artist told him that his family always painted the ceiling of their porches blue.

“Why? Because it looks like the sky?” Thran wondered.

“Not sure. I think it’s a regional tradition – James was from someplace in the American South, maybe Mississippi? We’ve got a ways to go before we have to decide what color to paint ours, though. Maybe by summer I’ll get to it.”

“I want to hire someone to do all the outside painting, lyubov moya. It is so much work, and in the hot sun, and up so high... by summer, you will be full time at your metal, so let someone else see to such a grueling chore.”

“I won’t argue with you. Painting inside is one thing. Outside’s another story. I wasn’t looking forward to that part.”

“Then it is decided. We will hire someone for that.”

“Speaking of painting, I don’t suppose I could get a variance on the local ordinance against renovation on Sundays and finish the bedroom woodwork and floor, could I? I didn’t get as far as I wanted to yesterday.”

Thran paused in his sweeping. “What kind of ordinance would it be, if you break it the first week it is in effect?”

“A flexible one,” Bard returned with an unapologetic smirk, starting on the steps.
“How will you explain this to our children, to break a duly-enacted ordinance that came about only because the local artist would not pay attention to important things without it?”

“If you’re all right with our bedroom being a construction site for another day, I guess I don’t have to work on it today.”

Thran put his arms akimbo. “Do you tell me that you have nothing of your art to distract you from woodwork and floors, my saint? What kind of artist are you, that you cannot find something better to do than woodwork and floors?”

“I have lots of things –”

“Aha!” Thran held his hands up in triumph. “Then you must do them, and leave the woodwork and floors until tomorrow! The local ordinance stands!”

Laughing, Bard scooped up some of the snow on the steps, balled it together, and heaved it at Thran. His angel ducked, but the snowball still thwacked on Thran’s shoulder.

“Suka blyad!” Thran swore. “You did not just throw a snowball because I uphold the local ordinance!”

“Yes, I did,” Bard backed off the steps into the yard.

“That is illegal! You cannot get away with that, I warn you!”

“Oh? What’re you going to do about it?”

“What will I do about it?” Thran stalked towards him. “I am Russian. What do you think I will do about it? I will get revenge!”

Scooping up his own snowball, Thran set out after Bard with a war cry. Bard tore around to the side of the house with Thran in hot pursuit, ducking around the corner to scrape together another snowball to launch at Thran as soon as he came into view. This one missed, but Thran’s aim was not so erring. Bard’s vision vanished as Thran’s missile exploded against the back of his head, sending powdery remnants everywhere.

“Oh, you bastard! I’ll get you for that!” Bard whooped, ducking another snowball to grab for more ammunition. “Eat snow, you fucker!”

“Eat it yourself!” Thran shouted, hurling more snow at Bard. “I hope it tastes delicious, because I have so much more for you where that came from!”

“Try some of it yourself, you Russian bastard!” Bard’s missile landed full in Thran’s face. “There! How does that taste?”

“Idi k chertu, ty grebanyy huiesos! Sosi moy chlen! Idi na khuy!” Thran howled, madly hurling snow as fast as he could gather it. So furious an assault was it that Bard sprinted away around the house again with Thran close behind, laughing uproariously at his husband’s furious barrage of curses. But his laughter didn’t last, not when Thran sprinted after him with both hands full of snow, hurling one after another at Bard until he was covered in powder.

“Mab i ast!” he swore, hurling snow back in desperation, for now it was Thran who guffawed at the state to which he’d reduced Bard. “You lowborn, underhanded, sneaky wretch of a villain, I am so going to make you pay for that –”
“Da?”

“Papa?”

Bard skidded to a stop, tearing his gaze from the snowy Russian panting in front of him to the four children standing in their bare feet on the front porch. A late snowball splattered on his chest, which gave him a reason to glare at Thran.

“Five minutes in the penalty box for a late hit after the whistle,” he growled, but Thran was not impressed, and sniffed in distain.

“What was Ada saying?” an awestruck Tilda asked Legolas, who swallowed.

“Really bad words, Kukla. Really, really bad words.”

“No worse than what Da was saying,” Sigrid surmised, looking down at the two combatants.

“Actually, what Papa said was a lot worse,” Legolas admitted, a guilty smile on his face.

“And how do you know?” Thran demanded. “You did not learn such words from me. Besides, I was justified. Our Bard tried to weasel out –”

“Weasel?” Bard’s interruption was indignant. “Weasel?”

“Yes, weasel. He wanted to weasel out of our local ordinance to work on only his art today and forego renovations, and I of course told him that he was not allowed! I was justified!”

Sigrid giggled. “Ye gods, you two! You’re no better than us!”

Bard put his hands on his hips, gave a rude little twitch, and stuck his tongue out at Thran. “Nyah, nyah!”

As the children huddled, Thran replied with a raspberry and then stuck his tongue out at Bard. “Brat.”

“Don’t make us come down there!” chorused the children, laughing.

Bard laughed, too. “They’re on to us, Thran! I guess we’ll have to finish shoveling the walk instead of playing in the snow.”

“They never let me have any fun,” Thran pouted, then stuck his tongue out at the children, then couldn’t keep from laughing. “Back to the shovels we must go, then.”

“We’ll be done in a bit, then we’ll be back inside to make your breakfast,” Bard said, picking up one of the shovels.

“We’ll manage,” Sigrid waved at them. “But Thran’s right, Da. No renovations for you today!”

“They never let me have any fun, either,” Bard quipped, as Sigrid threw up her hands and headed back inside.

“Ah, lyubov moya,” Thran found the other shovel. “That is because they are the fun.”

“I suppose so. Come on, let’s get this done. I’m soaked.”

“You earned it,” Thran grinned, and bent to their task.
In a few minutes, the walk from porch to lane was shoveled, as was the path to the barn, and the driveway from truck and SUV to walk. Bard and Thran circled the house to come in through the mudroom, for both of them were splattered with too much snow to track it through the center hall. Bard stripped off his heavy sweater to shake it hard before he even went inside, so caked was he. When he was finally shorn of most of his white coat, he and Thran left their boots and outdoor clothes in the mudroom. They came into the kitchen to find the children making toast and scrambled eggs. Legolas stood at the stove, presiding with pride over the egg skillet.

“How deep is the snow, Da?” Bain asked, as he held out his plate for Legolas to fill. “Enough to sled?”

“There’s a good eight inches,” Bard told him. “We’ve still got the sled and snow saucers in the barn.”

“Can we go?”

“It would be fun,” Tilda nodded vigorously. “Have you been sledding before, Legs?”

“Not for a long time,” Legolas shook his head. “Everything around my boarding school was flat, so here were no hills to use. I remember that I went with my Maman and Papa back in Saint Petersburg once.”

“We can go after breakfast,” Bard swiped a piece of toast from the toaster and slathered it with marmalade. “What time is Irmo coming, Thran? You can come, too.”

“Not until two, though I would not be surprised if he cannot help himself and comes earlier.”

“Oh, please, Ada, come with us,” Sigrid asked. “Don’t stay cooped up in here all day!”

“You don’t have to sled, but it’s fun to watch,” Bard coaxed. “You had so much fun dousing me in snow, a little traipse from the truck to the hill won’t hurt.”

“So let us go,” Thran nodded, smiling when the children all cheered. Anticipation provided good incentive for the children to shovel down the rest of their breakfast, then they scampered upstairs to don heavy clothes. Before long, everyone ran to the barn to find the old saucers and sled. Bard plied a bit of steel wool to take the rust off the sled runners, and Bain and Legolas wiped the cobwebs off the saucers. Soon everyone piled into Bard’s truck for the short drive to the preferred sledding hill on the edge of an industrial park. Thran perked up, pointing to the building that housed the UltraViolet Ballet studio as they drove by.

At the far end of the park was the sledding hill; many children were already sliding down the slope when the family pulled up and unloaded the pair of saucers and the sled. Someone had built a fire in a reclaimed metal barrel, and several people stood around it to keep warm as they watched the sledders. Bard lingered at the top of the hill to watch Legolas and Bain commandeer the saucers, leaving the sled to Sigrid and Tilda.

“Push, Da!” Tilda demanded, pointing forward like the captain of a ship from where she sat in front of Sigrid on the sled.

“Hang on, lasses!” he said as he took a grip on the sled. “Here you go!”

He gave them a good boost on their way, laughing as both girls gave a war cry down the hill. Thran watched Bain and Legolas as they careened ahead of the girls, grinning as both saucers flew over a slight bump halfway down the hill, sending both of them into the air.
“Oh, gods!” he laughed, wincing when Bain spilled out of his saucer to sprawl in the snow. “And there go our girls, straight for him!”

“No, Sig missed them, if not by much,” Bard pointed. “Gods, nothing changes. It looks just the same as it did when I was here last, ten years ago.”

“And here you are again. Another happy reunion, I hope.”

Bard nodded. “I’m glad to see the children happy. Look – there goes Legolas, right after Bain. He’s laughing so hard he can’t stand up.”

Thran’s face bore a wide smile. “That makes me very happy. He forgets to be so studied. Your children have been good for him.”

“He has a gracious soul, just like his father. I’m glad he’s with us.”

“As am I. Ah, look. There is the price to pay to fly so fast down such a long hill. The long, slow walk up.”

“It’s a haul,” Bard grinned. “Don’t let Bain sucker you into hauling him back up on the sled. I tell them that if you go down the hill under your own power, then you go up the hill the same way.”

“A wise adage,” snickered Thran, “if an unwelcome one.”

The children were willing to traipse up the hill far more times than Bard expected; clearly their sport classes at the Imladris Academy had done wonders for their endurance. But at length Tilda was ready for a breather, and Sigrid wanted to talk to one of her classmates by the fire.

“What do you think, angel?” Bard nudged Thran with his shoulder. “Want to take a trip down the hill with me?”

“Is that sled sturdy enough for the two of us?” Thran pulled at his lower lip in speculation.

“I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Thran gave Bard a look, then shrugged, grinning. “Akh, chto, chert voz’mi. Get on.”

Bard scrunched up on the sled, his feet on the steering runners, and Thran crowded close behind, fingers grasping the edge of the sled and his knees hugging Bard around the ribs. Bard looped his arms around Thran’s legs to grasp the side of the sled.

“Ready, my saint – oy!”

The sled jerked forward suddenly and they lurched down the hill as laughter from Bain and Legolas followed them – the boys had ganged up to send their fathers on their way. Gods, this was a lot rougher than Bard remembered – every bump and bobble traveled up through the sled and into his body. That same little rise that had sent Bain careening was rushing towards them faster than he could steer, so up and over they went, drawing shouts from both of them. They managed to stay on the sled, but their extra weight sent them flying down to another series of little bumps, enough that both of them were laughing hysterically by the time they tried to navigate the sharp turn at the bottom. Bard stamped on the runners, just barely keeping them upright, but the snow was softer here, not yet packed down enough for swift sledding, and they upended in a flurry of arms and legs.

“Gods, you’re heavy!” Bard groaned, as Thran fell across his chest. “Get off!”
Thran was laughing so hard that he couldn’t roll off Bard.

“Come on, you oaf! You’ll crush me! Get off!”

By dint of much pushing, Bard managed to shove Thran off and sat up to regard his usually elegant and refined husband sprawled in the snow, laughing helplessly.

“Suka blyad, I have not had so much fun in a long time,” Thran wiped his eyes. “We are not very good sledders, perhaps.”

“The hell we aren’t.” Bard clambered to his feet, and stuck out a hand to pull Thran up. “We made it all the way down, didn’t we? Look how far we have to walk to get back up to the top.”

“It was you who told me that if we go down the hill under our own power, then we must go up the hill under our own power, too.”

“Sooner started is sooner ended, then,” Bard said, pounding Thran’s coat to clear some of the snow off. “Come on.”

They skirted the sledders to trudge back up the hill, waving to Bain and Legolas as they bounced by on their saucers with wild yells. The boys caught up to them halfway up to commandeer the sled, so Bard and Thran both carted a saucer up the rest of the way. By the time they reached the top, the boys were already hurtling down with Tilda between them, all three of them ululating in high voices. Bard found Sigrid with a group of school friends, so he pointed to the huddle of people around the fire barrel.

“Need to get warm?”

“I am very warm after such a hike, but now that I am here, I will likely feel the cold soon. So yes, let us enjoy the fire.”

A small figure detached himself from the throng, pulling a sled behind him. “Excuse me, are you Bard Bowman?”

Bard regarded the slight figure coming forward towards him. He was not a youth as Bard first assumed, only a small man, perhaps in his fifties. He was well bundled in a sturdy blue down coat, with a bright yellow scarf wrapped securely around his neck and ears. His hair was curly brown untouched by grey, and his face was youthful for all his age. Yellow mittens and blue earmuffs made him a cozy figure, and the inquiring look on his face was friendly.

“I am,” Bard nodded. “I’m sorry, you have the advantage of me.”

“My name is Baggins. Bilbo Baggins. I’m very pleased to meet you. And you are Thran Oropherson, then?”

Thran’s eyebrows went up, but he nodded graciously. “I am. I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Baggins.”

“Oh, please, I’d like it if you called me Bilbo. I feel as if I already know both of you, even though we’ve not met before. You cannot imagine how many people have been insisting that I meet you, and so here we are.”

Bard raked his memory. Something was familiar about Bilbo’s name... Ah, now he had it. “You don’t know Rosie Gamgee, do you?”
“Why, yes! Yes, I do!” Bilbo smiled warmly. “It’s my pleasure to be her artist’s representative. A wonderful artist, and such a sweet lady.”

“Ah!” Thran’s eyes lit up. “You are with Shire Hills, yes?”

“I am, yes!” Bilbo nodded, gratified that Thran had made the connection. His shrug was self-deprecating. “Well, actually, I am Shire Hills. My nephew, Frodo, and I are the principals.”

“Our meeting is very timely, then,” Thran looked at Bard. “I have asked Bard several times that he should call you about his return to his art. He is most talented, and I am sure he could benefit from discussions with you.”

“Oh, my, but that is most kind of you,” Bilbo smiled in appreciation. “Rosie has said the same thing to me.”

“And to me,” Bard finally found his tongue. “We’re not long back to Greenwood Dale on the Lake, Thran and I, and I don’t have my studio in shape yet.”

“That’s what Rosie told me. Not to worry, not to worry at all. I’d be very pleased to talk to you at your convenience — about your work, where you want to go with it, media, and so forth, and how I can best help you. Once you find your stride, I can help you arrange a show and so forth. Rosie’s told me you’re a sculptor in metal, and favor larger pieces, so I’d be glad to come out for a visit if you’d like.”

Bard found Thran’s grey eyes skewering his with a veiled but pleading look. “Please, lyubov moya? It does no harm to talk to Bilbo.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Bard conceded. What a contrast — yesterday, Thran was the one who didn’t want to discuss anything about Angelo, yet today, he all but pushed Bard into Bilbo’s arms. “It’s only fair to tell you that I don’t know how long it’ll be before I’m back fulltime at my metal, Bilbo. We live in a construction site at the moment, and I’ve got a bit more to do before that changes.”

“I understand completely,” Bilbo nodded. “But I would like to see the pieces you have, so I can think about how best to help you. I’d like to bring my Frodo with me, too. He’s just getting started in my business, so seeing how things go from the start with a new client would be very educational for him.”

“Of course. When might you have time to visit?”

“I should think Wednesday or Thursday would suit, if that fits with your schedule. Here —” Bilbo unzipped his coat, pulled off his mitten, and fished a business card out of his shirt pocket. “May I ask you to call the office tomorrow morning to set up a time to visit?”

“Of course. I’ll be glad to,” Bard nodded, taking the card. “I’m glad to meet you at last, Bilbo.”

“I’m glad to meet you, too.” Bilbo smiled as if he’d just gotten a special present. “Now, one more trip down the hill, I think, and then it’s off home and a good spot of tea for me. I’m glad to have met both of you, and I hope to see you again soon.”

With a friendly wave, Bilbo sat himself on his sled and launched himself down the hill with a wide grin on his face.

“What an interesting little man,” Thran commented, as Bilbo hurtled down the hill amid all the children.
Bard gave him a look. “An interesting little man into whose arms you all but pushed me. What happened to the suspicious Russian?”

Thran gave him an unconcerned shrug. “What is that idiom? The suspicious Russian has done his homework. I inquired about Shire Hills some time ago. The talented Mr. Nori had only excellent things to say about him. So of course I want to push my husband into such worthy arms. The sooner you go, the sooner you will be the artist you long to be.”

“You’re a meddler, but a cute one,” Bard teased.

He got another unconcerned shrug. “We both are. As you ask me to be indulgent when you meddle to care for me, so I ask you to be indulgent when I meddle to care for you.”

“A fair trade,” Bard nodded. “Do you want to go down the hill again?”

“Once more would be nice. I want to steer this time.”

They got the sled from the children, and set off again. It was a distinctly different experience, hurtling down the hill in front of Thran without any control of the sled. Bard whooped as they dodged other sledders, careened over bumps, and finally lurched to a more or less controlled stop.

“Yes! We improve!” Thran chortled, as he climbed off the sled. “We stayed upright this time.”

“That seems to miss the point,” Bard laughed.

“Leave the roll in the snow to the children. Ah, now for the long trek to the top again.”

Again, the boys retrieved the sled from then so they and Tilda could take another wild ride, and this time Bard and Thran were happy to warm their hands by the fire until the children were worn out. They piled back into the truck, stopping at the art supply store for Bard to pick up six pounds of plastilina modeling clay so he could start work on Rahmiel, and a tin of furniture stripper for Sigrid. They were on the way home when Thran’s mobile chimed.

“Irmo,” Bard and Thran chorused, laughing as Thran fished out his mobile. He nodded confirmation as he put the device to his ear.

“It’s not even one o’clock yet,” Bard murmured.

“Yes, Irmo,” Thran murmured. “No, we are not at the house, as you say. We have taken the children on an outing, and will return shortly. Have patience.”

Apparently Thran’s counsel was met with less than enthusiasm, for Thran rolled his eyes. “In good time, yes. We will be home shortly, yes. Yes, soon. Until then.”

He disconnected the mobile with a shake of the head.

“He seems very impatient, Papa,” Legolas ventured.

“Rude,” Sigrid muttered.

Bard privately shared his daughter’s opinion, but he gave her a look in the rear view mirror urging patience, so she didn’t say anything else. They were home in another couple of minutes, and there was Irmo pacing by his car.

“I will deal with him,” Thran said, as they pulled up.
“That’s fine,” Bard agreed. “Everyone, sled and the saucers into the barn, then boots and coats in the mudroom, then we’ll get lunch on the table. Thran, don’t let Irmo kidnap you to the ballroom before you’ve had a bowl of soup or something to help you last until supper.”

Thran hummed noncommittally, but the children murmured their agreement as they opened the door. Sure enough, as soon as they spilled out of the truck, Irmo tried to snare Thran. The children took care of the sledding things while Bard got the mudroom door open, then took Thran’s coat while Irmo talked nonstop. Thran led him off to the sitting room and quickly returned to the kitchen.

“I loosed him on our stack of CDs to think about what music we might use while I help with lunch. You are not supposed to help today.”

“Let it go, Thran. I’ll set up my clay in the solarium this afternoon, and I’ve got supper in good hand for the children to put in. So let’s get everyone fed, you included, and the children sorted, then Irmo can have you.”

Bard was relieved when Thran agreed, and as the children trooped in, they sorted out lunch. Tomorrow Bard would have to visit the market to restock, but there was enough soup for Thran, toasted peanut butter for Tilda and Legolas, and grilled cheese for Bain and Sigrid. Bard ate the last bit of chicken casserole that had come home from Rosie’s last night, and a couple of clementines. Irmo was too excited to come in for anything, instead content to peruse Bard’s old CDs. At length, Thran finished his soup and fruit, and disappeared with a wry expression into the ballroom with Irmo.

Everyone in the kitchen breathed a sigh of relief. With Irmo out of sight, the energy level of the room went down dramatically, and cleanup progressed without issue.

“I want everyone to do a quick tidy and clean of their rooms,” Bard asked. “Then two of you can tidy and clean your bathroom, and the other two can do the same for the sitting room. After that, you can do whatever you want until suppertime.”

“May I start stripping one of the chairs I want to take to the upholstery class?” Sigrid asked.

Bard nodded. “I’m setting up my clay in the solarium, so bring your chair down there so we can keep the mess contained.”

“I’d like to draw,” Tilda decided. “Maybe you can give me another lesson?”

“I’d like that, little doll,” Bard agreed. “We can do that in the solarium, too.”

“Can Bain and I play zombie apocalypse in the sitting room?” Legolas asked.

“Sounds like a plan,” Bard agreed. “So who’s helping in the bathroom, and who’s helping in the sitting room?”

“Legs and I call the sitting room,” Bain said quickly, drawing the girls’ protests.

“That’s okay, lasses,” Bard held up his hands. “Next week, you’ll do the sitting room, and the boys’ll do the bathroom, so the chores will balance out. So everyone head upstairs to brush your teeth, then let’s get started.”

“Okay, Da; all right, Bard,” the children chorused, and everyone separated. Bard dashed outside to the barn to fetch the portable workbench he used as a base when he built his small clay pieces, and the Lazy Susan he’d scavenged from the thrift store that let him turn the pieces this way and that. By the time the children appeared to get him to review their cleaning efforts, he had a drop cloth spread
and a thin board atop the Lazy Susan, ready for clay. The boys settled in the sitting room, their intermittent laughter a soft undercurrent as Sigrid hauled her chair downstairs, and Tilda curled on the fainting couch with her sketchpad. As Sigrid upended her chair to sort out how to unscrew the upholstered seat from the frame, and Tilda turned to a fresh page in her sketchbook, Bard unwrapped the first of his blocks of plastilina and set it on the board.

As Bard set to work, he hoped that the atmosphere in the ballroom was as quietly satisfying as it was in the solarium, but it likely wasn’t.

Nothing about Irmo was quiet.
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Pity the angel who tries to keep a rogue meteor on course! Yes, it's Irmo in the ballroom, and a saint ends up there as well.

Chapter Notes

I don't own rights to "Hellboy - The Golden Army," or the Muppets. I just enjoy both of them :-).

Oy, suka blyad, how badly Thran wanted to swear! But should he swear in frustration at a devil, or swear fealty to a divine, if possessed, spirit? Irmo was both – endlessly capricious, darting from one thing to another with only tenuous focus, and yet inspired to create something fantastical and divine. Tracking after Irmo was almost impossible, for his thoughts flitted from one inspiration to another at the speed of light – it was like trying to make sense of a maddeningly cryptic oracle where ultimate truth was just out of reach. How did one know which thread to follow, when all of them held inspiration?

It was Chaos.

“No, no, no!” Thran barked, unable to stifle himself any longer as Irmo went off again. They’d been talking about the sequence of scenes that Thran and Bard had come up with, but Irmo careened off into the costume requirements for fifty dancers. When the choreographer looked up with utter fury at the interruption, Thran had mustered his most devastating Prince of Ice glare. “What have I said six times this afternoon, Irmo? Focus, focus, focus! You cannot expect this ballet to happen if you flit off in sixteen directions each moment! We will do one thing at a time, or we will get nowhere!”

“But there are so many things that need doing!” Irmo shouted back, hands clenching into fists. “How can you expect us to get all of those things done if we force ourselves to think of only one of them at a time?”

“It is true that we have many things to do. But we cannot do any of them if we do not follow through any of them!”

“Then what do you suggest we do, then?” Irmo retorted, hands on his hips.

“We will get someone who is skilled at dictation, and he will follow you about to write down all the things you say, especially those that are not about the topic at hand, and we will organize them, and delegate them accordingly,” Thran said, just as emphatically. “Today, we may not capture each gem as you mine it, Irmo. But given how early we are in this process, we will not lose much. Today, mon ami, let us agree on the scenes in our ballet, and determine how many roles we have, and decide the character of those roles as we can. And nothing more.”

Irmo’s irritation was gone as quickly as it appeared, and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Putting his
head to one side, he nodded. “That is a good idea. Yes, I like that. I like that very much. If we capture an idea, then I can let it go, because we can come back to it.”

“I will see to it. We will have someone soon,” Thran agreed. “So, the list of scenes?”

“Yes, yes, back to that.” Irmo picked up the list that he’d left on the garden table. “I think your husband is a wise man, to suggest that this be a succinct ballet. Three acts, but compact ones.

“Act One begins with the first battle; full corps. Death collects the souls of the fallen, solo dance. The Maid searches for the Soldier, finds him, and Death must retreat, principle dancers with selected corps. The Soldier and Maid dance their devotion, pas de deux. The second battle rages, full corps. The Soldier dies, and Death collects his soul, pas de deux. Death brings him to the Underworld, corps with principals. The Maid pursues, but the formidable gates to the Underworld separate them. End of Act One.”

“So we leave the audience to contemplate the enormity of the tragedy that has befallen our lovers,” Thran nodded, scribbling quickly to capture Irmo’s flow.

“Exactly! The Maid will collapse in wild grief in front of the gates – a most dramatic endpoint.”

“Now, Act Two.”

“Yes. Here we open the gates to reveal the Underworld – the entire corps. Death presides as he leads the Soldier around, pas de deux with corps. The Soldier wanders as he tries to find his place among the Dead, solo with corps; but all he sees is the Maid in his dreams, pas de deux with corps. Above, the Maid grieves, but all she sees is the Soldier in her dreams, solo and pas de deux. She travels to the Underworld to make her petition for the return of her Soldier, solo with selected corps as she travels, then full corps and principals. Death agrees, and so the Soldier and the Maid trade places, pas de trois and corps. Once again, we end with the gates to the Underworld separating the Maid and the Soldier.

“Finally, Act Three. We reveal Death in his palace as he tries to woo the Maid, pas de deux, but she sees only her Soldier, pas de trois. Above, the Soldier grieves in his turn, solo, but sees only the Maid in his dreams, pas de deux. He returns to the Underworld to make his petition, full corps and principals. Death refuses, the Soldier takes his life, Death takes his soul, and banishes the Maid, full corps and principals. As the gates close once more, the Maid takes her life, and the gates fall open. Maid and Soldier dance together despite all Death does to distract them, pas de trois with full corps. Death falls. The Maid and Soldier become stars in the sky, pas de deux. End.”

“Yes,” Thran nodded, scribbling the last bit. “Yes. That is it. Three acts, more than I thought, but they are compact, and I like the symmetry of ending all of them at the gates of the Underworld.”

“I do, as well. Now, the roles.”

“Death, the Maid, the Soldier; we know these,” Thran supplied. “We know the characteristics of each, as well. So the corps will be soldiers in Act One, and those who comb the battlefield for the wounded. In Acts Two and Three, the corps will be the denizens of the Underworld, with a few to act as the living whom the Maid and Soldier pass on the path to the Underworld.”

“All minor characters, but we can do much to make them individuals with costume,” Irmo mused. “Once we have the corps assembled, the dancers can do much to help flesh out their characters. Perhaps one soldier is superstitious, and always makes a ritual before battle. In the Underworld... so many possibilities! Rich men, criminals, saints, children, mothers, whores, the sick, the gluttonous —”
“I think that is a most worthy assignment for you to address in the next several days,” Thran said firmly. “Make a list of Underworld characters.”

“I will, I will,” Irmo nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes, that will give me something to think about.”

“Bard suggested Hieronymus Bosch paintings as one source of inspiration.”

“Oh, yes! That is a good idea!”

“The other suggestion he made was to view scenes of a troll market from a film.”

Irmo perked up. “A troll market? What is this?”

“I have not seen it myself. But Bard has this film, and we can look at it now.”

“Yes, yes!” Irmo nodded. “Let us look!”

Thran led the way back to the sitting room, where Legolas and Bain were giggling over their messy zombie apocalypse game.

“Excuse our interruption, but Bain, do you know this Hellboy film with the troll market?” Thran asked.

“‘The Golden Army?’” Bain asked. “Sure, we have it. Would you like me to find it?”

“I would appreciate it,” Thran nodded. “And if we may borrow the TV long enough to see this troll market, I would appreciate that, too.”

“I’ll pause the game,” Legolas told Bain. “You find the DVD.”

Bain rummaged through the DVDs, finally coming up with the case. “Here it is. Did you switch the input, Legs?”

“I did,” the boy nodded. “Put it in.”

Bain got the DVD up and running, and navigated to the scene that Thran wanted to see. As the scene played out, Bard came from the solarium to see what they looked at.

“The troll market,” Bard grinned. “That’s my favorite part of the film. You have to pause it to get the full effect – it’s so detailed and it all goes by so fast. So many different characters, different costumes, little dramas going on at the edges of the scene. The architecture, the implied trade structures... just everything.”

“This is fascinating!” Irmo exclaimed, all eyes as the scene unfolded. “I see why you mentioned this, Bard. Not so much for the look, perhaps, but the level of detail.”

Bard nodded. “Exactly. I thought of the Underworld as a place that had existed for uncounted mortal lifetimes, with little enclaves, little sub societies, all entrenched through the ages. It has its own society that’s partly like the world above, and partly not, but all very old because the Underworld denizens don’t pass on.”

“Exactly, exactly!” Irmo agreed. “May I borrow this to consider?”

“Sure,” Bard nodded.

“Think of this...” Irmo said, his eyes gazing at some far-off point. Thran recognized the light in the
choreographer’s eyes as particularly inspired, so he hastily cleared a space on the battered fruit crate coffee table for him to put his paper, so he was ready to write whatever Irmo came up with.

“This tale will show the human world, the battlefield, as a stark, almost bare set, all in shades of grey and black and red, the colors of war. Only the Underworld will be a full set. It will have color, life, but in dark, rich colors, like jewels in twilight and firelight. It will reflect how Death characterizes our world – short, shallow, brutal, transitory, one-dimensional. Only the Underworld has depth and complexity. The costumes of the mortals will be little more than comic book caricatures while the characters are alive, but become more layered and detailed when they pass into the underworld. There will be lights in the costumes that show life, and then reveal the change from life to death even as the rest of the costume becomes more nuanced. Death has a fantastical costume and is so much physically bigger than the Maid and the Soldier, but he will not have that life, but something much older, much more hidden. He will glow brightest in the Underworld, but even that will not have the same intensity as the glow of the living.”

Thran scribbled madly, trying to get all of this down, but he caught a fractured look from Bard. His husband wasn’t sure if Irmo was a madman or a shaman – the same reaction Irmo aroused in everyone he met – but Bard recognized that something was there. Irmo shook himself out of his reverie only to sharpen his gaze on Bard.

“Are you strong enough to pick Thran up?”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “Yes.”

“Show me.”

When Thran stood up, his husband hefted him around the waist to pick him off his feet.

“No, absolutely, no!” Irmo snorted in exasperation. “He is not a sack of grain, Bard! Not a mere weight to be toted from one place to another! He is – oh, there is not room to do it justice here. To the ballroom!”

Irmo turned on his heel and charged off. As Bard set Thran down, Thran gave his husband a pat on the arm. “Is it convenient to stop whatever you pursued before you came in here?”

Bard chuckled. “I’ll wash the clay off my hands, but yes, I can stop. I’ll tell Sig and Til, and then report for duty.”

Thran’s snicker matched his husband’s. “Thank you. And thank both of you, Legolas and Bain, for your kindness to interrupt your game. Let the zombie apocalypse resume.”

The boys exchanged looks of suppressed glee. “He’s very intense, Papa.”

“Yes, Legolas,” Thran nodded, “he is. But he is also very brilliant, and so we cope.”

Thran padded after Irmo, who awaited him impatiently in the ballroom. He launched into a tangled explanation of the difference between the spirits of the dead and that of Death himself, and how when mortals were alive they burned so much brighter than did Death, but after they died Death’s low glow was the brightest thing in the Underground. Bard arrived in the middle of this, sock footed, hands thrust in his front jeans pockets. Irmo skewered him with another sharp look, which Bard endured without rancor or affront; his husband’s expression revealed only interest.

“Now! I will teach you how to properly lift a dancer,” Irmo said without preamble. “Come, come! Presage lift. Bard, you stand here. Thran comes before you in arabesque. You put one hand at the waist, the other below the raised leg, and straight up. Yes, up! Up!”
Bard winked at Thran, perhaps thinking of when Thran had taught him to do a fish dive. “I’ll make sure Thran’s comfortable with my position before I lift him. Thran?”

Thran backed off two steps. “I take two steps to you, and come into arabesque, and you place your hands. We try that first.”

He took the steps forward, and as his back leg lifted, Bard placed his hands into position.

“A little higher on my waist, under the ribs. Yes, there. And a little closer to the knee with the other hand. I am tall, and that will offer more stability for us both. Let us do it again.”

Irmo waited impatiently as they made two more tries, but Thran ignored him. It was his husband who lifted him, not a trained dancer, and he who would be lifted; he did not want to hurt either of them, or force Bard to bear the guilt of hurting him. Taking their time assured them both that Bard had mastered the move.

“Yes. This time, we lift,” Thran told Bard, who nodded assent. “I come two steps to you, you place your hands, and then you lift straight up. If it is too much weight, or if we are unbalanced, do not go up very high, so that I do not come down awkwardly for either of us. Go up, hold for only a second or two, then come down as smoothly as you can.”

“Okay. Ready?”

“Ready.”

“On four, then. One, two, three, four…”

Two steps. Into arabesque. Place the hands. Lift...

Thran kept his body balanced and firm; the hands on his waist and leg were steady. Bard must have been working on his chin-ups, for he didn’t tremble while he held Thran. It was rare that Thran found himself aloft during a dance; while there were roles that included a lift for the male dancer, Thran had not danced any of them since he’d gained his full height. Just as had happened the other times Bard had lifted him, arousal rushed through him, even as focused as he was on the dance. He forced that aside as Bard brought him down again. Oh, if Bard knew that lifting him off the earth affected him even more profoundly than he’d revealed...

Down to the earth again.

“Yes, yes! You have it. Now, down the ballroom. Two steps into arabesque, lift, two steps aloft, then down. Two steps together, into arabesque, and so on – you can do this?”

“So the same thing, one after the other?” Bard asked.

“Yes,” Thran confirmed. “Let us walk through this without the lift. Take off your socks so that you do not slide as we move.”

Bard pulled off his socks, and Thran led him through the sequence slowly. “So, it is a count of four. On the first two, I take the two steps to you, arabesque, and you place your hands. On the second two, you lift, take two steps with me aloft, and lower. Then we are back to the beginning.”

“Yes, I see. Two steps, arabesque, hands. Lift, two steps, down. Two steps, arabesque, hands. Lift, two steps, down. And repeat.”

“Yes. You are a quick study, lyubov moya. So this time, we add the lift. Low at first, to find the
flow, and to save the strength. On four.”

“Ready.”

Thran counted slowly as they went through the steps, Bard counting softly with him. When they’d gone the length of the ballroom, they turned and retraced their steps, this time a bit faster, a bit higher.

“Again! Faster!” Irmo said excitedly.

Thran gave Bard a quick look to see if he were tired of heaving a heavy dancer up and down, but Bard grinned, signaling his willingness.

“What is he looking for, cariad?” he asked, not bothering to hide his question from Irmo.

“I have no idea, but I enjoy this dance with you, so long as you are not tired.” Thran looked at Irmo.

“What do you look for, mon ami, so that we make the best use of Bard’s patience and his strength?”

“Is it not obvious?” Irmo’s eyebrows went up. “I want to see Death fly.”

Bard grinned. “Of course, angel. I should have realized. Come on, let’s see if I can make you look like you have wings.”

“Wings?” Irmo latched onto that. “Wings! Of course! Come, come, down the ballroom once more as you have, then we will try something else.”

“Okay, I’ll give it my best speed,” Bard said. “But not enough to send Thran crashing.”

They came quickly down the ballroom as fast as Bard could manage, but whatever Irmo was looking for, he didn’t find it. He asked if Bard could hold Thran aloft for longer, so they tried that until Bard trembled as he held Thran.

“That is enough for now, Irmo,” Thran said finally, when Bard struggled to set him down without a thump. “We have worn out Death’s chariot.”

“I do not look for his chariot. I look for his wings.” Irmo threw up his hands in frustration, then clasped his hands at the base of his neck and pressed his arms against the sides of his head as he walked to the windows behind the garden benches. Thran winced as he stood in the middle of the white furry rug that was the sole reminder of the rendezvous he and Bard had made here at midnight. A glance at Bard revealed the same impression on his husband’s face. As soon as Bard finished their bedroom, they would haul the rug upstairs, never to suffer oblivious tramplings by choreographers again. But Irmo turned back to them, an inward look on his face.

“Death cannot be carried. He must fly under his own power.”


“On wings, ideally, and that is how it must appear. So we must use a flying harness.”

Thran winced. On top of everything else was now added the cost of a venue that could support such complex rigging, and riggers, and safety inspections...

As Irmo ran after his muse to monologue about aerial acrobatics and adagio ballets and Cirque du Soleil, Thran had more sympathy with Bard’s worries over money.
Bard’s arms were aching by the time Irmo had the idea of flying Death onto the stage like a circus acrobat. It was a stunning idea, but was it feasible? Wouldn’t it call for special equipment? And how safe would it be for Thran? He glanced at his husband, but he looked harried enough without Bard adding to it, so Bard decided to hold his silence. He’d have time to bring it up later, once Irmo was gone. In fact, this might be so impractical that it’d be dismissed without him ever having to voice his concern. A rustle behind him showed Tilda and Sigrid watching quietly from the door, so he left Irmo to Thran and went to join his children.

“That was amazing, Da,” Sigrid whispered, and Tilda nodded agreement.

“My arms think so, too,” he winked wryly. “What’s up?”

“It’s going on four,” Sigrid replied. “When does the lamb roast have to go in?”

“Right now, or as soon as the oven preheats. Four-seventy-five, put in the roast, let it go fifteen minutes, then down to three-fifty. Set the timer for two hours. Put the potatoes in when there’s an hour and a half to go. Green beans go on when there’s twenty-five minutes to go.”

“Got it,” Sigrid nodded. "How long is Ada going to make Irmo go? He’s intense.”

“It’s kind of the other way around, sweetness,” Bard explained. “Irmo’s like that mechanical rabbit in the battery commercials, and the rest of us just try to keep up. I’ll urge Thran to call an end to it in another hour.”

“Do you want me to cover up your clay?” Tilda piped up. “So it won’t dry out?”

“This kind doesn’t dry out, little doll, but thank you for thinking about it. I hope I’ll be back to it in a few minutes.”

“Okay, Da. Sigrid and I will get the supper started.”

“Thanks, you two.”

After the girls disappeared, Bard turned back to Thran patiently trying to follow Irmo’s impassioned discussion about costume fabric.

“That is a topic for another day, Irmo, when we have Rada Brown with us,” Thran said firmly. “Now we have done enough for today, at least until we have more of the legalities sorted. You work on the characters for the Underworld, the enclaves, the societies. You have Bard’s DVD to look at, and the Internet will provide you many of the Bosch paintings to consider.”

“Yes, yes, the Underworld,” Irmo agreed, letting Thran escort him from the ballroom to the center hall. “Hieronymus Bosch, and the troll market. Both offer so many ideas!”

“Try to write them down as they come to you, Irmo,” Thran coaxed, fetching Irmo’s coat. “I expect that Abebe and Lettie will contact me tomorrow, and we will proceed with our negotiations. As much work as you can make to define the characters and devise the dances for them, the faster we can bring this into being.”

“Of course, of course,” Irmo nodded. He glanced at Bard offering the Hellboy DVD, nodded as he took it, and then offered the same gesture to Thran before walking outside. He was already lost in
thought before he reached his car.

Thran shut the door and leaned against it with a huge sigh, drawing Bard’s sympathetic chuckle.

“He’s like Lord Shiva of the Dance,” Bard shook his head. “Creating and destroying all at the same time.”

“And most of the time, it is hard to know which part is which,” Thran shut his eyes. “The first thing I do tomorrow is call Mr. Nori. I need his younger brother.”

“What, are you going to put a contract out on Irmo?” Bard teased, as they walked back to the kitchen.

“As much as I would like to, I am not yet ready to end our problems so simply,” Thran rubbed his forehead. “I need Ori to translate the oracle that is Irmo. Ori excels at the collection of scattered, fragmented, and contradictory data, from which he conjures order. I will pay him to write down all that Irmo says, categorize it, organize it, and delegate it. That way, the oracle can scatter his pearls for Ori to collect, and I will keep him on the path to make the choreography. We have the story, we will soon have all of the characters. We have ideas of the set and costumes. As those develop, Irmo will have less to distract him, and we will have the steps. Then Abebe the ballet master can help with the casting and rehearsal, and again, there will be less distraction.”

Bard rubbed Thran’s back in consolation. “You make it sound simple, but I’m sure it won’t be. But we’ll get there. It was fun to dance with you, though.”

Thran’s smile was unforced, relaxing some of his tension. “I enjoyed it, too. Oh, I smell the first aroma of supper! Sigrid and Tilda, you have kept your Da out of the kitchen, then?”

The girls nodded proudly. “We’re doing the food tonight, and the boys are doing the cleanup,” Tilda said. “But we have a long time before supper.”

“That, I do not mind,” Thran assured them. “I am tired from our sledding and so many wrangles, if not the dance. I hope you had a more relaxing afternoon.”

“I got two of the study chairs stripped,” Sigrid reported. “It wasn’t as messy as I thought it would be, and the stripped wood is a nicer color than that gooey brown treacle finish.”

“Da showed me how to draw maquettes, and I did a bunch of those,” Tilda said. “It’s sort of like drawing comics, where the maquettes are the people in the comics. And Da played with his clay all afternoon!”

“Did you?” Thran turned to Bard with an expectant smile. “I would like to see.”

“Sure,” Bard nodded. “I’ve got a good start on Rahmiel. See what you think.”

Bard led the way into the solarium, which had taken on a definite air of art studio rather than tropical oasis. Sigrid’s two chairs were against the wall, with the third one nearby, offering a contrast of what all of them had looked like before Sigrid had set to with stripper, rags, and extra fine grade steel wool. One was already glued and clamped, soon to be ready for its new upholstery. The second was stripped. Tilda’s drawings were scattered around the fainting couch. In the corner by the window was his clay stand and stool, and he was gratified when Thran went to it at once, humming in excitement.

“You have gotten so far already!” he exclaimed. “The angel is in place, and the details emerge. How is it balanced? Only one foot on the base, and the rest in the air above? It defies gravity!”
“There’s a wire armature inside the figure,” Bard explained, pointing to the wires that extended from the foot. “The armature distributes the weight of the figure to the base. Right now they’re just clamped down, but in the final piece they’ll be embedded in the base so you won’t see them, and it’ll seem like Rahmiel is suspended above the base, all but that one toe.”

“Incredible,” Thran walked around the piece to see it from different angles. “You tell me how it is done, and still it looks like magic. And the figure is already so detailed. No wings yet? Do they come later?”

“I... had this idea to try something different with the wings,” Bard ran his hand through his hair. “I got it when I was in the craft store today. There was this package of feathers and some kids’ feather boas, and I wondered... what if I made wings something like what people wear as Halloween costumes, on a frame, like real birds’ wings? And instead of sculpting the hair, I want to experiment with some very light fibers, like some of those boas, so that the hair would float upwards. It’d move with every little air current, and it’d seem more alive.”

“I think that sounds amazing,” Sigrid breathed. “I’ve never heard of anyone mixing a cast metal figure with real feathered wings and hair. It’d be wonderful!”

“I think so, too,” Thran nodded vigorously. “Perhaps I can speak to Rada Brown, the costumier, about frames for the wings, and who can help you learn to make them.”

“You could look at the Muppets, too, Da!” Tilda exclaimed. “Some of them have really floofy hair. Maybe you could use the same floofy stuff for your angel’s hair.”

Bard nodded, gratified at his family’s enthusiasm. “I hadn’t thought about the Muppets, little doll. That’s a good pointer. And help on how to make a lightweight frame for the wings would be great, Thran. Thank you, both.”

“Welcome,” Tilda smiled. She gathered up some of her drawings. “See, Ada? Da showed me how to build maquettes out of lines and balls and boxes, and once you get the pose you want, then you smooth out the edges and erase the lines in the middle, and you have a figure.”

“This is wonderful, too, Kukla,” Thran took one of the sheets Tilda handed him. “You are only ten? These look very good for one so young.”

“I want to practice a lot, especially this summer,” Tilda explained. “I told Da about it already, but not you. The art classes at our school aren’t by grade, but by how good you are and what you’ve already learned. So if I practice a lot, maybe I can go into the classes for more than basic things sooner. I’d like to learn to paint like Mam, or do sculpture like Da. They have ceramics and textiles and other stuff, too.”

“You are well on your way, Russkaya Kukla,” Thran replied.

“She is,” Bard said proudly. “I didn’t have to show her much. You’ll have to practice a lot more, little doll, but I can already see how much better you’ve gotten with just an afternoon’s practice.”

“So our house has become its own artists' colony,” Thran teased. “That is exciting! Now, I am sweaty and worn out from trying to chase a meteor named Irmo. I will bathe now so that I do not ruin the nice aroma of lamb as it roasts.”

“We’re out of light in here, so I’ll lay a good fire for us in the sitting room, so we can enjoy it after supper,” Bard decided. “We’ll pry the boys out of their zombie apocalypse, and get ready for the new week.”
Thran headed upstairs, Tilda and Sigrid went back to preparing supper, and Bard rousted Bain and Legolas to help him fetch wood for the fireplace. Before long, Thran returned much refreshed, and supper was soon on the table. The girls had made an excellent meal, and the boys didn’t fuss when the time came for them to clean up. Bard retired to the sitting room with his husband, tea, and a little chocolate. He lit the fire, Legolas opened Harry Potter to read, the family settled to hear the tale, and the evening wound down to a serene close.

Bard savored the momentary calm. Surely not every round of dealing with a possessed choreographer would end so peacefully.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

A saint practices a little bedtime sketching, which earns him a reward from an angel. Later, while the saint reclaims another room from neglect and disrepair, the angel has only sore ears to show for the day's labors.

Bard climbed into bed with some reluctance. It had nothing to do with the hour – just after eleven – or weariness – snowball fights, sledding, and ballet had left him well exercised – or the company – Thran was already ensconced under the covers, waiting for him. Despite the excitement and exertion that had filled the day, though, his brain still raced.

First, he was back at work. He could call himself an artist again.

Second, his muse was still with him, and she was impatient – just consider all the ideas that flooded him! Feathered wings, textile hair, and cast metal figure... the parts identical in color but with tactile differences... so many ways to turn Rahmiel from a routine metal sculpture into something more. It would be hard to sleep tonight with his head full of possibilities, logistics, construction...

“You are distracted, svyatoy moy,” Thran observed quietly. His long, elegant hand reached out to stroke Bard’s hair.

“I am,” Bard admitted, smiling. “When you dance, do you ever get caught up in what you’re creating, maybe think about how to change the steps just a little to reveal more of your character’s intent, his motives?”

Thran closed his book – no, not a book, but the sketchbook that Bard had used in their game of sexual vampire and dodgy artist. He turned on his side, propping his head up on his hand to regard Bard. “So often, yes. The role takes me, even after dancing it and it alone all day. It becomes a presence, like a close friend who stands beside me and speaks of many things. Sometimes it is hard to sleep when that presence is so strong. Rahmiel is strong with you tonight, then?”

Bard mirrored Thran’s position, and took up the end of Thran’s braid to twine it between his fingers. “It’s the muse who’s strong with me tonight. Rahmiel’s not formed enough yet, but he will be before I’m done with him. Right now, it’s the muse.”

“Is your muse male, or female?”

“I sometimes get a vague sense that she’s female. I don’t know why. Maybe because the female gives birth to creation, not the male.”

Thran hummed acknowledgement. “I half imagined your muse would be Hephaestus.”

Bard chuckled. “The Greek god of sculptors and metal? He’d be a good muse. I’ll let that roll around upstairs with everything else, and see what he or she thinks.”

“What does your muse send you tonight?”

“Oh, so many things. Wings made of feathers... that really excites me. Bronze can take a dark finish,
and if I managed black feathers with the same slightly golden underglow... hair that floats on the air... the angle of the wings so they’re at full extension, just before they curve to backwing... Imagine what a life-sized one would look like.” Bard shut his eyes. “Too many visions.”

“Perhaps you should get up and draw some of your visions,” Thran suggested. “If you cannot sleep, at least you can channel what the muse gives you.”

“You and the children need breakfast and lunch tomorrow morning. And I’m going to finish this room so that we’re not living in a construction site. I won’t do the closet now, so I can start on the ballroom, because you’ll need it soon. I need to find out what to do to the floor so that it’s suitable for you to dance on it.”

“You are pulled in many directions,” Thran stroked Bard’s arm.

“So are you. I’m sure you’ve got a thousand things to think about with the ballet, too.”

Thran sighed. “I do, but my flood of thoughts is not so enjoyable as yours at the moment. Many, many headaches still. There is no contract, no agreement. The direction remains in limbo until we have a contract. I trust Lettie Johnson, but we cannot call upon her fully until we have the contract. At least finding someone to channel the geyser that is Irmo will help. There may be days of more negotiating ahead.”

“Sounds like we both need a distraction.”

Thran rolled over to pull Bard’s sketchbook between them. “That is why I looked at our book, to marvel at your skill, and also to savor the souvenirs of our game. I still want a picture of the artist as he stakes the vampire to the wall.”

Bard grinned at the clear relish that suffused Thran’s low voice. He propped the pillows against the headboard and sat up against them, drawing Thran to his side. As he opened the sketchbook to the first blank page, he asked, “I don’t suppose you hid a pencil or two under the bed with this, did you?”

“I was afraid they would break during our more... energetic moments,” Thran smirked. “There are two in the drawer of your night stand. A small sharpener that I found in the children’s box of home school supplies. And an eraser, though you seem to have little need for that.”

“Thoughtful of you.” Bard found the pencils, and Thran curled closer to watch as Bard considered the blank page. He sketched the corner of the artist’s garret with its heavy mirror that oversaw so many furtive liaisons canted at a subtly unbalanced angle. He filled in the background, a corner of the narrow bed with its limp sheet dragging on the floor, a scarred leg of the chair to the other side, the edge of a discarded boot beside the chair. The reflection was next, but only three quarters of it, as if the person viewing the sketch was as much voyeur as the artist reflected in the mirror. Bard made it brutal, the bare back of the artist and his heavy jeans and boots in dark shadows and heavy lines, and the naked angel he pinned against the wall the only lightness in the sketch. It would have been rape, but for the look of rapture on the angel’s face, and how closely he held the artist.

“Maybe not the best thing to put in your pillow book,” Bard exhaled as he shaded the sketch.

“Unsettling,” Thran agreed. “Call it ‘Dark Ecstasy.’ Whether the artist reaches above his station, or the angel below his, the title still applies.”

“I can take it out and make you another one,” Bard offered.

“Leave it. It is masterfully done. The uneasy angles; only the partial view, as if it were something
come upon unexpectedly, or perhaps in stealth; the darkness surrounding the light; the passion of both, whether licit or not... I would miss it if you took it out.”

“I’ll do you another one, without so much menace in it,” Bard offered, turning the page. This time, he sketched the two of them on his old bed, entangled side by side in passion. Bard lay with his back to the viewer, while Thran’s elegant back was reflected in the mirror. Bard emphasized the contrasts in their bodies; his heavier back muscles were starkly delineated in the moody candlelight, and the curves of Thran’s more refined glutes and shoulders were seductive caresses.

“You draw the multiple viewpoints so beautifully,” Thran breathed, stroking Bard’s knee as he watched.

Bard pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair as he turned the page. “One more. Just a study.”

In a few swift lines, the sensuous curve of Thran’s glute appeared, then the more angular lines of Bard’s heavier hand cupping that glute, dark fingers pressing the pale flesh underneath them in pleading urgency. Thran growled low in his throat as that one appeared on the page.

“This one is the most erotic one of the three. It shows so little, yet reveals everything. Oh, lyubov moya, it is nothing but a flame.”

The body of the angel beside Bard flushed with heat, and silver grey eyes turned intent. “Mmm, angel. Did that last one get you a little hot and bothered?”

“Put your pencils away, and I will show you how hot and bothered that last one got me.”

Thran ogled their book one more moment before he stashed it under the bed. Bard put his pencils away, then held up the tube of lubricant. “Do I need this?”

Thran took the tube and slipped it under the pillow. When he straddled Bard, he put Bard’s hand on his glute, just as Bard had just drawn. Leaning forward, elbows on the bed beside Bard’s head, hands in Bard’s hair, he brushed a kiss on Bard’s lips. “Perhaps not. But I will.”

After Thran made thorough use of the lubricant, then the body beneath his, Bard had good reason to shut his eyes in exhaustion. Even better, his muse had retreated enough that he’d soon fall asleep without problem. He gratefully snuggled into Thran’s embrace, relieved that his visions were content to wait until tomorrow for his attention.

Even the dozen sketches that came to mind during their dalliance would wait.

* * *

Another Monday morning arrived. Bard rolled out of bed with Thran, made breakfasts, made lunches, ushered children off to the bus stop. Bard headed upstairs to resume his painting, sending Thran off to the ballroom for his barre and yoga with a kiss. Mindful of the floor, he eased the bed away from the wall, draped his drop cloths, and set to, base molding first. He painted steadily, the windows and doorframes after the base molding, then the crown molding. By the time he was through once, enough time had passed that he could start the second coat, so around the base molding he went again. He got the doorframes and one of the windows done before his stomach growled so much he could no longer ignore it. It was already after noon, so he capped his paint and took the brush downstairs to wash it. Thran’s voice came from the sitting room, so he was in the
middle of one call or another. As he ducked into the fridge to scrounge for lunch, he realized that he’d have to get to the market tomorrow to restock. There wasn’t much left for supper, not even pasta. He mixed up dough for pizza and let it begin its rising in the warming oven. Once that was done, he stuck his head in the sitting room, looking an inquiry at Thran.

“Lunch?” he asked quietly.

Thran’s expression was long-suffering as he pointed to his mobile, then mimicked a blathering puppet with his hand. Bard smirked in sympathy.

“I’ll bring you a plate.”

Thran nodded gratefully, so Bard pulled out the bin of chicken breast, and enough veg to give Thran a selection. There were two pieces of chicken left; Bard put one back in the fridge in case Thran wanted that rather than pizza for supper, and the other in the microwave. While the chicken warmed, he chopped up the veg, put on the teakettle, and got a big bowl for Thran’s lunch that he could cradle on his lap and eat without spilling food everywhere. The chicken was hot, and it went in slices on one side of the bowl, beside the veg with the lemon juice that Thran used as dressing. Tea went into the pot, and soon Bard carried the filled bowl, a fork and cup, and the brewing teapot into the sitting room. He set the teapot down beside the mug, and handed Thran his fork and bowl. Thran gave him a big smile of appreciation, then blew him a kiss. Chuckling, Bard went back to the kitchen to see what he could make for his lunch.

He ended up grazing more than anything else – the remaining two slices of leftover lamb, a leftover apple, a bit of cheese, a carrot. He was still hungry, so nuked a potato, slathered it with plain yogurt and chives, and made a pot of tea for himself. He carried the teapot and a mug upstairs with him, and set to the last of the woodwork.

Another hour and a half later, the last of the woodwork was done. He was pleased at how good it looked with the subtly mottled blue walls. A little stenciling would put the finishing touch on things, but that would have to wait. The next order of business was the floor, so out came the steel wool and mineral spirits.

Without his crew of five helpers, this floor went much more slowly. It was bigger by far than the others on this level, as well, and took almost all of the rest of the afternoon to strip off the dirt and old wax. The only consolation was how much better the cleaned sections looked, especially the inlaid design around the perimeter of the room. He just managed to finish the cleaning when the children came home. As they clattered in from the mudroom, he went down to greet them.

“Welcome home, children!” he heralded. “How was school today?”

The children replied with varying degrees of enthusiasm – Bard and Legolas had a difficult math assignment, Tilda had new French words, and Sigrid was happy about doing well on trigonometry and government tests.

“Where’s Papa?” Legolas asked. “Is he still in the ballroom?”

“Your poor Papa has been stuck to his mobile in the sitting room most of the day. If he’s not still there, then he must be in the ballroom.”

“I’ll go look.” Legolas scampered off.

“I have good news and I have bad news,” Bard told the other children. “Which do you want first?”

“Good news,” Tilda decided.
“Yeah, Da,” Bain echoed. “Good news.”

“The good news is that we’re having pizza for supper. We missed it yesterday with the sledding, and the cupboard’s just about bare besides, so pizza it is."

“What’s the bad news?” Sigrid asked, taking a slice of cheese from the plate Tilda had arranged.

“I need help on the floor upstairs.” The children groaned. “But even that’s not so bad. I’ve done all the cleaning. Only the paste wax is left. It won’t take very long to do that if I have help.”

“That’s not so bad at all,” Tilda agreed. “The mineral spirits smell funny, but I like the way the wax smells. And it’s a lot easier to put on.”

“That’s no lie,” Bain agreed, as Legolas reappeared. “Did you find your Papa, Legs?”

“He’s in the ballroom,” Legolas confirmed, making a face. “He’s holding his mobile, doing pliés.”

“He’s been like that all day, I’m afraid,” Bard commiserated. “I hope he won’t be so tied up like that for too many more days. Once they settle about this ballet, then I’d think they’d talk less and dance more.”

“Pizza tonight, Legs!” Bain told Legolas. “But we have to help Da wax the floor upstairs first.”

“Okay,” Legolas looked at Bard, a torn expression on his face. “I hope it won’t take too long, Bard? I’m sorry, but I have a lot of homework tonight.”

“It just the waxing, and that should go quickly. Give me an hour, and then you can get to your studies. This’ll be the last time I’ll need all of you to help, I promise. It won’t matter if the other rooms take longer, because we don’t have to sleep in them.”

“Okay, thank you,” Legolas nodded. “So let’s go. Will there be pepperoni for the pizza?”

The children trooped upstairs to change their clothes, and Bard brought the plate of cheese and crackers and fruit bowl upstairs to sweeten their labors. Everyone set to with a will, and after an hour, most of the floor was waxed. Bard sent the children downstairs to set the table while he waxed the last bit, then ran a clean cloth over the whole floor to buff it to a shine. Done at last! He left the furniture as it was so that he could start supper. There would be time for him to put everything back in place after they ate.

“Thank you, all,” he said to the children when he got downstairs. “The floor’s done, it looks great, and that finishes our room. You’ll have your study back tomorrow.”

“Welcome,” went around the room.

“Okay, pizza. The dough’s in the warming tray. Do you want big pizzas, or individual ones?”

That prompted discussion, the upshot being that Legolas and Bain wanted one big one for the two of them with lots of pepperoni and onions, Tilda wanted her usual small cheese, and Sigrid was happy to make a big pepperoni and veg to share with Bard and Thran.

“We have a plan. You get started on patting out the dough, and I’ll see where Thran is.”

“Okay, Da; yes, Bard.”

Bard headed for the ballroom. Yes, the sound of voices revealed that Thran was still on his mobile. The device would surely need charging overnight after such a marathon. He came into the darkened
room, finally locating Thran’s tall frame by the fireplace, one leg on the floor, the other propped up on the mantle in a split. One hand drew the upstretched leg against his chest; the other still held his mobile to his ear. Bard ventured close, but within Thran’s line of sight so he didn’t startle his husband.

As soon as Thran registered Bard’s presence, he held up a cautioning hand, so Bard stood still. Maybe the conversation was at a critical juncture?

“Yes, I agree. That is fine. Of course. And certainly, that is a good compromise.”

He listened a few seconds, rolling his eyes at Bard.

“That would suit quite well.”

More listening.

“I agree. Of course. That is where we will start tomorrow. So we are in agreement. Yes, it has been a long day of it, but I am pleased. Yes, I can meet with you as soon as the papers are drawn up so that we can move quickly. A most satisfying end to the day, to be sure. Of course. I appreciate your patience, as well. Until tomorrow, then. Goodbye.”

Thran took the mobile from his ear, ended the call, and then with a pointed jab, turned it off. Then he gave Bard a look of such utter exhaustion that Bard went to him and enfolded him in his arms.

“They’re done?”

Thran nodded.

“Did you get what you wanted?”

Another nod.

“Congratulations, angel. I know you’re exhausted, but I hope it was worth it.”

“It will be. Eventually.”

“Supper’s underway. Pizza, or chicken?”

A long sigh. “Tonight, I want pizza. I have earned it. So to hell with the chicken. But... with salad.”

“I will make you a salad,” Bard chuckled. “Pepperoni veg okay?”

“Perfect.”

“Come on, then,” Bard coaxed, urging Thran towards the kitchen. “Have a sit down while everything’s baking, and you’ll feel better.”

“I have been on my mobile since this morning,” Thran marveled. “Without end. I have pissed while on the mobile, I have shat while on the mobile, I have eaten while on the mobile. I have done hours of yoga and barre while on the mobile. Both of my ears are numb, and both of my arms are sore from holding the cursed device to my numb ears.”

“Hence the emphatic way you turned off the mobile,” Bard sympathized. “I hope you don’t have to turn it back on again until tomorrow.”

Thran’s shake of his head was emphatic. “Even if I did, I would not. My ears are too sore.”
“The bedroom’s finished. No more construction site.”

“I am glad that one of us accomplished something tangible today. All I did was to herd cats, push ropes, juggle limp noodles.”

“Papa!” Legolas brightened to see his father appear. “You are finally away from the mobile!”

“I am even happier about that than you are, synok,” Thran smiled a greeting, returning his son’s hug. “And we are to have pizza for supper.”

“You’re going to eat pizza?” Legolas blinked.

“I am,” Thran said firmly. “I have spent the day chained to my mobile, and now that I am free, I celebrate with pizza.”

“Yes!” Legolas gave his father a high five. “Bain, Tilda, Sigrid, we need lots more pepperoni.”

“Coming up,” Sigrid giggled. “Ada, you’re finally learning to eat like a member of the clan.”

“I have sacrificed enough today,” Thran agreed, washing his hands at the sink. “Here, Bard, I will chop the vegetables.”

As quick as it was to bake the pizzas, it took little longer to eat it. The clan traded news of the day as they ate and during cleanup, and soon the children settled to their homework. While they worked, Bard took Thran back into the ballroom to help him haul the furry white rug upstairs.

“Let us take it outside first, Bard,” Thran suggested. “We can shake out the dirt from Irmo’s shoes before we take it upstairs.”

“Good idea,” Bard agreed, as they hefted the rug. “We’ll have to take it onto the porch, though. The terrace is still snowy.”

“Suka blyad, this is heavy. I think we need the boys.”

“Girls, too,” Bard agreed as they hauled the rug through the main room and into the hall. “Legs? Bain? Sigrid? Tilda? Would you lend a hand, please?”

The boys and Sigrid came with Tilda trailing behind, so all six of them got the rug out onto the porch, shook it, then hauled it upstairs. As the children went back to their homework, Thran and Bard lifted the bed back into place, then laid down the rug. The dressers and other pieces stored in the children’s study resumed their usual positions, and the metamorphosis from construction site to bedroom was complete.

“Very nice,” Thran nodded. “The floor is much brighter, even in this dim light. It will look even better in daylight.”

“Just be careful in your socks. The floor’s a lot slipperier now that it’s cleaned and waxed.”

“So it is,” Thran said, giving it an experimental slide.

“If you want to shower and soak, I’ll handle homework duty.”

Thran shook his head. “I will change from my dance things into something more comfortable, but I want to be with my family now, even if it is only to scratch my head over the math our children do that I cannot.”
“That sounds good for me, too. It’ll be good to get out of my boots and jeans.”

In a few minutes, they were back downstairs in the sitting room, talking quietly while the children worked. Thran poured them small glasses of nalivka to savor. Tilda came in to ask Thran for help with her new French words, and Bain asked Sigrid a question about his math. Legolas asked if anyone knew how to spell apotheosis, to which Sigrid replied with the correct spelling.

“What does that word even mean?” Bard asked quietly, getting a mystified shrug from Thran.

“It means the raising of something to a divine state, or the best example of something,” Legolas called.

“Ah,” Bard nodded sagely. “Of course. So when you dance in this ballet you’re making, you will be the apotheosis of Death.”

Thran rolled his eyes. “No more talk of the ballet tonight, please. I have had enough of it.”

“I can imagine. But it’s all a done deal, now?”

Thran’s sigh was audible, but he nodded. “We are in agreement, and committed, and on our way. And may the gods smile upon us.”

Bard rubbed Thran’s thigh consolingly, but it took several seconds before Thran's expression relaxed into a smile. He hoped that wasn’t an ill omen.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

Both an angel and a saint find themselves negotiating for their futures.

“Do you know what I didn’t do today?” Bard murmured as he and Thran snuggled in bed.

“Hmm?”

“I forgot to call Shire Hills.”

Thran’s hand tightened on his shoulder. “You must not forget tomorrow. It is important that you hear what Bilbo has to say, for it might guide your efforts to resume your art.”

“I will.”

“Promise me, lyubov moy.”

“Promise. Once the children are off to school, I’ll head to the market, then come back here to work on the ballroom until Shire Hills opens at ten, then I’ll call.”

“The ballroom is very big. It will take a long time.”

Bard nodded. “It needs a lot of prep work – scrape and seal the walls, and strip all the woodwork. I hate to say it, but I’ll need to call in an expert for the decorative plaster, because I don’t have the expertise to repair it properly. I don’t know how long the plaster will take, or how much it’ll cost. I can do the rest myself, but it’ll take at least two weeks. And it needs three chandeliers.”

Thran was glad that the lights were off so that Bard didn’t see him grimace. After a day of negotiation about the hard financial facts of putting on a ballet, he didn’t need a reminder of another expensive undertaking.

“Were any in place when you bought the house?” Thran asked.

“The house had been stripped of the fancy bits before we bought it. The previous owner had money issues, so he’d sold the main room mantle, the chandeliers, the brass lamps.”

“That was cruel.”

“Aesthetically, it was. But Jerry thought selling the fancy bits would tide him over long enough that he could keep the house. But the cost of the lead paint abatement was a lot higher than he expected, and some of his other business dealings went bad, so he ended up selling the house anyway. It was another thing that let Daphne and me buy it so cheaply.”

“In that case, I understand. It must have been difficult for him. But I am glad you were able to buy such a beautiful house, despite all the work it needs. You have made an entire floor of it beautiful again, and the rest will soon follow.”

“I hope so. I’ll try to track down a plaster expert tomorrow. I should have thought about that before
“You have had many things to think about. And I am in no position to criticize. I forgot to call the Imladris Academy about the possibility to use the school as the venue for the ballet.”

“I need to call the school, too. You know how we’re to trade time at the school to offset the reduction in the children’s tuition? I’ll do duty for us both while you get the ballet off the ground.”

“That is not fair,” Thran protested. “You already do everything around the house for us. I cannot let you do my school duties, too.”

“Yes, you can. Remember when I worried about bringing no money to our relationship? You convinced me that the work I did was an equal partner to your money, and it’s still true. You’re the breadwinner, and I’m the home fire. While you do the ballet, I do the house and school.”

“You make me ashamed, Bard.”

“Why? You said yourself that there’s no shame in what each of us brings to our family. We don’t keep score; we just do what we each can do. Besides, things won’t remain exactly like this forever. I’ll see Shire Hills, and maybe I’ll soon bring some money in, too. The house will be done before long, and the worst of getting the ballet off the ground will be, too. In six months, a lot of the hard work will be done, and we’ll rebalance again.”

Thran hummed a reluctant concession. “There must be something I can do at the school.”

“Too bad it’s a children’s school rather than a college,” Bard grinned. “You could model for the life drawing class.”

“What is that?”

“Nude modeling. You did a stunning job of it for a dodgy artist, so imagine the reaction you’d get from aspiring artists.”


“That’s why I said college, not high school,” Bard snickered, trying to dodge Thran’s pointed jabs. “But I hope you’ll pose for me again. I enjoyed it.”

“I made sure you did,” Thran purred, mollified. “But perhaps they have dance classes I can help with?”

“I’ll ask when I talk to them,” Bard agreed. “I have no idea what they’ll want me to do, so I’ll find out for both of us.”

“So it seems that we will both have our mobiles clapped to our ears tomorrow.”

“While you were in the shower, Sigrid told me to tell you to get ear buds to plug into your mobile, so you don’t have to hold it to your ear all the time. Maybe Legolas has a spare pair you can borrow. Or put your mobile on speaker.”

“I did do the speaker several times. But I thought it might disturb you, so I did not do that all the time.”

“It didn’t bother me. Do what you need to do to save your ears.”

“Do you think that ear buds would save my patience as well as my ears?”
Bard chuckled, and stroked Thran’s flank. “Probably not. How much talking will you have to endure before you can get to the part you enjoy? Dancing, choreography, and so forth?”

“I do not know,” Thran admitted. “At least Ori will appear tomorrow. I will be at the UltraViolet studio for much of the day, signing the papers and so forth. Ori will be there as Mr. Nori’s representative, and then begin his work with Irmo. He tells me that he has something that will greatly ease our collection of Irmo’s pearls, so I will be most interested to see what that is.”

“So I’ll start on the ballroom. Is that the best way for me to help you?”

“I think so. UltraViolet’s studio is not always available, as they have classes to teach and so forth to pay their rent, but here there is no such restriction. It will mean that Irmo will be a constant presence much of the time, which will be a strain. But I see no other way to move Irmo along in good fashion.”

“Then I’ll set to. I can get a lot done even if we decide to hold off on the plaster work, so it’ll be in better shape then it is now.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya. I am sorry to change the order of your work.”

“If it helps, then I want to do it. And in two weeks, I’ll start on another part. Getting the ballroom out of the way is a huge bit forward.”

“True.”

“When I go to the market tomorrow, is there anything in particular you’d like? Soup, or goulash?”

“I do like soup for lunch. And we need lots of eggs. The children and I both like them.”

“Will do. More clementines, too. Now. Enough work. We’re in bed, and let’s make the most of it before morning arrives.”

Thran shifted, exchanging their positions so that it was his head on Bard’s shoulder, his arm across Bard’s chest, his leg over Bard’s to draw them close. He wasn’t amorous, only appreciative of their closeness and warmth – apprehensive, then. Bard well understood that; with so many negotiations in the air, so many new responsibilities to take on, Thran was likely desperate for quiet, peace, maybe reassurance. Bard nestled Thran close, pressed a kiss on his hair, and stroked Thran’s hip in the spot that his husband found so soothing.

The next six months would be a struggle, but it would be a labor of love, not a trial. Whatever Thran needed from Bard, he would have.

That’s what a saint did when an angel asked. Even when the angel didn’t ask.

* * *

Tuesday started well enough – Thran made the children’s breakfasts and lunches with his husband, ate his porridge and drank his tea, and saw his family off, the children to school and Bard to the market. Thran retreated to the ballroom to work through his barre and yoga, grateful to embrace the early-morning calm that centered him so well. He was almost through his barre by the time Bard returned home. Out of respect for the wear and tear on Thran’s feet, Bard ventured into the ballroom.
in his socks.

“Will it bother you if I start on the woodwork?” Bard asked, when Thran met his eyes. “I’ll be quiet, or I can wait until you’re done.”

“Not at all. I will not be much longer – I must leave soon for the UltraViolet studio.”

“Thanks, angel.”

Thran kept on with the last part of his barre, the grand jetés. As Bard draped his drop cloth at the far end of the ballroom, he paused to admire the jumps, but didn’t comment beyond a smile of admiration. He stacked his rolls of paper towels, poured out a small pan of mineral spirits and a bigger one of stripper, and opened a new bag of steel wool. He knelt down – such a humble position, like an act of meditation – and started to paint stripper on the base molding. He slid along the floor quietly as he laid on the gooey stuff to soften the old paint, doing a long stretch of it before he returned to his starting point to scrape off the softened paint. As Thran worked through his sun salutations, Bard was a silent, patient presence in the room, as absorbed in his task as Thran normally was in his yoga. Today, however, Thran reflected more on his husband than his yoga. Today, however, Thran reflected more on his husband than his yoga. Today, however, Thran reflected more on his husband than his yoga. Today, however, Thran reflected more on his husband than his yoga. There was so much more to Bard’s task than merely the performance of a chore – he restored a neglected house to a beautiful home; he nurtured his family. Why had such a man thought he had nothing to offer anyone? No amount of money could compare to the heart Bard brought to anything he touched.

Money... Thran winced. He hadn’t lied when he’d told Bard that the amount of money needed to bring this mad ballet venture to life was absurd. It was more than that. Nor had he lied when he said that if this mad ballet went bad it would not ruin him. He hadn’t lied about anything.

Yet...

Thran hadn’t defined what not-quite-ruination was, nor would he. Bard had suffered from want too long to burden him further. He was happy at last, healing, strong, the glue that bound Clan Ffyrnig together. If this ballet succeeded, Thran’s silence would spare Bard a great deal of unnecessary worry. If this ballet failed, no one would end up in rags living under a bridge, nor would Bard have to sell any more of his treasures out in the barn. Thran had years of his career left, and he’d have enough money left to sustain them until he found a new position that paid.

Bard would not like Thran holding silence about this. But Thran could not bear to see sadness or worry creep back into his husband’s eyes, just when it had finally subsided. As willingly as Bard had borne so much, so would Thran bear this.

He finished his yoga, and gave Bard a kiss before he went upstairs to shower and dress. When he’d washed and dried his hair, he took pains to braid his hair in an elegant fishtail braid, then considered his closet. Louis Vuitton, or Armani? No, not the former – it was a relic from his life under the state, and not something he would ever have paid for himself. Wearing it might encourage some members of this venture to spend his money on things just as foolish. Yes, better the three-piece charcoal grey Armani suit, pale grey shirt with French cuffs, silver cufflinks of double-headed Russian eagles, cranberry red silk tie in a damask paisley, dark grey socks, black leather shoes. In case, he packed a bag with dancewear. When he came back downstairs, he found Bard in the kitchen, also packing – a lunchbox for him.

“Look at you!” Bard looked him up and down with admiration. “Who knew my angel would look just as good in a suit and tie as he does in everything else?”

Thran gave Bard a wry shrug. “I have a certain impression I want to make this morning.”
Nodding, Bard returned Thran’s smile with a perverse one. “You’re the boss? Good. Start them off on the right foot, then.”

“I hope so. For all that this is a mad venture, I intend it to be a professional mad venture.”

“Good.” Bard put a handful of chopped vegetables in a small box. “You’ll probably be there until late, but even if you’re not, you’ll have something to eat. Your usual chicken, fruit, and veg. Do they have a microwave?”

“They do,” Thran nodded, smiling.

Bard stuck his head in the refrigerator, pulled out another bin, and spooned brown rice into the bin partially filled with small bits of chicken. “Good. You’ll have something warm.”

“How will it look if I interrupt one of these oh-so-serious meetings to heat rice and chicken?” Thran teased, but Bard didn’t laugh. Instead, he gave Thran a serious look.

“Like you’re taking care of UVB’s prime asset. You’re bankrolling a lot of this, if not all of it, and you’re the prime talent. Take advantage of that so you take care of yourself.”

The intensity of Bard’s regard was such that Thran wondered if his husband had divined his earlier thoughts about the stakes of this ballet. He didn’t dare ask, but he stroked Bard’s cheek in appreciation.

“You really want me to act the divo, then.”

Bard caught his hand and squeezed it. “Not the divo; the alpha, the one in charge. You’re willing to work long and hard to make this work, but you’ll take care of yourself and everyone else in the doing. If you can’t hold them off long enough to eat a decent lunch, then you’ll never keep Irmo on track. So eat your lunch and set the precedent.”

Thran cocked his head at his husband. “I thought you said you had no head for business.”

Bard grinned. “I don’t, but Daphne did. She said that being in charge means that sometimes you have to act like a bastard. As long as it’s to take care of the people you want to help you, it’s okay. So maybe some shirt gets huffy about you eating, but I’ll bet none of the dancers do.”

“I will follow her advice, then, and yours.”

Bard relaxed into a smile. “Okay. Besides, I’ve fixed it so that you’ll make style points when you eat.”

“Style points?”

Laughing, Bard sealed the last of the three small black boxes into which he’d packed the food, then stacked them into an elegant whole. “I dug out the set of bento boxes that Daphne gave me for when I was out in the barn and couldn’t get to the kitchen. It looks like nice Japanese lacquer ware, but each box can go in the microwave. One minute on high, no longer. Then you have an elegant lunch that no one can fault. I cut up everything small enough for chopsticks, if you want them, or I can put in a fork.”

Thran admired the smooth nested boxes. “Very elegant, indeed, lyubov moya. How can I resist to make such a statement about the importance of food? It would be a travesty to use a fork with such a thing, so yes, chopsticks.”
Bard produced a long, thin, slender black box, opening it to reveal a nice set of black chopsticks. He fit that box diagonally in its shallow niche in the top lid. A woven elastic band in black went around the assemblage.

“There’s a cold pack in the bottom to keep the chicken and rice cool. So don’t nuke the bottom, just the individual box.”

“I hear and obey, my saint. Now I have a request of my own. Please call Shire Hills.”

“It’s just going on ten now. I’ll see you off, then I’ll call.”

“Then let me be off.”

Bard put Thran’s lunch in his bag with his dance things, and put his arms around him to bid him goodbye. “I hope everything goes well, angel. Don’t worry about anything else.”

“You are always zoloto moyo,” Thran replied, stroking Bard’s hair. “I have no idea how long I will be gone. If I will miss supper, I will text you.”

“You won’t miss supper,” Bard said as they walked to the central hall. He took Thran’s dress coat out of the hall closet and held it so Thran could slip it on, then handed him his red cashmere scarf. “You might not be here when the rest of us eat, but you’ll be home to eat something eventually. I’ll have it ready for you whenever you get home.”

Thran looped the scarf around his neck and tucked it into his coat. “Thank you, lyubov moya. I hope your call to Shire Hills goes well.”

“So do I. See you soon.”

Bard opened the front door, and stood on the porch as Thran made his way down the walk to the SUV. As he got in, Bard gave him a wave and a smile, not going back inside until Thran had pointed the SUV towards the lane.

Thran couldn’t wait until what would likely be a long day was over, when he could come home to that same warm smile.

He took his time driving to the UltraViolet Ballet studio, putting himself in the right frame of mind for the meetings to come. He dearly hoped that most of the wrangling was done, and signing the final papers would be routine. The sooner that was over, the sooner the planning meetings could begin. How he wanted to get on to discussions about sets and costumes, but especially the choreography! They had an aggressive schedule to meet, so sooner started was sooner done, as Bard was so fond of saying.

He piloted the SUV into the UVB parking lot. Once he stepped out, he made sure his coat was properly arranged, then his scarf, then his braid. He hefted his bag, and took a deep breath.

Time for the next performance.

* * *

Bard sent a silent wish for an easy negotiation after Thran’s SUV, then headed back inside. It was
just barely ten, so he cranked up Thran’s laptop and searched for plasterers. One of the advantages of living in a village full of artists was the number of craftsmen who had settled in their midst. A lot of the houses around town were as old as Bard’s, so the disciplines often crossed paths. He found two listed nearby, so rang up both of them and made appointments for the next few days for both to come out and make estimates. By the time that was done, it was ten-fifteen, so he found Bilbo’s card he’d stuck to the family’s schedule board and tapped the number into his mobile.

“Shire Hills.”

“Hello, this is Bard Bowman calling for Bilbo Baggins, please.”

“Bard! Yes! This is Bilbo. I’m delighted to hear from you. How are you this morning? Recovered from your sledding bumps, I hope?”

“Well recovered,” Bard smiled at the cheerful voice. “You, too, I hope?”

“Mostly. I do enjoy a good snowfall. There’s nothing quite as exhilarating as a good swoop down a snowy hill on a sled. It makes the warm spot by the fire that much more of a treasure, I think. So how may I help you this morning?”

“I wanted to see when you and I might talk about the chances of you representing my art. When would be convenient for you?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. You’re welcome to come into the office anytime, but I’d appreciate it if I could come out to see the sculpture I’ve heard so much about. I mean, digital images and so forth are wonderful, these days, but there’s nothing like a good look-round in person, I always say. I hope that wouldn’t inconvenience you too much.”

“Not at all,” Bard assured Bilbo. “The barn’s a bit drafty, but everything’s there, anytime you’d like to visit.”

“Well... I am free this morning, as it happens. My nephew’s not available this morning, and I have another appointment at two, but I’d be happy to nip out to see you before that, if that’s not too short notice.”

“That would be fine,” Bard nodded. “Let me give you the address, and directions if you need them.”

“Just the address,” Bilbo replied. “Internet directions are quite good, so I won’t bother you for those. Go ahead.”

Bard relayed the address, and Bilbo confirmed it.

“So I’ll see you shortly. I’m glad we can meet so quickly. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, and thank you for meeting with me. See you soon.”

“Yes! Goodbye for the moment.”

“Goodbye.”

Bard disconnected the call, then hurried to the mudroom for his boots and coat. He’d cleaned the dust of neglect off his remaining sculptures several times since Clan Ffymig had moved into the house. But another quick wipe wouldn’t hurt.

He scampered out to the barn, smiling.
“Mr. Oropherson!” The short, slight figure waiting in the corner chair of UVB’s small waiting area scrambled to his feet. “Good morning, sir!”

“Ori!” Thran smiled a welcome at Mr. Nori’s younger brother. Wispy ginger hair, much of it standing straight up, dark reddish-brown eyes, a soft voice, and a Fair Isles knitted sweater vest over a lavender button-down collared shirt might give the impression of a shy, sheltered youth, but it was an image that Ori cultivated. He was quiet, and he was shy around people, but he was brilliant with figures – any sort of data, to be honest. He had a nearly eidetic memory, too, which was very useful when he wanted to track down one critical fact in the midst of a huge lot of them. That would be a gift that Thran expected to call on many times before this effort was done. “Good morning. I hope you are well this morning.”

“Oh, yes, sir, I’m very well, and hope you are, too.”

“I am, thank you. How is your esteemed brother?”

Ori’s grin was entirely at odds with his innocent appearance. “Oh, you know Nori. One hand in this; another hand in that. He appreciates your business, and so do I. Thank you for asking for me to help you.”

“I understand you have a secret weapon to help us,” Thran said, as he sat down, gesturing for Ori to do the same. Ori took the seat at right angles to Thran so that they could lean close enough to talk without being overheard.

“I think I do,” Ori nodded. “My brother told me a little about the man you want me to follow. What can you tell me?”

“He is full of brilliant ideas, Ori. They come upon him in a deluge, often without any regard to what has come before, or will come after. He cannot let go of them because he thinks they are important, but that means that he cannot stay focused on the topic at hand, and so progress stalls. He is exhausting to follow, both because of his inability to focus, and because he does not wear down.”

Ori nodded. “Sounds as if he suffers from attention deficit at least, or he might be on the autism scale, too. I’ll see what I can find out when I meet him.”

“What is this secret weapon, then?” Thran asked.

Ori’s grin was gleeful. “It’s a standard voice recognition system, but how I use it isn’t standard.”

“Voice recognition?” Thran considered Ori dubiously, then his expression cleared. “Ah. You record what Irmo says, and the voice recognition turns it into text on the computer?”

Ori leaned close, his eyes bright with suppressed glee. “No, that’s the brilliant part! It’ll record my voice!”

Thran blinked. “Yours? Ori, how will that help?”

“Look, from what you tell me about this Irmo, he won’t hold still to let me calibrate the voice recognition system to him. He won’t be bothered to wear the device, either, will he? But I’ve already
got the system calibrated to me, and I know how to make the most of it. So all I have to do is to stay close enough to hear Irmo.”

Thran considered his grinning companion. “So tell me what I miss, Ori.”

“I’ll show you.” Ori unzipped his bag and pulled out a small tablet with an earpiece cabled to it. Ori held up the earpiece. “This is a microphone. It can be wireless, but until I know how much interference there is around here, I’ve got it cabled to my tablet. So it goes in my ear like this,” he inserted the microphone in his ear, “and I’m ready. Now, pretend that you’re Irmo, and I’m following you around, and someone asks you to describe the first scene of this ballet. You say...?”

“The first scene is a violent battle with the full corps ~”

“The first scene is a violent battle with the full corps,” Ori echoed a fraction of a second after Thran.

“What, you repeat everything I say?”

“What, you repeat everything I say?” Ori kept repeating.

“But Irmo speaks in French much of the time ~”

“But Irmo speaks in French much of the time ~” Ori repeated.

“Et qu’est-ce qui se passe quand il parle français ? Pouvez-vous répéter cela aussi?” Thran said swiftly.

“Et qu’est-ce qui se passe quand il parle français ? Pouvez-vous répéter cela aussi?” Ori repeated just as swiftly, grinning.

“Suka blyad!” Thran exclaimed, laughing. “To repeat the English so swiftly, that is amazing enough. But the French, too? Do you speak it?”

Ori shook his head. “Not a word. But that’s the way my brain works – whatever I hear, I can repeat. I can’t remember it, but I can mimic it as you say it. I’ll need to fine-tune the system to spell the French correctly, but once that’s done, I can run the French through a translator to get everything in English. Then everything will be converted to text files on the computer.”

Ori held up his tablet, showing Thran the text that the voice recognition software had converted from Ori’s spoken words.

Thran sat back. “Brilliant. Just brilliant! As long as you can stay close to Irmo, we will capture his ideas, and make sure they get to who should follow through on each one.”

“There’s only one thing about this,” Ori ventured, as he put his tablet back in his bag. “If Irmo’s the sort who needs only three hours of sleep, I won’t get everything. I need at least seven hours of sleep every night.”

Thran gave Ori a resolute look. “We will impress upon Irmo to make the most of your time.”

* * *

“Good morning, Bard!” Bilbo gave a wave as Bard opened the front door. “What a beautiful house
this is! And goodness – is this piece yours?"

"It is," Bard admitted. "Her name is Hope. One of my favorite pieces."

Bard told Bilbo the story of the inspiration for the golden antelope, and how Sigrid had named her. Bilbo’s eyes were bright as he peppered Bard with questions about how he’d made the piece, how long it had taken to construct, and so on.

“A wonderful piece,” Bilbo said warmly.

"Thank you," Bard allowed, closing the door behind Bilbo. “Before you take off your coat, I can give you the tour of the barn, or we can have a cup of tea first. Your choice.”

“The tour would be perfect.”

“All right. Come on through, and we’ll go out the back.”

“Lovely kitchen,” Bilbo complimented, looking around as Bard led him though to the mudroom.

“It’s the heart of the house,” Bard replied, pulling on his boots and arming his way into his coat.

“I well believe it,” Bilbo nodded. “It hasn’t been long since you moved in, Rosie told me?”

“Just since a couple of days after Christmas,” Bard nodded, leading the way out to the barn. “Rosie said you haven’t been long in Greenwood Dale by the Lake, either?”

“Three years, last July,” Bilbo replied, thrusting his hands deep in his pockets as Bard unlocked the front door of the barn, then slid it wide. “I’ve represented several artists in the village for twice that, so I was back and forth quite a bit to work with them and some of the shops in the tourist district. I loved the village so much that one day I decided to stop commuting and buy a small cottage just a short distance from here. It overlooks the lake, and suits my nephew and me very well. I’m sorry Frodo wasn’t available to come out with me today, but he’s finishing his college degree this term, and he has class this morning. Oh, my – you have several different styles, don’t you?”

“Some clients have a look they’re after,” Bard allowed. “When it’s my choice, the metal influences what I do with it.”

“Which of these were commissions, and which were your choice?”

“These are all mine,” Bard replied. “But there are still pictures on the Internet of several of my commissions, if you’d like to see them.”

He nudged one of the intertwined rings of his hollow sphere sculpture, which set it in motion. Bilbo oohed as the rings undulated in shades of copper and purple and blue.

“This is amazing! So light... but it’s a mechanical marvel, too, isn’t it? To mesh the rings so carefully?”

“I like that interplay,” Bard nodded. “To design the mechanics to look like something lighter than metal. That’s a theme I’ve played with several times. I have a pine tree in the back garden that’s another example of that. The natural world is another theme I like, too. Hope the Lope and the Sea Spot Run Pillar over there are examples of that.”

“See Spot Run?” Bilbo repeated curiously.

“Most of the fish in the piece are a variety called spot. They’re just humble fish, nothing fancy, but
good to eat for bigger fish, as well as people. I liked the play on name of the old school primers that they use in this country, where Spot was the dog. So of course that meant I had to throw in a few catfish at the bottom, just to keep the pun going.”

Bilbo laughed appreciatively. “Very clever. Now, what about this one?”

When Bilbo pointed to the iron knot, Bard chuckled. “Alexander's Downfall. That’s what a metal sculptor does when he scrounges a lot of free scrap iron out of a construction dump.”

Bilbo’s eyebrows went up, and his mouth fell open, but he quickly joined Bard’s laughter. “Really? This was scrap?”

“It was,” Bard shrugged. “I was on a welding job when a lot of bent rebar got thrown on the rubbish heap, so I asked if I could have it. The foreman said it was too badly damaged to reuse, so I hauled it out, one truckload at a time, then figured out what I could do with it. There’s still a pile of it in the back I haven’t used yet. So there you have it.”

“Wonderful,” Bilbo nodded.

Bilbo asked for a quick look around the shop in the back, so Bard pointed him around. He was glad he and the children had done a cursory cleaning of the place, so it didn’t look so neglected as before.

“I appreciate the look,” Bilbo nodded.

“Care for a cup of tea, then?”

“Yes, please,” Bilbo agreed. “Rosie and Thran tell me you’ve got some wonderful sketches, too?”

“They’re both kind to say so. I like them, so I hope they speak to other people, as well.”

* * *

It wasn’t long before Lettie Johnson arrived, and she led Thran and Ori into her office to hand him a copy of the contracts that detailed what all parties had agreed upon. Thran passed it immediately to Ori; he intended to read it fully himself, but he wanted Ori’s sharp eyes on it first. Ori was well aware of what it contained, and Thran relied on him to see if all had been spelled out as everyone had agreed. As soon as Ori finished a page, he passed it back to Thran, who began his own close review. Lettie had her own copy, and she, too, read silently while they waited for the others to arrive. Before long, Irmo arrived, on time for once. He wanted to launch into several ideas he had about the choreography, the set, the Underworld characters, but Thran reminded him that the boring but essential paperwork had to be finished before he was willing to go further, which Irmo reluctantly agreed was important. Ori leaned close, pointing out a small discrepancy, which Thran and Lettie agreed needed to change. Another one appeared in short order, this one not so small, but Ori’s memory served them well to hammer out what needed to change.

By the time Abebe and Rada appeared, Thran and Ori had completed their review, and had noted the things that required changing. On their heels came the set designer, Círdan Boatwright, whom Thran had met previously only in passing; Thran didn’t have time to do more than shake his hand before the remaining two members of the ballet’s board arrived. There was no room in Lettie’s small office to hold so many people, so they moved to the floor of the studio itself, where a table and chairs had been set up, and the slow process of getting everyone to agree to the changes began. Bless Ori, who
had a gift to explain everything clearly in a neutral yet sincere way that settled everyone’s tensions. An hour and a half later, signatures went on the copies, and handshakes went around.

The drive to create the Death ballet was now underway. A thrill went up Thran’s back; he preferred to think of it as excitement more than apprehension.

“The photographers and the publicist are here,” Ori murmured to Thran, tapping his mobile. “We’ll have a press release out this afternoon to start the spin.”

The wry cant to Ori’s eyebrows revealed what he thought of such things, but they were necessary if they wanted to start the buzz about their efforts. Not only would this encourage people’s familiarity about the upcoming ballet, but also interest potential donors to help bear the cost of the production.

“Bring them in,” Thran nodded, and Ori slipped out as Thran leaned to his left to remind Lettie of the impending appearance of the press. She nodded, as excited as he was, yet also as apprehensive, but she was as determined for her company to succeed as Thran was.

Ori soon reappeared with a pair of rugged, equipment-toting young men – dark-haired, dark-eyed twins – who quickly busied themselves setting up tripods, cameras, lights, and deflectors. While they worked, a third young man, this one tall, slender, and blond in a nicely cut if trendy blue suit, talked softly to Ori. As Ori stood off to the side, speaking softly into his tablet, the blond directed the two cameramen to set up the shot he wanted. He was assured, if a bit brash and staccato.

“No, not that wall, Elladan – the other one, with the ballet logo. Frame the shot around that, please. Good, good – softer light, Elrohir; anything brighter will wash out Mr. Oropherson’s hair. A little more, please. Still more – no, too much; that’s too soft. Take it back up, please. All right, that’s a start. Ladies and gentlemen, would you take your places, please? Elladan, how’s it look?”

“No bright enough for me, Rúmil, but take a look for yourself.”

The blond took a quick sight through the camera. “Right you are, Elladan. Elrohir, more on that left side, please. How’s that look?”

“A hair more, ‘Ro,” Elladan waved, so up the lights went a bit more. “Good. That’s got it.”

Rúmil took another quick look, and nodded. “That’s got it, indeed. All right, everyone. Let’s have a group shot with everyone, please...”

Thran posed, smiled, and shook hands with the other principals as directed for the next fifteen minutes. For all his brashness, Rúmil was efficient, and the publicity shots were soon done. By the time Rúmil decided everything that could be photographed had been photographed, Ori approached with his tablet. Thran leaned close to hear the slight man tell Rúmil that he’d sent the text of the press release to him via email. Rúmil pulled out his mobile, confirmed he’d received it, read through it briefly, then suggested a tweak here and there. Ori and he conferred until they’d agreed, then the deed was done. Rúmil and his two dark-haired photographers packed their equipment and made their exit.

Contract signed, publicity underway. Ori caught Thran’s eyes and winked.

* * *
“You said you had a sculpture of a pine tree?” Bilbo prompted, once Bard had put on the teakettle.

“Sure, you can see it from the solarium,” Bard led Bilbo through the sitting room and into the solarium.

“My word, it looks very lifelike,” was Bilbo’s pronouncement. “May I go out and look at it close up?”

“Of course,” Bard opened the door to the terrace. “It’s another piece that has hidden mechanical aspects that you don’t see until you’re close up.”

“Oh, I see!” Bilbo exclaimed. “The needles move, don’t they? How extraordinary! Again, it seems so much lighter than seems possible for metal.”

“Thanks,” Bard held the door open to the solarium. “Now you can stay inside where it’s warm.”

“And where there’s tea,” Bilbo grinned. “One of my favorite comforts, tea. Nothing like a steaming cup of it on a cold day, and a tall iced glass of it cools the worst hot summer day. Oooh, what’s this? A work in progress?”

“It is,” Bard nodded, taking the cloth off the model of his angel. “It’s called Rahmiel.”

He explained in a few words about the angel of mercy and love, the mixture of metal, feathers, and fibers, and the small human figure that appeared below the angel alighting upon the earth. He pulled out his sketchbook to show the preliminary drawings he’d made of the sculpture, which led to the other sketches he’d made of fencers, dancers, children. Bilbo particularly liked the ones he’d done in Thran’s ballet classes of the pianist and the dance master.

“You have quite a knack for capturing the essence of a person in a few lines,” Bilbo said. “It’s very much like the calligraphy that is such a high art in China and Japan.”

Bard told him how he’d come to his style from exactly those sources.

“I think Rosie and your husband are right,” Bilbo said frankly as they sat in the sitting room with their tea and a few of Bard’s cookies. “Your sketches are certainly worthy of any gallery. To be sure, your sculpture is wonderful, and will certainly interest collectors. But you have the potential to reach a much wider market with your sketches. I don’t want you to think that all I’m interested in is quantity, but I’m sure you can produce more sketches in less time than sculpture, which would present collectors with examples of your work that are, let us say –”

“Cheaper to buy,” Bard smiled. “I understand the economics of art.”

“Exactly,” Bilbo nodded, relieved at Bard’s pragmatic comment. “Then I don’t have to point out that your sketches would provide you a means to subsidize your sculpture.”

“Not at all,” Bard agreed. “I enjoy sketching, and if there’s a market for it, I’m game. I’m not an artist who thinks it’s crass to make money off his labors. Groceries aren’t free.”

“No, they aren’t. Good, you’ve got a realistic understanding of how the business of selling art works.”

“I do. So what do you think?”

“Several things. You’re a talented artist. There’s a market for your work. I can help you find that market. May I talk about what help I can provide, and how much it will cost?”
“Please do,” Bard said.

In plain terms, Bilbo laid out what avenues he would pursue for Bard, where he would advertise his work, and what percentage he would take for each sale. Before he could do any of those things, however, Bard had to produce enough material for Bilbo to work with. The quickest way to begin this process was for Bard to sketch, sketch, sketch, until he had enough that would allow Bilbo to arrange a showing. There was a small gallery in the tourist district with which Bilbo had an arrangement to show works he represented, and which would provide a venue for Bard’s showing.

“I suggest you take a week or two or three to produce a number of sketches, then you and I can talk about where we are, and how to proceed,” Bilbo summarized.

“I can do that,” Bard nodded. “Let me ask you... I would think that the subjects of the sketches would be more interesting if they weren’t merely portraits of people, because portraits won’t speak to many people other than those who know the subjects. Scenes with something going on, that tell a story... I’d think they’d be more intriguing.”

“Exactly!” Bilbo nodded vigorously. “Like your fencing sketches.”

“What about... more unsettling stories?” Bard probed, thinking of the sketch he’d done in Thran’s pillow book last night.

“How unsettling?” Bilbo asked directly.

“War, discord, conflict?” Bard suggested.

Bilbo nodded. “Much of the world is more provocative than a Degas or a Renoir painting. Draw what moves you, and we’ll talk about it all.”

“Fair enough,” Bard nodded.

In a few minutes, he and Bilbo agreed to meet again in three weeks to review as many sketches as Bard could produce.

As Bilbo waved goodbye from his car and drove away, Bard shut the door and returned to the kitchen. It was lunchtime, but he was too excited to want to eat.

Thran wasn’t the only artist in the house anymore.
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

While an angel holds forth about the importance of lunch, a saint delays his to follow his muse. When they reconvene, excitement gives way to realities, tradeoffs, and compromises. The saint cites the truth of an old adage, but neglects to let it temper his worries.

Will angst be in the offing?

The members of the UVB board stayed only a few minutes, mostly to chat with Thran. He made nice professional noises with both of them, smiling with the European charm so many casual acquaintances seemed to expect from a Russian ballet dancer. Why did none of them expect him to act like a Cossack, or Josef Stalin? The rhetorical question gave him something to smile about inside until the board members took their leave. He passed them on to Lettie to see them out of the studio, then he and Ori adjourned to the small break room. It was after one in the afternoon, so both of them were happy to sit down at one of the two small tables and pull out something to eat. An old campaigner, Ori pulled out a water bottle and a collection of energy bars, fruit cups, and a plastic bag full of trail mix. Thran unfolded Bard’s bento box lunch, heated the rice and chicken, and sat down to wield his chopsticks. Ori was still exclaiming over the cleverly nested boxes when Lettie came in, a small lunch bag in her hand.

“Oh, you two are wonderful!” she exclaimed, sinking down into the remaining chair with Ori and Thran. “I was sure I’d have to wolf down a power bar or something before we’d plunge right into things.”

“This will be my first decree as principal and major investor,” Thran replied with a flourish of his chopsticks. “We will have lunch every day, without fail.”

“You set a high standard,” Lettie observed, nodding at the nested boxes.

“That is courtesy of my husband, Bard,” Thran said. “He and I have a pact not to skip any meals, because we both do when we are absorbed in something. So he provided me an elegant lunch that I cannot resist.”

“Does he cater?” Lettie teased. “Because I wouldn’t resist that, either.”

“I am blessed,” Thran agreed.

Irmo burst in, closely followed by Abebe, Rada, and Círdan. “What is this? Eating? We must start!”

“We will start shortly, Irmo,” Thran said firmly. “You are right that we have much to do, and so we must see to the care of those who will work so hard. We will have lunch every day, for those who choose to have it. I cannot ask so much work of myself, much less the rest of our company, without proper attention to the things that keep us strong. Ergo,” he waved at his collection of boxes, “lunch.”

“That’s music to my ears,” Abebe avowed. “I’ll be right back.”
The ballet master and set designer disappeared, the former returning shortly with a couple of power bars; the latter, with a wrapped sandwich. “Are you serious about this, Thran?”

Thran nodded firmly. “Very. I do not doubt that we will all work very long and very hard to make this ballet live. It is too much to ask ourselves to dance, make the scenery, sew the costumes, and do the other important jobs, without proper attention to the body. For a few short minutes every day, we will eat, and not think about ballet. Then we can return to our tasks refreshed.”

“I’m all for it,” Lettie seconded, and everyone else offered enthusiastic agreement.

“Then tomorrow I’ll bring something better than this,” Abebe looked at his wrapped bar.

Irmo looked exasperated, but Rada quietly inched a packet of cookies out from under his furry Tibetan hat, surreptitiously opened it, and snuck one cookie after the other into his mouth.

“But this is time that we can put to better use, as we are all together,” Irmo waved his hands.

“We put it to good use now – reflection after the morning’s tedium,” Thran said, grateful for the crunchy vegetables Bard had put in one of the small nesting boxes. They gave him something to chew rather than biting Irmo’s head off. “Be patient, and we will soon be ready to begin on other topics.”

“I’m through mine, Mr. Oropherson,” Ori said quietly, capping his water bottle. “I can explain the voice recognition system to Mr. Lórien, so he’ll understand why I’m following him around and repeating everything he says.”

“I thank you, Ori,” Thran gave the small man a nod. “But first, let me make my second pronouncement. We will not stand on titles. To make our ballet, we will all find ourselves doing more than what our supposed titles define. We will all work however we can at whatever we can, yes?” Nods went around. “Good. So I am Thran, and you are Ori, and you are Irmo, Lettie, Abebe, Círdan, and Rada. We can be respectful without so much formality, I hope. If all of you agree?”

Nods went around again.

“Then Ori, while the rest of us finish our meal, please explain how we plan to capture Irmo’s ideas – actually, the ideas of anyone within Ori’s earshot.”

Ori gave a quick summary of the voice recognition system, producing the microphone and table and showing everyone how it worked. That provoked great interest and discussion that persisted until everyone was through eating.

“Then we will adjourn for a moment to tend to necessities, and then we will try Ori’s system out as we discuss the list of scenes we have so far for our ballet,” Thran directed.

Everyone agreed, and in a few minutes, the group was back in the small break room, ready to begin. Ori handed around copies of the ballet scenes and details that Thran had worked out with Irmo previously, and let everyone peruse it for a few seconds before beginning the discussion. It took a few moments for everyone to get used to the background echo of Ori repeating words a fractured second after someone said them. The obtrusiveness lessened as Ori adjusted his voice until it was barely above a whisper.

First, they discussed the story and scenes; this was the first time Círdan had heard a lot of this, and Rada, as well. Then they discussed the general look of what Irmo and Thran had come up with. People began to sit up and voices grew animated as everyone was drawn into the vision that had begun with Thran’s knife dance and his husband’s apt characterization.
Finally, finally, finally – the days of bureaucracy and legalities were over, and the excitement of creation had begun.

* * *

Bard’s first instinct was to snatch up his sketchbook and pencils, and never mind lunch, never mind ballrooms that needed painting, never mind chores and renovation and laundry. Despite the importance of all of those mundane things, he knew better than to ignore the muse when she was so engaged. So off to the sitting room he went, out came the sketchpad and pencils, and he blanked his thoughts as he opened to the first blank sheet.

He must have done ten or fifteen before the initial rush of excitement calmed. There was Tilda looking back at Sigrid as they were about to fly down the snowy hill on the sled. There were Bain and Legolas, running through the house and laughing. There was Thran standing pensively at rest in the ballroom, one hand on the barre and the other at his side as he looked out of the window. Another appeared of Thran leaning forward on the sitting room sofa to pour tea into his cup, one leg elegantly curled under him, his soft sweater draping his lean frame, one strand of hair falling in front of his shoulder. Thran in a backbend, one foot on the floor and the other arched elegantly overhead, expression serene. One of the double images he liked so much – his favorite was Tilda looking away from the mirror and over her shoulder at the viewer, while her reflection also looked at the viewer, both of them startled, as if the viewer had interrupted their conversation. The moodiness, the unsettled sense of which was a reflection and which was not, intrigued him enough that he did several like that, each a bit more unsettling than the next. He didn’t know what story had preceded each of the sketches, and what might come after was far from clear, but he liked that ambivalence.

When the muse let him go, he found that three hours had gone by, and it was almost four o’clock. He refused to regret missing lunch. Nothing could make him do that.

He ducked into the fridge and made a peanut butter sandwich, which he wolfed down with a big glass of milk. He’d have some fruit with the children when they came home, so he could in good conscience say that he’d had lunch, albeit a late one.

He’d just gotten the peanut butter and bread back in the fridge and had gotten out the cutting board and chef’s knife in anticipation of supper when the door to the mudroom banged.

“Bard! I am home!”

His husband sounded jubilant, bringing a smile to Bard’s face. “I’m in the kitchen, angel! It sounds like you had a good day.”

Thran swept through, his pale grey dress coat aswirl and a wide smile on his face as he came up behind Bard and put his arms around him. “At last, we are through the wrangles and papers and games of poker! The ballet commences!”

“That’s got to be a relief,” Bard grinned, as Thran bounced away to put his coat and scarf in the hall closet. “Go change out of your nice suit, then come back downstairs and tell me about it.”

“Come up with me!”

Thran sounded so ecstatic that Bard chuckled as he followed the tall dancer upstairs and into the
bedroom. He sat on the bed as Thran babbled from the closet, the gist of it being that the contract was signed with minimal effort, and the afternoon was spent in intense discussion with Irmo, the set designer, the costumier, the ballet master, and the artistic director as they began to bring their ballet to life. Mr. Nori’s brother, Ori, was also on board to record Irmo’s brilliance in a useful form. It was wonderful to see Thran so animated and engaged after the days of endless jousting about terms. He was so elated when he came out of the closet in his Henley and leggings that he pounced on Bard, pushing him flat on the bed and perching on hands and knees above him to kiss him thoroughly.

“You do feel better,” Bard teased, draping his arms around Thran’s neck and kissing him back.

“It has been nearly three months since I last worked on a ballet,” Thran shrugged without apology. “As much as I have loved our time together, it is good to be a dancer again.”

“Did you get to dance today?”

“No, but at least I got to talk about what I will dance before long. That is a great relief.”

Bard kissed Thran again. “I’m sure.”

Thran rolled off Bard and flopped onto his back beside him as he continued to babble about how the day had gone and how Ori and his marvelous device would capture Irmo’s ideas and how much he liked the set designer. Bard listened patiently, happy that his husband was so animated and full of life. When Thran’s spate of words slowed, Bard twined his fingers with Thran’s and turned towards him.

“It all sounds great, cariad. I had some good news today, too.”

“Do you know what we need?” Thran stared up at the ceiling. “We need a name for our ballet. We cannot continue to call it the Death ballet. That is too negative. What would be a better, more enticing name?”

“I don’t know; something like... Deathfall, or King of the Dead, or Fall of the King of the Dead, or The Death of Death, or The Son of Dracula Returns...”

Thran snickered. “The last one has already been taken, long ago. It was a terrible film.”

Bard snickered, too. “I missed that one.”

“I should have missed it.”

“You could call your ballet Immortal. That covers both Death and Love.”

“I like that one,” Thran hummed, still staring at the ceiling. In mid-thought, however, his eyes sharpened, and he looked over at Bard. “Did you say... you had good news?”

Bard smiled, gratified that the Death ballet hadn’t swept Thran completely away. “I did.”

Thran sat up all at once, propping himself up on one elbow. “You called Shire Hills! What did Bilbo say?”

Bard sat up completely, cradling Thran’s long hand in both of his to massage it. “He did more than say, angel – he came out to look at my stuff. He loved Rahmiel and the other sculpture, but he really loved my sketches. He thinks that I could make a good show out of them.”

Thran threw his arms around Bard and pressed a loud kiss against his cheek. “Of course they are
good! They are much more than good! Oy, lyubov moya, that is the best news! What else did he say?"

Bard took a deep breath. “The good news is that he thinks my sketches will appeal to a larger market than my sculpture because it’s quicker to produce, of course, and more affordable to more people, also of course. He has ties to a gallery where I could hold a show, even include a couple of pieces of my stuff from the barn to build interest in that, maybe attract some commissions.”

“That is wonderful, my saint.” Thran looked deeply into Bard’s eyes, concerned. “But if that is the good news, and it is very good news... is there bad news?”

“No really. It just... it means we – I might need to change a few things for a couple of weeks.”

“Tell me.”

“The only hitch is that Bilbo thinks I don’t have enough sketches. He’s right – I don’t. He’s asked me to see what I can produce in the next three weeks, and then he and I will see where I stand. The problem is... if I work on my sketches, then I don’t work on the ballroom, and you need the ballroom to work on the ballet. I called two plasterers to come out to make estimates, by the way; they’ll be out later this week. So I want to ask how soon you think you’ll need the ballroom so I can see what juggling I need to do to get it ready. I can put Bilbo off –”

“No, no, no!” Thran’s hands tightened on Bard’s shoulders. “For you to put off your sketches is no better than for me to put off the ballet. So you must sketch. We do not need the ballroom right away. We have much work to do first – cast the parts, choose the music, choreograph the dances... many, many things.”

The mudroom door banged open downstairs, signaling the children’s arrival from school. Both of them winced as that same door slammed shut.

“Let us greet the horde,” Thran suggested. “We will make supper, and then do homework, and then talk of what to do about the ballroom.”

“Okay,” Bard agreed, pulling Thran to his feet after him. “Steak tonight. Is that okay for you? I’ve got plenty of chicken breast if you’d rather I grill that for you.”

“I have not had steak in forever,” Thran admitted as they trotted downstairs. “Perhaps a small piece will not ruin me.”

“I don’t think it will,” Bard replied, as they headed into the kitchen to greet the children.

As everyone got ready for supper, the children were full of discussion about school. Sigrid had another track meet this coming Saturday, a big regional one with several schools in attendance, so Bard made sure that was noted on their schedule. Bain had a field trip on Thursday to the MOMA in the city. Legolas had to study for a big English test tomorrow. Tilda had a note from her art teacher asking Bard to email him.

“What’s that about, little doll?” Bard asked with some concern, his chef’s knife pausing over the cutting board.

Tilda’s expression was considered. “I don’t know. I’m not in any trouble that I can think of. Mr. Rohan liked my last two assignments.”

“Okay, I’ll email him after supper,” Bard agreed. “Table all set?”
“That’s Legolas tonight,” Tilda confirmed, waving a spoon. “I’m doing the fruit salad.”

“Table’s set,” Legolas confirmed.

Supper was soon ready. This was the first time since they’d moved in that Bard had grilled steak on their new gas stove, and it was met with enthusiasm. Even Thran ate more than the miniscule portion he originally took for himself, which relieved Bard; he still worried about how little Thran ate. That was not a concern he had about any of the children; the amount all of them ate, especially the boys, was stunning. They all seemed to eat like vacuum cleaners on full suck, too – one second the food was there, and the next second it wasn’t. There were no leftovers to put away, either.

As the children settled to their homework around the kitchen table, Bard settled in the sitting room with Thran. He borrowed Thran’s computer to send the email to Tilda’s teacher, set the laptop aside, then picked up his sketchbook. A reply appeared less than a half hour later, alerting Bard with a soft chime. As he read the man’s reply, a big smile appeared on his face, attracting Thran’s attention.

“What is it? Good news?”

Bard nodded, then pitched his voice to be heard in the kitchen. “Tilda, would you come in for a second?”

Tilda duly appeared. “Yes, Da?”

“I just got a reply from your art teacher. He didn’t just like your last two assignments, little doll. He thinks you’d do well in a drawing class rather than just the basic one you’re in, and wants to know if I’d be okay with that. What do you think? Would you like that?”

Tilda’s smile was wide. “I would love that! So can I, Da?”

“It might mean more work, so think about that. Do you think you can handle that and the rest of your homework, too?”

Tilda’s nod was vigorous. “I want to, Da. I really want to.”

“Then I’ll email him back right now.” Bard opened the reply window. “Dear Mr. Rohan: I appreciate the chance for Tilda to change her general art class to a drawing class. She is very excited about it, and I am sure this will improve her skills a great deal. Thank you for giving her the chance. Kind Regards, Bard Bowman.”

Tilda threw her arms around Bard. “Thanks, Da. I can’t wait!”

Thran sat up to offer Tilda a hug. “Congratulations, Kukla! You will become a great artist before you know it!”

“Just like Da,” she beamed, hugging Thran. “I wonder when I’ll get to move to the drawing class?”

The computer chimed again, and Bard checked the mail queue, smiling when the answer to Tilda’s question appeared. “Mr. Rohan says he’ll talk to you tomorrow about that.”

“Goodie!” Tilda jumped up and down. “I can’t wait!”

She bounced back into the kitchen to return to her homework as Bard tapped a reply to Mr. Rohan thanking him for his offer. When he was done, he logged off, and passed the laptop to Thran. He picked up his sketchbook and pencils again, and did a quick drawing of Tilda’s smile and sparkling eyes.
“That is exactly her,” Thran hummed, leaning over to look over at Bard’s book. “Oooh, you have done several sketches today, yes? May I see?”

Bard handed his sketchbook over. “I admit that I spent all afternoon sketching, rather than painting the ballroom.”

Thran shot Bard a stern look as he paged through the sketched Bard had done this afternoon. “Do not sound one bit guilty. This is a great chance you have, and you must take it, just as I take my chance to do the ballet.”

“When do you think you’ll need the ballroom? A month? Two months? A week?”

“I am not sure, though I am sure that whenever it is done, we will make use of it. Understand that we will never make our ballroom into the perfect ballet studio, Bard. I do not expect that, so we should not try. It is only to supplement UVB’s regular studio only.”

“Okay,” Bard exhaled. “Then what’s good enough to make it a supplemental space? Is it enough just to refinish the floors? Do the floors and lighting? Do the walls and ceiling need any work at all? Of course, having the whole thing done would be ideal, and it’d make a good backdrop for publicity shots.

“The other side of the equation, as Sigrid would say, is how to get the work done. I think the floor will need someone to come in and do it. The plaster isn’t essential to, but I want to make sure it’s stable before we hang any chandeliers. The paint I can do myself, though it’ll take a while. If we hired someone to do it, they’d likely be done in a week. Or we can hire day labor to help me do it.”

Thran mulled. “The most important part is the floor. Ours is old, it is wood rather than the new composites, but it is springy, and not slippery – both of those are essential. I do not want to do much to it, because sanding and varnishing would make it much too slippery to dance upon. We could add a top layer of the more modern material, but that is a great expense, and the herringbone floor is too beautiful to cover unless we must. One advantage of working on the wood is that whatever venue hosts our performance will probably have a wood floor, and so we must get used to dancing on it.”

“Okay, not much to do to the floor. Just leave it alone? Keep it swept?”

Thran nodded. “Yes. No grit, no shoes.”

“That’s easy. What’s next? Lighting?”

Thran nodded again. “Yes, we need the chandeliers. The side sconces alone do not make enough light. That will be a great expense, yes?”

“Likely,” Bard exhaled, scribbling figures on the back of one of his sketches. “We need three chandeliers, and each one needs to be about forty-five inches tall by forty-five inches wide. Crystal ones will be an arm and a leg. Maybe brass ones would be less. I have no idea. The size we need will likely need special ordering, and that may take time.”

Thran opened his search engine on his laptop and called up pictures of chandeliers. Bard slid closer to watch the screen. “I like the crystal ones. And look – they are expensive, but far less than the brass ones.”

“I guess that’s not surprising, now that I think about it,” Bard conceded. “All the metal arms have to be exactly the same, and that takes work, and good brass costs good money. The crystal ones rely a lot on gravity to make all the crystals hang the same way, and the wire doesn’t have to be so fine. So that’s something.”
“It seems that these are not special order, so that is something else,” Thran mulled. “I wonder how long it takes them to ship?”

“I wonder how much they weigh?” Bard added. “I think the places in the ceiling to hold them line up with the roof joists so they’ll take the weight, but I’ll need to check.”

“I don’t understand that,” Thran cast him a puzzled look.

“Click on that crystal chandelier you like. Okay, scroll down... there, it weighs sixty-five pounds. Unsupported plaster can’t hold that, so you have to anchor the chandelier to the beams in the ceiling under the plaster. Those beams are called joists, and they’re heavy wood to support the roof, as well as the chandeliers. So given that the ballroom once had heavy chandeliers, and the ceiling shows where they went, I assume that the original ones were well anchored. But you know what they say about assume, right?”

“What?”

Bard wrote the word, ‘assume,’ on his paper by his calculation, and drew a circle around the first three letters. “Assume makes an ass,” he circled the letter u, “out of you,” he circled the letters me, “and me.” He gave Thran a wry grin. “That means I’ll haul my ass up to the crawl space and make sure.”

Thran’s snicker was rich. “A wise as well as a funny man. So if we use this chandelier as an example, it will cost somewhere five and seven thousand dollars for three chandeliers.”

“It’ll be at least a couple of weeks to ship then, which is okay; the ceiling has to be in shape before they go up, anyway.”

“What about painting?”

Bard exhaled again. “Not cheap, but it’d be faster than me doing it. It runs about a dollar a square foot. I’d figure at least twenty-five hundred to three thousand dollars to have a crew come in and do it.”

“So the painters and the chandeliers will be ten thousand dollars.”

Bard winced. “That’s a lot. It might be cheaper to rent studio space.”

Thran winced, too. “Studio space starts at about seventy-five dollars an hour. So ten thousand dollars translates to about one hundred and thirty hours of studio space. Even at only fifty hours a week, that is less than three weeks of studio rental. Irmo will consume that in a single gulp. Perhaps the expense could be a tax deduction for business expenses?”

Bard shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Nor do I,” Thran agreed. “That will be a question for Ori or Mr. Nori tomorrow.”

Thran fell silent, and stayed that way as the children began to filter in, saying they were through their homework and heading upstairs to bathe. Bard’s old worries about money flitted around the edges of this thoughts – Thran hadn’t batted an eye when Bard had spent almost ten thousand dollars on kitchen appliances, or a roof, or updated plumbing. Maybe the financial gamble to put on this ballet was more severe than he’d thought. When Sigrid stuck her head in to say she was done and heading upstairs to talk to Finn, Bard worked hard to keep his worry out of his voice.

“Most of the expense of this is for the chandeliers,” he said casually. “If what you need is good
lighting, then we can get industrial fixtures to hold us until after the ballet. That’ll cost less than a thousand dollars for the lot, and it’ll provide better lighting, too. And I don’t mind dividing up my time, half on painting, and half on sketching. That’ll preclude us having to hire painters. That’d bring down the cost of the ballroom to just a thousand dollars for the lighting. I’ll have an idea about the plaster work once I get the estimates later this week.”

Thran swallowed. “The painting takes time away from your sketching, Bard. How can I ask you do to that?”

“I can’t sketch nonstop for the next three weeks. I can at least get the ceiling in shape for industrial lighting so you can see what you’re doing, even if we let the walls go for a bit. That’ll save you from having to rent studio space.”

Thran shrugged, conceding the truth of that. “That would avoid a large expense I would prefer not to incur. I accept, then – you will care for the ceiling, and we will hang industrial lighting for now. But your sketching must occupy fully half of your time, lyubov moya. Please agree to that.”

Bard nodded. “I will, especially if you let me sneak into some of your sessions to sketch?”

“Of course.” Thran mustered a smile. “Then once our ballet is a huge success, you will make a beautiful book from your sketches and call it ‘The Art of Immortal,’ and it will be a huge success on top of a huge success.”

“That’d be stunning,” Bard smiled.

Later, when Bard settled into bed beside Thran, he thought about Thran’s quick agreement to spend as little on the ballroom as possible to address the immediate need. This ballet was more of a gamble than Thran had let on, then. Had Bard contributed to that gamble because he’d spent too much on the house renovation so far? Granted, Bard had done only things that had been necessary to make the house habitable – roof, plumbing, kitchen appliances, and so on – and he hadn’t been too flamboyant with anything. But maybe he could have done more of it himself, or... something.

He’d find some way to get the ballroom in proper shape, because Thran needed it. Even if he had to put off his sketching for a little, it wouldn’t be forever. Bilbo and his show would still be there once the ballroom was fit for Thran and the company to dance in.

After all that Thran had done for him, he’d get it done, whatever it took.

* * *

**Technical Notes:**

For you house geeks out there (and math geeks who fondly remember the phrase, be sure to show your work), here’s how to calculate the size chandelier you need for a space:

- Allow 2.5-3 inches of chandelier height for each foot of room height. This gives you the height of the chandelier.
- Add the width of your room in feet to the height of your room in feet. This is approximately the diameter in inches of your chandelier.
Bard’s ballroom is 60 feet long by 30 feet wide by 15 feet high:

- The height of each chandelier is 15 feet high x 2.5 inches = **37.5 inches high** (minimum), or 15 feet high x 3 inches = **45 inches high** (maximum)
- The diameter of each chandelier is 30 feet wide + 15 feet tall = **45 inches wide**

So Bard and Thran need three chandeliers to fit the original configuration of the ceiling, each about **45'' high x 45'' wide**.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

The ballet continues to take its toll.

Chapter Notes

Most people remember the "Kyrie" section of György Ligeti’s "Requiem" for its inclusion in the film, "2001 - A Space Odyssey." It’s the eerie voice part that accompanies the appearance of the mysterious monolith.

Long after Bard relaxed into sleep, Thran remained awake. So many things flitted through his thoughts, a few logistical – how to manage Irmo, the set to be built, the publicity and the venue and the dancers – but many exciting – to dance again, to create something new, to work with so many good people. Over and over again, he forced his body to calm, only to find arms and legs and shoulders tense with desire to dive back into the madness. The constant shifting and turning would only wake Bard, so Thran stealthily slid away from his sleeping husband. Yet no sooner did he move away than Bard stirred, rolling over to stroke a slow hand over Thran’s back.

“Hard to sleep tonight, angel?”

“I am sorry. I had hoped not to wake you.”

“All of the day’s excitement.”

Thran sighed. “Very much so.”

A warm chest came to rest at Thran’s back. A strong left arm slipped under his and around his ribs, easing him close. “Maybe I can help.”

As the hand across his ribs stroked slowly, lightly, warm breath and soft lips caressed his neck, flooding his body with endorphins. Bard’s right hand slid under Thran’s body and wrapped around his shoulder; his left traced down Thran’s ribs, loin, hip, groin, then rubbed his cock gently. Teeth nibbled at the juncture of neck and shoulder, tensing Thran’s skin into gooseflesh. As his breath caught, his cock stiffened, only to be engulfed in Bard’s hand. A leg went over his to pull it back, and the hand around his cock would not be ignored. He was overwhelmed in seconds to gasp, then release, in the arms of his husband. Hands stroked him as he calmed, and a soft kiss at his nape sent another wave of gooseflesh over him. When he was spent, Bard passed him a small towel to blot himself and the sheets.

“Better?” Bard murmured, his soft voice blurry with sleep.

“You treat me far better than I deserve,” Thran whispered back, his hands tightening on Bard’s resting on his shoulder and hip.
“I love you, angel. That’s all.”

“I love you, too, lyubov moyya. Very much.”

Bard’s hands tightened on him, silent acceptance, then he resettled himself at Thran’s back. His breath deepened quickly as he drifted off. The comforting sound blessedly soothed Thran to sleep in only a few minutes.

Two hours later, Thran woke with his brain on fire, his thoughts spinning and racing and careening once again.

* * *

The next several days raced by so fast that Bard was hard pressed to distinguish between them. There were the children to see off to school, Thran to see off to UVB, and the house to manage. Plasterers made estimates – one outrageous, the other much more reasonable. Bard liked the second woman, who acknowledged that to restore all of the plasterwork was excessive, unneeded, and expensive, given that most of it was stable, if a bit worn around the edges. Just to re-anchor the one loose ceiling medallion didn’t cost too much and took only a couple of hours, so that’s what Bard chose to do. Even while the plasterer was at work, Bard spent more hours on the scaffolding, scraping and painting the ballroom ceiling, than anything else. Still, he’d learned from all the bedrooms that paint with included primer was a blessing, because it cut the number of coats that the ceiling needed to two. He ordered three industrial ceiling fixtures in white, which would come next week.

Even the weekend saw Thran off early to the UVB studio, so Bard shuttled Legolas to fencing, then he and the other children took Sigrid off to her track meet. Her events weren’t for a couple of hours, so Bard, Tilda, and Bain headed to the market, stocked the fridge, returned to pick up Legolas, and then went back to Sigrid’s meet to watch. Finn joined them there to cheer Sigrid on in her races. By two, the meet was over, so Bard brought Bain, Tilda, and Legolas home while Sigrid went out for pizza with Finn. He made tacos for lunch, put stuff in the crockpot for a supper of chicken and dumplings, threw laundry into the washer, then got everyone started on homework while he resumed work on the ceiling. When Sigrid and Finn came home, both of them joined the homework table. Bard climbed down as the washer and dryer required, or to answer homework questions as they arose.

Tilda finished her homework first, then came into the ballroom to keep Bard company while she worked on her drawing. It was fun to hear her impressions of her new art class, and Bard climbed down a time or two to elaborate on something she’d learned in class. Despite the diversions, Bard was able to finish the first coat on the ceiling without delaying supper too long. He threw the brushes and rollers into the mudroom sink to soak, then hustled up the supper crew to help get the veg and fruit ready to accompany with chicken and dumplings.

He’d hoped that holding supper late would give Thran a chance to get home in time for it, but the ballet had a solid hold on his husband. Supper was over, cleanup commenced, and Finn bade the family farewell. Bard felt bad that he hadn’t spent much time with Bain and Legolas, so after the family read the next bit of Harry Potter, he asked the boys to teach him how to play one of their video games. Taking pity on him, they spared him the zombie apocalypse, and chose car racing instead. He lost the first several races miserably, but once he got used to the controller, he steadily improved. When he finally won a race, he was elated.
“Finally!” Bain jibed with a grin. “At least now we can get out of the practice phase and try a real race!”

“What was this – the infant race?” Bard snarked back.

“Just about,” Bain returned. Beside him, Legolas smothered laughter in his hands. “It’s true, right, Legs? This is the baby race!”

“Um, kind of,” Legolas admitted with a guilty smile at Bard.

“Then bring on the real race,” Bard snorted. He’d stand no chance against his younger competitors, but he put on a brave face, all the same. Given the eager chortles from the boys, a brave face would likely be all that he’d get out of this, but onward he went. To everyone’s surprise, he held his own, and if he didn’t win many races, his losses were at least respectable.

“Can I play Dinky Farm now?” Tilda asked plaintively. “You’ve played at least a hundred car races, so it’s my turn.”

Bain groaned, but not loudly, so a four-hand round of Dinky Farm replaced the car races. Tilda had a wonderful time explaining all the nuances to Bard, and he was much better than all of the children at weighing the tradeoffs of one expense over another, so he was the winner of the game, much to everyone’s surprise but his own.

Just as Tilda headed upstairs to shower, the door to the mudroom opened. Bard turned over his video controller to the boys, but Legolas was quick to run into the kitchen; Bard followed close behind. Thran was just coming through. He’d shed his coat and boots, and was still in bedraggled dancewear. He looked tired and pale as Legolas greeted him with a hug.

“Papa! I’m glad you’re home at last! I was starting to worry.”

Thran wound arms around his son to return the greeting. “All is well, Legolas. I am sorry I was away so long today.”

“Is everything all right with your ballet?”

“It is very well, yes. We made very good progress today on the choreography. I am very happy... but tired.”

“Okay. I’m glad you’re okay. The Gondors said to tell you that they missed you today.”

“That is kind of them. I missed fencing with them, too. But I am well exercised, even so.”

Legolas smiled, encouraged at his father’s wry grin. “Okay. Bain and I are playing a game, so I should go back to it.”

“Of course. Good luck against the zombies.”

Chuckling, Legolas dashed back to the sitting room, leaving Thran to meet Bard’s eyes. He looked so weary that Bard offered him a hug.

“Welcome home, angel. You look all in.”

Thran nodded. “I am very tired.”

“Understandable. It’s going on ten. What can I get you to eat?”
“I am almost too tired to eat. Is there any soup?”

“There’s soup. Chicken with veg and a few noodles, or potato leek. I made chicken and dumplings for supper, so there’s that, too.”

“The chicken soup sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll put it on while you wash.”

“If I wash, I will only fall into bed after, so I should eat first, or I will not eat at all.”

“At least put on something comfortable while the soup heats. I can get you some leggings and a dry shirt if you want.”

“I have them in my bag. I will change in the pantry, so as not to offend the sensibilities of our children.”

Bard chuckled as he got out the bin of soup. “Go ahead, then. Anything with your soup? Salad? Rolls? Cheese and crackers?”

“A warm roll with butter would be perfect.”

“On its way.”

Thran rooted through his bag, dug out some clothes, and disappeared into the pantry. Bard busied himself heating a big bowl of the soup in the microwave, and put a plate of cracked wheat rolls in the warming oven. Out came the butter, salt, and pepper to go on the table. Bard had just turned back to the kitchen when Thran reappeared; his husband shivered and quickly pulled a long, woolly cardigan and equally thick socks from his bag and put them on.

“Tea?”

“Lemon with ginger?”

“Okay. Sit down; your soup’s almost ready.”

Thran went without comment, moving as if his arms and legs were too heavy, leaning on the table as he sat down. Bard put the bowl of soup and utensils before him, then brought the plate of rolls.

“Do you mind company? Or if you’d rather just eat, that’s fine, too.”

Thran looked up at him. “It would be nice if you would sit with me. Though I am not very good company. I will likely babble about the ballet to keep myself from falling asleep.”

Bard sat down opposite Thran. “Eat first. Then you can babble away as much as you want.”

Thran dug into his soup without further urging. His first couple of bites were tentative, but as the warm broth hit his stomach, he sped up, humming in relief. He downed that bowlful fast enough that Bard ladled more into it, which Thran didn’t protest. He paused long enough to butter a roll and chew it gratefully.

“Maybe I need to make you a bigger lunch,” Bard ventured.

“I would not turn it down,” was Thran’s frank admission.

“Chicken,” Thran nodded, then he smiled guiltily. “I do like peanut butter.”

“Maybe nuts? Or you can just keep a jar of the stuff at the studio with bread or crackers. Or a spoon.”

Thran snickered. “Rada – the costumier, yes? – eats the most bizarre collection of things. Mostly sweets. He has this voluminous coat full of everything, as if he were some sort of snack emporium. And a hat under which he keeps packets of ginger snaps. He carries around a jar of chocolate nut spread that he eats out of with a spoon – or he dips the cookies into it.”

Bard grimaced and laughed at the same time. “Gods, that stuff’s too sweet for me.”

“Then you would starve in the midst of Rada’s great bounty. He eats nothing but sweets, I think.”

Tilda came downstairs and into the kitchen. She was in her nightclothes, and her hair was wet from the shower. “Ada! You’re home! You must be tired!”

“At long last, I am home,” Thran gave her a smile. “I am tired, but your Da’s good chicken soup is a great restorative. Comment ça va, ma petite?”

“Très bien, Ada. Nous avons été au magasin et à la course de Sigrid.”

“Your French is coming along so well!” Thran complimented.

Tilda dimpled. “Legolas helps me a lot. He’s a good teacher.”

“That is kind of you to say.”

“He’s helping all of us. Sigrid sounds a lot better now, or so Legs says.”

“Excellent.”

“Before long, I’m going to be the only one who doesn’t understand what’s going on,” Bard shook his head.

“Then we’ll be able to talk about what to get you for Christmas without you knowing what we want to get you.” Tilda smiled, but put her head on Bard’s shoulder to take the sting out of her poke. “Can I have some of my cheese, please?”

“Dry your hair first, little doll, so it’s not wet when you go to sleep.”

“Sigrid’s got the dryer in her room.”

“Go knock politely on the door, and ask her for it. You can bring it downstairs and I’ll help you get the back.”

“Okay, Da.”

As she trotted off, Bard gave Thran’s bowl another look. It was empty again. “More soup, angel?”

Thran shook his head. “Perhaps another roll, though. I like these.”

“I saw them in the market today. They were on sale, so they didn’t cost much, so I thought I’d try them out. If you and the children liked them, I can make something similar.”

“You look out for us very well,” Thran sighed. “Would you think me terrible if I wash my dishes,
then wash, and then crawl into bed?”

“Of course not. Leave the dishes; I’ll get them. Just tell me what your schedule is tomorrow, so I can work around it.”

“I expect I will be at the studio again after breakfast. I am sorry.”

“We talked about it, Thran. If it’s what you need to do to get your ballet off the ground, then it’s what you have to do.”

“You are a saint, indeed,” Thran looked up at him with gratitude. “Thank you for taking Legolas to fencing, and seeing to the food, and taking care of me, and everything. I love you, lyubov moya.”

“I love you, too, cariad, and you’re welcome. You see to the ballet. I’ve got the rest.”

“You have more than ‘the rest,’ lyubov moya,” Thran smiled. “You have a big part of the ballet, too. You came up with Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield, and most of the story that follows the battlefield, and then the name of the story. It will say so in the credits.”

“What, as chief cook and bottle washer?” Bard teased, taking Thran’s bowl and utensils to the sink and returning with his tea.

“No, as lead writer of the story. It will say Bard Bowman and Thran Oropherson.”

Bard blinked, and a small smile pricked at his lips as he thought about Thran’s revelation. “Well. That’s... that’s very nice of you.”

“It is the least I can do for one who gives so much.”

“And... it’ll really be called Immortal?”

Thran chewed his roll. “It is a very good name. No one has come up with a better one.”

“Wow.” Bard’s smile spread across his face. “Just... wow.”

Tilda came down with the hair dryer and her brush, so Bard put aside his delight to tend to her while Thran went upstairs to wash. He chased the boys upstairs to take their showers, got Tilda her cheese, then decided what he needed to prepare for tomorrow’s supper for the children to make. Maybe a shepherd’s pie? While the boys showered, he and Tilda put the humble concoction together. All the children would have to do was put the filling into a dish, boil and mash potatoes for the topping, and sprinkle it with cheese. He slid the bin of filling into the fridge, made his rounds, then headed upstairs with Tilda. The children were ready for bed, so Bard bid them all goodnight, and finally made it into his bedroom.

His husband was already sound asleep in bed. Bard washed and dried quietly, then slipped in beside Thran. His angel was so exhausted that he never stirred.

Thran hadn’t asked about the family tonight. Just as he hadn’t yesterday, or the day before.

Bard refused to worry. Thran had told him how consuming this ballet would be. If anything, Thran’s exhaustion was just more evidence of how much he needed Bard to back him. He’d made good progress to finish the main color on the ballroom ceiling; only the white trim paint remained. He’d finish that on Monday, and see how far he could get on stripping the rest of the woodwork. Tomorrow, he’d work on his sketches for Bilbo; with any luck, the muse would favor him, and he’d get several done during the day. The children would help with cleaning the house and finishing the
laundry, so that would be in good hand.

There was no need to worry. Everything was going well.

* * *

Despite Thran’s eagerness to reach the UVB studio, guilt simmered in his stomach as he waved goodbye to Bard. What a saint his husband was – never a word, never a question, always a patient ear to listen, and a bowl of hot soup whenever Thran dragged himself home. Thank the gods for Bard’s steadying presence, and his more than competent management of their children and home. What a blessing it was to know that all was safe and secure, and in the best hands! What a blessing it was to not have to worry – if there were problems, Bard would tell him.

Until then, he was free to concentrate on this ridiculous ballet.

This ridiculous ballet was more than enough to worry about – Irmo alone was a handful, although Ori mitigated a great deal of that, just by capturing the frequent zigs and zags of Irmo’s inspiration.

Then there was casting the two other leads, the Maid and the Soldier. UVB’s first male principal was ailing, a stress fracture that had been the original reason that UVB had called for auditions, but the young dancer they had hired had the potential to play the Soldier. He was small and dark-haired, reminding Thran of Legolas’s friend, Kíllian, and would provide exactly the right physical contrast with Thran’s tall, pale elegance. Unlike Kíllian, however, Luka did not balance his easy-going personality with precision of technique. In fact, at times, Thran thought him a bit slapdash. Thran expected to have to take him aside at some point to reiterate the need for focus, but for now he had left that to Abebe to settle the youngster.

Thran’s friend, Charisse, badly wanted to accept the role of the Maid, but UVB would have to pay a premium to her current company to get her on loan. Of all the things to pay for, this was worth the expense, but it was still an expense.

Another concern was the licensing fee to use the music that had started this effort – the Prokofiev piece from *Romeo and Juliet*. The fee to use those two minutes of music would cost several thousand dollars, even for a short run. But again, it was an expense that would make the ballet. Both Thran and Lettie and told Irmo firmly that the rest of the music for the ballet had to be from the public domain, which would cost nothing for them to use.

Of course, Irmo had ignored that, insisting that the “Kyrie” section of György Ligeti’s *Requiem* was the only music that could adequately accompany the ballet’s chaotic opening battle scene. After hearing it, Thran had to admit that the music was a brilliant complement, and so there was another expense for rights to use those six and a half minutes of music. If they used the same music for the second battle, then that meant another fee. At least the music Irmo considered for the introduction to the Underworld was in the public domain - Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre*. He also had an interesting idea to overlay different bits of music to signify the Soldier’s travels through the underworld as he moved from place to place. But if he included any modern music, that meant more fees.

Thran winced. How was one supposed to create anything original when constrained to just the music of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven? No modern classical, no pop, no metal, no rap, no jazz? He didn’t want to think about the tangle that using any world music would cause –
What if they could use some of the student musicians from the Imladris Academy to lay down something atmospheric? He’d have to ask Irmo what he thought, and Ori about the legal requirements. Of course, he could commission a composer to create all of the music – he didn’t want to think about how much that would cost. They would have to muddle along somehow.

Thran stopped worrying about the tangle of music licensing fees as he pulled the SUV into the UVB parking lot. It was only eight o’clock, but Lettie’s car was already there, and so was Ori’s. To his delight, Charisse pulled into the lot just after him.

“Ma chère!” he heralded, waving, and the tiny woman waved back and hurried to join him as they walked through the parking lot. “I am delighted to see you, but how are you here? I thought your company still had not agreed to the price to let you join us.”

“I talked to the front office,” Charisse confided. “I told them I really wanted to dance this role, and they’d get a mention in the credits, so they finally gave in.”

“Merci,” Thran smiled, hoping that the mention of the company in the credits might reduce the price they’d wanted, but expecting not. “Merci beaucoup.”

“Pas de quoi,” Chairisse shrugged. “So tell me, how has Irmo been?”

Thran rolled his eyes, but explained about Ori as they came in through the door. He introduced Charisse to Lettie and Ori, and he was relieved that his fellow dancer’s sweet disposition made her a friend to both in short order. That would go a long way to keep everyone working well together. They separated to change into their dance attire, then began on their barre work, interspersing their stretching with a discussion of things so far. When Thran told Charisse how he wanted her to help reinforce Luka’s attention to technique, she grinned.

“I can give him a good jolt,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. It was an assertive pose at odds with her usual girlish and sprightly demeanor. “I’ll dance the feet off him, and he’ll have to try to keep up with me. Once he realizes that you and I will make him look so bad in comparison, he’ll straighten up, or he’ll be out.”

“Ruthless lady, you are,” Thran teased, drawing her raised chin and confident smile.

“We’ve both paid our dues, Thran. It’s time this young one does, too.”

The door opened to the studio, and there was Luka. Thran whispered a few words to Charisse, and he partnered her across the floor with effortless precision, lightly sweeping her into a fish dive, and then back across the way they came. They ended with a bow to each other, and straightened with playful smiles. Thran winked at Charisse and turned towards Luka.

“Luka, come and meet our Maid. This is Charisse. Charisse, Luka is our Soldier.”

Luka offered his hand, which Charisse took gracefully. “Nice to meet you, Charisse. Thran’s told me a little about you, and I’m looking forward to us dancing together. You’ve danced with Thran before, right?”

“Oh, many times,” Charisse nodded, dimpling at Thran. “We are old friends. I have learned so much technique from him, and how to project on stage, too. There are no better teachers than those who have trained at Vaganova and Mariinsky, are there?”

“Um, no, there aren’t,” Luka agreed. At least he was quick enough to realize that despite her tiny stature and bright smile, Charisse was a seasoned performer.
“This is a dream, to dance something new, and with one of the world’s most skilled dancers, isn’t it?” Charisse enthused. “Thran sets a very high standard, you know. You and I must be on our toes to live up to that standard, I think. It will be so exciting!”

“Oh, ma chère, you have set a high standard for me, too, I think,” Thran laughed. “Come, let us resume the barre, so that we will be ready when the rest of the company comes in, and then Irmo!”

“I’m ready for it,” Luka nodded, smiling at the winsome Charisse.

Thran was pleased to see that their young principal put more effort into his barre than Thran had seen so far. Charisse had already improved their effort, and she had barely danced a step yet.

Irmo and Abebe came in shortly, and Ori and Lettie followed. At this point, only the three principal dancers would help in the creation of the choreography; the rest of the company would follow once Irmo blocked out the major portions of the story. Thran lost himself in the delight of dancing again with Charisse, the back and forth with Irmo and Abebe – even the background murmur that was Ori catching Irmo’s pronouncements was exciting. The hours sped by uncounted as slowly, slowly, the ballet began to emerge...

* * *

Sunday came and went in a blur. Bard might not be atop a paint scaffold, but there was more than enough to do – breakfast for the children, marshaling laundry, the usual tidying and cleaning. After lunch, Bain and Legolas went off with friends, and Finn came by for Sigrid. Tilda was happy to have her Da all to herself, so they expected to spend the afternoon in the sitting room with their drawing pads. No sooner than they’d settled, however, when Bard came upon water spreading all over the mudroom floor – a sock had fallen into the laundry sink, clogging the drain when the washer emptied. Even with Tilda’s help, it took over an hour to set that right, and several pairs of boots and shoes needed to dry out. Together, they got the laundry back on track, and Bard set up a small fan to circulate the air to speed the drying of footwear. Crisis dealt with, they went back to the sitting room to resume their sketching; Bard got a few more done for his meeting with Bilbo, but he spent a lot of time explaining things to Tilda because he enjoyed working with her. Before he realized it, the children were home, supper was on, eaten, and cleaned up, and the children got ready for the new school week. Thran came home at nine, managed to speak to all of the children before he devoured whatever Bard put in front of him, and took himself off to the shower. At least tonight he was alert enough to be awake when Bard crawled into bed with him, and wrapped himself around Bard.

“Everything’s all right, angel?” Bard asked, snuggling Thran close.

“Everything proceeds,” Thran allowed, and told him how well his friend Charisse was doing, and that the slightly lackadaisical Luka had stepped up his game a little, if still not enough, and Irmo was a little easier to deal with given Ori’s presence, and Abebe would bring in the company starting tomorrow to continue the work on the choreography.

“It does not sound like much, I am sure,” Thran murmured. “It is the same thing, over and over and over. Work on the scene, try the steps, see how the dancers work together, keep what Irmo likes and try something new for what he does not, on and on and on. It takes a very great deal of time.”

“How long does it take to make the entire ballet?”
“Weeks, perhaps months. Then there are so many meetings about where the final venue will be, so that we can design the set and lighting, and more meetings about publicity, fundraising, and so on. A long process.”

Thran sounded so tired, and he was already half asleep. Bard stroked and soothed and listened. When he pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair, he got a soft hum of appreciation just as Thran fell asleep. Bard nestled beside him, and shut his eyes.

There was no need to worry. Everything was going well.

* * *

The next week zipped by. Bard got children off to school, Thran off to the UVB studio, then set to work. Mostly that involved painting. It took two more days to finish the second coat on the ballroom ceiling, working virtually nonstop. The industrial light fixtures came in, so up they went; Bard had already prepped the wiring and mounts for all three, so they went up with a minimum of fuss. Thank goodness these weighed far less than crystal or brass chandeliers, so he could hoist them atop the scaffolding himself. White paint went on the plaster bits. Because the woodwork was minimal – most of the embellishment was plaster – stripping took only another two days. He got the walls scraped in record time. He got one long wall done in another two days, working all day with his lunch in one hand. The first coat on the window wall and the fireplace wall took another day. That left him on Saturday with one more long wall to do, so he got Legolas to fencing, put Sigrid on the bus to another track meet, picked up Legolas, made lunch, then set to. A teammate dropped Sigrid off at home, which was a big help. She and her siblings did homework while Bard got the last wall done before supper.

Again, Thran did not get home for supper.

“Is Papa all right?” Legolas asked at supper. “I hardly see him.”

“I’m sure he’s all right, Legs,” Bard said from the end of the table. “He’d tell us if something were wrong. Making a ballet from scratch is a lot harder than just rehearsing for one that’s already been created. Thran’s got to help the choreographer make up all the steps, and see to all the pieces that go with it. It’s very complicated.”

“I wish he didn’t have to work so hard,” Legolas looked at his plate.

“He warned all of us how hard this would be,” Bard said quietly, though he heartily echoed Legolas’s sentiment. He’d seen his husband only seconds longer then Legolas had, and Thran was so tired during those few moments that Bard didn’t have the heart to distract him any longer than he already did. “This ballet is very important to him, and we’ll all help him by taking care of everything here for him. Once more of the ballet settles, he won’t have to work so hard. And soon he and the company will be able to work in the ballroom, because it’s almost finished. That’ll mean we’ll see more of him, which will help us all feel better.”

Sigrid gave him a look, but didn’t say anything. He tensed, expecting her to be her usual forthright self, but she only got up to bring the ice cream and cookies to the table – both store bought, as Bard had opted to spend more time painting than baking.

Thran came home very late – almost eleven. He looked so stressed and exhausted that Bard mutely
put his supper before him, offered a gentle hand on his back, and sat with him while he ate. Only half a dozen words made it out of his mouth before he headed upstairs.

Bard swallowed. Something was wrong. Nothing could exhaust Thran to the point that he wouldn’t offer a smile, a warm word.

But Thran had promised to speak up if something were wrong. Bard trusted him to honor that.

Bard washed and crawled into bed. Thran was already asleep, so Bard settled into his pillow, and shut his eyes.

There was no need to worry. Everything was going well.

* * *

Thran dragged himself out of bed. He dressed. He packed his bag. He ate whatever Bard put in front of him. He packed whatever lunch Bard had made him into his bag. He got into the SUV. He drove to the UVB studio.

He danced.

* * *

Bard was surprised when Sigrid came down to the kitchen shortly after he did.

“Morning, sweetness. You’re up early.”

“I’m here to help you paint the ballroom.”

“It’s Sunday. I’m not supposed to paint anything, much less the ballroom.”

“You’re going to, though. I knew it the minute you talked about getting the ballroom in shape to get Ada back here. You’re worried about him. So am I. I’m worried about you, too.”

“I’m fine, Sig. And you’re right... I was going to paint today. Every day that ballroom’s not done is another day that Thran’s paying for studio space elsewhere. If he’s here, maybe I can get him to eat more, too.”

“So let’s get on with it. I don’t have your steady hand, but I can do the rolling while you cut in. You’ve still got all of the second coat and the woodwork to do. You need me.”

“Keeping tabs on my progress, are you?”

“Of course I am. I sneak in there every night while you pretend to sketch in the sitting room while we do homework. It’s blatantly obvious what you’re doing, too – you, not baking? Store-bought cookies? Come on, Da. You aren’t making it hard.”

Bard sighed. “Thran told us that this ballet would consume him, but I didn’t have any idea how
much it would. This is the biggest thing I know of that will help, so I want to get it done.”

“You haven’t done much sketching, have you? For your meeting with Shire Hills?”

Bard swallowed. “Just like your Mam, you are. Persistent to the end.”

“Da, your art is important, too.”

“Yes, it is,” Bard nodded, pouring cups of tea for them both and sliding one across the kitchen island to Sigrid. “But right now, Thran’s art takes precedence, and there’s no deadline to my meeting with Shire Hills. If it slips a week, it’s okay. Once I finish the ballroom, I can stop painting anything for a while and get my portfolio up to snuff. I’m willing to do that if it helps Thran.”

Sigrid sniffed, but she didn’t argue with Bard’s logic. “So you need me even more than I thought you did.”

With a sigh, Bard conceded. “I won’t turn you down, sweetness. If I can get this done, then that helps Thran, and I can get back to sketching and cookies and better suppers than I’ve put on the table lately.”

Sigrid grinned. “There’s nothing wrong with chicken five days in a row. And we had steak once, too.”

“Still.”

“Okay, so make a pot of porridge, then let’s get to it. I turned down a visit from Finn to do this, I’ll have you know.”

Sigrid’s joke didn’t get the jibe back she expected, for Bard gave her a guilty look. “I’m sorry about that, Sigrid. You shouldn’t have to give up time with your friends.”

“It won’t kill me. More to the point, it won’t kill Finn, either. He was likely going to want to watch hockey or something, and I can take that only so much. So take advantage of my cheap labor while it lasts.”

Bard pulled out the box of porridge while Sigrid got out the pot. As his daughter held out the pot for him to dump in the porridge, he grinned. Finn’s loss was his gain. It wouldn’t always be this way, but today, he was grateful for it.
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

The perfect storm arises. Will the angel and the saint weather it well, or is wreckage on the horizon?

Sigrid and Bard finished their porridge and tea, and headed into the ballroom. They positioned the scaffolding on a section of wall between the ribs of trim work, draped the drop cloths, poured the paint, and Bard climbed up with his brush to cut in around the trim work. As he progressed, Sigrid came behind him to fill in with the roller, and Bard moved on to the next lower section, perching under the scaffolding until Sigrid was done. They moved the scaffolding out of the way, then Sigrid could fill in the next section as Bard continued to cut in. They finished one section and were onto the second before Tilda and Legolas came in, the latter rubbing his eyes sleepily.

“It’s Sunday, Da!” Tilda protested. “You’re not supposed to paint today!”

Sigrid kept rolling as Bard nodded to the younger children. “It is Sunday, and normally I would work on my art, yes. But Ada needs the ballroom to help with his ballet, and I want to finish it for him. It’d mean he’d be home more, and we can take better care of him. So I’ll trade one day next week to work on my art for the chance to finish this.”

“I want to help,” Legolas said, his mouth thinning in determination. “I don’t know how to paint, but I can learn.”

“What’s going on?” Bain yawned sleepily, coming after his siblings. His eyes widened. “Da, you said you’d do your stuff on Sunday!”

“We’re going to finish the ballroom for Ada,” Tilda explained. “Legolas and I are helping, too. So Ada doesn’t have to be away all the time. So Legolas doesn’t have to miss him so much.”

Bain gave Legolas a quick glance, and he grimaced. “Yeah. That’s no good. So I’ll help, too. What do you want us to do, Da?”

Bard gulped, but Sigrid punched his arm. “Don’t bother to argue, Da. We’re doing this. Let’s get the white elephant room painted, and at least then Ada will be around for us to make sure he eats. Just tell us what to do.”

“You all are troupers, you are,” Bard graved. “Okay, help would be great. First, you three need breakfast. What would you like?”

“I can make scrambled eggs,” Legolas volunteered. “Is that good, Tilda and Bain? Scrambled eggs?”

“With cheese?” Tilda asked.

“I can add cheese.”

“That’s good by me,” Bain agreed. “I’ll do tea and juice, and Til, you do toast.”

Tilda nodded. “Okay.”
Legolas met Bard’s eyes. “We’ll do our breakfast, and then we’ll be back.”

“Thanks, Legs – thanks, all of you. Remember to put on old clothes before you come back. And get your hair out of your way.”

“Okay, Da; okay Bard,” the children murmured, and disappeared. Bard swallowed the lump in his throat, drawing Sigrid’s tsk.

“Don’t get all mushy, Da. What’d you expect, anyway? You trained us this way.”

“I... guess I did a good job of it, then,” Bard gave her a crooked grin.

“I’d say so,” Sigrid grinned, and brandished her roller. “You’d better think about what you want everyone to do before they get back, or we’ll end up with Provence Crème everywhere.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Bard saluted her with his brush, and went back to cutting in.

By the time the younger children were through their breakfast and were back in the ballroom, Bard had figured out how they could help. Tilda was too short to reach very high with the roller, and it was awkward for her to handle, but she had a good eye for detail. Legolas was the tallest, so Bard put him with Sigrid to roll paint. Bain wasn’t particular about how he helped, so he and Tilda got out the roll of painter’s tape and started taping the floor where it met the trim. Even under Bard’s careful hand, the old herringbone wood would soak up any miscue faster than anyone could blot it up, so the tape would minimize that. Bain and Legolas switched off to work with Tilda as they chose, and so they made rapid progress. They reached the end of the wall and were able to start on the next one in good time. After a break for a hearty lunch, they were back at the paint, and finished in late afternoon. Everyone was elated when they finished, and Bard was lavish with his praise. They made an extravagant supper of meat and bean tacos with all the condiments, and topped those off with equally decadent ice cream sundaes. After all the hard work the children had put in, Bard refused to insist that they eat vegetables other than the lettuce and tomato taco fillings. They deserved every bite of ice cream, every lick of chocolate syrup, every dollop of whipped cream.

He wished Thran could have been there.

This couldn’t go on this way.

Maybe once he had the ballroom in shape, Thran wouldn’t spend so long at the UVB studio. He’d be here. Maybe Bard couldn’t shorten Thran’s effort, but he could at least make sure Thran had enough to eat.

Was that all he could do?

That question nagged at him throughout the evening – the children’s showers, the packing of backpacks and readying of lunch things for tomorrow, the making the rounds to see to all the doors and locks. It did more than nag at him when he had to see Legolas into bed.

“I wish Papa would come home,” Legolas admitted, as Bard helped him pull up the covers. “I wanted to tell him about the ballroom.”

“I want him to come home, too, Legs,” Bard replied. “But he’s working hard to make this a success for all of us. He told us how much work that would be. Did he work this hard when you were with him, before you went to boarding school?”

“Sometimes,” Legolas said reluctantly. “I had a babushka who looked after me – a nanny, you call them here. I was often in bed before Papa came in to tell me goodnight. But that was often true when
Maman was with us, too – they both often worked late.”

“Then this is what he’s used to,” Bard offered, but it sounded lame even to him, and Legolas looked no more satisfied. “Have you texted him at all?”

“Every night, as I used to do when I was in boarding school,” Legolas nodded. “He doesn’t keep his mobile with him when he dances, but he always sends me one back when he can.”

“Has he sent replies back to you so far?”

“Not every night,” Legolas hedged. “But almost every night.”

“That’s something,” Bard smiled. “I’ll send him one tonight, too. I’ll say we all miss him and hope he’s well.”

“That’d be good,” Legolas nodded.

“Okay, sprout,” Bard patted his leg. “Sleep well, and I’ll see you in the morning for breakfast.”

“Okay, Bard. Sleep well, too.”

“I will. Night.”

“Good night.”

Bard let himself out, shutting the door quietly once Legolas had turned off his bedside lamp. He’d already tucked in the other children, so he headed downstairs to wait for Thran in the sitting room. He pulled out his mobile, and chewed his lip for a second, unsure if he should interrupt Thran.

Legolas had said that Thran didn’t carry his mobile while he danced, so Thran wouldn’t get his text until he took a break.

* * *

Just wanted to say I love you. We all miss you. Please take good care of my angel, he typed quickly, and pressed Send.

He didn’t expect an immediate answer, but he was still disappointed when his mobile stayed silent. Rather than worry about the silence, Bard left a small lamp on in anticipation of Thran’s impending arrival, then went back upstairs to shower and shave. He didn’t look at his mobile until he was done, but once he was clean and dry, he checked, sure he’d see a text waiting.

Nothing.

It was after eleven. Almost midnight.

Now what?

For the first time, doubt crept into Bard’s heart.

He crawled into bed with mobile in hand, turned off the light, and lay there in the dark.

Even after the silk and cashmere bedding warmed, Bard shivered.

* * *
“... and it has to be this piece! Has to be!”

Thran winced as Irmo banged his fist on the table to emphasize his point. It seemed that Irmo did more banging than anything else these days, passionately defending every aspect of his vision for *Immortal*. It was not enough that Thran patiently danced every phrase, every consideration, every variation that Irmo came up with on the ballet floor, while he and everyone else slogged through the morass until just the right sequence appeared. Charisse did even more duty, noting the sequences in dance notation for Irmo – always in pencil, until the final iteration appeared. Several members of the company stood in for the side characters, but for the most part, it was Thran, Charisse, and Luka doing most of the work with Irmo.

Luka – he was the second trial to endure. He was very young, and not used to the rigors of such long hours, but he tried to soldier on as best he could. Unfortunately, his soldiering involved too many outbursts of frustration, most often taken out on the trashcan. He was smart enough not to kick it, but any soccer player would envy the deft way Luka could shove the unfortunate trashcan from one end of the studio to the other. He did try to direct it away from anyone, but he did it so often that Lettie replaced the metal can with a plastic one, to save both floor and dancers. Given the long hours everyone was working, the reprimands had been mild, but Luka’s outbursts had increased, and before long Thran would have to shake their puppy by the scruff of the neck.

Irmo finally took a breath in the middle of his rant. Today’s topic of outrage was his insistence on using pieces of music that required high licensing fees. Thran had agreed that they would use the Prokofiev piece for the entrance of Death onto the battlefield. He’d gone along with Ligeti’s *Kyrie*. He’d agreed to consider Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, but the fee for that was so high that Thran had said no. That refusal was the subject of Irmo’s current rant.

“The budget does not allow for it, Irmo, and in any case, we already have a piece for the battles in the *Kyrie*. We have nothing for the trip to the Underworld, or the romances between the Maid and Soldier,” Thran said patiently for the third time, but this time even he heard the edge in his voice. Irmo, unfortunately, did not hear that edge, and held up both arms in exasperation.

“But it is the only piece that conveys the chaos of battle –”

“Which was exactly your argument for why we had to have the *Kyrie,*” snapped Thran. “No more, Irmo. We do not have the budget for the *Threnody* – the fee for it is higher than for the *Kyrie*, and it is redundant. It is settled.”

“I cannot create a ballet if all I am allowed to use is the same Bach *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* that is in every hackneyed vampire and Halloween film!"

“Why would you even consider something so overused?” challenged Thran. “All that would do is make our audiences think of something less than what we show them. So better we choose less well-known pieces, both to reduce the licensing fees, and to help us create a new vision for the audiences. I do not want to rehash something else! Think of the other music we need, Irmo – I offer you my own consideration, the Rachmaninoff tone poem, *The Isle of the Dead*. It was written in 1908, so there is no licensing fee to use it, and it would be excellent to convey the journeys of the Maid and the Soldier to the Underworld. Or look at Franz Liszt’s *Totenanz*. Or Tchaikovsky’s *Hymn of the Cherubim*. None of those require fees.”

Irmo’s eyes threatened to bug out of his head, but he stopped shouting. His mouth opened, then closed, and his eyes calmed to consideration. He nodded, thinking about Thran’s challenge. “Yes. Yes. Those perhaps. I will consider. Yes.”
And so ended another argument, the latest of many, and likely the first of many more. It was a draining process, but Thran had a few minutes to marshal his scattered thoughts as Ori keyed his tablet to play the Rachmaninoff piece Thran had mentioned. The small, quiet man had proved his worth over and over again, not just in capturing Irmo’s ideas, but also by expediting their review of things available by computer, eliminating delays. As the somber tones of Rachmaninoff’s tone poem began, Thran sat back and nibbled whatever was left of his supper. Bless Bard for packing more food for him – between the hours of dancing and wrangling, he burned calories fast. He felt stretched, like an elastic band under constant tension.

Before many more minutes had passed, they were back in the studio, Ori’s tablet playing music while Irmo stepped and swayed, testing whether the music was acceptable to his muse. While Irmo meditated, Lettie and Thran whispered about financial matters, which only increased Thran’s tension. They needed to have a piece of the ballet in shape to begin making the rounds of other backers, and the press. So far, they did not have that piece.

Rada wandered in, his sketchpad in his hands like an afterthought, looking as if he’d wandered in off the street, lost to all thought. But Thran had learned that the soft-spoken Rada was far more perceptive than he appeared. He was a gentler spirit than Irmo, but just as visionary with fabric and designs as Irmo was with music and dance steps. He’d already come up with a beautiful image for Charisse’s Maid, which was no surprise. He and the tiny dancer had struck up a close friendship, and he had poured much time and attention into making her costume. His relationship with the mercurial Luka was less harmonious, but Rada had responded playfully, imbuing the Soldier’s costume with youthful brashness as well as military foolishness. He’d begun on the costumes of the supporting soldiers and the battlefield mourners as well, so at least that part of the production was proceeding without incident.

It was the only part that was.

When Irmo’s meditation ended, the dancers went back to the floor. The choreographer might as well have been a child in a playroom full of dolls, staging mock conversations, battles, rivalries, for all the consideration he gave. So the evening went, back and forth, up and down, left and right –

Almost without realizing, Irmo’s vision from the muse slammed into sharp focus, and the Maid, the Soldier, and Death spun around each other, no longer tired, sweaty dancers wilting under the glare of florescent lights, but three eternal forces. The brash Soldier fought and died, the Maid mourned, and Death descended to separate one from the other. A tremor went up Thran’s back as he strained to embody the muse’s will in his dancing. Back and forth the Maid passed between Death and the Soldier, oblivious to the former because of her craving for the latter. He was vaguely aware of Irmo’s enthusiastic encouragement, so deeply had the dance taken him. When they stopped, the letdown was painful enough to make his stomach clench. He walked over to the corner to compose himself, eyes shut, panting, swallowing hard.

This was why he danced.

When he looked up, Abebe and Charisse had huddled over the pad of notation paper, rushing to capture what had been bestowed upon them. Charisse called to him urgently, so he danced one of the phrases again, then again, so that they could capture it. Lettie had seen the transformation, in time to film a piece of it on her mobile, and held out the device so the notation would match the short film. The exuberance in the air was palpable. They forged ahead...

... and just as quickly, the muse retreated. Supplicating her for another hour did nothing but wear everyone out that much more, and so they ended before everyone descended into too much of a funk. Ori was hoarse and limp, and Thran shooed him out before Irmo could corral him. He went
with a grateful smile to Thran. The dancers filtered out next, then Abebe, and finally Lettie. She and Thran firmly escorted Irmo into the parking lot so Lettie could lock the studio doors. As the choreographer launched into something else, Thran escorted Lettie to her car and sent her on her way. Thran headed for Irmo’s car, the man trailing behind, still talking.

“Irmo.” Thran shut his eyes, no longer able to bear the unending stream of words, regardless of whether they were the utterances of a genius or not. “It is late, we have been at it for fifteen hours, and I am exhausted. Go home and write down whatever you want us to consider tomorrow, for I can no longer absorb another word tonight.”

“But if we –”

“No more, Irmo. Not tonight. Please. I do not want to yell at you, but if you cannot listen to me, then I will have to. I cannot absorb any more tonight.”

The choreographer finally fell silent. He sighed, and nodded. “I am sorry. I am. I cannot help it, sometimes. I can’t.”

“I know, Irmo. I understand. Just... please. The human body can take only so much, and mine is done.”

Irmo nodded. “I will wait until tomorrow.”

“If you cannot sleep, then think about music for the death scene, and for the Underworld.”

“I will. Until tomorrow.”

Thran nodded, and left Irmo at his car. His SUV was the only other car in the lot, so he climbed in –

He’d left his bag in the studio. He almost decided to leave it where it was, but it held his driver’s license, and as tired as he was, he wouldn’t risk even the twenty-minute drive home without it. He got out of the SUV, trudged to the studio door, and let himself in. His bag was in the changing room, so down the hall he trudged. It was so tempting to sit down on the small settee, to shed his dancer’s slippers for warmer socks and shoes, to lean back just for a moment before he faced the cold outside and the drive home...

* * *

The alarm went off softly, jolting Bard awake. He’d hardly slept last night, worrying about Thran, keeping one eye and ear open for sound of him, but the house and his mobile had both remained silent, and the right side of the bed was still empty and cold. How he swallowed his panic down, he didn’t know. He grabbed his mobile, hoping against hope that he just hadn’t heard the device chime, but no, there was no message. He texted again.

*Where are you?*

He dove into the bathroom, then into his clothes, but his mobile remained maddeningly silent.

He rang Thran’s number.

He was sent right to Thran’s voice mail.
Was his mobile off?

He called information, asked for the number of the local hospital, and rang it.

Thran wasn’t there.

That was a relief. But on the heels of that relief came the worst feeling in the world – Thran was somewhere else.

Where else could he be?

He called UVB.

Lettie answered, groggily. “Hello?”

“This is Bard Bowman. Is Thran there?”

“Bard? It’s Lettie. I’m not at the studio. The off-hours phone rings at my home.”

“I’m sorry. I woke you, I’m sure. Do you know where Thran is?”

“The last time I saw him was last night. He was in the UVB parking lot, about to come home.”

Panic dove in on him as he ran down the stairs. Maybe Thran had made it home and was downstairs?

The sitting room was empty.

Bard ran into the mudroom and jerked open the door.

Thran’s SUV wasn’t there.

“Bard?”

“Thran didn’t make it home last night.”

“Oh, gods!” Lettie gasped. “Did you call the hospital?”

“I did. He’s not there. Where else could he be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Irmo was bending our ears even in the parking lot last night. It was after eleven. Maybe Irmo corralled him?”

Bard swallowed, but couldn’t bring himself to ask the obvious question. He asked a coward’s question instead.

“Could they still be at the studio?”

“I locked the door behind us on the way out, but Thran has a key. Look, I’ll get dressed right now and head to the studio. I live an hour away, though, so it’ll take a while for me to get there.”

“All right. Okay. Um, I’ve got to get the children off to school, but I’ll leave my mobile on in case you find them – him. Would you call me?”

“Of course! I’ll head out as soon as I can.”

“I appreciate it. Thank you.”
Bard gave Lettie his number, then ended the call. He managed to swallow down everything he was feeling, and mechanically set about the children’s breakfast and lunches. At this point, the children were so used to Thran being away that none of them asked after him, not even the normally preternaturally aware Sigrid. He got the children fed and packed, then took them to the bus stop. After waving goodbye to them, he headed back to the house.

He checked the house methodically, hoping to find any sign that Thran had been there during the night.

The fridge hadn’t been touched.

The mudroom had no new laundry.

The warm wool throw in the sitting room was still folded on the edge of the sofa.

Bard got his wallet, the keys to his truck, his coat.

He got in his truck, and drove to the UltraViolet Ballet studio.

* * *

A hand fell on Thran’s arm, shaking gently.

“Thran?”

Thran got his eyes open. Luka squatted beside the settee, his dark eyes full of concern. “What?”

“Are you all right?”

“I am fine.” Thran rubbed his eyes. “I fell asleep for just a few minutes. You are kind to wake me - thank you. As much time as I spend here, I do not have to stay here all night. I will be glad to get home.”

Luka’s brow wrinkled. “Um, I think you did spend all night here, Thran. It’s almost eight o’clock in the morning. Monday morning.”

Thran stared at him. Whatever expression was on his face, it was enough to make Luka gulp and hold up his hands. “I swear, Thran, I’m not pranking you. It’s seven fifty-two a.m. on Monday morning. I think you’ve been here all night.”

“Oh, gods!” Thran’s mouth went dry. Bard must be frantic. He scrabbled for his bag, found his mobile – dead as the proverbial doornail. He looked at Luka with wide eyes. “May I borrow your mobile?”

“Sure.” Luka handed it to him. Thran typed Bard’s number immediately, but there was no answer.

“Oh, gods, gods, gods!” Thran gulped again. “I must go home! Right now!”

“Angry other party?” Luka tried to make a joke out of it, but Thran was too upset to reprove him. He gathered up his bag, jerked to his feet, and bolted out of the changing room. He came out into the hall off balance, stumbling against the wall on the way to the lobby. Luka grabbed him from behind to keep him from falling, steadying him so he could catch his balance.
The outside door opened, and there was Bard, skittering to a stop.

Luka looked from Thran to Bard and back, and belatedly let Thran’s arm go, pointedly clasping his hands behind his back. “Oh. I guess that’s the angry other party.”

Bard’s face flushed a deep red. His eyes burned with a fury Thran had never seen before, not even when they’d fought the drug gang. His lips thinned, and his hands clenched into fists. When he exploded, nothing would stand before that much rage –

Bard turned on his heel, and shoved through the outside door with such violence that it slammed against the glass panel beside it with a resounding clang. He passed Lettie running towards him, but he sidestepped her without a word, and made a direct line for his truck. Thran lurched out of his shock and shoved through the door to shout after Bard.

Bard’s truck pulled out of the parking lot without slowing.

“What’s going on?” Lettie wheezed, grabbing at Thran. “Your husband called me at six this morning, frantic to know where you were. I thought you left after me. Did Irmo latch onto you?”

Thran’s heart pounded. He wanted to howl to the sky. Instead, he clutched the keys to his SUV.

“I have to go home.”

Luka appeared behind him, drawing Lettie’s attention. She looked from Thran to Luka and back again, then at Bard’s retreating truck. She didn’t have to speak for Thran to put words to her thoughts, thoughts that were surely only a pale imitation of Bard’s.

Oh, gods.
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Rage and regret, shock and shame, disillusionment and despair.

Bard turned his back on... him... before his fury got the better of him. The last thing his children needed was for their father to end up in jail for assault. Justified assault, but assault nevertheless. Desperate for the cold air to blunt the shock of adrenaline racing through his body, he slammed through the glass door, piled into his truck, and got the key in the ignition despite how badly his hands shook. He didn’t look in the rear view mirror as he drove out of the parking lot and headed home.

Home. What a travesty that was. There was no home to return to. Only a house, one built on lies and deception, and nothing more.

What was the point of even going there? To be flooded by just how easy he’d been to fool, how stupid he was, how fucking blind naïve trusting he was? So he could wander from room to room, each of them just as empty as he was, empty of everything but rage? What was the point? Why not just drive off a bridge somewhere?

Because he had children, and he wasn’t cruel enough to abandon them as someone had abandoned him. He’d survived loss once before, if not betrayal, and he’d hang on for the children.

There was one thing that wouldn’t survive, though – that mass of wire and clay in the solarium, that naïve paean to his blindness.

Rahmiel. Angel of love and mercy.

Like hell he was.

Even thinking about Rahmiel made Bard’s stomach clench, and forced a growl from his throat. He was stupid, stupid, stupid... Why hadn’t he seen that the source of his vision of love and mercy had had neither? That source had been with someone else – probably not for the first time, given all the hours Thran had been away.

Bard’s stomach roiled. He swallowed the sudden moisture in his mouth, and forced his attention on the morning traffic, the red light ahead, the left hand turn, slow progress through the commuter traffic waiting to turn onto the highway, four blocks more, then left into the lane, and then into the driveway. He managed to fling himself out of the truck before his stomach knotted in spasms he couldn’t subdue, forcing him to retch over the grass. When his stomach finally calmed, he spat out the meager remnants of breakfast and dragged a shirtsleeve over his mouth. Straightening up sent his stomach into hard cramps again, and he smashed a fist into the side of his truck, trying to regain control over himself. He was only partially successful, and ended up stumbling towards the mudroom door bent over, his arms wrapped around his midsection. He got the key in the lock, shoved through the door, and hurled his coat onto the top of the dryer, choking down spasms all the way. He thought he was about to spew again, but he was too empty to do more than dry heave. He drove himself out of the mudroom, through the kitchen, into the sitting room, and finally into the solarium. There in the corner was his benighted, half made, failed travesty of Rahmiel with his long,
beautiful body, perfect extension, ethereal grace –

Bard unclamped the metal armature from the base and squeezed the figure in his hands.

* * *

Thran lurched into a run, throwing himself at his SUV. He jerked open the door, hurled his bag into the front seat, then hurled himself into the driver’s seat after it. He careened out of the parking lot, searching for Bard’s truck in front of him, but there was too much morning traffic for that. He was hyperventilating – quickly, slow the breath, slow the breath now, or he’d pass out on the road. His vision cleared as he held his breath for a few seconds, then forced himself to take long, deep breaths for several more seconds after that.

Oh, gods, oh, gods, how had so much vanished in a single second?

Just let him get home, home to lyubov yego –

What if Bard didn’t go home? What if he went somewhere else?

Where else would he go? No matter how badly betrayed Bard felt, he wouldn’t go anywhere else. Thran had to believe that.

He bit his bottom lip hard, using the pain to keep from screaming. If only Luka hadn’t made that damning remark about an “angry other party.” If only Thran hadn’t been in such a panic that he’d stumbled and forced Luka to grab him. If only he hadn’t fallen asleep last night –

Or stayed so late, or forgotten to charge his mobile, or to text his family, or to do so, so, so many other things over so, so, so many days and nights...

The turnoff to the lane was ahead. Thran cursed the thick traffic, begrudging each second that kept him from making the turn. Finally! He zoomed down the lane, turned into the driveway –

Oh, thank the gods! Bard’s truck was here – but skewed across the driveway, with the driver’s side door agape.

Oh, gods, oh, gods, where was his husband?

Thran got out of his SUV, shutting the truck door as he passed it. Was Bard in the house, or still outside? No, the barn door was shut, but the mudroom door wasn’t. He fled inside, listening for Bard. The sitting room? No, the solarium! Thran raced through both kitchen and sitting room and burst into the solarium.

Bard had the shreds of Rahmiel in his hand, and the most terrible rage still burned in his eyes.

“Oh, gods, Bard, don’t! Please don’t!”

Bard would’ve heaved the ruined sculpture at Thran, but Thran scrambled forward to grab Bard by the arms. Bard shoved him away, his greater strength sending Thran stumbling backwards against the doorframe.

“Why not?” Bard snarled, all but spitting. “Can’t you bear to see your lovely little image of love and mercy get the treatment it deserves? Go the way of all false idols?”
“Stop!” Thran held his hands out to beseech Bard. “Please, stop! Oh, gods, Bard, I am so sorry! Let me explain! This is not what you think!”

Bard looked down at the mass of clay and wire in his hand, the center of it already mangled, bent, and crushed under his hand. He hurled it at the wall opposite the windows. Thran flinched at the power and violence in Bard’s throw as the clay made a dull thwack on impact, then fell to the floor in a nearly unrecognizable lump.

“Neither was that,” Bard spat. “Which one of us were you going to tell first? Legolas, or me?”

“There is nothing to tell, Bard! I have not betrayed you!”

“Really? What did he call me? The ‘angry other party?’”

“Luka is a fool. I fell asleep –”

“You fell asleep? When? Where? In his arms?” Bard held his arms wide in disbelief. “You didn’t think to call me? I would have come and gotten you! You didn’t think to answer my text? Or your son’s? What the hell, Thran? You couldn’t have fucked this up more if you’d tried!”

Thran put both hands over his eyes. “I know. I know. I have made such a mess of this. I am sorry, lyubov moya –”

“DON’T call me that! Just don’t! Because I’m not, am I? I’m just someone convenient to see to your son, your soup, your bed until something else comes along –”

“No, you are not! You are my husband! Let me explain –”

“No, let ME explain – explain just how stupid I’ve been. In fact, I’ll do better than that – I’ll show you. A picture is worth a thousand words, right? Let me show you a picture, Thran!”

Bard grabbed Thran’s upper arm and hustled him through the sitting room, down the hall, through the main room, and into the ballroom. Thran went without resistance, without a cry at how badly Bard’s grip hurt. With a shove, Bard sent Thran stumbling into the middle of the room.

“See this? Do you fucking see this?” Bard threw up both hands, indicating the ballroom. Thran didn’t know whether to look at the ballroom or his husband. He kept his eyes on Bard, who shook with suppressed fury. “It’s got lights. It’s got paint. Do you know how it got this way? Because I fucking did it instead of working on my stuff, and that’s not all of it. My children and your son chose to work on this, too – I didn’t ask them, Thran; they volunteered, because they wanted to get this to the point where you could be here, with us. But we weren’t fast enough, were we? It’s one thing for you to do this to me. But Legolas, your son, has missed you, too. He told me you didn’t even bother to return all his texts to you. What has that fuckboy Luka got that could distract you from everyone and everything here? How could you be so heartless? Gods!”

Bard slammed a fist into the plaster wall with such force that Thran recoiled. When his husband turned away to stare out of the windows, the new paint and lights registered. Somehow, in ten days, Bard had managed to put twenty-five gallons of paint on the walls of the ballroom, plus several more on the white plaster of the ceiling. He’d hung lamps, too. And the children had helped.

Shame descended upon Thran in such a thick shroud that he sank to his knees. He was so lightheaded that he felt dizzy and his vision greyed. As his stomach roiled, the taste on his tongue turned thick and metallic. If he hadn’t been so empty, he might have thrown up.

“I am sorry, so sorry.” His voice was little more than a wisp, but something in it drew Bard’s gaze.
Thran bowed his head, unable to bear that cold stare. “You are right. I do have a lover. But it is not the one you think. There is no person who could take me from you, our children, all we have here. But I cannot deny that I have a mistress, one I cannot resist. Her name is The Dance, and that is the only thing that has consumed me.”

Bard stood bristling, arms akimbo, shaking his head. “You know, even if I hadn’t seen your fuckboy turn as white as a winding sheet when he set eyes on me, I’d still call you a liar –”

“I do not lie to you!” Thran shouted back. “What I say is not a lie!”

“Yes, it is, you bastard!” Bard snarled. “Do you want to know why it’s a lie? Because if it's The Dance instead of a fuckboy that besots you this badly, then it's not a mistress you have riding on your back, Thran. It's a fucking addiction, and it's made a liar out of you to me, and to the children. Hell, you’re not even being honest with yourself! Go look at yourself in a mirror – you’re emaciated! You've chewed through your body as fast as any addict does with his drug of choice. Now you’ve found someone just as addicted as you are to give you a little on the side, without having to come home when you want to take the edge off.”

Thran’s jaw dropped. “You have gone mad!”

The terrible rage flared in Bard’s eyes again. “Have I? Get up.”

Thran swallowed. “If you want me to get up so you can punch me, I will decline the privilege.”

Bard’s hands clenched, but he turned on his heel. He was leaving? Thran scrambled to his feet. “Gods, Bard! Don’t leave! I am sorry! I am sorry!”

“Not sorry enough,” Bard growled. He kept walking, his boots pounding through the house on the wooden floors, heading upstairs. Seconds later, the sounds heralded Bard’s return, and his husband stalked back into the ballroom. He put something on the floor and sent it skidding towards Thran with a rough shove of his boot. It was the scale that Bard had put in their bathroom two weeks ago, the same scale that Thran had studiously ignored ever since. Bard pointed an accusing finger at it.

“You want the truth about your addiction, Thran? There it is. It’s the same thing that happens to every junkie. They give up everything for a high – their family, their happiness, their bodies. If that’s what The Dance is to you, then I’m done. I won’t be second in your life to an addiction.”

Bard turned his back on Thran and disappeared again, leaving Thran alone but for the racket of Bard’s boots clattering away, then a few seconds later, the slam of the mudroom door. After that, the only sound was the rasp of Thran’s panicky breathing, short, fast, and shallow.

Thran put both hands to his mouth, as if that would keep him from hyperventilating again. He tried to calm his breath, if only to ease the stench of his fear in his nostrils. Gods, gods, how to ease his husband’s fury, his own disorientation, the madness of the spheres?

Without noticing how he got there, Thran stepped on the scale that Bard had confronted him with in such anger.

It read 175 pounds.

That was impossible. Thran stepped off of it, fiddled with the adjustment knob until the scale read zero, then stepped back on it.

It read 172 pounds.
 Somehow, in three weeks, Thran had stripped at least thirteen pounds off his already lean frame.

Gods. Oh, gods. Everything Bard had said was true. Everything was gone – his husband, his family, his happiness, even his body. He had whored everything away for a ballet.

Thran slid to his knees, and cried.

* * *

Bard stormed out to the barn in a haze of fury – crippling, consuming, setting every nerve aflame past bearing. He went back to the workbench and yanked a piece of scrap rebar from its bin and pounded it again and again on the anvil until his hands were sore. When that didn’t dissipate enough of his anger, he threw himself atop the wooden crates underneath the chin-up rafter, tore off his ratty sweater, and heaved himself up and down until he could no longer breathe. He let himself drop, regained his breath, then hurled himself up and had at again until his shoulders were afire and his back ached and his breath rasped from his throat. When that didn’t help, he tore off his shirt to stand bare chested in the cold, and had at again. Yet even when sweat streamed off him in icy rivulets, fury still raged inside him. His muscles screamed in too much pain for him to heave himself up to the rafter again, so he fell to his knees atop the crate to pound it, over and over and over again.

Before long, Bard’s hands were raw and bleeding, and he didn’t have the strength to do anything other than curl in on himself. All his exertions had done was force his body to bear a pale shade of the pain echoing in his thoughts. He managed to get himself down from the crate, but he staggered as he jumped down, falling against the crate and scraping a wide swath across his right shoulder blade. Salty sweat turned the raw wound into another conflagration, but he slumped uncaring against the crate, hoping that pain and cold would take the edge off his fury.

Nothing touched it.

The cold soon had Bard shivering so uncontrollably that he got up to stumble back to the house. When he got there, he paused at the mudroom door. What was he going to do when he got inside? He didn’t know – get warmer, but other than that, he didn’t know. He came inside, throwing his shirt and sweater on top of the washer. He leaned on his elbows over the dryer, head bowed, until he stopped shivering and his hands were warm enough to unlace his boots. He tugged them off, almost losing his balance in the doing. He’d trashed himself well and proper – sweat and blood mingled in streaks over his torso, and his hands were a mess. He was too filthy to sit on anything, even his ratty furniture. If he got in the shower, all that raw flesh would burn hotter than a volcano, but maybe that would dull the pain of his thoughts.

Fat chance. That old phrase that had tortured him so badly after Daphne had died, *Love Never Dies?* Yes, it did, it self-immolated just like every other stupid delusion had since the dawn of time. His love had died today, and the pain of soap and water burning in a few minor scrapes would be woefully insufficient to cauterize the hole that was left inside him.

He shuffled through the kitchen and into the central hall, refusing to look at Hope the Lope. She had no balm for him –

A murmur of sound came through the main room from the ballroom – crying? No, sobbing. Abject sobbing.
Bard’s fury spiked again. Enjoy it, fucker. Enjoy the carnage you’ve left behind you. No matter how well you dance, you’ll never dance Death as well as you did this morning. You had everything, and you killed everything. You reign victorious. Long live the king.

Bard turned to go upstairs, but that sound, that broken sound...

It was what a traitor should sound like when he realized the irreparable damage he’d wrought.

Bard swallowed. That sound wasn’t just broken. It was heartbroken. Gods, if he were honest, it was the sound of his fury, fury that was only a mask for grief, despair, and loss. That sound was exactly the shape of the emptiness inside him.

Thran had spent his entire life bereft of everything but his dancing. It was all he knew how to do. He’d had handlers and nannies and caretakers who’d taken all of life away from him, all but his dancing. He’d been trained to sacrifice himself this way, no different than a Thoroughbred trained to leave everything on the track. But Thran wasn’t a horse – he’d delighted in making a life here with Bard, helping as he could with the renovations. He’d done homework duty, he’d gone to track meets and fencing practice and markets. He’d given not just money, but time, effort, and attention.

Maybe Thran was addicted to The Dance. But what if he’d done what he’d done in some part because it was all he had to give to his family?

Bard shut his eyes. How sick was it to feel this about the man who’d betrayed him, destroyed him? He’d seen Luka’s guilty look, all but felt his flinch away from Thran, heard his flippant dismissal.

Would Thran be attracted to that kind of man? Really?

Not the Thran that Bard knew.

Did Bard know Thran at all?

Bard swallowed again, and ventured through the main room to stand by the ballroom door.

Thran was curled in a knot in the middle of the floor, his body racked, his hands clasped at his nape, his forearms wrapped around his head like a vice. Bard had never heard a man – anyone – sob with such abandon. There were no words to the sobs; Thran keened more than he sobbed. The sound was even more desolate up close than it had been when he’d heard it in the hall.

So was the emptiness inside Bard.
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Have our angel and saint weathered their storm?

How long did it take for his sobs to wring him out like so much limp laundry? Thran’s head pounded, his stomach knotted, and his body felt as broken as if he really had been flattened between rollers. He lay in the middle of the ballroom floor, without strength to move.

There was no point to moving, anyway. Everything was gone. Everything was cold. Everything was splinters and shards, desolation and despair. Everything.

He shut his eyes. Maybe he fell asleep. Maybe he wished he had. Whatever the case, after long seconds, he tried to sit up.

He couldn’t. There was no strength in his bones, his muscles. Of course not. He’d wasted his body on an ephemeral dream, and had nothing left for the real world. A real world that he had destroyed with a thousand small acts of neglect.

He had destroyed the saint in the center of that world, too.

His keening rose again, but even a few seconds of it exhausted him further. He pressed hands to his mouth to silence himself, to keep some breath in his body. Should he, though? Without his saint, there was no reason to keep breathing. It would be so much easier just to let everything go. It was the only fit penance to offer.

He still had a son. Legolas. He had lost his saint, but perhaps he hadn’t yet lost his son. There was a reason to keep breathing.

Thran allowed himself a breath. He managed to roll onto his back and lay there breathing. In, out. In, out. Gods, his neck hurt after so long in such a cramped position. He turned his head gingerly from left to right, left to right, left to right –

Bard sat slumped against the ballroom doorjamb.

His head was down, his legs were bent in a semblance of a cross-legged position, and his hands lay palms up in his lap. Limp, sodden hair hung in his eyes. His bare chest was streaked with sweat and blood. The worst were his hands – bloody and battered.

Oh, gods – what had he done?

Thran managed to roll over, but his body was far from under his control, jerking and slipping as he tried to crawl to Bard’s side. As he floundered, Bard raised his head and opened his eyes. The rage they’d held was gone, but the despair and desolation that replaced it were awful.

His saint was broken.
Thran crawled within reach and reached out to touch Bard’s knee... but he didn’t touch him, unsure if Bard would allow it. His sobs threatened to overwhelm him again, so he pressed both hands to his mouth.


That single word might as well have been the final, uncomprehending plea of a victim to his murderer. It was an apt analogy, and Thran choked back another sob.

“Because I am a fool. I am not an adulterous one, but I am a thoughtless one. I am so sorry I have hurt you so badly.”

Bard swallowed hard, his eyes searching Thran for something, but it was impossible to tell whether he didn’t find what he wanted, or was too disillusioned to believe in what he found, because he shut his eyes and looked away.

Thran inched closer, and took Bard’s bloody hands in his. “What have you done?”

“Mourn.”

Bard’s voice was soft and low, but shattering all the same. Whimpering, Thran crowded between Bard’s legs, wrapped his arms around Bard’s waist, and buried his head in the angle of Bard’s hip.

“Please, lyubov moya, please, I am so sorry!” Thran begged. “You are right that I am such a fool! I cannot bear how I have hurt you! Tell me what I can do! I will do anything!”

The chest under his hands heaved a breath, a second, a third. All were long and labored, more shudders than anything else. A deep swallow followed them.

Slowly, slowly, one bloody hand stroked Thran’s disheveled hair. The touch was light and tentative, but it was something.

“Oh, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered, as his eyes flooded with tears again.

Bard’s hand stroked his hair again. “I can’t bear for you to cry. I thought my heart was broken already, but... to hear you cry... I guess it isn’t, not yet. So... please... stop.”

Thran gulped down his sobs, and sat up. Bard was as wrung out as he was, leaning against the woodwork without strength, but one hand was on Thran’s knee, and the other one reached up to smooth Thran’s hair out of his eyes. Thran caught his hand, and winced at the wreckage of scrapes and splinters.

“Where is your mobile? I will call the EMTs.”

Bard shook his head. “I don’t need the EMTs.”

“Tell me what you do need, then. I will do it.”

Bard swallowed painfully, eyes searching Thran’s face without hope. He swallowed again. “Just tell me the truth. You didn’t.”

“No. Never. I am yours, as you are mine. Always.”

Bard heaved a sigh. It would be a lie to say that he smiled, or looked less than desolate. But his rage was gone, and that was better than a few minutes ago.
“I will tell you everything. Everything. I promise. But first, let me see to you. You are hurt.”

Bard swallowed. When he spoke, it was with regret. “So are you. No one cries like you did unless they’re hurt.”

Thran winced. “Most of my hurt was self-inflicted. I inflicted most of yours, too. I am well ashamed. Let me take you upstairs to the bathroom and tend you.”

With a sigh, Bard tucked his legs underneath him and got to his feet. He held a hand out to Thran, but in deference to Bard’s wounds, Thran took Bard’s wrist. He felt lightheaded as he rose, and put a hand out to steady himself against the wall. They walked slowly upstairs. Thran was embarrassed that he stumbled up halfway up the stairs, but Bard’s arm was there to catch him. As they limped into the bathroom, Thran turned on the light, wincing at the reflection of Bard’s scraped back in the mirror.

“You need to get in the shower,” Thran ventured. “Though that will hurt very much.”

“So do you,” Bard allowed. “You’re rank.”

“I am,” Thran said. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, “I hope it is obvious that all you smell on me is me, and no one else.”

Gasping, he clapped both hands over his mouth. But Bard’s reaction was neither anger nor humor. Rather, he sank down to sit on the closed toilet and hung his head.

“You’re right. It is. I’m sorry I doubted you. I’m such a fool, too... I should have known better. It’s just... I was frantic. I thought I’d lost you. I even called hospital to see if you were there. So when... and he looked so guilty....” He winced. “That’s no excuse.”

“I have done so many things wrong, so many things.” Thran knelt by Bard, his hands on Bard’s knees. “Please, Bard, say that I have not broken your heart so badly that I cannot try to repair it. I love you.”

Bard’s bloody hands went atop Thran’s. “I love you, too, Thran. More than I can tell you. But we can’t keep on like this. We can’t. I know it’s the way you’ve been trained, to work this hard. But you’re gone so long, and I wonder and worry... then when you come home...” He waved a hand up and down Thran’s body. “It kills me to watch you work yourself to death like this.”

“It kills us both. I will not spend so much of every day on this ballet again. We will decide together what we both can live with. Yes? Please, yes?”

When Bard nodded, his face eased from its tight, closed expression. The expression that replaced it, however, wasn’t a smile. It was desolation, loss, pain. He took a fractured breath, then wrapped an arm around Thran’s neck, and groped for Thran’s hand. He pulled Thran close.

“I’m sorry, cariad. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you. I don’t.”

Thran shut his eyes as he returned Bard’s embrace. “No more than I, lyubov moya. No more than I.”

They clung to each other for a long time.

* * *
Eventually, Bard’s exhaustion eased him out of Thran’s arms. Thran was in no better straits, so they undressed and helped each other into the shower. The sting of the soap and hot water on his back was awful, despite Thran’s gentle touch to do the actual cleaning. Once they’d washed, the sight that greeted them in the mirror was dismal. It had been days since Bard had seen Thran in the shower, and he was shocked at how emaciated and pale he was. His eyes were red, and his eye sockets looked like bruises. Bard looked like he’d been in a fight with his scraped back and battered hands. Not the most auspicious pair, to be sure. He held out Thran’s robe for him, because he was already shivering. The tall dancer huddled it close gratefully and got out the hair dryer. While Thran dried his hair, Bard sat on the stool with his surgical kit open on the counter, patiently drawing the splinters from his hands. Only one looked evil, but as it was a big piece of wood, it came out easily. It was the only wound that needed a bandage. When he put the kit aside, and started to stand up, Thran urged him to stay where he was.

“Stay there. I will dry your hair for you.”

“You don’t have to,” Bard said. “It’ll dry on its own.”

“I want to. Then it won’t drip into your scrapes.”

The dryer went on. The warm air felt good, and eased his tight muscles. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome. Do you need a bandage on your back?”

Bard swallowed. “Um, I have to ask you for a favor.”

The corners of Thran’s mouth turned down, as if he’d picked up on Bard’s uncomfortableness. “Anything. Anything.”

“I know you don’t like to look at wounds. But I can’t see my back myself. Are there any splinters?”

Thran swallowed, but that was the only sign he made of his distaste for poking at wounds, and he looked carefully. “Just one that I can see.”

“Can you get it out? Or I can wait until Sigrid comes home to do it.”

“I think I can do it. Where are the pliers?”

“Tweezers,” Bard handed him the implement. He couldn’t suppress the small smile on his lips at Thran’s misnomer, and at sight of how Thran’s eyes lit up at it, he was glad he didn’t.

“Tweezers, then. Turn towards the light.” Thran tsked. “It is too high. Lean your elbows on the sink.”

Bard did, and Thran draped himself over Bard’s back to brace his arms. He tried once, twice, three times before the offending piece came out. Thran held it up. “There. It is out.”

“Thanks. You’re a trouper.”

“You are welcome,” Thran replied with a grateful smile.

Bard got to his feet, but Thran's reflection was so pale that Bard turned towards his husband at once. He managed to grab Thran’s arm just as the dancer seemed to cave in on himself.

“Oh, gods, Thran, I’ve got you,” Bard stuttered, and quickly got Thran out of the bathroom and onto
“I should’ve waited for Sigrid to come home. I know you’re not thrilled with the sight of blood.”

“It is not that,” Thran protested, but he didn’t resist when Bard pulled one of the blankets over him. He pulled it close, shivering. “It has been a very long time since I have eaten, and I feel quite faded.”

“How long? Last night?”

“Lunch yesterday, though I had a bit at five.”

Bard tsked. “Almost twenty-four hours. What am I going to do with you?”

Thran eyed him. “And did you have breakfast this morning?”

“Technically, yes.”

“What is this ‘technically?’”

Bard gave him a shamefaced look. “I was... sick when I got home this morning.”

Thran’s stricken look was back. “I am so sorry. So sorry.”

“I shouldn’t have doubted you. He just looked so guilty...”

Thran grumbled deep in his throat. “Luka thinks he is funny. Most of the time, he is not. This morning, even he realized how unfunny he was. That is the look you saw.”

Bard felt a little better. “Can I make you an omelet?”

Thran’s smile was tender. “I would love an omelet. And then we will talk. I want to tell you everything.”

“Okay. Stay here; I’ll bring you some clothes.”

“Thank you.”

Bard found a clean Henley, underwear, warm socks, and leggings for Thran. As his husband – yes, thank the gods, his husband – dressed, he fetched Thran’s favorite long sweater to keep him warm. Then he put on his clothes, and the two of them went down to the kitchen where Bard made omelet, and Thran made tea and toast. They settled in the sitting room to share their food. When they were done, they stayed side by side, and talked.
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

The reconciliation continues.

“I’ll get the dishes,” Bard said, leaning forward to pick up their plates. “What else would you like to eat?”

“I am full,” Thran said as he refilled their teacups.

“I can bring you another slice of toast, at least,” Bard coaxed, giving him a concerned look.

Thran sighed. That look all but shouted you’re so thin. He was, but overeating after such a traumatic morning was not the way to address it. “I truly am full, Bard. If I eat any more, I will not want lunch.”

“It’s only just after ten. Lots of time before lunch.”

“I am full enough for now.”

“Okay. How does bean and ham soup sound for lunch?”

“Very good. Is it made, or do you start it now?”

“It won’t take long to put it in the pot.”

“Then I will help. First, I will call Lettie and tell her that I will not be there today. Then I will chop with my favorite knife.”

Bard gave him a startled look, but his small smile revealed relief. “That’d be great, Thran. Just great.”

Thran smiled shyly back. “May I borrow your mobile? Mine is dead.”

Bard dug into the pocket of his sweat pants, pulled out his mobile, and handed it to Thran. “Sure.”

While Bard got out the things to make soup, Thran made a quick call to Lettie. He stayed in the kitchen where Bard could hear the call.

“Hello, Lettie.”


“I am fine. We are fine. I will not be with you today. I am exhausted, and I will take today to recover.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? If you can’t talk, just say yes or no. Do I need to call the police?”

Thran winced. After seeing the rage in Bard’s eyes, he understood Lettie’s worry.

“Not at all. We are about to make bean soup for lunch. Would you like to talk to Bard? I am sure he
will give you the recipe.”

“No, no, I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“I am.” He looked at Bard, hefting the big pot onto the stove burner, and tilted his mobile towards him. “Say hello, Bard.”

“Hi, Lettie,” Bard called. “Tell Thran if you want soup, and I’ll send you a care package with him tomorrow.”

“Did you hear that? Bard says hello, and if you want soup, he will send you some tomorrow.”

“Okay, you’re all right. Good. Take the time you need.”

“I am sure that the rest of the company is equally exhausted – it is nothing but ruination to treat ourselves this way.”

“Irmo doesn’t think so.”

“Irmo is likely the only one who is not exhausted, but that must change, Lettie. We must let go of the burden to keep up with him, and give him the burden to accommodate us more. We will consider that tomorrow.”

“I won’t complain, and neither will anyone else. You’ve had the biggest part of that burden, but I agree that we’ve all suffered from it.”

“If you can keep Irmo away from me today, I will be most grateful. If he protests, tell him that I will not answer either my mobile or the door. I must rest.”

“It’ll be my pleasure. And I’m sending Ori home now. There’s someone else who’s exhausted. He’s been a trouper.”

“He has. I heartily approve. So I will see you tomorrow, sometime between eight and nine.”

“All right, Thran. And I hope Luka didn’t create too much of a mess for you. Even he realized what an ass he was this morning.”

“He did not help, no. But we recover. So farewell until tomorrow, ma chère.”

“Bye, Thran. Thanks for calling.”

Thran disconnected the call, and handed Bard’s mobile back to him. “You will find an unfamiliar call on your mobile from this morning. I called you on Luka’s mobile. I want you to know this.”

Bard put the wrapped chunk of ham down on the cutting board, and hung his head. “What happened yesterday?” he said lowly, not looking at Thran.

Thran grimaced. “Yesterday... like so many days before it... so long, so difficult. Irmo argues about everything. So much wrangling... fifteen hours of arguments, and yes, dance, some of it good, but... I was exhausted. I was so exhausted that when Irmo followed me out of the studio, still so full of arguments, I forgot my bag. I sent him home, then went back into the studio for my bag, because I did not want to risk the drive home without my license, because I was so tired. I sat down for just for a moment...”

Bard grunted in understanding. “You fell asleep.”
Thran nodded. “Luka woke me up not five minutes before you saw me. He said it was seven-fifty-two on Monday morning. I knew you would be frantic. I was frantic. When I tried to call you, I found that my mobile was dead, so I called you from Luka’s mobile, perhaps two minutes before you arrived. I was so frantic that Luka made a stupid joke to ask if I called an angry other party. When I did not reach you, I ran out of the changing room so fast that I stumbled. Luka caught me so that I did not fall just as you came in, and when he saw you he said, ‘oh, that is the angry other party,’ which sounded very bad even to me. I do not fault you because you took it the wrong way…”

Bard looked up as Thran’s voice trailed away. “But?”

Thran met his eyes. “But what?”

“Just say the rest of what you’re thinking. No matter how bad it is.”

Thran extended a long finger to roll a couple of the carrots back and forth on his cutting board. “You were so quick to think I had cheated on you. That hurt.”

Bard’s grimace was ashamed. “I did jump to a contusion, as they say.”

“The saying is to jump to a conclusion, yes? What is this contusion?”

“It’s a fancy medical term for a bruise. It’s another way of saying that ASSUME makes an ASS out of U and ME. So I made an ass out of myself when I saw you with Luka’s arm around you.”

Bard sighed, and his fingers plucked at the wrapper around the ham. “So now it’s my turn to confess the nasty. I thought you were with Irmo, just because he and you are so attuned to each other when your visions align. I know, I know – that’s stupid. So fucking stupid. But you’re away so much of the time, and you wouldn’t be if you didn’t love what you were doing, and that’s why I pushed to get the ballroom done, so at least you’d be reminded of your home and family some of the time. But then I saw you with Luka, and…”

Thran hummed. “I understand. I do not like that you doubted me, but I have certainly strained all credibility because I chose to be here so little. I have neglected you and our children badly, and that will stop. But I would also like you to know that Irmo has no thought for anything but his visions. I do not think sex or even the most basic ideas of companionship or interaction exist for him. Ori thinks that he is on the autism spectrum – many savants are. As for Luka, he is straight. He has a girlfriend. Even if he were gay, I would not be attracted to him. He is very fond of Wagner and petrol station burritos, and he does not take his practice as seriously as I would like.”

“Wagner,” Bard muttered with a shudder. “That’s a death knell, right there.”

Thran smiled as he began on the carrots. “Indeed. How small with the carrots?”

“Minced, please. The potato can be bigger dice.”

“So it will be.” As Thran plied his chef’s knife, Bard unwrapped the ham and sliced it into cubes. Thran chopped carrots, then a potato and onions, which went into the pot with olive oil and a little parsley. In went the ham with chopped tomatoes and garlic, and then four kinds of beans and a bit of pepper. While Thran busied himself with washing the cutting boards and knives, Bard took the empty bean cans out to the mudroom to go in the recycling bin.

Soon the kitchen was clean. Thran followed Bard back into the sitting room, but his husband had ducked into the solarium. Thran found him contemplating the remains of Rahmiel.

Thran put a hand on Bard’s shoulder. “I am sorry I ruined your vision. I never meant to.”
“That wasn’t your doing. It was mine.” Bard rubbed his neck as he regarded the tangle of clay and wire, and half glanced at Thran without meeting his eyes. “I’ve had too many stars in my eyes, ever since we met. You’re overwhelming – so beautiful; so, so talented. Why you saw anything in a welder is beyond me.”

“A mere welder, no. An artist, much more talented at many things than a dancer, yes.”

“Maybe. In any case, you saw something, and I...”

Thran’s throat tightened as he put both arms around Bard’s shoulders. He didn’t squeeze, but only in deference to Bard’s scraped back. “And you loved me back.”

“I did. But... I put you on such a pedestal. That was wrong. I thought you could do no wrong. And you didn’t. But I thought you did, and...” He grimaced, and ran both hands through his hair. “Gods. I don’t know.”

“Oh, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered in Bard’s ear, and turned him around into his embrace. They stood there for a few moments; Thran was glad to have the solid substance of Bard’s body against his. “I think I understand.”

“What?”

“What we both have done. We have not allowed either of us to be mortals.”

“I feel pretty mortal right now.”

Thran’s lips curved up in a chagrined smile. “So do I, because I did do wrong. Maybe you jumped to your contusion, but I neglected everything but the dance. I left everything else for you to shoulder – the children, the house, the laundry, all the other chores. Only a superman could do so much, but you did, without complaint. Before long, you and our children would learn to do without me.”

A tremor went through Bard.

“Ah,” Thran’s hands tightened on Bard’s shoulders. “That has already happened.”

“Not quite. I missed you so much. The children all missed you. That’s why they wanted to help me paint the ballroom. We spent all yesterday on it. The only thing that’s left is some of the woodwork.”

“You were supposed to spend Sunday on your art,” Thran scolded.

“That should tell you how much everyone wants you back. I got no argument when I said I’d work on the ballroom, and all four of them volunteered without a second thought.”

A hard lump formed in Thran’s throat, and his eyes stung. “Oh, gods.”


“I won’t. I won’t. But we must not let this happen again, Bard. Never again.”

“Never again.”

“Then what do we do? I have never had a family like this before, and it is clear that I do not know how to take care of it. So tell me what I must do.”

“We both have things to do. You need to spend more time here. I need to not let things run so long without saying anything.”
“In the nutshell,” Thran agreed. “And so perhaps we should talk each day of how things progress.”

“That’s good. I don’t want us to get so out of step again. I haven’t got too many rages in me to match today.”

“I suspect that I did not see the worst of it... whatever you did in the barn. Is it a shambles?”

“No. I took most of it out on me. Appropriate, considering how stupid I was.”

Bard eased away from Thran, bent to pick up the mangled Rahmiel, and laid him on his work stand in the corner. Even unfinished, he had been beautiful, and to see him as a ruin made Thran’s stomach knot. It was not his place to say a word, but he did anyway.

“I hope you remake him. He was beautiful.”

Bard’s hand paused over the ruin, his fingers smoothing a bit of the clay that had sheared away from the armature. It was such a despondent gesture that Thran went up behind Bard to stroke his hair, his arm.

“I know that I am mortal now, and no longer your angel. But Rahmiel was already a rare piece, and I hope that you will not abandon him. If you can bear to continue him, I hope you do.”

Bard swallowed hard. “So... I’m not your saint anymore, either...”

His voice was half a question, which Thran was quick to answer. “You will always be my saint. We had a terrible, terrible moment, but I hope it is only a single moment in the midst of all that came before, and all that will come after.”

Bard’s hand paused over the clay and wire, then he moved closer to the base and took up the twisted armature. Under his deft fingers, the bent wire straightened – it hadn’t done much more than twisted, and a turn or two here and there realigned it without much effort. He clamped the armature back to the base, and stripped the clay from it in careful bits. When it was bare, he rolled the clay into a ball and set it in the bin with the rest of the block.

“There. Ready to start over.”

“Will you?”

Bard nodded. “It’s not every day an angel gives me a commission.”

The wide smile on Thran’s face was probably very silly, but he didn’t care. He brushed a kiss on Bard’s hair. “Thank you, lyubov moya.”

That got a sheepish shrug out of Bard. “You’re welcome. So... I suppose we have only one more thing to figure out?”

“Do we? What is that?”

“What do we tell the children?” Bard held up his hands. They looked better now that the blood was washed away, but bruises had started to purple the base of each hand under the little finger. He’d balled up his fists and pounded something, then. Thran suppressed a wince. “They’ll know something was up, because I look like I’ve been in a brawl, and you look like death.”

Thran shivered, not at Bard’s words, but the cooler temperature of the solarium had finally seeped into his bones. Bard realized at once, and led them back to the sitting room sofa, Thran huddling
close to Bard because he was cold. His husband grabbed the throw on his end of the sofa and shook it open to drape it over Thran.

“I do not know,” he admitted, snuggling the throw close. “Is it better to tell them that we had a fight, or is it better to concoct a story? Both are bad.”

Bard shook his head. “Both are very bad.”

“Very, very bad. I do not want to lie. But if we tell them the truth, I do not want them to think you hit me.”

Bard’s face spasmed with the first humor Thran had seen today. “They think you’re a god with knives. Since I’m still breathing, they won’t think I fought with you.”

Thran hummed, as he laid his head on Bard’s shoulder. “They think you are very strong, and since I am still standing and have no bruises or broken limbs, they won’t think I fought with you, either.”

“Lying is out. Right out.”

“Agreed. So...”

“So... we’ll tell the truth. We’ll tell them we had a disagreement, and we worked it out like civilized people.”

Thran snorted. “What did you do in the barn? Was that civilized?”

Bard pursed his lips, and darted a quick, furtive glance Thran’s way before looking away. “I pounded a lot of metal and did a lot of chin-ups.”

“Relatively civilized, then,” Thran amended. “So we do not lie if we tell them we were civilized.”

“As long as they don’t ask for particulars. They’ll ask what we argued about.”

“Tcha, that is none of their business.”

“Welcome to the new generation, Thran. They don’t have the boundaries you grew up with.”

“No one in this country has the boundaries I grew up with,” Thran scoffed. “That does not mean I must answer every question a child puts to me.”

It was Bard’s turn to scoff.

“All right, all right. They will ask. What do we say?”

“The truth again. That I got worried about how much time you were away, and we... had an argument, but we worked it out, and you’re going to be home more. They’ll be happy about that, and won’t ask anything more.”

“What if they do?”

“Then... we’ll say that you realized that you had gotten so thin, and that you missed us, and so you decided to fix both. And we’ll just leave out the part about you not coming home last night and me being stupid this morning, and they’ll be satisfied – no, we won’t leave all of my stupid stuff out. We’ll say that I was stupid not to say how worried I was about you earlier, and I should have, before things went so far. Then we both look equally stupid, and equally smart.”
Thran hummed. “That is a good solution. We tell the useful parts of the truth, and forget the rest.”

Bard’s hand tightened on Thran’s knee. “I won’t ever forget the rest. But that stays between us, so that we do better from now on.”

“I agree.”

“Okay. Last problem solved.” Bard eased his arm around Thran’s shoulder. “Getting warmer now? I can make a fire if you’d like.”

“How long must the soup cook before it is ready?”

“That’s the great thing about soup. It’s ready whenever we want it to be.”

“What time is it now?”

“About eleven.”

“So... perhaps it is soup at one?”

“Sure. No sooner.”

“Then I want to go upstairs and crawl into bed and get truly warm. Perhaps I will nap.”

“That’s fine, Thran. You need to rest. I can start on the woodwork for the ballroom while you sleep.”

“Perhaps... you would come upstairs with me?”

Bard gave him a guilty look, then fiddled with the fringe on the throw draped around Thran’s shoulders. “I... haven’t been the kindest man this morning, Thran. I don’t know how you can look at me, to be honest.”

“I have neglected you for many more days than today, and myself. I am much too thin. Can you still look at me, despite those?”

Bard still stared at the throw, but his lips curved just the least bit at the corners.

“Then I want to get warm, and I want my saint back.”

It took only a little nudge to convince Bard to get up from the sofa. They made a quick detour through the kitchen to check on the soup, then Thran coaxed his husband upstairs. Bard was tentative as he stripped his clothes and got under the covers, so Thran curled around him, careful not to brush against the scrapes on Bard’s shoulder. He slipped an arm around Bard’s ribs and eased him close, sighing in relief as his chilled body soaked up Bard’s body heat.

“Mmm,” he breathed, shutting his eyes. “Gods, to be warm. Are you comfortable? I do not hurt your scrapes?”

Slowly, slowly, Bard relaxed, and he stroked Thran’s arm. “I’m fine, Thran. I... it’s good to have my angel back. I’ve missed you.”

Thran stroked Bard’s chest. “I am sorry. I will not be so neglectful again.”

“I won’t be so silent again.”

“Then we will take good care of each other.”
Thran nuzzled his nose into the crease where Bard’s neck met his shoulder, savoring the scent of Bard’s skin, the warmth curled against his stomach, the soft hair on Bard’s chest under his fingers. A tension he didn’t know had been coiled in his body eased as he warmed, and he shut his eyes.

Thank the gods tenfold. He had redeemed himself, and his saint was back in his arms...

* * *

Bard was relieved as the body at his back relaxed almost immediately into sleep. Good. After such a hellacious morning, sleep was the best thing for Thran. Between the rigors of the past three weeks and their cataclysm this morning, he looked so wan, so worn, so ravaged. Bard had been such a fool to hold his silence for so long, to let his husband waste away so badly. He wouldn’t let that happen again. He’d find one of those online websites that estimated how many calories the human body burned doing various activities, and see what it said about dancing. Then he’d make sure Thran got enough calories to hold his weight from now on. Maybe showing Thran some hard numbers would convince him that he wouldn’t die if he ate more.

As for what had happened this morning...

In deference to his scraped right shoulder, he got out of bed without waking his exhausted husband, circled around to Thran’s side, and eased back under the covers. He eased Thran into his arms, humbly aware of how much he had to be grateful for. They’d weathered a terrible storm, and were back in rapport.

There was only one more trial to come, but they would bear it together.

In five hours, the children would be home.

Sigrid would give him a fit.

Despite himself, Bard grinned, imagining the intense glare that would soon be turned on him. But that was five hours from now. For the moment, he was safe in bed with Thran.

Bard shut his eyes and snuggled into the warmth that was his husband.

His angel.
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint face a hard discussion, then the Cherubs' Inquisition. The latter will be tougher by far.

Thran woke gradually, luxuriating in the pervasive warmth that cocooned him so deliciously. Gods, what luxury, not to have to move, only to soak up the heat gloved in silk and cashmere, pillowed in down. With eyes still closed, he reached out to draw his husband closer...

He was alone in bed.

Blinking, Thran found the clock radio that sat on his husband’s nightstand. After two. Two? In the afternoon? He was in bed at two in the afternoon?

All that had happened this morning filtered back into conscious thought.

Panic rose, but only for an instant. On the heels of that, he recalled the reconciliation he and Bard had forged one painful breath at a time – thank the gods. Still, that was only the start. They both had work ahead of them, but Thran more than Bard. How long ago had it been since he’d supplicated the gods to keep him from plunging into \textit{Immortal} without regard to anything else? Yet despite his resolve, in less than three weeks, he had done just as he’d feared, and forgotten everything else – his saint Bard, his treasured son Legolas, his excellent co-conspirator Sigrid, his mischievous Bain, and his small Kukla Tilda.

Well, then. If he could not keep his head above water, and the gods could not, then he would beg Bard to help him. Bard would help him keep his balance.

Thran grimaced. Bard could help him only if Bard spoke up. Clearly, he still didn’t see himself as an equal partner in their marriage, or he would have asked for more from Thran before now. His saint was so used to just... bearing whatever life gave him, without complaint or protest, no matter the sacrifice. How many sketches had he done in the past two weeks? Probably not many. Clearly, Bard needed as much prompt to make time for on his art as Thran did to make time for their family.

They would help each other do these things. They must, or both would be unhappy, if not now, then somewhere down the line.

A sudden smile broke his somber mood. There was always Sigrid. She suffered no fools, even foolish parents. She would relish the chance to ride herd on both her Da and her Ada.

Still smiling, Thran eased back the covers, found his clothes by the side of the bed, and got dressed. When he went into the bathroom, he was gratified that his eyes were no longer red, and his eye sockets didn’t look so bruised. He still looked pale, but a good night’s sleep would cure that. He padded downstairs to find Bard.

The kitchen smelled wonderful; the soup that he and Bard had put together earlier simmered gently on the stove, and a bowl of flour was out on the counter. Light streamed in from the big windows by the table, and the house was quiet. How had \textit{Immortal} seduced him from this sanctuary? Perhaps
Bard was in the ballroom, painting as he’d mentioned earlier, patiently working to bring their sanctuary for its full beauty. Just to make sure, Thran stuck his head in the sitting room – no, there was Bard, comfortably slumped on the sofa with his sock feet propped on the fruit crate and Thran’s laptop cradled in his lap. At Thran’s entrance, Bard looked up with a relieved smile.

“The sleepyhead arises,” Bard greeted. “You look better. I hope you feel better, too.”

“Very much. The soup smells divine. Have you eaten?”

“I had some fruit earlier. I thought you’d be up soon, and I’d have soup with you.”

“You did not have to wait for me.”

“I wanted to.” Bard put the laptop carefully aside, still open, then got up. “I’ve got biscuits started, so in ten minutes they’ll be ready.”

“You are a delight,” Thran hugged him, then they came into the kitchen. “You need the milk, yes?”

“Yes, thanks,” Bard acknowledged, as Thran put the carton on the counter. The milk went in the bowl, the biscuits went on the cookie sheet, and the cookie sheet went in the oven – already preheated; Bard had heard Thran stirring upstairs, then. They got out bowls and plates, utensils and cups, honey and butter. Thran ladled out the soup while Bard fished the biscuits out of the oven.

“Would you put a little more in your bowl?” Bard asked quietly, when he saw Thran had given himself less soup than Bard.

“This is plenty,” Thran protested.

Bard swallowed, took an uncomfortable breath. “I found out while you were asleep that it’s not enough. So try to eat a little more. Please.”

“What is this that you have found out?” Thran asked him curiously, as he duly put a bit more soup in his bowl.

“Let’s sit down, and we can talk about it. Or we can eat first. I’ve got two uncomfortable things to talk about, so if you’d rather eat first, that’s okay.”

Thran took his seat at the table. “Are they uncomfortable because of... this morning, or because of what came after this morning?”

“It’s... not because of this morning... exactly,” Bard ventured, taking the chair beside Thran. “It’s... how we get better. But it’s hard to talk about.”

Thran considered. “Hard to talk about because of the things themselves, or hard because you find it hard to talk about them? Or perhaps hard because I will not like them?”

Bard looked at his soup, not at Thran, as if he were not sure of what to say.

Thran gulped. “Is this about us?”

Bard’s glance was startled. “No! No, that’s the one thing I know. I love you, and whether you’re crazy or not, you love me, and that’s a grace, one I have a hard time believing is mine. But...” He took a deep breath, maybe a little shaky at the end. “This morning rattled me. I thought I was okay, but while you slept, I started looking at things to help us, and... now...”

Bard looked so uncomfortable that Thran’s throat knotted in distress for him. He snaked his hand out
to capture Bard’s. He stroked Bard’s wedding ring before he intertwined their fingers. “We will get through it, whatever it is. We will eat our soup, and as you can tell me, you will.”

Bard nodded. “Okay.”

“If it helps, I woke up with the thought that I have failed to find my balance with this ballet, even though I promised myself that I would. I will need your help. But... it is hard for you to speak up about such things, even now. You are too much the saint.”

Bard’s hunched posture straightened, and he gave Thran a relieved look. “I don’t know about the saint part, but yes, it’s hard to know when I should say something. It’s not my way to tell you what to do.”

Thran considered. “I do not like to tell you what to do, either. So perhaps we will not do that. We will ask questions instead. You will not tell me that I am not home enough; rather, you will ask me why it is a good idea for me to be away so much.”

Bard’s shoulders relaxed still more, and his expression lightened. “That I can do. Yes. That makes it something to discuss, not one of us telling the other something and that’s it.”

“I like that, too. So I will start. Do you think it is a good idea to spend so much time to make such delicious soup only to look at it?”

Bard’s chuckle was chagrined. “No, I don’t. Let me remedy that right now.” He shoveled in a big bite, drawing Thran’s laughter. “What if you ate a little more, too? If only to keep me company?”

“Of course.”

They ate in companionable silence for a few moments before Bard looked at Thran again. “Um, so the things I looked at while you slept... I wanted to find out how I could help, where I could help. I won’t tell you about dancing, or the ballet... that’d be like you telling me how to cast metal. You don’t know about that, just like I don’t know about dancing. So that’s one boundary. We ask all we want, but the artist rules his art.”

“That is good, yes. It makes sense.”

“We decide together about the house, because we both live here.”

“I defer to your knowledge of such things, but I appreciate that you offer me a vote when such things arise.”

“Okay. So... food, eating... that’s a problem... for you more than me.”

Thran nodded, and belatedly took another spoonful of soup, which drew Bard’s wry smile as he followed suit. “I cannot deny that.”

“I looked on the Internet. There’s a medical site that offers health calculators – I thought it’d be easier to know what to do if we had numbers to help us.”

“Numbers about what?” Thran asked curiously, eating more of his soup.

“About how much calories you burn every day, because that would tell you how much you need to eat to keep up with yourself. You have lost weight, am I right?”

Thran winced. “I am embarrassed at how much. I do not understand – I eat lunch every day at the
UVB studio, Bard! The rest of the company loves it, because they eat then, too. I am the envy of the company because of the lunches you make me in the fancy boxes. Several have asked if you cater, so that is a compliment to how well you feed me. And we also eat during our evening discussions. How I managed to lose so much weight not only surprises me – it worries me, too.”

“Me, too. Today’s the first good look I’ve had of you for two weeks, and you’re noticeably thinner. So clearly you need to eat more. I looked up a website that told me how many calories ballet dancing burns per hour. Another one told me how many calories a thirty-four-year-old male who’s six-five, weighs one-eighty-six, and does what they call a ‘heavily physical job’ needs to hold weight. Then I estimated how much you eat now, and it’s no wonder you’ve lost weight. You need to eat a quarter more to hold your weight, and a third more if you want to gain some of your muscle back.”

Thran’s jaw dropped. “So much?”

Bard nodded. “I know. I didn’t expect that, either. I think stress burns calories on top of your physical exertion, too. I’ll show you when we’re through eating so you can check my math, but it looks like to me that you can eat pretty much anything you want, and still be in no danger of gaining an ounce. So if you want another bowl of soup or another biscuit or ice cream, have at.”

“Perhaps a biscuit, then. Supper is in less than four hours, and I suppose you will want to stuff me then, too.”

The tension was back in Bard’s spine. “I want to help you take care of yourself. I don’t want to nag you, or make you do anything that you don’t want to.”

Thran winced at his inept phrasing. “I know, lyubov moya. I should not have said it the way I did. Because that plays into how uncomfortable you are to say the things I need to hear.”

Bard nodded mutely.

“I need you to say those things, even when I do not want to hear them – especially when I do not want to hear them. It is bad enough that I neglected you and our family, but for a dancer to abuse his body is unconscionable. I cannot do that, Bard. I cannot – but I have. So please, you cannot hold back. Promise me that you will not.”

Maybe the intensity of Thran’s insistence lent credence to his words, because Bard’s jaw twitched, and he nodded. “I promise. And I know I’m prone to carry too much, which is why I looked on the Internet. I thought numbers would give us both some guides – objective ones, and not just me or you guessing. We’ll have to do some math for a while until we figure it out, but it’ll get easier.”

Thran didn’t resist a smile. “I did not think that artists were so good with math.”

“I didn’t think dancers were, either, funny Russian. We ought to be able to handle addition and subtraction, which is all this is. We’d better – you don’t want Sigrid to take this over, do you?”

Snickering, Thran took another bite of biscuit. “I thought of her this morning, if I am honest. But I would prefer not to give her the satisfaction to chastise her Da or her Ada for anything.”

“Gods, no,” Bard winced. “About that... no matter what we tell the children when they get home, she’ll find a way to have a private word with me. So once we get the rest upstairs, I’ll linger down here and let her ambush me. Better to get it out of the way rather than let her stew.”

“Will I need to apologize to her?”

Bard winced again. “No. I’ll be clear about that. We fought about you not being here and not eating.
I won’t let her glare at you because I was stupid.”

“But you think she will speak of what you feared was true this morning.”

Bard folded his arms atop the table and sighed. “I don’t know. I’m ready for anything. You have to be with a teenaged daughter. In about two years, we’ll have Tilda at that stage, too. They’re irreverent, nosy, snarky, moody, and proddy, and at the same time, they’re loving, mature, thoughtful, and wise. It’s never a dull moment. You’ll see before long, once the glamor of beautiful Ada wears off and you become just plain old Da.”

“If I become a plain old Da on par with you, then I will be honored.”

With a smile, Bard scraped the last spoonful of soup out of his bowl. “I hope you still think that the first time she snarks at you. Any more soup for you?”

“I am quite full.”

“I’d try to talk you into half a cookie, but they’re just store bought.”

“I will save myself for your decadence, whenever it arrives.”

They cleaned up the kitchen, then spent a half hour side by side in the sitting room, looking at the nutrition numbers Bard had gleaned. It was a revelation to see just how much energy Thran burned every day – no wonder he had thinned so much.

“I ordered this nutrition guide to food for us, because a book’s better in the kitchen than the laptop – spills are easier to wipe off a book,” Bard finished.

“That will be a good help,” Thran agreed. “So we are well on our way to handle the food, yes?”

“Just one more thing,” Bard grinned, finally relaxed. “I found this website that talked about what Olympic athletes eat during training? You work that hard, too, so I thought you’d get a kick out of reading what your peers eat.”

He navigated to the page, and Thran bent close to read about the outrageous breakfasts of one Olympic swimmer, and the collection of smoothies favored by a runner.

“Gods, Bard! I would double our food bill if I ate all of that!” Thran exclaimed.

“They’re intense,” Bard agreed. “I imagine some of this was for show, but not most of it. They’re all eating a lot of protein to keep their muscle. So you need a lot of that, too.”

“We will work it out.” Thran linked his arm with Bard’s and leaned his head on Bard’s shoulder. “Thank you, lyubov moya. This will help me not be such a fool.”

Bard’s hand strayed to Thran’s thigh and squeezed gently before he closed the laptop and put it on the fruit crate.

“So... about the second uncomfortable thing,” Bard ventured, as his hand tightened on Thran’s thigh again.

“The first one was not so bad,” Thran observed, refusing to tense. No matter what the topic was, he would not telegraph his apprehension to Bard. That was not fit encouragement for Bard finding the courage to bring whatever it was up without a prompt.

“This one’s harder – for me, anyway. It’s come up before, and I know what you’ve told me, but...
it’s part of the reason why I didn’t say anything for so long.”

“What is it?”

“It’s... oh, hell, I’ll just spit it out. It’s money. It’s still money.”

Thran kept a tight rein on his tongue. “What about money?”

“Is money tight? Because of the ballet? Have I spent too much on the house? Because I can cut back –”

No, no, no – Bard’s worry about money had resurfaced! Hadn’t they put that behind them? Before he’d realized it, he’d tensed, and right after him, Bard did the same thing. Oh, gods, he couldn’t let this turn into another conflagration, not when things were still tenuous from this morning. He forced himself to relax, to rub Bard’s leg in reassurance.

“ – it is tight, isn’t it?”

Thran took a deep breath. “Stop. Do not jump to another contusion because I flinched. Let us both calm down. Please. No contusions.”

Bard gulped, he looked at Thran with an almost panicky worry, but he clamped his jaw on whatever he was about to say, and took a deep breath to settle himself. “You’re right. No contusions. I don’t need any more contusions.”

“Money is hard for you. I understand.”

“Money is not hard for me,” Bard gave a short, nervous chuckle. “It’s lack of money that’s hard. Is lack of money a problem because of the ballet?”

“No,” Thran said firmly. “The ballet costs a great deal of money, yes. But it does not put you or our family or our house or anything else at risk. I wince at how much everything costs, yes, because I insist that the money I spend is appropriate and provides a good return or a good result. I will continue to wince. Ori and studio space and set designs cost a great deal. But those things do not affect your work on the house or our children. If it would help for you to look at financial statements, I will show them to you.”

Bard looked a little easier. “I don’t know how much I’ll understand, but yes, I would like to see.”

Thran leaned forward to pick up his laptop. “If you see something that does not make sense, then tell me, and I will explain.”

Over the next half hour, Bard backed up his claim that he was not the world’s most astute financier. He was more than adequate when it came to their household expenses, and he was painfully frugal. But he struggled to understand more than that – investments, trusts, commercial accounting, and so forth were not things he knew much about. Thran well understood how adrift he must have been when Daphne had died, leaving him to struggle through her estate, the children, the house, his art, and the business of his art. Fortunately, Mr. Nori had already vetted Shire Hills as a reputable and fair business, so if Bard signed with Bilbo, he would be in good hands there. As for the rest, Thran had some ideas on how to reassure Bard.

“So... the only thing I have to understand is that this is the household money, and that is the ballet money, and one doesn’t take from the other?”

Thran nodded. “That is right. They are completely separate. So you see that all is well for the
If *Immortal* falls badly on its face, then it will be painful, but it will not affect what I have put aside for the household.”

Bard looked at the ballet accounts, and gulped. “That’s... so much. So much.”

“It is. But so is this,” Thran pointed to the household accounts. “So if we need more paint, buy paint. If we need more groceries, buy groceries. The money is there.”

Sitting back, Bard heaved a breath. He met Thran’s eyes, and nodded. “Thank you. I understand better now.”

“I am glad to show you, *lyubov moya*. I want you to understand everything so that you are comfortable. The house is safe. You and the children are safe. If anything happens to me, may the gods forbid it, you and the children are safe. If anything happens to you, may the gods also forbid that, the children are still safe. We have a financial planner if we need one. And when your career as an artist emerges into full glory, you will have someone to help you see to your assets for the children. I hope this puts your mind at ease.”

Bard’s expression was thoughtful, but he nodded. “It does. Not knowing... I thought the best thing I could do was to handle whatever I could, so that you didn’t have to worry about things. But... that wasn’t good for either of us. This is better.”

“It is. I do not like us to be at odds, so badly out of step. I do not want that to happen ever again.”

“Nor do I,” Bard gulped. “We need to talk about these things every couple of months to make sure we’re clear about everything.”

“I agree. Now, it is I who must bring up something uncomfortable.”

Bard sat up straighter. “I’m ready.”

“How many sketches have you done for Bilbo?”

He winced. “More than you think, but not enough.”

“Then just as we must see that I eat, we must see that you work on your art. Do not misunderstand – I appreciate your urge to push on the ballroom. But now that it is mostly done... please, Bard, you must take the time for your art. Nothing can happen until you make your sketches.”

“I know.” Bard stared at the floor. “The children scolded me about it yesterday, but when I told them why, no one complained. And I promised them that I’d take one day this week to work on my stuff. So I figure another two days, and the ballroom is done. Then I’ll take my day.”

“I want you to take as many days after that as you need to get what you need for Bilbo. No, I will not debate this. You must do this – for you, for me, for the children. Please.”

Bard didn’t protest. “I appreciate that. But I warn you – you’ll need me to work on more than my sketches once you get a few more dancers in the ballroom.”

“What more is there to do there?” Thran held up his hands in puzzlement.

“Oh, the ballroom will be brilliant. But even ethereal dancers need to take a piss now and again, and the closest bathroom is not in great shape,” Bard pointed at the door to the half bath. “At least it’s bigger than a broom closet. And it’ll be fine for just a few dancers, maybe. But more than that, and they’ll need to head upstairs.”
“I had not thought of that,” Thran admitted. “If I ever want to teach master classes here, they will have to be small, or else we must look into an addition. But that is not something to worry about now. This small room... all the plumbing is correct, yes?”

“It is. New sink and toilet. Walls, ceiling, floor... they need the same business as every other room in the house. But it’ll be a walk in the park after the ballroom.”

“But it is usable now, so we will make do until you make more of a portfolio. You must not put this off any longer.”

“I can live with that. Tomorrow and Wednesday, ballroom woodwork. Then on to the sketches.”

Thran stuck out his hand. “That is a deal.”

Grinning, Bard stuck his hand out to shake Thran’s. “It is.”

“Good. So our crisis is done.”

The mudroom door opened signaling the arrival of the children home from school. The look that Bard gave Thran was half grimace, half smirk. “Not yet. We still have to face the Inquisition.”

“Tcha,” Thran waved an airy hand. “As long as we are back in resonance, we will manage.”

“Ah, ignorance is bliss,” Bard warned, smiling. “I’ll remind you of your blitheness later.”

“Do so. Until then, allow me to sweeten my naïveté with a kiss.”

He brushed a kiss on Bard’s lips, drawing a chuckle from his husband, as well as a kiss back.

Finally, they were back on keel, and smiling again. Just in time – they’d need all the humor they could muster when the children descended upon them.

* * *

The amount of tension that fell away from Bard’s shoulders made him feel twenty pounds lighter. He was the most fortunate man alive to have a husband who, despite being accused of the most despicable betrayal, found the compassion and forbearance to forgive, comfort, and explain to his accuser. A volatile Russian husband, at that. Bard was the one who was supposed to be so patient and longsuffering, yet this time it was Thran who’d kept them away from the brink.

They’d settled just in time, too. Bard didn’t have a second to reflect on Thran’s financial revelations before all four children clattered into the kitchen.

“Da?” Bain yelled. “Da, we’re home!”

“In the sitting room, Bain,” Bard replied. “And someone’s come home to roost, too.”

“Who?” Tilda called. “Who is it?”

“Papa?” Legolas’s eyes widened, and his grin was wide – but just as quickly the expression changed to wrinkled brow and downturned lips. “Oh, no – is anything wrong?”
“I am well,” Thran assured him, getting up to hug his son warmly. “I am even better now because you and the other children are here.”

“Ada?” Tilda called from the kitchen. “Ada’s here?”

“He’s here!” Legolas replied, letting his father go. “Are you sick, Papa? You look pale.”

Sigrid had hurried in after the other children, but she was too busy studying Thran, then Bard, then Thran again, to say anything. Bard had seen that look before, both on Sigrid’s face and on her mother’s. Both of them backed that penetrating, skeptical expression with persistent probing – prying, if Bard was honest. So while he offered her a smile in welcome, he didn’t expect that to placate her.

“What happened to you?” was her far-from-subtle challenge. “Da, are you all right? What did you do to your hands?”

“Da hurt his hands?” Bain looked quickly at Sigrid, then at Bard. “Da, what happened? Are you all right? Did something happen in the ballroom?”

“Da’s hurt? What’s wrong?” Tilda was swept into the interrogation, and even Legolas gave Bard a worried look, as Bain and Tilda clamored anxiously.

“Ada, you don’t look so good, either,” Sigrid’s frown deepened. She swallowed, the only sign of apprehension in her otherwise critical demeanor. “Gods, what have you two been up to?”

Bard gave Thran an I-told-you-so look. Thran looked back with uncertainty in his eyes, and he nibbled his upper lip. Gods, Mr. Confidence would be no help to start this discussion, so Bard gave him a wink before he looked back at the children.

“Why don’t you get out the cheese and crackers, and we’ll have a sit down,” he invited.

“Uh-oh,” Bain gulped, looking at the other children. “It must be serious if they won’t tell us straight out.”

“Just get the cheese and crackers, Bain,” Bard gave his son a look. “Til, Sigrid, Legs, you can help him.”

The children went reluctantly, Sigrid last, and only after a stern look at her father. He winked at her, which got a smile out of her, but she ducked into the solarium before she went after the others, shaking her head. Bard could guess why she went out there, and what implications his very smart daughter would make of what she saw. Bard glanced at Thran, only to meet his eyes. He was likely making the same inferences that Bard was, but both of them held silence. In a few seconds, a platter of cheese appeared with three boxes of crackers. For once, the children didn’t dive into the bounty, but searched their fathers’ faces for reassurance.

“So give,” Sigrid folding herself down on the other sofa so she faced both men.

Bard had already taken a marshaling breath while the children had rummaged in the kitchen for their snacks. He had Thran’s hand clasped in his.

“We had a fight,” he said in his mildest tone.

“I knew it,” Sigrid muttered to herself, shaking her head and throwing her hands up in the air. “What about?”
“I have been very heedless,” Thran said quietly. “I have let the ballet consume me more than I should, and I have worked much too hard, and I have neglected all of you. Your Da was much too longsuffering, and it was not until he saw how thin I was this morning that he finally spoke out, as he should. I did not want to hear this, and so we had words. But then I discovered that he was right – I have become much too thin. He told me what all of you did to paint the ballroom yesterday to help make a place for me to be at home more. So I am very sorry that I have worried him so much, and all of you. I will not let the ballet consume me so much again.”

“So you’ll be here more?” Legolas asked.

Thran nodded. “I will, and gladly so.”

“Did you yell?” Bain blurted, drawing Bard’s sheepish laughter.

“We yelled,” he nodded, glancing at Thran.

“Both of us,” Thran nodded, too, looking back at Bard.

“But it’s okay,” Bard shrugged. “I was worried about Thran, and he was surprised, but we worked it out.”

“What about those?” Sigrid pointed to his hands.

“Um, we had to call time out, so I did a lot of chin-ups in the barn.”

“Did you trash the place?” Sigrid pressed, her lips a thin line.

“No,” he replied, then let the mildness of his tone sharpen subtly. “Let’s remember courtesy, okay?”

Sigrid’s intense frown crumbled into contrition. “Sorry, Da.”

Bard nodded acceptance. “Just to make this a teaching moment, this wasn’t all Thran’s fault. I was worried, and I know you were, too. I should have said something about our worries before this morning, before Thran got in too deeply. So I didn’t do as good a job of taking care of him as I should have. He didn’t do as good a job of taking care of us, either, so we’re going to watch out for each other better from now on.”

Thran sat forward and pointedly took a piece of cheese and a cracker. “I will do a better job to eat more, and to be here with our family more. Bard will do a better job to watch out for me. And I will also watch out for Bard to see that he works on his art more. This will be better for all of us.”

“Everyone okay now?” Bard asked, also taking a piece of cheese.

The children looked between themselves, trading glances and silent questions. Tilda was the first to turn back to their fathers.

“Okay,” she pronounced, and helped herself from the platter. “Now we can read the next part of Harry Potter. We haven’t for a while because you weren’t here, Ada. We knew you wanted to hear it, so we waited. Legolas really wants to hear what comes next.”

Thran’s hand tightened on Bard’s, and Bard wondered if he’d tear up again. But Thran kept himself in control, and gave Legolas a rueful smile.

“I am very sorry to have delayed the story, Legolas. You were all kind to wait for me. So perhaps tonight, after the homework, we will have time to read the next part. I would like that very much.”
“Oh, goodie!” Tilda exclaimed. “Everyone, get your homework done so we can read!”

“Fine by me,” Bain shook his head. “I don’t want to spend any longer on that old pre-algebra than I have to. I hate it!”

“I don’t like it very much, either,” Legolas agreed, wrinkling his nose. “Kukla, did you get new French words today?”

“Yes! These are about animals!” Tilda divulged, and the discussion quickly turned to the day’s events at school and the homework to be done this evening.

All told, he and Thran had gotten off easily – for now. The considering look on Sigrid’s face revealed that she was not completely convinced. Bard sighed, not surprised that he’d typed his eldest daughter’s reaction so accurately. The weight of the day’s rigors descended on him all at once, from the ache in his shoulders and back from his exertions in the barn, to the knot in his stomach that had only recently started to ease. Even the caring and positive way he and Thran had talked this afternoon had taken a lot of energy. All he really wanted to do was put supper on the table, then retire to the soaking tub until all tension melted away. The last thing he needed was to let Sigrid ambush him later tonight, once the other children were in bed, when he’d have even less energy to talk sense to her.

He squeezed Thran’s hand before letting it go, then caught Sigrid’s eye as he got up. He looked out to the kitchen, then back at her, and she got up to follow him without hesitation. He led the way through the hall and main room and into the ballroom.

“All right, have at,” he exhaled.

“About what?”

“About whatever’s simmering behind those big brown eyes.”

“I know Thran didn’t come home last night.”

“Oh?”

“My room overlooks the driveway, Da. I listen every night for him to come home, and I know he didn’t last night.”

“And?”

“And you went out this morning. You did a lousy parking job when you came back, because you were upset. Thran’s parked beside you, so he came in after you. And Rahmiel’s gone.”

Bard nodded.

Sigrid’s expression hardened. “Did he cheat on you?”

“No.”

“Would you tell me if he had?”

“I wouldn’t have to. It’d be obvious. Wouldn’t it?”

“Ye-e-es,” Sigrid allowed. “What happened? Where was he?”

Bard exhaled. “He worked fifteen hours yesterday. He fell asleep in the UVB studio. One of the
other dancers found him this morning and woke him up. He was appalled.”

“So where’d you go after we got on the bus?”

“The UVB studio. He was in sad shape. The guy who found him was helping him up just as I came in looking for him, and...” Bard grimaced. “I was stupid.”

“So you thought he’d cheated. You drove home, destroyed Rahmiel before he came home, and then the two of you had it out.”

Bard nodded.

Sigrid swallowed. “You’re sure he didn’t?”

“Absolutely and positively,” Bard was quiet, but adamant. “And don’t you pester him about it. He’s had one of the worst days of his life today, and it’s my fault.”

“He looks like death, and I don’t mean the character in that blessed ballet.”

Bard nodded yet again. “He’s exhausted. I said he can’t keep on the way he has been, and when he realized how much weight he’d lost, he agreed he'd let things get out of control. But that’s not just his fault, Sig. It’s mine, too, because I was worried and I didn’t say anything. So I’d let things get out of hand, too. We both made the problem, so we’ll both fix it. Does that answer everything you want to know?”

Sigrid folded her arms over her chest, and nodded at Bard’s hands. “Chin-ups have never done that to your hands.”

Bard grinned. “There’s always a first time.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Gods, Da.”

Bard looped an arm around her shoulders. “Gods, Sig.” He jostled her. “Okay now?”

“Are you and Thran?”

Bard nodded. “He’s still your Ada. And my fy nghriad, my cariad.”

“Ew,” Sigrid mugged, pushing Bard away playfully. “Too much information, Da.”

“That’s never happened before,” he teased.

“It’s the second time in twenty-four hours,” Sigrid said, but without a smile, drawing Bard’s frown.

“Oh? Something I should know about?”

Sigrid nodded. “I talked to Finn last night.”

“You talk to Finn every night.”

“Yeah, I do,” she shrugged. “But last night he told me that Lance Dunmont’s never been back to school since Christmas.”

Bard’s eyes skewered hers. “He hasn’t?”

She shook her head. “The official story is that he’s moved with his grandmother to Florida or
someplace.”

“I take it there’s another story that’s not so official.”

She nodded again. “Finn says the word is that the drug gang didn’t like him getting Angelo in trouble with us.”

Bard’s mouth went dry. “What else did Finn tell you?”

She shivered, and rubbed her arms with her hands as if she were cold. “Just that no one knows what really happened.” She looked up. “Have you heard anything?”

“Not a peep.”

“Finn offered to ask around, but I told him to stay the hell out of whatever it was.”

“He does not want anything to do with those thugs. If you’ve got any influence with him, absolutely tell him that if he brings it up again. He needs to stay away from them.”

“I’ve already told him, twelve ways ‘til Sunday,” Sigrid shivered again. “Finn’s such a doofus, Da. He really is. But he’s a sweet doofus, and I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

“If he keeps his nose of it, he’ll be fine,” Bard reassured her. He hoped that was true.

“I hope so.”

“Thanks for telling me. Now we’d better get back to the others before they eat all of the cheese and crackers.”

Sigrid smiled at him, and let him draw her back into the sitting room.

As the chatter resumed, Bard did his best to forget about a certain drug gang. He’d ask Thran to send Mr. Nori a discreet inquiry with all due speed.

Forewarned was forearmed.
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint end a very long and trying day on a better note.

Chapter Notes

Translation Notes:

ty zoloto moyo = you are my treasure (Russian)
ti yw fy drysor mawr = you are my treasure (Welsh)

Tilda is not the only one who loves John Astin (father of Sean Astin, who played our favorite Sam Gamgee) who played the dapper Gomez Addams who blew up his trains on a regular basis. So did I!

When Bard wandered into the kitchen with Sigrid close behind, Thran kept the other children focused on the cheese and crackers, and the stories of their school day. Better to give his husband and their eldest child the privacy Bard wanted, so as to clear the air completely. The glares he’d endured from Sigrid already were pointed enough; he well appreciated Bard’s warning about the depth of her anger once it was aroused. May all the gods favor them when Bard answered whatever questions she had – Thran did not want to face the claws of Clan Ffyrnig’s fiercest lioness.

He wouldn’t want to endure little Tilda’s disappointment, either. Sigrid might want to disembowel him if she thought he’d harmed her Da, but his little Kukla’s tears would be no easier to bear. Bain would show disgust, also not easy to suffer, but not as hard to swallow as the rage of the girls.

The worst would be Legolas. His son was so happy here, with a family at last. To force him from it would be unconscionable. That was another reason why Bard’s first instinct of his infidelity had stung so – how could Bard think he’d hurt their children so badly?

He had to put that hurt past him. Bard felt worse about it than he did, and no matter how relieved they both were at reconciliation, Bard would feel too ashamed to touch him past a hug. It would be up to Thran to ease him. That was fitting – it was Thran’s neglect that had put them in this situation, so it would be Thran’s attention that put them past it.

It wasn’t long before Bard and Sigrid rejoined them. Sigrid looked much lighter, and met his eyes with warmth. How funny it was to feel so relieved! Bard looked pensive, but winked at him and gave him a surreptitious thumbs-up. So the lioness was satisfied, and would not seek to disembowel him.
Bard stayed part of the general conversation long enough for the children to relate all of the day’s news. When they scattered to unpack their backpacks and change out of their school clothes, Bard headed to the kitchen to peruse the refrigerator for supper.

“What deliciousness do you plan for us tonight?” Thran asked as he followed Bard, the ravaged cheese platter in one hand, and the three boxes of crackers tucked under his other arm. He closed the boxes and put them in the pantry, and found the wrappers to package the leftover cheese for the refrigerator.

“I thought grilled salmon, fruit and nut quinoa, maybe roasted sweet potatoes, your usual stir fry veg, and some kind of fruit. We’ve got fresh raspberries, or canned peaches.”

“You know I am a glutton for raspberries,” Thran admitted. “All of the rest sounds delicious.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to make you a big chicken pie, or Tandoori chicken. Or maybe Chicken Kiev. Russian food for a Russian dancer.”

Thran snickered as he got out the cutting board and his favorite chef’s knife. “Chicken Kiev is very much more French than Russian, but I like it. I want to take you to the Russian restaurant that Legolas and I like so much in the city. I think you and the children would like it. Then you can sample my favorite lamb stew, in the hopes that we could make something like it here.”

Bard gave him a smile. “We would like that. The children loved my description of the seafood café we went to on our first date. We could take them there, too. They’d love Kasim.”

“He would enjoy them, too. We will go there soon.”

“That’s a great idea,” Bard enthused, getting out the pantry bowl of sweet potatoes and the bags of dried fruits. “I’ll sort out the potatoes if you chop chop with your favorite knife on the veg.”

Thran decided tonight’s vegetables would be broccoli, red peppers, onions, carrots, and water chestnuts, so he peeled and chopped and sliced a big bowl full while Bard scrubbed six potatoes, poked each one several times with a knife, and put them in the oven to roast.

“Why do you stab them so many times?” Thran asked curiously. “Do you seek vengeance upon them?”

Bard laughed. “If you don’t stab them, they blow up in the oven. The water in them gets hot as they cook, turns to steam, and if you don’t put holes in them, there’s no way for the steam to vent, so they blow up. Bain thought that was funny, until I made him chisel the hard, dry remnants out of the stove once it was cold. He wasn’t so eager to make them explode after that.”

“Ah. Perfectly sensible.” Thran shook his head. “Why are boys so fascinated with ‘more stuff blows up?’”

“Not just boys,” Bard assured him. “There’s an oldie but goodie TV show that Tilda loves where one of the characters blows up his toy trains on a regular basis. She thinks that’s hysterical.”

“Our Sigrid does not like things that blow up?”

“She doesn’t need to. She’s fierce enough all on her own.”

“So she is. Did she grill you mercilessly?”

“As thoroughly as I’m about to grill this piece of salmon.” Bard exhale was long and audible, but his
Thran smiled reassured Thran. “Don’t worry. You’re in the clear.”

“I admit I am relieved. I would not want to disappoint her. Not that this will happen again, but I want you to know that not only would I never think to hurt you, I would not think to hurt our children. That would be unbearable.”

Bard’s hands paused over the small bowl in which he’d mixed olive oil and spices. “I know. I’m so sorry, Thran.”

Thran circled the island to stand beside Bard. He stroked Bard’s back with a consoling hand. “You would never have thought what you did if I had not been foolish first, and I am sorry for that, too. We know what to do to help each other from now on, so let us think only about how to go on. And this excellent supper we make.”

He pressed a kiss on Bard’s hair, and offered him a squeeze. Bard smiled guiltily, and glanced at him before going back to mixing his spices. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You do, as much as I deserve you. Come, tell me how much of the fruit to chop chop for your quinoa.”

Thran chopped dried apricots to go with the raisins, dried cherries, dried cranberries, pine nuts, and pecans, as well as a whole onion. Bard set the quinoa on the flame, then shoveled the onions into their second biggest skillet to caramelize. He had a strange wire mesh contraption that he put the salmon into, then put it on the grill to cook. The mesh, Bard explained, kept the fish from falling apart when he turned it, and it also made it easy for him to tend it as well as the other dishes on the fire. While Bard worked his magic, Thran mustered Legolas and Tilda, who were today’s table crew; Sigrid and Bain would clean up after supper. When the quinoa was cooked, Thran dumped it into the skillet with the caramelized onions, then the dried fruit and nuts after it. Bard laid on with several Indian spices, which lent an exotic patina to the already delicious aromas. The vegetables went on to stir-fry, and very quickly everything was ready. Bard plated the fish, Thran fished the potatoes out of the oven, and the skillets went on the island with everything else.

“Go ahead and start the queue,” Bard beckoned as Thran stacked the plates by the fish. “That way you can have your pick before the horde descends.”

Snickering, Thran pointed behind Bard, where the children were already heading for the plates. “The horde has descended in a surprise attack.”

“We’re not a horde,” Tilda said with great dignity, as she took the plate Sigrid handed her. “We are a clan.”

“A hungry one,” Thran replied, ruffling Tilda’s dark hair. “I defer to the hungry children.”

“No, you don’t.” Sigrid pointedly put a plate in Thran’s hands. “We defer to the hungry dancer.”

Taking the plate, Thran offered Sigrid an ironic bow. “Yes, madam, as your Da would say.”

“Just somebody go,” Bain grumbled from the back of the line. “Some of us are hungry!”

The family dished their plates full. While it was no hardship for Thran to take something of everything, given Bard’s delicious dishes, it was a decidedly different situation to be able to eat everything he wanted, even dessert, though it was only store-bought ice cream and cookies. When was the last time that had been the case? Perhaps when he was a teenager in Russia. He mused about those days as he helped put the few leftovers into bins for the refrigerator, then made tea. As the children settled to their homework around the kitchen table, Thran regarded them with curiosity.
“The upstairs is now painted, and all the detritus is out of your nice study now. Why do you still choose the kitchen table?”

The children looked up, but Bain was the first one to speak. “No lamps.”

“Of course,” Bard winced as he filled his teacup. “I forgot about them, didn’t I? We’ll do a run on the junk shops again this Saturday, if any of you want to go. Or Sunday, depending on when you’ll be home, Thran, if you want to go, too.”

“Sunday is for your art. I will see how things go with the ballet for Saturday.”

“Saturday it is, then. Who’s coming?”

“I am,” Tilda announced. “Could we stop at the bookstore?”

“What not the cheese shop, too?” Bard teased.

“I guess I can go there, too, if you really, really want me to,” Tilda teased back.

“Oh, you will, will you?” Bard grinned. “What about the rest of you?”

“Finn’s coming out to see Killian,” Sigrid looked up with pleading eyes. “He asked me to come along with them and Tara to see a film in the afternoon, then have supper at Tara’s house. May I go?”

“You know the deal, Sig. If your homework’s done.”

Sigrid bit her lip. “I know it won’t be, Da. I’ve got a paper to write, but if I work on it all week, Saturday morning, and then Sunday to finish it, could I still go?”

Bard considered. “I appreciate your honesty, sweetness. You’ve been great so far about getting everything done this year, so we’ll give this a shot. Just don’t leave so much for Sunday that you can’t finish it.”

Sigrid’s smile was grateful. “I won’t. Thanks, Da.”

“What about you two, lads? Maybe after your fencing, Legs? Bain, you can come along with us when we drop off Legolas at the Gondors’.”

“I’m not particular about a lamp, as long as it’s not one of those weird globular flower things,” Bain shrugged.

“Oh, I like those!” Sigrid exclaimed.

“No surprise there,” Bain rolled his eyes.

“I’m not particular, either,” Legolas said, “but I don’t want a flower one any more than Bain does.”

“Okay, two non flowery lamps on the list,” Bard grinned. “Til, it’s you and me, and maybe a dancer who’ll be just as glad to go to the cheese shop as you will.”

“Goodie!” Tilda clapped her hands, looking at Thran. “I hope you can come, too, Ada, but if you can’t, I’ll get you something.”

“Thank you, Kukla. Tomorrow we will hammer out a new schedule for the ballet, so I will see about Saturday. Bard, do you think the ballroom will be ready by Friday?”
“That’s my plan,” Bard nodded. “Oh, I received an email from the children’s school this afternoon while you were napping. Children, we’ll let you get back to your studies. We’ll be in the sitting room if you need us.”

Thran and Bard carried their tea into the sitting room, where Bard settled on the sofa. Thran found a CD to play, an interesting collection of Middle Eastern instrumental music that provided a good if exotic ambient background for the children’s homework.

“Where did this CD come from?” Thran asked.

“The resale bin at the library,” Bard explained. “It was fifty cents or something. It looked interesting, and the price was right. I found it helped the children focus on their homework, because it’s not obtrusive, it cuts background noise, but it’s interesting at the same time. A bit exotic. I like it.”

“Do they have a resale bin at our local library? We should look for it. And get a card.”

“Good idea. Maybe I’ll stop in for one on Friday when I go into the school.”

“Yes, you said you got an email from the school? I hope none of the children are in trouble.”

“Not at all. I’m going in Friday to see what we need to do to qualify for our tuition reduction. Once the ballroom is done, I’ll have more time, and I’ll take care of that for us.”

“What time on Friday?” Thran asked. “I do not want you to shoulder all of this for us, lyubov moyav.”

“I don’t mind going in and finding out the particulars for us. I’m sure they have a packet of explanation or something about it. That’s what the paper said that was in the introductory packet they gave us when the children first enrolled. So I’ll get that, hear what they have to say, and then you and I can decide what we want to do.”

“All right,” Thran agreed. “Now, until the children need us for their homework, Bard, would now be a good time for you to work on your sketches for Bilbo?”

Bard’s smile was wry. “Thank you for making it a question. Yes, I would like to work on my sketches. Maybe I could get you to pose for some?”

Thran lowered his lashes and gave his husband a small smile. The expression brought a flush to Bard’s cheeks.

“I didn’t mean those kind of poses.”

“Pity. What kind did you mean?”

“Poses I can display in public, you.”

“I suppose I can manage that.”

Bard smothered a grin, and got up to fetch his pencils and sketchpad from the solarium. He settled on the sofa to Thran’s left, made himself comfortable, and considered the blank sheet only briefly before he started to sketch. In short order, a belly dancer appeared, surely brought to mind because of the exotic music playing softly in the background. One arm stretched up, fingers gesturing like a flame; the other curled out and then down towards her hip. Skirts swirled to reveal bare feet, and a sinuous torso spoke of powerful feminine mysteries. A musician curled around his tabla went in the background to offer a crouched contrast to the dancer’s elongated limbs.
“I like that one,” Thran complimented. “Does it bother you if I watch you so closely?”

Bard shook his head. “Not at all. In fact, you can help. Tell me something to draw.”

“Hmm,” Thran considered, intrigued. “Did Tilda ever play the schoolyard game of hopscotch?”

“She did,” Bard nodded, eyes brightening. “That’s a good one.”

The expressive lines that defined Bard’s spare style flickered over the page, and soon Tilda as a tot appeared in mid-jump, laughing. Her father’s affection permeated each line, making it a joyful celebration.

They sat there side by side for several minutes, Thran providing inspiration for Bard’s efforts. When he’d done four sketches, Bard gave Thran a glance.

“Would you hold up your left hand? There’s this way you hold it when you dance that I like. It’s like this,” Bard stretched out his arm, palm down, fingers extended, the ring finger a bit lower than the others, “only more elegant.”

“That is how I hold it in an arabesque.” He turned slightly away from Bard so that he could stretch his arm out in front of them both. “It is like this?”

Bard nodded. “Almost. Would you pretend you’re reaching out, but move very slowly so I tell you when to hold still at the part I like?”

“Of course.” Thran hitched forward a bit on the sofa until his spine was properly aligned, then looked back at Bard. “My hand will be roughly here when I reach out. That is the right place for you to draw it?”

“That’ll be perfect.”

“All right. I start to move... now.”

He moved just as he would on the dance floor, but slowly, arm stretching out, fingers extending the expression that began at the shoulder –

“Right there.”

Thran stilled.

“Perfect. I’d like to do a more detailed one, so tell me when you get tired.”

Thran held the pose for perhaps three minutes before his shoulder grew painful. “I put my hand down now.”

“Thank you, cariad. I’ve got it.”

Thran slid back against the cushions to peer at Bard’s sketchpad. This one was not in Bard’s usual spare calligraphic style, but a more delicate drawing of thin, pale lines that looked like something out of an ancient book, perhaps as Da Vinci would have drawn in his notebooks.

“This one is so different,” Thran observed as Bard continued to fill in his outline with more detail.

“Every now and then I like to do one that’s more realist than impressionist,” Bard replied, his attention on the paper. “A realistic one takes me a lot longer, and I have to concentrate on different things, so it has to be a subject that I enjoy so that I don’t rush through it. Believe it or not, your
hands are one of the most beautiful things about you. They’re a joy to watch, whether you’re dancing or not. Such long fingers, and that little dip of your ring finger... that makes it.”

“You make it,” Thran said softly, as the sketch appeared one small line at a time, as if it emerged from the mist. “I have never seen you sketch like this before.”

“It takes a lot of warmup,” Bard admitted. “Give me a few minutes...”

Thran sat quietly as his husband worked on the sketch, oblivious to all else. His expression was very internal as if listening to his muse, an almost frown of concentration. The only break in his efforts was to sharpen his pencil not once, but twice, to keep the lines from thickening. To watch it develop was magical, for all that there were no tricks involved. Perhaps forty minutes went by before Bard looked up.

“You were in deep conversation with your muse,” Thran offered.

Bard blinked, then nodded. “I was. It’s not quite finished yet, but it’s close.”

“It is beautiful, even if you say it is unfinished. So expressive.”

Bard’s right hand reached out to span his thigh. “Of course it is. It’s a dancer’s hand. The hand of an angel.”

“Oh, lyubov moya, I speak of the drawing, not the hand.”

Bard’s hand tightened on Thran’s thigh. “I draw what I see, that’s all.”

“You draw what you feel, too. That is what I see in this. And great skill.”

Bard gave Thran a crooked smile. “I’d like to do more like this, if your hand is willing.”

“My hand is ready to pose for you however and whenever there is a moment. Also the other one. It already feels quite jealous that you have not yet immortalized it.”

That roused a chuckle from his husband. “I’ll remedy that another time. I’m good for only one example of realism at a time. It takes it out of me.”

Tilda stuck her head in the sitting room. “Would you do my French words, Ada?”

“Of course,” Thran beckoned. “They are about animals, yes?”

Tilda trotted in with her vocabulary sheet. “Yes! We saw a film about them today. It’s all in French, but I sort of got the idea about part of it. Once we learn the animal names, it’ll make more sense, and then Monsieur Cornett will help us understand the verbs. It’s not a very hard film. It’s for little children, but we kind of are about the language, even though we’re older, so it’s fun. It’s to get us used to what French sounds like when real French people speak it.”

“Very wise,” Thran nodded, taking the paper Tilda passed to him. “So let us see what sense we can make of the animals.”

“If you and Til sit on the other sofa, I can sketch while you practice,” Bard asked.

“Of course. Come, Kukla, let us give your Da a good scene to sketch.”

As he and Tilda ran through the words, Bard sketched away. A few more shreds of his upset from this morning drifted away, as he and Tilda played with the words, and Bard sketched easily. Before
long, the other children drifted in as they finished their homework. Sigrid was the last one to appear.

“I like that music,” she commented, experimenting with a couple of dance steps. “Sounds like belly dance music. Very hypnotic.”

“It makes me think we’re in a bazaar,” Legolas agreed.

“Have you ever been in a real bazaar?” Tilda asked.

“I haven’t,” Legolas shook his head, “but Papa has. Istanbul, I think?”

“Really?” Bain asked, wide eyed. “Did it have those cobras in the baskets?”

“If they did, I did not see them,” Thran demurred, laughing. “I think they are in Indian bazaars more than Turkish ones. I saw a lot of everything else, though. The Turkish Grand Bazaar is famous all over the world for all its beautiful wares. Jewelry, lanterns, clothing, shoes, so many things. There is a pair of lanterns in the main room with the other boxes that I bought there. I had forgotten about them until now, Sigrid. Perhaps we could put them in the solarium this summer, Bard?”

“Oh, I remember those lanterns, Papa!” Legolas exclaimed. “I liked them, too. Yes, let’s put them in the solarium!”

“Can we see them?” Tilda asked in a hopeful voice.

“Of course,” Thran got up. “Where is the torch, Bard? We have no light yet in that room, either.”

“It’s in the mudroom,” Bard put his sketchbook aside. “I’ll get it. You lead the horde to the box.”

“Clan, Da, not horde!” Tilda rolled her eyes.

“You look just like Sigrid when you do that,” Bard teased her as he headed for the mudroom. He came after the rest of the family into the main room where the boys were already prowling through the boxes.

“Here they are!” Legolas announced, easing a tightly packaged cardboard carton out of the mix and handing it to Sigrid. He took another slightly smaller box in his arms. Both were shabby, evidence of their journey from halfway around the world.

“Let us bring them into the sitting room,” Thran urged, and they retraced their steps back into better light. Bard had already seen how well wrapped the boxes were, so when he returned the torch to the mudroom, he came back with a box cutter. Thran neatly slit the heavy tape from the seams of the first one, and opened the flaps as the children gathered around. He lifted out a huge wad of packing material, inside of which was a beautiful melon-shaped lamp in deep blue ribbed glass with brass fittings at the one of the rounded ends, and a brass finial at the other. A chain at the top end showed how it would hang.

“That’s amazing,” Sigrid breathed, reaching out to touch the glass. “Such a deep color.”

“The market was amazing,” Thran said, holding the lantern out to Legolas to hold. “Imagine so many of these beautiful lamps, hung from the roof of the stall in all colors. The other one is also blue, but not a solid color – a mosaic.”

Thran got the second box open. This lantern was more of a squashed sphere – an oblate spheroid, Sigrid called it with a laugh – with brass fittings on top and bottom, but instead of the solid blue glass, it was a mosaic of small tessellations in blue, white, green, and yellow, with small spots of red
“Wow,” Bain leaned forward to look at it closer. “How did they get all those small pieces together in such a curved shape? That’s something!”

“I like this one best, too,” Legolas grinned at Bain. “It looks like the inside of a kaleidoscope.”

“It does,” Tilda agreed.

“They’re both amazing.” Bard carefully took the melon lamp from Legolas. “They’d be perfect out in the solarium.”

“Will you work on that room next, Da?” Bain asked.

“I’ll do the bathroom down here next, then we can vote on the next room. The solarium, dining room, main room, and mudroom are all still on the list.”

“Solarium!” was the unanimous chorus from the children.

“Yeah, Da,” Tilda bounced on the sofa. “Spring is coming, and we can have our garden room ready for it.”

“I like that, too,” Bard agreed. “Thran?”

“I make it unanimous. The solarium after the bathroom.”

“That’ll be fun to work on. Did you ever hear back from Mrs. Mathom about whether she found screens like you wanted?”

“I think she did, but I have not gotten back to her. I will check and tell her that perhaps Saturday we will visit?”

Bard nodded vigorously. “That’s good. Okay, you lot, the renovation schedule’s set for the next bit. Has everyone finished their homework?”

“I want to work on my paper, so I’ll head upstairs and get through the shower,” Sigrid said.

“The rest of us are done. So we can read!” Tilda declared. “Harry Potter!”

“One more thing before we read,” Bard asked. “I’m off to the market tomorrow. If you have a request that’s not on the list in the kitchen, speak now.”

While the children discussed what they wanted for lunches this week, Bard helped Thran pack the lanterns away with care. They set the lantern boxes in the solarium while Legolas got out their book. The next chapter was duly read, and the younger children headed upstairs to shower and get ready for bed.

“I may have to get in the tub tonight,” Bard grimaced, as he and Thran relaxed on the sofa. “I ache all over.”

“I am not surprised,” Thran offered a consoling stroke on Bard’s arm. “How many chin-ups did you do this morning?”

“Enough to make me regret it now,” Bard gave a shamefaced wince. “The less said about that, the better.”
“I will run the tub for you. May I join you?”

“Of course. I might need to find the ibuprofen, too.”

“Then let us go upstairs, and see to the children, then we will see to each other.”

“Rounds first.”

“Of course.”

They circled through the rooms, checking doors and windows and lights, then slowly headed upstairs. Tilda was already in bed, glad to settle with Mr. Bun in her arms. She bid her parents goodnight with a sleepy smile and a kiss for each.

“I’m glad you’re back, Ada,” she murmured, drawing the covers close. “I like to do my French words and read with you.”

“I like both of those, too, Russkaya Kukla,” Thran stroked her hair out of her eyes. “I will see to it that we do more of both, and many other things.”


Thran moved out of the way for Bard to hug his daughter good night. “Night, little doll. You and Mr. Bun sleep well.”

“Monsieur Lapin,” Tilda dimpled. “Bonne nuit!”

“Bonne nuit,” Thran grinned.

“Just plain bye from me,” Bard chuckled. “See you in the morning.”

They left Tilda to her slumber, then split to see to their sons. As Thran came into Legolas’s room, his son looked up from his bed with a somber look.

“What is it, synok?”

“Is everything all right with Bard now?” he asked diffidently.

Thran sat beside Legolas and put an arm around him. “Everything is all right, Legolas. I have been very foolish to let myself get so swept away. I apologize to you for being so thoughtless. I did not answer all of your texts, and I missed so much of everything. That was not right of me.”

“I missed you,” Legolas admitted. “Which is sort of strange. I mean, in boarding school you weren’t there, and while I thought about you many times, I didn’t miss you as the term went on, I suppose because I got used to knowing that you were not nearby.”

“But now you are not at boarding school, and I am not away, and we live in a house together with the rest of our clan. It is more normal, until I made it not normal. Again, I apologize to you.”

“Thank you,” Legolas’s arm tightened around Thran’s waist. “Did Bard... try to hit you?”

“No. A thousand times no. In fact, even though he was very, very angry with me, and rightly so, he took great pains only to yell, nothing more. He went out in the barn and did many chin-ups until his anger passed. Our Bard is not one to use violence, no matter how angry he is.”

“He punched the drug gang people in the park. I was glad he did that. I was glad you did that.”
“He defended us well. That is the man he is – fierce on our behalf, but gentle with us.”

“I’m glad he didn’t hit you.”

“It is not in his nature, Legolas. Rest easy. He is a good man.”

“Okay, Papa. I like him. I like being in our clan. The other children don’t tease me, they like me for being me, and we help each other. I don’t want to leave here, ever.”

“We will not leave here, ever – at least not until you go to college. By that time, you may be glad to go from this house of such a fierce clan, yes?”

Legolas smiled at Thran’s joke, easing his tension.

“We are safe here, and loved here. Do not worry. Bard cares about you very much, as well as me.”

“He played video games with Bain and me. He isn’t very good yet, but he kept trying, and he was a good sport. And he’s really good at Dinky Farm. I know Bain says he dislikes that game, but he doesn’t dislike it that much. It was fun playing it with him, Kukla, and Bard.”

“He looks after us well. I am glad that he was here with you when I was not. There will still be times when I will not be here. I do not like that, but I feel better knowing that Bard will see to things when I cannot.”

Legolas nodded. “Yes, that’s good. And if it means that you will be here more, then I’m glad he got mad.”

“Life makes things that seem bad turn out well,” Thran gave an exaggerated shrug. “Now, it is time for bed. Rest well, and I will see you at breakfast tomorrow.”

“I love you, Papa.”

“I love you, too, Legolas.”

Thran gave both of Legolas’s green braids a gentle tug, then a kiss on the forehead, and let himself out. Bard was waiting outside to tell Legolas goodnight, so Thran went in to wish Bain goodnight. He didn’t expect Bain to say much more than goodnight, so he was surprised when Bain looked up at him and shrugged.

“I’m glad you and Da aren’t mad at each other.”

“So am I. But he was right to be angry with me. I needed him to tell me to take better care of myself, and of all of us. Your Da is a good man.”

Bain smiled unexpectedly. “Thanks. I think he’s the best. But don’t tell him I said that.”

Thran held up his hand. “My lips are sealed. He is very proud of you, too. Sleep well, and I will see you tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, Thran. You sleep well, too.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Thran shut the door behind him, to find Bard exiting Legolas’s room. “One more to go,” he grinned, pointing to Sigrid’s door. “Brace yourself.”
“I am braced,” Thran mugged, and in they went.

“How’s the paper coming, sweetness?” Bard asked, when Sigrid had answered his knock.

“It’s coming. ‘The Medical Implications of the Assassination of James Garfield.’ I thought it’d be boring, but it’s not bad at all. He was an interesting guy.”

“Ah,” Thran said. “He was the president who was assassinated around 1900, yes?”

“1881,” Sigrid nodded. “That’s the one.”

“There were medical implications?” Bard asked.

“There will be when I finish my paper,” Sigrid grinned. “It’s my opinion he wouldn’t have died if he’d gotten good medical care. The whole thing was mishandled from the get go, and he died of sepsis because of all the people poking at him, and so on and so forth. He was pretty smart, and if he hadn’t died, he would have likely changed a lot that followed for the better. Medical care changed because of his death, too. That’s the point of my paper.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it very convincing,” Bard gave her a kiss. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t. And don’t you two get so out of sync again. I’m going to hound both of you to make sure you stay on track from now on.”

Thran bent down to give Sigrid a hug. “I am sorry I was so neglectful. I hurt you and your siblings and especially your Da. I love you all very much, and do not want to worry any of you. It is good that you will help me with this.”

Thran’s ready apology caught Sigrid off guard, and her mock sternness fell away. Her arms went around Thran’s neck and she gave him a swift, hard hug. “I’ll hold you to that, Ada. I mean it.”

“So do I. Now tell your Da good night, and we will leave you to your paper.”

“Okay. Night, Da. Sleep well.”

“I will, sweetness. Sleep well, too. See you in the morning.”

She nodded as Thran and Bard drew her door shut behind them.

“We’ve apologized to everyone at last,” Bard exhaled, giving Thran a weary look. “I’m for the tub.”

“With all speed,” Thran agreed.

In a few minutes, they settled in the soaking tub. Thran wound his braid around his head and got in; poor Bard swallowed a dose of ibuprofen before he followed Thran. He hunched down until his shoulders were under the water, humming with relief as the warmth soaked into him.

“Gods, that’s the last time I try to do fifty chin-ups without working up to them,” Bard groaned softly.

“Fifty!” Thran echoed, appalled. “Not so many!”

Bard hung his head and exhaled. “I was angry. Now I’m paying for it. Fitting, that.”

“It is over. We have apologized to each other and the children, and we have plans so that such a thing does not happen again. So do not despair. We have weathered the storm. That makes me very
“I’m happy, too. But I’m still ashamed of myself for what I did. If I’d just stayed there, I would’ve known soon enough what’d happened.”

Thran sighed. “Perhaps. But... as awful as this was, perhaps it had to be, to make enough of an impression that we changed. Little else could have shaken my obsession with Immortal, or convinced you that you had to speak up.”

Bard stayed hunched under the water, his back against Thran’s chest, for some seconds. “Do you really think so, or do you say that to help me feel better?”

“I want to help you feel better, but I think I said the truth, too. My obsession and your reticence are both deeply rooted. We needed a conflagration to wake up. Both of us.”

A hand under the water snaked around Thran’s leg to grasp his knee. “I think you’re right.”

“So do not despair. All is well. We are stronger going forward.”

The body against his relaxed, and Bard’s head came to rest against his chest. “Okay. Okay.”

Their conversation lapsed as they soaked in the hot water. Bard might be the one most in need of the heat, but it worked its magic on Thran’s weary body, too. By the time the water cooled, he was relaxed and ready for bed. That didn’t mean he was ready for sleep, however. One he and Bard were warm and dry and ensconced under the covers, Thran curled at Bard’s side, his head on Bard’s shoulder and his arm over Bard’s chest.

“How are your scrapes?”

“Not so bad. It’s just one part that stings, so it’s bearable.”

“Good. Your shoulders are easier, too?”

“Thank goodness. The ibuprofen’s kicked in, and the hot water helped, too. I won’t have any trouble getting to sleep.”

Thran’s hand traced over Bard’s chest lightly, tracing circles over it. As one finger grazed a nipple, Bard’s breath caught, so he did it again, this time more purposefully. Bard’s hand caught his.

“Thran –”

“Don’t make me stop,” Thran whispered. “Please, lyubov moya.”

“After what I did, how can you –”

“Because I love you. Because you blame yourself, and I do not want you to. If I had not been so thoughtless, you would not have thought what you did. Please, lyubov moya, let me show you how much I love you.”

“But I was so stupid –”

“Shh,” Thran urged, slipping atop Bard to kiss him. “All is well. All is well.”

Thran crouched atop Bard, his hands full of Bard’s hair as he kissed lips, throat, shoulders. He traced fingers down Bard’s chest to find nipples that had not been touched in two weeks, and there was no more talk of anything as Bard’s arousal took him. It was such a delight to suckle both of them, to feel
Bard’s muscular cock rise hard against Thran’s abdomen. Thran rolled over, drawing Bard with him, to reverse their positions.

“Please, my saint, make love to me. I want to be your angel again.”

“You’re sure?”

“Very sure. Please, lyubov moya. Make me yours again.”

Bard reached for the lubricant, but it was Thran who slicked himself, then Bard’s cock. A few seconds of Thran’s stroking and petting were all that Bard could endure before he eased inside Thran. Thran wrapped legs around Bard and pulled him close to kiss and stroke.

“Oh, gods, I’ve missed you so much,” Bard whispered. “So, so much.”

“Mmm... mmm. I love you inside me so deeply, so completely.” Thran arched his back, then bowed forward, shuddering as each little movement sent ripples of pleasure through him. He traced fingers up Bard’s back, then down over his buttocks to knead and massage, as he drew him deeper into him. “Slowly, my saint. Please, make it last. It is so good, so good...”

“You’re so tight... I don’t know if I can last very long – oh, gods, angel, I’m in so deep – No, don’t – don’t touch my nipples, or I won’t be able to stop – stop myself! Gods, no! Oh, I’m coming, I’m coming now – ”

Bard spasmed deep within Thran, his hips thrusting over and over as his orgasm consumed him. Before either of them could touch Thran’s cock, he followed his husband over the edge, wrapping himself around Bard to join him in release. He bit back a cry as ecstasy took him, and wound hands in Bard’s hair to pull him into an all-consuming kiss.

“Oh, gods, oh, gods,” Thran whispered, as Bard’s weight pressed against him. He stroked Bard’s back and kneaded his buttocks, savoring the solid substance of him as he pressed a kiss against Bard’s temple. “Ty zoloto moyo, velikoye zoloto. Ya lyublyu tebya.”

Bard eased out, and slid up enough to kiss him tenderly on the lips. “Ti yw fy drysor mawr, cariad. Garu di.”

They lay there for some seconds, savoring their closeness and the release they’d shared. They rose together to wash, and slipped back to bed to hold each other close. Thran was nearly asleep when Bard spoke softly into the dark.

“You’re still my angel, Thran. You always will be.”

“My saint,” Thran breathed, and pressed a kiss on Bard’s wedding ring.

Thran’s last thought before he fell asleep was relief.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Harmony has been restored, a ballroom moves closer to its debut, and Ori proves his worth not once, but twice.

The Tuesday morning ritual was far from old hat this morning, because the atmosphere in the house was so much lighter. For one thing, Thran didn’t bat out of the house before the children; he was beside Bard in the kitchen as they made the children’s breakfasts and lunches. Bard made a quick omelet full of veg and cheese for them both, as well as tea and toast, which they ate alongside the children at the table, rather than over the kitchen island as they worked. Thran dashed to pack his bag as the children collected their things, and then it was time for the bus stop run. Bard was touched to see that all of the children, even Bain, hugged Thran goodbye as the bus trundled down the lane.

“Don’t you dare let UVB kill off their prize dancer!” Sigrid hissed as she hugged Thran. “I mean it, Ada! What good is their ballet if they kill you before it’s ever performed?”

“She has a point,” Bard observed, standing beside Thran as Sigrid headed for the bus with a wave.

“So she has,” Thran exhaled. “A most excellent point. One I may be so crass as to state today if needed. Lettie and I will talk about what we will do so that we do not kill any of us from now on. Ah, I forgot to mention yesterday – when you go to the school Friday, would you please ask who we might talk to about whether the school is a possible venue for *Immortal* during the festival?”

“I will. I found out from Rosie that the Greenwood Dale on the Lake Art Festival is July sixteenth through the twenty-fourth. So I’ll ask the school. Oh, there’s something I forgot to mention yesterday, too. When Sigrid and I talked, she told me that Lance Dunmont, the boy who started the mess in the park on Christmas Day, has gone missing.”

Thran shot him a serious look. “That is not good.”

“No, it’s not. Finn told Sigrid that the official story was that he relocated to Florida with his grandmother. The unofficial story is that the drug gang took him out because he got Angelo in trouble.”

“Oh, gods,” Thran gulped.

“My sentiments, exactly,” Bard jammed his hands into his pockets and hunched into his coat against the cold. “I told her to tell Finn to keep the hell away from those guys, and she said she’d already told him that, in the same emphatic fashion. You might want to ask your Mr. Nori about it.”

Thran hummed. “It might be wise to inquire, yes. I will ask Ori if he knows anything. I would hate to think that we are at risk.”

“I hope they decide to claim a moral victory because they drove us out, and let it go at that. Or figure out that without their boy trying to show off, this whole thing could have been avoided.” Bard winced. “Lance was stupid, granted. But that’s a hell of a reason to end up in a ditch somewhere.”

Thran shivered as they came in through the mudroom door. “I do not know what they expected us to...
do, either. From what the children told me, the gang boys attacked Legolas before he could retreat. The children tried to retreat after they freed him, too, and the gang prevented them once more. Did they think I would not defend my son? That you would not do the same?”

“I don’t know, angel,” Bard shook his head as he hung up his coat and followed Thran into the kitchen. He had the bento boxes for Thran’s lunch already out, and he pulled food out of the fridge to fill them. “To our lights, there’s no sense in it. But to theirs, there’s turf to defend, and even though we tried not to engage, the gang’s rivals might have seen our score as a sign that Angelo’s gang is weak and ripe to take over. Let’s hope we’re far enough away that we’re not worth bothering about.”

“I will talk to Ori this morning. If he knows nothing, I will speak to Mr. Nori directly.”

Despite the serious nature of their conversation, Bard couldn’t suppress a grin. “Mr. Nori gets a title, but Ori doesn’t. Is Ori’s full name Ori Nori, then, or does the mysterious ginger-haired expediter choose to go by his first name?”

Thran’s face eased into a smile. “Their surname is Goldman. From the little I have gleaned, Mr. Nori chooses to... distance himself from others of that name. His business interests range... farther afield.”

Bard’s chuckle was rich. “I bet they do. I’m putting the rest of the quinoa in with your salmon and veg. And grapes. And a stack of peanut butter crackers. And here’s a bin of the bean and ham soup for Lettie.”

“Such a lot of food!”

“So you’ll have a choice. What you don’t eat, bring back, and the children will.”

“And then they will yell at me for not eating.”

“Probably,” Bard grinned. “Don’t cop out and feed the leftovers to any other hungry dancers.”

“Or Ori,” Thran conceded. “Irmo has run him ragged, but Ori has kept up with him. I will speak to him about how we can rein Irmo in from now on.”

“Another reason to get a library card,” Bard observed, stacking Thran’s boxes and putting the elastic strap around them. “If Irmo’s autistic, maybe there are books we can read.”

“Another good idea. Now, I must go. Thank you for the bin of soup for Lettie. I’m sure she will enjoy it. I will be home at a reasonable hour for supper if I have to quit the ballet to do so.”

Bard looked up, swallowing as he handed Thran the bento boxes to tuck in his bag. “I don’t want you to quit, angel. I know doing Immortal means a lot to you. Just... as Sigrid said, don’t kill yourself doing it. Please.”

“I will not. I will text you when I leave the UVB studio, so you know when I will be here.”

“Okay.” Bard took Thran’s shoulders in his hands to give him a kiss. “Safe journey, and good luck with Irmo.”

“I will need it. But the rest of the company will be with me, so we will prevail.”

Bard followed Thran to the mudroom, holding his husband’s bag so he could put on his coat. He handed the bag over, put on his own coat, and offered one more kiss before they went out together. “I’m off to the market, See you tonight.”
“I love you, my saint. Until later.”

“Love you, too, angel.”

They got into their vehicles, and Bard followed Thran out to the lane. He waved when he turned into the market parking lot, and Thran waved back in the rear view mirror. Then it was into the market to stock Clan Ffyrnig’s empty pantry.

As much painting that waited for Bard at home, he didn’t rush down the aisles. Visiting the market was something he enjoyed, and he took time to savor the sights, sounds, and smells. The colorful produce displays, the tempting aromas emanating from the bakery ovens, the variety of seafood, even the colorful stacks of canned goods and yogurt – all offered possibilities for delicious meals his family would enjoy. The amount of stuff that ended up in his cart still made him wince, but all were things he needed to keep six busy people well fueled. He chose several things to add to Thran’s diet, such as dark meat chicken as well as white meat. He got some lamb, too; he’d look on the Internet for a recipe for Russian lamb stew that might approximate Thran’s favorite treat.

The hour was still early, so there were few people in the market to slow Bard as he made his way methodically down the aisles and through the checkout line. He loaded everything into the back of the truck, headed home, and got everything stowed. After a quick trip upstairs to change his clothes, he headed to the ballroom. He had woodwork to paint.

The morning proceeded quickly as he carefully embellished the ballroom’s freshly painted walls with glossy white woodwork. The day was so overcast and gloomy that not much light filtered in through the ballroom windows, so Bard was glad of the new fixtures he’d put in the ceiling. They might not provide the best aesthetic match for the rest of the room, but their bright light was welcome, and the portable CD player added a variety of music to speed Bard’s work. It was easy to imagine the dancers who would soon grace this room, bringing their artistry and beauty to the restored space. He worked steadily, plying his paintbrush and plastic paint guard to keep his brush strokes from impinging on the freshly painted walls. Thank the gods that most of the woodwork was straight expanses up the wall; the curved sections took more care to keep smudges from the walls, and therefore more time. He broke for lunch, eating the last bowl of the bean and ham soup as he pounded chicken breasts flat for Chicken Kiev. Thran wasn’t one much for fried food, and Bard generally had too much going on in the kitchen to want to mind a frying pan full of hot oil, so he’d found an online recipe for a baked version that sounded good. He made the garlic butter and froze it for a few minutes, then put small pieces of it on the flattened chicken breasts. He rolled the pieces up tightly, dipped the packets in egg and seasoned flour, and put them in a pan in the fridge to wait for dinner. Then it was back to the ballroom.

He hoped Thran had made out as well as he did this morning.

* * *

Good, Lettie’s car was already in the UVB parking lot when Thran pulled in. So was Ori’s. Irmo’s, thank the gods, was not. Thran hefted his bag and strode in with purpose, intent on making the most of the time they had before Irmo appeared.

“Thran!” Ori heralded as Thran came in. The small man was still in his coat with his scarf bundled around his neck, and a thick knitted watchman’s cap was pulled down over his ears. His face was all wrinkled brow and worried eyes. “Good morning! I hope you’re feeling better.”
“Very much so,” Thran greeted. “And you? I hope you are somewhat restored, as well.”

“I slept all day yesterday,” Ori admitted with a shrug. “I was so tired I thought I’d never catch up! But the long nap and a full night’s sleep after, and I’m feeling human again.”

“I have something to ask you,” Thran said. At Ori’s inquiring look, he drew them down into two of the lobby chairs to pass on Bard’s story about the missing Dunmont boy. Ori’s expression never twitched, but his gentle appearance was not the extent of his true nature; his lips tightened the slightest bit, giving him something of his brother’s hardness.

“May I ask you how you heard this?” Ori murmured.

“A previous classmate of one of the children. We have passed the word back to this person in the strongest terms not to inquire further.”

“A wise precaution, though in this case, it’s likely no longer material.”

Thran arched an eyebrow at Ori, who tapped a finger against his bottom lip and looked thoughtful.

“May I ask what that means?”

“It’s not a good idea, no,” Ori sighed, shaking his head. He picked distractedly at the fringe of his knitted scarf.

“I want only to know whether my family is in danger from retaliation over a situation we tried to avoid.”

“Understandable.” Ori considered, debating with himself, before he turned solemn brown eyes on Thran. He hugged his bag close to his body, and leaned towards Thran. “Please, you will be discreet? Nori won’t like that I’ve told you.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t know the particulars about the Dunmont boy, I don’t want to know, and neither do you. Whatever happened, Angelo decided that serving twenty-five years for the charges pertaining to you, your family, and Sergeant Fundin was preferable to facing charges about the boy. It’s no longer material, because Angelo suffered a... setback his first week in prison, and won’t be directing anyone to retaliate against anyone else again.”

“A setback?”

“A... permanent setback.” Ori’s dispassionate voice quieted, and he looked up at Thran. “A proxy for a rival, I understand. Please don’t ask me any more. I don’t want to know, and the less you know, the better. And don’t tell Nori.”

“Of course not. You may trust my discretion. And thank you.”

Ori nodded. “You’re very welcome.”

“I must thank you for your patience with Irmo, too. How he has not managed to exhaust you, I cannot say.”

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be,” was Ori’s surprising reply. He looked thoughtful again. “I’m beginning to understand how he thinks. Very lateral, very parallel, rather than linear.”

“Is Lettie in?” Thran asked. “I wanted us all to discuss changes in our approach, so that we are not so
worn out and do not spend so many hours each day. We will all burn out before we are halfway through this if we keep on this way.”

“That’s what I think, too,” Ori nodded at once. “And yes, I think she’s in. I just arrived a minute or so before you, but I saw her car in the lot.”

“Let us see, then we can talk about Irmo,” was Thran’s suggestion, so he and Ori got up from their chairs in the lobby and headed back to Lettie’s office. Her door was open, and she was checking through some papers as Thran and Ori came up.

“Good morning?” Lettie looked up expectantly, but her brow was creased. “A better one than yesterday for both of you, I hope?”

“Better for me, yes,” Ori nodded, looking at Thran. “I hope it’s a whole lot better for Thran.”

Thran nodded. “It would not take much to be a better morning than yesterday. So yes, a much better one.”

“How is Bard?” Lettie asked.

“He is well, happily.” Thran dug into his bag for the bin of soup Bard had given him. He handed it over to Lettie. “Bard sent you some of the soup he made yesterday, with his compliments.”

“Oh, how sweet of him! Please tell him how much I appreciate this,” Lettie said as she put the bin of soup on her desk. “Honestly, I was very worried about both of you yesterday. I’ve never seen anyone as furious as he was.”

“I had given him much to be angry about, long before a silly comment from our young Luka added to it, and I do not blame him for being so angry,” Thran winced. “Too many hours away, four children and a house to manage, plus all the renovation work he has done. But he is not the only one stretched so thin. All of us are, as well. This must stop, or as my Sigrid said to me this morning, we will all die before Immortal is half done.”

“I agree with that.” Lettie was adamant as she turned her desk chair around to face the rest of the room and sat down. Thran and Ori took the two other chairs. “You look so drawn, Thran, and not in a good way. And Ori, I don’t know how you’re putting two words together, after so many hours of repeating everything that Irmo says. I’d be a babbling idiot by now.”

“That is one reason why Bard was so angry with me,” Thran admitted. “I have lost too much weight in three weeks, and I cannot afford that if I am to last through this effort to create Immortal, much less if I am to dance it. I am also aware of how so much time in the studio forces UVB to cancel several of its classes, which does not improve the flow of cash.”

“That’s a big concern, yes,” Lettie nodded. “I didn’t think it’d be more than a couple of classes, but that’s not the way it’s turned out.”

“In just another day or two, the renovation of the ballroom in my house will be complete. I propose that we locate Irmo, Ori, Charisse, Luka, and myself to there and focus solely on the choreography. We need to complete that first and foremost. From that will come costumes, scenery, lights, and so forth, but most particularly the material we need for publicity and promotion. That will relieve the rest of the company from the long hours, and in your case, let you tend to UVB business. Charisse, Luka, and I will do our barre with Irmo, and then we will give him eight hours of our complete attention, no more. He will take responsibility of whatever he comes up with after that. Then perhaps one day a week, perhaps Friday, we will meet here with the whole company with the choreography
done so far to discuss scenery, costumes, and so forth.”

“If I may make a small request, please?” came a soft voice. Turning, Thran found Rada, the eccentric costumier, standing in the doorway.

“Oh, of course,” Lettie nodded. “Good morning, Rada.”

“Good morning, all,” he nodded, slipping sideways into the room, one small tiptoe at a time. He slipped behind Ori’s chair to stand by the window. “I would very much like to be with you as you work on the choreography, if I may. I’ll stay out of the way, and I won’t say very much, but it helps me a great deal to watch the dance develop.”

“Oh, of course, Rada,” Thran nodded at once. “You will be the voice of sanity many times, I think.”

“What an idea,” Rada considered that with concern, then smiled at everyone reassuringly. “I prefer just to sketch.”

“And sketch you will. You will be welcome.”

“So how are we going to break this to Irmo?” Lettie asked, looking uncomfortable. “He won’t like not having our undivided attention, especially given how short our time frame is. Do we have a date for the festival yet?”

“July sixteenth through twenty-fourth,” Thran related. “We will need to line up a venue. Bard will broach the subject with the Imladris Academy this Friday. The auditorium is said to be quite good.”

“That is a nice facility,” Lettie nodded, turning back to her desk to look through a drawer. She pulled out a handful of business cards and passed them to Thran. “I’ll be glad to look into that, too, once Bard’s contacted them. If he gives these to the people in charge, I’ll take it from there.”

“I will,” Thran nodded.

“So, back to how do we break this to Irmo?” Lettie repeated.

“I think I can do that,” Ori mused. When everyone looked at him, he shrugged. “As I told Thran, I’m beginning to get a handle on how Irmo thinks. It’s really quite beautiful, in a way. He doesn’t think in a straight line the way most people do – A to B to C to D, for example. He thinks laterally – A goes right to D, which goes over to G and sometimes Z. It’s hard to explain.”

“Can you give an example?” Rada asked quietly. He folded himself cross-legged on top of the two-drawer filing cabinet besides Ori’s chair, slipped a packet of ginger cream-filled cookies from a pocket, and munched quietly.

Ori mulled. “Hmm... suppose I asked you how many costumes we need for the first battle scene, Rada. You might say the Soldier, the Maid, and Death, plus twenty-five of the company, so that’s twenty-eight costumes. But Irmo wouldn’t approach it that way. He’d say a costume for Death, which must be blue and include a mask, and it must accommodate a flying harness and that means special rigging and the lighting must be able to follow Death’s descent to the battlefield, where the soldiers lie dead, so the lighting must look a certain way, and would a single costume have the desired effect, or would a cape during the descent work better, and that means the whole stage is for the battlefield, empty, so that the Underworld is the only real set, and should Death look one way above ground and another in the Underworld, which is the full set so maybe the other sets aren’t set at all but merely scenes before the curtain which will call for special lighting which will reflect differently on the costume before the curtain and it has to be a contrast with the Soldier and that means that costume is the same as the other Soldier costumes and there must be a pocket to hold the
“Sometimes he thinks in parallel, on top of it, which is why we think he can’t focus on the subject. He does, but he focuses on several other subjects at the same time, all about the original topic of costumes, but not just the count of them but the lighting, the staging, the metaphorical meaning he’s trying to instill, and so on. He’s wired upstairs very differently than we are. In fact, he thinks we can’t focus as well as he can, and in a way, he’s right.”

“So how are you going to explain the changes we make so that we don’t exhaust the rest of us single-minded creatures?” Lettie asked.

“He’s a successful choreographer already, isn’t he?” Ori shrugged. When everyone nodded, he leaned forward. “I looked it up – he’s never been so much trouble as he has been with us. I think we’re over-stimulating him. We’re giving him too much input, so we’re getting much too much output. If we put him with just the three principals and me, and Rada stays in the background, and it’s only about the story we want to tell, maybe that will keep him from throwing out so many ideas. In fact, it might be as much relief to him as it would be to us.”

Thran and the others exchanged glances. Lettie was nodding, and Rada chewed his cookie with thoughtful consideration.

“That makes sense,” Rada nodded. He offered Ori a whimsical smile. “Good sense.”

“I think it does, too,” Lettie exhaled. “Wouldn’t it be something if we’ve been causing our own overload all this time, trying to get so much done quickly?”

“It does offer a large dose of irony,” Thran grinned perversely. “So perhaps our perceptive Ori has found a solution for us. We have only to find the words to tell Irmo.”

“Tell me what?” the choreographer called from the hallway. Lettie and Rada both started, and Thran winced, but Ori held up a hand, urging silence. When Irmo appeared in the doorway, Ori turned around to face him.

“We’re talking about how badly we’ve distracted you, Irmo,” Ori said without preamble. “Much too much goes on that keeps you from your choreography, and that fractures your vision for Immortal. Without your choreography, the rest is immaterial. So you, Thran, Charisse, Luka, and I will work in Thran’s ballroom away from the rest –”

“What is this?” Irmo interrupted, eyes wide. “No, no, this will not work, Ori, not in the least! To work separately, when there are so many things that are intertwined!”

“Yes, they are intertwined, Irmo,” Ori kept on firmly, raising his voice. “All things are intertwined, but they all begin from a source, a single source, and that is what we have neglected — no, let me finish, Irmo. We have the story of our ballet, the words, don’t we? From that source must come the steps — your choreography. All the rest is immaterial without that. Until you create that, then any plans for costumes and lighting and design are tentative, at best. We have only the first part of your steps, not the middle, or the end — stop, Irmo, let me finish; you know what I say is true. What must the lighting be for those end steps? We don’t yet know, do we? So there is no point to doing tangential work until we have the main spine, the steps. We do you a disservice to distract you with details until you complete your choreography. So to banish distractions, you, Thran, Charisse, Luka, and I will work in Thran’s ballroom, and we will devote ourselves to your vision of the steps. Only when that part of your vision is complete does the rest matter.”

Thran held his breath as Irmo’s eyes bugged out and his mouth gaped wide. It was all he could do to
smother a giggle, because the choreographer looked like nothing so much as Harpo Marx about to express great indignity, albeit without the silly red wig. He stared at Ori, who folded his hands over his stomach and sat back to meet Irmo’s piercing stare without a blink. Irmo stared back unmoving for long seconds, then clapped his hands once with so much explosive energy that everyone in Lettie’s office jumped at the sharp noise.

“Yes, yes!” Irmo threw up his hands and seemed to grow three inches. “Of course! Yes, Ori, you are right to tell me not to talk, to listen to you, for this is a most revealing observation. Yes, you are right about a single source, and from that flows the rest, and we need the steps, and so it makes sense to work apart. I like this. I like it very much! With only the principals and an empty room, then yes, we can buckle down and consider less, and Ori, you will be there to capture the other things that come up, and yes, perhaps that will help us find those last few pieces of music, and we may use that beautiful ballroom both as Underworld and before the curtain, and have a better sense of space because of the height of the room, yes. Yes, I like this idea very much!”

“Brilliant,” Thran nodded, but his smile was for Ori, who reddened. Rada said nothing, but he smiled wisely and offered Ori a pat on the shoulder.

“So we will start this today?” Irmo pressed, hugging his bag to his chest.

“Bard finishes the ballroom today and tomorrow,” Thran replied. “I had thought Friday would be a good time to start. Perhaps Thursday, if we are sure this is a good idea.”

“It is, and one I hate to delay,” Irmo pressed, his lips turning down. “What delays Bard?”

Thran didn’t bridle at Irmo’s question. Irmo had no idea of the monumental amount of work Bard had already done to get the ballroom to its current state. “He finishes the paint. The walls are done; only some of the trim remains.”

“Can we not work around that?” Irmo pressed. “If there are but the four of us who dance, and Ori can stand to the side, we can work around Bard. Or dispense with the paint for now. This is important.”

Thran made a quick decision. “It is too late today to move our efforts there. I will call Bard at lunchtime, when I know he will be there, and discuss with him whether we can begin our efforts there tomorrow. Today, we will keep the principals apart from the rest as we begin this new effort. Then we will be ready to begin tomorrow.”

Everyone nodded at that, and even Irmo looked agreeable.

“Then that is what we will do. So let us go to the barre. Lettie, Rada, and Ori, perhaps you can put together lists of what we have come up with so far that others can work on while we work in the ballroom.”

“Perfect,” Lettie revealed her first wide smile of the morning. “We’ll get right on that.”

Thran got up, smiling. As Irmo bounded from Lettie’s office to head for the studio, he exchanged a smile with the others, and offered Ori his palm to slap.

“My compliments,” Thran grinned, as the others exchanged high fives.

“I’m stunned,” Lettie shook her head. “Ori, I’m in awe.”

“Let’s hope it lasts,” Ori offered, reddening again. “We’ll just have to work hard to keep everything focused only on the steps, to keep Irmo from running off on more tangents.”
"We will do our best," Thran vowed. "So, to the barre."

Thran headed for the changing room to change his clothes. When he came into the studio, he flagged down Charisse and Luka, huddled with them quickly to explain the changes, and was relieved when both of them heartily approved of the change.

Now, if only Bard could accommodate dancers two days early, all would be well.
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig enjoys the resumption of their domestic bliss. Will a cautionary tale disrupt that? Along the way, an angel resumes his dance, and a saint toils with his paintbrush.

Bard climbed up on the scaffolding, uncapped his paint, and eyeballed the expanse of woodwork to be painted. He took up his brush and paint guard, and began to transform the dull, greyed finish to a bright, glossy, white one. He got perhaps three feet down from the top, far enough that he sat comfortably cross-legged atop the scaffolding, before his mobile chirped. He set down his tools, fished out his mobile, and checked the caller ID. It was Thran.

“Hello, angel. How’s the ballet world?”

“I love to hear you call me that.”

Bard’s cheeks warmed, and a crooked smile twitched at the corners of his lips. “I’m glad. Everything’s well?”

“Very well, from my perspective. Ori managed Irmo with a deftness that is beyond mortal. Irmo is very excited to have his three principals and Ori at his beck and call in the ballroom. I think Rada will make an appearance, as well.”

“That’s great,” Bard nodded.

“I have a great favor to ask, lyubov moya. Irmo wants to launch us on this new path as soon as possible. Would it interfere with the last of your painting if we were in house tomorrow?”

“Not if you don’t mind working away from one long wall at a time. I think I’ll get the first coat on completely today, so it'll dry overnight. Then I can put the second coat on tomorrow. So if there are just four or five of you, would the scaffolding leave you enough room?”

“I am sure it will. If this would not put you out too much, it would help us a great deal. The sooner we can get Irmo focused, the sooner the rest of the effort calms down – and the sooner you can move on to your sketching. That must be your next effort.”

“What is it you always say? ‘I hear and obey?’ I can hear and obey, too.”

Low, rich laughter whispered over the mobile. “I will find an appropriate way to thank you for such... compliance, svyatoy moy.”

“Mmm,” Bards eyebrows quirked up despite there being no one in the ballroom to see his pleased expression. “I don’t know whether to hurry up and finish the painting all out, or to save enough energy to enjoy wasting it in bed with a certain angel.”

“I will just wait long enough that you enjoy everything completely. In all seriousness, do not exhaust yourself. We will work around whatever you need us to for a day or so.”

“Okay,” Bard agreed. “Let me get on with it, and I’ll see you when you get here.”
“Until later, then. Love you.”

“Love you, too, angel.”

Thran disconnected the call, and Bard tucked the mobile back in his pocket. He got back to his painting, considering as he proceeded down the strip of woodwork to the floor. Four midribs of woodwork per side, plus two end ribs, then the plaster work around three wall sconces per side, so that was eight midribs, six sconces, four end ribs, the trim around the faux-painted wooden fireplace mantel, and around the windows. The windows themselves would wait with all the other windows for warm weather when he could take them out to work on them. The faux-painted mantel wasn’t in bad shape, and if he wanted to touch that up later, he’d need only a ladder, not the scaffolding.

He exhaled. It was still a lot of work. Thank the gods the ceiling plasterwork was done!

He went back to work; sooner started was sooner ended. He’d already done three midribs, one end rib, and all three sconces on this side, and around the fireplace, so he had only this midrib and the second end to go before he finished this side. If he prevailed upon the children to help with supper and Thran with homework tonight, he should be able to finish the first coat before bedtime.

He helped the time to pass more quickly by thinking about the next room to renovate – the half bath. The secondhand rug in the sitting room had a beautifully faded red center around a stylized floral border. The border was interesting enough, all muted jewel tones of emerald, sapphire, topaz, amethyst, and even a bit of darker ruby. But the center had been the reason he’d bought it – it was the same dark, muted red that Rembrandt had used so beautifully in many of his paintings. The small half bath had no windows, so was suited to an over-the-top, nighttime pallet. At first, he’d thought about a lot of black marble, which would please Bain no end – his son had teased him for years about having one room in solid black, just because. But the red of the rug had him thinking about red walls, maybe over-stenciled in gold, something vaguely Russian... maybe a dark blue floor to match the sapphire in the rug, flecked with topaz and gold...

He enjoyed his musings as he steadily worked his way through the rest of the wall around the windowed end, and down the other side. By the time the children thundered in from the bus, he had just two midribs and an end rib to go. He climbed down to greet the children, bring out the cheese and crackers, and collect empty lunch bags. His mobile rang in the thick of things.

“Thran’s on his way home!” Bard heralded. “Where’s Legs?”

“In the bathroom,” Bain replied, stuffing cheese in his mouth. “Hey, Til, I like this Double Gloucester cheese you got.”

“I like it, too,” Sigrid agreed, taking a piece. “Get more of this next time, Til. You picked a winner.”

“Thank you,” Tilda beamed. “It’s a pretty color, too! A nice, crayon yellow.”

“Crayon yellow?” Bain repeated incredulously. “I’ve never heard cheese described that way before.”

“Did someone call me?” Legolas asked, rejoining the other children.

“Your Papa’s on his way home. He’ll be here in about twenty minutes.”

“Really?” Legolas smiled widely. “That’s great! Just great. What’re we having for supper?”

“Chicken Kiev, except baked. You know how your Papa is about fried food.”

“It’s not fried?” Legolas looked disappointed. “I like the crunchy part.”
“I think this’ll be crunchy, if not as much as if it were fried. But it’s still got the garlic butter on the inside.”

“Sounds good.” Sigrid considered the cheese plate before she opted for a slice of Swiss on a wheat cracker. “It’s about time Ada made it home for supper. He’s gotten so thin! I bet he’s never been so thin before. Has he, Legs?”

Legolas nodded solemnly. “He was that thin when Maman... left us. He didn’t think I noticed, but I did.”

“We’ll take good care of him, once he starts working in the ballroom, Legolas, don’t worry,” Tilda assured him. “Da will make him eat lunch every day, and we’ll make him eat supper every night. And snacks.”

“Ice cream at ten o’clock,” Bain chortled. “That’s my favorite snack.”

“How can you tell?” Bard asked, feigning surprise. “So far, we haven’t found much you won’t eat at any time, boyo.”

Bain refused to look embarrassed. “Hey, some kids are picky. I’m a gift because I’ve never been picky.”

“A gift, hmm?” Bard grinned. “If the lack of pickiness at the table makes you a gift, then you’re the biggest gift ever.”

The children laughed as Bain puffed out his chest and made muscle arms. “The winner!”

“So Ada will be back in the ballroom on Thursday?” Sigrid asked.

“Tomorrow,” Bard exhaled. “Apparently the campaign to corral the choreographer went a little too well, and he wants to start right away. I’ll have just the one coat of paint on the trim to do, so tomorrow they’ll work around me while I finish, then they’re on their own.”

“And then you can do your sketches, Da,” Tilda said. “You have to spend one whole day sketching this week, to make up for Sunday. And next Sunday doesn’t count.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Bard agreed. “I’ll get to watch Thran and the other dancers work, so I’ll have a lot of inspiration.”

“That’ll be neat,” Tilda helped herself to more cheese. “I’m learning to draw spheres and cubes in my drawing class, just like you showed me, Da...”

Bard and the children chatted around the cheese and crackers for long enough that they were still snacking when Thran came through the mudroom door. He was met with loud cheers and a hug from Legolas, which brought a wide grin to his face. Bard gave him a quick hug and kiss as he got up to turn the oven on and bring out the pan of prepared chicken breasts. The children made room for Thran around the table, and badgered him into sampling each of the three cheeses while they told him their news.

“The chicken’s going in the oven, so supper’s in an hour,” Bard said as the news died down. “Who are our sous chefs tonight?”

Legolas checked the list. “I am, and Tilda.”

“Do you think you two can do a couple of veg and a starch?” Bard asked.
Legolas and Tilda looked at each other. “Macaroni and cheese?” Tilda suggested.

“Broccoli and... um, carrots?” was Legolas’s contribution.

“You’ll have to cut up the carrots, and but I can peel them for you,” Tilda offered.

“How do you make the cheese part?” Legolas asked. “I know the noodle part, but...”

“I know the cheese part,” Tilda said with a confident nod of her head. “So we’re set, Da.”

“Sounds good. So if the chicken comes out in an hour and you want the noodles done at the same time, when do you put on the noodles?”

The two children looked at each other. “Read the box?” Legolas guessed. “We need to get the box, Kukla.”

They ducked into the pantry, and a discussion of what shape of noodle ensued, drawing both Bard and Thran’s grins. The children duly came out with two boxes of spiral pasta.

“Sixty minutes for the chicken minus twelve minutes for the pasta, so we put the pasta on in forty-eight minutes,” Legolas announced.

“When the timer says twelve,” Tilda nodded.

“Okay, you turn on the water to cook the pasta ten minutes ahead, so it’s boiling when you want to start the pasta,” Bard explained. “And add five more minutes so you have time to add the cheese at the end.”

“So we turn the water on when the timer reads twenty-seven,” Legolas surmised. “What about the carrots and broccoli?”

“Fifteen minutes ahead for the carrots, and seven for the broccoli.”

Tilda and Legolas looked at each other, and Legolas got a piece of paper and a pencil. He and Tilda conferred as he wrote down numbers, then when they agreed, he recited from their notes. “So in thirty-three minutes, when the timer says twenty-seven minutes left, turn on the noodle water. When the timer says seventeen, put the noodles in the water. Timer says fifteen, put the carrots on. Timer says seven, put the broccoli on. Timer says five, take the noodles off, and add the cheese to the noodles.”

“Timer says zero, we eat!” Tilda finished.

“You’ve got it,” Bard nodded, pleased at how fast they’d sorted it out. “So let’s get everything prepped.”

“I appoint myself corporal of cutlery, and will set the table, Captain Bard,” Thran offered. “Will we need butter on the table?”

Everyone set to. Bain and Sigrid cleaned away the cheese and crackers, Bard got out the heavy pans for the side dishes, Legolas and Tilda rummaged for vegetables and cheese, and Thran got out flatware, glasses, and napkins for the table. As Tilda began to peel carrots over the sink, Bard grinned at her explanation to Legolas of how to make the simple cheese sauce for the macaroni. Tilda cooked just as Bard did – a little of this, and a little of that, until it looked and smelled right. Her description was replete with words such as a bit of butter and a splash of milk and a dash of cayenne pepper, which weren’t the most enlightening for the blond-headed boy.
“That’s okay,” Tilda assured the dubious Legolas. “It’ll come out all right when the noodles are cooked. We mix it up right in the pot, and you’ll see. We need a biiiiig spoon…”

Bard had originally planned to duck out to do more painting while the children worked on supper, but it was so much fun to watch tall, blond Legolas and short, brunette Tilda work together that he stayed in the kitchen, doing the cleanup for the children as they finished with knives and cutting boards and bowls. He got out the colander and drained the heavy pot for them when it was time, then dumped the noodles back in the pot so Tilda could show Legolas how to do the cheese. Tilda added the ingredients while Legolas stirred, and when the oven timer beeped the noodles were properly cheesy.

“You’re right, Kukla,” Legolas agreed. “It was easier to do it than explain it.”

“And see? It’s crayon yellow, like the Double Gloucester cheese.”

Smiling, Legolas shrugged agreement. “You’re right, Kukla. It kind of is.”

Bard got the pan of chicken out of the oven, Thran had the stack of plates ready at the end of the island, and they called Bain and Sigrid in from the sitting room. Everyone was quick to dish a plate full and sit down to eat.

“That makes so much sense, using the oven timer,” Legolas observed as they took their places around the table. “It’s like a rocket launch – you just back everything up from zero!”

“The secret of good cooking,” Thran smiled.

“Or at least getting everything done at the same time,” Bard amended. “So is the chicken crunchy enough, Legs?”

“Not as much as fried, but yes, it’s still crunchy,” he nodded. “It’s good!”

After the meal, Sigrid and Bain took over the cleanup, and Bard excused himself back to the painting. Thran came in behind him to keep him company while he painted.

“This is a beautiful room, even with your so-called industrial lamps,” Thran said appreciatively as he looked around. “So bright now, and the paint is beautiful. It is the perfect cake, like the room I saw as a child.”

“I’m glad you like it. I’ve got just this rib, the next one, and the end rib to finish the first coat. Tomorrow, it’s around again to do the second coat, and that’s it. I’ll do the window in the summer with the rest, and the fireplace will hold for a while. The faux painting looks good for right now.”

“I did not realize it was painted,” Thran said, leaning forward to regard it closely. “Amazing! It looks like real marble. Such patina.”

“I think it being wood was the only thing that saved it from being stripped out of the house like the one in the main room,” Bard speculated. “If it’d been marble or limestone, Jerry likely would have sold it, but it was in rough shape, and maybe he thought the wood would be hard to remove intact. Not too many houses can handle a fireplace that large, either. Anyway, for whatever reason, it was still here when Daphne and I moved in. It was such a wreck that Daphne used it to learn faux marble painting. She figured that if she made a mess of it, it didn’t matter, but I think it turned out well. She claimed that the left side’s better than the right, because she got better as she worked on it, but I can’t tell the difference.”

Thran leaned closer to examine it. “Tcha, both sides are perfect. It goes well with Sigrid’s Provence
Crème paint. Why not leave it, as a memento of her?”

“I’d like that,” Bard agreed. “Speaking of her, and by extension Vileria, we need to get frames for the children’s pictures of their mothers.”

“An item for the Saturday chore list,” Thran hummed. “We will ask them to choose the pictures they like, and then we will know what size frames to get. And I have another thing to show you. Mrs. Mathom did send pictures of screens. One I like, but the other not so much. I will show you after the paint. Is there any part that I can help you with?”

“I’ve got it. Decide what kind of soup you’d like tomorrow for lunch. And tell me about that lamb stew you had at the restaurant. I got some lamb at the market, and I thought I’d look for a recipe on the Internet, once you told me what the one you like tastes like.”

They chatted back and forth until Bain came in with a worksheet that he didn’t understand, so Thran sorted that out for him. Bard climbed off the scaffolding, slid it over so he could do the bottom of the midrib, then positioned the scaffolding for the second midrib. While he worked on that, Tilda came in for Thran’s help with her French words. In another half hour, Bard moved the scaffolding for the last time, and worked his way down the end piece while the children came in to read the next bit of Harry Potter so he could listen as he painted. Sigrid headed upstairs to shower, and the other children went back into the sitting room to play Tilda’s Dinky Farm.

It was just past nine when Bard capped the paint, climbed down, and washed his brush in the mudroom sink. He came into the sitting room, glad to sit down and watch the end of the children’s video game beside Thran. When Tilda headed upstairs for her shower, the boys coaxed their fathers into a quick car race game, which provoked much hilarity as Thran and Bard sorted out their controllers and the maneuvers.

“It is a very good thing that I am a better driver on a real road than I am in this game,” Thran shook his head when he crashed for the third time. “That is the second time I have hit that same guard rail!”

“Next time, sideswipe Legolas,” Bard advised. “He pushed you into that guard rail.”

“No coaching!” Legolas protested. “Don’t listen to him, Papa!”

“Better I listen to him that to you,” Thran snorted. “You do not want me to sideswipe you so that you may do it first? I think not!”

“Uh-oh, Legs,” Bard teased. “You’ve made the tall Russian dude mad.”

“We’re at the end of the game,” Bain hedged.

“No, we go again, so I have a chance for my revenge!” Thran grinned evilly. “Come, Bard, let you and I play the partners as our sons so nicely have, and we will sideswipe them!”

“Game on,” Bard mirrored Thran’s evil grin. “Better watch out, Bain – Clan Ffyrnig’s out for blood this time!”

The game led to so much loud mayhem that Sigrid came downstairs with mobile in hand. “What are you all doing? I can hear you upstairs, you’re so loud!”

“We win the race!” Thran chortled. “See, Legolas, I sideswipe in your general direction!”

Thran’s enthusiasm sent Legolas’s virtual car careening over an embankment and down a hill to explode in a bright fireball, which brought yells from both Legolas and Thran – the former in protest,
“Papa, you wrecked me!”

“Yes, I did!” Thran held up his hands in victory. “Now, Bard, finish that blue pile of snake junk, and we will win the game!”

Sigrid watched in incredulity as Bard ran Bain’s blue Viper off the road and zoomed after Thran to drift over the finish line in a spray of gravel. As confetti rained down, Sigrid spoke into her mobile. “It’s my Da and Ada. They just mopped up the floor with my brothers playing this car race thing. They’re both hoodlums.” She laughed. “Finn says to tell you congratulations.”

“That is Finn?” Thran instantly sobered. “May I speak with him, please, Sigrid?”

“Sure. Finn, Ada wants to talk to you, so I’m putting him on. Here he is.”

Bard took Thran’s controller as the tall dancer got up to take Sigrid’s mobile. Hmmm... had he learned something from Ori this morning?

“Hello, Finn; I hope you are well this evening. Yes, thank you, I am well, too. I will not keep you from Sigrid long; I want only to tell you that she relayed your speculation about Lance Dunmont. I appreciate the information, but please, do not inquire further, you understand? Those are dangerous people, and I want you to remain safe from them. Let all mention of them pass, please. You will do this? Yes, I understand your concern, but we are well. Yes, please. Thank you. Until I next see you, stay well. Here is Sigrid back again.”

Sigrid took the mobile back, but quickly disconnected the call. By the time the boys had turned avid eyes on Thran, Sigrid was right there beside them.

“What happened to Lance?” she pressed.

Thran looked at Bard. “I did find out some things this morning. They are not suitable for Kukla. But I think I should speak of it to all of you.”

Bard swallowed. “Okay, if you think we need to know.”

“I do.” Thran turned a very serious expression on Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid. “You must all promise not to speak of this except to the two of us. This is not something to brag about to friends, or to frighten younger children. Do you make this promise?”

All three of them nodded at once.

“Wait,” Bard gulped. “This sounds serious. Why do the children need to know?”

“Because I want to put their minds at ease in one way, and offer a cautionary tale in another.”

Bard didn’t like the serious light in Thran’s eyes, but he trusted his husband’s judgment, so nodded. “Okay. Go ahead.”

Thran turned back to the children. “I do not know what happened to Lance, but he will not bother anyone again. Anyone. You understand me?”

The children nodded soberly, and unconsciously moved closer to one another.

“You understand who has done this?”
More nods.

“You understand why I do not tell Tilda this? She is afraid of Lance, but this would give her worse
to be afraid of. This is not where the story ends, either. The beast who visited such savagery upon a
child will not bother anyone again, either.”

Sigrid’s breath caught, but her face never changed expression. As the boys revealed more
apprehension, she asked, “What happened? Someone got him in prison?”

“‘A proxy for a rival,’ I was told,” Thran replied. “That is all I know, and all I care to know. I
speculate that this rival might be more grateful to us than not, because we brought about Angelo’s
downfall, and so he will not retaliate against us. So perhaps the danger to us has lessened, though I
cautions you all to remain careful. More importantly, if ever you needed a cautionary tale as to the
danger of involvement with a gang, let this be it. Once you begin such an association, it is nearly
impossible to end it. Please, all of you, stay away from such vermin.”

“Gods,” Bain breathed, looking at Sigrid with a sick expression on his face. “All Lance wanted to do
was look important, and...”

Sigrid’s jaw was clenched and her eyes were hard. “I’m not sorry about Angelo. I didn’t like Lance,
and I’m sorry he ended up... however he ended up. But I’m glad he won’t be around to scare Tilda
anymore.”

“That’s the only good thing about it,” Legolas murmured, swallowing.

“The only thing, indeed,” Bard agreed. “I think we need to end the evening on a better note. How
about one more car race? Sigrid? You want a hand?”

“I’m good,” she nodded soberly. “I told Finn I’d call him back. I won’t say anything about Angelo.”

“Okay, sweetness. As long as you’re good.”

“I’m fine. It takes more than hearing that a rat got what he deserved to rattle me.”

She went upstairs with her head high, drawing Bard’s smile. The boys she left behind, however,
weren’t so nonchalant, and welcomed the distraction of another car race. By the time the sideswiping
and barrier jumping and extreme disobedience of all traffic laws had ended, both Bain and Legolas
looked much happier, and headed upstairs in better spirits.

“Perhaps I should not have said anything,” Thran murmured, as Bard turned off the boys’ gaming
system.

“Sigrid’s tough,” Bard shrugged. “This was likely a shock for Legolas, though. Bain... borderline.
But they know now, and that’s that.”

“Are you angry with me?”

Bard shook his head. “I’m just sorry any of us have to deal with the fallout of what happened
Christmas Day. This wasn’t pretty, but let’s hope it’s the last of it. Though I’ll bet the lads ask to
sleep in the same room tonight, or that they end up in one room or the other if they don’t ask.”

“I am glad they will have each other as company through this,” Thran exhaled. “Let me make it up to
you with a sip of nalivka and pictures of wooden screens from Mrs. Mathom.”

“Sounds good,” Bard agreed, so Thran got up to fetch the small glasses while Bard stowed the game
Thran brought the glasses of cherry cordial, and they looked at Mrs. Mathom’s pictures. One of them was more rustic than the other, without the finer details that the other revealed. Bard preferred the same one that Thran did, so Thran emailed Mrs. Mathom back about their preferences. Then Bard told Thran about his ideas to redo the half bath. As Thran sipped his cordial, he was not sanguine about the dark red paint at first, but when Bard talked about the gold stenciling, he was intrigued.

“I leave it to you, lyubov moya,” Thran said comfortably. “It will match this rug, yes? I like these colors, so I am sure the small room will look like the little jewel box that you imagine.”

“I’ll trade you. I’ll decide about the half bath, and you decide for the main room. That’d make sense, especially if you teach classes in the ballroom one day. Your students might come through there, so pick something that looks suitably impressive.”

Thran snickered. “Perhaps lots and lots of pink tulle?”

Bard nearly choked on his cordial. “I said, suitably impressive, not ridiculous.”

“It is a beautiful room. It will be more so with a suitable mantel. I will give it some thought.”

“You can make it your salon, where you hold court with all the besotted little ballerinas.”

Thran’s snicker grew to a snort of laughter. “You want me to design a pristine white room, then, all very sleek and modern, adorned with perhaps a fluffy white poodle or some such ridiculous creature? The very idea.”

Bard grinned. “Better do it all in grey, with a fluffy grey poodle. With four children, it won’t stay white for long.”

“Very true. I will consider. It will be some time before we get to that room. I suspect it will be the last one, as we do not have much use for it yet. Let us wait until everything else is done, and see what appeals to us.”

“Maybe the sitting room should be last. We’ll have to move into the main room while I redo the walls and floors.”

“Perhaps so.” Thran yawned, then sipped the last of his nalivka. “I am ready for the shower, my saint.”

Bard finished his. “Me, too. Hot water will feel good tonight.”

“For both of us.”

They headed upstairs and settled the children in bed. Tilda was nearly asleep, and accepted her parents’ kisses with a mumbled goodnight. Sigrid was at ease, despite the earlier news about Angelo, and Bard didn’t worry about her as he bid her goodnight. The boys seemed okay as well, so Bard kept his goodnights brief. He was relieved, to be honest; between his angry stint with the chin-up bar yesterday morning and today’s all-day painting marathon, his shoulders were quite sore. All he wanted was to dive into the shower and turn the water on as hot as it would go until he stopped aching. He downed some ibuprofen before Thran came into the bathroom. His husband didn’t need to know how sore he was; if he could just get through the last coat of the ballroom woodwork tomorrow, he could ease off a bit while he worked on his sketches.

He got into the shower and scrubbed off the day’s labors, then lingered under the hot water, hoping his husband would join him. Thran must’ve gotten waylaid by one of the children, though, because
he didn’t make an appearance. Bard got out, dried off, and headed into the bedroom for leggings and tee shirt to go find his husband when said husband finally came in, drawing the doors shut behind him.

“Everything all right?” Bard asked, pausing with his leggings half on.

Thran nodded. “As you expected, the boys are a little nervous, so I said it was fine if they wanted to share a room for the night, but that they were not to play games or stay up. Tomorrow is still a school day. So they are in Legolas’s room.”

Bard winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you to sort them out. I thought Sigrid was okay, and the boys didn’t say anything, so…”

“Our fierce lioness is okay, as you say. The boys will be. As I was the one to make them nervous, I did not mind to sort them out. So all is well. Get into bed and be warm while I wash. I will be in quickly.”

Bard was quick to strip off his leggings and clamber into bed. “Don’t have to ask me twice. I’m knackered. I’ll probably fall asleep thirty seconds after you hit the water.”

Thran came to his side and offered him a kiss. “Then I will kiss you now to make sure I do before you fall asleep.”

Bard kissed him back. “Mmm. Better go wash before I get other ideas.”

“I go,” Thran grinned. “When I come back, the bed will be nicely warm, and I will enjoy that very much, whether you are asleep or not.”

“Glad to know I’m good for something,” Bard teased. “See you when you’re clean.”

“Only in body, lyubov moya. Never in mind.”

Bard snickered as Thran eased off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom with a backward look. It didn’t matter that the look was all lowered lashes and seductive smile; Bard was so tired that his eyes shut as soon as the bathroom door closed. But his weariness didn’t keep him from smiling as he sank towards sleep. When a long, elegant body slid under the covers to snuggle him close, he even managed to smile a little wider. He fell asleep cradled in an angel’s arms.

* * *

The next morning saw Clan Ffyrnig muster at the usual time for lunch assembly, breakfast mess, and early maneuvers out to the bus stop. Back at headquarters, Bard put together a pot of chicken soup for lunch while Thran changed into his dance attire. He came downstairs to find that Bard had seared the chicken and set it to simmer, and was just chopping the last stalk of celery to go with the carrots and onions he’d already prepared. He scooped the rounds into the bowl with the other vegetables, and set it in the refrigerator to be ready to add during the last hour of cooking. Bard looked up as Thran came in.

“Noodles or no?” he asked. “I made enough for the lot of you, if you’re inclined to share. So will the others be averse to the noodles?”
"You can safely put in the noodles," Thran replied. "Everyone has worked very hard, and a few good noodles in a good soup will be welcome. You are kind to make such a bounty."

"I thought it might sweeten the opening day," Bard shrugged. "I expect Luka’s a bit nervous. And I wanted to make Charisse welcome. I like her."

That was delivered in such an even voice that Thran snickered. "Luka has reason to be nervous. He is about to meet my formidable husband. And Charisse will appreciate both Luka being nervous, and your kind welcome. She asks after you often."

Bard’s grin was sheepish. "I’ll remember my manners today, I promise. Okay, the soup’s ready to simmer for a bit. Time to drag my ass up on the scaffold, brush in hand."

"I turned the heat up earlier, so the ballroom should be warm by now."

Bard waved a hand as he headed upstairs to don his painting clothes. "Thanks, Angel. Down in a tick."

Thran wandered into the ballroom slowly, wrapping his sweater around his torso as he surveyed the room. The sun was not well up, and the sky was overcast, but even in the dimness the ballroom was beautiful. He tied another sweater around his ribs to add more warmth, then took up the wide floor mop to remove the dust and detritus Bard had stirred as he painted. His husband came in shortly after clad in boots, jeans, tee, and flannel, all well used. He had a bandanna tied around his forehead to keep his hair out of his eyes, and his silver earrings added an exotic touch to the Welshman. Bard offered a smile before he looked around, nodding once.

"Almost done."

"It looks wonderful already. Where do you plan to start today, so I know where to put the barre?"

Bard switched on the overhead lights, then pointed to the end rib to the right of the fireplace. "That’s where I started yesterday, so it’s dried the longest. I’ll go from there around, and end up where the scaffold is now. I’ll move the garden furniture out of the way, if you want."

"We have plenty of space for four dancers already, and perhaps Rada and Ori will want to sit there. I will set the barre in the middle near the other end, so we will be out of your way until this afternoon."

"That’d be good. I’ll move the scaffolding over, then move the barre for you."

"Tcha," Thran waved a hand. "I can move the barre myself, lyubov moyo. Do you need help with the scaffolding?"

"I’m good. It’s on wheels, so it’s easy."

Bard pushed small levers to unlock the wheels, rolled it into place, and locked the wheels again. He slipped old toweling under each wheel to spare the floor before he set his can of paint and brushes on the platform. After a kiss for Thran, he climbed up and set to his painting. Thran finished mopping the floor, then moved his barre. But for the occasional sounds of Bard as he painted, the room was almost silent, like a cathedral in the morning. That sense of reverence made Thran smile as he began his yoga – reverence was supposed to be the state in which every dancer approached the warmup, or so one of his childhood instructors at Vaganova had insisted. Perhaps it was how Mlle. Zabotkina’s over-arched eyebrows regularly ascended nearly into her hairline that gave him reason to smile every time he thought of her, which was not the reverence she’d hoped to instill in him. But it relaxed him, and he began his warmup in good spirits.
He hadn’t gotten far before a knock sounded on the front door. When he came through the main room into the central hall and opened the door, there stood Charisse, bundled in her bright red coat, white scarf, and white cap. They exchanged hugs of greeting, then Charisse exclaimed over Hope the Lope, as Thran had expected. He’d wanted his colleagues to see his husband’s artwork right from the start, so that no one would think that Thran was the only talent in the family. Even the scuffed walls didn’t detract from the antelope’s satiny golden glow. He’d only just hung up Charisse’s coat when the door sounded again, and there was Luka, with Rada close behind.

“Wow, that’s a stunner!” Luka exclaimed, as Thran hung up his coat. “Where did you get that beauty? India?”

“It is beautiful, is it not? My husband is a metal sculptor – this is one of his works. We will have several other pieces in place eventually, once our house is further restored. There is another outside in the garden already, but the rest must wait until the weather warms before they move from his studio in the barn.”

Luka was suitably impressed, but the interesting one was Rada, who regarded the antelope with his usual thoughtful consideration. He reached out a single index finger to gently touch the metal, then withdrew it to rub his fingers together, as if to feel microscopic atoms of the metal. He looked back up at the piece again as Thran offered to hang up his coat. He demurred with an absent-minded smile, and trailed after the three dancers to go into the ballroom still in his voluminous coat. His eyes lingered on the scraps of Indonesian daybed stacked against the wall of the main room as they went by.

Bard had progressed from the top of the scaffolding to the floor to paint the bottom part of the end rib, and he got up to greet everyone as Thran came in with them. Luka swallowed uncomfortably as Bard gave Charisse a smiling welcome, doing a credible job of the triple air kiss that was so very French. But Bard gave no sign of unease as he offered Luka his hand and a genial good morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Oropherson – Mr. Bowman,” Luka stammered, taking Bard’s hand. “I – I’m glad to see you again under better, um, circumstances. I’m sorry about Monday.”

“Call me Bard. Thanks for offering Thran a hand on Monday. It was kindly meant, I’m sure.”

“Uh – th-thanks,” Luka’s eyes widened at Bard’s mild tone. Only Thran understood how hard Bard worked not to growl or chuckle at the young dancer’s disconcert. “Um, your antelope sculpture in the hall is amazing. Really.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“And this is Rada Brown, the costumier,” Thran completed the introductions. “Rada, this is Bard Bowman, metal artist and my husband.”

“It’s good to meet you, Rada,” Bard leaned forward to offer his hand. “Welcome to the ballroom.”

“It’s really quite beautiful,” Rada looked around with placid eyes. “So is the rest of your house. I hope perhaps you would let me see the rest at some point?”

“I’ll give you the tour at lunchtime,” Bard nodded, as another knock sounded at the front door. Rada offered to answer it, and padded off quietly. “For the moment, though, I’ll let you all get on with your ballet work while I get on with the paint.”

“This room is beautiful - exactly like a cake, just as Thran described,” Charisse said with a winsome smile. “Such a luscious color!”
“My daughter picked it out. Provence Crème. She thought it sounded delicious.”

“And it looks no less delicious, too,” Charisse held her hands out, taking in the room as she looked around. “And this beautiful floor! We will dance in a palace, won’t we, Luka?”

“It’s the fanciest studio space I’ve ever worked in,” Luka nodded as Rada came in with Irmo in tow. “Uh-oh. Here comes Monsieur Fermez.”

“Shh,” Charisse hushed the other dancer with a reproving glance. Bard smothered a smile; even when she frowned, the petite dancer could not dissipate her air of grace and charm. “That wasn’t funny the first time you said it, Luka, and it’s still not funny now.”

Charisse stepped away to greet Irmo with her pretty French hello, so Bard glanced at the shorter man. “Monsieur Fermi?”

Luka’s face crumbled into a mischievous grin. “Yeah, Monsieur Fermez. As in, Monsieur, fermez votre gueule, je vous prie. Mister, shut your trap, I beg of you. He talks a lot, you know?”

“I guess I’ll find out,” Bard said neutrally, giving Thran a surreptitious wink. His husband likely found Luka’s epithet funny, given how many times Thran had complained about Irmo’s nonstop talking, but it was sweet that he didn’t encourage Luka’s irreverence. Bard greeted Irmo briefly before taking himself back to his painting, and soon Irmo and the three dancers took themselves to the barre and began their morning ritual.
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Work in the Clan Ffyrnig ballroom commences for an angel, and continues for a saint. Such rigors leave neither one with energy for more than a little sexy talk, but maybe that'll lead to fun later on.

Rada introduces the children to a friend, too.

Chapter Notes

I don’t hold rights to any piece of the wide and wonderful Star Trek universe. It, however, holds a large piece of my affection ❤️. Live long and prosper, y'all.

Bard kept most of his attention on his painting, but Thran’s practice CD playing on the old portable player offered a calm background to his work. Irmo’s voice as he called out the positions and combinations was not unpleasant, possibly because the dancers were silent as they warmed up. Rada was also silent, but he wandered about the room, sometimes staring out of the windows, sometimes sketching. Bard itched to see what he drew, but he kept on task despite his curiosity; once he was through with the woodwork, he’d have many days to peek at the work of a fellow artist. For now, it was up and down the scaffolding and around the room.

He’d done the two end pieces at this end of the room as well as around the mantel when a knock came on the front door. Rada padded out again to let Ori into the house, and he met everyone with a bright smile and a wave. He came over to introduce himself to Bard. Was this small, slight, bookish young man brother to the worldly and mysterious Mr. Nori? Thran had said he was an expert data analyst, with a close to eidetic memory, but in his Fair Isle sweater vest, button-down collar shirt, and corduroy pants, he seemed the perfect candidate for children’s librarian at the local branch. How interesting it’d be to watch Ori in action when Irmo and the dancers moved past their warmups and began the day’s work on Immortal’s choreography.

He spent the rest of the morning quietly painting ribs of woodwork on one side of the ballroom. He made better time today than yesterday; the first coat of glossy white was much easier to coat than the prepped wood had been. Consequently, when the dancers moved from their barre and on to working on the ballet, Bard could have paid more attention to them, but he tried not to. If he could just dispense with this seemingly endless expanse of white woodwork, then he could look as much as he wanted, and sketch besides. So mostly he listened as he moved up and down the scaffolding.

Perhaps it was the lack of visuals that made Bard pay more attention to the voices of dancers and choreographer. Right away, he noticed the soft background of Ori’s voice, quietly repeating Irmo’s words. It took some moments to figure out that Ori didn’t repeat absolutely everything that Irmo said, which was what Thran had led him to believe. No, the soft voice didn’t repeat every name of a position, or every sequence of steps. Somehow, Ori had learned how to sift through what he saw and heard to repeat only the relevant portions as they worked on the reunion between the Maid and the
Soldier, after the first battle. When Bard allowed himself a glance, Charisse and Luka were sorting out a pas de deux with Irmo; Thran hovered in the background as Death, watching the mortals in their exuberance. He hardly moved, compared to the other two, but the weight and gravity of those moves clearly set him apart as more than mortal. There was also a sense of want each time Death drew near to the Maid. Bard had to tear his regard away from the scene.

Damn so many endless miles of woodwork!

“No, no, that is not what I want, Luka! Yes, you play a young soldier, but you have been in many battles, and you are well hardened to it, and no, you must not flaunt your wounds! Let the Maid see them and lavish her care upon you! She is not your mama about to bandage your knee! You understand this, yes?”

“I’m trying to show that I love her and don’t want to hurt her!” Luka protested.

“Then why is it that you simper like so much applesauce?” Irmo protested in return.

“I don’t even know what that means!” Luka threw up his hands.

“Non, Irmo, c’est pour moi, allow me, for I am the only woman here, n’est-ce pas?” Charisse held up her hands in placation as Irmo started to sputter. She turned to Luka and softened her voice. “Luka, the Maid is so happy that her Soldier has survived, oui? When he sweeps her into his arms in such wild relief, she does not mind. She is as exuberant as he, and he does not feel the sting of his wounds until the Maid hugs him as hard as he hugs her. Perhaps there is some way to put blood in the costume, so that I can mark my hand in it, hold it up, and then we discover the Soldier’s wounds, which allows us to call the attendants, and we leave the battlefield with them. Is that what your vision shows you, Irmo?”

“Yes, yes, exactly!” Irmo nodded excitedly. “That is wonderful! Yes!”

“And then perhaps Death reaches out for the blood, too, only to have the Maid and Soldier swept away,” Thran suggested.

“Yes! I like that, too! Rada, blood in the costume? Can you make it so?”

Rada held up his hand in assent, and he scribbled a note in the corner of his sketchpad.

“Excellent! Yes! You will dance this again, as Charisse so perfectly described.”

“You are okay with this, Luka?” Charisse asked. “It makes sense?”

Luka’s expression wasn’t so wrinkled. “Yes, I like it. I understand it. It will make the Soldier appear braver, and more relieved to see his love, and the Maid will meet his passion with hers.”

“Perfect,” Charisse gave Luka a big, pleased smile. “Oui, this is much better.”

Bard allowed himself to watch the next run-through of the sequence, and yes, it was better, for all three dancers. As they bent over the papers to note the steps they had chosen, Bard turned back to his painting.

Gods, let him rip through the rest of this damned woodwork in record time. His fingers ached to hold a pencil and a sketchpad, not a woodwork paintbrush!

It was nearly two when the dancers called a brief break. Bard had climbed down from his scaffolding over an hour ago to add the veg to the chicken soup, and again just a few minutes ago to add the
noodles. He threw together some biscuits, then let Ori know that food was ready anytime anyone wanted it. He drifted back into the kitchen to have his bowl of soup, and before long the others came in. Charisse had brought something, but she decided to have the warm soup instead. Luka had his usual schlocky burrito, but admitted that the soup smelled better and had a small bowlful. Thran, Rada, and Ori were elated to have something warm, and Irmo was prevailed upon to sit down and have a little. None of the dancers ate a lot; Thran had explained that dancing on a full stomach was neither easy nor desirable, and that most dancers made do with a few bites here and there throughout the day; they ate their biggest meal of the day at night. The biscuits were nice in that they were easy to eat and could be nibbled off and on. When Charisse confessed that she and many dancers loved cake as their nibble of choice, Bard filed that away, and decided an occasional batch of muffins might be welcome. Unlike many troupes, Thran’s decree of lunchtime meant that the dancers ate a bit more because they had time to let it settle as they discussed work they would do in the afternoon.

Bard left the four of them at the table to take Ori and Rada around the house on the tour he promised. He didn’t mind taking them upstairs to see the children’s rooms and the bathroom, as that was where most of his effort had been so far. Rada was interested in the bits of daybed in the main room and how it all fit together, but mostly he peered closely at everything with interest. The sitting room was where he finally had something to say, because Bard’s sketchbook lay open on the fruit crate coffee table, revealing the belly dancer he’d sketched recently.

“May I?” Rada asked, pointing to the sketchbook.

“Sure,” Bard shrugged. “I’ll do a lot more of that once I finish all the miles of white ballroom woodwork.”

“How interesting,” Rada mused, as Ori looked over his shoulder. “So many instants in time.”

“How long does it take you to do a sketch like this?” Ori asked, pointing to the one of Thran and Tilda sitting on the sofa for the little girl to recite her French vocabulary words.

“I took a bit longer for that one, because Thran and Tilda – that’s my youngest daughter – sat there for a bit. Maybe six or seven minutes. I worked my way through art school doing a lot of caricatures at carnivals and festivals and such, so I learned to work fast.”

“You put so much life in them,” Ori observed. “It doesn’t look staged at all, as if you sketched them without them knowing you were there.”

Bard grinned. “Thanks. Tilda was concentrating on her vocabulary words. She’s used to me sketching, so it doesn’t bother her. Thran’s used to being stared at, he told me, so both of them ignored the funny man with the pencil, and it made a good pose.”

“When you finish your woodwork, do you plan to sketch our dancers, or do you move on to more of your renovation?” Rada asked.

“I have a lot of sketching to do,” Bard ran a hand through his hair. “I’m working with an artist’s rep to help me get back to my art, and I owe him a lot of sketches. Just as soon as I can get the ballroom finished, I’ll trade the paintbrush for a pencil, and I’ll be in there.”

“That will be wonderful,” Rada said in his quiet, unexcited voice, but his eyes twinkled. “Most wonderful. I will be most delighted to watch you work.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you work, too. I’m always interested to see how another artist approaches the same subject. But for the rest of today, I’m the house painter. I’ll head back in there so I can move the scaffolding before the dancers start again.”
Ori and Rada rejoined the dancers around the kitchen table, so Bard headed back to the ballroom with a marshaling breath.

Only half of the trim left to go.

* * *

Oh, such a difference in their work today! Bless Ori for understanding such a fundamental point about working with Irmo – narrowing his focus eliminated so much of the scattering of his thoughts. Here in the ballroom with only Charisse, Luka, and Thran to deal with, Irmo stuck to plotting their choreography. Most of the morning was spent on the first pas de deux between the Soldier and the Maid, danced to Juliet's theme from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. While Thran watched that work closely to make the most of Death’s lurking presence, he had time to cast surreptitious looks Bard’s way. His husband did nothing to draw attention to himself, so it only was Thran’s affection that drew him repeatedly to see where Bard was and what he did. He stood atop the scaffolding, carefully painting the trim, then sat cross-legged, until the top portion was done. He climbed down with assured, spare grace, quiet despite his heavy boots, to perch on the lower rung of the scaffolding to continue down the strip of trim, and finally rolled the scaffolding out of the way to reach the bottom portion. The funny part was the very bottom, which was apparently easier to paint while upside down; Bard bent forward with hips against the wall as if he held a variation of the basic Uttanasana yoga pose, gave a half twist to his torso, and painted from the very bottom edge up to meet the part he’d already painted. He moved on to the next rib and repeated the same steps.

Thran couldn’t wait to get that painter’s body into the shower tonight and then into bed. That was the only suitable retaliation for Bard teasing him all morning with his grace, however unstudied and unconscious.

His husband went back to work in the ballroom before Thran, Irmo, and the rest. He was perched atop his scaffold, patiently tending to the trim on the second side of the ballroom. Now that the dance was roughed out for the Maid and Soldier’s reunion after the battlefield, Irmo moved on to consider the end of the second battle, where the Soldier fell. This music would be a reprise of the Prokofiev piece where Death collected souls from the battlefield, because this time He would collect the Soldier’s soul. Thran had much more to dance in this portion, so he couldn’t indulge in as many glances at his husband. By the time the children clattered home from school, he was surprised to see that Bard had completed all but one midrib and one end rib of the trim. Bard climbed down to greet the children, skirting around the dancers to disappear into the kitchen to get out their snacks for them. In a few minutes, the children appeared at the door in their sock feet, eager to see what the dancers were doing. When Irmo paused, Thran beckoned the children in for introductions. Legolas came right to him to give him a quick hug, and offered a smiling greeting to the others in the room as Thran made introductions. Charisse was her usual charming self, and even Luka managed not to put his foot in his mouth too badly. Rada was instantly drawn to the children, drinking up their laughter and answering it with silent chuckles of his own – no, not just silent laughter. What – what was he pulling out of his coat pocket? That didn’t look like a packet of ginger cookies!

“Oh! It’s a hedgehog!” Tilda gasped. “A real hedgehog! Look, Legs! Look, Bain! Sigrid, Mr. Brown has a hedgehog!”

“Gods, he does!” Sigrid exclaimed, drawing closer. “Oooh, look how cute he is!”

“He is cute!” Tilda said. “May I hold him? Or is he a she?”
“Oh, my dear, this is Sebastian, and he’ll sit quite nicely on your hand, but you have to hold him carefully. He’ll flex his quills at you if you frighten him.”

“Oh, I won’t frighten you, Sebastian,” Tilda breathed, as everyone but Irmo gathered around Tilda to look at the little animal. “There, you’re not afraid of me, are you?”

“Oh, tellement mignon! Si adorable!” Charisse cooed at the little animal sitting up in Tilda’s hand. “What a cute little thing you are!”

“Here, my dear,” Rada dug in another pocket and produced a bag of what looked like cat food. He sprinkled a couple of niblets in Charisse’ hand. “He’s quite polite. Just hold it for him by your fingertips, and he’ll take it quite nicely.”

Bemused, Luka scratched his ear. “Why do you have a hedgehog in your pocket?”

Rada looked apologetically at Irmo, who’d finally come over with a glare to see what had caused the interruption. “They hibernate, you know. But it’s not really safe for pets to hibernate in most situations. They need to stay warm. They’re most active at night, so it’s really no problem to carry him with me during the day to make sure he stays warm.” Sebastian took the bit of food from Charisse’s fingers with both tiny hands and nibbled away industriously, charming the dancer as well as Tilda. “I’m sorry. I thought the children would like to see him.”

“I do,” Bain nodded. “He’s neat! I’d like to hold him, too, please?”

Bard put his hand on Bain’s shoulder. “Why don’t you and the children take Mr. Brown into the sitting room, and you can all look at Sebastian while the dancers finish their work?”

“Great! Thanks, Da!” the children chorused. As they led Rada away, Bard snagged Sigrid long enough to tell her that he had about another hour’s work, and then he’d be in to start supper. She nodded, and then hastened after the other children. Bard winked at Thran.

“As long as you eat eventually, the rest is your call,” Bard nodded. He pointed to the wall. “So back on the scaffolding for me. I’m ready to be done with this part.”

Thran grimaced. “Until later, lyubov moya.”

Bard gave him a smile then climbed back up to resume his painting.

Thran and his two fellow dancers made good progress over the next hour, working with Irmo to do a suitable pas de trois for the Soldier’s death, the Maid’s frantic despair, and Death’s collection of the Soldier’s soul and escort to the gates of the Underworld. He was vaguely aware of Bard clambering wearily down from the scaffolding for the last time, finishing the lowest stretch of the last end rib, and easing out of the ballroom. After he left, there was no distraction from the ebb and flow of
movement, rhythm, music, the steps of the other dancers swirling around him. The muse snapped into even clearer focus, and as the music played once more, the Soldier fell amid the rest of the fallen, Death descended to collect His harvest, and the Maid cast herself on the body of her love in utter futility. He could all but taste the emotions that poured from all three of them as Irmo’s muse guided and refined and nurtured. Yes, yes, yes – this was what the dance had to be!

He bore the faltering Soldier towards the gates of the Underworld. With one gesture he swept them open; with another, he shepherded the gathered souls before him, making sure he left none behind. That bright spark of life that ran after him so heedlessly? He ignored it – the living had no place in his kingdom. When the dead were all before him, he turned away from the world above, and gestured a third time to draw the gates closed behind him. The souls wavered around him, lost beacons atop a long descent, so he strode forward to lead them home. As for the spark behind him, banging at the gates, he was unconcerned. Her turn would come soon enough, as it did for all mortals. Only then would he turn towards her, collect her soul tenderly, and lead it home...

“I’ve got it, I’ve got it!” Charisse breathed, on her knees as she scribbled notations on the paper. “C’est parfait, vraiment. La perfection.”

Thran turned with a blink. For a moment, just a moment...

“Gods, Thran,” Luka gulped. “Oh, my fucking gods. You were Him, Thran. You were Death. You nailed it.”

Irmo gulped. Were his eyes damp? “Yes. Yes. Yes. You are sure you have it properly noted, Charisse? You cannot miss a piece of it, not a piece of it!”

“I think so. Check me, all of you. Thran, mon ange, you felt that, yes?”

Exhaustion crashed in on Thran; hosting the lord of the Underworld, even for just those few minutes, had sapped him. “I did. I very much did. That is what you wanted, Irmo? Because if it is not, then you do not have the right vision.”

“No, no, that was exactly it. It was. And yes, dear Charisse, you have it properly noted. Thank you. Thank you. Thank all three of you. This is so much better, so much. I am quite overwhelmed.”

“I think we can do no better tonight,” Thran said tiredly. “We have done something wonderful, without doubt. It is a good note to end on.”

Not even Irmo protested. In fact, he put both hands to his mouth as if he didn’t know whether to cry, scream, or laugh, so instead of doing any of them, he merely bid everyone a brief, subdued, humble goodbye, and let himself out.

Ori looked after the maestro with incredulous eyes. “That’s the first time I’ve seen Irmo so overwhelmed.”

Thran mustered a smile. “Then we will take that as a sign that we have progressed. We are done at a human hour, and happily so. We will see you again at eleven tomorrow.”

“Righto,” Ori smiled happily. “This was the best day yet!”

The three dancers laughed at Ori’s enthusiasm as they bid him farewell for the evening. Charisse and Luka stayed only long enough to properly cool down with Thran, then they, too, bid Thran goodnight. Thran turned off the ballroom lights and padded into the kitchen to find the children around the table working on their homework. Bard was beside Tilda, helping her with her geography. Everyone looked up as he came in.
“Everything okay?” Bard asked.

“More than okay,” Thran nodded. “I am very tired, but an amazing thing happened – the muse arrived, and three dancers became who we had only imitated just a moment before. It was such a feeling... I cannot describe it.”

Silence greeted his admission, and when he regarded his family, they gazed back with a gamut of emotions as he sank into a chair, glad to take his ease at last. Bain and Tilda revealed mostly incomprehension, but Sigrid and Bard seemed awed; Legolas had seen the dance take Thran before, and his face conveyed understanding. He smiled. “It was a very wonderful moment. It will make a very wonderful ballet even more so.”

“I’m glad it’s coming together,” Bard offered. “Do you want to savor the moment a bit longer, or can I bring you something to eat?”

“I would love something to eat. What did you have for supper?”

Bard looked guilty. “Just spaghetti. I wanted to get the last of the woodwork done, so I didn’t start anything earlier. I’ll have something more substantial tomorrow.”

“It was fine, Da,” Sigrid exhaled. She’d said that at least once before, apparently. “Legs and Bain ate buckets of the stuff. We had a good salad, and fruit, so no one’s suffering. And you made it through the woodwork once and for all. It’s all good.”

“Yeah, Da,” Bain muttered.

“We had cheese, too,” Tilda supplied, drawing Legolas’s laughter.

“Lots of cheese. It was really good,” his son nodded.

Thran held up both hands. “Then all is well. Did our horde leave any pasta uneaten?”

“No, but I can make you some, anyway. Or there’s soup from lunch left.”

“The soup, I think. That would be wonderful.”

“I’ll help you, Da,” Sigrid offered, but Bard shook her head.

“Thanks, sweetness, but I’d rather you keep on with your paper so you can have the free time this weekend for your meet.”

“I’ll help,” Legolas got up with Bard. “I can do the biscuits and milk.”

“What is this?” Thran looked up as Tilda and Bain got up, too, leaving only Sigrid at the table. “A track meet, then?”

“It’s regionals, all day Saturday,” Sigrid explained. “I didn’t think I was going, but I am for the four hundred. That’s pretty cool. But I’ll be there probably all morning and afternoon, so Finn, Killian, and Tara changed the early film we were going to see for a later one after supper at Tara’s house so I could go, too, which was nice of them. So I’m trying to get most of my paper written before Saturday so I don’t have to worry about it.”

“Such a busy day you will have on Saturday, then,” Thran smiled as Legolas put a glass of milk and a plate of warmed biscuits beside his place at the table. Tilda followed behind with a bowl of salad, and Bain with another bowl of peach slices. As the children all resumed their places at the table,
Bard followed with a big bowl of steaming soup and a handful of utensils. “Look at this! A huge feast appears as if by magic! Thank you, each one.”

“How does your paper progress?” Thran asked, eagerly spooning up his soup.

“I like it so far,” Sigrid replied, studying her computer screen. “I’m up to the part about the sepsis setting in, and I have notes on what Garfield’s doctor did after that made it worse, so I think I’ll make a convincing case of it. I’m trying to get it all done by Friday so I can forget about it Saturday, then review Sunday to make any little cleanups. And I’ve got a trig test Friday, which doesn’t make it easy.”

“Don’t remind me,” Bain grumbled. “Legs and I have a pre-algebra test Friday, too. I hate pre-algebra!”

“I have an art test Thursday,” Tilda ventured. “But I like art.”

“How does one take a test for art?” Thran asked.

“We draw a bunch of things,” Tilda explained. “I can’t exactly study for it.”

“Okay, let’s be a little quieter so everyone can study,” Bard asked gently. “And let Thran eat. He’s had a long day.”

Silence descended as the children turned back to their work. Thran was grateful for the silence, so that he could concentrate on his meal. The hot soup brought welcome warmth into his core, easing his tight muscles. The salad and fruit and milk were also welcome, and he nibbled a biscuit gratefully. Bard brought him another bowl of soup without asking, and he ate every bit of it. He sat back to enjoy a warm, full stomach.

“Tea?”

He nodded, too comfortable to speak.

“Go wash, then. Get warm and comfortable, and I’ll have tea ready when you’re done.”

“That bears no argument, my saint,” Thran exhaled deeply. “I will be down in short order.”

He took himself upstairs, undressed, and tried not to moan in ecstasy when hot water cascaded down on him in the shower. Such complete, total, utter bliss...

His fingers were as wrinkled as raisins when he could finally bear to turn off the water. He dried his hair and dressed in soft leggings, Henley, and thick socks to rejoin the family. Sigrid had taken herself to her room to work on her paper, Tilda and Bard were in the sitting room drawing, and Bain and Legolas were side by side on the other sofa playing the car race game. Thran sat down beside Tilda to look at her sketchbook. She had painstakingly copied a simple vase that Bard had drawn for her, carefully shadowing it and matching the curves on both sides. He was content to listen to her and Bard talk back and forth about her efforts as he sipped the tea Bard had put on the coffee table for him.

“What do you think, Ada?” Tilda said at length, when she’d decided her drawing was done.

“I think it is very nice – I can tell that the light comes from the right, and it is even one side to the other, and it is not something you see through like glass. I think it looks like a blue vase.”
“We can’t use colors yet,” Tilda sighed. “But when we can, I’ll make you a blue one.”

“I would like that very much, Kukla.”

“It’s getting late, little doll. Sigrid’s through her shower, so you head up before the lads decide to.”

“Okay, Da. Can we read tonight?”

“It’s a bit late, so let’s put it off until tomorrow. The next chapter’s a long one.”

“Okay,” Tilda replied, clearly disappointed. “I hope we can tomorrow, then.”

“Me, too. Upstairs with you.”

Tilda closed her sketchbook and stowed her drawing pencils in their box before she went upstairs. The boys wound up their car race and headed upstairs, probably to sneak in a bit of zombie apocalypse before they had their turn in the shower. Thran was happy to slide over into Tilda’s vacant seat and slump comfortably beside his husband. When Bard’s arm went atop the sofa cushions behind his head, Thran leaned his head on Bard’s shoulder and wrapped his hand around Bard’s thigh. He rubbed slowly, appreciating the warmth beside him.

“A good day,” Bard murmured.

Thran hummed assent, letting his eyes close. A soft chuckle reached his ears.

“You’re too big to be a lap cat. A very large Borzoi, maybe.”

Thran grinned, though he kept his eyes shut. “Shall I roll over and let you rub my... belly?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure exactly what to think about that.”

“I promise not to woof while you do it. Though I might moan.”

Fingers insinuated themselves into Thran’s hair. “How about I stick to the G-rated bits until the children are safely in bed?”

Thran heaved a sigh. “I suppose that would be wise.”

Bard chuckled, and stroked Thran’s hair until he was all but asleep. Or perhaps he did fall asleep, because when Bard shook him gently, he found himself flat on his back on the sofa with his head in Bard’s lap. He blinked, and looked up to find Bard smiling fondly at him.

“Did I fall asleep?”

“You did.”

“For how long?”

“Maybe twenty minutes. One of the lads is still in the shower, so you didn’t miss much, other than the blowjob I gave you. You seemed to like it.”

Thran shut his eyes. “You did no such thing. I would never sleep through such a sacrament.”

“You smiled a lot, I grant you.”

“Tcha, silly man, do not tease me. But I am sorry to make a pillow out of you.”
“Don’t be. It gave me a wonderful excuse not to move for the twenty minutes you were asleep.”

Opening his eyes again, Thran looked up into Bard’s tired but smiling brown eyes. “Oh, lyubov moya, you are just as exhausted as I am after you painted all day without stop. Every muscle must ache.”

Bard’s fingers soothed a path through Thran’s hair. “The ballroom’s done. You had a good day today with Irmo and the others, and tomorrow will be better. I’ll get the scaffolding out of there, and you’ll have your sanctuary without a painter in it.”

Thran found Bard’s hand and brought it to his lips to kiss. “There will always be an artist in my sanctuary, whether he is there in body or not. Each time I look at such a beautiful room, it will remind me of how hard you worked to make it so.”

Bard snickered. “Make it so... did you hear Irmo say that to Rada this morning, something about the costumes? The bloody captain of the Starship Enterprise, telling everyone to make it so.”

Thran’s snicker joined Bard’s. “He is much more imperious than any of the captains of that legendary ship, no? I do not mean to be imperious when I say that you have made something so.”

“You’re not. It’s very sweet the way you say it. Come on; the shower just finished, so the lads are done. Let’s put you to bed before you fall asleep again, and put the children to bed, and put me in the shower. I am rank.”

“Honestly so,” Thran sighed. “I do not mind. You smell good even when you say you are rank. I cannot wait to ambush you in the barn this summer when you are truly are rank.”

That got a guffaw out of Bard. “You’ve got a rank kink?”

A low, deep rumble was Thran’s reply. “You know this already. It snared a certain sexual vampire quite completely.”

“I thought it was the smoke.”

“That was entrancing, yes.”

“Any other kinks you want to tell me about? Ladies’ underwear? Bondage? Whips and dungeons?”

Thran laughed. “No, occasionally, and no.”

“Occasionally? What occasionally?”

“I do like leashes. You know this already, too.”

“I do. What about more bondage than that? I admit I don’t understand the attraction.”

“Oh, I can explain that to you. The bonds are to keep you safe.”

“Safe? How do you mean?”

“Some people, who would otherwise be inhibited, find that the bonds free them to enjoy themselves. The bonds mean they do not have to refuse the enjoyment that follows. They are safe to enjoy whatever comes.”

Bard silently stroked Thran’s hair for some seconds as he digested that. “I never thought about it that way. I thought it was just coercion.”
“Some may use it thus, I suppose. But that verges into nonconsensual, a matter of power rather than arousal. I am not interested in that at all. But the freedom to enjoy oneself, that I can understand.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“I have never had a partner whom I trusted so much. It is perhaps similar to how you did not want to bottom with anyone before me.”

“Makes sense.”

“Why? Do you want to try it?”

“I haven’t decided. Do you?”

“I will try anything twice, but only if you want to, too.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll have to get my seer a leash.”

Grinning, Thran hummed as he sat up to stretch. “You can borrow mine. But not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Bard echoed. “We’re both well knackered.”

“We are happy and in accord, and that is a blessing.”

Arms went around him, and Bard rubbed his cheek against Thran’s back. “It is.”

The hands clasped around Thran’s waist were both well bruised and scratched. Thran winced to think how they must have pained his husband through so much painting, though he’d never spoken of it. Bard must do no more renovation until he healed, until he had filled at least two sketchbooks full of wonders for Bilbo. Thran would insist on this. But now was not the time to think about more work, not as tired as they both were. He tightened hands on Bard’s wrists.

“Come. Upstairs with the two of us.”

“No argument from me,” Bard murmured, pressing a kiss on Thran’s neck. “Rounds first, then up we go.”

They circled the house as they usually did, then headed upstairs. The children were put to bed, all but Sigrid who still labored on her paper. She promised to put it aside shortly, so Thran and Bard kissed her goodnight and then retreated to their bedroom. Bard headed right into the shower, leaving Thran to turn down the bed and crawl in. He left his Henley on until the sheets had warmed a bit, then stripped it off to snuggle into the warmth with a sigh of relief. Before long, Bard came out of the bathroom to crawl into bed beside him.

“Lyubov moya?” he said drowsily, as Bard stroked his braid.

“Hmm?” Bard answered, just as drowsily.

“These kinks you asked me of?”

Bard chuckled and stroked Thran’s arm that crossed his chest. “What about them?”

“Tell me what kinks are yours.”

“You already know what mine are.”
“Tell me anyway.”

“I’ve never done fantasy with anyone but you. I like that a lot.”

Thran smiled. “I like that, too. To be someone else, to make a story, to fuck you in so many different ways... all are so, so nice.”

Bard snorted in laughter. “For an ethereal creature of the light, you swear like a minion of the devil.”

“I like to because it shocks you. It turns you on.”

“Only when you talk about fucking me. When you swore at Angelo in the park, it turned my blood to ice.”

Thran refused to let the drug gang sour another moment of Clan Ffyrnig’s life. “I am Russian. That is how we meet any threat. Tell me another kink.”

“His name’s Thran Oropherson. He’s every kink I could ever want – angel, devil, vampire, dancer, sous chef, Mandarin, sultan, royal seer, pirate’s spoils, husband, every lover I could imagine, all rolled into one hellaciously beautiful body. How lucky am I?”

Thran looked up at his husband, who tilted his head to meet Thran’s eyes. He was smiling.

“You quite take my breath away.”

“See what it’s like, angel?” Bard stroked Thran’s jaw. “That’s what happens to me, every time you smile.”

Bard slid down to press a kiss on Thran’s lips, a kiss Thran humbly returned before they settled in their usual tangle of arms and legs to sleep. Gods, just two days after a terrible, terrible fight, Bard had put aside his hurt and disappointment to affirm how closely he still held Thran in his soft warrior’s heart. He curled around Thran to keep him warm, nestled his nose in Thran’s hair, and stroked Thran’s ribs slowly before he drifted into sleep.

Bard wasn’t the lucky one, not at all. Thran was.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

A saint finds himself snared by Immortal's siren song, and an angel incurs a cherub's wrath. And will a special guest soon appear?

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to johnnysmitten for allowing Hal Galadhrim to appear, if only in a brief mention, in this chapter. He'll pay us a visit in a chapter or two, so be prepared. Hal is entirely johnnysmitten's character from the story, "Heartsigh," and the most fun ever!

At last, a day without renovation! Bard zipped through the children’s lunches and breakfasts with anticipation, because today he’d be back in the ballroom not as a workman painter, but as an artist. Maybe he’d get to watch Rada work, too. He knew little about costume design, but imagined it began the same way as so much of his sculpture did – with a picture, whether a rough pencil sketch or a more polished color piece. He couldn’t wait to find out. And if he could manage to be in the ballroom when Irmo’s muse struck – how amazing would that be?

He laughed at the children’s usual chorus of how they were off and leaving, too, then wished them the expected response to do their best, just as always. Beside him, Thran waved a smiling farewell, then trotted to keep up with him as he headed home.

“Your spirit is light and quick today, my saint,” Thran observed, lengthening his stride to keep up as they headed home.

“I’m excited to sketch today,” Bard admitted. “No more woodwork!”

“Your plan is to sketch all day, then?”

Bard’s nod was emphatic. “Even if I didn’t need the sketches to show Bilbo, I would. I’d finally gotten to a place where I could, then we needed the ballroom, so I put it aside. I missed it.”

“I am sorry to take you from your art for so long,” Thran stroked Bard’s hair as they paused for Bard to unlock the mudroom door. “And I am glad you plan to resume your sketches today. That means that I do not have to insist. Your hands must have hurt a great deal through so much painting. I would like it if you do no more renovation until they have healed.”

Bard looked back at Thran, gratified at the worried wrinkles that creased his husband’s brow. “I appreciate that, angel. It’d be great if I can spend a few days away from a paintbrush, I grant you. The more sketches I can do for Bilbo, the better, too.”

“When do you plan to see him again?”

Bard led the way into the kitchen. “He said three weeks, so I thought I’d use as much of the next
week as I could to work on my stuff, then see him maybe a week from Monday or so.”

Thran nodded. “Then I have an unpleasant but necessary piece of business that we both must see to.”

“What, did one of the toilets back up?” Bard teased. “No, that can’t be it. I’m the only one who knows how to fix that.”

“Funny saint,” Thran sniffed. “The house is fine. I speak of the dreaded chore to file income taxes.”

Bard winced. “Oh. That. The thing I put off as long as possible every year. Not that it takes me very long. I just don’t like being reminded that I live below the poverty line.”

Thran shot him a look. “Do you make a joke?” he ventured.

Bard smirked as he got eggs out of the fridge. “No. Until you came along, the children and I did live below the poverty line. Welcome to the new America. We have a few folks richer than Croesus, a dying middle class, and a whole lot of working poor.”

Thran looked stricken.

Bard shrugged. It was hard to know what to say. No, it wasn’t fine, and no, he hadn’t stopped worrying about it, and no, he didn’t take Thran’s money for granted. There was no point upsetting Thran about any of that, so instead he got out the frying pan. “Omelet, or scrambled eggs, or hard boiled?”

Swallowing, Thran took a deep breath and looked away. “Scrambled is fine. Whatever you prefer.”

“Don’t worry, angel. You knew I was poor when you met me. I got by. I was more worried for the children than myself. So as much as I love you, I also thank you for sparing my children hardships they didn’t deserve.”

“I forget these things because we are not poor here. You did not seem poor in the city, not given how well you managed for your children. I just...”

Bard nodded as he cracked eggs into a bowl and stirred them with a fork. “That’s why I don’t like figuring my taxes. I usually get most of what’d been taken out of my wages back, because I had the children, which helped. Still, it’s demoralizing, seeing in black and white how little I have for them. So what makes you bring up such a cheerful subject?”

“My – our financial planner emailed me my tax workbook yesterday. I have already received all the documents that I expected, so I prefer to schedule an appointment to dispense with this as soon as possible. We did not marry until January, but I thought I would offer you the chance to have Hal file yours as well as mine. He is very astute, and I would like you to get to know him before we file next year. How long will it take you to collect your documents?”

Grinning, Bard ducked into the pantry and came out with a shoebox. “Documents collected.”

Thran’s jaw dropped, drawing Bard’s laughter. “It’s not like I have a lot of stuff to collect, angel. A few W-2 statements are the bulk of it. Here, hold that while I scramble the eggs. Have a look if you want. Toast?”

“Yes, please,” Thran’s answer was automatic as he took the shoebox. “You?”

“Please. Two slices of rye.”
Thran opened the box long enough to see the few slips of paper that barely covered the bottom. He sat the box down on the island, and got the bread and toaster out. He loaded it with three slices of bread, started them toasting, and found the honey and butter for the table. He collected plates and put them beside Bard busily scrambling eggs, and checked that the teapot still held enough tea for the two of them. In short order, they sat down at the table to eat. Thran ate, but he was so distracted that Bard leaned over to touch his arm.

“Hey. Your eggs are getting cold.”

Thran met his eyes, then looked back at his plate, shaking his head. “I am sorry, Bard. That I pay your breakfast so little attention, and that your life before us was so hard.”

“We’re both better off now. My children are better cared for, and you and Legolas have a home and a family. We’re okay.”

Thran sighed, but sketched a nod. “You are right. It does no good to brood over what is no more. Though it is a very Russian thing to do.”

Bard chuckled. “So tell me about your financial planner. Hal. When do we go to see him?”

Thran smiled. “Oh, we do not go to him; he comes to us. That is one advantage to have wealth. We have found that it works better for him to visit me, for he generally has one question or another, and all of my records are here, so better to answer it when he poses it than to wait. He will sort through our things for last year, but I also want him to prepare us for next year. For example, some of the renovation work you did may qualify for a deduction – things such as insulation and energy efficient appliances, perhaps. Hal will know.”

“He sounds like a savvy guy.”

Thran’s face finally cleared as a perverse grin swept over his face. “He is exceptionally so. But he is also a person it takes time to appreciate.”

Bard swallowed his eggs. “Oh? Why is that?”

Thran considered, smiling through two bites of toast. “There is no delicate way to say it. Hal Galadhrim is what they call a flaming queen.”

“He’s a – gods, there’s a story behind this.”

Thran continued to munch his toast. “He was highly recommended to me about two years after I emigrated. I was a name, and I had done well with my investments early on, mostly because while Legolas recovered from the trauma at the train station, I did not dance. I had much time to... consider how else to occupy myself when my son did not need me.”

“You played the market,” Bard surmised.

“I did,” Thran shrugged. He sipped his tea. “I needed the distraction, and so I did very well. Hal specializes in the finances of the untraditionally wealthy – dancers and artists, among others. I am one such, so it seemed a good match. He was not what I expected at all. Much more flamboyant by far.”

“Flamboyant... how?”

Thran’s chuckle was rich. “Women love him. He is the perfect girlfriend, and has an opinion on everything. Quite the gossip socially, though notoriously closemouthed about his clients, which is
exactly what one wants in a good financial planner. He will be on his good behavior to meet you the first time. But once he knows you, he is prone to the most outrageous observations.”

Bard put his elbow on the table and cradled his chin in his hand to regard his husband. “He sounds like a character. I’m curious – you could have any financial planner you want. Why Hal?”

“I trust him,” Thran said without concern. “He is unapologetic of what he is, comfortable in his own skin. He is also very funny. He suffers no fools, and he is unsparing in his financial advice to the benefit of his clients. His expertise in the world markets has earned me several thousands of dollars, and saved me several thousands more. He is honest, and refuses to finagle the ledgers for anyone. I am assured that I pay my proper taxes and am unlikely to be audited.”

“There won’t be much to interest him in my paltry box of nonsense.”

“Perhaps not this year. But next year, I do not think that will be true.”

Bard scraped up the last of his eggs. “I hope not. I appreciate you looking out for my interests, cariad. Gods know I need all the help I can get. Arrange away.”

“Perhaps early next week? You do not need to sit in on my part, though you are welcome to, and I encourage you to, not just to hear of my concerns, but also to see how Hal works. I expect mine to need perhaps an hour, perhaps half an hour more. Your portion may be another hour or less, depending on what Hal has to say.”

“Right now, only sketching’s on my plate for next week, and maybe seeing Bilbo towards the end. And I’ll look for some marble or such for the half bath floor. That’s it.”

“I will send Hal a message this morning, then. But for now, I must get to the barre.”

“I’ll leave you to it. I’ll be in here for a while, figuring out what to make for lunch and supper. Maybe I’ll do some muffins, too. Charisse says she likes cake.”

“She is very sweet, is she not?” Thran smiled. “I hope you get to see another side of her at some point, though. She is a very experienced, very tough in the most delicate of ways. She slaps Luka on a regular basis, so gently that he does not realize how she keeps him in line. She might actually make him a decent dancer over the next several months.”

“He’s not good?” Bard looked at Thran in surprise. “He seems very good to me, but I admit ignorance.”

“Technically, he is very good. But he needs to pay more attention to his work ethic, and I hope that we can soon get him not to try to make the joke about everything he observes. He is not very funny. Only young and awkward.”

“We’ve all been through that phase.”

“Most of us get through that phase. So far, Luka remains dismally mired in it.”

Laughing, Bard got up and collected the dishes. “Good luck with that, then.”

“Thank you. Here, I will help with the dishes.”

They washed and wiped in comfortable silence, then headed upstairs to brush teeth, make the bed, and change into the day’s attire. Thran disappeared into the ballroom, and Bard puttered in the kitchen until knocks on the front door signaled the arrival of the dancers. He greeted Charisse, Luka,
and Irmo in rapid succession, and sent them all back to the ballroom. He went back to the kitchen to finish his stew prep – lamb and vegetables – and got out chicken to marinate for supper. Then he hastened to collect his sketchbook and pencils. He sat in the sitting room to jot down a list of what he wanted to sketch today, and did a few warmup sketches before heading to the ballroom.

Damn – the scaffolding was still in place. It was too late to take it down now, given that the dancers were already at the barre. Maybe it’d offer him a different perspective, so he climbed up to arrange himself for sketching, liking the unusual view of the proceedings. He sketched quickly, not thinking but observing, letting his hand flit over the paper to reveal what had caught his eyes. Irmo was as nuanced in his physical movements as the dancers, if not as emotionally; from the precise way he moved, he must’ve danced at one time. Slowly, the differences between the four sorted themselves out – petite, delicate, feminine Charisse; robust, exuberant, puppyish Luka; elegant and otherworldly Thran, and technically precise Irmo. He got several good sketches done before it grew close to eleven. He climbed down from the scaffolding to check on his soup, and to hear the knock on the door when Ori and Rada arrived.

He’d just thrown the veg into the pot along with a good slurp of red wine when the first knock came. That was Ori, who came into the kitchen long enough to sniff appreciatively before he headed to the ballroom. His batch of cranberry orange muffins went into the oven before Rada appeared; the costumier headed right for the ballroom as soon as he bid Bard a cordial good morning. Bard lingered in the kitchen until the muffins were done, and brought a plateful into the ballroom when he went back to his sketching. Both Ori and Rada were quick to help themselves, and Bard had one himself as he decided to station himself near Rada for his next sketches, in the hopes to see how the costumier worked.

Today, the dancers ran through the choreography they had for *Immortal’s* first act. This lacked the battle scenes that the whole company would dance, but they had blocked the rest out. They ran through it slowly, without the full emotional portion, only the technical to see how the steps flowed together. This was a fascinating process that Bard took full advantage of, making several sketches of Irmo gesturing and talking. Now that the choreographer was more narrowly focused, his genius stood out as the dancers moved, seeming by instinct to know when just a small adjustment in a hand or the addition of an extra step or turn evoked much more emotional content. Bard’s training as a caricaturist stood him in good stead as he sketched rapidly, sometimes getting two or three sketches of the same exchange between Irmo and the dancers.

Charisse was a delight to sketch, and Bard had no problem finding ways to express her sunny outlook, whether she danced the Maid or was just herself during a discussion. He did one he particularly liked when Luka’s Soldier swept the Maid into his arms, for her face was aglow as he bore her aloft and across the floor. Contrasted with that was Thran’s expression as Death, struck dumb at how a living mortal drew Him so completely. The lost expression on Death’s face was both chilling and heartbreaking, for the god did not understand His predicament in the least, or what fate awaited Him.

“You are a joy to watch,” Rada murmured softly at his elbow, startling Bard. “Oh, I’m sorry. You were very caught up in your work. I’m sorry to interrupt. But I’ve been watching how quickly you work, and yet you capture the essence of each sketch so completely in just seconds. It’s wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Bard ran a hand through his hair. “It’s true I get caught up in it. It took a long time before that happened – I used to think too much about what I drew, and everything came out too stiffly to suit me. Now... I try not to think so much. Everything turns out better that way.”

“You’ve found what works for you so well. I wonder...” Rada tapped his pencil against his front teeth meditatively, then brought out Sebastian to absentlly feed the little creature a corner of his
muffin. “I wonder if perhaps we might trade ideas to help my costume sketches along? The essences you’re so adept at capturing... they would add so much to the costumes, and I’d like to work with you more closely. I’d give you full credit with me on them, to be sure.”

Bard blinked. “I’d love to work with you, however you’d like. I don’t know anything about designing costumes, but I’d like to learn, and if I can help, I’m glad to.”

Rada offered the widest smile Bard had seen so far. “Oh, that would be fantastic. Would you like to see what I’ve come up with so far?”

“I would,” Bard said with enthusiasm. “There’s plenty of room to spread out on the kitchen table or the sitting room, if you need it.”

“We likely will. We can leave the dancers alone with Ori to manage for a while without us, then this afternoon when they move on to the second act, you and I will be more prepared to think about how to translate that work into the appropriate costumes.”

“That sounds exciting,” Bard nodded. “We can tell Ori what we’re up to, and then take over the sitting room.”

They made their exit, and soon were ensconced in the sitting room with fresh tea. Rada laid his sketchbook on the coffee table, but didn’t open it yet. He savored his tea deeply, inhaling the fragrant steam, and letting the cup warm his fingers. Bard let him proceed in his own time, glad to enjoy his tea as well. Eventually, Rada looked up from his concentration.

“I suppose it doesn’t look like I’m doing very much,” he offered with a whimsical smile. “I’m told that I look like I’m somewhere else a lot of the time. But it’s just my version of trying not to think too much at first. I want to hear what Irmo says, and how he and the dancers go back and forth, and especially the brief snippets of meta-level discussion about symbolism and intent and purpose. That gives me so much insight into what my costumes must reveal to the watcher.”

“That makes sense,” Bard nodded. “You don’t want to make costumes for Roman soldiers if the choreographer wants hip hop street warriors.”

“Exactly!” Rada’s eyes grew wide, and he leaned forward in excitement, but his voice stayed as soft as ever. “Exactly right.”

“Have you picked up anything so far from Irmo and the dancers yet?”

“Quite a bit, actually,” Rada tapped his finger against his chin as he looked off into space. “It’s really quite fascinating. For example, have you noticed that the music is very modern for the sections that the Soldier and Maid and other mortals dance? The music for the Underworld is much older, much richer, much more across several old cultures. That’s what made me realize that this ballet is a story told from Death’s point of view, not from any of the mortals.”

“Really?” Bard sat back to consider that.

Rada nodded with confidence. “It is. Death is very, very old. Think about the Underground, His kingdom. It’s full of enclaves from hundreds, likely thousands of cultures. Think of how many tongues are spoken there! How many songs are sung there? How many forms of dress would we find? How many rituals must be conducted there every day? How rich a place it is! How can the world above compare to that? It’s a temporary, transient, superficial place compared to Death’s kingdom. Much more stripped down. Mostly black and white and grey, compared to all the colors in the Underworld.”
“That makes perfect sense,” Bard agreed.

“So I must make that more obvious in my costumes, you see. But that’s not all – the mortals are all alive, and so their costumes must reflect the spark of their lives. Those in the Underworld are not alive, but their souls retain something, so their spark must be far dimmer. Death must be the brightest thing in the Underworld, for He is a god. Yet even his spark can’t outshine the spark of the Maid. So I want to make that distinction, too.”

“That’s a lot to do with just fabric,” Bard said.

Rada nodded quickly. “I think so, too. So I thought to make some of this obvious by making the costumes of the Maid and Soldier and other mortals very simple, almost like a cartoon – rather one-dimensional. They will have light elements that show the brightness of mortal life – I think a single element over the heart. The costumes of the denizens of the Underworld will be much richer, and their hearts will glow with a much dimmer light.”

“Maybe you can also mix up the Underworld costumes a bit, too,” Bard offered. “Over the ages, maybe the souls lose focus, or become richer, whichever makes sense to you. Either way, they’re together through the ages with all this mixup of cultures. Maybe the fez of the Arab is now on the head of the Nordic skier, and the Cretan dress is on the Spanish Moor, and so on.”

“I like that very much,” Rada nodded, taking up his sketchbook to flip to the page that held his notes, and scribbled a new entry on the page. “We will see which interpretation Irmo likes better – do the souls grow richer and nuanced, or lose focus and become more diffuse yet uniform? That also makes it much easier to make the rich environment that Irmo wants for the Underworld set. Lots of shadowy artifacts from so many places... yes, that will be very useful.”

“This fits with what I’ve heard Thran say about the troll market set being the only set, and the rest being very stark. Compared to the Underworld, the world above must seem very empty and stark to Death.”

“The troll market?” Rada asked curiously.

“Oh, it’s what Thran and I have been calling the Underworld set. Have you seen the Hellboy film about the Golden Army?”

“Ah, of course,” Rada nodded. “Yes, I have seen those scenes, if not the entire film. It was professional curiosity, you see. That is a most wonderful set, and the costumes are entirely engaging. Yes, that is a good concept to keep in mind. That same level of complexity would be a good model for the Underworld.”

Rada leaned forward to show Bard the concepts he’d worked up so far. As he paged through his sketchbook, many whimsical designs appeared one after the other. Rada’s style seemed almost from another age – he’d be the perfect illustrator for Alice in Wonderland with his trailing curlicues and tendrils. Several of the costumes bore faint watercolor washes of filmy blues, greens, ambers, and roses. The Maid in her simple shift and peasant vest was well captured, evoking all of Charisse’s charm, vitality, and devotion to her Soldier. The Soldier’s costume, breeches and tunic with an armored breastplate, helmet, shield, and sword, was almost as far along. Here and there were concepts for mortal civilians and Underworld denizens. The one costume that was conspicuously missing was for Death Himself. When Bard asked Rada about that, the costumier sighed heavily.

“That is the hard one, yes. I don’t think the trappings of a king are right. Nor do I want to do anything that resembles a Grim Reaper in yards of black gauze and carrying a scythe. He needs to be much more formidable than either.”
“I’ve had this thought...” Bard ventured.

Rada smiled. “I thought you might.”

“The way Thran dances his Death Collecting the Souls of the Dead solo... it’s a ritual, isn’t it? It’s a sacred rite, no matter how gruesome we mortals find it, and calls for ceremonial robes. I saw a kabuki troupe once. The dancers were from another world, metaphors for things I didn’t understand, but I understood that they performed much more than a representational dance. So what if Death on the battlefield looks very kabuki-like, or like a samurai warrior? Not Japanese, but very stylized, a metaphor for things no mortal understands. He could shed those for something more elaborate or different in the Underworld. And when He tries to woo the Maid, He could be down to just tights and tunic and some kind of headdress that makes Him very tall compared to the Maid, to show him at his most vulnerable.”

“I like all of that,” Rada nodded. “That is well thought out about Death. I would like to tell Irmo your thoughts about this at lunch, and see what he thinks. That will filter into the dance, and then when we sketch, we’ll have more to work with.”

Bard grinned. “That’d be great. Just great.”

“Then if you in your sketches find those moments of essence, I will add them to my sketches, and around we’ll go again.”

“We’ve got a plan,” Bard agreed. “I’m going to enjoy this, I have to confess.”

“So am I,” Rada leaned forward conspiratorially. “I do enjoy having another in league with my musings.”

“It’s a good feeling when you’ve got someone else to help you get into trouble,” Bard snickered. “Let me check the stew, and maybe we can coax a few people out of the ballroom.”

“Oh, the smell alone would draw me. It smells quite delightful. Lamb, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t long before Ori appeared, then Charisse and Thran after him. Irmo and a subdued Luka appeared last, but the young man’s demeanor perked up as Rada distracted Irmo with the ideas about Death and the costumes that Rada and Bard had come up with. Lunch was very animated as the group batted the ideas back and forth. Ori displayed pictures of kabuki artists and videos of their dances on his tablet for everyone to look at. Thran sat at the table trying out the stylized head movements that they saw on Ori’s tablet, and Charisse and Luka offered their critiques. Bard found it all so exciting that he well understood how Thran had gotten so caught up in the ballet to the exclusion of all else. Maybe Bard drew and the dancers danced, but he felt so much more alive in the company of others as busily creating as he was regardless of the different media.

The rest of the day swept by, filled with sketching as well as collaboration with Irmo, the dancers, and Rada. It was hard to believe how fast the hours had passed, even when the children came home from school. Bard was sorry to leave the dancers to their work, but he wanted to make sure the children were welcomed home with more than an empty kitchen. Rada trailed along behind him, delighted when he was greeted with smiles and questions about Sebastian. The little animal quickly made an appearance, and he was well on the way to being spoiled rotten with attention.

Bard was in the middle of supper prep when Luka, Charisse, and Ori came into the kitchen to bid everyone goodbye for the day. That was a surprise – it was only five o’clock, early for Irmo to call a halt. Charisse paused when Bard commented to that effect.
“It is not so early for Thran, I fear,” she shrugged. “Rada is still there, too. Please, in an hour, go in there and tell them to stop. It is not good for Irmo to work Thran so hard for too long, and at this moment he works Thran very hard.”

Bard’s jaw tightened and he paused in arranging the marinated chicken into the baking pan. At the kitchen table, Tilda looked up from her drawing pad with an uncertain expression. “I’ll stop that right now. I won’t let Thran get so overwhelmed again.”

Luka gave Charisse an uncomfortable look. “I, um, understand now why you were so angry on Monday, Bard. I’m sorry I made you worry – it wasn’t like you think, and I’m straight, so – um, so I mean –”

“Oh Luka,” Charisse sighed, “you do not know what you mean. As I say so often, very little is about you, and very much is about the world around you. So do not further concern Bard over something that was never a concern to begin with.”

Luka grimaced. “I’m sorry – again.”

“As you should be, but you make progress, in that at least this time you know you have reason to be sorry. So, Bard, let me try to explain. Irmo and Thran thrash out something important, something radical. Luka and I add nothing to that effort, and so we depart, and Ori wisely takes himself out of the effort, too. This effort is necessary, because it defines the character of Death, but it is very intense. So do not let it go for more than an hour, or I think anything productive will vanish. They are both so intense, and such intensity should not burn too long.”

Bard swallowed his alarm. He swallowed again when Tilda edged close to him and slipped an arm around his waist. He looked down at her with a reassuring smile, enough that she relaxed and smiled back at him. “Okay, I’ll let it go until six, then I’ll break up the party.”

“That is good,” Charisse gave him a fond smile. “Take good care of our Thran, mon cher. La petite Tilda, you take good care of ton père, oui?”

Tilda nodded. “Toujours, mademoiselle.”

Charisse’s eyes widened, and her mouth flew open. “C’est génial! La petite parle le français!”

Tilda grinned. “Juste un petit peu.”

“You do very well! Thran, he teaches you?”

“I have lessons in school, but Thran and Legolas help me a lot. My brother and sister are learning, too.”

“I’m the only ignorant one,” Bard shrugged, ruffling Tilda’s hair. “But so far, they’re not talking about me behind my back, so I’m good.”

“That is wonderful,” Charisse declared. “Eh bien, time for Luka and Ori and me to make our escape, before anyone thinks of a reason for us to stay. Jusqu’a demain.”

“Til and I’ll run interference for you,” Bard teased, following the three to the front door to see them out. “And thanks for the heads up, Charisse.”

“Ça me fait plaisir,” she waved.

“See you tomorrow, Bard,” Ori wished.
“Give my regards to your brother,” Bard grinned, drawing a wry shake of the head from Ori. “See you tomorrow, Luka. Hang in there.”

“I’m trying,” Luka slowed, letting the others go ahead of him. “I really am sorry about everything, Bard. I’m such a dork. I hope you’re not still mad at me, because I’m learning a lot about everything with this company, and I really don’t want to piss anyone off. This is my first big company position, and I’m trying to do a good job, even though it looks like I just put my foot in everything.”

“This is a tough crowd, and a tough job. You’re the new man in, so it’s your job to listen all you can, and soak everything up. Let Irmo and Thran and Charisse take the lead. They’re all good teachers.”

Luka nodded. “That’s what I think Charisse tries to tell me. I’m surprised she hasn’t smacked me yet.”

Bard laughed. “Charisse is a lady, Luka. A rare breed these days. She won’t smack you. But you’ll impress her if you do what my mother used to tell me over and over and over – just act like a gentleman.”

“What did she mean?” Luka asked, his brow wrinkling.

“My mother was a smart woman. She used to tell me that it was better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.”

Luka smothered a laugh. His gleeful snicker reminded Bard of no one more than thirteen-year-old Kíllian, the young fencer and archer. Luka probably pulled the same pranks as that rascal did not even ten years ago. Unsurprisingly, Bard felt more kindly towards this young dancer when he thought of Kíllian.

“Yeah, I’ll try to remember that. Charisse says I need a filter between my brain and my mouth.”

“She’s right,” Bard agreed, but he smiled to lessen the sting of his words. “We all need some of that, to be honest. So I’m good. Don’t worry about me.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Luka headed to his car, and Bard headed back to the kitchen.

“Is Ada okay, Da?” Tilda asked, back at the table with her drawing pad.

“He’s fine, little doll. Sometimes he needs our help so he doesn’t get too worn out, that’s all.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and looked down at her picture. “Does this look like an elephant to you?”

“Hmmm. Maybe a cricket?” he teased.

“Da! It’s an elephant!”

“It is. A pretty good one, too. I can tell it’s an African one because it’s got big ears.”

“Really?” Tilda looked up with bright interest in her eyes. “They have big ears?”

Bard nodded. “Indian ones have smaller ears. You can look them up on the Internet to see the difference. Maybe one of your brothers or sister can show you on their computers. Or I’ll borrow Thran’s computer after supper to show you.”
“I’ll go ask Legs. He’ll show me if he’s not busy.”

She scampered off to look for Legolas.

Tilda really needed her own computer, rather than relying on the good humor of her siblings. She’d need one for sure next term when she started middle school, and it would likely help with some assignments now in fifth grade. That was something that he wanted to talk to Thran about; computers weren’t cheap, and not something to just take out of the household budget without discussion. But for the moment, Bard had supper to prepare, and a husband to rescue from an intense choreographer before the hour was out.

To his surprise and gratification, Thran appeared to escort Rada and Irmo out before Bard had to rescue him. The mood was interesting – Irmo was distracted, intent on his own thoughts, but he waved farewell at least, and seemed positive. Rada was warmer, but equally thoughtful as he wished Bard and the children goodnight. The only sign of concern was that he patted Thran’s arm in seeming consolation before taking himself outside.

“How long before supper?” Thran asked when he returned to the kitchen.

“However long you need,” Bard replied.

That got a smile from Thran. “I would greatly appreciate a shower beforehand.”

“So... twenty minutes?”

Thran nodded. “That is perfect.”

“Consider it done.”

Thran pressed a kiss on Bard’s temple. “Zoloto moyo.”

Thran took himself upstairs without a backward look. Sigrid stood at the sink scrubbing sweet potatoes and gave Bard a look.

“He’s subdued.”

Bard nodded. “Very.”

“Wonder what Irmo’s done this time.”

“Maybe we’ll find out at supper.”

“I think Irmo’s loony,” Bain commented, sitting on the stool as he chopped celery for the stir-fry.

Bard laughed, thinking of another person who could benefit from his mother’s advice about remaining silent. “He’s visionary, Bain.”

“Yeah, that’s just a polite word for loony.”

“Whether the man is or not, let’s give him the benefit of the doubt and say he’s visionary,” Bard said with a look at Bain.

“Yes, Da,” Bain conceded, keeping his eyes on the celery.

Thran reappeared as supper was going on the kitchen island. He looked cleaner, more alert, and less subdued, but he still had an air of consideration about him that nagged at Bard. Bard intended to
probe for the cause soon as they had a private moment, but he didn’t have to. As soon as they sat
down to eat, Legolas asked how the day’s dancing had gone. Thran put down his fork, sipped his
milk, and considered what to say. That brought Bard’s fork to a stop in midair as he waited for Thran
to speak.

“Today we worked on the pas de deux for Death and the Maid. He is in love with her, and tries to
woo her. Irmo wants Death to be at His most vulnerable for this dance. So he has asked me to dance
it on pointe.”

“He what?” Sigrid and Legolas gasped in unison.

“That’s impossible!” Sigrid exclaimed. “You’ll break your feet!”


“What’s on pointe? Tilda asked, equally confused.

“It’s when the ballerinas dance on their toes,” Sigrid explained. “Female dancers. Not guys. Guys
don’t dance on their toes. It’s too hard for them, because they weigh too much.”

“So... Thran’s supposed to dance on his toes like a ballerina?” Tilda asked.

“I told you Irmo was loony,” Bain shook his head and stuffed more sweet potatoes in his mouth.

“You’re not going to do it, are you, Papa?” Legolas asked. The corners of his lips had turned down.
The thoughtful look on Thran’s face was answer enough.

“You’re seriously considering this?” Bard blurted. “Wait – didn’t you tell me that you’d never dance
on pointe because you’re too tall, too heavy to support your weight on your toes? What the hell,
Thran!”

Thran held up his hands as the cacophony of protests rose. “Stop, please. This is not the instant death
you make it out to be. It is for seven minutes only, and there will be no jumping, no flying in the air,
only a few seconds on a single foot. I will certainly need custom pointe shoes to properly support me.
I have not yet decided if this is something I will do. But it is possible.”

“Guys don’t dance on pointe!” Sigrid argued with characteristic vehemence. “They don’t!”

“They do,” Thran gave Sigrid a half smile. “What is it that Bain always says? Go look on
YouTube?”

Sigrid cranked up her protests again. Bard was more inclined than not to let her run, but Thran didn’t
deserve the full force of Clan Ffyrnig’s fiercest warrior. “Sigrid, you’ve made your point, sweetness.
Dial it back, please.”

“Yes, Da,” she muttered, but the angry expression on her face was vivid proof that she didn’t like
this latest development for Immortal. “But you don’t like it, either.”

Bard exhaled, as all of the children looked at him. “My first reaction is not to like it, yes. But Thran is
the dancer, not any of us. He knows what his body can do and what it can’t do. It sounds like he
hasn’t completely made up his mind. So let’s give him the benefit of the doubt and agree that he’ll
make the right decision.”

“You said that earlier, Da,” Bain noted.
“Said what?”

“That benefit of the doubt thing. That Irmo’s not loony like I think, but visionary like you think.”

“You two just had this big fight about whether Thran knows what he’s doing,” Sigrid argued, “because you didn’t think he did because he’s gotten so thin, and —”

“Stop,” Bard barked, sharper than he meant to. “Everyone, just stop —”

“I can’t!” Sigrid barked back, with a glare at Bard that was both furious and scared. “I just can’t, Da! And you can’t, either. We can’t let Thran do something so dangerous! What if he hurts himself so badly that he can’t dance anymore? Where are we all then? What happens if —”

“Hold on, Sigrid – calm down!” Bard protested. “Stop yelling. Take a deep breath. Come on.”

Sigrid stuttered to a stop. She grabbed her napkin and pressed it to her mouth, then shut her eyes, but neither action kept tears from leaking from her eyes. She stumbled to her feet and fled.

“Whoa,” Bain whispered into the silence, cutting his eyes at Legolas. The blonde boy met Bain’s eyes, but his only reply was a gulp.

“Da?” Tilda wavered, biting her lip. “Sigrid was crying.”

“I know she was, little doll. She’s upset now, but she’ll be all right in a few minutes. I’ll talk to her. You stay here and eat your supper with your brothers and Ada.”

“I will go,” Thran said, standing up. “She is angry with me, not the rest of you. So I will see to her. Do not worry.”

“She’s going to yell at you,” Bain warned.

Thran’s lips curved into a faint smile. “She is very fierce, your sister, so perhaps she will. I promise not to yell back.”

As Thran headed after Sigrid, Bard wished his husband luck. This might not be the first time Thran would endure Welsh fury, but Clan Ffyrnig’s elder lioness was a far dirtier fighter than Bard was. Once Sigrid started to vent her righteous indignation, Thran might be very sorry he’d promised not to yell.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

An angel's week continues to be fraught with upset. A saint, however, gets a glimpse of heaven.

Clan Ffyrnig’s reaction to Thran dancing on pointe was not unexpected. In fact, it was all too similar to the reaction he had had when Irmo first suggested it. How on earth Irmo thought a dancer of his size and weight – even as underweight as he was – could put such pressure on his long, narrow feet bore no contemplation. It’d come out of an innocent remark from Rada, but that was often the way of Irmo’s inspirations, to come out of something seemingly innocuous, seemingly unimportant.

“Bard and I were talking about Death appearing in layers, yes,” Rada had replied to something Irmo had asked. “The outermost is the mystical collector of souls on the battlefield, a skin He sheds to reveal the Lord of the Underworld. And then He sheds that one to try to woo the Maid, in only a simple doublet and tights. Bard thought perhaps some sort of crown would exaggerate the height difference between Death and the Maid, but I don’t think it should be much, because He’s at his most vulnerable, revealing His love for the Maid –”

“Yes, yes, yes, His most vulnerable!” Irmo had gestured vigorously, one hand low to represent Charisse’s height, and another high to represent Thran’s. “But still, so different from human. He is a god, much more than mortal, and no crown is suitable – Thran’s white hair will be crown enough, loose like the hair of an angel, for that is what Death is in many manifestations – no, no crown, but height, yes! Height –”

Irmo had skewed around to stab Thran with his sharp, imperious gaze. “Beside her, beside Charisse, yes, yes! Now, up, up, up on the toes, yes!”

Thran had done as Irmo asked, standing beside the diminutive Charisse, standing his tallest, then on his toes...

“On pointe!” Irmo had barked. “Of course! Death must be on pointe! This makes Him very tall, and very precarious, just as He must be, balanced on the edge of a razor, not only to love a mortal, but to confess it! Thran, you can do this?”

Charisse had put a hand to her mouth. Luka had put both of his over his mouth, and walked away, trying not to burst out with anything. Rada’s hands had fluttered for a moment, and his expression had turned worried, but he hadn’t spoken. So it had been left to Thran to say anything.

“No.”

“But it must be! Death will float, He will defy physics to loom so high –”

“I cannot defy physics, Irmo,” Thran had said flatly. “Even so thin, I weigh too much and I am too tall to support myself on my toes. I will not ruin my body for this more than I already have.”

“This is possible for other men!” Irmo had declaimed, his eyes bugging out and his hands thrown wide. “How is it not possible for you, the best in the world?”
“How is it not possible for you to see that the physical stresses are much more for someone six-five than someone five-eight?”

“All right, all right, all right!” Irmo flapped his arms. “There will be no jumping, no leaping, no flamboyant spins and twists. Does that reassure you? Surely you can manage mere steps, then? Charisse, is it so hard to take a few steps on pointe that Thran cannot manage that?”

“I cannot tell you what is possible for a body so different from mine, Irmo,” the little dancer had said calmly, with dignity. “I am half his weight; seventeen inches shorter. There is no one so tall who dances on pointe, so it is Thran who must decide if this is possible, not I.”

Snorting in exasperation, Irmo had stalked back and forth. Luka had edged beside Ori, for once not trying to make a joke or draw attention to himself. After several seconds, Irmo had whirled and stalked up to Thran, spouting irate French that did not bear repeating. Thran had summoned his Prince of Ice stare.

“Enough. This is not productive. Charisse, Luka, Ori, Rada, we are finished for the day. There is no reason for any of you to be subjected to this. I will work this out with Irmo, and we will resume tomorrow at the usual times.”

All but Rada had hastened out of the ballroom. The costumier had remained by the door, so Thran had ignored him to narrow his glare on Irmo again.

“That was not acceptable. My ballet and my company do not tolerate bullies, even when the one who tries such shit is a gifted choreographer. You cannot bully me in any case, no matter how you may construe it as constructive criticism within your purview. You understand me? Try it again, and you are out.”

“Then I will take my ideas elsewhere!”

“Take them. But you do not take one bit of Immortal. I own the story, I commissioned it, and I fund the company that will dance it. Try to put it on elsewhere, and you will pay me for the privilege. You agreed to the conditions I set to work with UltraViolet Ballet. So you do not and will not bully, or you are free to go elsewhere.”

Irmo had lapsed into silence – angry silence, but silence. Thran had taken himself to the barre and begun his cool-down stretches, letting the movements still his anger as well as his body. He had shut his eyes on Irmo, forcing himself to make the moves precisely and completely.

“You are right.”

“I am,” Thran had said with brutal coldness.

“I said so, yes.” That had been said with exasperated terseness. "What do you want from me?"

“An apology. You will not harass like that again, no matter that choreographers are known for such things. Immortal is hard enough without that. I will not tolerate it.”

“You suffered worse in your Russian academy than you have from me.”

“Which is why I will not suffer it again.”


Thran had kept bending and stretching.
Another sigh, softer. “I am sorry. I cannot always help myself.”

“Try harder. Is that not what you tell me? The others? Try harder.”

A sort of chuckle. “That is true. Then yes, I am sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

“Then may we talk about this? It is the perfect vision, Death on high, about to fall so low?”

“I agree; it is a vision, but one that may not be possible. I have no technique, no training. Nor do I exaggerate the strain on my body. I will not risk my career for another six inches of height.”

“It is a single scene. No jumping. No turns... well, perhaps one or two. But in a seven-minute scene, perhaps only three minutes on pointe?”

Thran had sighed. It would be a spectacular vision, his tall, attenuated Death contrasted with the petite, vibrant Maid... it would cause a sensation... if he could manage it.

“I will consider. I will see if it is possible only if we find proper shoes, and a teacher. Then I will see what wear and tear it causes me. I must dance the rest of the ballet, not only those three or four minutes.”

“Yes, yes,” Irmo had agreed quickly. “All wise precautions, yes. Yes.”

“Then we are done for tonight. The physical hurdles are not the only ones I must surmount. My family will not like this.”

“They do not decide about the ballet or your dancing.”

“I consider them when I decide. I have already distressed them a great deal. I do not like to add to that.”

“Then don’t tell them.”

Thran had shaken his head. There had been no point in trying to explain further to someone who had little understanding of social interactions and none at all of family dynamics. He had merely escorted Irmo out, and put off talking to his family until he had showered and dressed. But the time in the shower had not softened his family’s reaction when he had told them of Irmo’s latest inspiration. Their protests had been exactly what he had expected.

What he hadn’t expected was Sigrid’s upset.

What had she said?

We can’t let Thran do something so dangerous! What if he hurts himself so badly that he can’t dance anymore? Where are we all then?

She was so much her father’s daughter.

He sighed as he headed upstairs. He knocked on the door to Sigrid’s room softly.

“Go away, Da! Just go away!”

“It is Thran, Sigrid. Please, I would like to talk to you.”
A long silence followed.

“Please, ma chère. I am sorry I upset you so. I come to make amends.”

A soft rustle or two, and the door came open. Sigrid had wiped her eyes, but they were still red, and her face was blotchy. But her gaze was hard and angry, and her posture was ramrod straight.

“So you aren’t going to try to dance on pointe?”

“I did not say that. I did not say that I would, either. Please, may I come in?”

She stood aside in silence, and plunked herself down on her bed to lean against the wall, a pillow clutched to her stomach. That left the desk chair for Thran, or the floor. He chose the latter, and folded himself down on his heels.

“I appreciate that you worry on my account. I am most grateful to you.”

Glaring, Sigrid looked away and swallowed hard.

“I appreciate that you worry more on your Da’s account. For that is the reason for your upset, yes?”

She gave him a look that was chagrin, anger, and worry, and she bit her bottom lip.

“It is a sign of your love for your Da that you are so worried for him. You fear that if I do something so foolish that it means I can no longer dance, then your Da will be poor again. You and your brother and sister and your Da will go back to the precarious life you led not three months ago, and all we have here will evaporate like a mirage.”

Sigrid’s glare froze, but it lasted only a few seconds before it crumbled. She buried her face in the pillow. She made no sound, but her ribs heaved, and her arms tightened on the pillow. Swallowing, Thran eased off the floor to sit beside her. He drew her gently close, and put his arms around her.

“Ma pauvre petite,” he murmured, as Sigrid gave into her tears and edged an arm around him. “Je suis désolé. Je suis vraiment désolé de t’avoir inquiété.”

“How can you even think of doing something so incredibly stupid?” she spat through her tears. “You can’t do that to Da, Thran! You just can’t! I won’t let you risk everything on this stupid fucking ballet!”

Her epithet brought her up short, and she cast him a glance that was decidedly rattled. Thran offered her a sympathetic smile. “I have called Immortal this stupid fucking ballet many times myself. Sometimes, it is that. Other times, it is a wondrous thing. That is true of anything done for the first time – so fraught with drama, upset, confusion, many things, none straightforward. But that is not what you need to hear. What you need to hear is that nothing about this ballet or the dance will send you or Tilda or Bain or your Da back to your old life. I have provided for all of us, no matter what happens. There will be no more grotty apartments, no more worry about money for food, no more slavery for your Da. You have my promise.”

Sigrid kept her face buried against Thran’s chest for several more seconds. Her hand tightened on his arm, and she sat up to rub the heel of her hand over her eyes. “What about the pointe shoes?”

“I have not said either yes or no. I have said I will consider, but only with proper shoes, and only with a teacher. It may be physically impossible for me, and it may not.”

“Da said that you told him you’d never do it, it was stupid for someone as tall and as heavy as you to
“I did tell him that.”

“Then why do it now, Thran? Why? If you said it was stupid up until now, then why all of a sudden is it not stupid anymore? After the past three weeks, and then Monday, you’re not impressing me with your understanding of stupid.”

Thran sighed. “I have made many mistakes in the past three weeks, I agree. I want badly to do this ballet, Sigrid. It is like your Da wanting so badly to sculpt, to draw. When he began again, he glowed like an angel, for all that he calls me one. That is what the dance does to me. I let it pull me away from my home and family, and that lapse has hurt us all, your Da most of all, which shames me badly. So he and you and all our clan now know to speak up, to help me stay on track. I can only offer that as an apology, and as a promise not to be so foolish again.”

“But on pointe, Thran? Really? Do you think I don’t know what that means, what stresses are involved?”

Thran smothered a smile when Sigrid flounced off the bed, but she wasn’t merely flouncing. She grabbed her laptop off her desk and flounced back down beside Thran, opening the laptop and mousing quickly over the desktop.

“I’ve spent hours on the Internet since I first met you, since I saw Da light up like a Christmas tree every time he so much as thought about you. I knew who you were before he did. I’ve seen every video of you that’s been posted anywhere. I’ve watched so many ballet videos that I can practically dance them myself. I’ve read all the reviews of your dancing, and I know you don’t, but most of them are good, in case you didn’t know. I’ve even seen the pictures those stupid paparazzi posted of us at the county office when you and Da got married. They were pretty funny, actually; the paparazzi got roundly razzed for thinking you’d married me instead of Da. What wasn’t so funny was what they wrote when they figured out whom you did marry – they called Da a one-time artist, a has-been artist. That made me so mad, and now they’re writing all this speculation around about you and UltraViolet Ballet and that maybe you’re doing a new ballet with wacko Irmo because Da’s making you do it for the money. It makes me sick.”

Under Sigrid’s fingers, images appeared one after another, from pictures of Thran at old premieres, in costume for various roles, even a few paparazzi shots. Sigrid was right about how funny the wedding day pictures were, but Thran paid them little heed. He’d been an expert at avoiding his own publicity for years.

“You have been most thorough,” Thran agreed.

“Do you know why I have been?” she said with an edge to her voice.

“Tell me.”

“Because I love my Da. He’s the sweetest man in the world, and he’s the best father, and he’s a brilliant artist now, not a one-time has-been. But he’s got the business sense of a hamster, and I will not let anything put him in a situation where he’s got to try to cope the way he did before. He was slowly dying with each and every day that passed. I can’t let that happen to him again.”

“And you read all these things on the Internet because...”

“I don’t know.” She picked disconsolately at the pile of her sweater. “Because I thought that the more I knew about everything, the better I’d be able to help him. You love him so much, and I
thought, perfect, you’re looking out for him, too... then Monday...”

Thran sighed. “Again, I am sorry. Not just that I worried and upset your Da, but that I worried and upset you and your brothers and sister. I have so many reasons why I cannot let such a thing happen again. And I do not want your Da to ever worry about money again. I cannot stop what is said on the Internet, but I can tell you that I have provided for us all in such a way that no matter how Immortal turns out, we are protected. I have shown your Da the proof of this, so if you ask him, he will confirm what I say to you.”

“Why did they say those things about my Da?”

“Because their aim is to sell articles, Sigrid, not to tell the truth. Who would read the truth that our family is happy? It is a better story to talk about how low I stoop to marry an underage girl, or a gold digger artist, or perhaps next week a cave troll. This is why I do not read such things. They are cruel and hold no truth. It is better that you do not read them, either. You live in the truth, and if you have any questions about it, you have only to ask your Da and me, and we will answer them.”

Sigrid searched his face, swallowed, and nodded. “Okay. Okay. I’m glad you told me. Now you just have to convince me that this pointe shoe thing is not the dumbest idea ever.”

Thran grinned. “Ah, ma chère, it may be. I will not know until I try. And to try is all I have agreed to. I must be comfortable with it. I must be able to do it. I must not risk the ability to dance the rest of Immortal, and then many ballets beyond this one.”

“Why did you even agree to try?”

Thran considered. “Because it is hard, and it would be quite the spectacle if I can manage it. It is only for a few moments – I will not dance more than three minutes in such a way. So I will educate myself, and then we shall see. You have seen videos on the Internet of men doing this, yes?”

Sigrid shrugged. “I didn’t think to look for them. I didn’t think men did it, so...”

“So let us look.”

Sigrid looked up at him, so he pointed to her computer. She typed M-E-N – D-A-N-C-I-N-G – O-N – P-O-I-N-T-E into the search engine, which displayed a list of several videos in the search results. She selected one at random, and there was a professional dancer in pointe shoes taking his first tentative instruction, learning to balance at the barre.

Sigrid snorted. “He’s probably shorter than I am.”

“I know him by reputation,” Thran replied. “Anthony Ngele. He is perhaps a bit taller than six feet.”

Sigrid watched the rest of the short video in silence, then started another. Thran sat beside her, as interested, but for different reasons. He paid attention to the build of the dancers, how wide or narrow their feet were, and how arched. Several were more muscular than he, which boded well for his slender build, though none were as tall. One of the instructors opined that the men she’d taught came to it easily because of their greater strength, which also boded well for Thran; his legs and feet were in good shape, even the ankle he’d injured in November. The dancers in the videos he watched with Sigrid seemed to perform easily, so perhaps this was not as mad as it had first seemed.

“It doesn’t look as bad as I thought,” she admitted, drawing Thran’s smile at how quickly she echoed his sentiments.

“Perhaps not. I understand if you do not approve that I try this, but after seeing these videos, I hope
you accept why I do.”

Sigrid sniffed, but her jaw unclenched a little, and she took a breath. Her nod was slight, but it was a nod.

“Are we friends again?”

She bit her lip, and her finger traced over the track pad of her computer in aimless circles. She kept her regard on the screen as a male dancer in practice attire made one rapid, seemingly effortless turn after the other across the stage, all of them on pointe. “I hope so. Just...”

“Your Da?”

She nodded.

“He is my greatest treasure, Sigrid. And you and Bain and Tilda are very important to me, too, just as Legolas is. I did not like to let you down, and I will do everything to make sure I do not again.”

“Okay.” Sigrid took another breath. “Okay. Just... be careful, not just for Da, but for you, too. He loves you a lot. I love you, too, not just my Da.”

“You are very generous, ma chère. I love you, too. You are my most excellent co-conspirator, and I am glad to have another care about your Da as I do.”

“Please, don’t tell Da about what I read on the Internet. He doesn’t need to know.”

“He does not, so I will not tell him. But neither do you need to know. Please, let such vicious things go. There are better ways to take care of yourself.”

“You better take care of yourself, too, Ada,” she muttered. “Honestly, this place needs a zookeeper.”

“Perhaps so,” Thran chuckled. “So, would you come downstairs with me so that we may finish your Da’s supper? It is no better for a budding runner and scholar to miss a meal than a dancer.”

She gave him a look. “That’s fighting dirty.”

He shrugged. “It is also true.”

“I guess it is. I’ll wash my face, then I’ll come down.”

“I will wait, and we will go together. Then neither of us will have to face the Inquisition alone.”

“Good point. All right, let’s go.”

Thran headed back to the kitchen with Sigrid, feeling both relief and determination. The former was because Clan Fyrynig’s lioness had let him off easy – this time. He would never escape so lightly again, and that’s where the determination came in. Nothing, not even the dance, would let him risk his lioness’s disappointment again, because next time it would not be mere disappointment he’d face. It would be fury, as fierce as her father’s own, and deservedly so.

* * *
As Thran and Sigrid came down the stairs, Bard got up to put Sigrid’s plate in the microwave to warm it. She’d been crying, that much was obvious, but she looked reconciled, and offered a small smile and a murmur of thanks when he put her warmed plate before her. Thran’s expression was calm as he sat down at the end of the table beside Sigrid, so Bard took his plate to warm it as he had Sigrid’s. The tall dancer also offered thanks for the warmed plate, and gladly took up his fork to take a bite of chicken.

The other children looked at the two returnees with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity.

“Did she yell at you?” Bain blurted.

“No,” Sigrid shot back, glaring at her brother. “So just stuff it.”

“Both of you,” Bard warned, giving them both a look.

“It’s none of Bain’s business,” Sigrid protested.

“It’s not. But courtesy is appreciated nevertheless.”

Sigrid huffed a bit, but not much under Bard’s eye. “Sorry, Bain.”

“Sorry, Sigrid,” came the immediate response, and both children looked to their suppers.

Bard arched an eyebrow at Thran. His husband met his gaze with a reassuring look, then concentrated on his supper. Bard let it go, and gradually the atmosphere grew calm again as Tilda and Legolas began to clear the plates and condiments from the table, and brought out bowls and spoons for ice cream. When conversation picked up about a new ice cream store that was about to open in the village, Bard relaxed. The crisis was over, at least for the moment.

He sat with Thran as he worked his way through a hearty supper, and even a small dish of ice cream. Tilda and Legolas began the cleanup, Sigrid retreated to her room to concentrate on her paper, and Bain sat at the kitchen table to begin his homework. Bard and Thran retreated to the sitting room with tea and a last cookie or two. Thran looked so tired that Bard didn’t question him as he poured Thran’s podstakannik full of tea and handed it to him. His husband gave him an appreciative smile for his consideration and sipped the steaming tea between bites of a spice cookie.

The children didn’t have a lot of homework today, though the boys had their pre-algebra test to study for. Tilda came in with her French vocabulary, but she made quick work of it, and eagerly waited for the boys to finish so they could indulge in more of Harry Potter. Thran remained mostly silent through that, other than when it was his turn to read. As Bard had warned it was a long chapter, and after they finished reading it, the children all went upstairs to cycle through their showers and prepare for bed. Thran went to spend a little time with Legolas, so Bard stuck his head into Sigrid’s room.

“Oh, sweetness?”

She looked up from her computer, stretching cramped shoulder muscles. “I’m okay, Da. I’m sorry I got upset. Everything’s fine.”

“I’m here if you want to talk.”

“I know. I’m okay.”

Bard nodded. “Paper’s okay, too?”

She brightened. “Yeah, it is. It’s written, so I’m editing now. I think I’ll be finished tonight or
tomorrow, so won’t have to work on it at all this weekend. That would be a gift."

Bard chuckled. “That’d be great. What time do you need to be at the meet Saturday?”

“Eight to catch the team bus. Finn, Tara, and Killian are coming to watch, so when we get back to
the school, they said they’d bring me back here to shower, then we’ll go to Tara’s for supper, then
we’ll see the film.”

“I’m okay with that. Curfew’s midnight, same as usual.”

“The film’s at seven-thirty, so I’ll be home before then.”

“I appreciate it, sweetness. I’m glad you’re making friends. It’s been a lot easier out here than in the
city.”

“A lot better, too. I love it here.”

“So do I.” He bent down to brush a kiss on the top of Sigrid’s hair. “Even if we do have our share of
ups and downs trying to learn about making a ballet.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “That’s the truth. I told Ada we need a zookeeper.”

“What did he say?”

Sigrid’s grin was impish – good, she was her usual feisty self again. “Wellll, he didn’t disagree with
me.”

“I wouldn’t, either. Sleep well, sweetness.”

“Night, Da.”

He bade the rest of the children good night, and was happy to retreat to the shower. While he
indulged in hot water and lots of soap, Thran returned from Legolas’s room, ensconced himself in
bed, and was well settled in the pillows by the time Bard was done. Bard made sure his Henley and
leggings were beside the bed in case one of the children needed him during the night, then crawled in
beside his husband. They settled into their usual tangle of arms and legs, with Thran’s head on
Bard’s shoulder.

“Did she yell at you?” Bard murmured.

“She did not,” Thran confirmed in the same low murmur. “She confirmed only that she is very much
your daughter.”

Bard grimaced. “That sounds ominous. She didn’t hit you, did she?”

Thran raised his head to give Bard an affronted look. “Of course not. Have you ever hit me? Would
you ever think to do such a thing? Tcha, such an idea.”

“Then what did she do?”

Thran sighed and put his head back down on Bard’s shoulder. “She was afraid that if I hurt myself,
then you and she and Bain and Tilda would be poor again. I assured her that I had no intention to
hurt myself, but even if I did in any fashion, our family will be well cared for. All of us. Then she
and I watched Internet videos of men who dance on pointe, and she was reassured that it is not
complete madness. So all is well.”
Bard’s throat knotted, and he shut his eyes. Gods, Thran had stated only the truth, that Sigrid was entirely his child, worrying about all the same things that he did, money – or the lack thereof – being the main one. A long, slender hand rubbed his chest slowly.

“Do not worry, please? Sigrid is well, I am well, you are well. There is nothing to worry about. All is well.”

As Bard wrestled the lump in his throat down, the faint pleading tone of Thran’s voice registered. “You sound like you’ve had a long day, angel.”

Thran exhaled. “I have worked very hard on the ballet. I have had a fight with Irmo. I have made amends because I angered our lioness. So yes, a long day. I hope yours was not so fraught.”

“You had a fight with Irmo?”

“Yes, we had words. He conceived of the pointe dance, I demurred. He acted the bully, I was the Prince of Ice. I threatened to fire him, he apologized, I accepted, it is done.”

Gods, if only he’d been a fly on the ballroom wall for that! Thran, however, looked too wan and sounded too tired to want to rehash it, so Bard let it go. Instead, maybe telling his husband about how well his day had gone would ease him.

“I can’t tell you how great my day was,” he offered, stroking Thran’s braid as it trailed over Bard’s chest. He found the spot on Thran’s hip that his husband loved for him to stroke. Thran’s hum was nearly soundless, but clearly conveyed the depth of his enjoyment. “Rada asked if we could collaborate on some of his costume designs, which was flattering. He’s a treat to work with, and we got on very well. This is the first time that I’ve ever worked with another artist like this – the day just flew by. I haven’t had such a good day in a long time. I’m sorry yours wasn’t so good.”

“Rada told me that he liked to work with you very much, too,” Thran smiled. “I am very happy for you. The ritual kabuki-esque costume will be wonderful. He said you talked about silver armor?”

“We haven’t decided yet. White, silver, black, something stark. Maybe blue, to offer a contrast to the blacks, greys, and reds of the mortal world. I made the joke about using ultraviolet as a little nudge, nudge, wink, wink pointer back to the name of the company, but we’ll need to see what looks best under the lights.”

“Listen to you,” Thran looked up at him again, but this time his expression was teasing. “You are truly one of the company now, first as a storyteller, and now as a costumier. Where I am only a dancer, my husband is a man of many talents.”

“I’ve got a ways to go. But I understand how easy it is for you to get swept up in this. It nearly did the same thing to me today. I felt like I did something worthwhile today.”

“You do so many worthwhile things every day,” Thran protested softly.

“Artistically worthwhile,” Bard amended. “I feel like maybe you do when you dance. I did something with my sketching that made a difference to Immortal. That’s a good feeling.”

“It is, my saint. Oh, lyubov moya, it very much is.”

Thran slid up to brush a kiss on Bard’s lips. It was slow and tender, so very easy to reward with a kiss of his own. Without conscious thought, their bodies shifted to lie side by side, facing each other to nuzzle and stroke and kiss. Bard savored his husband’s beautiful body as their arousal grew, neither of them in a hurry to rush into sex. How delicious it was to savor the caress that was each
touch of that pale body against his. The slow brush of fingers against his skin, the nip of lips at his throat or the base of his collarbone, the tickle of Thran’s chest against the hair on his torso... how divine was each touch after such a long day? When a tight glute flexed, then equally tight abs rubbed against his cock, he was eager to cup that glute in his hand, to knead and massage it as Thran’s lips swallowed his. Thran was no better at resisting such enticements – he moaned and groped for Bard’s cock. At the first touch, the first squeeze, Bard’s loins ached, craving release. His arousal spiked again as long elegant fingers wound around his cock, as a long tongue dove deeply into his mouth. Gods, he wouldn’t last a second under such an assault, so he groped for Thran’s cock, growling when he found his husband just as hard. So sweet, so sweet, to work Thran’s cock as brazenly as Thran did his, until both of them were straining and moaning, desperate for release...

Thran spasmed first, his soft, unrestrained whimpers too compelling to resist, so Bard didn’t relent until Thran was completely wrung dry. His angel lay consumed before him, eyes shut, head back, silky white hair coming loose from his braid. But Thran’s release hadn’t loosened his hold on Bard’s cock, and he rolled over onto Bard’s chest to smother the last of his cries as he suckled first one of Bard’s nipples, then the other. Such a concentrated assault drove Bard after his husband to release in seconds. When a moan fought its way past his lips, Thran swallowed it in a kiss.


“Oh, gods,” Bard when his body had calmed. “Gods, angel. We both needed that.”

“We did.” Thran retrieved a towel from the side of the bed, and wiped them both clean. “It is a good way to end a day fraught with so much upset.”

Bard turned out the light, then nestled Thran closely beside him. As he stroked Thran’s ribs, he smiled. “It’s a good way to end a wonderful day, too.”

A soft chuckle escaped Thran, and his hand rested on Bard’s. He squeezed gently. “A good way to end any day, then.”

“Amen.” Bard pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair, and they rested together, warm and content, until they both fell asleep.
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint have a weekend away from Immortal, discuss school obligations, and find an interesting way to deal with their taxes.

Chapter Notes

Hal appears courtesy of johnnysmitten's story, "Heartsigh." Thank you, my dear! Check out that story for Hal's awesome scene where he combines cupcake baking and disco dancing in a way no one has attempted before or since!

I don't own an Audi, own any stock in Audi, have anything to do with Audi, or even want an Audi. But Hal likes his R8.

Friday raced by. The only break in the routine was Bard’s brief visit to the Imladris Academy to collect the materials about ways to contribute to the school that would reduce their children’s tuition, but he was back quickly. Thran was happy to see him and Rada in close conversation as they sketched out ideas for Immortal’s costumes – how excited Bard had been to work with the eccentric costumier, an excitement that Thran hoped would continue. Thran was also happy to find Irmo much less fractious, if no more straightforward in his approach to anything. They put in a full day of hard work on the choreography, and had the principal dances for the first two acts largely blocked out. Irmo was not happy when Thran decreed that there would be no work on either Saturday or Sunday, and that work would resume on Monday. At the end of the day, everyone but Irmo was excited about the work they had done, and looked forward to their much-needed break.

Supper was animated as the family planned their Saturday errands together, but the children were more excited to light a fire in the sitting room fireplace and toast marshmallows while they read Harry Potter. The next morning, after a substantial breakfast, Bard took Sigrid to meet the team bus that would take her to her track meet, then headed to the market with Bain and Tilda. Thran and Legolas left at the same time to enjoy their two hours at the Gondors’ studio. After so much concentrated dance work, Thran was in excellent shape to hold his own against all but the expertise of the Gondors themselves, and he delighted in the time with Legolas. When fencing was over, the family headed off in Thran’s SUV to watch Sigrid’s race, scheduled for noon. How wonderful it was to see their fierce lioness place third at a level she’d never expected to reach with so little prior experience! Bard was even more elated than his daughter was, and the whole family whistled as loudly as they could so Sigrid knew they were there to support her. Thran smothered a grin at the exuberant way Finn greeted her later, sweeping her into a big hug, because Bard’s face was such a study.

“She grows up, our lioness,” Thran observed, leaning closer to Bard on the gym bleachers.

“And I thank you for it, cariad,” Bard swallowed, as Tara, Kíllian, Legolas, and Bain surrounded Sigrid and Finn in laughing exuberance.
“That credit belongs to you, lyubov moya, not to me.”

“Oh, it belongs to you, too. If you hadn’t come along, she would have had to grow up in that grotty apartment rather than out here. Thank you, more than you’ll ever know.”

Thran offered only a warm smile, given their reluctance for PDAs. “I know. Just as you know how happy I am that Legolas is not in that boarding school, and I am not in that cold and sterile apartment.”

“We both made out like bandits,” Bard conceded.

Thran snickered. “How does one make out like bandits? Perhaps we should try it.”

“Cut it out, you,” Bard grinned, cutting his eyes at Tilda sitting on the bleacher in front of them, whistling at her sister.

“Only for now. I intend to consider it for later experimentation.”

The pair collected Bain and Legolas, confirmed Sigrid’s plans about a ride home with Finn, then set off for Tilda’s favorite cheese shop for lunch. Errands took up the earlier part of the afternoon, then they headed home. In the afternoon, the children took care of their homework, and helped to clean up the dust and debris from the week. To end the day, they read the next bit of Harry Potter in front of the sitting room fireplace with Tilda, Bain, and Legolas, toasting marshmallows and making s’mores. Finn escorted Sigrid home by eleven, stopping in politely to exchange a word or two before departing. One by one, the children bedded down, and the house calmed.

Sunday was decidedly relaxed, a much needed calm after the last frantic couple of weeks. Thran helped Bard prepare an extravagant breakfast of blueberry pancakes, sausage, and fruit. While Bard put a big pot of potato leek soup on for lunch, the children decided to make hamburgers for supper, since Bard was not allowed to cook today. Once his husband headed to the solarium to work on his art, Thran did an abbreviated barre, enough to keep him well limbered and ready for tomorrow’s resumption of work on Immortal. The children finished their homework, then Kíllian came over to fence with Legolas under Thran’s watchful eye, and Bain had a schoolmate from down the lane over to kick a soccer ball around the back yard. Tilda was pleased to draw with her father in the solarium, propped comfortably on a couple of big cushions from the sitting room.

Once Kíllian headed home, Thran ventured into the solarium to find Tilda drawing Mr. Bun, Sigrid wiping down the disassembled fainting couch, and Bard working on Rahmiel.

“Such industry!” Thran observed, smiling. “Sigrid, your chair is done! And what is this? You have become so adept that Bard has loosed you on the fainting couch?”

“I got to help Sigrid take it all apart,” Tilda looked up from her drawing with a big grin. “That was fun. I’ve never gotten to take anything apart before. It wasn’t very hard. The glue was all crumbly.”

“It turns a much nicer color by far.”

“What, you like fruitwood better than molasses?” Sigrid teased. “It was about as sticky as molasses, too. Yuck!”

“Too yucky for me,” Tilda shook her head, making a face. “So I drew Mr. Bun instead.”

She held up her drawing pad for Thran to see. It was still the picture of a child, but it showed Tilda’s continued improvement, for the outline was not too stiff, and it was credibly shaded. “It is a good picture, Kukla – it looks very like him. Even the way his whiskers turn down on the left. You have
captured him very well.”

Tilda gave her drawing a critical look. “I need to make the left ear more up.”

“I think he moved while you looked away,” Thran winked at her. “Just to see if you paid him close attention.”

Tilda gave Mr. Bun sitting innocently on one of Sigrid’s refinished chairs a stern look. “Sometimes he does that. Da says he has a sense of humor.”

“He would have to have one, to live so long with you and the rest of our clan. We are a humorous lot.”

“Da’s working on Rahmiel,” Sigrid said, with a nonchalant glance Thran’s way. She kept most of her attention on the wooden strut she wiped with a cloth soaked in stripper, but she caught Thran’s small smile before he turned towards Bard perched on his stool. A thrill of excitement jolted up Thran’s spine to see Rahmiel once more emerging from the wire and clay clamped to Bard’s workbench.

“So he is!” Thran exclaimed, holding up his hands in surprise. “Oy, lyubov moya, you have brought Rahmiel back even more vividly than before.”

Bard looked up with a big smile. “It’s still the same pose, but he’s a little softer this time.”

“You have done the legs and torso again, but now you have added the arms. And the wings will flow behind?”

Bard put his hands at the back of his model in imitation of wings. “Something like that. I’m not sure whether I’ve got the arms the way I want yet.” He gave Thran a critical look, as if he looked at another model for his sculpture. “Would you mind? Hold your arms up, as if you were just about to land from jumping off of something?”

“Of course.” Thran stripped off his fencing jacket just as Legolas appeared behind him.

“What’s going on?” Legolas inquired, taking the jacket from Thran.

“I become the sculptor’s model,” Thran gave his son a smile. “The crash dummy, as you and Bain would say.”

Legolas snickered as Thran held up his arms. “You need those funny black and yellow circles stuck all over you to be a crash dummy, Papa.”

Tilda giggled. “That’d be funny, Legolas.”

“Very funny,” Bard grinned, fingers pinching off bits of clay and pressing it onto the armature. “Hang on, I have to move the wire a bit... there. Move your arms a bit wider apart, and more out in front of you? Lower the left one a bit more, and raise the right one – your weight’s coming down on your left leg. Yes, that’s good. Hold it only until you get tired.”

The children looked back and forth between Bard and Thran, one posing, the other sculpting. Should he offer to take off his tee shirt? If the children had not been present, he would have just peeled it off, but Bard seemed content with him as he was, so he held the pose as he was. He thought about what it would be like to have wings, and how he would land from on high if he did, and subtly shifted his weight.
“Oh, that’s perfect, angel,” Bard said, working quickly. “Try not to move if you can, just for another minute... I’ve almost got it...”

Thran relaxed as if he held a yoga pose, using his bones rather than his muscles to hold himself in position, and concentrating on his breathing. Before him, Bard worked with assurance, angling the armature this way and that, adding clay, and smoothing curves with his fingers, then with small tools. When it got to be too much, he said, “I put my arms down now.”

“It’s okay, go ahead,” Bard said, his regard intent on the clay and wire before him. “Needed a hitch to the right in the torso, so I’ll have to touch up the clay a bit, but that’s easy enough. But I’ve got the shoulders at the right angle to the hips, and the arms in the right place.”

Thran and Legolas drew closer to see the model. Legolas gave an experimental poke to the wad of clay beside the sculpture. “Oh! It’s stiffer than I expected.”

“That’s because that bit’s cold,” Bard explained. “Take a bit if you like, and warm it in your hands. That makes it more pliable and easier to shape.”

“It does,” Legolas agreed, kneading a small lump of the clay. “I like the way it smells.”

“I do, too,” Bard smiled in recognition. “One room of the art department at my school reeked of the stuff all the time, because that’s where the potters and sculptors worked. The painter’s studio smelled like linseed oil and paint. The welding shop sometimes smelled like hot metal. All good smells.”

“Interesting,” Thran considered. “I think of art as such a visual thing, not an aromatic thing. But to those who make the art, creation smells.”

Bard and the children laughed. “I’m sure ballet does, too. All those sweaty dancers!”

“Thank the gods that the audience wears so much perfume that they cannot smell us!” Thran grimaced. “Else we would never get the funds to put on a single act of anything.”

“Track meets are like that, too,” Sigrid shook her head. “All those teenagers – ugh!”

“It’s all honest toil,” Bard grinned. “I say that now just so you won’t lock me out of the house when I start working in the barn this summer. Rank doesn’t begin to cover it.”

“Yeah, Til, you’re the only one of us who doesn’t reek yet,” Sigrid teased her sister. “Lucky you!”

“I don’t smell very good after I go to my sport class,” Tilda stuck out her tongue at Mr. Bun. “No one does!”

“So we all smell,” Thran shrugged. “That reminds me – Legolas, we must put the fencing things in the washer so that you will have them clean for this week.”

“I’ll put them in now. Which cycle?”

“Permanent press, warm water,” Bard supplied.

“I will go put on different pants, then,” Thran said. “Then everything can go in the washer, Legolas.”

“Okay, Papa. I’ll change, too.”

“Come back down when you’ve changed, angel,” Bard invited. “I didn’t get a chance yesterday to tell you about the options we have about helping the school. There’s one I think you might like, and it’s a one shot, which will be easier for you this term.”
“Back in a tick, then, as you say,” Thran replied, and headed after Legolas to change. Once he and his son got the fencing attire into the washer, Legolas headed outside to play with Bain and his friend, and Thran returned to the solarium. Sigrid had finished stripping the fainting couch, and was carefully smoothing it with a pad of fine steel wool.

“So, the school things,” Thran prompted, setting the seat back in the frame of one of Sigrid’s chairs so he had a place to perch.

“There are a lot of options,” Bard began. “A lot amount to being a teacher’s assistant, helping during class and such. Despite the number of artists around, a lot can’t make time during the day, so they were glad when I said I could do that. So I’m going in once a week for a couple of art classes. That actually covers us both, but there was one item that I thought might interest you, and it could potentially give the school a big boost. Each spring, the school holds a talent show. There’s a lot of singing and acting, but not much dancing. Your reputation precedes you, because Halina, the lady who told me about everything, specifically mentioned you. I gather you’d be quite a catch for the show.”

Both Tilda and Sigrid looked up, but it was Sigrid who spoke. “The show’s a big deal, or at least that’s what my classmates say. It’s called the April Fool’s Follies, and it’s always on the Saturday afternoon that’s closest to April Fool’s Day – April 2, this year. The talent acts are in the auditorium, but in the halls there are other things – a bake sale, of course, and a silent auction of donated artwork, and craft booths for the artists who sell jewelry and things. It’d be cool if you could do a dance, Ada.”

“I heard about it at school, too,” Tilda added. “There’s a girl in my class who’s going to sing with her Mam, and two brothers who are doing an acrobatic act. It sounds like fun.”

“I would do that,” Thran nodded. “I will be in good trim for dancing, with all the work I do for the ballet. But if these are the Follies of the April Fool, perhaps I could do something not so serious? Charisse and I danced together for a donor’s gala once. She was a rag doll and I was the doll maker, and she would put herself into all sorts of contortions even as she made a fool out of the doll maker. It is not too long, and fun.”

“That sounds like just the thing,” Bard nodded. “Do you think Charisse would do it with you?”

Sigrid sat up from her rubbing to give Thran an inspired grin. “What if you were the doll, Ada, and Tilda was the doll maker? Think how funny it would be for little Tilda to try to pose such a big floppy doll.”

Thran laughed. “That would be very funny, Sigrid! What do you think, Tilda? Would you like to have such a big doll to play with?”

Tilda looked dubious. “I don’t think I can move you, Ada. You’re so tall!”

“I would help you,” Thran offered. “Suppose your Da carries me on stage, and then you sneak in to play with the doll you’re not supposed to play with, and I will be very floppy.”

“That sounds cool, Til!” Sigrid enthused. “But if you don’t want to do it, that’s okay. I’d like to do it.”

“Let’s try it,” Bard got up from his stool. “Okay, rag doll. I’m going to pick you up.”

Thran struck a stiff pose as Bard wound arms around his waist and carried him into the sitting room. As the children followed, Bard plunked Thran down on his feet in the middle of the floor, then
backed away. Thran held the pose just for a second, then slowly sagged down into a split and half flopped over like the saggy toy he pretended to be.

“So what should I do?” Tilda wondered, looking at Thran dubiously.

“Just sort of poke him at first, to see if he moves,” suggested Sigrid. So Tilda tiptoed up to him and gave him a little push on the shoulder. Thran collapsed his torso flat over his leg. He really did look like a limp rag doll.

“Oh, Ada; you’re funny!” Tilda giggled.

“What if you tried to push him up again?” Sigrid asked.

“Okay,” Tilda nodded, getting into the spirit of the game. She pulled on Thran’s arm, and he sat back up, only to flop over the other way. So she pushed him to the front, and he fell over again. When Tilda pushed on his back, he rolled all the way over and sat up again.

“Keep pushing my back, Kukla,” Thran told her, and so she did. This time, he rolled onto his feet, but his arms were still flung wide on the floor, and his head hung limply. “Now pull my hair – gently, please!”

As Tilda pulled, Thran stood up, legs still wide. As Tilda kept pushing, he straightened up, only to flop over her shoulder. That made her laugh, and Bard and Sigrid with her.

“That’s amazing,” Bard shook his head. “You really do move like a rag doll. What do you think, little doll? Do you want to do this with Ada? If you don’t want to, it’s okay.”

“Maybe Sigrid can do it with me?” Tilda said. “The children in my class said a lot of people come to watch. That sounds a little scary.”

“If you would like Sigrid to play with us, or if you do not want to do it at all, that is okay,” Thran assured Tilda. “Tomorrow, when you get home from school, I will ask Charisse to help me show you our silly dance, and you can decide whether or not you want to do it.”

“I’d like that,” Tilda nodded.

“So would I,” Sigrid nodded vigorously. “I think it’d be fun.”

“So I can call the school tomorrow, and tell them that you’re in for a dance?” Bard asked.

“Yes,” Thran nodded. “It will be fun to do something not so serious.”

“That’s great,” Bard grinned. “Halina will be delighted.”

They returned to the solarium to continue their progress on clay, paper, and furniture. Thran was glad to relax with them until Legolas and Bain came inside, well winded from their soccer game. Before long, it was time to start supper, so Thran and the children left Bard in the solarium while they prepared the meal. Supper was simple – hamburgers, salad, fruit salad, and roasted potatoes, beets, and onions. The evening wound down to a comfortable end, and soon Thran and Bard settled in their soaking tub.

“Lyubov moya?” Thran ventured, when Bard reclined against his chest.

“Hmm?” Bard rumbled, sipping his glass of nalivka.

“Did you think to offer your caricatures at the school Follies?”
“I did,” Bard said. “I’m ashamed to admit that I didn’t for selfish reasons.”

“You? Selfish? What is this? I cannot imagine!”

“Okay... maybe not selfish reasons... exactly.”

“Tell me.”

Bard’s hand stroked Thran’s knee restlessly. “You and Bilbo and Rada tell me that my sketches are pretty good...”

Thran waited, but Bard didn’t continue. He pressed a kiss on Bard’s neck. “They are more than ‘pretty good,’ Bard. They are distinctive, masterful, evocative, unique.”

“Okay-y-y...” The trailing sound of Bard’s last syllable conveyed his uncomfortableness. “If they are, then maybe it’s not the best business decision for me to do caricatures at the school Follies? I’m not a snoot, Thran, but I want to be taken as a serious artist again, not just some want-to-be who happened to marry a famous and wonderful dancer. I don’t know. I’m no good at this part of the business.”

Thran had just enough time to keep himself from tensing. Of course Sigrid had not said anything to Bard about what she’d read on the Internet; this was just Bard speaking of a tangent to his money concerns. He took a sip of nalivka to give himself time to think, and to appear unconcerned.

“Why not wait to decide anything until you show your new sketches to Bilbo?” he suggested. “If he thinks they are as good as Rada and I do, then perhaps it would be a better to donate a nice piece to the silent auction. That would mean that you did not flood the local market with many quick pieces of children who simper, and when you have your show, whoever bought your more thoughtful piece at the Follies would feel as if he or she had purchased a treasure.”

Bard had chuckled at Thran’s characterization of fair-going children, but at the same time his body relaxed the slight tension that had crept into it. “You put me to shame, angel. You came up with a good solution without thinking hard.”

“Neither of us can know everything about everything.” Thran set his empty glass down on the edge of the tub behind him, shut his eyes, and enjoyed the body cradled against his. “I could not have done one tenth of the things you have done on our home to make it beautiful. I cannot sketch as you do, or make sculpture. You cannot dance as I do, and yes, I have more expertise with the money side of life than you. So it is good that we have each other, yes? Together we have everything we need.”

Bard’s answer was silent, merely a kiss on the back of Thran’s hand, and another on his wedding band.

Once they dried and got into bed, however, Bard rewarded Thran’s thoughtful compassion with more than a pair of kisses on the hand.

* * *

Had life finally settled into a routine? “Routine” seemed like a dull, inadequate word to describe the rhythm of Monday morning, because despite the early hour and the rainy weather, Bard took pleasure in each moment. He made school lunches and breakfasts with Thran, saw the children off to
school, and concocted the day’s soup – ginger carrot – while the dancers worked through their barre. He perused the Internet on Thran’s computer to look at floor tile for the half bath. So far, he hadn’t seen anything he liked to go with the Rembrandt red, but a beautiful white, grey, and silver star mosaic had seduced him so badly that he was considering relegating the Rembrandt red to accents so he could pair the floor mosaic with silver tea paper on the walls and ceiling. It’d be just as decadent as Russian gilded red, but imagine how beautiful little Charisse would look against a silver backdrop, or Thran. Add a comfortable chair where a dancer could adjust her shoes, or gaze at a vase of flowers, Rembrandt’s lady in red, or a Degas ballerina, and it’d be perfect. Marble mosaic tile was expensive, but the room was small enough that that wouldn’t be such a big deal. As for the walls, he found something that looked just like silver origami paper that wasn’t too expensive. It’d be easy to put up, and the hand-applied look would be nice. He filed that away when Rada and Ori appeared, and hastened into the ballroom with sketchbook and pencils in hand.

The morning proceeded calmly, without upset. Whatever Thran had said to Irmo during their argument, the choreographer was well behaved and focused. They worked on the pas de deux in Act II where the Maid pines for her Soldier gone to the Underworld, and the pas de deux in Act III where the Soldier pines for his Maid gone to the Underworld. The consensus was to parallel the dances so that the steps would be almost identical, but the parts would be reversed in the two acts. That would reinforce the idea of how closely bound the Maid and the Soldier were in their love for each other.

Over lunch, the discussion centered on which culture would be the reference point to make the Soldiers’ costumes. World War I? Ancient Greek? Very modern ones where abandoned because they called too much attention to a specific political situation. Identifiable ancient ones were also abandoned, because they clashed with the modern music chosen for the mortal scenes. In the end, Rada and Bard put forth the idea that the conflict was a mythical, hand-to-hand conflict, and that the two factions should look almost identical, to further suggest the inanity of war. Irmo liked that, so simple tunics bearing vague insignia, swords, and pikes were all that was needed.

As lunch wound down, Thran pulled Bard aside before he went back to the ballroom. “We have our meeting with Hal this afternoon at two, so I told him to come to the front door.”

“T’ll keep an ear out,” Bard nodded. “I’m mixing up Tandoori chicken for tonight. Shall I serve tea to the fancy financial planner?”

Thran snickered. “Hal would love that. He has become something of a tea snob, he tells me – his best friend has quite the taste for exotic blends, and has pulled Hal into that discerning world with him. His latest fad is green matcha tea.”

“Is that the stuff that looks like pond scum?” Bard raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“It does, but do not say that to Hal unless you want to see him recoil in horror. He can be quite histrionic.”

Bard had a mischievous grin on his face. “Maybe I will say that, just to twit the fancy financial planner.”

“He is great fun to tease. But please, do not twit him about anything before he is through all of our financial endeavors, or we will be at them all afternoon. Charisse is anxious to show the doll dance to Tilda, so we cannot poke at poor Hal for very long.”

“I’ll serve tea, then, but Hal will have to take solace in spice tea to go with the muffins. Orange cranberry, blueberry, Nirvana... what’s your preference?”
“I leave it to you, lyubov moya. If you are kind enough to make muffins, then you should have the pleasure to make the kind you want.”

“I’ll come up with something. It’s after one now, so let me get on with the cooking before I have to explain my paltry box of paper to the nice financial planner.”

“I hear and obey, my saint,” Thran stroked Bard’s hair with a smile, then headed after the rest of the ballet crew.

Chuckling, Bard mixed his chicken marinade, thoroughly doused chicken pieces with it, and stuck the mixture to chill in the fridge. He decided to make both orange cranberry and Nirvana muffins, given how much the children liked them. He got both mixed up, baked, and on the kitchen island to cool before he heard the knock on the front door. Bard wiped his hands off with a grin of anticipation, and headed for the central hall.

Bard opened the door to reveal a slim man about Bard’s height clad in understated but expensive clothes. He wore the front and top of his shoulder-length blond hair pulled straight back and pinned at the back of his head. Each long slender ear bore a diamond stud in the lobe. Clear, green eyes flecked with blue swept Bard with just as much curiosity as Bard’s brown eyes swept him. Such beautiful clothes – calf-length camelhair coat with a shawl collar, green plaid cashmere scarf at the neck, and supple brown leather driving gloves, understated, tailored wool trousers in a dark blue and grey herringbone, black calfskin leather oxfords with thin black laces. The requisite briefcase was rich brown leather with gold fittings, and the matching satchel was the same brown leather. Behind this vision, beside Bard’s well-worn tradesman’s truck, sat a pristine white Audi R8. All in all, he was quite the prosperous-looking financial planner.

“You must be Hal,” Bard greeted, offering his hand.

“I am. And you are most definitely Bard,” Hal replied with a smile, clasping Bard’s hand with his own. “You’re just as Thran described you. It’s a pleasure to meet you in person.”

Hal was the picture of decorum, but Bard was well ogled, albeit in the most discreet fashion. Bard smothered a grin. “Glad to meet you, too. Come on in. Let me take your coat, and we’ll drag Thran away from the ballet to go over our stuff.”

“Oooh, Thran told me about this ballet of his,” Hal confided, letting Bard take his coat. As Bard hung it up in the closet, Hal looked around at the hallway, then took in Hope from top to bottom. “Oh, my god, this is such a beautiful piece! What a beautiful finish, and so expressive! Thran said you were a metal sculptor – is this one of yours?”

“She is,” Bard nodded. “Hope the Lope, as my children call her.”

“Stunning,” Hal looked up at Hope’s outstretched hoof. As he studied the antelope, Bard noted the deceptively simple braid that held Hal’s hair at the back, the elegant dark blue blazer, and white shirt with impeccable French cuffs. Thran was right that the man had a sense of humor – his cufflinks were small, white gold crowns that twinkled with diamonds, and his pocket square was bright fuchsia. The queen, indeed.

“Thanks,” Bard smothered another smile. “You can leave your things in the dining room, then we’ll pry Thran free.”

“Thran said you’re in the midst of restoring the house,” Hal said as he put his bags down by one of the dining room chairs.
“It’s still rough around the edges,” Bard shrugged. “Most of the work I’ve finished is upstairs – bathrooms, the children’s bedrooms, the children’s study. We have four children, so I wanted them settled first. The kitchen’s done, too, and the ballroom. But I’ve still got a lot of work to do downstairs for the public rooms. The ballroom’s this way.”

“Did you say ballroom?” Hal’s distinctive blue-flecked green eyes widened. “Really, or are you speaking metaphorically?”

“Oh, we have a real ballroom,” Bard assured him, leading the way into the main room. “So far, we’ve had soccer games and fencing matches in it. Now we’ve got a troupe of dancers, a choreographer, and a few more people creating a ballet in it.”

Bard escorted Hal into the ballroom, gratified when the financial planner’s eyes popped wider still, and his mouth fell open.

“Oh. My. God!” Hal mouthed silently, putting his hand over his heart. “You’ve got a ballroom!”

“That we do,” Bard agreed.

“It’s beautiful! It’s amazing! It’s just like something out of Cinderella! Look at the herringbone floor! And so much gorgeous plasterwork! And the color’s divine! I can’t believe it!” Hal gave him a rapt stare. “You redid this yourself? It must have taken you weeks!”

“I had someone fix the ceiling plasterwork, but the rest was just a lot of elbow grease, spackling, and paint.”

“Well, it’s stunning,” Hal assured him, as Thran broke away from his huddle with Irmo, Luka, and Charisse and came forward with a welcoming smile. “Just stunning. The perfect setting for the perfect dancer. Thran, good to see you again.”

“Welcome, Hal,” Thran greeted the financial planner warmly with a hug. “I am pleased to see you again, too. You have met my husband, Bard?”

“I certainly have,” Hal purred, grinning. “You’re quite the lucky man, old friend.”

“I am,” Thran purred back, causing Bard to roll his eyes.

“Gods, you two. I’m having tea. Do either of you want any?”

“I’d love some,” Hal agreed with a delighted smile. “Did Thran tell you, I’ve gone into tea in a big way lately?”

Bard led the way back to the dining room. “He did. No green matcha, I’m afraid. Indian spice.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Righto,” Bard replied. “Cariad, go ahead and start in the dining room. I’ll collect my stuff, and bring in the tea.”

Thran winked at him, and his smile widened just the barest bit, but it had faded by the time Hal cast his husband a look. Bard shook his head, and retreated to the kitchen. Those two reminded him of nothing so much as a couple of cats who hoped to indulge in a game of pat the ball, with Bard standing in as the ball.

He’d take his time collecting his shoebox and the tea tray.
Hal’s smooth demeanor lasted all of three seconds after Bard disappeared into the kitchen. Then he smirked at Thran for all he was worth, and put his hand over his heart. That was Hal’s favorite gesture.

“Oh, my god, Thran! He’s gorgeous! Please tell me he’s got a brother somewhere, a cousin, a halfway decent friend!”

Thran sat back in his chair and allowed himself an amused smile. In truth, it was hard not to laugh outright at Hal’s typical flailing. “What happened to the biker I thought you were so enamored with?”

Hal waved a hand as he took off his blazer and draped it over the back of his chair. “Oh, that was so last year, Thran. He was so last year. Ran off with a waitress, if you believe that. I’ve moved on, onward and upward.”

As Hal adjusted the cuffs of his shirt with his usual fastidious precision, Thran chuckled. “Crowns, Hal? Gods, that is gaudy, even for you.”


“You certainly do.”

“So tell me about this,” he waved his hands, indicating the house. “You’re married? You, the Prince of Ice? The man with the untouchable heart? You could have knocked me over with a feather when you told me you were married! Though seeing Bard, I don’t blame you. He’s a catch and then some.”

“It is quite a story, and I am as surprised as you are. It was not something I expected, not at all.”

“Well, it can’t be that you got him pregnant – or he you, for that matter,” Hal looked at him skeptically. “You aren’t going to tell me a fairytale about true love and destiny, all swans and violins, are you? Really.”

“It is nothing less,” Thran shrugged, smiling. “Though so far we have seen neither swans nor violins.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Oh, no – you ran into him on a rainy day trying to catch a cab. Honestly, Thran! That is such a cliché.”

“It was rainy, but there was no cab. I had to walk home in the rain and my radiators were ice cold, and Bard was the night super who had to face my wrath. He was quite patient with me, as it was not his fault. Then he made me chicken soup, and Thanksgiving dinner, and I was quite entranced.”

“He seduced you with soup?” Hal’s face revealed astonishment. “Oh, Thran – that’s an even bigger cliché! Snaring a man through his stomach. He sounds devious to me.”

“He is anything but – it was I who seduced him. Though I must warn you that Bard is a very good cook. Do not let his muffins incite you into something foolish.”

“No longer. In a few minutes, you will see that my husband is more than a beautiful man who is patient and cooks well. He is a gifted artist, a wonderful partner, excellent father –”

“Oooh, Legolas likes him, then? That’s gold.”

“He does. Bard has three children of his own, too. We are a large clan.”

“You certainly are,” Hal’s brow wrinkled. “That’s a surprise – I never saw you as the type to want more children.”

“I have two lovely daughters now, and another son. They are all gems, and I am lucky to have them, as well as Bard. But quickly, before Bard returns...”

“Yes?” Hal leaned forward conspiratorially.

“Bard has suffered badly in the ten years since his wife died. He has worked harder than you and I could imagine, all to care for his children, who are his treasures. He has not much money sense, but he knows it, and he has done the best he can. I expect that because he can now work as an artist again, he will soon find himself with more money than he expects.”

“He’s good, then,” Hal said, his teasing façade gone. His face was sharp and focused now, down to business.

“He is more than good, Hal. He will soon sign with a reputable artist’s representative who will market his work more widely. A show is in the plans. He has contributed much to this ballet I pursue, too – he has written most of the story, and he so impressed the costumier that he collaborates on that, too. I expect that his sketches may well play into the publicity for the ballet. And I wonder if a collection of his sketches of the creation process would not make a wonderful book. This is all in addition to his sculpture.”

“So he’ll have a brand to manage, and the money that follows to manage, too.”

“That is what I expect. He worries very much about money, so when you see his so-very-thin paper trail, do not fault him. You and I have no idea what it is like to live the way he has, nor could we cope the way he has. Be gentle.”

Hal’s nod was sober. “Of course. I appreciate your trust in me to help him. So whatever he’s got now is next to nothing, and probably in a mess. Going forward, he’ll need a plan for his assets; and help to understand what he can do with them, as well as grow them for his children. I’m guessing that’s foremost in his mind – providing for his children.”

“Exactly so.”

“Right.” Hal steepled his fingers and pinched his bottom lip between his index fingers. “Several ideas come to mind right away. But we’ve got time, and as things move along, we’ll see what makes sense.” He smiled and gave Thran a fond smile. “Does he know what a gem he’s got in you?”

“I know to a fine point,” Bard said, coming into the dining room with a tray on which rested the black iron teapot, Japanese porcelain cups, small plates, a basket of muffins, and a crock of butter. “I’ve got a dancer I have to badger to eat, who pretends not to know how to do the laundry. But he’s cute, so I keep him.”

“I know how to do the laundry,” Thran protested, smiling, as Bard went back in the kitchen to
retrieve his box of receipts.

“True. You do. So I guess I have even more reason to keep you.”

“You are very good to me,” Thran batted his eyes at Bard, drawing a snort from Hal.

“Oh, my god, you two are disgusting – I’m about to die from the sugar overload.”

“Then perhaps you should not eat any of Bard’s muffins,” Thran teased, as Bard sat down on the other side of Hal. “They have sugar in them, yes, Bard?”

“A little,” Bard conceded, taking one. Ah, his husband had outdone himself – both cranberry orange and Nirvana muffins graced the plate.

“There’s nothing wrong with a little sugar overload,” Hal sniffed. “Honestly, Thran.”

“Then perhaps you should try these,” Thran pointed to the darker muffins. “Nirvana muffins. Bard’s speciality.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a little Nirvana to go with my sugar high, either,” Hal grinned in anticipation as he took one to butter, then sampled a bite. “Oh, my god, Bard, these are to die for! Quick, we’d better get started, or I’ll eat the entire plateful! Which of you wants to go first?”

“I will,” Thran replied, reaching for his packet of papers that lay on the table. “As usual, I thank you for your excellent workbook, which makes the cataloging very nice and easy...”

Little more had to be said before Hal dropped his histrionics to focus on Thran’s finances. As funny as Hal could be, it was a carefully cultivated persona that masked a sharp mind. Hal ticked through Thran’s documents, forms, and spreadsheets in sequence, asking clarifying questions as needed, answering Thran’s questions in a crisp, no-nonsense tone. Sitting across from Thran, Bard sat patiently, likely not following most of what was said, but watching both of his companions to gauge the discussion.

“... so everything’s in good order,” Hal concluded, after an hour’s concentrated study. “I’ve got everything to complete your returns, Thran. Going forward, though, I’d suggest you keep an eye on those eastern oil shares. Those two companies are heavy in coal, and given how low oil prices are going to be for the next year, coal’s not coming back anytime soon – the cost to mine is much higher than the cost to drill. Think about trading that position for a company with less coal, or even some alternative energies, if you’re feeling adventurous. I’ll look into some alternatives if you want to think about it.”

“Sounds prudent,” Thran nodded. “See what you think about the solar offerings. I am interested in that.”

Hal scribbled a note to himself, nodding. “Righto. All right. Anything else we need to talk about?”

Thran took another bite of his muffin. “We have covered everything, my friend.”

Hal scribbled a few more notes, stacked his papers neatly in a folder, and put the folder aside. He gave Bard a smile. “All right, Bard. Let’s see where you stand.”

Bard gave Thran a wry look as he opened his shoebox and took out a few slips of paper. He slid them over to Hal. “I don’t think it’ll take you as long to see to me as it did to Thran.”
“What a relief!” Hal rolled his eyes with a grin. “Those complex Russians are exhausting!”

Hal sorted out Bard’s documents with the finesse of a Las Vegas dealer, taking each one in with a glance. “So... three W-2 statements; interest statement on a bank account; one, two, three receipts for medical expenses; and a stack of rent receipts.”

“That’s the lot of it,” Bard nodded.

“Do you have any records of the hours you put in for the night supervisor position?”

“I do,” Bard nodded as he slid over a battered ledger book. “I’ll tell you before you look at it that it won’t match whatever that bit of paper from Steffen Masters sent me. It never has.”

“Why not?” Hal flicked a frown at Bard before Thran could catch his eye. When he did meet Thran’s eyes, he winced before looking back to Bard. “Ah. This Steffen Masters shorted you.”

Bard nodded. “I think by about a hundred hours. Has Thran already told you why?”

“He hasn’t.”

In a calm, unemotional voice, Bard explained that he hadn’t complained about the chronic shorting of hours because he hadn’t wanted to lose his subsidized apartment, and what it would have meant to Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda if he had. Hal probed whether Bard had copies of any of the time cards he’d turned in to Steffen. Bard pointed to the ledger book.

“They’re in the back, but it won’t make any difference,” Bard shook his head. “The differences amount to a couple of hours a week, and nothing I could ever prove, though I admit I didn’t try too hard. I didn’t want to risk my apartment.”

Once more, Thran saw how precarious Bard’s situation had been just three months ago. His anger must’ve shown on his face, because Hal’s jaw tightened in commiseration.

“No, it wasn’t right, and yes, I wish it hadn’t been the case,” Bard exhaled, taking in Thran’s and Hal’s expressions. “But I get the impression that Steffen’s gotten in trouble for a lot more than shorting my hours, and I’m out of that situation, and into a better one. So whatever numbers are on his bits of paper, let them go.”

“Did you receive anything for those extra hours?” Hal pressed.

Bard shook his head. “Not in money. Does the rate reduction count?”

“How do you have any receipts for the rent you paid?”

“I do – the green papers are the rent receipts.”

Hal looked at them. “Do they list the amount of the original rent, or the rent you paid? Oh, never mind; at that amount, clearly, that’s what you paid. Hmm. Creative financing doesn’t begin to cover it. But if your ex-landlord’s in trouble, the chances are slim and none that you’ll collect anything from him, though I can put through the paperwork if you want.”

Bard shook his head. “I’m out of there, my children are safe, and I’m taking care of them better now. I’ll take that, and a chance for better this year.”

Hal didn’t argue, but Thran thought he regarded Bard more thoughtfully than before. “Good enough. All right, I know what I need to do with this. I suspect that I’ll be able to get you the amount you
paid in for taxes back, given the total amount you made last year. Do you have a copy of your previous year’s return that I can take with me for comparison?”

“Sure. I’ll get that for you. Back in a tick.”

Bard headed upstairs for his slender box of records from previous years that he kept in the closet. As soon as he was out of the room, Hal narrowed his gaze on Thran.

“What that bastard did to your dishy husband amounted to slavery, Thran.”

“Oh, it was much worse than that, my friend,” Thran growled. “But please, honor Bard’s request to let it go. Steffen Masters is currently in so much hot water that he will soon be nothing but greasy broth. I have made sure of that.”

“Have you, now?” Hal’s eyebrows went up. “How wonderful! Nori Goldman, I assume?”

Thran nodded.

“Most excellent. Give him my congratulations when you talk to him next. I might have to look into this, purely for my own shameless self-gratification. He’s always fun to watch.”

“So he is.”

Bard came back with the copy of his tax return that Hal had requested, and after a few more moments of chat, Hal collected the documents, stowed them in his satchel, and pulled out a business card to give Bard. “I’ll be in touch with you both when I’ve got your returns ready. After that, I’d like to come out again for some more of your delicious muffins, Bard, as well as to talk about ways to handle your finances from how on. In case you have any questions before that, please give me a call.”

Thran’s husband grinned at the flamboyant fuchsia card with Hal’s information on it. “It’ll be hard to misplace this, won’t it?”

“Well, that is the point,” Hal looked up at the ceiling with an exaggerated shrug. “Isn’t it?”

“It is,” Bard agreed, as Hal resumed his jacket and they escorted him to the front door. Bard retrieved Hal’s coat from the closet, and passed it to Thran to hold for Hal.

“All right, lovebirds,” Hal turned back to Thran to give him a farewell hug. “Thran, old friend, it’s always a pleasure.”

“It is for me as well, Hal,” Thran returned Hal’s hug warmly.

“And Bard, my new friend?” he invited, arms wide.

Bard gave him an unruffled but amused smile. “As long as it doesn’t cause too much excitement.”

Hal put his hand to his heart and eyed Thran. “Oh, he’s a saucy one, is he? Oh, my god, you must have your hands full with him!”

“As often as possible,” Thran teased, as Bard opened the door.

“Then I definitely need to give him a hug! Bard, it’s been a pleasure. And the muffins were absolutely divine!”

Bard hugged him back without reservation. “You’re welcome, Hal. Thran told me I’d get a kick out
of meeting you, and he was right. I appreciate you stooping to deal with my slim pickings so
gracefully.”

Hal put his hands on Bard’s shoulders without any theatricality. “Next year, you’ll have a lot more
for me to deal with, Bard, and deservedly so. I’ll talk to you soon about ways to make the most of
what you earn for yourself, Thran, and especially your children. Don’t you doubt it for one single
moment.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Bard nodded, as Hal went out on the porch and turned back to wave
goodbye. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Hal smiled, and went down the stairs

Thran took in the outrageous Audi R8 sitting in the driveway, and couldn’t resist a snort as he waved
at the car. “Really, Hal? That is over the top, too, even for you.”

Again, a grinning Hal shrugged without apology. “I told you, Thran. I love bling.”

“Bling, indeed. Safe trip home, my friend. Until next time.”

Hal winked. “Until next time. Ciao!”

As Hal revved up his blingy car and disappeared down the lane, Bard chuckled.

“You survived well, lyubov moya,” Thran observed, as he and Bard came in from the porch and shut
the front door. “You did not let Hal discommode you in the least.”

Bard wasn’t able to suppress a snicker. “Actually, I was trying not to ‘discommode’ either of you. I
felt like a cat toy between a pair of Siamese.”

“You handled us both very well. What was your secret?”

Bard shrugged, but his eyes twinkled with suppressed humor. “I pretended I was straight. It
worked.”

Laughter bubbled out of Thran as he snared Bard by the shoulder and backed him against the door to
kiss him. “Oh, my saint, you are a most resourceful man. Would you let me tempt you from your
straight path back to a crooked one later tonight?”

Grasping Thran’s wrists, Bard kissed him back with a smile. “I think you’ve already done so.”

“I want to be sure.”

Bard pulled Thran into another kiss. “Hmm. You perform better when faced with a challenge, but
given that you’ve got to go back to the ballroom, maybe I’ll go easy on you.”

Laughing, Thran pushed away from the door, and headed back to the ballroom. “When I am done
with you, you will go very easily. Until later, lyubov moya.”

Bard’s chuckle followed Thran back to the ballroom. It was a most anticipatory sound.
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

A pair of cherubs try their hands at the dance, complete with music. Later, an angel confesses his compulsion to meet a bandit, and a saint considers the riches a bandit might plunder.

Chapter Notes

The music that accompanies this chapter is "Valse Pour Jeanette," by Tonny Eyck (the doll's dance), and "Carnival of Souls (Theatre Organ and Calliope Instrumentation)," by Verne Langdon (the ghost's dance). Both are wonderful, but "Carnival of Souls" has just made it into my top ten rotation. Both are available on YouTube, so play them while you read.

I don't own any rights or whatever to YouTube. But they've been my go-to site when I wanted to find music for this story!

After Hal left, Bard had an hour to fill until the children came home. He could've followed Thran back into the ballroom to work with Rada, but he decided he’d add to his growing collection of sketches for Bilbo, and spent that hour at work on pictures of the flamboyant financial planner. Hal offered so much to work with, so Bard had a good dozen portraits of him completed before the children rattled through the mudroom door. He got up to muster the usual snacks of cheese and crackers, which disappeared in seconds down four hungry throats. Bard followed them as they ducked into the ballroom to wave hello to Thran. When Legolas gave Thran a big hug, Bard’s throat tightened. The boy had missed his Papa more than he’d let on, but at least his happiness with Thran’s presence was open and unrestrained.

“Bain! Sigrid! Tilda! Welcome home!” Thran called to the other children as he draped an arm around the shoulders of his tall son. “You have all had a good day, I hope?”

“I have new French words today!” Tilda waved. “Words about l’école, the school.”

“We’ll make quick work of those,” Legolas looked up at his father. “Won’t we?”

“We certainly will, synok,” Thran grinned, hugging Legolas. “But first, we will have a treat before supper. Have you had your fromage et craquelins, mes petits?” At the assorted nods, Thran pointed to Charisse. “Good. Charisse has happily agreed to do the doll dance with me. When Irmo is finished with her and Luka, we will show you.”

Tilda’s eyes brightened as she and Sigrid traded gleeful expressions. “Will she be the doll, or will you?”

“She will be the doll first, then I will be. So you will see our original dance, and then what you or Sigrid might do as the child who wants to play with the toymaker’s new doll.”
“That’ll be so cool,” Sigrid exclaimed. “What do you think, Tilda?”

“It will.”

“Ahh. Here comes Charisse.”

The little dancer gave the children’s welcoming chorus a warm smile. “Hello, children. My friend Luka has generously told Irmo that he wants to go over a part of his dance alone, so I can slip away to dance something fun with Thran. We had such a good time when we did this dance two years ago, so I’m glad to do it again. We’re doing the original dance first, aren’t we, Thran?”

Thran nodded, and held his hand out to Charisse. “Shall we, ma chère?”

“Wait,” Sigrid asked. “Don’t you need music for your dance?”

“We can do it without for now, just to show you,” Thran shrugged.

“Tell me what it is, and I can play it on my laptop,” Sigrid offered. “I’ll go get it.”

Sigrid retreated to the kitchen to retrieve her backpack, and returned with it cradled in her arms.

“How’s the name of the piece?”

“It’s a very light and pretty waltz – *Valse Pour Jeanette*, by a Dutchman named Tonny Eyck,” Charisse supplied. “But on the accordion, it sounds very French, very sunny.”

“I’ll check YouTube,” Sigrid said, clicking away. “Oh, there it is. Say when, and I’ll start it.”

With a smile, Charisse gave her hand to Thran, and he escorted her to the end of the ballroom. He looked back at Bard and the children, and pointed to the area in front of the tall windows. “We will make this the stage. So face the windows, and we will begin.”

Once Bard and the children were in place, Thran nodded to Sigrid, and she started the music. Charisse froze into a rigid pose, all wide unblinking eyes, wooden face, and stiff legs and arms. Thran tucked her under his arm to carry her to the middle of the floor, then set her down on her feet. He then walked around her, rubbing his chin, considering this wonderful doll. He pushed down on her head until she slid into a split, moved her arms upright, and tilted her head. Then he turned away to fetch a tool. As soon as his back was turned, the doll made a naughty face at him, and slid upright into her original position. When Thran turned back to her, Charisse’s face was once again wide-eyed and wooden. Thran made a show of looking all around for whom had moved the doll, but of course there was no one, so he repositioned the doll, then bent for his tools again. The doll put her thumbs in her ears to waggle her hands at the doll maker, stuck her tongue out at the same time, and flopped into a new pose. Again, the doll maker looked unsuccessfully for the culprit, but was now too suspicious to look away. He poked and prodded the doll into ever more contorted poses, finally satisfied that the doll would not move again. This time, however, when he turned his back, the doll leaped up and kicked the doll maker’s backside to knock him over before slipping back into immovability. A battle of wits ensued, until the doll maker found himself bowled over and the doll flopped atop him in a ridiculous pose. The harder the doll maker tried to extricate himself, the limper she became, but finally he got himself upright and the doll back on her feet. The dance swirled again from one ridiculous pose after another. Finally, the flustered doll maker ended up on his belly with the doll standing atop him, arms upstretched. When the doll maker cradled his chin in his hands and heaved a sigh, conceding defeat, the doll made muscle arms and smiled triumphantly, ending the dance. That met with enthusiastic applause.

“That was terrific!” Bain declared, clapping as hard as the girls. “You made it look so easy, like you
really were a rag doll, Mlle. Charisse!"

“Thank you!” she laughed. “Oh, it is still fun to do that, even two years on, Thran. So much fun!”

“It is nice to do something lighthearted,” he agreed. “Shall we switch roles?”

“I will have to pretend to wheel you out on a cart or something,” Charisse decided. “For certainement, I cannot lift you.”

“That’s where I come in,” Bard held up his hand. “The story we started with was that I’d be the toymaker who carries the doll out, and Tilda or Sigrid would be the little girl who isn’t supposed to play with the doll. But she sneaks in anyway, and tries to get the doll to dance. But of course, he just flops around. Then I thought about what should come next. Maybe the doll breaks a dish or something, and the doll helps her hide the bits, then they put him back into his original position. When the toymaker comes in to ask who did it, the little girl disavows all knowledge. After the toymaker leaves, the girl and the doll think they’ve put something over on him, and dance around until they end up in a heap.”

“That’s a good story!” Charisse clapped her hands. “Let’s try it, Thran.”

“I need my ride,” Thran winked at Bard, and struck his stiff pose. Bard duly picked him up, carried him in front of the window, set him down, and pretended to brush him off. Charisse moved close to the windows.

“I stick my head out of the curtains,” she said, miming that. When Sigrid started the music again, Charisse looked left, then right, then tiptoed from behind the imaginary curtain, still looking to make sure the doll maker hadn’t seen her. She walked around the doll, poking and prodding, pulling on his arms to make him dance, but he merely let her flap his arms until suddenly he slumped over into a split, the rest of him leaning floppily to one side. Charisse recoiled in shock, then pushed him to and fro into the most impossible positions. When she got him into a backbend, then she pushed him over, and laughed when he fell into a heap. She was so delighted in her mischief that the doll sat up with an exaggerated frown, and sent her tumbling, pretending to laugh at her. When Charisse picked herself up, of course, the doll was immobile. So she put him in another impossible pose, but a swinging arm tumbled her over again, and the doll flopped down on top of her. She struggled to get out from under him, glaring at him when she finally did. The battle of wits went back and forth until an errant foot flapped wildly around.

“So I break the dish,” Thran called, as he and Charisse froze, both of them with their hands over their mouths in shock. The doll and the girl looked at each other with exaggerated alarm, and they hurriedly swept the bits of broken crockery away. Then Charisse struggled to put the doll in his original position.

“Now the doll maker appears, because he heard the noise,” Thran called. He stood awry from his original pose when Bard stepped forward with hands on hips. He held his hands wide, miming a sharp question. Charisse put her hands behind her and looked innocent as she shook her head vigorously. Bard put his hands on his hips, frowning at Charisse, then shaking his finger at her. Charisse shook her head again just as vigorously, holding her hands up mystification.

Bard looked around suspiciously, but exited when he didn’t find anything. Charisse mimed glee at putting something over on the doll maker, and the doll did, too. The girl mimed wanting to dance with the doll, who offered a floppy bow, and the pair danced around in a circle twice before the doll stumbled, tumbling on top of the girl. She ended up on her stomach, with the doll sprawled face up on top of her, her chin in her hands as Thran had done the first time. To end the dance, Thran turned towards the audience and grinned, waving his arms wide.
“That was great!” Sigrid clapped enthusiastically. “That was so great!”

“It was!” Tilda agreed. “It really was!”

Charisse and Thran got up and offered bows. “That was fun,” Charisse laughed. “You make a very good doll, mon cher.”

“And you make a very good playmate,” Thran replied. “What do you think, Kukla? Would you like to be my playmate in the dance?”

“If you don’t want to, I will,” Sigrid offered. “It won’t be a cute as if you do it, because you’re smaller than I am, but it looks like so much fun.”

“It does look like fun,” Tilda considered. “Do you think I could learn to do it?”

“There’s a time limit of no more than five minutes for each act,” Bard said.

“Our music is three and a half minutes, no more. That will be a perfect time.”

“Three and a half minutes?” Tilda considered. “I can do that.”

“We will practice until we both know it,” Thran said. “It will be fun.”

“Why can’t you do zombies?” Bain shook his head, looking at Legolas. “Dolls are okay, but zombies would be a lot more fun.”

Charisse laughed. “Ah, remember how we all danced the zombies from Thriller at the end of the gala?”

“I do,” Thran grinned. “Also much fun.”

“If Tilda’s going to do the doll dance, would you do another dance with me, Ada? Please?” Sigrid ventured. “I found this piece of music last night. It’s not zombie music, but it’s eerie. It’s a waltz.”

“Two dances?” Thran looked to Bard. “I would be glad to do it, ma chère, but is there a limit on only one act per person?”

“I’ll call Halina tomorrow and ask,” Bard offered. “I don’t think they have many dance entries, so maybe they’d be glad for you to do two. Anyway, we’ll just tell them different children are in the sketch.”

“It’s really neat music, Ada,” Sigrid pleaded. “It’s called Carnival of Souls, and I love it.”

“Then let us hear it,” Thran winked at Bard. “Show your Da how to start the music, and then we will waltz.”

Sigrid’s delighted grin was so wide that Bard wondered if his daughter had caught a little of the performance bug from Thran. She showed him which button to click on his computer, then scrambled to take her place in front of Thran. He showed her how to position one hand on his shoulder and the other in his hand, and he led them through the basic waltz step for a turn or two.

“Ready for your eerie music, ma chère?” Thran asked.

Sigrid nodded. “Okay, Da.”

The music started, as eerie as Sigrid promised, a combination of a massive Wurlitzer theater organ
and circus calliope. Thran swung Sigrid rapidly around to the music, occasionally murmuring an instruction or a direction. Sigrid kept pace with him as they danced round and round the ballroom, the wide grin never leaving her face. When they passed Irmo and Luka, the pair paused, and Luka made his escape to swing Charisse around after Thran and Sigrid, laughing. The music evoked abandoned circus tents at midnight when old spirits ventured out for one more dance, one more memory. Maybe it wasn’t the zombies the boys wanted, but with the right costumes and lighting, it would be a ghostly performance.

“Oh, I liked that!” Sigrid exclaimed when the music ended. “That’s amazing, so amazing! Please, Ada, if you can do two dances, would you do this one, too?”

“I love this music!” Charisse enthused. “So eerie, not quite mortal. So wonderful. Would you play it again, Bard?”

“I like it, too,” Thran nodded at once, as Luka and Charisse circled around to the music. Watching them, Irmo got caught up in it, and began suggesting steps, which the two dancers did in time with the music. “Very odd, but very beautiful. Of course, we will dance this, Sigrid. Your Da must come up with a story for us that fits such evocative music.”

“I’m halfway there,” Bard said. “An abandoned carnival at midnight, when the spirits of the performers come out to dance. Maybe not zombies, but ghosts.”

“That’s perfect!” Sigrid nodded. “We can dress up as a little bit creepy, a little bit decaying.”

“It is a fast waltz,” Thran observed. “But we must make it light, like ghosts.”

“I can do that,” Sigrid nodded. “All the running has done my lungs wonders.”

“Let us go again, then,” Thran offered, and Sigrid agreed with alacrity. This time, Sigrid was more assured, more relaxed, and even managed a twirl under Thran’s arm with reasonable finesse.

Tilda came to stand beside Bard. “That looks like fun.”

“It does. Want to give it a try, little doll?” Bard offered.

Tilda looked up at him with such appreciation that Bard held out his hand. “Let’s do it, then.”

“A waltz is one-two-three, one-two-three,” Tilda supplied, drawing Bard’s chuckle.

“Got it. Ready?”

They waited until both pairs went by them, then swung after them. They did passably well, keeping up with the others, keeping good time.

“Switch partners!” Luka called, handing Charisse off to Thran. Sigrid went to Bard, and Tilda went to Luka without a hitch. Rada stepped in to restart the music, and with a taller partner, Bard got the full force of the pace and the dance. When Luka called again, Bard sent Sigrid on to Luka, Tilda went to Thran, and Charisse came to Bard. The little dancer was a joy to partner, and Bard flew around the ballroom with her, both of them laughing. When the music ended this time, Bard was sorry no matter how winded he was, for the eerie music had a hypnotic quality that drew him. In whatever purgatory the carnival lingered, this music never stopped.

Bard had the worst urge to snare Thran and dance with him to this eerie music. But now was not the time for it. One night soon, when the children were in bed, he’d light a candle in the ballroom, play this music, and see what ghosts he’d lure to his midnight carnival. If a tall, ethereal, white haired
apparition appeared, Bard would have his dance.

That gave Bard something to anticipate as they sorted themselves out. Interestingly, the eerie mood of the music fit so well with *Immortal’s* troll market scene that Irmo had snared Thran, wondering aloud whether it was something they should incorporate. Thran waved to Bard and the children as work shifted back into gear after the short interval, so Bard led the children back to the kitchen. Bain and Legolas were happy to play a video game while Tilda and Sigrid helped Bard start on supper prep.

“Luka dances like a dream,” Sigrid mused, as she leaned on the kitchen island to watch Bard pull out food from the fridge.

Bard eyed his oldest daughter over the bag of green beans. “He does?”

Sigrid nodded as she opened the bag of beans and took out enough for supper. “Ada does, too, of course. But it’s a little easier dancing with someone who isn’t so much taller than I am.”

Bard hummed noncommittally. Sigrid didn’t say any more, so Bard was willing to bide his time. “That was a great piece of music you found.”

She grinned. “I know! I love it. I figured that once Tilda saw what Charisse and Thran did with the doll dance that she’d want to do it, so I looked for something maybe I could do with Ada. I hope they’ll let him do two, Da. I want to dance with him, too.”

“It’ll be a lot of work,” Bard warned her. “For you, too, Tilda. Make sure you’re both willing to do the work it’ll take to get your dance ready. Once I tell Halina that you want to be in the show, you’re committed.”

“I want to,” Sigrid said quickly.

“I do, too,” Tilda agreed firmly.

“Okay,” Bard nodded. “You think about it overnight, then let me know for sure in the morning before you go to the school, then I’ll talk to Halina.”

The girls began to talk about what costumes they could put together, so Bard put chicken in the oven and a pot of farro on to simmer. Tilda put together fruit salad, Sigrid chopped veg for the steamer, and Bard set the table. Before long, Charisse, Luka, Rada, and Ori stuck their heads in to say goodnight, and soon after Thran escorted Irmo to the door. Supper was almost ready, so Thran hurried upstairs to divest himself of his dancing attire and put on something more comfortable. Supper was replete with good food, as well as a lot of talk about the girls’ dances with Thran.

“What about you, Legolas and Bain?” Bard teased. “Do you want to do an act, too?”

“No!” Bain said at once, and Legolas shook his head just as fast. “No way!”

“You, either, Legolas?” Thran made an exaggerated look of surprise.

“No, thank you, Papa,” Legolas said hastily. “Unless they let me fence or do archery or play zombie apocalypse, I leave the performing to you and Kukla and Sigrid.”

“Just as well,” Bard smiled at the boys. “Three hams in the family are enough.”

“Four, Da,” Sigrid corrected. “You’re the doll maker.”
“A nonspeaking, nondancing part. Just a mule. Which is just fine with me.”

“Bard is our storyteller,” Thran said. “He comes up with the story for *Immortal*, and then for the doll dance, and then for the carnival dance.”

“The carnival dance isn’t much of a story,” Bain said. “Just two people dancing.”

“He’s right,” Bard agreed. “If you want a story, it wouldn’t take much to add one.”

“Like what?” Sigrid asked.

“Hmm,” Bard thought about his idea to lure Thran down for a waltz. “What if Thran wanders into the abandoned carnival at night, and the ghost of a long dead performer appears, lures him into a dance, then disappears as the music fades? That’s all the story you need.”

“I like that!” Sigrid sat up straighter with a delighted grin. “And I get to be the ghost! That’s cool!”

“It is a good story,” Thran nodded. “So the audience stays interested, because it wants to see what happens when the dance ends. Will the ghost lure the boy to his death? Steal his heart? Vanish into smoke? Well done, my saint!”

“I still think it’d be better with zombies,” Bain cradled his chin in his hand, drawing Legolas’s laughter.

“With lots of blood,” Legolas muttered, mimicking Bain’s posture.

“Yeah! Blood!” Bain exclaimed.

“Ew, you two,” Sigrid grimaced. “No zombies! Next thing you know, you’ll want my arm to fall off in the middle.”

“That would be cool,” Legolas giggled.

“Yeah, we could rig her up with a false arm –”

“Bleah!” Tilda covered her eyes with her hands and shuddered. “I couldn’t watch that.”

“No, no, no!” Sigrid tapped the table with her fists for emphasis. “No zombies, no arms falling off, no blood! I’ll be a ghost who dances with a mortal at midnight. That’s it. That is it.”

“The queen has spoken,” Bard grinned.

“So let it be written, so let it be done,” Thran seconded, also grinning. “So we will have a cute dance between a doll and a very smart little girl, and an eerie dance between a mortal and a ghost. We have our assignments.”

“And some children have homework assignments,” Bard prompted. “Let’s have our dessert, then it’s time to crack the books.”

“I wish someone would crack my pre-algebra book,” Bain groaned. “Right in half, never to be repaired!”

“*Une doleur,*” Legolas grumped, hunching down when Thran eyed him.

“What’s that mean?” Bard asked.
“A pain,” Thran translated. “We do not have to add what kind of a pain, no?”

“No, Papa,” Legolas said as the boys got up to collect the plates from the table. Dessert proceeded without further comment, then cleanup, but as Bard carried his teacup into the sitting room with Thran as the children settled around the kitchen table, he overheard Bain murmur to Legolas.

“What’s *une douleur* really mean, Legs?”

“Just a general pain. Not a pain in the ass or anything.”

“How do you say pain in the ass?”

“Just say *merde*. That means shit. It works for everything, even pre-algebra.”

“Especially pre-algebra,” Bain muttered back. “*Merde, merde, merde. Beaucoup de merde!*”

“*Merde complète,*” Legolas agreed with heartfelt exasperation.

Muffled snickering ensued, even from Tilda. Thran was about to get up, but Bard put his hand on his husband’s thigh. “Let them alone. That’s probably one of the most useful things they’ve learned today.”

Thran’s face crumbled into rueful amusement. “Perhaps so. All right, *lyubov moya*. I will let the children alone.”

“Maybe I can give you something else to think about.”

Thran’s eyes slid to Bard’s, and his lips curved up. “Oooh. I hope it is about how bandits make out.”

“Mmm. That’s a lot more interesting than what I was about to say.”

“What were you about to say?”

“That some night before too long, I want to light a candle in the ballroom, and dance with a white-haired carnival ghost to Sigrid’s waltz.”

“Oh, *lyubov moya*, how can you think that is not interesting? You are the romantic, which is always interesting, and delicious. I want to do that, too. But I will not leave you at the end of the dance.”

“I’ll find some way to reward you for that.”

“Most deliciously. But tonight, I want bandits who make out. I have thought of nothing else since Saturday.”

Bard gave a quick look towards the kitchen, but the children were quiet. He brushed a kiss on Thran’s lips. “Tell me what you’ve thought about.”

“I thought about what it would be like to stumble upon such a sly fellow while he rifled my closet, only to have him decide that I offered much more to steal than my closet did.”

Bard shut his eyes, thinking about that. “I’m surprised that such a formidable warrior as my husband didn’t take exception to that.”

“The bandit knew that I did not really want to resist, so made sure that I could not. Then he took his time.”
“A brazen fellow, then.”

“A veritable highwayman. Is that enough for you to spin a tale to delight us both?”

“I think I can manage that. Any twists in the end?”

Thran’s grin was evil. “Only in the ropes, lyubov moyya.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“Your bastard, entirely. Later, then?”

“I hope you can wait that long.”

“I wait with bated breath.”

Bard smothered a snicker. “You’ll be the death of us.”

“I will be the life of us, and so will you. Think how delirious we will be for many years.”

“If I do, I’ll never make it upstairs.”

Thran chuckled. “That has its own allure.”

“Stop it, you bastard. We’ve got children in the next room.”

“That is a tragedy. It would be a challenge to see how fast I could reduce you to ashes, merely with my fingers.”

“Gods, and you want to bottom with a bandit? He doesn’t stand a chance.”

“He will not stand for long. He will be too eager to take me to bed.”

“What’re you giggling about in there?” Sigrid called. “You sound like the boys when they’re up to something.”

“I am not up yet, but soon will be,” Thran teased in a whisper.

Bard shushed his husband with a smirk. “We are up to something. I’m telling Thran my favorite bad pun. You interrupted me at the punch line.”

“If you haven’t told him the punch line yet, then why is he laughing?”

“Because I’m laughing, and he’s laughing at me laughing. So let me tell him, okay?”

“I bet he groans,” Bain called.

“Tell me, quickly,” Thran whispered.

“Why did the Frenchman use dynamite in his kitchen renovation?”

“I have no idea. Why?”

“Because he wanted to see linoleum blown apart.”

“Linoleum? That is the floor? Then why – oh, I see! Napoleon Bonaparte, Linoleum blown apart! Oh, lyubov moyya, that is a terrible pun.”
“That’s the best kind,” Bard snickered. “It’s my favorite.”

“It is awful. Yes, Bain, I did groan.”

“Told you,” Bain’s voice came from the kitchen. “It was the linoleum one, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

“Linoleum?” Legolas asked. “I don’t know this one.”

Bain related the joke and the punch line. Legolas, however, didn’t groan, but laughed uproariously. “Oh, that’s hilarious! What, don’t you think it’s hilarious? It is!”

“It was the first sixty times Da told it, but that was a long time ago,” Bain groaned, but Sigrid snickered in the background.

“I still think it’s funny,” Tilda inserted. “It’s my favorite joke.”

“Thank you, little doll,” Bard called.

“Welcome. Can I come in to do my French words now?”

“Of course,” Thran called.

Tilda came in with her sheet, and Bard enjoyed watching her and Thran go through all of the words. This was an easy list, for Tilda got most of them on the first time or two. So Thran told her how all the terms for ballet steps were French, and a little about why they were. As this was the last of Tilda’s homework, she and Thran tried a few things for their dance. It was fun to watch Tilda become more confident that she could handle such a large doll, because Thran would do most of the work. Bard pulled out his sketchpad, and added a few more drawings to his collection. Tomorrow morning, then, he’d call Bilbo and arrange to visit him with his growing portfolio. He was both excited and apprehensive about what Bilbo might say, but there was nothing unusual about that – every artist worried about how his or her work would be received, but he wouldn’t let that apprehension keep him from creating. The only person he had to please, ultimately, was himself.

“This is fun!” Tilda giggled, as Thran flopped over onto his back, arms and legs awry. She pulled on his arm to sit him up again, and he came up with a smile.

“That is the important thing, Kukla – that we have fun. If we have fun, then the people who watch us will have fun, too.”

“Is it scary, having so many people look at you?” Tilda asked.

Thran sat up, and gathered Tilda into his lap on the floor. “It is for some people. It does not scare me, as long as I like what I do. Perhaps if I had to give a talk about something I knew nothing about, I would be scared.”

“What if I get scared?”

“We will practice a lot, to make sure we know what to do. That will help. But if you do get scared when we dance, it will be all right. You will just look at me, not at the people who look, and we will get through it.”

“There will likely be some rehearsals, little doll, so you’ll get used to it before you do the dance in the Follies. That’ll help, too,” Bard offered.
“It won’t be so bad, then,” Tilda decided.

“Not at all,” Thran agreed. “You will be an old pro by the time we get to the Follies.”

“I like that music that Sigrid chose for her dance,” Tilda said. “It sounds like a carousel. An odd one.”

“Very odd,” Thran agreed. “A haunted one.”

“And I’m the ghost,” Sigrid came in, smiling. “I can’t wait to do it. Are we reading tonight? I finished my homework and my paper’s done, so I can help read tonight.”

“Goodie!” Tilda crowed. “This next chapter’s exciting – Ron’s going to play the big chess game. Hurry up, Bain and Legs! I want to read!”

“Almost done, Kukla,” Legolas called. “Just this last problem. Sigrid, would you look at it, to make sure I did it right?”

The math problems were soon dispensed with, and reading commenced. Ron completed the chess game bravely, and Harry went on to confront Professor Quirrell. The second book in the series would soon be underway, and the children headed upstairs to clean up and get ready for bed.

“I’ll head up for a shower, too, angel.” Bard stretched before he stood up. “Then you can have your turn before a bandit makes an appearance in your closet. In the meantime, I did some sketches of Hal this afternoon, if you’d like to see them.”

“Yes, I would.” Thran leaned forward to pick up Bard’s sketchbook. “Are they in this one?”

“Just before the pages of you and Tilda that I just did,” Bard nodded. “Be back down in a tick.”

He left his husband to peruse his sketches, and enjoyed a leisurely scrub and dry. When he rejoined Thran in the sitting room, his husband had a glass of nalivka ready for him. He sat snickering over Bard’s sketchbook.

“These pictures of Hal are exquisite, lyubov moya. Every one of them is perfection. He would love them!”

“If I gave him one of them, do you think he’d sign a model’s release to let me use them?”

“I think he would be honored even if you did not give him one. He would be overjoyed if someone bought one of your sketches of him – if he does not decide to buy the lot of them himself.”

“I’d better talk to Bilbo, then,” Bard ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t have any idea of how much to charge for any of these.”

“Then call Bilbo.”

“I plan to, as soon as he’s open tomorrow. I think I’ve got enough for him to look at. I’ll need to get model’s releases from everyone associated with Immortal. And I won’t include any of the costume designs for Immortal in the first batch I show Bilbo. Maybe after the ballet’s done, but not before.”

“I had a thought about what a nice book you might put together of your sketches of the ballet.”

“That’s a neat idea,” Bard nodded with a smile at his husband. “A companion piece?”

“Just so. I have the feeling that after we perform Immortal in the school auditorium for the festival, it
will shortly appear on a much more prominent stage.”

Bard looked up at Thran in surprise. “What, has someone approached you about that?”

“Not yet,” Thran shook his head serenely. “But I have the feeling, Bard. This ballet will see more performances than those we give in a school auditorium. Your story is wonderful. The costumes you and Rada will devise will be wonderful. And Irmo’s choreography... he is a difficult and sometimes unpleasant man. But his choreography is divine. *Immortal* will be like nothing else.”

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Bard grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut. “I did ask about whether the school auditorium could host *Immortal* during the festival. The rumblings sounded good. I gave them Lettie’s name and number, and I called Lettie to let her know who in the school was the contact. So I hope that’s getting underway.”

“Most excellent,” Thran said with satisfaction. “So for tonight, we have done all that we can do. So let us bid the children good night, and then I will shower. Perhaps when I am done, I will stumble upon a bandit in my closet.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” Bard drawled with a slow stare for Thran. “Rounds first. I’m the only bandit I want in my house.”

“Prudent,” Thran agreed, as they began their usual check of doors and windows and light switches. When all was secure, they headed upstairs, and made their comfortable rounds of the children. When they’d bid all four goodnight, they retreated to their room with anticipation. Bard drew his husband close, filling his hands full of tight glutes.

“Enjoy your shower, angel,” Bard breathed, nuzzling a kiss on Thran’s neck.

Humming, Thran cradled Bard’s chin in his hands to kiss his lips. “Not a very long one, I think.”

“The longer you take, the more time you give the bandit to think about what he wants to steal.”

“He will have to think fast,” Thran kissed Bard again before he slipped away and backed into the bathroom.

Grinning, Bard flopped down onto the bed to consider just what was worth stealing from an angel. So many things sprang to mind.

When the water stopped running in the shower, and the hair dryer switched on, Bard got up, and took himself into the closet. He had a few things to collect before he turned into a bandit.
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

The game's afoot - or is it?

Later, the saint's work receives a critique, and an angel has news about pointe shoes.

Thran combed the last lock of his hair, and smoothed the last bit of oil on the bottom of the long white strands. He loved the exotic scent of the oil, and rubbed the last traces of it into his hands. Tonight, however, the last traces of that scent weren’t enough. As expensive as it was, he couldn’t resist warming just a little more of it in his palms, then rubbing it slowly into his skin, from top to bottom. It was a faint smell, but delicious, and the calming touch of his hands, the silky feel of the oil... such a sensual delight.

As delicious as this was, Thran didn’t linger over it. Even more deliciousness awaited him in the bedroom. What would he find in the closet? Had Bard spun another of his tales? The man was amazing at how quickly he came up with an enchanting story – the ballet, the dances he would do with Tilda and Sigrid for the Follies, the artist and the vampire, pirates, musketeers, kings and seers... Sheer anticipation already had his skin tingling.

He put on his silk robe, but didn’t bother to button it – it would likely be off before long. Instead, he wrapped it around himself to savor the touch against his skin. Mmm. Another tactile pleasure, so eagerly enjoyed, even more so tonight in the face of his anticipation. He came out of the bath and into the bedroom –

Hands took his shoulders from behind. The touch was soft, but Thran stopped, shutting his eyes when Bard drew close enough behind him that he felt body warmth through his robe.

“You asked for bandits and bonds tonight. I’ll give you both, but maybe not exactly how you expected. If you want the latter, you need to give me something first.”

“Anything.”

“You know I’ll never hurt you, always treasure you. Do you trust me to keep those promises tonight?”

“I trust you with my life, lyubov noya.”

“Then take off your robe.”

Thran let it slide to the floor, skin tingling as the cool air touched it.

“Middle of the bed, on your heels.”

Thran crawled into position, not turning around. His heart sped up a hair, and the brush of his hair against his back was the worst teasing touch. Even the smell of his exotic oil seemed more beguiling.

“Put your hands behind you.”
Thran offered his wrists.

Bard was behind Thran, out of his sight. A loop of something – soft, giving fabric, itself a sensual delight – went around his wrists, then looped between them, binding them oh so softly together. Bard’s fingers moved carefully, methodically, but even that was arousing. Thran’s heart jumped again when the soft fabric looped around his ankles, binding them to his wrists. The loops were comfortable, not too tight, but if he tried to move much, he’d only fall flat on his face.

Bard moved in front of him to regard him in the dim light. “All right so far?”

Could Bard see how aroused he already was, just from anticipation? He veiled his eagerness behind lowered lashes. “You have me.”

“Not quite,” Bard stroked his face. “I want you to enjoy every moment of this, without reserve, without inhibition. That’s something I won’t trust to a bandit, only to me. So this isn’t a game – it’s you and me, and I need one more thing to help you enjoy yourself.”

“What is it?”

“Something that will steal your inhibitions better than any bandit, so I can give you what you’ve never had before.”

“What is this thing that can do so much?”

“It’s why I asked you if you trusted me. Do you?”

Oh, gods, the anticipation would kill him before Bard so much as laid a hand on him! Thran bent his head in assent. “I do.”

Bard kissed his lips. “You know our trigger word. Tell me when you get uncomfortable being so confined.”

“I will.”

“Then the only demand I make of you is to enjoy.”

“I hear and obey, my saint.”

Bard was out of his sight again. What was about to happen? Where would Bard touch him first? His hair? His ribs? The exposed soles of his feet? Or would Bard not touch him at all, content to let Thran’s anticipation build on the strength of his imagination?

Unexpectedly, a soft scarf went around his eyes, and was knotted behind his head. He gasped at the sudden loss of sight – now he was blind as well as immobile. Immediately, other senses scrabbled to fill in the gaps – touch, smell, hearing. For long seconds, there was little to sense; Bard was not on the bed, and silent wherever he was. The smell of the oil on his skin changed subtly as a faint hint of sweat joined it. Gods, the waiting was unbearable! As the seconds went by, Thran’s imagination went wild, trying to fill the blind void that engulfed him.

A single finger traced up his back from the top of his glutes to his shoulders. Gasping, he spasmed against his bonds. How his body trembled! The provocative touch of Bard’s hand, the tickle of his long hair against his back, the prickle of gooseflesh racing over his body... gods, the sensations were electric. He was given no time to relax before a faint tickle – nothing human; perhaps a feather? – traced down his cheek, over his chest, and down his abdomen. It twitched up his arm, under his chin, over his shoulder, and down his back to brush against his bare feet. When it brushed against his
nipple, so much arousal rushed through him that he jerked against his bonds again. The restriction intensified the sensation, because he couldn’t dissipate it through movement. He bit his lips, trying not to move or speak.

A sharper, more defined touch – no, several parallel touches – traced up one thigh, from knee to hip. Now and again the touches were more definite, as if a cat’s paw flexed to reveal its claws. Whatever it was, it reversed track to slide down towards his knee, and now the touch was smooth and cool – a fork, perhaps? But no sooner had he relaxed than Bard was behind him, tracing fingers up his thigh in time with whatever he used on the other, and brushing a soft kiss at the juncture of neck and shoulder. Thran leaned into him, head back, letting the touches overwhelm him, savoring the warmth of Bard’s skin against his.

“Oh, gods,” he breathed, wanting more. “So good, so good…”

Bard’s arm went around his waist, pulling him close. Teeth claimed his earlobe just before an ice cube pressed right above the top of his cock. It traced a narrow but freezing path up the centerline of his abs, veering off to circle one nipple, then the other. The sudden shock had every muscle taut as the ice melted against his skin, sending cold rivulets down his torso. As Bard ran the ice cube directly over his nipple, Thran gasped and writhed, but he was held fast. A hand went around his cock, massaging and coaxing, mixing icy shock with carnal arousal, turning both sensations upside down. Just when he thought he’d scream, the ice ran up his throat, over his lips, and into his mouth. Bard released his ear and ran both hands down to Thran’s groins, rubbing and massaging and teasing. It was a thoroughly consuming combination that grew in intensity when Bard dragged his hands up Thran’s torso, over both nipples, and down his back. After the shock of the ice, Thran arched up at the pleasure of this warmer touch, shocked at how quickly his body responded to the unexpected change. His heart sped up when hands slipped under his glutes to squeeze them, then traced around his hips to massage his groins again. Oh, gods, what that did to his cock bore no contemplation –

He should have expected the hands that rubbed his groins with such expertise would trace up his chest, up his sternum, across his clavicles, then down to find his nipples. They were still cold, which made the warmth of Bard’s fingers even more pronounced. As his body flooded with endorphins, his shiver was so consuming that he got a whispy chuckle from Bard. Between his legs, his cock spasmed and twitched, mindlessly aching for the least touch. As if Bard knew, he trailed a filmy bit of silk over Thran’s cock; the random and half imagined touches were so maddening that Thran panted for more. The silk flicked over his shoulders, his bound hands, his hair, his cheeks. When it touched his cock again, he whimpered. The silk became a veil that pressed over his face, then his mouth, rubbing his lips until Thran whimpered again.

The silk tightened, and went between his teeth like a gag. The body behind him vanished, and he was left quivering and alone. As the seconds went by, Thran’s body didn’t know what to do – calm, or anticipate another teasing.

A mouth engulfed his cock, working it hard, nipping and sucking, licking, flicking little touches against the head of it, until he arched up, pumping his hips in time with that warm, insistent teasing –

Then it was gone. Thran was left in silence, in emptiness, every nerve ending on fire, his cock aching and dripping, desperate for something, anything –

The gag slid away. The faintest aroma of fruit enticed him, then a finger tasting of raspberry pressed against his lips. Thran sucked it into his mouth before he realized he’d invited Bard to penetrate him, claim him – what would follow that? But Bard let him suck his finger only for a few seconds before he eased it out, traced it down his chest and abdomen, then his cock, trailing circles around the head of it. A raspberry touched his lips, teasing him into opening his mouth. When he did so, however, the
berry was pulled away, and teeth caught his bottom lip. It wasn’t to the point of pain, but it was unexpected, and he flinched. The teeth let him go, and the berry slipped into his mouth. The flavor was so intense – was there a tiny bit of chocolate inside? The taste so distracted him that he didn’t immediately identify the touch against his chest – his own hair, caught in a tuft and stroked over his skin. Another chocolate-studded raspberry rubbed against his lips before it went into his mouth, giving him something to taste, something to lick. What would he do if Bard wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked him? Instead Bard spread broad hands over his thighs to rub them, then dug thumbs into the creases of his groins to massage and manipulate without ever touching his cock again. He jerked against his bonds, desperate to free himself from such relentless stimulation before he was completely possessed, but as soft and yielding as those bonds were, they held him fast.

Another raspberry slipped in his mouth, but as soon as he bit it, a tongue licked the end of his cock. When he spasmed, that tongue licked first one nipple, then the other. An arm went around his waist, a hand twined in his hair to pull his head back, and a torso pressed against his. Lips dragged across his ribs, fastening onto his nipple to suckle hard. After so much teasing, this was much more intense – torso scraped against rough chest hair, nipples bitten, back arched over Bard’s arms. A hand engulfed his cock to jerk him to even more painful hardness before falling away. The feather was back, teasing and tickling his nipples and cock like a goad, not increasing his arousal, but not letting it fade, either. Gods, his cock and balls ached so badly for release that he whimpered again.

All that got him was a hand at his nape, drawing him forward into a hard kiss. A hand cupped his balls, squeezing and pulling, and all he wanted to do was drown in the kiss. He kissed back eagerly, craving everything offered to him. But even his concession didn’t earn him a reprieve; he was torn from the kiss, and his head pressed down as if he bowed to his husband. Oh, this was no bow; Bard’s cock pressed against his lips, demanding entry. Willingly, Thran took as much of it as he could, sucking and licking. But even that didn’t last long; Bard eased away scant seconds later, leaving him alone yet again.

His emptiness didn’t last; again, hands went around him to soothe and entice, but this time they were slicked with oil. It took some seconds to realize that the oil had something in it that warmed his skin. His back and glutes were flushed when Bard set on his nipples, kneading softly, rolling them in between his fingers. Gods, they were already sensitive enough, but now the heat in them grew into urgency for release. Bard was relentless, shoving Thran’s knees wide apart so that he had complete access to Thran’s cock, balls – oh, gods, oil went around his opening, then inside it, all while Bard kissed Thran to oblivion. In seconds, his most sensitive points were afire, throbbing, and desperate for any touch, and he was almost past thinking. When Bard left him this time, he nearly sobbed in desperation.

His silk bonds loosened, freeing his ankles, but he didn’t have time to react before he was flat on his stomach, draped over a stack of pillows. Bard kneaded Thran’s glutes as he inched his cock inside with maddening slowness, so slow that Thran pulled his knees up under him and pushed his hips back to impale himself on Bard’s cock. Bard pulled him back until his glutes were pressed hard against Bard’s groins, which soothed part of his overwhelmed body even as it wound the rest of it tighter. As Bard arched and bowed above him, Thran stopped thinking of anything, and reveled in the sensations flooding him. It was an exquisite torture when Bard slowed his stroking to lean over him, pressing his chest against Thran’s back and wrapping his arms around him, fingers worming through the pillows to find his nipples. The slow caress of fingers, the even slower slide in and out of him, left him gasping. But Bard didn’t take that to mean Thran wanted him to speed up, but rather slow down. Hands and lips danced over him, first here, then there, so randomly that his body couldn’t stop spasming, unable to calm, unable to release. The parade of sensations began again, one after the other, but more this time – feather, fork, silk, ice, soft fur, rough sandpaper – all touching him without pattern from head to toe, all punctuated with enough thrusts inside him to keep him delirious.
When Bard pulled out, he thought he’d die. Perhaps he moaned or begged for release – he was past thinking coherently. He barely registered the bonds loosening on his wrists, but it was only to lengthen the silk between his wrists, not to free them. Bard wormed his way between Thran’s bound arms and his body, effectively binding Thran to his torso. Three raspberries went into his mouth, then he was impaled again, but there was no slow, maddening stroking this time. When Bard raised himself to his hands and knees, Thran hung beneath him, unable to move as his husband slid in and out of him. Gods, gods, Thran wasn’t strong enough to withstand such an onslaught, and his body spasmed, seconds from release. Bard felt it, because he put both of their faces in the sheets to take Thran’s cock in one hand and his balls in the other. He knee’d Thran’s legs wide, then he delivered as thorough a fucking as Thran had ever received.

Control vanished, sentience vanished, everything but sensation vanished as a wildfire of orgasm consumed Thran. His body flailed as he was overwhelmed, and the only things that muffled his scream were the sheet and mattress pressed against his face. That was welcome, especially when Bard convulsed atop him, thrusting over and over into him past Thran’s ability to resist. He was merely a vessel.

When the fire of release faded, but before Thran’s arms started to cramp, Bard wormed his way free, released Thran’s wrists, and carefully eased Thran onto his back. He slipped off the blindfold, and pulled the sheet and blankets up to cocoon Thran warmly. Then he took one of Thran’s hands in his to massage, making sure that there was no bruising or hurt. By the time Bard got to Thran’s other hand, Thran remembered how to breathe again.

“All right, angel?”

Thran mustered a silent chuckle. “‘All right?’ I think, lyubov moya, that the correct term is ‘wasted.’ I can barely talk.”

“Oh, gods – did I hurt you? Shit, angel, why didn’t you say something? Where do you hurt?”

Thran put out a hand, grasping Bard’s arm when he found it. “Please, do not spoil such a completely delirious fucking with worry. I do not hurt. Merely lie here and pretend that you are still a saint, rather than the grebanyy huiesos who has just wasted me as no one has before.”

Bard relaxed beside him. “So the experiment was a success, then.”

“You have no idea. I highly recommend it.”

“What was it like?”

“You were right to add the blindfold. Every touch, every scent, every taste became so much more vivid. The anticipation was unendurable because I did not know where the next sensation would come from, or what it would be. It is impossible not to live in such a moment, without distraction. I was completely consumed. And now I am completely relaxed.”

Bard pressed a kiss against Thran’s hair. “I’ll wash and be back.”

Thran found Bard’s hand and squeezed it in acknowledgement, and shut his eyes as his husband got up and went into the bathroom. He was gone only a few seconds, but Thran’s eyes were already closing before Bard got back. He registered Bard mopping up the sheets, and the warm body that slid beside him. Sleepily he curled around his husband, resting his head on Bard’s shoulder and stretching his arm across Bard’s chest. He snuggled close with a sigh.

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”
“You’re welcome.”

“You take good care of me.”

“You deserve it.”

“So do you. If you decide to try it, I promise to take as much care as you did.”

“Maybe I will. But for now, sleep well.”

Thran smiled. “You, too, my saint. Ya lyublyu tebya, zoloto moyo.”

“Garu di, angylis. Ti wv fy drysor mawr.”

* * *

As soon as Bard got back from taking the children to the bus stop Tuesday morning, he rang Halina at the Imladris Academy to talk about Thran’s willingness to dance in the April Fool’s Follies. She was delighted to confirm that Thran was welcome to dance with both children, so he’d have good news to tell the girls when they arrived home from school today. Not long after, right at ten o’clock, he gave Bilbo a ring. The artist’s representative was happy to hear from him, and arranged to come out for a visit with his nephew, Frodo, late this afternoon.

Bard spent the morning hastily collecting all of his sketches and putting them in the dining room, then hurried into the solarium to at least put a head on Rahmiel before his guests appeared. The sculpture looked gruesome with just wide-flung arms and legs poised to land, like a chicken beheaded for the night’s stew, but adding a head brought the pose into sharper focus. Bard shaped only a suggestion of a face, but the neck was nicely done, and the head was at the right angle to regard the saint who would appear below. On a whim, he plucked a couple of strands from the ostrich feather he’d used on Thran last night to waft from the top of Rahmiel’s head to approximate the flowing hair he wanted for the angel. Then it was a rush to collect model’s releases from the crew working in the ballroom in anticipation of good news from Bilbo.

“I’m happy to sign one,” Ori agreed at lunch, scribbling his signature on the form that Bard had given him. “But I don’t think any drawing of me will be much good to you.”

“Don’t say that,” Bard cautioned him, riffling through one of his sketchbooks. “I’ve got a couple of you that I really like. This one, for instance.”

Ori’s face was a study as Bard held his sketchbook out to the young man. The sketch showed Ori seated on one of the garden chairs with his tablet cradled on his thighs, his hands in mid gesture above the tablet, as much conductor as typist. But what made the sketch was the way Ori’s head cocked to the left as he looked up, eyes bright and aware, as if he’d had the perfect idea just at that moment. No one else was in the sketch, so Ori could have as easily been listening to some internal muse as Irmo or Thran. It captured so much of Ori’s magic that it was one of Bard’s favorite sketches from the ballroom.

“Oh, my – is that what I look like when I’m listening to Irmo?” Ori’s mouth fell open and he gave Bard a surprised look.

“I don’t know if you were listening to Irmo,” Bard’s shrug was sheepish. “But you look like that
fairly often. You look in the moment, centered... happy. I like it.”

Ori looked around, but everyone else was laughing at something Charisse said. He leaned closer to Bard. “I like it, too,” he said softly. “Don’t get me wrong; I love a lot of the things that Nori sets me loose to do. But this has been amazing, even when Irmo yells. The way he sees A and B and goes right to F, not C or D first – that’s incredible. I’m beginning to understand how he does that, because I want to do it, too. He sees so many details, but he doesn’t realize it. He doesn’t know. But I see it, and I’m this close to doing it myself – not intuitively, as Irmo does, but consciously, when I’m fully aware of it. I would never have had the chance to learn something so amazing if Thran hadn’t asked for me.”

“How do you do it? Figure out how Irmo goes from A and B right to F?”

“I think he’s got an eidetic brain as I do, but he doesn’t know he does. All these things he doesn’t remember knowing combine in different ways, all the time. At lot of the time, he doesn’t know he’s doing that, either. Then something random appears in front of him, like the color blue or the sound of the music that reminds him of another piece that reminds him of a gesture of the assistant ballet master last year, and that fits into one of those half formed patterns, and out it comes as a full idea without him being aware of all the middle steps.”

“So... knowing that, you’ll be able to think like Irmo does?”

Ori shook his head. “No one thinks as he does. He has different memories, different interests than I do. But that means no one thinks as I do, either. The trick is to let everything come in, and get stored away however which way. Then one day, I’ll get one more impression, and out will come a combination I didn’t expect.”

“So stay in the moment, and don’t pre-judge what comes to you.”


“It’s not completely new for you, either, you know. You think like that already. The way you sorted out that working on so many parts of *Immortal* in the UVB studio was too much stimulation for Irmo, which just made his scatterbrain worse, was brilliant.”

“I did do that, didn’t I?” Ori looked surprised and pleased, as if Bard had given him a gift. “I guess I did.”

“You certainly did, and everyone’s better off for it,” Bard patted his arm. “Thanks for the release, Ori.”

“You’re very welcome.”

The afternoon passed by as quickly as the morning, so much so that Bard had little chance to savor last night’s adventure with Thran. He’d no sooner settled himself with his sketchbook, idly sketching something that was more appropriate for Thran’s pillow book, than Rada drew near with an excited gleam in his eye. He’d made some preliminary drawings of the costume that Death would wear on the battlefield, an intriguing mixture of armor and ritual robes, both stark and arcane. Bard especially liked the mask that framed Death’s face, with its thin gossamer veil that would allow Thran to see through it, but removed almost all resemblance to mortals. It would be an eerie, attenuated face that would appear on the battlefield, in shades of silver, ultramarine, and white. Bard quickly turned to a new page in his sketchbook to work with Rada, and by the time the children came home, they’d come up with several refinements to Rada’s initial drawing. Rada trailed after Bard into the kitchen to keep sketching while the children chatted over their cheese and crackers, and Sebastian came out
to play for a bit. Bard was mixing up meatloaf and had almost forgotten about his appointment with Bilbo when a knock echoed from the front door.

“Who’s that?” Bain looked up towards the door. “You want me to get it, Da?”

“Oh, I almost forgot – that’s Bilbo, the artist’s rep. He’s brought his nephew to see my sketches. Yes, please, get that, Bain. Bring him into the kitchen, and I’ll be done in a moment.”

“I can finish the meatloaf for you,” Legolas offered. “Tilda can help me if there’s more stuff to put in it.”

“Yes, I’d like to help,” Tilda jumped out of her chair and trotted up beside Legolas. “Have you smushed the crackers yet?”

“Smush?” Legolas turned a bemused smile on the small girl.

“Yes, smush. It’s a fun word that means crumble into tiny bits,” Tilda explained.

“Not yet. Just the eggs. Not the crackers or the spices. Do you know which ones, little doll?”

“I know. Come on, Legs. Let’s look in the pantry.”

The two children ducked into the pantry just as Bain led two people into the kitchen – the sandy brown hair was Bilbo’s, so the much darker brunette hair must belong to his nephew, Frodo. Bard finished washing his hands, waved to Bilbo, then grabbed a kitchen towel as he came around the kitchen island. “Hello, Bilbo. It’s good to see you again.”

Smiling, Bilbo came forward to shake hands with Bard, then turned towards his companion. “Hello, Bard. Allow me to introduce my nephew, Frodo Baggins. Frodo, this is Bard Bowman.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Bard,” Frodo offered his hand. “Uncle’s told me so much about you. I’m glad to meet you at last.”

“Welcome to the bedlam. Everyone, this is Frodo and Bilbo Baggins. That’s Sigrid, Bain, Rada Brown, and little Sebastian at the table,” Bard explained, as Tilda and Legolas came out of the pantry, each clutching several bottles of spices and a packet of crackers. “And that’s Tilda and Legolas. Um, Legs, Tilda, that’s a lot of spices for one meatloaf.”

“Is there a difference between minced onion and onion powder, and paprika and smoked paprika?” Legolas asked.

“Either onion and either paprika is fine,” Bard supplied.

“Then we’re good,” Legolas nodded.

“Yes, we’re good, Da,” Tilda seconded.

“Okay. Little doll, you’re in charge of the meatloaf. Legs, you know how to make mashed potatoes, so that’s for you. Tilda, you choose the veg, but let Legs cut them up. I’ll be in the dining room with the Bagginses if you need me.”

“Okay, Da; yes, Bard,” the children chorused, as Bard led the Bagginses through the kitchen.

“Would you like some tea?” Bard asked.

“I never turn down a nice cup of tea,” Bilbo agreed.
“Yes, thank you,” Frodo nodded.

“I’ll get it, Da,” Sigrid called, getting up from the table.

“Earl Grey okay?” Bilbo and Frodo both nodded as Bard ushered them to the dining room. “Thanks, Sig.”

“My, you have been busy,” Bilbo commented, as he took in the stacks of drawings on the table.

“I hope I have as many as you wanted,” Bard admitted, as he and the Bagginses took seats around the table. “We’ve got a company of ballet dancers in the ballroom, which meant I had to finish renovating it for them so they could get on with their work, but I’m back to my stuff now.”

“Uncle said you were restoring your house yourself,” Frodo offered.

“It’s still rough downstairs,” Bard shrugged, as he slid his sketchbooks towards Bilbo. “I’ve got the whole upstairs done for the children, and the kitchen’s done, and the ballroom’s done for Thran and his company. So the big push is over for things that needed doing yesterday. I can split my time now, and get back to my art.”

“You’ve got some lovely pieces, Bard,” Bilbo said, pondering the first of Bard’s sketchbooks. “You see what I meant about the calligraphic lines, Frodo?”

“I do,” Frodo nodded, leaning closer to his uncle to study the drawing. “It’s amazing how you get so much out of a single line.”

“Thank you,” Bard nodded, as Sigrid came in with the tea tray. She’d set out the pot with cups and saucers, milk and sugar, and a plate of warmed muffins and butter. “Thank you, too, sweetness.”

As the Bagginses smiled their thanks, Bard poured the cups full. He was thankful to have something to do with his hands while the two men looked over his drawings. Bilbo’s comfortable and kindly face turned thoughtful as he turned the pages of Bard’s sketchbooks, but Frodo’s was more expressive. He was not many more years older than Sigrid – perhaps the same age as Luka – but his wide and expressive blue eyes would remain youthful throughout his life. His mouth was quick to twitch into a smile, revealing his delight in the world around him. He was also quick to express his delight with a word or two; if his frequent murmurs and intent expressions were any indications, he liked Bard’s work quite a bit. But it was Bilbo’s reaction that meant more to the future of Bard’s hopes.

“These are so expressive,” Frodo said when halfway through the first sketchbook. “So distinctive, but not just the style of drawing – I feel as if I’d recognize the subject if they walked into the room, too. Do they reflect what the subjects look like as well who they are?”

Bard nodded. “More times than not, I’d say. I don’t always concentrate on faces. Sometimes the way someone moves makes a better subject.”

“This is your daughter,” Frodo continued, pointing to one of Bard’s drawings of Tilda and Legolas reading together on the sofa. “And your son? The meatloaf makers.”

“The very pair,” Bard grinned. “They read quite often together in the evenings.”

Wide blue eyes smiled. “They enjoy it; that’s clear. It makes me want to read along with them.”

“A lot of us do, every night. It’s become a common ritual for us.”
“How long does it take you to draw a picture like this?” Frodo asked.

How interesting that Bilbo’s concentration was on Bard’s sketches, leaving the questioning to Frodo. Of course Bilbo had already seen some of Bard’s work, and he was the experienced member of the pair, so perhaps he expected to find the answers to his questions in the sketches before him. But Frodo was young and inexperienced, so Bard leaned forward for one of his sketchbooks and a pencil. He flipped through it, found a blank page, and shrugged.

“That depends on the subject. The one that your uncle’s looking at took a couple of hours, because I used it as an exercise to draw a hand the way you first learn in high school or college – exactly as you see it. The one on the page before it was less technical and more emotional; that one took maybe fifteen minutes. It’s the same hand, just different styles of drawing.”

He turned his sketchbook around. Frodo’s quick inhalation of breath was more obvious, but Bilbo’s eyes widened, too. Bard hadn’t done all of Frodo’s face, only his expressive eyes, guileless and inquiring, just as they’d been when Frodo had asked how long Bard’s sketches took to produce.

“That—that’s amazing,” Frodo stammered, then looked at his uncle. “Those are my eyes.”

“The very image of them, and the very expression, too,” Bilbo chuckled. “You don’t know it, Bard, but that’s Frodo’s favorite expression. He does marvel at the wonder of the world more times than not.”

“Uncle,” Frodo rebuked, reddening.

“There’s nothing wrong with marveling at the wonder of the world, is there, my boy?” Bilbo smiled fondly at his nephew.

“Nothing at all,” Bard agreed, nodding.

Bard let conversation lapse, preferring to give Bilbo the time he needed to look at his sketches. Or was he just reluctant to hear that his work wasn’t… something? It didn’t matter that Thran, his children, Rada, or even Bilbo himself during their first meeting said his sketches were something special – it was still nerve-wracking to wait for judgment. Had he done enough sketches? Were they distinctively his, or all too much alike? Maybe he should have done a wider variety of scenes, or more of the detailed technical ones, or something more provocative –

Just sit still, and stop worrying. You liked what you did, and let the rest go.

That was wonderful advice, and impossible to follow.

Bard managed to sit still, determined to wait for Bilbo’s determination without asking for it. Eventually, Bilbo did meet Bard’s eyes with a smile. “I like everything I see, Bard. I do think you’ve got many wonderful things to bring to a show. I especially like the double images you do so deftly. So many things are happening in most of those – seen and unseen. They pose a lot of questions, I think. Was that what you meant about venturing further afield, as you mentioned in our first meeting?”

Bard took a marshaling breath. “I… did venture further afield, and I did start with the double images, and whether they’re truly mirror images, or different realities, and which one is the so-called real one. I pushed on that, and what started to emerge was more than just the double reality I drew. Those were still there, but so was whatever the viewer felt. I liked that… moral ambiguity, for lack of a better term.”

“I’m intrigued,” Bilbo leaned forward. “Do you have some examples of that that you’d be willing to
show me?"

“I have a couple. Neither are for sale. I’m still experimenting, but I’d like your opinion.”

Bard had debated long and hard about showing these two sketches to Bilbo, especially without telling Thran that he might. But he wanted a read on this direction, even if it wasn’t something he chose to show at first. So he pulled out two of the sketches he’d done for Thran’s pillow book – first the one of Thran’s glute with Bard’s hand on it, and then the image of a mirror that reflected an artist and a vampire in the midst of their rapture. Where Bilbo’s eyes widened, Frodo gasped, turned bright red, then gulped.

“That,” Bilbo pointed to the deceptively simple sweep of lines that revealed Bard’s hand and Thran’s glute, “is a beautiful image. But this,” he picked up the other, “is a very powerful one. I see exactly what you mean about how it adds the viewer’s patina. That patina will be radically different for every viewer.”

Bard nodded. “I like that, which is why it’s not for sale.”

“It’s certainly provocative. But the story shifts, doesn’t it, more you look at it? My first impression is not my second impression, or even my third.”

Bard nodded again. “That’s one of the reasons why I like it so much. I drew it, yes, but every time I see it, I get a different reaction. I’d like to go in that direction with more pieces, whether there’s a market for that or not. It’s not tourist fodder, by any means.”

“No. It is not.” Bilbo’s tone was firm, but he continued to regard the piece thoughtfully. “I’m happy to represent a few artists who are content to address that market, to be sure. But I’m much more interested to represent a few artists who want to push beyond that market and into ones for serious collectors. If you add a few of your moral ambiguity works to the mix, I’d welcome them. They’d make a nice addition to a show, and even if they don’t sell, they’ll be noticed. That’s a good way to raise the interest in your work in that more rarefied market.”

Bard nodded at once. “I’ll do my best, then.”

“Good. You’ve got a distinctive style that’ll raise that first bit of interest, but it won’t necessarily hold it. It’s true that provocation, creating a stir, you might say, is a good way to show your depth, so let yourself roam, Bard. But yes, I do think you have plenty here to offer for a small show at the gallery I talked to the gallery owner yesterday, in anticipation of a few clients who might be ready for an exhibition, so I have a list of available dates you can look at. And of course, I’ve got a contract spelling out everything I explained in my previous visit that I want to leave with you. Have your lawyer review it, to make sure it’s what you expected and that you think it’s fair, and then we can start work on your show.”

Bilbo opened his small satchel, took out a few sheets of paper covered with small legal print, and handed it to Bard. “I hope we can get started on your show very soon, as soon as you’re comfortable with everything.”

“That’s brilliant,” Bard swallowed, leaning forward to take the sheets. “Um, how many works should I get ready? Do you want them framed, or just matted?”

“I’d think no more than thirty to start with. We’ll choose that many, then see which ones would combine to make a good flow between them. That’s key, you know – we want the energy of the gallery to encourage people to look, reflect, discuss, and then buy. Frodo here’s in his last term of school, and he’s taking a most interesting class about art restoration as one of his electives, and
another about how to marry the presentation to the piece, as it were. He’s developed quite a good eye for that sort of thing, haven’t you, my boy?”

“It’s kind of you to think so, Uncle,” Frodo murmured, glancing at his uncle with a distracted smile. Maybe he hadn’t quite recovered from Bard’s sketch yet.

“I do. So just looking at the sketches here on the table, how would you choose to present these? All the same, perhaps?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t do that,” Frodo shook his head at once, and his eyes sharpened on Bard’s sketches. “We don’t want potential buyers to think they’re all alike, not at all. This one, for instance.” Frodo sorted out a drawing of Thran in mid turn, drawn with loose strokes. “This one looks very Japanese, like one of the traditional Buddhist ox paintings. It’s larger, too – a thin, black lacquer frame might work. Certainly not a faux bamboo – that would call too much attention to itself rather than the drawing. This other one, though, the detailed one of the hand... that looks more like an Old Master, so a bit more of an ornate frame would work better.”

“Your uncle is right,” Bard complimented. “You do have a good eye.”

“Oh!” Frodo looked accusingly at Bilbo, who smiled proudly at the result of his little trick. “That wasn’t fair, Uncle Bilbo.”

“It was harmless, and it proved my point. So once we work out the contract, we’ll sort out which pieces we all agree to show, and then we’ll see about framing and matting.”

“What prices do you think you want to set?”

“The price will include the framing costs, so you won’t be out of pocket for those,” Bilbo explained. “And I’m inclined to ask a bit more than the standard tourist rate, because I don’t think these are tourist fare. Not as high as maybe you were expecting, but that’s just at first. As the market for your work grows, the prices will rise accordingly.”

“That’s what I expected,” Bard hastened to explain. “I had another reason for asking. My children’s school has an art fair coming up –”

“The April Fool’s Follies?” Bilbo’s eyebrows went up.

“That’s the one,” Bard nodded. “I had thought about contributing a piece to the silent auction, just the one, but wanted your opinion about that. I want to support the school, because my children love it there. But I want to support my career, too.”

“It’s a generous gesture, and will do your career no harm, and possibly some good,” Bilbo nodded. “The artwork is a much higher caliber than what you’d see in other schools, just because of the number of good artists we have in the village. A nice piece, not too large, would be a good contribution, and not out of place. One of the dancing sketches would be a good choice, or one with children in it. If you did one of the sledding hill, that would be an excellent subject.”

“That’s good to know,” Bard sat back in relief. “I’ll choose a piece to contribute, then.”

“Have you made any progress on your model of the angel?” Bilbo asked. “I so wanted to show it to Frodo.”

“I have,” Bard got up. “It’s still in the solarium, if you’d like to see it.”

Bard led the way through the kitchen and sitting room to the solarium, and uncovered the clay model
on his stand. “I’ve given the fellow a head at last, so he looks a bit better now.”

“He does, indeed,” Bilbo agreed. “And what’s this? Ostrich feathers for hair?”

Bard described his plans for feather wings and wafting hair, which both of his guests greeted with interest and enthusiasm.

“How do you plan to make the wings?” Frodo asked.

Bard chuckled. “There are lots of videos on the Internet about making wings of one kind or another. Even better, though, the costumier working with my husband’s ballet company has a lot of experience about how to build frames and armatures. I’m looking into where I can get feathers in bulk, so I can experiment with dyeing them if I can’t get them in the color I want. I want dark brown feathers for the wings and hair to match the dark bronze patina of the metal, so the piece will be one color, but with three different textures.”

“That’ll be wonderful,” Frodo agreed. “Incredibly stunning.”

“I hope so,” Bard agreed. “The first one will be small, as that’s all my studio can handle. But ultimately, I’d love to do a life-sized one.”

“It will be an amazing piece,” Bilbo agreed. “So take a few days to make sure everything you expected is in the contract, and then we’ll get started.”

“I will,” Bard assured the small man. “I appreciate you coming out so quickly, Bilbo. Frodo, it’s been a pleasure to meet you, and I hope I’ll work with you soon.”

“So do I,” Frodo smiled as they retraced their steps back to the sitting room. “I’ll give some thought about frames and mats, so I’ll have some ideas for you soon.”

“Thanks, Frodo,” Bard nodded, then spotted his husband standing by the kitchen table, still in his dancing attire as he snared a remnant of cheese from the children’s snack plate and chatted with Tilda while she set the table. When Thran looked through the doorway to meet Bard’s eyes, Bard lifted a hand in greeting. “Thran, do you remember Bilbo? This is his nephew, Frodo Baggins. Frodo, this is my husband, Thran Oropherson.”

“Of course I remember,” Thran smiled, offering his hand. “It is good to see you again, Bilbo. Frodo, it is good to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” Frodo shook Thran’s hand, looking up at the tall dancer.

“For me as well,” Thran replied.

“It smells as if supper is well under way,” Bilbo smiled at Tilda and Legolas. “We’ll take our leave, Bard, and hope to hear from you very soon.”

Bard collected coats for the Bagginses, and saw them outside with a wave. He headed back into the kitchen with a good feeling about the meeting. He found Thran in the dining room, nibbling his cheese as he looked at Bard’s drawings scattered over the table.

“Done for the day, angel?” Bard asked, coming to stand by his husband. Thran held out his piece of cheese for Bard to have a bite. As Bard moved closer to sample the treat, his hand strayed over Thran’s glute.

“I am. We made good progress today. The only new excitement is that Wednesday I go into the city
to be fitted for pointe shoes. How was your meeting with the Bagginses?”

Bard related the gist of his discussion, which brought a smile to Thran’s face. “That is wonderful, lyubov moya! We will scan and email the contract to Mr. Nori tonight, so that he can look at it tomorrow for you. How many sketches will you need for the show?”

“Somewhere between fifteen and thirty,” Bard replied, sorting through a few of the pages.

“I am excited for you...” Thran’s eyes widened as he picked up the mirror sketch that Bard had taken from the pillow book. “What is this? Why is this one here? You took this from my book? How could you think to sell this?”

Bard chuckled. “At least you’re not upset about me showing it to Bilbo in the first place, though you would have smiled to see how red Frodo was when he saw it. But to put your mind at ease, I have no intention of selling it. I made that clear.”

“Then why did you –”

“Show it at all? Because it’s the prime example of the kind of thing I want to do more of. Not the sexual aspect, but the multiple viewpoints, the way the viewer engages, and I wanted a professional opinion of whether there was a market for that or not.”

Thran slid his gaze from the drawing to Bard. “What did Bilbo say?”

“He said it was a powerful piece. He wanted to see more.”

Thran’s lips slid into a proud smile as he handed the drawing back to Bard. “He has discerning judgment.”

“So do our children. Since this isn’t something I’m ready for them to discern, I’ll take it back upstairs.” He sorted through the sketches to find the one of Thran’s glute. “This one, too.”

“You showed them that one, too?” Thran pretended shock.

“I did. Bilbo called it very beautiful. He was polite and didn’t ask if it were drawn from life.”

“That is something,” Thran conceded, grinning. “So is my ass soon to hang in a gallery, for sale to whoever fancies it?”

Bard shook his head, smiling. “Not in this or the next six lifetimes, angel. The only one with the privilege to fancy your ass is me.”

Snickering, Thran snuck a hand out to squeeze Bard’s hip. “Then my ass is in good hands, exactly as I would have it.”

Thran took the drawings from Bard and headed upstairs to put them safely away before he changed out of his dancing things for supper. Bard watched him go, then straightened the sketches scattered over the table and arranged them carefully in folders and books.

One step closer.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

An angel encounters the Weird Sisters of the ballet world, and a saint draws a line in the sand.

Chapter Notes

I took a page out of Sir Peter Jackson’s book, who usually sneaks a personal cameo into his works, so here is mine. My friend johnnysmitten also makes an appearance, so together we are the Weird Sisters. I hope you forgive my whimsy :-).

Also, those of you familiar with my Kiliel tale, "Innikh Dê," might recognize a certain tattoo. I couldn’t resist ;-).

Thran had much to smile about as he pointed his SUV into the city Wednesday morning. Bard had been so excited after his visit from Bilbo and Frodo yesterday, because at last someone from the art world had told him how good his sketches were. So good, in fact, that a show of those sketches would soon be in the offing. He and Bard had read through Bilbo’s contract together last night; it had seemed more than fair to both, but just to make sure, Thran had sent a copy of it to Mr. Nori via email. This morning, as soon as Ori had arrived, the young man had found Bard in the kitchen to tell him that he, too, agreed that the contract was good, so Bard had signed it and sent it off to Bilbo posthaste. So Bard had a representative now, one who was honest and fair, and who would set about making something of Bard’s work. His work with Rada on the costumes for *Immortal* was also progressing, so soon Bard would no longer have to rely on wishes. He’d be the equal partner he wanted to be with Thran.

Thran already considered Bard to be his equal, but bringing in money to the family was important to Bard, and Thran welcomed the time when that would be so, because of how much that would boost Bard’s confidence.

He’d left Bard back at the house to work with Rada; Charisse and Luka would continue their work with Irmo in the ballroom. The choreographer had calmed down considerably in the past several days, thanks in large part to Ori. Several times, the young man had retrieved some thought or other that Irmo had come up with earlier, and had detailed what actions they’d taken on it. After the third time, Irmo didn’t protest so much because Ori’s kind and quiet phrasing had calmed the storm before it began, enough so that Thran was comfortable to leave the group to work without him for a few hours. He was off to the city to be fitted for pointe shoes.

Pointe shoes... should he feel excited, or ridiculous? Worried, or excited? Watching YouTube videos with Sigrid of men dancing on pointe had proved it plausible for some, though he was not yet convinced if it was for him. He’d called a dancer from his previous company, Dario, who had talked about dancing on pointe not for performance, but because he claimed it made his ankles and legs so
much stronger. In the long discussion that followed, Thran had not revealed why he was interested in
dancing on pointe, but had merely asked if Dario continued to see a benefit from such practice. At
Dario’s enthusiastic response, he’d asked after an instructor, which had led him to discuss the
possibility of lessons with Mme. Morgelle. Before long, he had an appointment set up at the shop
that provided Dario’s pointe shoes.

He parked his SUV and made his way into the small shop. The long, narrow store was crowded with
shelves, all stuffed full of boxes and bags of dancing shoes. Ha, it could be a sister to the wand shop
described in the Harry Potter book the family had just finished reading, albeit not so dusty. He was
early, as was his preference. There were no other customers here, but the clerk at the register had
clearly expected him. As she turned towards the back of the shop, he had time to scan the wall of
autographed photos behind the register, all of dancers who patronized the shop.

“Hey, Weird Sisters, your guest is here!” The clerk called, then turned back to give Thran a
reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Mr. Oropherson. They just look odd. They’re both really good. Go
on back.”

Chuckling, Thran headed to the back of the shop, but a tall woman had already appeared from
behind a curtain that screened the back room of the store from the public area, and walked towards
him. She was comfortably dressed in faded blue denim jeans, and a deep blue, heavily embroidered,
cotton kurta. A distinctive bright white streak of hair at the front of her hairline enlivened wavy,
shoulder-length, light brown hair, the front of which was held back with half a dozen tiny cobalt blue
clips. Grey blue eyes peered at him over small silver-rimmed glasses. A trio of bright cobalt teardrop
earrings sparkled from each earlobe as she came forward to greet Thran. The only brighter color
about her were her black flat shoes, each embroidered with a bright red dragon.

“Good morning, Mr. Oropherson,” she grinned, meeting his eyes frankly and extending her hand for
a firm handshake. There was a small tattoo on her wrist of a tiny wolf – no, a fantasy beast that
looked like a wolf – and rider. “I’m Elle Mage, the senior fitter. Welcome to our sanctum.”

“Good morning,” Thran offered her a smile. “I hope you are well today.”

“I am, thank you, and I hope you are the same. Jessa and I are ready for you in the back, Mr.
Oropherson. We thought you’d like a little privacy for your fitting, so you can concentrate on your
feet, not all the adoring fans.”

“I hope to spare you that,” Thran grinned, following Elle back through the curtain.

“More is not merrier when you’re trying to get the best fit,” Elle agreed, as a shorter woman
crouched on the floor looked up from the stack of shoes she was sorting and slotting into spaces on
the shelves. “This is Jessa Smitts, our other fitter.”

Jessa was thinner and six inches shorter than her colleague, with pale blue eyes and very long,
straight blond hair, the front of which was pulled back at her nape into a braid down her back. If Elle
was the older bohemian of the pair, Jessa was the younger counterculturalist, with small royal blue
ear gauges, a silver septum piercing, and multiple tattoos of fantastic beasts visible at the neck and
sleeves of her grey and teal sweater. Her jeans were grey, and her shoes were black ballet flats. She,
too, wore glasses, with thin turquoise frames. She scrambled to her feet to offer her hand.

“It’s an honor, Mr. Oropherson.”

“I hope it will continue to be, and I will not cause the two of you to pull out your hair,” Thran
shrugged, shaking Jessa’s hand.
“Between the two of us, we’ll figure it out,” Elle assured him. “I’m good with the technical stuff, and Jessa’s good with the hands-on bit. So what can we help you with today?”

“Pointe shoes.”

Jessa’s eyes got round. Elle didn’t look surprised, but she did give Thran an assessing look up and down. “More and more men are getting into that, because they claim it strengthens their legs in a way regular work doesn’t.”

“A colleague has described the benefits, yes. I sprained ligaments last November, and thought a regime such as he suggested would help me to build strength now that I am back to the dance again. So I am here. I understand you have several men as clients, and have shoes big enough for us.”

“We had one guy in last week who was a size fifteen, believe it or not,” Jessa said, glancing down at Thran’s feet. “You don’t look like your feet are quite that big.”

“Not quite. But they are very long and narrow, with long toes. It may not leave me with a wide enough base.”

“Let’s take a look,” Elle said. “Did you bring tights and a dancer’s belt with you? We need to see a full line to make sure the fit’s right.”

“Dario – my colleague who advised me – so informed me,” Thran nodded.

“Dario?” Jessa smiled. “Dario Sansonne?”

“The same.”

“He’s a regular,” Jessa nodded. “He was one of the first men we fitted.”

“So he said. So yes, I have transition tights on under my leggings, rather than the footed ones I usually wear.”

“You found a pair in your size?” Elle asked. “I’m impressed.”

“It was not easy. But they will suit to make sure my shoes fit properly.”

“Exactly so. So when you’re ready, we’ll get started.”

As Thran unlaced his hiking boots, then peeled off his socks and leggings, Jessa put a Brannock measuring device on the floor. “If you’d put your bare foot in here, Mr. Oropherson?”

“Of course,” Thran stepped on the device. Jessa directed him how to stand on both feet evenly while she measured first one foot, then the other.

“Size thirteen,” she called to Elle, who noted that on a pad. “C width. Long toes, second longer than the first, at least a modified Egyptian, and a high arch.”

“Got it,” Elle nodded. “Go right to the cheaters, I’d say. He’s too tall to mess about with a shoe that doesn’t provide as much support as possible.”

“Cheaters?” Thran’s brow wrinkled in curiosity.

Elle chuckled. “Some of the newer makes of shoes dare to use materials other than the traditional burlap, glue, and so forth to build the toe box and shank. They’ve improved on the traditional models so much that they don’t need breaking in, they last a lot longer, they offer a better fit, and they’re
more supportive. They did such a good job for so many dancers that of course the traditionalists called them a cheat, which they most certainly are not. As tall as you are, with such narrow feet, I’m going right to those because if they fit you, they’ll take better care of your feet. Do you expect to perform on pointe?”

Thran kept his expression guileless. “I do not say never. But first, I think it would be better to find out whether I can stand on pointe at all. If not, this may be a very short visit.”

Jessa’s eyes were full of mischief. “We’ll get you up there. Whether you want to stay up there, once we get you up there, is another story.”

Jessa headed to the shelves to consider the selection of shoes, so Thran turned towards Elle. “I should expect this to be painful, then. I hear that it is from so many of my female colleagues.”

Elle shrugged. “It’s unnatural from the get go, isn’t it? Putting all your weight on the tips of your toes? That’s a lot of weight, a lot of strain. But a lot of the men we fit say they have an easier time than the ballerinas, because they’re stronger. The right shoes will make it as easy as possible, though I strongly recommend that you practice only with a good instructor, or you’ll cripple yourself.”

“So I have been advised.”

“Do you think the higher arches and a strong shank, Elle?”

Elle got down on her knees to squeeze Thran’s foot at the metatarsals, then at the heel. “The strongest shank we have – he’s got a lot of height and weight to manage. And the sleek fit for those narrow heels. A fair amount of compression.”

“I agree. Mr. Oropherson, I hope you’re not upset if your shoes are white satin, rather than pink.”

“Devastated,” Thran purred, smiling perversely.

Jessa giggled as she brought out several pairs of shoes. “Some men are, believe it or not.”

“I am more than content with white ones.”

“Okay, have a seat,” Jessa invited. “Would you put the footie part of your tights on, please?”

Thran did, and then Jessa sat at his feet to slip on the first pair of shoes. She eased them over his heels, and adjusted the drawstrings until the shoes sat properly on his feet. Elle had him stand in first position, then second, then plié. His toes were supposed to touch the box inside the shoe, not be too crunched or too loose. They kept up a steady stream of questions, asking him how this one and that one fit. It took a couple of tries to find the right size.

“Okay, time for the barre,” Elle said, studying Thran’s feet. She had him stand face on to the mirror, feet absolutely straight, then hold onto the barre, then point one foot, then the other, without putting any weight on either foot. As he answered many more questions, Elle and Jessa debated back and forth. Jessa’s gentle fingers pinched the shoe at the heel, and checked whether the shoe gaped at the side. Finally, Jessa slid back and nodded at Elle.

“Okay, pointe time,” Elle said. “Hands on the barre, then go up carefully.”

“One foot at a time?”

“No, roll up both feet at the same time. Be careful not to go over.”
Thran did as requested. Because of the care the two women had taken, he rolled up easily, then stayed balanced on his toes. It was a weird sensation, to be balanced on the ends of his toes...

“Come down,” Elle and Jessa chorused, and he quickly found his shoes stripped off. Another round of questions ensued. The women bent their heads over the shoes to fit very tiny, very thin bits of this and that inside, not in the toe or heel, but on the side, then put them back on his feet. Ah, that was better - a snugger fit around the knuckles of his big toes. The women peppered him with still more questions, adjusting the shoes according to his answers, until they decided they’d adjusted the shoes as much as they could. Finally, finally, he was allowed to roll up onto his toes again, then take a step or two, but still while holding onto the barre. When he assured the women that he was comfortable, he was allowed to release the barre to see if he could stand up under his own power.

He could.

Never had such a simple thing seemed like such a monumental accomplishment. Jessa gave Elle a look.

“Take a step,” Elle said. “Carefully.”

Thran took a small one, then another, then another. He did a very ginger walk across the wooden platform before the bar, and back. When he held his hands wide, Elle shook her hair back over her shoulders and folded her arms over her chest. It made him smile when Jessa made the same adjustments.

“Okay, see if you can roll up to pointe without the barre,” Elle requested.

When Thran managed that without a tremor, Elle and Jessa gave each other high fives.

“Another impossible mission accomplished,” Elle chortled.

“The Weird Sisters rule again,” Jessa pumped her fist.

“What is this Weird Sisters?” Thran looked back at them, smiling.

“The witches from Macbeth,” Elle laughed. “They have magical powers. So do Jessa and I.”

“Yeah,” Jessa held out her arms in triumph. “We can fit anybody with pointe shoes.”

“You have certainly have fit me,” Thran agreed, joining their laughter. “So what other wisdom do you have for me?”

The two women gave him a quick rundown about elastics and ribbons and so forth, and how waxed dental floss was the best thread to use. Jessa even drew tiny marks on the inside of his shoes where he should put both, and told him to check with his instructor to help him get the exact placement. Then Elle explained about the padding they’d put in the shoes. Six pairs of shoes later, he was saying goodbye to the Weird Sisters.

“Remember, those shoes don’t need to be broken in, so don’t go slamming them in any doors,” Elle cautioned. “And you don’t need any of the traditional lamb’s wool padding, either. If they don’t feel right, come back for any adjustments before you put in any padding or inserts. We’ve got your specs now, so the next time won’t take as long.”

“It has been a pleasure,” Thran shook Jessa’s hand, then Elle’s. “Thank you for your care, mes chères.”
“Oh, it’s been my pleasure – I mean, our pleasure, Mr. Oropherson,” Jessa blurted, drawing Thran’s chuckle. “The rest of the day will be anticlimactic, to say the least.”

“It probably will,” Elle shrugged without apology. “Thanks for coming in, Mr. Oropherson. It’s been an honor.”

They walked him to the front of the store, where he paid for his shoes. He left the shop with a wave, and not only for the two fitters and the clerk – three young dancers and their mothers waited for the Weird Sisters’ expertise, so he had an autograph or two to sign, and a picture to pose for before he could head back to his SUV.

The autograph he’d been happiest to sign had gone on the picture the clerk printed out of him standing between Elle and Jessa. He grinned as he headed home, thinking of how they’d stood on a chair to pin it high on the wall above the other photographs, a sight gag about his height.

Impossible mission accomplished, indeed.

* * *

Bard saw Thran off to his shoe fitting appointment, then thought about how he’d spend the day as he chopped carrots and ginger for today’s soup. He had pages marked on the Internet to show Thran tonight about the tile and tea paper he wanted to use for the half bath. He could start work on the dining room. He could work on more sketches, inspired by either his imagination or the dancers in the ballroom. Or if Rada had more work for Bard to do on costumes, he’d help however he could. Or he could continue his work on Rahmiel.

If he started on the dining room, he’d be back to stripping woodwork, but he was heartily sick of that. Instead he’d patch the dining room walls –

Wait, Sigrid’s upholstery class would start in another week or so. He’d promised to take it with her, so he headed into the solarium to put the fainting couch back together so he’d have it to work on while she tended to her chairs. His daughter had done a good job stripping and cleaning the wood pieces, and the light fruitwood color would go well with the carved wooden screens that Thran liked so much. Those were due to arrive in Mrs. Mathom’s shop in a few days, so he’d have to plan a pickup for them. He got the fainting couch pieces together quickly, using elastic bands and clamps to hold everything together while the glue dried. The broken table with the marble top that Thran had hauled home was nearby, and Bard spent another hour or two with stripper and steel wool cleaning off the battered paint. His efforts revealed wood that was a little darker than that of the fainting couch, but still an attractive fruitwood finish. When he was done, he upended it to reglue all of the legs back into place, not just the broken one. When it dried, it’d be a sturdy base for the marble top again.

He wandered into the ballroom, hoping to add a few more sketches to his portfolio before lunch. He also wanted to talk to Rada about where he might get the Majorelle blue velvet he wanted for the fainting couch. Ori was in his usual spot, on one of the garden chairs with his tablet on his lap, softly murmuring into his microphone. Rada stood by the windows, but slipped quietly towards Bard when their eyes met. The corners of Rada’s mouth were downturned, giving him a bit of a comic expression, but that was the beginning of a frown, not laughter. Bard quirked his eyebrows up at the generally placid costumier.
“Luka is bearing the brunt,” Rada whispered, nodding at the young dancer out in the middle of the ballroom. Perhaps he and Charisse were working with Irmo on one of their partner dances, because Charisse stood beside the young man, her hand on his shoulder. Was she consoling him? Luka certainly looked downhearted, staring at the floor while Irmo gesticulated and talked rapidly. Thran had an endearing habit of waving his hands around and talking fast when he was excited, but Irmo’s interpretation was not endearing – it was angry.

“No, no, no! Why do you insist on that stupid half step before you do the lift, Luka? It throws off the entire sequence, as I have told you and told you and told you! It puts you on the wrong foot every time, yet you insist on it, like some sort of ridiculous automaton! Why, why, why?”

“Because I’m on the left foot the beat before, not the right foot, as I should be,” Luka tried to explain. He was calmer than Bard expected he’d be. “You want me on the right foot to be in the correct position for the lift, but look at the steps, before the lift. One, two, three; not one two three, four. Left, right, left; not left, right, left, right. So I keep trying to put in the extra step so that I’m in position, but there’s no place for me to do that. So where am I supposed to put the extra step?”

“No at all, idiot!” Irmo’s voice went up. “How hard is that? Not at all?”

“Irmo, Luka’s right,” Charisse inserted, laying her hand on the choreographer’s arm, trying to calm him. “The measure before the lift right now has only three steps in it, not four, and so Luka tries only to put himself in the correct position that you want, oui?”

“No, no, no! Has that same inability to count infected you as well? Gods, there are four steps before hand, as we have danced all morning!”

“Non, maestro, non,” Charisse said gently. “We have four beats, yes, but only three steps, so perhaps there is another you meant to put in the measure, or perhaps the second one is meant to be held as the fourth is –”

“Impossible! Impossible!” the choreographer snapped. “Augh, both of you have lost the ability to count!”

Luka gulped down his frustration, but even Charisse’s consoling look didn’t help, and he jerked away to boot the plastic trashcan that appeared the first day the dancers had been in residence. It had never seemed to collect any trash, and Bard had wondered what it was for. Now he knew – it was how Luka kept from snapping back at Irmo in kind.

“Oh, the child decides to throw his toys again rather than admit that he cannot count to four?” Irmo threw up his hands again, then put his arms akimbo to stare at the young dancer’s back.

“Luka knows how to count, maestro,” Charisse again tried to soothe the agitated choreographer. “So let us count the previous measure again, and decide where the extra step must go –”

“There is no extra step!” Irmo roared. “Not one! Not a single one! Augh, both of you have not just lost the ability to count – you are both idiots, too! Idiots!”

“That’s enough.”

Irmo swung around to stare at Bard. “What did you say?”

Bard blinked – he hadn’t been aware of speaking aloud. But it had been his voice that had drawn the choreographer’s glare. His jaw tightened, but he had no intention of backing down, now that he’d put his foot into it.
“I said that’s enough. Confusion over whether someone counts to three or four doesn’t mean you can insult them.”

“What business if it of yours? Do you know anything about what we do here?”

“I know what common courtesy is, and I know that shouting insults at people isn’t common courtesy. It isn’t the way to resolve your problem, either.”

“I will say what I choose, however I choose, in the best fashion to get my point across to idiots—”

“Not in my house, you won’t,” Bard said. His voice was soft, but firm. “You’re here by my invitation, just as Luka is, and Charisse, and Ori, and Rada. If you disagree with one of my guests, that’s your business. But if you insult them, that’s my business. You’ll treat my guests with respect, or you’ll leave.”

“You can’t tell me to leave in the middle of—”

“I don’t care what you’re in the middle of. Luka’s doing his best to follow your direction, and so is everyone else here, and if you can’t offer your best to them in return, then leave now.”

Irmo’s face went purple and his eyes bugged out at Bard. “I will not stand for interference from you or anyone else!”

“That’s your choice,” Bard growled, as Irmo marched straight up to him. “But I won’t stand for anyone acting like a three-year old having a temper tantrum in my house and insulting anyone. Calm down, or out you go.”

“You are as much cretin as he is!”

“That’s it.” Bard hefted Irmo in his arms and gave Ori and Rada a look. “Someone get the front door, please.”

He had just time to catch sight of Luka putting both hands over his mouth in wide-eyed disbelief, and Charisse gasping in French before he carted the irate choreographer through the house. Ori ran ahead of him, scrambling to yank the front door open; Rada, Luka, and Charisse ran after him to see the end of the spectacle. As he lugged Irmo out through the doorway, across the porch and down the porch steps, Thran’s SUV pulled into the driveway and parked beside Bard’s truck. Bard set Irmo down beside his car; Ori came up behind him with Irmo’s coat and satchel, setting both on the hood of Irmo’s car and backing away to join Rada, Charisse, and Luka on the porch. Thran got out of his SUV with a look of open-mouthed consternation, but Bard kept his eyes on Irmo as the choreographer sputtered in outrage.

“I don’t care what excuse you claim, whether it’s autism, or savantism, or a day without your favorite breakfast cereal,” Bard stared deep into Irmo’s eyes. He spoke with conviction, but without raising his voice. “You owe everyone here an apology for acting like a raging bully. Regardless of that excuse, and no matter what your vision is, it’s no vision if you can’t make it happen without abusing your colleagues, and my guests. You’re not welcome in my house until you understand that you cannot and will not treat anyone here like that again.”

Irmo turned to Thran, who looked less shocked after hearing Bard’s admonishment. “You will let this happen? You will ruin Immortal because of his thin skin?”

“I will not ruin Immortal because of your viciousness,” Thran said flatly, coming to stand beside Bard.
“This is an argument over nothing! Nothing!”

“If Bard says it is something, then it is something.”

“He doesn’t have the right to throw me out. My work is with you, not him.”

“Ah, but the house is Bard’s, Irmo, and we must behave in accordance with his rules. If Bard says you have acted the bully, then he is right to escort you out. We have talked about this – I do not condone a bully. So act the bully and go, or practice restraint and stay.”

Irmo muttered under his breath, snatched up his coat and satchel, threw himself into his car, and drove off.

Thran’s eyes were on Bard in an instant, but to Bard’s relief, Thran didn’t look angry, merely thoughtful.

“What did he do, lyubov moya?”

Bard exhaled. “He went after Luka. Then he started on Charisse for sticking up for the lad. I don’t like my guests mistreated, and I said so. He took exception, so I put him out.”

Thran’s sigh was philosophical as they turned towards the quartet standing on the porch – Rada grimaced, Charisse looked affronted, and Ori and Luka exchanged similarly appalled looks. “It was bound to happen. At least we have much of the solo work done, and no one has had a breakdown yet, so it could have been worse.”

“Gods, Bard, thank you for standing up for me, but – but – I didn’t mean for him to storm off like that –” Luka stuttered, as Bard and Thran walked up the porch stairs.

“I did,” Bard gave Thran a wry smile. “It doesn’t matter whether you counted the three that you thought or the four that he thought. It didn’t merit getting the dressing down you received.”

“No, it didn’t,” Charisse shook her head. “So rude, so rude...”

As they came inside the house, Thran’s colleagues hastened to explain what had happened. Bard let them precede him back to the ballroom, grimacing all the way. Despite Irmo’s insulting words, despite how much the choreographer had merited a dressing down, despite the support of Thran’s colleagues, Bard still winced. He’d likely just made Thran’s life much more complicated.

Chapter End Notes

For all you geeks out there, I spent a loooooonnng time looking at videos and reading stuff about how to fit pointe shoes, and I have a healthy respect for the amount of expertise that goes into fitting shoes. The so-called "cheaters" that Elle refers to in this chapter are a nod to the Gaynor Minden shoes that are a relatively recent development (the past 20 or so years). Normally, a dancer provides an outline of his/her feet, and the company produces shoes customized for that dancer. As this process takes time, and because my story is a fairytale, I took artistic license to have Thran visit a shop rather than get his shoes in the usual fashion.

I found a fascinating (that means I understood most of what I read :-) paper called "A Comparative Mechanical Analysis of the Pointe Shoe Toe Box - An In Vitro Study -
The American Journal of Sports Medicine June 1998” that did the most amazing technical comparison of pointe shoes. To quote that paper, “(t)he Gaynor Minden uses a patented design in the shank and toe box. The toe box is formed from an elastomeric material sandwiched between layers of shock-absorbing foam. In contrast, the Capezio, Freed, Leo’s, and Grishko toe boxes are composed of materials such as burlap, cardboard, or paper— or some combination thereof—saturated with glue. The high threshold of elastic limitation, evident by the long fatigue life, presents itself as the distinguishing mechanical characteristic of the Gaynor Minden pointe shoe.”

The paper went on to say that the cycles of failure and vertical strength are both much higher for Gaynor Minden shoes than other shoes (Capezio, Freed, Leo’s, and Grishko). That means they last longer, and have provide more of certain kinds of strength. A lot of dancers described how much more comfortable they were than traditionally constructed shoes, too. As a geek, I couldn't resist going for the new tech version of such traditional footwear.

Who said a beautiful art can't benefit from technology?
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint deal with a dragon.

It took little time for Thran to sort out what had preceded Irmo’s summary ouster from the house. Rada and Ori provided a quiet explanation, while Charisse explained the troublesome dance sequence that had caused so much consternation. Luka was uncharacteristically silent, but his tight, nervous posture telegraphed his apprehension. Bard stayed in the background with a neutral look on his face, but Thran knew better. His husband likely catalogued a whole list of trouble he thought he’d caused Thran, felt guilty about it, and bided his time before he offered an apology. He would see to Bard soon enough. First, however, he wanted to reassure Luka. Rada was right about how often the young man had borne the brunt of Irmo’s withering irritation, and while the dancer had thankfully become more serious in his attention to details and techniques, Thran didn’t want him to be so demoralized that he lost his love of the dance.

“No, no, Luka, there was nothing you could have done,” Charisse was saying. “You were right—you must take another step to put you in the right position for the lift. Thran knows this as well as you and I, so we will fix the step.”

“But Irmo’s out,” Luka spread his hands and looked up at the ceiling of the ballroom. “I pissed him off, and now he’s gone, and I’ve made yet another blunder. Gods!”

“Irmo’s out because I threw him out,” Bard stepped forward with a shrug. “Luka was not out of line, Thran, and Charisse tried to calm Irmo down, too. This is on my head, not Luka’s.”

“This is on Irmo’s head only,” Thran took in everyone with his regard. “I have warned him more than once that I will not tolerate a bully. What we do is hard enough, and requires much trust on all our parts. We do not have a place for anyone who cannot practice the respect. So none of you have reason to worry or to regret or to feel guilty because Irmo has been put out. We will go on, and Immortal will become what we want it to be. Please, do not worry.”

“What are we going to do about a choreographer, though?” Luka asked.

“Nothing for the next three hours,” Thran smiled. “Let us see if Irmo is smart enough to realize that he needs us more than we need him. It may be that he will see this, and reappear with an abject apology in hand. If by tomorrow he has not reappeared, then I will consider.”

“That is wise,” Charisse nodded firmly. “We will work out the steps ourselves, Luka, and when that ridiculous man reappears, we will show him how smoothly it works, and he will be abashed that he didn’t listen to us long before.”

Luka’s lips trembled into a grateful smile. “That’s just what we’ll do. He’ll wonder why he didn’t think of our solution himself.”

“Of course. Such a ridiculous man, sometimes,” Charisse put her hands on her hips. “Come, let us try it—oh, but wait! Thran, what about your fitting? How did that go?”
“Yes, did you find any shoes?” Rada asked, perking up.

“I did,” Thran nodded proudly. “Tcha, I left them in the SUV. I will bring them in and show you all.”

Thran trotted outside, fetched his bag, and rejoined his husband and colleagues in the ballroom to unveil the shoes, the ribbon, and the elastics to a collection of murmurs and exclamations.

“Oh, they do make them in your size!” Charisse grinned as Thran handed one of the shoes to her. “Oh, so plush in the inside! Very nice. These are the modern ones, so controversial. And they are not pink – c’est dommage.”

“No pink,” Thran offered a theatrical sigh, much to everyone’s amusement. “I received quite an education about them from the fitters. They call themselves the Weird Sisters. I enjoyed them very much.”

“Oh, they’re famous!” Charisse laughed. “So good, both of them! And funny!”

Thran described his visit, which provoked much discussion. Charisse gave him a careful lesson in how to sew on his elastics and ribbons, even bringing out her sewing kit to show him how to make the small stitches that would not rub, nor puncture the outer satin. Once he had tailored a pair to her specifications, of course he had to model them, and laughed when Charisse fussed at him to tie the ribbons correctly and tuck in the knots. He took a few steps in them to get used to the feel of the ribbons, but stayed flat – until Bard looked up dubiously from his sketchbook, fingers pulling at his bottom lip.

“So... you’re supposed to stand on your toes in those?”

“I did stand on my toes in them,” Thran confirmed. “I even took a step or two.”

Charisse tsked, shaking her head. “Be careful, Thran. You should wait for the instructor.”

“I should,” Thran grinned, going to the barre. “But perhaps I will indulge in a single step, merely to illustrate.”

Charisse tsked again, but everyone else looked so eager that Thran made sure his feet were straight to the barre and rolled up just as he had in the shop. When he was sure he was steady, he released the barre and held out his hands.

“Oh, my,” Rada breathed, cradling his chin in his hand as he looked up and down Thran’s height. “Oh, my...”

“Oh, oh, my,” Ori seconded. “It’s not as if you’re not tall enough already, Thran. But now you’re...”


“It will look spectacular, will it not?” Thran drew himself up to his tallest and raised his arms above his head. “Death so tall, and the Maid so small?”

Charisse took a position beside Thran. She extended one leg forward, bent over it, and looked back at him, further exaggerating the height difference between them. “Vraiment – truly. It will be formidable.”

Rada tugged at Bard’s sleeve. “We must draw that, while we have it.”
Bard patted Rada’s arm in agreement, and they both turned to clean pages in their sketchbooks.

“This is the scene,” Thran looked to Charisse. “Death brings the Maid to the Underworld, and makes the case for His love.”

“Yes, yes,” Charisse nodded vigorously. “But the Maid, she is still so in love with her Soldier, and hardly sees anything around her but her memory of him. Luka, come, be the memory of my Soldier.”

Luka scampered into place, caught up in Charisse’s enthusiasm. As the three arranged themselves, Rada and Bard sketched madly. Thran forced all thought of them away, and considered only Death afire with his love for the human Maid, desperate to offer Himself to her. But she was so inflamed with the loss of her Soldier that she didn’t notice Him enough to reject him. All she saw was the spectre of the Soldier who was lost to her.

“Hold that – yes, that!” Bard pleaded. “Right there. Can you hold that?”

All three of them froze. Thran put himself in his yoga trance, relaxing muscles even as bones held him in the pose, until the stress on his feet grew too much.

“I am sorry, Bard – I must come down,” he warned, and let his feet roll carefully flat.

“That’s okay, angel; I’ve got it. I’ve got it,” Bard said distractedly, not seeing the smiles that everyone exchanged at the endearment. Thran allowed himself a fond smile to go with the rest.

“You most certainly do,” Rada murmured, looking over Bard’s shoulder. “Bard, you have the whole story in a single sketch.”

“Show us!” Charisse exclaimed, as Bard drew one last line. “Ah, such anticipation!”

She and Luka drew close, their arms around each other’s waists, and Thran looked between them as Bard turned his sketchbook around. Thran’s breath caught at the spare yet evocative drawing that depicted the Maid and Soldier reaching out to one another, with Death behind and above them, impotent to distract either of the pair. The movement of the figures was palpable, as were the urgency of the mortals and the inevitability of Death.

“May I?” Rada asked, with pencil poised in his hand.

“Yes, of course,” Bard turned his pad towards the costumier. “Please.”

“Just here, and here,” Rada mimicked a pair of lines.

“Yes, you’re right – that’s great,” Bard nodded, adding the lines, then turning the pad around again. The extra lines extended the Maid’s dress and the Soldier’s tunic. “More motion, and a better hint at the costumes.”


“I like it very much,” Charisse agreed.

“It’s wonderful,” Ori nodded. “And the way you’ve drawn Death’s long legs... that’s good, Bard. It hints at him being up on his toes, but doesn’t show it explicitly. It’d be a great poster for the ballet, and a great marketing tease.”

“It will be, indeed,” Thran agreed. “If I can back up the sketch with the shoes, then it will be perfect. So I must arrange for instruction quickly. Charisse, do you know this Mme. Morgelle?”
“Of course – she is very good, and has familiarity with other male dancers who dance on pointe. Your friend Dario, he recommended her?”

Thran nodded.

“She is an excellent choice. She is very insistent about precision, but for someone as tall as you, that is good. Balance will be even more important to you than it is for a small ballerina.”

“Then I will call at lunch – ah, it is that time now. Come, we have paused, anyway, so let us have our meal, and then we can resume afterwards.”

“What... what will we work on?” Luka asked. “Without a choreographer...”

“We have plenty to work on.” Thran’s voice was firm. “We will review what we have done, and what we have left to do. We still lack music for the troll market. We have costume work to consider.”

“I’d like to organize my most recent notes, too,” Ori volunteered. “I’ve kept up with most of it, but I have some questions that I’d like to fill in. So I’m set for the afternoon.”

“To lunch, then,” Thran invited, and the group filed out of the ballroom and into the kitchen. Bard’s soup went into bowls, Luka nuked his burrito, Rada fished out a packet of cookies, and Ori brought out a thick corned beef sandwich. They assembled around the kitchen table in good spirits to share their meal.

Take that, Irmo.

* * *

At first, Bard thought Thran was merely putting on a good face over Irmo’s ouster. Was he just trying to make him and the rest of the folks in the ballroom feel better? But as lunch went on, it was clear that Thran was not glossing over any resentment, frustration, or displeasure about it. If anything, he looked excited, even anticipatory. What was Thran up to?

The tall dancer made sure that the lunch conversation was light at first, and positive, but when the talk turned to the music for the troll market, he let it run on its own as everyone threw out ideas about what background would best convey the diversity of the Underworld. Rada started the best part of that, reiterating his ideas about the different enclaves of souls that inhabited Death’s realm. With typical irreverence, Luka teasingly called the enclaves ‘hoods, and made beat box noises to accompany his joke. At long last, the young dancer’s teasing had a positive result, because Rada wondered what if the music ebbed and flowed as Death led the newest souls through His realm – Luka’s hip hop here, Beethoven’s Für Elise there, and Indian tablas over there. Perhaps a dreamy background could underlie all the bits, such as Ravel’s Daphnis et Chloé? Ori quickly called up the Ravel piece on his tablet, and found out that it had premiered in 1912, so UVB would not have to pay any licensing fees if they chose to use that piece of music. As the dreamy sounds of the music played, everyone agreed that it was a good choice to anchor the Soldier’s travel through the Underworld.

“So we have the last piece of the music,” Thran nodded with satisfaction. “See, we make good progress. Ori, would you please add that to our list of music for each scene?”

“I will,” Ori nodded, fingers tapping rapidly. “Just a moment...”
When Ori turned his tablet around, Bard leaned forward with everyone else to scan it. Typically, Ori had organized a tidy chart that listed the acts and scenes of the ballet, the music chosen for each one, who the dancers were, and how approximately long each scene ran.

“So our ballet runs about ninety minutes,” Thran tapped his finger against his lip, then gave Bard a smile. “That should not be too much for those who dislike overlong operas to endure, no?”

“I think that’s manageable,” Bard grinned in return. “How long are the pauses between acts?”

“It depends on the set design,” Thran mused. “We have only one complicated set, so perhaps not long. It is time to bring Círdan into the mix. In fact, soon it will be time to bring the rest of the company into the mix, too. We have the basics of the principal choreography done, and so now we must work on the battles and the troll market.”

Discussion evolved into details of the ensemble work that would soon begin. Bard confined himself mostly to listening, soaking up the details, sketching now and again as he could, sometimes ideas about what he heard, and sometimes the scene of his companions around the table. At times, he imagined a big Italian family gathered around a Sunday dinner table to argue, laugh, tease, and generally fill the air with loud affection. It made him smile as he sketched Luka laughing at Charisse wondering what an enclave of Eskimos would make of a skirt of leaves, or tropical islanders of a fur anorak.

Soon enough, the gathering returned to the ballroom, and Luka and Charisse worked through the sequence that had caused Irmo so much trouble in the morning. Together, they thought to add exchange two of the steps in Luka’s part to a single full turn. That gave him a chance to add more emotion to the dance, and brought him around on the correct foot to the correct position to hoist Charisse aloft.

“What do you think, Charisse?” Luka asked, lowering the woman to the floor. “That’s a lot easier for me, yet it feels more like what the Soldier would do.”

“I agree,” Charisse gave an emphatic nod. “And if I make my step just before a little wider, then it brings me to you with more passion, which suits the Maid. Thran, see what you think of our refinement.”

The two dancers retraced the steps, both of them humming the music that would accompany them.

“Yes, that is very nice!” Thran applauded. “The extra half step is no more, the emotion is there for both the Soldier and the Maid, and the lift comes naturally after. Where is our notation?”

“I have it,” Charisse hastened to the papers that recorded the choreography, and quickly sketched the revision, reciting the steps as she wrote them so that Luka and Thran could check her. How anyone made anything of the mysterious marks was arcane knowledge, and Bard was thankful he wasn’t the one who had to make sense out of them –

A knock came at the door.

Everyone paused to exchange glances. “Irmo,” most of them murmured, albeit with varying degrees of dread, exasperation, and amusement.

“I’ll get it,” Bard put up a hand. “You all carry on.”

“Not just carry on,” Thran said swiftly. “If that is our errant choreographer, let us show him that we are well able to progress, and happily so. We do not revolve so much around brilliance that we allow it to burn us.”
Thran was all but trembling in anticipation. Oh, it was clear now – why he’d been so animated since Irmo had stormed away, why he’d smiled so much during lunch...

Thran was gambling.

What had Bard’s husband said before lunch? Right now, with Immortal’s story set and most of the principal dances sketched out and notated, Irmo needed Immortal much more than Immortal needed him. A lesser choreographer could fill in the rest, perhaps not as well as Irmo, but with less ill will. If Irmo knew that, then he might be so desperate to finish the work himself that he’d put a rein on his bad behavior far better than anyone else could.

That was the gamble – how badly did Irmo want to finish Immortal?

Bard’s grin spread slowly across his face. “I’ve got you, Thran. We just need to make Irmo see that we’ve got him by the short hairs, and he’ll police himself better than we can.”

The expression on Thran’s face wasn’t quite a malicious grin, but close enough that Rada smothered a chuckle. “Exactly, lyubov moya. Exactly.”

“I can help with that,” Ori said into the silence, as a second knock sounded, this one more urgent. His expression was even more mercenary than Thran’s as he explained himself in a few words.

“Yes,” Thran nodded, taking them all in. “We must all follow what Ori starts. Bard, you begin at the door. The rest of us will take our places here.”

“On my way,” Bard agreed, taking up his sketchbook and turning to the page where he’d drawn the sketch Rada had so liked from this morning. “Ori, you hang back and come in wherever you think is best.”

Ori waved a hand as he tapped on his tablet. Bard headed for the front door, taking a marshaling breath before he put a busy expression on his face. As he passed the main room, he snuck a peek through one of the windows – yes, there was Irmo’s car. He looked back at Ori, nodded, and reached for the knob as the small man ducked back into the ballroom to alert the others.

Bard pulled open the door, still looking at his sketchpad, only belatedly looking at who stood there – Irmo, of course – after a second or two. He sharpened his gaze on the choreographer.

“Hello, Irmo.”

“I want to speak to Thran.”

Not an auspicious start, but Bard kept his expression neutral. “He’s busy at the moment.”

“Bard?” Ori hurried in from the ballroom. “Oh – hello, Irmo. Bard, Thran wants to see that sketch you did for the promotion. I’ve got the list of choreographers he wanted, too, so I thought we could interrupt him just the once –”

“Choreographers?” Irmo repeated, blinking in surprise. “What other choreographers do we need?”

“You walked off the job this morning, if you remember,” Bard gave Irmo a pointed look. “We are considering whether another choreographer can help us fill in the rest of the ballet, or if Thran will take that on himself. He’s already doing so much, though –”

“That is absurd!” Irmo exclaimed. “It is unnecessary and pointless! I want to speak to Thran myself and explain this!”
Bard stuck his pencil behind his ear and regarded Irmo frankly. “I meant what I said about respect this morning, Irmo. Do you hear yourself making demands? No one comes into my house by making demands. If that’s the best case you can make to see Thran, it doesn’t pass muster with me.”

“Come on, Bard,” Ori murmured. “Thran’s waiting for this.”

Bard handed Ori his sketchbook. “Sorry, Ori. I finished the sketch, so if you take it in, I’ll be right there.”

Ori took the sketchbook reluctantly. “Okay, Bard. Oh. My. That is a wonderful sketch.”

“Thanks. Irmo, I’ve got to go—”

“I am sorry,” Irmo said hastily, as if the words tasted so bad that he wanted to spit them out as fast as possible. “Of course, you have the right to set the rules for your house, and of course, it is right that I meet them. So yes, I will meet them, and please, I would like to talk to Thran.”

Bard and Ori exchanged dubious looks. Ori especially had endured Irmo more than the rest of them, and no hint of a smile touched his face. Bard had more reason to snicker, but the stakes were too high for that. Ori gave a slight shrug, which Bard mirrored before he looked back at Irmo.

“I appreciate the rephrasing. I’ll see if Thran’s at a point where he can come out. He’s in the middle of something with Luka and Charisse.”

“I’ll go,” Ori offered, and hastened off, leaving Bard in the hallway with Irmo. He didn’t want to engage Irmo, so he looked around the hall, then back towards the ballroom. He really needed to paint this space. It’d do so much to improve the air of the place if Hope the Lope’s sanctuary wasn’t so dingy—

“He says bring Irmo on through, Bard!” came Ori’s voice. Bard beckoned to Irmo, and led the choreographer through the main room to the ballroom, where Thran was in the middle of watching Luka and Charisse dance to taped music. Rada had scattered a lot of sketches near the garden benches, and Ori stood beside Thran like an attentive scribe.

“Yes, yes – excellent!” Thran approved. “That is very smooth, very nice. Once more, please?”

Ori queued the music again, Charisse and Luka danced, and Thran watched critically. “Yes, that is it exactly. That is a good fix. Charisse, let us note that.”

“Certainement,” Charisse and Luka bent over the notation, leaving Thran free to notice Bard standing with Irmo.

“Ah. Irmo. Good afternoon.”

“If I may have a word with you... please?”

“Of course,” Thran assented, and the pair took themselves away from the others, standing in low but animated discussion by the fireplace. Bard sidled up to Rada and they bent over their sketches. Ori soon joined them, and Charisse and Luka began their dance from the beginning so that they stayed busy.

“Oh, to be a fly on the wall,” Rada murmured, winking at Bard and Ori.

“That’s the truth,” Bard breathed, flicking a glance at the pair. “This must be part and parcel of a lot of your jobs, Ori.”
“Yes,” Ori admitted, not bothering to look away from his tablet. “But don’t tell my brother I said that. He’d kill me.”

“Quite the intriguing man, your brother,” Bard observed. “Exactly what is his job, anyway?”

“He considers himself an… expediter,” Ori said guilelessly. “Don’t tell him I said that, either.”

“Exactly how does one become an expediter?” Bard teased, but Ori’s look back at him was not a smile.

“We’ve got an older brother – a hairdresser. He’s a bit of a motherer and a fusser, but he’s a good soul… generous to a fault. Someone like Angelo burned Dori’s shop because he wouldn’t pay protection money, and because he was gay. Up to that point, Nori had been more on the wrong side of things than the right, but it changed after that.”

Bard skewered Ori with his stare, but Ori’s normally friendly brown eyes were hard and angry.

“There was a hairdresser named Dori in my old building.”

Ori nodded. “That’s my brother, yes.”

Bard swallowed. “He’s a sweet guy.”

Ori nodded again. “He likes you, too. You were always nice to him.”

So the man who’d brokered the deal to put Clan Ffyrnig’s drug dealing harasser in prison had seen to his brother’s harassers, too. And to Steffen Masters’ downfall. And likely to Angelo’s demise, as well. Bard didn’t need to know what form the retaliation against Dori Goldman’s arsonists had taken – it had surely been decisive and final. A cold shiver went up Bard’s spine. It was one thing to tease Thran about being in the Russian Mafia. It was another to know that Ori’s brother and Thran’s “expediter” was in another league entirely. And how many people had found themselves in a world of trouble because the gentle soul sitting cross-legged beside Bard on the floor had tap-tap-tapped his way through damning data?

“Give my regards to both your brothers when you see them,” Bard said.

The anger eased from Ori’s eyes, and the man gave Bard a gentler smile than he would have a moment ago. “I will. Dori in particular will be touched that you asked after him.”

Bard didn’t ask whether Mr. Nori would be touched or not. He hoped not.

“The harpy approaches,” Rada warned softly.

Bard looked up – yes, Thran and Irmo had ended their discussion and approached. Thran’s expression was even, but a hint of smugness flickered in his grey eyes. Irmo looked abashed, something Bard hadn’t seen before, but he took it as a good sign.

“I am sorry for so much bad behavior,” Irmo began without preamble. “Over and over, I have made little of you and much of myself, when it should be the other way around. Yes, I set the steps, ask for the sets, ask for the costumes, but it is you, Charisse and Luka – and Thran, of course – who make the steps live. It is Rada who makes the costumes live. It is Ori who organizes my rambles and makes them into a tidy web rather than a jumbled maze. It is Bard who captures the essence of so many things and provides this wonderful place to create. I know these things. I do not forget these things. I have an angry and impatient muse, sometimes, and from now on I must work very hard to calm her temper so that it does not insult and belittle you. I hope you know these things are true, and will forgive me so many lapses, and will allow me to continue to work with you.”
This recital, which surely reflected what Thran wanted to hear as much as how Irmo felt, was met with silence – not surprising, given how many incidents Irmo had precipitated. Thran gestured to all of them.

“We will vote – with one caveat. If Bard agrees that Irmo remains, well and good – the rest of us will also vote, and the count For or Against will determine whether Irmo is back with us or not. But if Bard is not happy with this at all, and says that Irmo must go, then it is done. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” chorused the others.

“Then I’ll vote last,” Bard replied. “I want to hear how the rest of you feel before I vote.”

“As you say,” Thran nodded. “I will vote next to last, then, because I am the one in charge. It is Charisse, Luka, Ori, and Rada who must vote first.”

Rada raised an index finger. “May I start the vote? I will vote yes, Irmo may stay, but I also suggest that if any of us reach a point where we cannot follow Bard’s most excellent house rules, then we must excuse ourselves for an hour? That means that we are not part of any decisions made in that hour of our lapse, and we must live with those decisions accordingly. Also, we must work to reestablish our rapport with the rest. That is a stiff penalty.”

“Oh, very much so,” Charisse nodded. “I will also vote yes, and agree that we should add Rada’s suggestion.”

“I can go with that, too,” Ori agreed, smiling. It wasn’t lost on Bard that the three quickest to agree were the even-tempered ones.

“That leaves me,” Luka grimaced. “I don’t like being yelled at when I don’t understand. And please, don’t take away my trashcan. Sometimes, I just have to vent, and better I kick my trashcan than yell at any of you when it’s not your fault. You take a lot of everything out on me, Irmo, and I don’t like that one bit, not when I’m trying hard to do my job. But... if I can still have my trashcan, then okay... I’ll do my best.”

“The trashcan is allowed, and for all of us,” Thran agreed. “So I cast my vote for yes, also. You understand, Irmo, that yes does not mean it is back to the rudeness. If that returns, then Bard will escort you out again at his discretion, and for good. You understand this?”

Irmo nodded. “I understand. I will do my best. Though... maybe sometimes I will resort to the trashcan, too.”

“Acceptable. So Bard, it is up to you.”

Thran stood slightly behind Irmo, so the choreographer didn’t see Thran’s surreptitious wink at Bard. Bard didn’t acknowledge it, but he made a show of rubbing his chin as he pretended to consider. After an unconscionably long time, he gave a slow nod.

“I can live with that. I hope you appreciate what a good company this is, Irmo. They embrace your vision, just not the way you choose to convey it. You’ve got a good thing going. Think how much better it’ll be when you encourage instead of discourage. This’ll be the ballet to beat them all.”

“You are right. You are very much right,” Irmo replied, and for the first time he seemed moved. Maybe Bard had done the right thing, to speak to what drove Irmo most – his visions. “Terpsichore, that muse is a hard one. This I know. But she is right, and true. I will try to be a better mouthpiece for her.”
Bard nodded to Thran, so Thran turned to Irmo. “Then we welcome you back, Irmo. We have made good progress while you were gone, so let us inform you of these things...”

Ori moved to catch Irmo’s coat as the choreographer shrugged it off his shoulders, exchanging a shrug and a grin with the rest of the company as Thran crouched with Irmo beside their notation notes. Maybe the threat of expulsion would register, and Irmo would mend his ways.

Maybe.

If it didn’t, Bard would have no compunction about hauling Irmo out again, this time for good.

* * *

Thran grinned as Bard got into bed beside him and fell back into the pillows with a deep exhale. He snaked a hand out from under the sheet and blankets to stroke his husband’s arm.

“What a day, yes?”

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Bard graved. “I signed a contract with an artist’s rep and will have a show before long. You got pointe shoes and can actually stand on them. We fired a choreographer and then hired him back. Rada and I drew some good stuff, and Luka and Charisse fixed up their dance. It’s a roller coaster that never stops.”

“I have never been on a roller coaster,” Thran mused, snuggling into Bard. “They look terrifying.”

Bard reached over to turn out the light, then gathered Thran close. “Bain loves them. Tilda does, too, surprisingly. Sigrid can take them or leave them. She says the wait in line is too long to justify a scant two minutes of excitement. Has Legolas ever been on one?”

“No.”

“Maybe he’d like to take a ride or two. If he does, we can take the children to a coaster park this summer. Then you and I can ride one, too.”

“I know such contraptions must be safe or they would not exist, but I am dubious to entrust my life to something that looks so flimsy.”

“That’s half the fun, pretending to do something dangerous that really isn’t.”

“So it is said. I am not convinced.”

Bard snickered. “So says the man who dares to put on a ballet, dance on his toes, and gamble on the reappearance of errant choreographers. All in one day.”

“Those are all acceptable risks, risks I understand.”

“A lot of the people who ride roller coasters would never take your risks. It’s all in what you know and what you’re comfortable with. But I think I’m going to start calling you the gambler.”

“What is this gambler, lyubov moya?”

“You are, that’s who. That look in your eyes all through lunch... you were betting that Irmo would
come back. And when he knocked on the door, you almost crowed, you were so sure it was him.”

Thran grinned. “I did. If that is a gamble, then it is a gamble I won.”

“You certainly did. Getting on a roller coaster would be anticlimactic after that.”

Thran sniffed. “To go upside down and around and back in defiance of gravity seems much more dangerous, Bard. Perhaps I should stick to the carousel. That is only around and around. No up and down or upside down.”

“It makes no difference either way. The important thing is to enjoy yourself, and if all you do is watch the children enjoy a little mayhem, that’s okay.”

“I did think of something I would enjoy,” Thran purred.

“Oh?” Bard drawled, drawing out the syllable. “And what might that be?”

“This time, I thought of a game for us to play.”

“Mmm. Tell me more.”

“It will be for the dining room. Remember that I said how we could have a picnic on a beautiful Oushak rug, once you restored the room?”

“I do.”

“I have a better idea. It will reward the lord of the house, who has worked so hard to make it beautiful for his family, who today defended the rights of his guests so stoutly.”

“If it calls for the lord to wear a suit, it’s no good. I don’t own one. And a crown is right out.”

“We will do without either. Though soon enough, we will buy you a very nice suit. I assume you have something suitably artistic to wear to your art show, but you will need a suit for my ballet premiere. As for our game, you may choose to wear what you like when your loyal valet serves you a delicious meal on a table laid with all of our finest things, and then gratifies your choice of positions for dessert. I would take great pains to ensure that the lord of the house is well satisfied.”

“Mmm,” Bard rumbled, turning towards Thran to nuzzle a kiss at the base of his throat. “You could serve me a toaster pastry and I’d think it was perfect.”

“Tcha, those horrible cardboard things with artificial fillings and overly sweet icing? I can make nice scrambled eggs with toast, or perhaps a warm muffin.”

“Sounds perfect. I’d better get painting, then.”

“It will come in good time. I like the beautiful marble tile you showed me for the half bath, and the silver tea paper with the red accents.”

“That marble will take a while to come in once I order it. I’ll probably get the tea paper up, the central hall painted, and the dining room painted before it does.”

“As I said, it will come in good time. Until then, imagine how your valet may best please you. It will give you something to anticipate.”

Bard’s nuzzling gave way to a long kiss. “I have a lot to anticipate right now. Maybe I won’t have to anticipate for very long, if a certain dancer is in the mood.”
Thran smiled in the dark as he enjoyed his husband’s caresses, rewarding them with his own. “With such a beautiful artist in my bed, it is very hard not to be in the mood.”

Hands stroked down his body, soon gloving the most sensitive part of him. “Mmm. It is very hard, indeed. I can do a lot with that.”

Bliss soon warmed the dark.

* * *

**Author's Note!**

For you music geeks out there, here is Ori's scene list with the specific pieces of music that the company is considering. It's subject to change, but I thought some of you might find it fun to listen along. I apologize for the formatting - this doesn't support table lines, but I hope you can read along anyway!

<table>
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<td>i.</td>
<td>First battle</td>
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<td>ii.</td>
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<td>iii.</td>
<td>Maid searches for and finds Soldier; Death retreats; Maid and Soldier rejoice</td>
<td>PDT w/ SC</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>iv.</td>
<td>Second battle; the Soldier falls</td>
<td>FC</td>
<td>Kyrie</td>
<td>7:38</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>v.</td>
<td>Death claims Soldier and leads to Underworld; Maid pursues, Underworld gates (UG) close</td>
<td>Principals, FC</td>
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Underworld revealed; Death leads Soldier around; Soldier wanders but cannot forget the Maid

Principals, mixed up, fading in and out as each enclave steps forth; underneath is *Daphnis et Chloé*, Maurice Ravel

Maid grieves Above; dreams of Soldier; travels to Underworld

Solo; Lachrimosa, Requiem, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Maid petitions Death; Death accepts; Soldier and Maid trade places; UG close

Principals, The Isle of the Dead, Sergei Rachmaninov; Knights Reprised

Death woos Maid; she is blind to all but Soldier

PDD; Elegy for Viola and Piano, Opus 30, Henri Vieuxtemps

Soldier grieves Above; dreams of Maid; travels to Underworld

Solo, Valse Sentimentale, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Soldier petitions Death; Death refuses; Soldier dies; Death collects his soul and ejects Maid; Maid dies; Maid and Soldier reunite despite Death; become stars; UG gates close for the last time

Principals, Knights Reprised

Hymn of the Cherubim, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Dark ambient music fills in between scenes as needed

FC = Full Company

PDD = Pas de Deux

PDT = Pas de Trois

SC = Selected Company
As spring draws near, the pace quickens for an angel and a saint - an art show, a ballet, and a talent show are all in the offing!

Life raced by for several days. The UltraViolet Ballet corps joined Thran, Charisse, and Luka in the ballroom for morning barre, followed by work on Immortal. Some days, as many as twenty or thirty dancers worked on the troll market scenes, embracing an exotic combination of urban, ethnic, and jazz styles as well as the traditional ballet. Ori remained in residence, working his soothing and organized magic on Irmo, and Círdan made an occasional appearance to discuss set design. Bard missed Rada more days than not, as the costumier was now back in his workshop to draw colored sketches of the Immortal costumes, gather fabric swatches, and make costume patterns. Abebe, UVB’s ballet master, became a fixture in the ballroom, freeing Thran from running the morning barre and other practices. Surprisingly, Irmo managed to smother the worst of his bad behavior, and with Ori’s help became much more collaborative. Three afternoons a week, Thran traveled to take his pointe instruction from Mme. Morgelle. He made good progress, and he and Irmo gradually introduced pointe work into Death’s courting dance with the Maid.

Bard made regular forays into the ballroom to sketch. It was exciting to capture the exotic combination of dancers on paper, and he helped Rada as the costumier asked. In addition, it was awe-inspiring to see Thran progress with his pointe work, and Bard loved the several sketches he did that featured the tall dancer on his toes.

Bard also resumed the reclamation work on the house. His children deserved a proper home, from Legolas who hadn’t had one before, to Tilda, Bain, and Sigrid who had endured their grotty apartment for so long without complaint. At the same time, something told him that Thran would soon be more in the eyes of the world, and Bard wanted to surround his husband with a beautiful house to match the acclaim. He dismantled the scaffolding in the ballroom and moved it into the central hallway to patch plaster gouges and dings, and to repair the damaged plaster in the ceiling. That ended up to be a bigger job than he liked, because a whole section crumbled under his ginger probing one morning, scattering debris over most of the floor. Thank the gods he’d moved Hope the Lope carefully into a corner of the main room before he’d started, or the plaster would have showered down on her. He ended up having to replaster a large section. Of course the woodwork needed stripping, which was a chore and a half. But the oak trim that emerged from under the layers of old paint was still in good shape, and seemed to glow with a bit of the same golden color that radiated from Hope. In a week of long days that stretched into nights, he’d repaired, primed, and painted the ceiling; stripped and sealed the oak trim; and painted the walls. After much deliberation, he’d chosen a pale grey-green paint that complemented the iron balustrades with their crystal globes; the oak bannisters, woodwork, and floor; and Hope’s golden patina. It would also match the slightly darker grey green that would finish the dining room walls, which were plainly visible from the hall.

When the last of the painting was done and the scaffolding was moved into the dining room, all the central hall lacked was a chandelier to cascade light down over Hope like a rainstorm. He found antique fixtures online, showed them to Thran, and ordered them. It’d take some time before they arrived, but already the hallway provided a beautiful welcome to visitors. He polished the oak newel posts and bannisters to a soft glow, shined the fluted crystal globes of the balustrade, and mopped the
Once he finished the dining room and main room, he’d bring in a professional to refinish the floors, and no one would recognize the once shabby spaces.

The dining room took another several days, for it needed the same ceiling and wall repairs that the hallway had required. Thankfully, the central plaster medallion was in good shape, and he found a dilapidated chandelier at one of the salvage shops missing several of its crystal drops. Once Bard cleaned, repaired, rewired, and reassembled the bits, he added replacement crystals to fill in the gaps, and soon the fixture cast sparkles over his battered dining room table. The table was too small for the restored room, but it would do for now. As Bard wheeled the scaffolding into the main room, he looked forward to the day when Thran would offer himself as dessert in their reclaimed dining room.

March rolled around. The children continued to settle into school well, especially Legolas, who relished his classes as well as his new life with his extended family. Sigrid and Bard began their upholstery class. As the chairs she’d wanted to cover were basic, she finished the first one in the first class, then the other two during the week, because she wanted to help Bard with the fainting couch. The Majorelle blue velvet from the shop Rada had recommended was stunning, but it would take father and daughter working together to wrangle the plush fabric into the elegant smoothness that made the most of the fainting couch’s simple lines.

The ballroom was almost as busy during the evening as it was during the day, for the girls had their dances with Thran to work on. Sigrid was thrilled to be the eerie carnival spectre that drew the bemused Thran into her haunting waltz, so she and Thran quickly had their act in place. Tilda grew more and more confident each time she practiced getting Thran to flop over as the rag doll, so their act came along quickly, too. Sigrid found a simple costume pattern at the craft store to make bloomers, a top, and a conical hat for Thran’s doll costume, and she and Bard figured out how to make it on the old sewing machine. At Tilda’s request, they sewed immense pompoms down the front of the top and on the top of the hat. With a red nose and exaggerated makeup, Thran would make a ridiculously silly doll for Tilda to play with, which delighted the tall dancer no end. For his dance with Sigrid, Thran would wear only a simple Henley, jeans, and trainers, but he borrowed a small tutu and a tiara from the UVB costumes for Sigrid to wear with a leotard and tights for her circus costume.

To make sure that Legolas and Bain didn’t feel neglected during the girls’ efforts, Bard ran so many car races with them that he began to win regularly. In desperation, the boys introduced him to the zombie apocalypse game, and soon he was blasting away at decaying corpses with impunity. While it wasn’t his favorite form of entertainment, he came to enjoy it as the silly, guilty pleasure it was. When he finally got the best of Legolas and Bain at their favorite game, he enjoyed their howls of outrage even more.

Frodo Baggins visited several times with Bilbo to choose the sketches for Bard’s show. It would be the Saturday four weeks after the April Fool’s Follies – April thirtieth – and just before Bard’s birthday on May 2. The thirty sketches that the Bagginses ultimately chose were a mixture of pieces, but it gratified Bard that several of the mirror images went into the mix. Frodo’s eye for framing materials impressed Bard, for his works looked twice as good matted and framed as they did when they’d come out of his sketchbooks. As press releases and notices for the show appeared in the media and around the village, a fluttery sensation grew in Bard’s solar plexus, especially when he worked on Rahmiel, for he wanted to finish the clay model for his show. He was a working artist again!

As if the bustle of children, ballets, and art shows weren’t enough, Bard began his weekly volunteer stints at the Imladris Academy. At first, he was happy merely to help set out supplies for the classes, clean up, and help the teachers as they requested. He got to know Theodred Rohan, Tilda’s art teacher, and found him personable. The young man was popular with the young children because he
was funny and patient, and the older children appreciated his calm demeanor, even as he challenged them to stretch the limits of their materials. As he and Bard chatted, Bard’s caricature experience drew special interest, as the teacher was trying to start a class in comic, manga, and graphic novel work, but hadn’t had much luck in making his case with the administration.

“There’s so much fantastic art out there in those areas,” Theodred explained to Bard. “So many people, not just the young, love them. A class would help a lot of young artists realize they’re legitimate fields, and instead of tagging buildings and semi trailers, they’d be pursuing degrees in art and putting their works in galleries and museums.”

“For what it’s worth, I think they’re great fields, too,” Bard shrugged as he carried a tray of paint back into the supply room to store. “Drawing caricatures paid a lot of my college tuition, and I still use that training every day – the dealing with people as much as the drawing.”

Theodred paused as he shuffled the bottles of paint from Bard’s tray to the shelves. “Could I prevail upon you to talk about that to my drawing students? About plying the craft fairs, and what skills you took from away from it that you use today?”

“Sure, if that’ll help. I’d be glad to.”

“Great, just great!” Theodred smiled. “I know they’d be interested, never mind the posturing. You know the age – every one of them wants to blend in, yet stand out, sometimes at the same time. They don’t know whether they’re coming or going, or even in which direction.”

“Oh, that changes as you grow up?” Bard teased.

“Only sometimes,” Theodred laughed in return. “By the way, I saw the sign in the Blue Mountain Coffee Shop about your gallery show. It’s in just a few weeks, isn’t it?”

Bard nodded, and resisted the urge to run his hand through his hair. “It is. The first one in a long time. I’m excited.”

“I can well imagine. So many of my students are excited about the April Fool’s Follies for the same reason. I’ve got several who plan to exhibit pieces, and more have offered something for the silent auction.”

“I’ve got a piece for that, too. You know, it’d be great if you could get an exhibit together from your manga-graffiti-graphic novel crew. I know it’s short notice, but it’d be a great example of why the class you want to teach would be a real asset to the school.”

Theodred gave up his semblance of fiddling with the paint bottles, and turned his full regard on Bard. “I have encouraged many of them to put in their work they do outside of class, but I didn’t think to turn it into a plea for the class. That might be just the thing to encourage more students to put their work into the show, as well as explain to Headmaster L’Eärendil about the kinds of artwork involved, and why it’s a worthy medium.”

Bard grinned. “A little not-so-subtle pleading, especially when accompanied by wide puppy eyes from earnest art students, never hurts. You could have a petition at the exhibit to ask people to show their support for your class, and if you get enough names, that might give you some leverage, too.”

“That’s another great idea,” Theodred nodded, smiling. “Maybe I could prevail upon you to talk to some of those students, too?”

“I’m game. Do you want me to just talk? I’m better with a sketchpad, so if I sketched while I talked, it would be easier for me, because I can show them what I mean.”
“I like that, too,” Theodred agreed. “Maybe next week?”

And so Bard soon found himself talking to a lot of art students. With his sketchbook in hand, he didn’t have to say so much, something he was too self-conscious to enjoy at any length. Drawing to illustrate his points was easier, because it urged the children to ask questions, and it was always easier to answer questions than to make a speech.

He was gratified when Theodred emailed him that night to tell him several students had committed to hosting what they’d dubbed an urban art booth for the Follies.

Bard’s visit with the art students turned out to be good practice, for Bilbo called the next day to ask him when he could film a short video segment about his show for both online and broadcast play. Bard swallowed his apprehension, even as he agreed to do the segment. He told the rest of the family at supper about the upcoming filming, which provoked much discussion.

“You’re going to be on TV?” Tilda asked, pausing as she sprinkled cheese on her taco.

“That’s what Bilbo says,” Bard said. Damn, he’d run a hand through his hair before he’d even realized it – always a dead giveaway of his self-consciousness. “He’s bringing some of my sketches that Frodo framed to show, too.”

“Cool,” was Sigrid’s pronouncement, as she smiled proudly at her father. “What are you going to wear?”

“What is he going to wear?” Bain repeated, raising his eyebrows. “Clothes, duh!”

Sigrid rolled her eyes at Bain. “Just because the sum total of your wardrobe is soccer jerseys, jeans, and trainers doesn’t mean everybody else’s is so limited.”

“Papa always takes a long time to get ready for such things,” Legolas said unexpectedly, drawing the regard of the other children to him. He shrugged. “It never looks like he does, but he does.”

“Of course I take a long time.” Thran took a deliberate bite of his taco and chewed slowly. He’d put a little weight back on his bones, so he didn’t look so emaciated, which meant his smile was more self satisfied and assured, rather than mere gallows-humor bravado. “I want to look just so, very calm, very elegant. Such things take care. It is hard to look elegant when my hair is not smooth, or a button is loose, or the color of my shirt does not match that of my pants.”

“I bet your buttons have never been awry, and you’ve never looked anything but elegant,” Sigrid observed tartly as she popped a cherry tomato into her mouth, but Bard smiled at the affection behind her words.

“Of course not, because I take the time,” Thran gestured wide with his hands, half amusement at Sigrid’s opinion and half wry comment on his vanity.

“Then you’d better be my wardrobe consultant,” Bard exhaled. “I’ve never been interviewed on camera before.”

“Papa has, lots of times,” Legolas said. “It’s not that terrible. I did one for my fencing two years ago. Not so bad.”

“When is it?” Tilda asked. “Can we watch it, too?”

“They’re going to record it during the day, when you’re at school. I have to go to the station, which isn’t far. Bilbo will be there, so it won’t be so bad.”
“Then you’ll be on TV?” Tilda asked.

“Not right then. They make a video of the interview, like the ones that you play on YouTube. Then they play it whenever they like.”

That satisfied the children, and the discussion had drifted to other topics, specifically the upcoming Follies. But after supper, when Bard settled on the sitting room sofa while the children did the dishes and began their homework, Thran brought in their tea and sat down beside him. As Bard leaned forward to take his cup, Thran’s long hand came to rest on his thigh and rubbed slowly.

“I could go with you for this interview, but only if you would like for me to,”

Bard put his hand atop Thran’s and squeezed gently. “It’s during the day, angel. You’ll be with the ballet. I don’t want to interrupt that.”

“If this is something you want to do alone, that is fine. But if you would like company, the ballet could do without me for an hour or two. It is your decision.”

“Bilbo will be with me, so I won’t be completely thrown to the wolves.”

“True. Whatever you are comfortable with.”

“I’ll need wardrobe advice, though.”

“You have nice things, all suitable. But I am at your disposal as you choose.”

“You’re the expert at these things, not me, so all advice cheerfully accepted. It’ll be good practice for you, anyway. You’ll be doing your own interviews for Immortal’s premiere before long.”

“So let us practice for what may become a more common event for both of us, my saint.”

Thran sat back to enjoy his tea with his usual aplomb, but while Bard was quiet, inside he wasn’t as calm as his husband. Drawing and sculpting and renovating a house were all so much easier than presenting a public face! But art promotion was a necessary evil of the business, so Bard resolved to see it through with as much grace as he could muster.

The day of the interview, after the children headed off to school, and Ori and Abebe arrived to take charge of the dancers. Bard’s appointment was at ten. He’d decided to take Thran with him for moral support, so Thran did his barre and yoga early, then marched both of them upstairs to the bedroom. Shaving, combing, grooming, more combing, more grooming... Thran was as exacting with Bard’s appearance as he was with his own, and while Bard thought his husband’s focus on hair, skin, and nails bordered on obsessive, he had to admit that the results were polished. In contrast, the actual dressing part of Thran’s routine took less than ten minutes. He felt comfortable in a grey-blue shirt over a soft blue tee shirt, and darker blue trousers. His brogues, grey coat, and blue scarf topped everything off. Thran looked his usual impeccable self in black silk tee, pale grey sweater, and black velvet jeans, but Bard would hold his own with his exotic husband.

“Make sure you take your sketchbook and pencils,” Thran reminded him.

“I’ll need them,” Bard grimaced. “I’ll sketch in the lobby or something while we’re waiting, to stay calm.”

“You could do a sketch of the host, too — a nice one. Perhaps that would impress her.”

“She’s been a big booster of the arts for a long time,” Bard explained as they headed for Bard’s
truck. “Mavis Davis has been the arts reporter for both the local public television station and the village newspaper since before Daphne and I moved here, and she’s still at it. Her show’s called _Heartbeat of the Art Beat_. Rosie told me she’s been one of the biggest advocates for the art festival in July, where you’re hoping to premiere _Immortal_. Maybe after my bit, you can talk to her about your bit, and get her on the case.”

“That is a good idea,” Thran conceded. “If you do not mind, I will call Lettie and see if she has already talked to her, and if I should say something now, if the chance arises.”

“No, go ahead.”

“I will not press, whatever Lettie says. Today, the focus is on you and your gallery show, _lyubov moya_.”

“I’d just as soon divert a little of that focus, _cariad_, but I appreciate the thought.”

Bard drove while Thran talked briefly to Lettie. From the sound of it, Lettie was all in favor of Thran talking to Mavis Davis if the chance came up. Listening to Thran’s half of the conversation gave Bard something to draw his attention away from his impending interview. At least he didn’t have to worry about putting on airs. He was too down to earth for that – in fact, his biggest worry was that he’d be as boring as a corpse buried in that earth. He sighed. What would come would come, and soon it’d be over, and then he could get back to working on Rahmiel and the house. First Rahmiel – Rada had explained to him how to make the framework for wings to fit his model, and he’d had the idea to buy a package of turkey wings at the market to look at the musculature so he could see just how the anatomy worked. Now all he needed were feathers...

In a few minutes, he pulled into the parking lot of an innocuous one-story building faced with grey stone. The glassed entrance looked little different from the front of the UVB building – the only difference was the name on the door. Was it some sort of unwritten rule that the places that housed creative endeavors should all look so boring? That gave Bard something to smile about as he and Thran got out of the truck and paced up to the entrance. A man at the modern reception area alerted someone that they had arrived, and in a few minutes a smiling teenaged boy not much older than Sigrid appeared to lead them to a set dressed like a small library, with a pair of chairs arranged to the side of a fireplace. Bilbo and Frodo had preceded them, and had already set up a tabletop easel with one of Bard’s framed sketches on it between the two chairs. Bilbo spotted them, and came up with a warm smile and a wave.

“Good morning, Bard, and Thran, too! How are you this morning?”

“Well, thank you,” Bard replied, glad to see Bilbo’s welcoming face. As Thran greeted the artist’s rep, Bard waved to Frodo, who waved back before turning back to the technician helping him with the easel. “Already hard at work, I see.”

“Yes, indeed,” Bilbo beamed. “I’ve brought four of your sketches with me. The routine generally is that Mavis will chat you up a bit, then you’ll talk about your pieces, and they’ll finish with information about when and where your show is. It won’t take very long. No nerves, I hope?”

“Not unless I think about it,” Bard grinned. “Thran’s the media expert, not me.”

“You will do fine, _lyubov moya_,” Thran assured him with a wink at Bilbo. “Just be yourself, yes?”

“That’s exactly right,” Bilbo nodded vigorously. “Mavis will do most of the work for you. I’ve already talked to her about you and your work, and she’s looking forward to meeting you. Let’s get you in place.”
Bilbo led Bard and Thran forward, and one of the technicians waved Bard towards the leftmost chair, explaining something about lighting levels, so Bard handed his coat and scarf to Thran, and gingerly sat in the chair, sketchbook in hand. People came and went, and someone came forward to pin a small microphone to his shirt. Then he was left to himself, so he opened his sketchbook to draw Thran, Frodo, and Bilbo gathered together to talk. He did another one of one of the cameramen squinting into the eyepiece of his camera. And here came Mavis Davis herself, pausing to talk to Bilbo, Frodo, and Thran. She was in her seventies, with golden strawberry blonde hair styled in an attractive pouf and twinkling green eyes. Her clothing was stylish, a bright apple green tunic and slim black pants with black half boots, and a chunky clear crystal necklace and earrings added sparkle without overpowering her. She came over to shake Bard’s hand.

“Hi, Bard. I’m Mavis, and I’m very happy to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Bard got up to take her hand firmly. “I appreciate the interest.”

“You work offers a lot to be interested in,” she smiled appreciatively. “It’s a delight to draw more attention to such a talented local artist, but I’ve come to expect that of Shire Hills. They have a knack for finding top flight artists, over and over again.”

“They’re a joy to work with, both Bilbo and Frodo,” Bard agreed.

“So has anyone explained to you how this works?” Mavis asked, as she sat down in the other chair.

“I’m all ears,” Bard grinned.

“Pretty simple, really. I’ll introduce you, and ask you some general questions, then we’ll chat about the pieces you’ve brought, then we’ll talk about when and where your show is to wrap things up. It’ll seem like a long affair, but that’s so we can make several short spots, each one with the intro, a look at one of your pieces, and the show details. So don’t worry about the crew milling around during the whole process. You and I will just chat back and forth, and this herd of people running around will do their thing to make us look good. Right, Bella?”

Mavis winked at the young woman who came forward with Mavis’s microphone. Bella gave Bard a friendly nod as she fastened the microphone to Mavis’s collar. “Give Mavis the good stuff, Bard, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

“I’ll give it my all,” Bard promised.

“So while we’re waiting for the herd of turtles to get themselves in gear, can I see what you were drawing?” Mavis tilted her head to look down at Bard’s sketchbook. “Oh! That’s me talking to your husband and Bilbo and Frodo!”

Bard nodded as he turned the pad around to show her the picture right-side up. “I liked the energy of the conversation, so away I went.”

“Just that fast?” Mavis marveled.

“Sure. It’s all about being in the moment to catch people in the moment – to capture something spontaneous,” Bard said, turning the book around and turning to a fresh page. “I imagine that’s what it’s like to do an interview like this one, too – you look for something unstudied that captures the essence of the person you’re talking to.”

“Exactly right!” Mavis nodded understandingly. “I understand you came to that technique in art school?”
Bard grinned as he sketched. “I did. It’s a cliché about starving artists, but in my case, it wasn’t far from the truth. I worked as a caricature artist at a lot of art fairs to pay for my tuition. I learned to chat a bit, to help people relax, and get them talking, and pretty soon they forgot about me sketching, and then I’d pick out something distinctive that I could draw.”

He turned his sketchpad around to show the quick line drawing he’d done of Mavis, leaning forward in the comfortable wing chair, one elbow on the chair arm and her chin resting on her fingers as she listened to Bard with an alert smile on her face. He’d suggested her elegant clothing and jewelry with a few emphatic lines, and the artful fall of her hair with lighter ones. He’d completed the sketch to show one leg crossed over the other and the small heels on her boots.

“That is amazing!” Mavis gaped. “That must’ve taken you all of two minutes, and it’s stunning!” Bard hoped his face wasn’t as red as it felt, but he managed a small smile and nod. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Is that typical of how fast you work?”

“Only for quick studies. Most other things take longer.”

“I would imagine that would be true of a piece like this one,” Mavis gestured to the picture on the easel, which was the very detailed study of Thran’s hand in the ballet position he so liked.

“That one took much longer, yes,” Bard nodded. He talked a little bit about that one, and why he liked to do such detailed ones, though it was so different from his usual style. A technician came into the set to exchange the hand picture for one of the mirror image ones, and he and Mavis talked a bit about that one and the different versions of reality it reflected as well as the viewer’s own impressions. That picture was replaced with one he’d sketched of Charisse in the ballroom, standing at ease with her hands on her hips, laughing. The final one showed Legolas and Tilda reading together on the sofa.

“How do you choose your subjects, Bard?”

He looked blank. “The problem is generally which one thing to draw out of so many. There’s something interesting going on just about everywhere you look. I never have any lack of things to draw.”

“You don’t just draw, though – you’re also a sculptor in metal?”

“I am. That’s the medium I concentrated on during my formal training – iron and bronze, for the most part. Some of them have mechanisms for movement, because I like the challenge of making the heavy metal look as light as possible.”

“Will you have any examples of your sculpture at your show?”

“I will have a few finished pieces, yes, as well as a look at the clay model for the piece I’m working on now. It’s called Rahmiel, who is the angel of love and mercy. It’ll ultimately mix metal with textiles, so I’m excited about that.”

“So let’s remind our viewers when and where they’ll get a chance to take a closer look at all these wonderful pieces.”

“It’ll be April thirtieth at the Ilithien Gallery at 13 East Galway Place, from six to nine in the evening.”

“Excellent! Thank you for sharing some of your artwork with me today, Bard.” Mavis looked away
from Bard towards the camera setup. “I’ve been chatting with Bard Bowman today, who’ll display several examples of his work on April thirtieth at the Ilithien Gallery in Greenwood Dale on the Lake. If you’d like more information about Bard’s show on April thirtieth, please call the Ilithien Gallery at 555-555-5555. It’s sure to be an exciting event, so don’t miss the chance to see Bard’s wonderful pieces up close, and talk to the artist himself. I hope to see you all there. Until next time, I’m Mavis Davis for Heartbeat of the Art Beat. Thanks for joining us.”

“Cut,” a voice sounded from behind the camera.

Bard’s jaw dropped. “Have you been filming the whole time?”

Mavis gave him a mischievous smile. “Pretty much. You were so natural, it was too good of an opportunity to waste, and we got almost everything we needed in one take. You would’ve been much more nervous if I’d told you, right?”

“Oh, you’ve got that right,” Bard wrung a hand over his mouth, but he was smiling. “That was sneaky.”

“I’m pretty good at catching people in the moment, too,” she shrugged. “Forgive me?”

“I’m more liable to thank you,” Bard exhaled. “This is not my favorite part of being an artist.”

“A lot of artists feel the same way. You did great, by the way, so the only part you’ll have to do knowing the camera’s on is the introduction. Ready for that?”

Bard gave Mavis a smile. “Sure. Whenever you’re ready.”

That was much easier than Bard expected, just Mavis introducing herself as the host of Heartbeat of the Art Beat, and then Bard. For that part, all he had to do was smile at Mavis, then say hello and how glad he was to be here.

“I’m here talking with Bard Bowman, a wonderful artist and sculptor, whose work will be featured on April thirtieth in the Ilithien Gallery in Greenwood Dale on the Lake. Bard, what can you tell us about the pieces you’ll have on display at the gallery?”

“The focus will be on my sketches, most of them in pencil, but a few in charcoal.”

“What’s your preferred subject to sketch? Landscapes, seascapes, animals, people, or something else?”

“People are my favorite subjects to draw, hands down. Sometimes it’s just the way someone moves, or how two people laugh when they share a joke, or maybe it’s the winner of a race rejoicing while the loser despairs. There’s never a lack of moments to capture in a sketch.”

“Why did you choose to draw in pencil rather than say, pastels, or chalk?”

“It’s a lot easier to work in pencil most of the time, especially when I have to work fast to capture the moment that catches my eye. Charcoal, pastels, and chalk let you do a lot with color, and I like them for impressionistic works. But they’re not so easy for me to carry around. I’ve always got a pencil to hand and paper, so they work well in more situations for me.” He flipped his pencil up with a smile. “Now’s no exception.”

There was a bit more banter, but before long the lights dimmed. Even though Bard was more relaxed than he had been when he first sat down, he was relieved that the session was over. Mavis patted his hand.
“Not so bad, was it?”

“No,” Bard agreed with a sheepish smile. “But that was entirely due to you. Thanks for going easy on me.”

“I enjoyed chatting with you. And expect me at your show, Bard. I’m anxious to see more of your sketches, and the sculpture that mixes the metal with textiles sounds quite intriguing.”

“I hope it will be,” he nodded, as Bella came forward to remove the microphone from his collar. “I donated a piece to the April Fool’s Follies coming up. My children attend school there, so I hope you do a piece about the show to get out the visitors to help the school. My husband’s dancing in the talent show, too.”

“Yes, I’ve done a couple of pieces on the Follies already, and I’ve made mention of your husband’s intention to dance.” Mavis looked at him expectantly. “The rumor is that he’s working on a new ballet. What can you tell me about it?”

Bard grinned. “I can tell you that I think it’ll be the most amazing ballet I’ve ever seen, but as I’ve never seen a ballet before, that might not be the most ringing endorsement it could be. But it will be stunning, even to someone who’s seen fifty ballets before this one. Why don’t you ask Thran about it? He won’t mind.”

“He won’t?”

“Sure. You can have an exclusive,” Bard prodded. “Come on.”

Bard headed to Thran’s side, glad to divert focus away from himself. Thran was more at home with such things, and he was his usual courteous self as Mavis asked him about the ballet. He wasn’t surprised when Thran quickly ended up in the chair he’d just vacated to chat about *Immortal*. Far from feeling upstaged, Bard was happy to watch his elegant husband finesse his way through Mavis’s questions with charm and humor.

After Mavis’s profuse thanks, Bard and Thran helped Frodo and Bilbo carry Bard’s sketches to Bilbo’s car. Bard made sure he thanked both of the Bagginses for setting up his interview just as profusely as the reporter had thanked him.

“You did an excellent job, my boy!” was Bilbo’s pronouncement. “That’ll get a fair amount of airplay, I’m sure. Brilliant move on your part, to sketch Mavis like that!”

“I’m glad it turned out so well,” Bard confessed. “Thanks again, Bilbo. And Frodo, the framing’s brilliant on every piece.”

“Thanks, Bard. I can’t wait to see them on the gallery walls, all together,” Bilbo’s young nephew replied.

“Neither can I. Won’t be long, though,” Bilbo waved as he and Frodo got into his car. “See you soon, both of you!”

Thran and Bard waved back as Bilbo piloted his small car out of the parking lot and away. As Thran got into the truck and fastened his seatbelt, he chuckled.

“What’s so funny? Other than me being interviewed?” Bard teased.

“You did very well, my saint. And Bilbo was right – to draw the reporter was brilliant. You were very fast, and the sketch was very magical, as so many of your pieces are.”
“I never would have had the nerve to do that if I’d known the camera was on.”

Thran’s smile was smug. “I know. That is why I told them not to tell you.”

Bard skewered Thran with a surprised stare, but quickly focused on the road as they left the station parking lot. “You told them?”

“Oh, Bilbo and Frodo agreed, so I suppose I cannot take all of the blame – or credit, however you choose to look at it.”

“Mavis said she decided not to tell me.”

“She decided so only because the three of us told her that would make for a better interview. You were most natural, and assured. I am very proud of you for doing such a good job.”

Bard snorted. “A good job because of ignorance, it was.”

“A good job all the same.”

“Thank the gods I got to go first. If I’d had to follow your interview, it would have been anticlimactic. You knew the camera was on, but you were natural and assured and elegant anyway.”

“Perhaps so. But I did not do magic. You did, with your sketch of Mavis. People will be eager to see more of you and your work.”


Thran put out a hand to squeeze Bard’s thigh. “Be sure, lyubov moya. Your turn comes. I am sure of it.”

The conviction in Thran’s voice was firm and unruffled. Bard didn’t look away from the road, but he smiled.

He really was married to an angel.
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

An angel and a saint may not be able to christen their most recently restored rooms, but they manage to find other ways to indulge. Then it's on to rehearsals for the April Fool's Follies.

Is a little angst in store?

“I owe you an apology, lyubov moya,” Thran said that night as they stood in the bathroom. He had just finished drying his hair, and his husband had gotten out of the shower to towel himself briskly.

“What for?” Bard paused in his rubbing to give him a mystified look.

“You have beautifully transformed both the central hall and the dining room, and we have not christened either of them yet.”

“And why is that your fault, and not the whirlwind of stuff that’s taking our time? Ballets, art shows, dancing acts, interview taping – gods, it’s a wonder either of us have time to breathe.”

“And all the beautiful restoration work you do. That takes time, too. Perhaps we do not have the time to breathe, but I still want you to know that I notice these beautiful things you do, and marvel at how everything blossoms about us. The children are happy, we are happy, and all is well.”

“So what is there for you to apologize for, then?” Bard put the towel over his head and continued his vigorous rubbing. “Sounds to me like everything’s fine.”

“Everything is fine. Everything is more than fine. But that does not mean that I am sorry we have not had the chance to fuck ourselves blind – oh, so sorry, ‘christen’ the two new spaces you have reclaimed for us.”

Bard snorted with laughter and threw his towel at Thran, who ducked it, then caught it before it hit the floor. “After spending all day in constant motion, how you manage to muster even the thought of fucking anyone anywhere is beyond me.”

“Is it?” Thran hung Bard’s wet towel up on its rack and turned a disappointed face on Bard. “The tragedy of the day. Je suis désolé.”

“Je suis désolé. I am desolate,” Bard translated, as Thran took his arm to draw him into range of the hair dryer. As Thran urged Bard to sit on the stool, then directed the warm air over Bard’s hair, his husband hummed in appreciation. “Are you?”

“Entirely.”

Bard looked up at him through his tousled locks, offering Thran his favorite come-hither smile. Thran bit his lip as he wielded the hair dryer, easing his fingers through Bard’s hair as he dried it. Bard closed his eyes to deepen his enjoyment of Thran’s attentions, humming again as Thran caught one of his earrings to pull gently. It took little time to dry Bard’s hair, but Thran lingered over it, enjoying the chance to please his husband. Bard worked so hard without complaint, simply because
he enjoyed making his family happy, and he did so without thought of reward. But after what had happened when Thran had fallen asleep in the UVB studio, Thran would not neglect to tell his husband how cherished he was. How easy it was to offer a little pampering with a hair dryer and his fingers, and how good it was to hear Bard’s hum of enjoyment, see him relax, feel the hand that took his, then savor the lips that graced his fingers with a soft kiss.

“Maybe I can offer to ease your desolation, angel.”

Oh, that caressing note in Bard’s voice sent a flutter through Thran faster than he expected. As Bard got to his feet and eased Thran into an embrace, Thran traced a finger down Bard’s cheek, smiling when Bard nipped at it. “It is I who wants to offer you something, lyubov moyya. A small reminder of how much I love you, and appreciate all you do for the children and me. You make such a beautiful home for us, such good food, such a graceful life. You are zoloto moyo.”

Thran threaded his fingers through the hair at the back of Bard’s neck, cradling his head as he bent to kiss Bard’s lips. Bard leaned into the caress, his hands tracing down Thran’s back to cradle his buttocks and massage gently. “Mmm. You spoil me.”

“I want to spoil you rotten. You deserve nothing less. So savor. Savor all I give you.”

Thran traced his lips down Bard’s throat, across his pectorals, so enticingly firm from all the chin-ups Bard had taken to doing in the barn every day. Maybe his husband did them in preparation to work metal again, but the swell of muscles across shoulder and chest was a delicious enticement regardless of why it had come to be. He got a gasp out of Bard when he licked first one nipple, then the other; the sound was so charged that Thran sank to his knees, dragging his lips down Bard’s torso until he engulfed Bard’s cock in his mouth. It wasn’t soft for long, rising hard and fast under Thran’s attention. He’d positioned them carefully so that Bard had a full profile view of them both in the floor-length mirror on the far wall of the bathroom, as well as a front-on view in the mirror before him of Thran’s long hair and back as he offered his attentions. For the few seconds it took before Bard’s cock hardened into more than Thran could take in his mouth, he stroked legs, back, groins, and abs as Bard’s soft moans guided him. Then his hands came into play, teasing and tickling the shaft of Bard’s substantial cock, until Bard could not keep himself from thrusting into Thran’s mouth. Thran cradled Bard’s balls gently in one hand, and tightened the other around Bard’s shaft while he teased the head of Bard’s cock with his lips and tongue.

“So good, so good...” Bard whispered, stroking Thran’s hair with distracted fingers. “Gods, angel, I’m lost, I’m so lost...”

“I have you safe, my saint,” Thran whispered. “Come home to me. Come now.”

“I’m coming, coming, oh, gods –”

Bard’s hips flexed, thrusting back into Thran’s mouth. Thran took all he could, wrapping an arm around Bard’s hips to steady them as Bard spasmed hard. Thran swallowed quickly as he carried Bard over the edge and into oblivion, holding his lover firmly until he was back in control of his body, then sucked all of Bard’s spent cock into his mouth to caress it. He let it slide out when Bard trembled against him, then he rose to take Bard in his arms and rub his back slowly.

“Zoloto moyo,” Thran repeated, pressing a kiss against Bard’s hair. “Velikoye zoloto moyo.”

Strong arms wound around him. One hand caressed his buttock as the other stroked down Thran’s spine. “Gods, you bastard, do you know how erotic it is, to watch the world’s premiere dancer kneel in front of me and suck my cock like a common bath slave?”
Thran grinned. “Tell me.”

“Too erotic for me to be satisfied with just a blow job. You planned that, didn’t you?”

“Still hungry, then, my saint?”

“You’ve only whetted my appetite. A mouth like yours makes me want to fuck the rest of you.”

Thran’s cock twitched in feral response. He growled low in his throat and bit where Bard’s shoulder met his neck, hard enough that Bard jumped. “Fuck me like a slave if it pleases you, but I will not be a common one.”

Bard wound a hand in Thran’s hair, pulling him into a kiss. “Oh? What kind will you be?”

Thran growled again as he cupped Bard’s balls and bit Bard’s lips. When Bard swallowed a curse, Thran grinned and backed out of the bathroom. He got the lubricant out of the drawer of his nightside table, and perched on the end of the bed on his heels. He slicked his hands, arched his back as he caressed himself with his lubricated hands, then looked over his shoulder at Bard as he prowled after Thran. “One worth fucking. Well trained to delight you in a thousand ways. What would you like to do to me? Or would you prefer to watch me fuck myself?”

Thran shut his eyes as he stroked himself, teased his opening with his fingers, thinking of how he’d used his mouth to bring Bard to release. If Bard was content to watch him, then so be it. He was shameless enough to finish himself – no, Bard took his hands.

“If my slave needs a fucking, far be it from me to deny him. I’m a generous master when it comes to gratifying those kind of needs.”

“Most generous,” Thran breathed, as Bard rubbed Thran’s lubricated hand over Bard’s cock until it was well oiled. Then Bard tossed a towel between Thran’s knees.

“Wipe your hands. I won’t have you taking yourself. That’s my privilege.”

Thran cleaned the lubricant off his hands quickly. As soon as he put the towel aside, Bard pushed him onto his hands and knees and slid inside him, drawing a gasp from Thran. Gods, all inhibitions melted as Bard filled him so completely. Hands dug into his groins to pull his hips back tightly against Bard’s thighs, thighs that shifted from side to side to more deeply seat the cock within him. The scrape of skin and hair against Thran’s glutes sent waves of pleasure through him, so much that he arched his back sharply, dropping to his elbows to intensify the stretch. Yes, gods, yes, that was the rhythm that consumed him, such a seductively slow pull out, then the faster, more staccato stutter stroke in. He flexed and bowed in time to Bard’s thrusts, moaning softly on each stroke in, sighing on each stroke out.

“You’re right,” Bard whispered, pulling Thran’s hips back even farther so that he could stroke faster. “You’re far from common. Tight, warm, soft... so pretty on your knees with all that beautiful hair in disarray... a rare treat, indeed...”

“I’m anything you want,” Thran whispered, shutting his eyes and reveling in every sensation. “Anything.”

Bard muscled him forward towards the pillows, them pressed him down until his chest was against the mattress and his back was hard against Bard’s chest. Wrapping arms around Thran’s hips, Bard pulled them tightly together, keeping his prize close. He pressed his knees out against Thran’s thighs to splay him wider, then with a grunt of satisfaction, pushed in deeper, sending a tremor through Thran as he sank lower. Gods, he was stretched so wide, nothing but an open vessel for whatever
Bard chose to give him. What little movement he could make only drove Bard more deeply into him, and the extreme splay of his legs made each twitch and spasm that much more intense.

“Give me your wrists.”

Thran twisted his arms behind him. Bard coiled his long white hair into a rope, crossed Thran’s wrists, then wound his hair around his wrists, further deepening the arch in his back and neck. That put his opening at the perfect angle for Bard to work him hard. With his wrists bound in his hair, Than could only gasp when Bard’s hands snaked underneath him, one to cradle his balls, the other to take his cock in hand and stroke so rapidly that his whole body shuddered. The cock sliding in and out of him fell into the same rapid rhythm. Bared teeth grabbed him at the juncture of shoulder and neck, and rough breathing was harsh and feral in his ears. His body erupted all at once, but he was too pinned to buck against the weight atop him. His orgasm rose even higher when Bard spasmed atop him. He lay unresisting as Bard reached his peak, then quieted.

“Had enough?” Bard growled, holding him pinned beneath him.

“Mmm,” Thran grinned, savoring the last vestiges of his release. “Have you?”

“I should be ashamed of myself, the way I let you get under my skin.”

“I prefer you shameless. You are so delicious that way.”

Bard eased out, and carefully unwound Thran’s long hair from his wrists. As Thran eased back onto his knees, Bard pitched him the towel so they could mop up the sheets, then leaned in for a kiss.

“Look who’s talking. You don’t know the meaning of shame.”

“But I do know the meaning of delicious,” Thran purred, kissing back. “I trust you are well sated, my saint.”

“Gods, yes. Come on, we’re both trashed. A quick rinse, then bed.”

In a few minutes, Thran snuggled under the covers with his husband, luxuriating as the sheets warmed around him. “So good, to be so warm.”

Chuckling, Bard stroked Thran’s hip. “You’ll be reincarnated as a cat some day, content to look elegant as you bask in the sunshine.”

“Perhaps so. You... I cannot think of an animal that fits you well. So you will have to be reincarnated as a saint again. For you are very much so.”

“Then you’ll have to be an angel, so I can find you again. I can’t wait to see you with wings.”

This time, it was Thran who chuckled. “You make turkey wings for Rahmiel. I hope it will look better than that sounds.”

“I’m just trying to sort out how the bones go together, and how the feathers attach. I want it to look as natural as possible. Rahmiel’s wings will be more elongated, so they look like they’d actually bear his weight.”

“How will you make them? Will you fashion bones in some way?”

“I’ll use a wire armature, just as what’s inside the clay, then I’ll start padding it with something, something that will hold a rigid shape, then put a stiff cloth covering on top – maybe buckram – to hold the feathers. That’ll be the hard part, to get them to line up correctly. Rada’s offered to find a
place that sells feathers for such things for me. I hope he’ll have some names of places tomorrow.”

I cannot wait to see Rahmiel in his glory. He is already beautiful.”

“So is a certain dancer when he’s on his toes. I hope that’s not stressing you too much, the pointe work. It looks amazing.”

“It is a paradox,” Thran mused. “It is hard, and painful, but I am careful. At the same time, it is the most indescribably light feeling, even when my feet hurt. At moments, I feel very centered, like a meditation. Though I am glad that I must do only a few minutes of it during a performance. It is tiring because it takes so much control.”

“We’d better get to sleep, then, so you’re fresh for tomorrow. More dancing in the ballroom, I assume.”

Thran rumbled an assent. “And for you?”

“Rahmiel’s wings, mostly. The tea paper for the half bath, now that the dining room’s done. The floor tiles won’t be here for another bit, so I could start on the main room or the solarium. If it’s the main room, though, you have a decision to make.”


“The main room needs a fireplace mantel. That’s your room to arrange, if you want to. So think about what kind of mantel you’d like. We need to know what it’ll look like before I paint and such.”

“Have you had any ideas?”

“The room has an eastern exposure, so it’ll get morning light. You could go for a nice wood one, either natural or painted, or stone, or marble. It’s not as big a fireplace as what’s in the ballroom, but it’ll still be a pricey piece. We can look at the salvage shops again and on line to see what strikes your fancy.”

“We will look. When will you work on the solarium? I thought we decided you would work on the solarium after the half bath, but then you did the hall and dining room...”

“We’re starting to have more people troop in and out. I wanted the public areas to look better.”

“Ah,” Thran acknowledged. “They do not merely look better. They look beautiful. But if we must wait for a mantel and floor tile and chandeliers, then no one will fault you if you work on our solarium paradise. That will be a wonderful sanctuary for all of us.”

“That one will be fun,” Bard agreed. “It’ll all get done eventually, even the sitting room. I’d done some research, and I think the paneling in there is pecan. If I can get it cleaned up, then it’ll look amazing, especially with the rug.”

Thran hummed appreciatively. “The entire house will look wonderful. But I will not let you do the outside painting yourself. Or the windows. Or the millions of doors that need so much paint stripped. Those, my saint, we will hire others to do.”

“That’s the best Christmas present anyone could ever give me,” Bard nuzzled a kiss into Thran’s hair.

Thran pressed a kiss against Bard’s chest. “You are an easy man to please.”
“When it comes to letting someone else strip paint, yes, I am.” Another kiss fell on the top of his head. “When it comes to loving an angel, I am, too.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” Thran whispered. “Spokojnoy nochiu.”

Bard snuggled closer to Thran with a sigh. “Garu di, angel. Cysgu yn dda.”

* * *

The last week of March, the one preceding the Follies, was hectic. The girls practiced their dances with Thran for the Follies, so much so that Bard worried about the toll it took on his husband, who spent all day with UVB working on Immortal. But no matter how tired Thran was after the UVB company went home, he still found a smile for the girls each time they circled the ballroom. Sigrid’s dance was the easiest, as it was mostly waltzing, with only a little acting. Tilda’s took more rehearsal, but the little girl stuck to it without complaint.

There were enough acts for the Follies talent show that rehearsals would stretch over the four days before the show. Each act would attend two rehearsals, so Thran made arrangements to be home early for the Thursday and Friday slots they’d been assigned. The first rehearsal would be just a technical run through to make sure lighting and music were properly set up for each act, but the second would be a full dress rehearsal, just as if it were a professional production. Both of the girls were excited about finally getting to wear their costumes, even though both of them had worn them several times to practice in the ballroom.

While the boys were not performing, they were both excited about the show for a different reason – all of the teachers had suspended homework for the week, because so many children were either in the show, working as crew for the show, or setting up exhibits for the show. This was the Imladris Academy’s biggest fundraiser of the year, and the teachers did their part to help make it a success.

On Thursday night, Clan Ffyrnig’s supper was beef pot roast and vegetables that had simmered most of the afternoon, so it was quick to eat and quick to clean up. As Bard took charge of the CDs of the girls’ music, he noted Thran’s anticipation as they put on coats and piled into Thran’s SUV to head to the school. This was the first time he’d seen Thran in rehearsal for a performance, and there was a noticeable change in his husband’s bearing. He was calm, but clearly excited, even for a school production, and his carriage was alert and aware. Sigrid pointed to the auditorium so that Thran knew where to park, then they headed into the school.

“There’s the check-in table,” Sigrid pointed, and led the way with Thran. Bard followed with Tilda, and the boys brought up the rear.

“Hi, Sigrid!” A smiling girl in a bright turquoise hijab and long sleeved turquoise and white kurta waved to them. “Are you here for the rehearsal with your retinue?”

Sigrid laughed at the mischievous grin dimpling across the girl’s face. “Hi, Zuhayra! Yes, Clan Ffyrnig’s here in force tonight – this is my Ada, Thran Oropherson; my Da, Bard Bowman; my sister, Tilda; and my brothers, Bain and Legolas. Are you singing tonight?”

The girl shook her head as she checked them off her list. “I did my stint Tuesday and Wednesday, thank goodness. Tonight and tomorrow, I get to watch the fun, not be the fun. I can’t wait to see your dance!”
“My sister’s got a dance, too,” Sigrid pointed to Tilda. “Right, Til?”

Tilda came beside her sister. “Mine is the cute one, and Sigrid’s is the eerie one.”

“I can’t wait to see them,” Zuhayra gave Tilda a thumbs-up, then pointed them to the auditorium doors. “Tell Jason and Esme down near the stage that you’re here, then take a seat. And break a leg, both of you!”

“Thanks, Zuhayra,” Sigrid laughed, as the group moved ahead.

“She wants me to break my leg?” Tilda looked up at Thran with a frown. “That wasn’t very nice!”

“She did not mean for you to really break your leg, Kukla,” Thran assured her. “That is only the way people in the theatre wish each other good luck. So she offered you a wish for a good performance.”

“Oh,” Tilda looked relieved. “So it wasn’t bad, but good.”

“Exactly,” Thran gave her a smile. “Come, let us find this Jason and Esme.”

“The boys and I’ll find seats for us,” Bard offered, as Thran went down with the girls towards the stage. “Oh, wait – your CDs!”

Bard trotted after his husband, passed him the CDs with the music for both dances, then headed back to the boys. “Let’s find some seats. Do you want to pick?”

“How about ten rows back?” Legolas suggested, pointing. “That’s close enough to see their faces, and far enough away to that we don’t get sore necks looking up so much.”

“The voice of experience,” Bain grinned, and he and Legolas scrambled down the aisle to choose just the right seats. By the time the boys found six in the middle of a row that suited them, Thran and the girls came back up the aisle to join them.

“So what’s the plan?” Bard asked.

“A lot of sitting and waiting out here for you and the boys,” Sigrid replied, smiling. “We get to go lurk in the back hallway, because Ada has to warm up for Tilda’s dance. They’re going to do our acts one after the other – first mine, then Til’s.”

“I’ll stay with the lads, then, until after you and Thran are done,” Bard decided. “Then I’ll come up to help move your doll, Til.”

Tilda nodded. “Please do, because I can’t move him myself!”

Bard ruffled Tilda’s hair. “I’ll get him out on stage, and be there to do my bit at the end. The rest of the doll posing is up to you.”

Tilda clapped her hands gleefully. “Goodie!”

“We will go warm up,” Thran winked at Bard at Tilda’s enthusiasm. “We will see you shortly. Come, mes petites.”

Thran and the girls headed back to the entrance of the auditorium, so Bard and the boys settled into their seats. The boys had brought books to read, and Bard had brought his sketchbook and pencils, so they all had things to occupy them through the first half hour or so of acts. There were a lot of singers, a clever acrobat act with two sisters, and several musicians. Killian was one of the latter, teaming up with a guitarist to fiddle a couple of Irish reels. He waved at Bard and the boys as he
came off the stage, heading over to sit with them for a few minutes. When they heard about the
dances Sigrid and Tilda were doing, the boys sat down to chat until the girls appeared. Bard got a
good sketch of the four of them, Killian leaning over the back of the seat in front of Bain to laugh at
something. A couple of acts followed, then the announcer called for Sigrid and Thran to take their
turn.

“On stage now, Sigrid Bowman and Thran Oropherson, with *Midnight at the Carnival*. On deck,
Tilda Bowman and Thran Oropherson, with *The Doll*."

The stage darkened, then a single spotlight appeared. Thran walked into it. The spotlight followed
him as he walked about the stage looking around, his hands in the back pocket of his jeans. A second
spotlight appeared. There was Sigrid, tiara in place and tutu over her leggings, posed with one hand
on her hip, the other upraised as if she were a circus acrobat or trapeze flyer making her entrance.
Thran mimed startlement, as Sigrid walked around him, smiling and posing, then she raised her arms.
As her hands fell, the eerie *Carnival of Souls* waltz began, startling Thran a second time. Sigrid
circled him again, this time dancing, inviting him to join her. Drawn into her spell, Thran joined her
to waltz arm in arm around the stage. In one section, they danced side by side; in another, Sigrid
flitted aside, teasing, then Thran spectacularly flung himself into the air after her, whirling with such
abandon that his feet arched back to nearly touch his head. There were a pair of lifts, both prettily
done, and another round of straight waltzing around and around until Sigrid spun out of his arms,
blew him a kiss, and disappeared. The dance ended with the strains of the waltz dying away, and
abandoned Thran looking after Sigrid with arms outstretched.

Enthusiastic applause greeted the end of the dance, and Sigrid reappeared with a big grin on her face.
Her grin grew wider when Thran offered her the bow he offered his ballerina costars, and she
curtseied back before they came forward to answer a question about the lighting and when to cue the
music.

“That was terrific, sweetness!” Bard beamed at her, as he came onstage to help Thran and Tilda with
their dance. “Just wonderful!”

“Thanks, Da!” Sigrid returned Bard’s hug enthusiastically. “That was so much fun!”

“It looked like it. You were so good!”

“I could get used to that kind of thing,” she confessed. “Now it’s your turn to break a leg!”

“I’ll do my best to provide clueless comic relief,” Bard winked, as the announcer called for Tilda and
Thran.

He jogged into the wings with Sigrid to join Thran and Tilda. His husband had his clown nose on,
and he’d stripped off his jeans to reveal his tights. He pulled on a pair of leggings that would allow
him to slide easily over the wood floor, and exchanged his trainers for ballet slippers. Sigrid helped
Tilda put on the big hair bow that was part of her costume, then collected Thran’s jeans and trainers.

“Ready, Russkaya Kukla?” Thran asked.

“Ready!” Tilda nodded firmly. “I should go hide behind the center curtain, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes. I will tell them where to put the spotlight. Remember not to look right at it, because it is very
bright, and then you will not be able to see.”

“I remember. Okay, Da? Time to carry the doll out.” Tilda gave him a big smile, and scampered off
to take her place.
“Good luck!” Sigrid called after her, as Thran walked out onto the stage.

“The center light goes there,” he called to the lighting operators, pointing to where Tilda stood by the curtain. “Then Bard and I will come from stage left. The music does not start until Tilda tells you, yes?”

A wave signaled that Thran’s instructions had registered, so Thran waved back and rejoined Bard and Sigrid in the wing.

“You and Sigrid were great,” Bard offered.

“Thank you, lyubov moya,” Thran smiled at Sigrid. “Our lioness makes a good ghost indeed. Now, it is Kukla’s turn to shine.”

The spotlight appeared at the center of the back curtain. “Now, Kukla!” Thran called, and Tilda’s head appeared, looking out from behind the curtain first right, then left. “Now we go,” Thran prompted Bard, taking his stance. Bard hefted him around the waist, and carried Thran out onto the stage. Tilda disappeared behind the curtain, then peeked out as Bard set Thran down, brushed him off, adjusted an arm, tilted his head, then stood back to admire his work. He gave a nod, then headed offstage. After a second, where Thran stood there stiffly, Tilda crept out to consider this strange doll. She gave it a poke, without reaction, then turned to the techs.

“Start the music, please,” she called calmly, drawing smiles. When Valse Pour Jeanette began, she and Thran began the battle of wits between small girl and large doll. Bard had seen Tilda and Thran practice this many times, but to see it for the first time on the stage was exciting. Thran’s flexibility was amazing enough, but Tilda held her own through sheer persistence and cuteness. He was so busy admiring them that he almost missed his cue when a crash interrupted the music. Thran and Tilda scrambled to mimic the sweeping up of broken bits, then get Thran back into his opening pose just as Bard stamped out, his hands on his hips. He pointed to the doll standing a bit crookedly, then at Tilda, who shook her head vigorously. Behind Bard’s back, Thran surreptitiously straightened, drawing Bard’s suspicious notice. He circled around to pointed at the doll again, then Tilda again. Tilda shook her head even more vigorously, so Bard shrugged, and walked offstage, mimicking confusion. Behind him, Thran and Tilda mimed uproarious laughter that they’d put one over on the doll maker, then they circled the stage together twice in a silly little dance, then collapsed into a heap.

This dance met with enthusiastic applause, too, led by Sigrid and Bard in the wings, and her brothers and their friends in the seats. As Thran went to answer the tech’s questions at the front of the stage, Sigrid put a hand on Bard’s arm.

“Tilda and I have to get our bag, then we’ll come around to the seats,” his eldest daughter said. At Bard’s acknowledgement, she and Tilda disappeared backstage, so Bard headed downstage to join Thran. Once Thran had answered the tech’s questions about lights and music, he and Bard left the stage to rejoin the boys.

“That was cool!” Bain heralded, as they approached. “Boy, Da, Thran and Tilda sure got the drop on you!”

“They were supposed to,” Bard laughed. “A fine job they did of it, too.”

“Hi, Thran!” Kíllian waved. “That was amazing!”

“Thank you, Kíllian,” Thran waved. “I enjoyed the music you and your friend played, too.”

“Thanks! This is my mate, Derry. This is the first time we’ve done anything for the Follies, so we’re
pretty pleased at how well it went.”

“Sounded like the old country,” Bard offered. “Nicely done, both of you.”

“Oh, are you from Ireland, then?” Derry asked.

“Wales. But a lot of music from Wales sounds like what you played.”

Tilda came running down the aisle to join them, with Sigrid close behind her. Bard was about to offer her a big congratulatory hug, until he registered the look on her face.

She was frightened.

“What’s wrong?” he said at once, stooping down as she ran to him. Tilda threw herself into Bard’s arm and clung to him, but she didn’t speak. “Tilda, little doll, what happened? What frightened you?”

She pushed away far enough to look deeply into Bard’s eyes.

“I saw him, Da. I saw him. He’s here.”

“Who, Tilda? Who’s here?”

“Lance Dunmont.”
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig takes precautions after the unexpected reappearance of a certain goblin.

“Lance Dunmont!” Bain gaped. His eyes went to Thran. “No way, Til! He’s –”

“Bain,” Bard cut in quickly, as quietly as he could manage, cutting his eyes towards Tilda.

His son smothered whatever he’d been about to say, but Tilda was too smart to let the interrupted outburst pass unnoticed. As Legolas and Bain looked guiltily at each other, Tilda’s gaze flitted between them and then latched onto Bard.

“He’s what?” Tilda asked, her voice sharp and strained. “Da, what did Bain mean? Lance Dunmont is what?”

Bard’s arms tightened around Tilda. “Tell me what you saw, little doll. Take a deep breath, then tell me what happened.”

Tilda’s deep breath was long and exaggerated, but it served to calm the little girl enough to ease her panic. “Sigrid and I went back to the hallway to get our bag. One of Sigrid’s friends kept it for us. So we got the bag. Sigrid wanted to talk to her friend, so I decided to come back here, so I went down the hall. I turned the corner where the front of the auditorium is, and that’s where I saw him. I screamed, and he ran out of the school.”

“What was he doing before you screamed?”

Tilda shook her head. “I don’t know. Just standing at the door of the auditorium, looking in here.”

“Did he see you?”

Tilda nodded hard. “When I saw him, when I thought it was him, I froze. I kind of gasped. He must’ve heard me, because he turned around and looked right at me. That’s when I screamed – because I knew it was him. Then he ran out through the door.”

Bard looked up at Sigrid, but she was looking away from him. So was Thran – gods, both of them were looking around like bodyguards, eyeing everyone near them. “Sigrid, did you see him?”

His eldest daughter swung around to look at him. Her hard expression eased into something more neutral when Tilda looked up at her, but her lips tightened in regret. “I heard Tilda scream, so I ran after her. This boy ran out of the door just as I came up, so I saw only the back of him in the dark. He was about the right size, and his hair was about the right color, but I can’t be sure of anything else.”

Why would the boy have run if he were anyone else? Bard left that thought unsaid.

“What did Bain mean, Da?” Tilda persisted. “What about Lance Dunmont?”

“It means that we’re not sure,” Bard replied. “That’s all it means. We have to find out.”
“Da, I’m scared,” Tilda whispered. “And I don’t understand what Bain was about to say.”

“He was about to say that he thought Lance was in Florida with his grandmother,” Bard hedged. “That’s what we’d heard, that he’d moved to Florida.”

“So how come he’s back here now?”

How was he alive at all, if what Ori had told Thran was correct?

“I will ask,” Thran murmured quietly, reaching into the bag Sigrid held for his mobile. “Stay together here.”

* * *

Thran headed for the back of the auditorium, scanning all of the people coming up and down the aisle as the rehearsals continued on stage. When he reached the doors, he unlocked his mobile, but paused before he called; Legolas was coming up the aisle after him.

“Bard asked me to stay with you, Papa. Not to watch you, but to watch everyone around us.”

“He is a cautious man,” Thran replied, “and wise. I welcome another set of eyes.”

They retreated to the far corner of the open space inside the auditorium, where Legolas stood between Thran and everyone else. As Thran waited for someone to pick up his call, he scanned the auditorium again, but no one seemed anything but calm and focused on the stage. After a pair of rings, the usual gruff voice answered.

“Mr. Nori, please. It is urgent.”

Another silence of some seconds stretched, then, “Nori.”

“I am at the Imladris Academy with my family. Two of my children think they saw Lance Dunmont. When he saw them, he ran. I am concerned.”

A curse, perhaps German or Yiddish, whispered across the aether. Thran had never heard Nori curse before. “Things are... unsettled.”

“How unsettled? Is Angelo –”

“He’s out of the picture. I confirmed that personally.”

Thran didn’t know whether to feel reassured, or wonder how Nori had “confirmed that personally.”

“What remains unsettled, then? Something to do with the boy?”

“He’s a flea on the tail of a dog. Not even small change.”

“I was told the boy went down.”

“The source of that information is no longer... reliable,” Nori hedged. “I’m still running down what happened – or didn’t.”
“I must have more to work with. I will not risk my family. What is unsettled, and should I care about it?”

“I don’t know... yet,” Nori conceded. Thran had never heard him claim ignorance before, and it was clear from the reluctance in Nori’s voice that he didn’t like being ignorant. “Angelo went down because a second party saw the chance to acquire his business. A third party saw opportunity in that. The result is a dogfight between two, maybe three groups. Some of my people are affected.”

Shifting alliances, Thran translated. Some of Nori’s “affected people” were surely embroiled in the gang war and were not able to fill Nori in, or were no longer willing to. Some might have been lost in more unsavory ways.

“Speculation?”

“Too early to tell.”

“Are you in danger? Or Ori?”

“Install a security system at your home, if you haven’t already.”

“We have not.”

“I’ll send someone out. It’ll alert me as well as the authorities.”

The willingness to extend protection worried Thran. Nori never volunteered anything without reason.

“I will report this to the local police.”

“Tell your local politsey to contact Thor Oakland in the city. That might shake something loose my way, too.”

“I will.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Nori said, and hung up.

Swallowing, Thran disconnected his mobile. He took a moment to compose himself, so that the face he turned towards Legolas was calm and untroubled. Legolas’s face, however, was not calm. When Thran put a hand on his son’s shoulder, Legolas pointed to the rest of their family in the aisle of the auditorium. A policeman stood with them, talking to Bard.

“Good,” Thran murmured. “That is the person we want to see.”

“It is?” Legolas looked up at him.

“It is. Let us join them.”

Thran and Legolas hastened to rejoin Bard and his children. The policeman stood silently listening as Bard spoke. From the fragment Thran overheard, Bard had related Tilda’s story to the officer.

“Officer Kelso, this is my husband, Thran Oropherson, and his son, Legolas,” Bard said. “Thran, this is Officer Kelso. He heard Tilda scream and wanted to make sure she was all right.”

Thran offered his hand to the officer. “I am glad to meet you.”

“Likewise,” the officer nodded.
“Any news?” Bard asked.

“A little. Children, would you wait here for us while Bard and I speak to the officer?”

“That’s not good,” Bain shook his head as he muttered to his brother and sisters.

“Sit tight for a few minutes, Bain, let us talk to the officer, and we’ll find out what’s what,” Bard said mildly, but with a look in his eye that brooked no discussion.

“Yes, Da,” Bain conceded, and the four children filed into a row of seats, and sat down together. Thran’s jaw tightened to see Tilda want to sit with Sigrid, then he, Bard, and Officer Kelso moved a few feet out of earshot.

In brief terms, Thran explained to Officer Kelso about what had happened on Christmas Day in the city, and the resulting battle for control among the gangs. The officer listened impassively, nodding and taking a few notes. Thran gave him Thor Oakland’s name and telephone number, which Officer Kelso also noted.

“We’ve had a few instances where the city gangs try to make inroads out here,” Kelso commented. “This is a nice, sleepy little village for the most part, but with our high concentration of artists and musicians, the gangs think they’d have an eager market for the drug fad of the day. We keep a pretty close watch on it.”

“Chief Inspector Oakland may have good information for you, then,” Thran urged. “I do not think this is related to a gang’s attempt to expand their territory, but if a war wages between factions in the city, it may affect what happens here.”

“I’ll call him tomorrow morning,” Officer Kelso nodded, handing small cards printed with the officer’s name and numbers on it to Bard and Thran. “In the meantime, keep your eyes open, and watch your step. There’s not much we can do just on a sighting, because there’s no crime in coming to a school event. Tell your kids to stick together to and from school, and don’t any of you go off alone. If you see him again, report that right to me at my number on the card.”

“Will do,” Bard nodded, holding the card up in acknowledgement. “I appreciate your time, Officer Kelso.”

The officer nodded. “You’re welcome. I hope I don’t hear from you, but if I do, I’ll get right on it.”

The officer moved away. Thran belatedly noted that the rehearsals were winding up, and people had begun to file out of the auditorium. Before they headed back to the children, Bard put his hand on Thran’s arm.

“What did Mr. Nori have to say?”

“Little. Our troubles on Christmas Day have set off a gang war, which has put some of his people in disarray, which is a concern. He will be back in touch when he knows something. He sends someone tomorrow to arrange a security system for the house.”

Bard grunted. “That was the first thing I thought of, too. He didn’t have anything else to say?”

“He said he had personally confirmed that Angelo is no longer with us. I did not ask about the particulars of that.”

“What about Lance?”
“The reports of his demise may have been greatly exaggerated, as it is said. Our Tilda is not a foolish child. I believe she saw whom she thinks she did.”

“So do I.”

“So what do we do?”

“Take care going home, make damned sure no one’s broken into the house and the doors and windows are locked, and then tomorrow... let’s talk about that later. Right now, let’s take the children home, and put the best face on it that we can. Though if we say it’s likely that Lance is hanging around, we’ll have a small addition in bed with us for a while.”

“If that comforts her, then she will have it,” Thran said firmly. “Come, you are right that we must go to the children. They are worried.”

Bard led the way back to the children, who got up from their seats when their fathers approached.

“What did he say, Da?” Sigrid asked as soon as they were in earshot.

“We’ll talk when we get home,” Bard replied. “Put your coats on, everyone. Lads, don’t forget your books. Tilda, would you hold my sketchbook for me?”

The children all put on coats and hats, then collected books and bags and sketchpads. Bard led the way out of the auditorium and through the lobby. Many other people drifted out to the parking lot to head home, so they walked briskly to Thran’s SUV, got in, and quickly headed home.

No one saw any sign of Lance Dunmont, but his spectre was certainly foremost in everyone’s mind.

* * *

It was almost ten before Clan Ffymig reached home. The drive home was mostly silent, which was far from the children’s normal habit. Each time Thran looked in the rear view mirror, he caught glimpses of all four staring out the window, almost as if they expected to see the boy who’d started so much trouble over an errant soccer ball three months ago. Even Bard glanced out of the window now and again, but it was mostly to peer in the side view mirror. He looked to see if they were followed, then. Thran kept a similar check, but no one and nothing appeared behind them. They pulled into the lane, then into their driveway, without incident. Neither Thran nor Bard had to urge the children to hurry into the house. Sigrid grabbed Legolas and Bain, muttering softly to them as she pulled them into the kitchen ahead of Tilda, Thran, and Bard. They didn’t bother to take off their coats before they scattered throughout the house.

“What do they do?” Thran asked as he hung up his coat.

“In a hurry to get home, I expect,” Bard replied, cutting his eyes toward Tilda. “I’ll see what they’re up to.”

“Then Tilda, you and I will take off our coats, and we will make cocoa. I would like some – would you, too?”

Tilda’s solemn eyes brightened a bit. “That would be good, Ada. But I know how to make just a mug of it in the microwave. Da knows how to make a whole pan full.”
“Cocoa I know how to make, because Legolas has always loved it. You can help me get out the ingredients. Here, Kukla, hand me your coat.”

Thran ushered Tilda into the kitchen, listening to the sounds of his husband and the three older children going methodically through the house. Thran’s favorite crime drama told him what they were doing – sweeping the house for intruders. The bald phrase seemed more fraught with tension tonight, because the search was not some scene from a television show, but part of his family, his home, his life. He paid no attention to Bard ducking down into the cellar, or Legolas and Bain casing the sitting room and solarium. Nor did he comment when Bard ducked outside, probably to check the barn, but he caught Legolas’s eye and silently sent him and Bain after Bard. Sigrid passed through the kitchen and went into the mudroom to hang up her coat, then came back to give Tilda a big smile.

“What’s cooking, Til?”

“We’re making cocoa for everyone,” the little girl explained. “He’s not here, is he?”

Sigrid didn’t try to dodge Tilda’s question. She shook her head emphatically. “He’s not here, Til. We made sure.”

“Good.” Tilda took a deep breath. “Ada, do you want me to pour just the milk in the pan, or mix in the chocolate and the sugar, too?”

“First we must put the cocoa and the sugar in the pan with a little hot water and mix that well. Then we whisk in the milk.”

“Okay. How much sugar and cocoa?”

“We make cocoa for six, so six heaping tablespoons of the cocoa, and twelve level tablespoons of the sugar.”

Sigrid got the measuring spoons for Tilda, then leaned on the kitchen island to watch her sister carefully measure out the sugar and cocoa. Thran added a little hot water from the tap, just enough to whisk the mixture together smoothly. Then he added enough milk to fill six big mugs, and Tilda whisked that smooth. The pan went on the burner and warmed gently until Bard and the boys came in.

“Mmm, cocoa!” Legolas sniffed deeply.

“Oh, that’s great!” Bain exclaimed. “Great idea, whoever came up that that.”

“It does smell great,” Bard agreed, bringing up the rear. Thran assumed that the trio’s casual air meant that they’d found nothing untoward in the barn.

“I will tell you a secret ingredient for cocoa,” Thran said as he ladled the warm beverage into mugs. “Legolas likes a little orange extract in his, to make delicious chocolate orange cocoa. You can also add a little peppermint extract if you want chocolate mint cocoa. Or coconut for chocolate coconut cocoa.”

“Oooh, I want chocolate orange, too,” Sigrid said, going into the pantry. She came out with several bottles of extract. “How much in a mug?”

“Just a few drops,” Legolas explained, taking the orange to show Sigrid. “See?”

The children doctored their cocoa accordingly, and everyone settled around the kitchen table to sip
the warm drink. As Thran expected, Sigrid was the one to start the discussion.

“So what did the cop have to say?” Sigrid leaned forward over her elbows.

“Office Kelso will keep an eye out,” Bard said. “He’ll talk to Chief Inspector Oakland tomorrow morning to see if he knows anything. In the meantime, we’ll keep an eye out, too.”

“What if he comes to our school tomorrow?” Tilda asked.

“He can’t come into your school, little doll,” Bard said. “No one can, unless they buzz the office on the intercom, and then the office people have to unlock the door for them. The office people don’t unlock the door for anyone who doesn’t have business in the school, remember?”

“That’s true,” Tilda allowed, looking slightly less tense.

“What about sport after school?” Legolas asked.

“That is a good point,” Thran nodded. “Bain, you are on the soccer field with your mates, so be sure to stay with them. Legolas, tomorrow is archery?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“You also stay with your mates. Tilda, what does your sport group do tomorrow?”

“We’re in the gym tomorrow. I can jump rope, or play kickball, or do the wall climb.”

“Then you will be fine. Sigrid, you will be on the track?”

“Yes,” Sigrid nodded. “The first week of outdoor track. I’ll stick with the other middle distance runners. There are five or six guys I can run with, so I’ll be okay.”

“All right,” Bard nodded. “The only other thing you need to be careful about is getting on and off the bus. Thran and I will be with you in the morning just like always. When you get to school, stick together until you get inside. At the end of the day, stay inside the school until you’re all together, then go out to the bus together. We’ll meet you at the bus stop.”

“So it really was Lance Dunmont?” Bain asked.

“We don’t know for sure,” Bard shrugged. “But I believe Tilda, and if she says it was him, then we’ll assume it was until someone tells us differently. If it’s him, we don’t know what he wants. Maybe he’s got a good reason to be here. Until we know, we’ll be careful, and keep our wits about us. If anyone sees anything, you call the police, then you call one of us.”

“What if he tries to get in here?” Tilda asked. “When we’re asleep?”

“Tomorrow someone comes to put a security system all through the house,” Thran said. “No one we do not allow will come here, Kukla. Do not worry.”


“It’s getting late, and you’ve still got school tomorrow, plus we have the dress rehearsal for the Follies after supper tomorrow,” Bard noted. “Let’s finish our cocoa, then get through the shower. Who wants to go first?”

“I will,” Tilda said, but she looked up at Bard. “Will you go upstairs with me, Da?”
“Course,” Bard nodded. “Put your mug in the sink, little doll, then I’ll go up with you.”

Bard gave Thran a look as he got up with Tilda, and headed upstairs with the little girl. As soon as their footsteps sounded on the stairs, Thran found three sets of eyes fixed on him.

“What’s really going on?” Bain whispered. “You told us Lance was dead!”

“So I was told,” Thran nodded. “Tonight, I hear another tale, so perhaps that is not the case.”

“What happened?” Sigrid asked.

“I do not know. This may mean nothing, but I am not the one to assume that without proof. So be careful, and say nothing to frighten our Tilda more. Can any of you tell me why this boy so frightens her? She did not see the fight we made against the gang. Did she know him before?”

“She didn’t know him,” Sigrid shook her head. “She didn’t know the other two boys, either. But she saw them at the park, and she heard me call him out, and when she came up after the fight was over, she thought Da was dead. Lance is the only name she heard, so that’s who she thinks caused the whole thing. It makes perfect sense to me that she’s terrified.”

“That’s not all,” Legolas said softly, drawing everyone’s eyes. “We were reading once, just the two of us, and she told me that she heard us say that Lance grabbed you, Sigrid. I didn’t say anything, because we all thought Lance... wouldn’t bother us anymore. But I think she’s worried that he’ll try to hurt you, because you hurt him.”

“That makes perfect sense, too, synok,” Thran nodded. He sighed. “Poor Kukla. We must all wear the brave face so that we do not scare her any more than we do. You will tell me or Bard if she says anything about why she is frightened, so that we can take good care of her.”

“Bet she ends up in bed with you tonight,” Sigrid observed.

“We have already considered that, and if it comforts her, of course she will stay,” Thran replied. “The rest of us will close ranks around her, and around each other. Do nothing foolish, and we will get through this.”

“Yes, Papa; okay, Thran; okay, Ada,” the children murmured.

They got up to wash and dry all the mugs and the cocoa pan, then filtered upstairs to get ready for bed. When the children were done, Thran took his turn in the shower, Sigrid retreated to her room to talk to Finn, and Bard played cards with Tilda and the boys in the study. When he was clean and dry, it was time for the children to turn out the lights. Sigrid and the boys settled with little apprehension, but Tilda was not so sanguine.

“We’ll leave our doors open tonight, little doll,” Bard said, as the girl settled into bed. “Try to sleep in your bed, but you know you can come get me or Ada anytime you need to.”

She nodded. “Okay, Da. I’ll try.”

“Do you want more of your toys?”

“I want all of them. They help me sleep better.”

Thran and Bard piled close to a dozen plush toys around Tilda. She gave Thran a smile when he made Mr. Bun hop over the bed to plunk down into her arms. “I think Mr. Bun likes to have all his friends here, too. I hope they do not jump on the bed all night.”
“Sometimes they do, but tonight they’re all tired,” she said. “I’m tired, too.”

“We had a busy day today,” Bard said, kneeling by the bed to press a kiss on Tilda’s forehead. “We’ll be busy tomorrow, too – you get to wear your costume and do your doll dance with Thran again.”

“I like our dance,” Tilda yawned, tucking Mr. Bun under her arm.

“I like it, too,” Thran said, kneeling beside Bard to offer Tilda his goodnight kiss. “Sleep well, and soon we will dance it again. This time in our costumes.”

“Even the makeup?” Tilda asked, shutting her eyes.

“Even the makeup. I will give you pink cheeks and big eyes.”

“That’ll be fun,” Tilda murmured, nearly asleep. “Night-night, Ada.”

“Goodnight, my Russkaya Kukla.”

“Night-night, Da.”

“Sleep well, little doll.”

Thran and his husband eased from Tilda’s room, making sure her nightlight was on before they pulled the door ajar.

“I hope she sleeps,” Bard murmured, as they went into their room.

“Go wash,” Thran urged. “I will watch, so if she does not, I will bring her in with us.”

“I’ll take my night clothes in with me, in case we have a guest sooner than I expect,” Bard replied, scooping up his soft sleep pants and tee shirt as he disappeared into the bathroom. He didn’t take long, and soon climbed into bed beside Thran. Both of them kept their night clothes on, for both expected Tilda to arrive at some point. But for now, the house was quiet, and they were grateful to lie back in the pillows together.

“Do you know when you and the older children searched the house, that Tilda knew exactly what you did?”

“What, she said something about it?”

“When Sigrid returned to the kitchen, Tilda said, ‘He’s not here, is he?’ Sigrid did not try to deny what you did, and merely assured Tilda that no, he was not here.”

Bard exhaled. “They’ve grown up in a not great part of a big city. All of them are used to watching their backs. What other revelations did she reveal?”

“She was not the only one with a revelation. While you were upstairs with her, Legolas said that she might not be worried so much about herself as her sister.”

“Oh?”

Thran repeated what Legolas had said, as well as what Sigrid had said about why Tilda was so frightened.

Bard hummed. “They all make a lot of sense.”
Thran hummed back. “We are blessed with four very smart children. I hope Mr. Nori has something more for me tomorrow.”

“He might be in a lot more trouble than we are,” Bard considered, stroking Thran’s back. “If he’s got informants on various sides of this war, he likely doesn’t know which of them he can trust anymore.”

“That matches what I thought,” Thran agreed, snuggling closer. “But I will not think about it any more. I am very tired, and tomorrow will be another long day. I want to do the dances with our girls justice, and to do that, I must sleep.”

“Let’s hope we all do,” Bard yawned as he shifted, trying to get comfortable. “Though it’ll be harder in clothes.”

“It will.”

Bard snickered. “For ten years, I slept in these same clothes without a blink. Now I feel confined. You’ve turned me into a hedonist, angel.”

Smiling, Thran snuck a hand under Bard’s shirt to stroke his chest. “I was a hedonist before. But thanks to you, now I am a shameless hedonist.”

“Go to sleep, then, shameless hedonist. Before both of us have to wake up and be good parents.”

Thran pressed a kiss against Bard’s chest. A similar caress graced his hair, and Bard settled around him with a sigh. As Thran’s eyes closed, his last thought was a wish that Tilda’s well-loved toys would keep all evil dreams at bay.
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig makes it through the night, then presents a strong front for the new day. In the midst of it all, divine Rahmiel alights.

Chapter Notes

Look for another pair of cameos - a more adult version of a certain pair of Dwarvish brothers. I just couldn't resist :-)

Flitting images, like kites on the wind... flying soccer balls... green sneakers... ham sandwiches and pumpkin pie for a plainclothes policeman... a Wolverine tee shirt... so many images, all swirling out of the mist and then into it again...

Weird, hollow voices and organ music... ghosts, dancing out of the mist and then into it again...

A red clown nose that grew and expanded into a blood red moon illuminating a desolate land where zombies ran in packs like hyenas, out of the mist and then into it again...

A scream, a child’s scream...

“Fuck off, lowlife! Back off, back off!”

“They’re children, Angelo! Just children!”

Lightning streaked across his ribs so fast and so hot that the pain stole his breath, can’t breathe, can’t breathe, Can. Not. Breathe...

Falling, tumbling head over heels, plummeting into a bottomless chasm that glowed blood red where children wailed, “Da! Da!” –

Bard flailed, trying to right himself, only to find himself tangled in bed sheet and blankets. He was soaked in sweat, and his lungs heaved in a harsh rasp. The light on Thran’s side of the bed was on.

“Fucking hell...” he graved, as tension dribbled out of his body. “Oh, bloody fucking hell...”

“Yes?” A voice penetrated his haze. “Are you awake now?”

Am I?

He didn’t remember pushing the covers back or sitting up; for all he knew, he could’ve magically levitated. He found himself leaning over his knees on the side of the bed. That voice... whose voice? Thran’s. Thran’s voice. He reached out, groping for his husband’s arm, leg, something, but the bed was empty. Gods, was he gone? Was Thran gone? Oh, gods, was he hurt? Or had he left Bard – no, no! – oh, shit, shit, shit...!
Gods, let me still be dreaming – Thran’s got to be all right –

“Bard. Lyubov moya.”

Shit! He was dreaming. Thran wasn’t in bed, but he heard his voice. He heard it –

“Thran! Don’t –”

“Bard. Please, lyubov moya. You must wake up.”

In a panic, Bard twisted around. Where in hell did that voice come from? How did he hear Thran when his husband wasn’t in bed –

Thran stood beside his side of the bed, clutching a pillow.

Bard found his breath. He was awake, after all. Finally. Thank all of the gods for blessings small and large.

“I’m awake.”

Thran eased his tight stance.

“Are you sure? Do you know where you are?”

Bard cleared his throat. It was nearly impossible to swallow, as dry as his mouth was. “At home. In bed. Sort of. I hope.”

Thran dropped his pillow back on the bed, and came to sit beside Bard. He put an arm around Bard’s shoulder. “You dreamed.”

“Hell, yeah. A hellacious fucking nightmare.” He wrung a hand over his face. “I hope I didn’t flail you out of bed.”

“I could not wake you,” Thran squeezed Bard’s shoulders. “I tried.”

“I was deep in it, then.” Bard put a hand over Thran’s knee and rubbed it slowly. “I’m sorry, angel. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Can I get you a glass of water?”

“I’ll get it. I’m soaking wet, so I’ve got to dry off, anyway.”

He got up to strip off his sodden tee shirt and sleep pants, then padded to the bathroom for his water. He would have preferred to shower, but in deference to the children, he made do with a wet washcloth and a towel. He tended to the obvious necessity, had his water, and felt a little better. When he got back to bed, Thran was back under the covers. Bard rummaged for dry sweatpants and tee, dropped them on the floor by his nightstand, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Do you remember what you dreamed about?” Thran murmured.

Bard snorted, but not loudly. “That day in the park, dancing ghosts, clown noses that turned into blood moons and the zombie apocalypse, the children screaming... and when I woke up, I thought you’d left me...”

Thran snuck a hand out to rub Bard’s back in comfort. “Suka blyad, Bard. Everything of the day, and then some.”
“We thought it was Tilda we’d have to worry about, but it was me. Gods, I didn’t yell, did I? I didn’t wake the children?”

“You made no sound. Just... I could not wake you up. You seemed in such pain that I thought you might be in the middle of a heart attack. And you fought against something.”

“I dreamed about getting shot. I couldn’t breathe, no matter how hard I tried. Then I fell into this deep abyss, and all of the children were screaming... then... you were gone...”

Bard fell silent, but eventually got under the covers and lay down. When Thran realized that Bard wouldn’t put his tee shirt and sweats on, he sat up to strip off his clothes, turned off the light, and lay beside Bard. He stretched his arm across Bard’s chest to stroke it.

“All is well, my saint. You are in bed, the children are safe and asleep, I am here, and all is well.”

“What time is it?”

“Only just after one.”

Bard smothered a groan, and laid a hand on Thran’s arm to cradle it against his chest. “Still early. Damn. I hope the rest of the night isn’t more of the same. You didn’t hear Tilda, did you?”

“All of the children are asleep,” Thran assured him, drawing him close. “Come, lyubov moya. Three deep breaths, as you tell me, and try to think of nothing.”

Bard allowed himself a rueful smile. “Do I really tell you that? Mab i ast, it’s impossible to think of nothing after a nightmare like that.”

Thran nuzzled his ear, lips pulling on his earring just a little. “We will think of something else. What should it be? Ah, I know – would you let me buy you new earrings for your birthday? One of yours turns dark. Or perhaps they are sentimental?”

“No surprise, there,” Bard grinned in the dark. “They’re just junk I bought at some teen palace when I was eighteen. So not sentimental.”

“I will buy you new ones in white gold. I could add a matching cock ring, but since neither of us suffer from lack of frequency or endurance, to buy you one would be an insult.”

Bard snickered, relaxing in Thran’s arms. “If I last any longer, I’m liable to kill you, and I don’t want that.”

“Dying in ecstasy will be a glorious way to go when I am one hundred years old, but not now. If I reach one hundred, then I will buy you a cock ring in hopes that you put it to good use.”

“You’ll kill both of us,” Bard managed to reply through smothered laughter. “Me when I try, and you when I succeed.”

Thran giggled. “We would go together, then. That would be a good end for a man of one hundred, and his love of one hundred and four.”

“Let’s focus on the fucking we can do between now and then,” Bard exhaled, shutting his eyes.

“Mmm, delicious,” Thran purred, stroking Bard’s arm. “I love you, my saint.”

“I love you too, angel.”
Thran snuggled next to him. “Sleep well.”

*I hope I can. Gods, I hope I...*

Bard’s eyes closed, and he was gone.

* * *

Thran stayed awake long enough to register when Bard fell asleep in his arms. He didn’t last much longer than his husband, and before he knew it, Bard’s clock radio was playing softly. This morning’s wake-up music was the Tchaikovsky piece he hated most, *Marche Slav*. It was so overwrought, nothing but heaving histrionics – he’d hated it the first time he’d heard it as a child, and time had not improved it. As Bard stretched, then sat up, Thran muttered a curse under his breath and pulled Bard’s pillow over his head. Despite the padding, Bard’s snicker still penetrated.

“What, no desire to get up this morning, angel?”

“To get up is one thing. To listen to that atrocious rag of a march is another. That piece has accounted for more hatred of all Russian music than the rest of the repertoire put together.”

The bed shifted as Bard leaned over to turn off the clock radio. Thran pushed the extra pillow away with a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, my saint. I have always loathed that piece.”

“It’s too much to take first thing in the morning, I grant you. You want the bathroom first?”

“Take it. I will pretend to wake up without that wretched march in my ears. A pox on the Slavs who inspired an otherwise brilliant composer to such a low.”

Chuckling, Bard got up, headed for the bathroom, and was soon back to collect clothes to begin the morning routine. Thran had his turn to wash the sleep from his eyes and tend to necessities, then joined Bard to scrounge for jeans and tee shirt, socks and flannel. As Bard armed his way into his Henley, he paused to look over at Thran.

“Tilda made it through the night.”

“She did.”

“I didn’t, though. I had a nightmare, didn’t I?”

Nodding, Thran cast Bard a concerned look. “You seemed to sleep well afterwards. I hope that was the case?”

“I did. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I slept well afterwards, too, so all is well.”

Bard looked out of the window. “Rainy this morning. That should discourage a certain unwelcome party from prowling about.”

“I hope so, too.”
Bard’s expression was inward as they headed downstairs, started the morning porridge, and began the assembly line for the children’s lunches, but slowly it turned into puzzlement. “Did I dream the part about the cock ring, or did you really say that?”

Thran snickered. “I said only that we do not need one.”

“Ah. Okay. I wondered how that fit into the nightmare.” Bard shot him a skeptical look. “What possessed you to talk about cock rings at one in the morning?”

Thran’s grin was perverse as he got the crock of raisins out of the refrigerator and set it on the table. “Yours was a very intense nightmare. I was forced to resort to extreme measures that would hold your attention long enough for you to fall back into sleep.”

“Oh, that’s no lie. If you don’t mind, though, I prefer to fuck my husband without mechanical aids.”

“You have no need of mechanical aids, of course. I prefer your cock unadorned, besides. I was merely concerned.”

“I’m surprised I didn’t dream about a cock ring that grows to the size of a circus hoop that I have to jump through – or maybe I’d make you jump through it.”

“As long as you do not make either of our cocks jump through it,” Thran shot back. He leaned over the kitchen island to snare Bard’s tee shirt, and pulled him over the island far enough to kiss him. “Suka blyad, all this talk of cocks so early in the morning! After the children go to school, maybe I should drag your ass back to bed and pillage you.”

The first thump from the children sounded overhead, drawing both of their gazes up to the ceiling. Thran grinned, but Bard sobered.

“Maybe I should take the children to school, rather than let them ride the bus.”

“It rains steadily,” Thran noted. “I think they will be all right on the bus.”

Bard leaned both hands on the island and stared down at the line of bread slices atop their waxed paper sheets. “What in hell does Lance want with us? Or was it even him?”

“I do not know, lyubov moya. All I can offer is the perspective of one who has lived in the eye of the public for many years. Sometimes, the eye that watches is a cruel one, but I will not let it change my life, make me retreat. Let the children ride the bus.”

Bard looked up. “What if Lance has a gun, Thran? This is America – everyone’s got a gun.”

“Do you have one?”

“No.”

“Neither do I. So not everyone has a gun.”

“Nearly everyone in a gang has a gun.”

“Sigrid said that Lance was only a spotter for Angelo’s gang, and only recently taken on. Would such a child have a gun?”

“Maybe not.” Bard looked away. “But he’s sixteen, Thran. That’s old enough to steal one.”

“Lance did not have a previous record of a weapons violation. It seems to me that if he had just
gotten a gun, he would have brandished it quite proudly in the park as part of his newfound rise in the world. But he was not accused of a weapons violation when the police took him, so he did not have one. Then last night, when a ten-year-old girl surprised him, he ran before he did anything else.”

“True,” Bard conceded. “But I’d feel better about it if Mr. Nori calls you back with whatever light he can shed on this. I’m not okay with risking my children’s lives on what I ‘think’ might be the case.”

Sigrid appeared in the hallway. “Morning, Da, Ada. How was Tilda last night?”

“Slept through, as far as we know,” Bard replied, brushing a kiss on the top of Sigrid’s hair. “She didn’t make a peep.”

“Good,” Sigrid breathed, circling the island to give Thran a hug. “I slept, she did, and you both did, so unless the boys had trouble, we’re okay. Oooh, Muenster cheese! Would you put a slice of that on my turkey sandwich, please?”

Thran kept his features neutral when Bard shot him the expected look, telling him not to say anything about his nightmare. His husband was so predictable, not wanting to upset the children.

“Muenster cheese, on the sandwich,” Bard replied mildly. “Yellow or spicy mustard?”

“Half and half?” Sigrid smiled as she dished up porridge for herself. “So are you going to let us ride the bus this morning the way Thran wants, or will you bundle us into the truck and take us to school the way you want, Da?”

Thran snickered. “She is very perceptive, our lioness.”

“Not really,” Sigrid shrugged, but she looked proud of herself nevertheless. “It’s just that you’re both so predictable. I vote for the bus, personally.”

“Why is that, sweetness?” Bard looked up at her.

“Because it’s pouring rain, and Lance won’t dare try to tackle any of us in a crowd, and a crowd is what we’ll be in, from the moment we get to the bus stop this morning until the moment we come back to the bus stop this afternoon. I’m not even sure the boy I saw was Lance, anyway. The only thing that persuades me that it was Lance is because it was Tilda who saw him.”

“Tilda might be overreacting,” Bard ventured, but before Thran could protest Sigrid had scoffed. “Come on, Da – you know better. Tilda’s got your artist’s eye for detail, for faces. If she says it was Lance, it was Lance. She had a good, long look, too. She wouldn’t make a mistake.” She glanced away from them as Bain and Legolas came into the kitchen. “Ask the boys about the school bus. I bet they’ll agree with me.”

“What about the school bus?” Legolas asked as he got his usual juice from the refrigerator. Bain already had a slice of ham from the lunch assembly stuffed in his mouth, but he looked up in inquiry.

“Thran thinks we should ride the school bus today. Da thinks he should drive us to school.”

“Told you,” Bain mumbled to Legolas around his mouthful of ham.

“I told you I agreed with you,” Legolas looked back. “I’m okay either way. Whatever you like.”

“Always the diplomat,” Bard grinned sheepishly. “Bain? What’s your choice? Quickly, before Til
“I’m fine with the bus,” Bain nodded. “There’s more of us on the bus than in the truck, yeah? Safety in numbers.”

Bard’s glance at Thran was wry. “Then you all do what we said last night – stay together, keep your eyes open, and don’t go out to the bus this afternoon until you’re all together. I’ll meet you at the bus stop at four-fifteen.”

Tilda came silently into the kitchen, yawning cavernously. “Morning, Da. Morning, Ada. It’s raining.”

“So it is,” Thran leaned down to kiss the top of her head. “But it is Friday, so not so bad. Porridge for you this morning, ma petite? Apple or raisins?”

“Both,” Tilda sighed, and carried the bowl of porridge to the table to sit with her siblings. “Morning, everyone.”

“Morning, Til; morning, Tilda; morning, Kukla.”

Conversation lapsed as the children began their breakfast. As Thran brought a plate of chopped apples to the table, the three older children regarded Tilda with concern, then exchanged glances among themselves, but Tilda remained oblivious to their silent scrutiny. Once Thran and Bard finished the children’s lunches, they sat down with the children to eat one of Bard’s quick omelets full of vegetables and cheese. Between them, they’d eaten a lot of eggs since their nutrition guide had arrived; Bard had learned that both of them needed more protein in the morning, and eggs were an easy and delicious solution. Thran also liked having a choice of something that wasn’t sweet for his first meal of the day.

The children quickly devoured their breakfasts, collected their things for school, and soon set out with their fathers for the bus stop with umbrellas in full force. Thran had time to appreciate that the bitter chill of winter had finally lost its hold, and the air, while cold and damp, definitely felt like spring. Shrubs and bushes were greening, and even the tree buds had poked out their first tinges of green. Tilda pointed to a clump of snowdrops well in flower, and to another of daffodils with swelling buds about to burst open.

“Spring is finally here,” the little girl observed with a smile up at her fathers.

“It’s been here officially for a week and a bit more,” Bard nodded, his tense expression finally easing into its usual warmth. “It just hasn’t felt like it until now.”

“Morning, Bard, Thran!” Sam waved from the bus stop. “Morning, Sigrid, Tilda, Legolas, and Bain!”

“Morning, Mr. Sam!” the children waved, and Tilda finally ventured away from between her fathers to run over to little Elanor. Sigrid watched her go before she slipped between her fathers.

“We’ll be fine,” she said, before she slipped away again. “We’re Clan Ffyrnig.”

“My hair will be as white as yours in a year,” Bard murmured to Thran, but he was smiling. “And that girl will be the cause if it.”

“We will still be a striking couple,” Thran patted Bard’s shoulder in comfort as Sam came up to talk. “Good morning, Sam! It seems that spring is here at last, yes?”
The conversation turned to the quickening season and Sam’s excitement for his favorite time of year. They chatted about the Japanese garden he and Bard wanted to make around Bard’s pine tree sculpture, and Sam offered to come over on Sunday to talk to them about it. He was eager to draw up a plan for them, and if they wanted unusual plants, he could see about ordering them. The bus arrived, the children chorused that they were off and leaving too, and Bard and Thran replied for them to do their best, just like always. Sam reiterated their plans to meet about the garden on Sunday, then they headed home. Bard’s step was lighter as they made their way inside, which lightened Thran’s concern as he dressed in his dance attire for the morning’s work.

“You be sure to keep an eye out when you drive to your pointe lesson this afternoon,” Bard said, when Thran came down from the bedroom. He was in the kitchen, mulling the day’s possibilities for lunch and supper.

“I will not go this afternoon, but not because of Lance,” Thran replied when Bard looked from the depths of the refrigerator at him. “The Follies dress rehearsal is tonight, so I chose to stay here today so I finish in time for a timely supper. This means very much to our Sigrid and Tilda, so I will not disappoint them.”

“You’ve been wonderful with them,” Bard reached out to tug Thran’s braid with affection. “You’re a good Da as well as a hot lover.”

Snorting with laughter, Thran flicked one of Bard’s earrings. “I enjoy both, if for different reasons. What do you make for us today?”

“I was thinking chili. I have a lot of ground turkey left in the freezer, and soon it’ll be too warm for anyone to want chili, and turkey burgers are not too good – bland, in a word. If I make a big pot to use all the turkey, it’d be enough for lunch and supper.”

“Perhaps you will convince Luka that there is a viable alternative to petrol station burritos,” teased Thran.

“I’m not sure anything can do that,” Bard shook his head. “I’ll make bread to go with it. Then it’s back to Rahmiel’s wings, at least until Mr. Nori’s man shows up about a security system.”

“Do you know anything about a security system?” Thran asked.

Shrugging, Bard ducked into the pantry to bring out cans of beans for his chili. “Enough that I could generally repair things that went wrong with Steffen’s disaster of a system. Enough to ask questions, anyway. We have too many children running in and out, especially during the summer when they’re not in school, to make a lot of wires and such a good choice. Such things are wireless now, just like our home computer network, so we’ll see what Mr. Nori’s expert has to say.”

“Please call me aside when he comes, so that I understand what he thinks we should do, too,” Thran asked. “Until then, I will be in the ballroom.”

“Imagine that,” Bard mimicked surprise. “I’ll let you get through your barre and such first, though.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya,” Thran stroked Bard’s hair. “Until later, then.”

“Happy pliés,” Bard grinned, saluting Thran with the chef’s knife.

Thran took himself off to the ballroom, relieved that Bard was less apprehensive.

Thank all the gods that humans were not telepathic. If a certain sixteen-year-old hooligan knew how much trepidation he’d ignited in Thran’s family, he would be ecstatic.
Once Thran went off to the ballroom, Bard concentrated on his chili. Brown the turkey with chopped onions, no stirring until the crumbles had colored well, otherwise they turned to mush. Four kinds of beans, canned diced tomatoes, lots and lots of chili powder, then several kinds of spices, including a hefty dose of cumin. Then on to the bread as the chili started its long simmer. A little Parmesan cheese and Italian herbs into the bread, a little pepper, and into the warming oven to rise. Maybe some more brownies? Not chocolate ones this time, but vanilla brownies, which had chocolate bits in them. The delicious aroma of chili mixed with that of yeasty bread and then the chocolate cookies, and all was right with the world...

Except all was not right with the world. His youngest daughter’s three-second glimpse of a teenaged boy had changed all of that, and no amount of cooking would ease Bard’s worry.

Worry changed nothing. When the cookies were done, Bard took the pan out of the oven and headed into the solarium to work on Rahmiel. Rada had emailed pictures, instructions, and sources for feathers, so Bard called around until he found a supplier that could provide black turkey feathers rather than the regular white ones from commercial farming enterprises. They cost more, but given how much time he’d save not having to dye them, the higher price was worth it. He could have some sent to him, or he could come pick out what he wanted. He decided to drive out tomorrow for that. He disconnected his mobile for the last time with a feeling of accomplishment, then turned to the armature he’d been building for Rahmiel’s wings.

It had taken some doing, but he’d finally come up with a frame proportioned to his liking. He hated to do it, but the only way to anchor the wings to the rest of the figure was to remove the clay, and weld the two armatures together. He carefully cut the clay off the torso section of the armature, and headed out to the barn. It too very little effort to weld the wing and body armatures together – so little effort, in fact, that he was almost disappointed. This was the first time in years that he’d welded something other than construction materials, and he would have liked to savor it, but that would come soon enough. Right now, advancing his art meant reapplying clay to Rahmiel’s armature. Once back in the house, he carefully clamped the cooled armature back on his board. He was in the middle of reapplying the clay to Rahmiel’s torso when a knock came on the front door.

A short, stocky man with black hair disarranged into spikes faced the door. Behind him, a shorter yet just as stocky man with a blond buzz cut stood looking out across the yard. Both of them wore dark green coveralls emblazoned with Dale Security Services on the right breast. Despite the professional attire, both of them looked no more than a decade older than Sigrid, and seemed to be more professional computer gamers than security experts.

These days, a lot of computer gamers were security experts.

“Mr. Bowman?” the dark-haired one asked politely, a friendly smile on his face.

“I am.”

“Fritz and Karsten from Dale Security Services, at your service.” Karsten offered Bard his company ID, and Fritz offered his in turn. “Mr. Nori sent us. Said you’re in need of a security system for your home.”

“You’re in the right place,” Bard nodded. “Come in.”
“Thanks. We understand that you’re in a bit of a rush, so we can skip all the blather, if you like, and get right down to it.”

“And what’s that entail?” Bard asked mildly, smiling at the young Karsten’s forthright humor.

“We walk through your house, doing our best not to tread on the carpets, counting all your accessible windows and doors, and then we walk all around your house, doing our best not to tread on the shrubbery,” the heretofore silent Fritz explained, brandishing a clipboard. “Then we figure out how to keep the undesirables out. And just so you know, we’ll ask a lot of nosy questions along the way about valuables and such, so I hope you don’t think we’re two of the undesirables you wished you’d kept out of your house.”

Bard laughed. “Fair enough. Would you like to start in the dining room?”

“As good a place as any,” Karsten grinned. “Lead on.”

Bard led the two young technicians through the lower level of the house, listening as they counted windows and fingered window locks and sashes, and looked out into the yard through said windows. He left the main room and ballroom for last and led them upstairs to survey the bedrooms, then the two empty rooms and attic on the third level. Then it was down into the cellar, out to the barn, around the house and grounds, and finally back inside to the main room.

“So no jewelry, no electronics to speak of, a little heavy equipment...” Fritz looked up from his clipboard to regard his partner thoughtfully, who looked back with the same neutral expression. “If you don’t mind me asking, why do you need a security system?”

“We have four children, and we’ve acquired a stalker.”

The glances went back and forth again. “Ah,” Fritz murmured. “That explains the urgency. So we’ll just finish with this room, put our heads together, and see what we come up with.”

“There’s one more room,” Bard pointed to the door at the end of the main room. “The ballroom. My husband’s dance company is in rehearsal. I’ll ask them to take a break long enough for you to make our checks.”

“No need,” Karsten demurred. “We’ll stay near the windows, if that’ll help.”

“It would. And if you’d leave your boots at the door, that’ll help, too. We don’t have much in the way of carpets you have to watch out for, but the dancer’s floor is pickier than any carpet.”

“Righto,” Fritz nodded. “All right, Kar, I’ve got this room done. On to the ballroom.”

Bard preceded the two security techs, leaving his boots by the door and going inside. The whole company was not in residence today; only Irmo, Ori, Charisse, and Luka. Thran was in his pointe shoes, weaving a spidery dance of alien longing around the tiny Charisse. Despite how many times Bard had seen bits and pieces of this part of the ballet, it still raised goosebumps. How Thran managed to convey both longing and a gap of understanding that was too much for a mortal to overcome was clear testimony to his technical and emotional sophistication. Ori sat on his garden bench with his tablet, and Luka was at the barre in the corner, staying limber. Irmo stood halfway down the ballroom against the wall watching Thran and Charisse as they danced past him. Bard held Fritz and Karsten back as the pair of dancers continued their phrase.

“Gods, that really is Thran Oropherson,” Karsten shook his head. “Incredible! I got the name, but... it just didn’t register...”
Fritz gave his partner an exasperated glare. “I told you. But did you listen? No, you didn’t.”

“I thought you were joking,” Karsten shrugged. “Do you have an older brother, Mr. Bowman? Mine delights in pulling my leg so often it’s three inches longer than the other one.”

“Only child, I’m afraid. But the four resident children do a bit of that from time to time.”

Fritz sniffed at Karsten’s triumphant expression. “Only to pay little brothers back for being such pains, I’m sure.”

“Bollocks,” Karsten muttered, but under his breath. “Well, it’s registered at last, Fritz. That’s the guy I saw on the tube last night. Something about the local art follies show tomorrow.”

“He’s dancing in it,” Fritz supplied with a longsuffering sigh, peering at his clipboard again. “All right, just a quick look at the windows, then we’ll be out of the dancers’ way.”

The two technicians crept behind Ori to check the bay window components, then circled around to check the outside door, the fireplace, and the windows that flanked the fireplace. They retraced their steps so as not to disturb Luka, and returned to Bard by the door. By then Thran and Charisse were done, and Thran came forward to meet the two young men, smothering a smile at Karsten’s awed hello when he shook Thran’s hand.

“They’ve seen everything,” Bard explained. “And they know our situation.”

“Thank you, Bard,” Thran nodded. “I am sure that my husband has answered all of your questions, but if you have any for me, please ask.”

“I think we’ve got enough to start on a plan,” Fritz said. “Let us do a think, then we’ll explain our recommendation, and answer any questions you have for us.”

“Of course,” Thran nodded. “Bard will get me when you are ready to talk.”

Thran bowed himself back to his colleagues, and Bard ushered the two technicians back into the main room, where all of them resumed their boots.

“If we can use either your dining room or your kitchen table, Mr. Bowman, we’ll get ourselves organized,” Fritz asked. “It shouldn’t take us but half an hour or so.”

“There’s probably more room for you to spread out in the dining room,” was Bard’s suggestion. “I’ll be in the solarium if you have questions.”

He left the two young technicians muttering away about motion detectors and window alarms. By the time he’d retreated to the kitchen, they’d lapsed into another language, either German or Yiddish, going back and forth at lightning speed. He poured himself a cup of tea, and went back to Rahmiel. He finished replacing the clay over the armature, excited to see the angel’s spirit emerge with each bit he added. The wing armature might not yet be filled out, but already it intensified the impression of the angel at the very moment he alighted on the earth. Inspired, he laid down more clay at the angel’s feet, and quickly formed the armature that would support the saint’s torso and outstretched arm as he beseeched the angel. A little clay fleshed out that figure, and he carefully aligned the gaze of the saint with that of the angel hovering above him.

As he stepped back to check it, another chill went down his back. As much as Thran’s spirit called to Bard when he danced, it called just as strongly from clay and wire. Soon, when Rahmiel’s wings were fully fledged, when his hair drifted about him in a cloud, that call would be even more compelling.
Death, lord of the Underworld, would immortalize Thran's name in the dance world. Rahmiel would immortalize Bard's name in the art world just as decisively.
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

Security systems, the repercussions of gang wars, welding, dancing, garage cleaning, interior decorating, cooking, sculpting, upcoming rehearsals... it's a full day for an angel and a saint.

After Bard escorted the two security technicians out of the ballroom, Thran went back to his rehearsal. He’d been glad of the break, because Irmo had been particularly intense this morning, and would likely remain so all day. The choreographer been polite, and had not resorted to any of his previous outrageous behavior, but still, it was hard for him to stomach the shortened rehearsal today, and Thran’s unavailability tomorrow or Sunday.

The Follies accounted for the disruptions today and tomorrow, and Irmo grudgingly accepted that Thran’s efforts for the event would stir up interest in Immortal’s upcoming premiere in July. The Imladris Academy had agreed to provide their auditorium as the venue, in exchange for allowing qualified students to intern on the set, lighting, sound, and costume crews. Once Lettie had confirmed those arrangements, Thran had had UVB’s publicist place an advertisement in the Follies program for the UltraViolet Ballet Company, which included the teaser line, “Please join us at the Seventh Annual Greenwood Dale on the Lake Arts Festival for the World Premiere of UVB’s New Ballet – Immortal.” Bard’s sketch of Charisse, Luka, and Thran as the Maid, the Soldier, and Death was featured in the ad, and provided a stark yet elegant counterpoint to the words.

While Bard had gladly given permission for Thran to use his sketch in the ad, he hadn’t seen the ad itself yet. Tomorrow night, then, should bring a welcome affirmation of the power of Bard’s abilities, but not just from the program ad; the sketch Bard had donated to the silent auction was wonderful, depicting Aragorn and Arwen Gondor when they’d visited to fence in the ballroom. Both Gondors had generously signed model releases, so Bard’s sketch revealed them quietly smiling at each other, Aragorn with his mask under his arm and épée in hand, holding Arwen’s hand to kiss it. Where Aragorn’s face was more in profile, Arwen’s was a three-quarter view as she met Aragorn’s eyes. Her beauty and his devotion glowed from Bard’s lines, and the love the two shared was palpable. Frodo Baggins had framed it beautifully in a black filigree frame that complimented the romantic nature of the subject, so it should present well in tomorrow’s auction, even at its premium opening bid.

If Irmo understood the importance of the Follies for the children’s school, Bard, and Immortal, he did not understand Thran’s decision not to rehearse on Sunday. There were no other pressing duties, no draws on Thran’s time that Irmo could see – of course not; the choreographer didn’t know the meaning of down time. But Thran was desperate for just that. While he had not regretted a single moment of his work with Sigrid or Tilda for the dances they would do tomorrow night, they had been in addition to countless hours of pointe work, weight training to strengthen his legs, barre work, choreography development, and ballet rehearsals.

Thran wanted – no, needed – a day off.

He wanted to sleep late with his husband, enjoy a decadent breakfast with Bard and the children, perhaps go into the village to peruse the shops, sit quietly in the solarium while Bard worked on
Rahmiel or his sketches, talk with the children, hear Sam Gamgee’s suggestions for their Japanese garden, watch the light change from dawn to dusk throughout the beautiful house that grew ever more beautiful each day...

None of those things meant anything to Irmo, so Thran didn’t mention them. Rather, he reminded Irmo of how many days he had worked without a break, noted the devastation that would result if Thran didn’t allow his body a respite, and declared Sunday to be a much-needed break for the three principal dancers as well as the stalwart Ori. Irmo was not happy, but he conceded.

Still, the prospect of not having Thran for two full days at his disposal had made Irmo very focused and very intense all morning. While the concentrated work had resulted in several welcome refinements, it was tiring, and even something so mundane as a discussion of a home security system was a welcome distraction.

In an hour, Bard reappeared as expected. Thran had urged Irmo to work with Charisse and Luka on the Soldier and the Maid’s opening joyous pas de deux so that his absence would not be so disruptive. He left them with Ori to follow Bard into the dining room where Fritz and Karsten waited for them.

“How does their work go?” Thran asked, as he pulled on a sweater, then tied the arms of another around his ribs to keep warm.

Bard shrugged. “Well enough, I hope. They’ve done the whole thing in German or Yiddish, and they’ve been quite animated. So we’re both about to find out.”

“It is likely Yiddish,” Thran surmised. “Many of Mr. Nori’s associates speak that regularly. Few do these days, so it is an effective means to hold privacy.”

“The real Russian mafia,” Bard murmured softly. As he led the way to the dining room, his expression was too sober to be teasing.

“They are more likely to be German,” was Thran’s assessment. “I believe Mr. Nori’s family was one of the many Jewish lineages who fled Europe during the nineteen-thirties.”

Bard winced. “At least they got out. A lot didn’t.”

“A situation many still face in many countries, regardless of religion or other differences.”

Bard swallowed as he took Thran’s arms to shake him gently. “At least a certain Russian got out of his bad situation. He saved another émigré’s life.”

“We saved each other, lyubov moya, for which I, too, am grateful.”

Bard hummed his agreement as Thran pulled his leggings over his tights, then they headed to the dining room.

“Here’s Thran,” Bard said, as they came in. “So what do you suggest for us?”

What followed was a very professional presentation of how Fritz and Karsten had assessed the house, the potential threats, and possible solutions. Thran found no fault with any of it, but despite the serious reasons for a security system, his overall impression was that their two young technicians were every bit the savvy computer hackers that Bard had been reminded of. They might also be excellent at computer games of war and strategy, too – or make a good team of cat burglars, if they’d been so inclined. The ruthless way they catalogued the security weaknesses was impressive; so were their solutions to eliminate those weaknesses.
Given how often the children ran in and out, both Thran and Bard noted their concern over false alarms. In reply, Fritz explained about the different modes they would have at their disposal, from the full alarm capability when they were out, including a night mode that would detect any break-ins without going off if someone got up at night, an in-residence mode, and completely off.

“We’ve planned for your barn, too, given that it holds all your metal-working equipment as well as your finished art, Mr. Bowman,” Karsten continued. “But we also recommend that you alarm the carriage house, too. And the sooner you can put your vehicles in it at night, the better. That’ll be the best protection for them, better than any alarm system you can install on the SUV. Your truck’s old enough that installing one on it isn’t cost effective, and none for a model that old would be much good, anyway. You can still park them out on the driveway during the day, but at night, it’s better to have a snug place for them.”

Bard glanced at Thran. “That’s a good idea. Vandalizing either the SUV or the truck would be just the act of revenge a stalker might resort to, if he couldn’t do anything else.”

Both technicians nodded. “You don’t want to make it easy for them to vent,” Fritz said. “At the same time, you want to make it easy to manage all this for yourselves. Of course you’ll want to manually set things if you want, and just like your thermostat you can set up typical settings. But you’ll have computer access, too, so if you’ve got a tablet or a smart phone, you can modify your settings through them. Say you’re out shopping one evening, and you run late. You can adjust the settings with your phone so you don’t have to rush home. Very convenient.”

“Indeed,” Thran nodded. “So let us talk for a moment, and then we will reconvene.”

“Of course,” Fritz nodded. “At your leisure.”

By tacit consent, Thran and Bard headed upstairs to their bedroom. Thran took the chair in the corner, and Bard lounged on the bed.

“I think we should do the whole thing,” Bard said before Thran could speak.

“So do I. We have little of value other than our children, but they are the most important things we will ever have. I do not want them to worry, or us to worry about them while they are in the house.”

“Exactly my thinking,” Bard nodded. “And that’s a good idea about the carriage house. I should have thought of that before now.”

“What is in the carriage house that precludes our use of it?”

“Mostly construction supplies and garden equipment. If I work at it, I can get the construction supplies in the barn, and that would give us plenty of room for the truck and SUV. It’s actually big enough to get a third vehicle in there, but don’t tell Sigrid or Legolas that. They’ll both be ready to drive soon.”

“Oy, vey,” Thran shuddered. “Nothing will provide us a sense of security when that happens.”

“No,” Bard shook his head. “More white hair for me, I expect. You’re already there.”

“I will still cringe.”

Bard exhaled. “All right, looks like I need to change my plans. If the security lads don’t need me, I’ll start this afternoon to move enough of the stuff out of the carriage house for us to get the vehicles in there. Tomorrow, I’ll commandeer the lads to help me – Bain, anyway, as I assume Legolas will go to the Gondors’ to fence. Are you going, too?”
“Perhaps Legolas will do without me tomorrow. I want to help you.”

“You’ve got to dance tomorrow night, angel.”

Thran waved a hand. “For a grand total of ten or eleven minutes. An hour to warm the body, a half hour to cool it, and that is all. I will behave myself in the carriage house and not try to lift massive amounts of boards or bags of cement or whatever is in there, but I can certainly use a broom or wash windows or arrange things on a shelf. Even if I do all of those, it will still be a vacation from *Immortal*. And I can at last say that I have helped with the work on the house.”

“You’ve helped paint and clean floors and scrub woodwork. That counts.”

“So will to clean the garage. This is a time-honored task of families, yes? So I will help my family with this ritual, as is right.”

Bard’s face dissolved into a crooked grin, and he shook his head. “I haven’t seen you so excited since you learned to program the ballroom thermostat. The ballet dancer’s becoming domesticated.”

Thran grinned. “Happily so. As for the security system, we will do it all, then?”

“I think we should. I want the children to be safe, not just feel safe. And us, as well.”

“I agree. So let us tell our two security experts.”

They went down the stairs together, informed Fritz and Karsten of their decision, and the pair soon had their paperwork completed and ready for Bard and Thran to sign. As he reviewed it, though, Thran frowned at one particular clause.

“What does this mean, waiver of installation cost?” Thran reversed the contract for the two technicians to read. Both, however, glanced at each other rather than at the paperwork.

“That’s courtesy of Mr. Nori,” Karsten said, after some deliberation.

Thran skewered them both with sharp eyes. “Explain.”

More glances back and forth, and Karsten’s lips tightened. It was the older brother, Fritz, who ventured to speak.

“Consider it appreciation for a long business association.”

“Ah,” Thran didn’t lower his gaze. “The gang war, yes?”

Karsten’s eyes widened and he looked at his brother, but Fritz met Thran’s eyes without a blink. “You, ah, know about that, then.”

“I am the cause of it,” Thran reposted. “Is Mr. Nori in danger? Or perhaps I should rephrase that – is Mr. Nori in more danger than he normally is, given the nature of his business?”

Karsten muttered something under his breath, a Yiddish curse if Thran had to speculate.

“Nori Goldman,” Thran pressed, “is caught up in a war between drug gangs because some of his associates have, shall we say, a vested interest in one or more of those gangs, and in the chaos he may be compromised. I have had nothing but good dealings with him, and do not wish him to come to harm. But it is not like him to reward our dealings with a waiver of fees. You understand my concern, then?”
The younger brother murmured something in Yiddish to the older, but Fritz’s expression remained impassive. He didn’t quail at Thran’s concentrated attention.

“Mr. Nori thanks you for his concern. The waiver’s his way of saying so. He’s a tough old fox, and he’ll be all right.”

“What of his brothers, Dori and Ori? Are they safe?”

Karsten muttered again, and this time Fritz hummed a concession. The younger brother met Thran’s eyes. “Dori’s gone on a well-deserved vacation. Ori’s here a lot of the time, and that’s a big help.”

“Does Ori need a place to stay?” Bard asked quietly. “We’ve got a spare room here. It’s as much of a construction site as the rest of the place is, but he’s welcome to it, if he likes. If you need to talk to him, he’s in the ballroom.”

“It’s kind of you to offer,” Fritz replied. “Ori’s spoken of how generous you’ve been to him, and I see the proof of that in your offer. But he’s all right, and should be until things settle.”

“Yah, he’s bunking with us. Our place is pretty well secured,” Karsten volunteered with a slight smile.

“I would think so,” Bard agreed. “Ori’s a good soul.”

“The best,” Fritz agreed firmly.

“I have read everything, then,” Thran handed the paperwork to Bard. “See what you think.”

Bard read carefully, asked to clarify a minor point or two, but in a few minutes they agreed to terms. Fritz and Karsten outlined what they needed to do to begin their installation, then headed out to their van for the necessary components. As Thran prepared to go back to the ballroom, Bard hauled out his bowl of bread dough, gave it a quick punch, and shaped it into long French loaves.

“I'll head out to the carriage house to assess the chaos,” he gave Thran a wry smile. “I hope it’s not as bad as I expect it to be.”

“Everything will get done,” Thran reminded him. “Just so that you do not worry, I will tell you now that I will not stop at noon for lunch. Irmo is already unhappy that he must stop early today, not to mention not work at all tomorrow and Sunday, so I will delay lunch until three, when I have told him I must stop. So eat something for yourself as you need to, and I will eat when we are through.”

“Okay,” Bard agreed, if reluctantly – he was not thrilled about the delay. His saint watched every bite that went into Thran’s mouth more than Thran did. “I’ll take a quick look, and plan my attack on the mess accordingly.”

“Until later, then, my saint.”

“You know where I’ll be, angel.”

Thran headed back into the ballroom. As much as he loved to dance, today he would have rather stayed with Bard to oversee installation of their security system, and help with Bard’s efforts in the carriage house. But for the next four hours, he would remain the ballet dancer, if a distracted one.
Bard had a lot to think about as he grabbed the key to the carriage house and headed outside. He made sure that the security techs knew where he was in case they needed him, then he hurried to haul up the middle bay of the carriage house and get out of the steady rain. He hadn’t ventured in here for years, and the dust that coated everything gave proof to that. There was a jumble of lawn and garden equipment – rakes, shovels, loppers, hoes, a mountain of flower pots strewn every which way, and a half-full bag of potting soil so old that the plastic wrapping had dried out and crumbled, spilling dirt in a ring around it. Paint cans, some empty, some not. A pile of rebar he should have put in the barn years ago. Stacks of lumber for a playhouse that Daphne had wanted to build for the children. A few shutters off the house – those, at least, could be stripped, painted, and put back on the house if he wanted, or recycled if he didn’t. Bags of garden stone, another pair of garden benches, two ladders, a broken snow shovel… so many dribs and drabs that long ago had held promise, only to have lost it when Daphne had died. Maybe most of these things would find purpose again, now that a family was back in residence.

Most of the avalanche of garden pots was on the far right side of the carriage house, so by default that bay would become the potting shed. Bard heaved up that door so he could see what he was doing. The carriage house had once had light fixtures overhead, but they’d been vintage enough that Jerry had sold them, just as he had the interior house fixtures and fireplace mantel, trying to stay afloat. Daylight would have to do until Bard could see about some new fixtures. He found a broom and swept out the rightmost bay, then cleaned off one of the old wooden shelves against the back wall to hold the pots. He got most of those brushed out and stacked before Karsten came trotting out to ask a question. Soon after, he got another three shelves cleaned off and into place beside the first, and piled most of the gardening supplies in rough order on them. Tools got stacked against the wall. The spilled potting soil went into the wheelbarrow and hauled out into the yard to fill a hole or two. He moved the mower from the barn back into the carriage house, then lined up the barrow and garden cart next to it. Empty paint cans went into the big rubbish barrel, and so did cans full of solidified paint. Only one or two cans held anything liquid, so Bard put them on a shelf; he’d look later to see if any of them held anything worth keeping.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, so Bard took the chance to haul the rebar into the barn. The lumber would take more effort, because he had to clear space before he could move it. For now, he’d stack it on the floor of the third bay so he could get the SUV and truck in the other two. His stomach growled, but he pushed on, wanting to at least get the carriage house floor swept before they put the vehicles inside. The water dripping onto the floor would turn the dust and dirt into mud, which would be that much harder to remove. He relented once he got the lumber moved, and dashed inside to down a thick ham sandwich. Minutes later, he was back to tackle the cobwebs that festooned the carriage house rafters and walls. As he swept, the air grew so thick that he sneezed repeatedly, and clouds of dust billowed out into the rain. It wasn’t a great cleanup, but it would hold them until tomorrow. He checked that the window locks were still secure – he’d been scrupulous about maintaining such things over the years – then backed Thran’s SUV into the leftmost bay and his truck into the center one. It would be a tight squeeze until he could get the lumber stacked in the barn, but at least the vehicles were under cover.

He heaved down two of the three bay doors, leaving the third one open in case Karsten and Fritz needed access to complete their work. Before he headed back to the house, he shook out his coat, grinning at the cloud of dust that resulted. Better he leave that much grit outside rather than in the house. Life had been so hectic that no one had cleaned anything for a week, and the dust balls had grown to alarming proportions. Once the Follies were over, everyone would have to chip in for some serious cleaning.

When Bard came back inside, he found that the security technicians had made good progress.
Karsten was in the central hall, checking that the components he and his brother had already installed were working properly; Fritz was upstairs, installing window monitors.

“Last one in the yellow room’s in,” Fritz called down.

“Got it,” Karsten called up, tapping his tablet, smiling at Bard as he came in. “Hi, Mr. Bowman. Once everything’s in place, we’ll show you how to access your system on your computer and your phone, but we’ll get everything installed first.”

“Sounds good,” Bard nodded. “I’m done for the moment in the carriage house. I left one of the doors open for you.”

“Thanks,” Karsten replied. “We’re almost done here in the house, as that’s the most important part. Then we’ll head outside for the barn and the carriage house. Those shouldn’t take too much longer.”

“Let me know when you need us,” Bard agreed.

He headed back to the kitchen to check on the simmering pot of chili. He’d left the bread to rise longer than he should have but it would taste fine anyway. He switched on the oven, then headed back to the solarium for a few more minutes of work on Rahmiel while the oven preheated. Once the bread was in, its rising aroma gave Bard something delicious to anticipate while he worked. His ham sandwich was long since gone, and his mouth watered as the bread baked.

Just as the bread came out of the oven, he heard voices in the central hall – Charisse, Luka, and Irmo were leaving. He stuck his head out to wish them a good weekend, which Luka and Charisse returned with wishes of their own. Irmo seemed disgruntled more than anything else, but at least he raised a hand in farewell as he headed through the door. Soon only Ori’s car remained in the driveway; the young man stood talking softly with Karsten. Thran made his appearance from the ballroom, looking tired, but he smiled widely at Bard.

“Look! No ballet until Monday! Two days and a bit more away! I am beside myself!”

“A holiday, indeed!” Bard grinned. It was good to see Thran look forward to a little home life, and Bard easily caught a little of Thran’s festive spirit. “Do you want lunch first, or a shower? The bread just came out of the oven.”

“Tcha, how do you expect me to care about a shower in the face of such a delicious aroma of fresh bread?”

“I don’t,” Bard teased. “You need to eat, so come eat.”

Ori was still in the hall with Karsten, and the pair still murmured back and forth quietly. Ori looked so concerned that Thran interrupted the quiet conversation.

“Ori, all is well with your brother?”

Ori glanced at Karsten, who muttered what sounded like an explanatory sentence, then studiously turned his eyes on his tablet. Ori met Thran’s eyes directly. “Nori’s fine, Thran. He’s not in any real danger, or so he’s led us to believe. He’s concerned about some of his employees, that’s all. He’s asked me to stay with my cousins for a day or so, until things blow over. It’s just a precaution.”

“I told Karsten that we’ve got a spare room here, if you need it,” Bard said. “It’s not much, but it’s here if you need it.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’ll be fine with Kar and Fritz. If I could stay here until they’re done with
your security system, though, I’d appreciate that. That we we’d all end up home at the same time.”

“Of course,” Bard nodded. “We’re about to have lunch, if you’d like some.”

“That’s kind of you, too, but I brought a sandwich, and I can help Kar and Fritz with the computer interface.”

“Good enough,” Bard replied. “We’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything.”

Bard and Thran left Ori and his cousins to their work, and headed into the kitchen for a much-needed meal. Thran sliced the warm bread and fetched the crock of butter while Bard ladled chili into bowls. Both were so hungry that neither spoke for some minutes until they’d taken the edge off their hunger. Even after that point, conversation was sparse; Thran was likely as relieved for a chance to sit as Bard was.

“We must run the dishwasher,” Thran observed when they took their dishes to the sink, “or we will not have enough bowls and cups for supper.”

“That’s not all that needs doing around here,” Bard exhaled. “With everything going on, the laundry needs doing, the house is about to be taken over by dust balls, the bathrooms are appalling, and every one of us has scattered stuff from one end of the house to the other. Tomorrow and Sunday, we have to muster the troops.”

Thran hummed in agreement. “I will start the dishwasher now, then I must wash. I am much too foul to go to the Follies rehearsal as I am.”

“I’m no better,” Bard agreed. “Let’s head up for a scrub, then we can enjoy a cup of tea.”

“Perfect,” Thran agreed, and before long, they were back in the kitchen much the cleaner for their scrub. Bard put the kettle on the stove while Thran found two mugs in the cupboard.

“What kind of tea do you want?” Thran asked, peering at the glass containers that held their various kinds of tea.

“I’m not particular, angel. Whatever one you want is fine.”

“Green?”

“That’s good. Either the plain or the jasmine.”

“Jasmine, then. A counterpoint to the spicy chili.”

“Kettle’s hot.”

Thran got the tea into the pot, and passed it to Bard to fill. “The sitting room?”

“With a side trip to the solarium? I worked on Rahmiel this morning, in and around everything else. I’d like to see what you think of him.”

“Does he have wings now?” Thran asked, eyebrows raised and lips curved in a smile.

“He’s got wing armatures now,” Bard amended. “So you can see what they’ll look like.”

“Let us look,” Thran grabbed the pot and the mugs and hurried into the sitting room. He plunked everything on the fruit crate without ceremony, and pulled Bard into the solarium. “Chert, Bard, he is wonderful! Such a wide sweep of his wings – and you have made the base and there is the saint.
Look, the armature for his wings comes right out of his back! How did you manage that?”

“Two minutes of welding, if that,” Bard explained.

“Suka blyad!” Thran put his arms akimbo to glare at Bard, but they didn’t stay still for long. As Bard expected, Thran threw his hands up in the air, as he was wont to do when he was exasperated. “I missed you weld? Ty grebanyy huiesos! I would have thrown Irmo and the rest of them out hours ago if I had known you would sneak into the barn and do that! I have waited so long to see it, and I missed it!”

Bard dissolved into laughter. “It was only two minutes, angel, and nothing like what you expected. It took me longer to prep the torch than to do the actual weld. Wait until the weather’s warmer, and you’ll get your chance to indulge your kink for grungy welders.”

Thran sniffed as he folded his arms over his chest and gave Rahmiel a close inspection. “Tcha. You owe me for this, lyubov moya.”

“Put it on my tab,” Bard teased. “You missed the grungy carriage house cleaner, too.”

Thran’s lips curved up in a sly smile. “Him I will see tomorrow, I hope. How did the cleaner’s efforts go?”

“Both vehicles are inside. The driveway’s empty but for Ori’s car and the techs’ van.”

“You have been your usual unbelievable self again, then, to work so hard,” Thran exhaled, still regarding Rahmiel. He swallowed, then offered Bard a shy glance. “I am very humbled when I look at him. He is me, but so much more. I know I am biased, my saint, but he is magical. The wings have drawn the focus so much clearer. Such movement, such life...”

Bard stuffed his hands in his front jeans pockets. “I was worried that after our big fight, he’d never capture what I originally saw when you flew down the stairs that day. But we came through it stronger than before, and so did Rahmiel. He’s better now, just as we are.”

The look that Thran turned on Bard was somber as he put his arms around Bard. “We are better, yes. But you still have so many stars in your eyes – it quite takes the breath from me.”

“Paybacks,” Bard snuck arms around Thran’s waist.

“What is this paybacks?” Thran held him at arm’s length to frown at him in puzzlement.

“You took my breath when you flew down the stairs, and you still do it more times than not when I watch you dance. You’ve got your own magic, don’t doubt it.”

Thran’s smile was pleased, then he mugged an exaggerated shrug. “So we both have a little magic.”

“We both have a little tea waiting for us in the sitting room. We ought to drink it before it gets cold.”

“Soon we will drink lots of cold tea,” Thran said, drawing Bard back into the sitting room. “In the summer, nothing slakes thirst as well as tea over ice. Black tea with spearmint is my favorite – so good.”

“We’ll make sun tea. That’s easy – you fill a clear bottle with water, add tea bags, and set it in the sun. In a couple of hours, take out the teabags, and you have a bottle full of tea.”

“Mmm,” Thran hummed in anticipation. “It will be delicious, whether in our solarium or in the main
room – *chert!* The main room! I have something to show you for it, Bard.”

Thran picked up his laptop and opened it. He opened the browser and quickly navigated to a particular page.

“There!” he pointed to the thumbnail of a sofa on the page, and quickly clicked on it. “I like this. What do you think of it?”

Bard slid closer beside Thran to regard the screen. The sofa looked to be a sectional, but it was a sweeping, curved oval, rather than the usual three-sided U-shape. It was sleek without being what Bard thought of as airport modern, and seemed to be covered in a soft, pale green, sueded fabric. There were no legs, but sat flat on the floor, and the cushions were luxuriously plump, comfortable enough to nap on. It could easily sit eight or nine.

“I’ve never seen a sofa like that.” Bard admitted. “It’s got great lines, and the fabric looks great. I can see you lounging on that, looking very... compelling.”

Thran snickered. “Then shall I show you la pièce de résistance?”

“Go.”

Thran clicked on the screen, and the sofa turned blue – a greyed one, maybe hinting towards turquoise, or maybe lapis. Bard hummed appreciatively.

“Very nice.”

“Very nice, indeed. Imagine it before the fireplace, perhaps with a silver gilt table with a glass top?”

“I like it. Can you send for a fabric swatch? I can’t tell if it’s turquoise or bluer than that.”

“I will find out. And we should check that the measurements fit the main room. If it is too large or small, it will look ridiculous.”

“If we like the fabric, we can get paint to complement it, and I’ll lay about with a brush again.”

“And we will get a mantel that matches the sofa. It will look beautiful.”

“It will.”

Bard’s mobile chimed. He sobered instantly, fished the device out of his pocket, and silenced it. Thran gave him a concerned look. “What is it, Bard?”

“Time to head to the bus stop. I set an alarm so I got there before the bus arrives.”

Thran sobered just as fast. “I will change and go with you. If you will shut down my computer?”

“Go,” Bard nodded. Thran ran upstairs, so Bard shut down the browser and closed the computer. He headed for the mudroom, fetched jackets and umbrellas for him and Thran, and was waiting for Thran in the central hall when he came clattering down. They headed outside through the front door, calling to Karsten and Fritz who were in the carriage house. The rain had slackened, but the air was still misty as they hiked up the lane.

“See anything?” Bard asked, as they drew near to the bus stop.

“Nothing,” Thran replied just as tersely, looking around them. They waited in silence for a few minutes, then greeted Rosie as she came up from her house to wait for the bus. She looked at them in
surprise for it was not their habit to meet the bus, but Bard steered the conversation to tomorrow’s Follies. Rosie had donated a small piece of stained glass to the silent auction, and they chatted about that, Bard’s sketch, and Thran’s dances with the girls. In a few minutes, the bus arrived, and all the children spilled out. All four of the children looked happy and carefree, which lightened Bard’s thoughts. They bade Rosie and her brood goodbye, and headed home.

“How was your day, sweetness?” Bard heralded Sigrid.


“As long as he’s not there,” Tilda said, and no one had to ask who “he” was.

“Maybe you scared him off, Til,” Bain said.

“That’s true,” Legolas said firmly. “He ran away from you last night as soon as he saw you, so I bet he won’t be anywhere near us ever again.”

Thran smiled at Legolas, proud of his son’s attempt to reassure Tilda, and patted his shoulder in thanks as they headed back to the house.

“Hey! What happened to the truck? And Ada’s SUV?” Sigrid exclaimed, as they came up the driveway.

Bard explained about the security system being installed, and how he’d gotten the carriage house cleaned out enough to get the vehicles inside. As they approached, Karsten came out of the barn to say that he and Fritz were finished, and wanted to install the administration software on Thran’s laptop and phone. While Thran fetched both devices to give to Ori, Bard shepherded the children into the mudroom to shed jackets and boots and shoes, clean out backpacks, and retrieve lunch bags.

By the time Thran had had his lesson on how to use the security system and seen Ori, Karsten, and Fritz on their way, supper was underway. Even though Bard and Thran had just eaten two hours ago, both ate something with the children. Both Sigrid and Tilda were also light eaters, because both of them were so excited about tonight’s dress rehearsal; still, neither turned down Bard’s vanilla brownies. Bain and Legolas more than made up for their sisters’ lighter portions, wolfing down everything that passed either of them. If either of the boys felt any apprehension, it certainly hadn’t affected their appetites.

The family shared the cleanup, then Tilda and Sigrid put on their costumes, and Thran dressed in the jeans, Henley, and trainers he’d wear for his dance with Sigrid. He also collected his box of theatrical makeup, as well as his doll costume. Bard had on jeans and a flannel shirt, and his boots, and he had a workman’s apron to wear when he carried Thran onto the stage.

“Everyone ready to go?” Bard called. “Lads, you have your books?”

“I’m ready,” Tilda called, skipping into the kitchen. She had on a red corduroy pinafore atop a white pullover, both of which she and Sigrid had found at the thrift store, black tights, and her black snow boots to which she’d fastened big red pompoms. Bard had braided her hair into two pigtails just above her ears, and the big red hair bow was pinned to the top of her head.

“You look great, little doll,” Bard complimented.

“Thank you,” Tilda said primly, striking a pose. “Ada’s going to give me pink cheeks when we get to the school.”
Sigrid came into the kitchen. She had a white leotard and tights under the tutu, and her hair was wrapped into a tight bun and crowned with the ballet tiara Thran had borrowed for her. She pulled on leggings over her tights, and a loose sweater over the leotard. With her ballet slippers, she looked just like an aspiring ballerina.

“You could pass for a student in any dance class,” Thran nodded approvingly. “Very nice.”

“That’ll change when you make me up like a ghost,” she grinned. “That’ll be fun.”

“So let us go,” Thran beckoned, ushering the family out of the mudroom door. "Oh! Bard! Remember to bring your sketch for the silent auction!"

“I’ve got the sketch, angel. Wait, don’t we have to set the security system?” Bard paused before he locked the door behind them.

Thran pulled out his mobile. “I will do that once we get the SUV from the carriage house. Ori and Karsten explained it all to me, and the program is very easy to use. They set up different modes for us, so all I must do is choose the Away mode, and everything is set.”

“I’ll get the door open, then,” Bard said, handing his sketch to Bain, and soon the family was ensconced in Thran’s SUV. Bard closed the carriage house bay and climbed into the SUV beside Thran.

“So now I arm the security system,” Thran said, holding up his mobile. Bard leaned close to watch – it was as simple as Thran had promised, merely a display of modes, one labeled Away, which Thran selected. Other than the appearance of a couple of new outside lights, nothing seemed to be different.

“That’s it?”

“Indeed,” Thran nodded.

“Hmm,” Bard exhaled. “We’d best be off, then.”

“And we’re leaving, too!” the children chorused behind him, drawing Thran’s laughter as well as his own. Thran pulled out of the driveway, and they were on their way to the Imladris Academy auditorium.

Now, if only the rest of the evening passed by with as little fanfare...
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

It's on to the dress rehearsal for the April Fool's Follies! How will a ghostly acrobat and a mischievous little girl fare on a cold and rainy night?

Rain still fell steadily as Thran piloted his SUV out of the driveway and down the lane. It might be the first of April, but the cold, damp evening felt more wintry than springlike. It wasn’t cold enough to turn the rain to snow or sleet, but it still was miserable enough to remind Thran of the night he’d walked home from his old ballet company’s studio, out of a job, ankle aching, and frozen, the same night he’d first set eyes on the man who would become lyubov yego. It brought a smile to his lips—four months later, he was husband to a talented artist, father to four delightful children, living in a beautiful house full of laughter, and head of a new company that was about to bring an exciting new ballet to the world.

Before he’d dance as Death in Immortal, though, he’d dance as a young man with a beguiling ghost, and as an oversized rag doll with a small, mischievous girl.

His smile widened. Playful dances these might be, and nothing monumental to the dance world, but in his new world, no amount of cold rain would dim his pleasure or his pride.

In deference to the time Thran would need to properly warm up for the dances with his daughters, Clan Ffyrnig had set off early, so arrived at the school in time to find a parking space close to the building. Everyone piled out, Sigrid holding an umbrella over her father’s head as he carried his plastic-bag-wrapped sketch in his arms. Thran had his makeup box, and the boys had their books. Tilda stayed close to her father as they walked into the school, but she was calm; only her intent inspection of everyone around her revealed that she was wary about spotting Lance Dunmont again. Both of the boys noticed her watching, for they positioned themselves on either side of her—or perhaps they’d decided beforehand to provide a reassuring presence for their sister. It would be like them to do so. When Thran caught Legolas’s gaze, he smiled and offered a thumbs up in appreciation.

“I’ll drop off my sketch, then I can play dance roadie,” Bard gave Thran a smile.

“The silent auction’s in the lunchroom, Bard,” Legolas pointed. “I saw some of it as they began to set everything up after lunch. There are several amazing things already.”

“Yeah, Da,” Bain seconded. “I saw Miss Rosie’s stained glass. I bet you’ll like it, Til— it’s a sun catcher, shaped like a sunflower.”

“Oooh!” Tilda brightened. “Elanor told me about it, but it wasn’t here yet when I had lunch. They’d just started to set up the tables.”

“Let’s go see,” Sigrid invited, and led the way with Tilda. They came into the lunchroom, transformed into a gallery with many pieces of art already in place. Bard waved at the young man helping a group of students to set up an exhibit.

“Hi, Theodred!” Bard called. “Look at this—you got your urban art students’ collection after all!”
You’ve got some nice pieces, lads.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bowman!” several grinned in appreciation. There were a variety of pieces – a pair of big, graffiti-inspired paintings in a bright kaleidoscope of colors, several manga pages, a scattering of colorful anime cels, some kinetic art. Several posters around the art explained the different genres and their history, and the final one made a plea to sign the students’ petition to add a class to the school’s art curriculum. While this kind of art was not Thran’s favorite, he was still impressed at the skill and range of subjects, and the attractiveness of the exhibit.

“Theodred, you know Tilda, of course...”

“Hi, Mr. Rohan,” piped Tilda.

“This is my husband, Thran Oropherson, and these are the rest of our children, Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid.”

“Hi, Tilda,” the young man smiled. “Nice to meet you, Thran, and you, too, Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid. Tilda, you’re going to dance tonight with Thran, aren’t you?”

Tilda’s face warmed to her usual sunny enthusiasm. “I am, and Sigrid, too! Tonight we finally get to wear our costumes, and Ada’s going to make up our faces and everything. He’s going to turn Sigrid into a ghost.”

“Pretty exciting,” Theodred grinned.

“I can’t wait,” Sigrid admitted.

“So here’s my sketch for the auction.” Bard hefted his armful of wrapped picture frame. “Where do you want me to put it?”

Theodred craned his neck, finally pointing to the line of tables that ran down the center of the lunchroom. “Over there, about halfway down, I think.” He turned to the four students working to arrange the exhibit. “I’ll put Mr. Bowman’s donation up, then I’ll be right back, guys.”

“Okay, Mr. Rohan,” the students waved.

Theodred led the family to the easel set up for Bard’s sketch. Once unwrapped from its protective plastic, the sketch went on the easel. Even in a school lunchroom surrounded by other artwork, it still drew attention.

“Wow, that’s a great piece,” Theodred nodded, as Bard stood back. “It ought to bring a good price.”

“I hope so,” Bard shrugged. “You can use the funds to bring your urban art class in house.”

“That’d be perfect,” Theodred agreed, chuckling. “We need all the help we can get. Enjoy your dances tonight, ladies. Break a leg! And Thran, Sigrid, Legolas, and Bain, I’m glad to meet you.”

The family left Theodred hastening back to his students to make the final adjustments to their exhibit. As they strolled out, Thran was impressed at how many different contributions already festooned the lunchroom tables – woven tapestries, jewelry, paintings, sculpture, stained glass, handmade paper collages, and many more. Tilda pointed to Rosie’s sunflower sun catcher, which was only one of the treasures to be found.

“So many beautiful things,” Thran murmured to Bard as they headed for the auditorium. “And all so professional! For the first time, I realize how talented our village is. This is a delight. I would like to
“So would I. It goes on all afternoon, just like the talent show and the craft booths, so we’ll have lots to see around your dances with the girls. Do you know what times your dances will be?”

Thran shook his head. “I asked only that there not be too much of a gap between them, so that I do not have to stay warm for more than an hour, especially if I do Sigrid’s first. Tilda’s requires me to be well limber. But however it ends up, I will manage.”

They made their way into the auditorium. Bard and the boys found seats while Thran, Sigrid, and Tilda headed for the sign-in table near the stage.

“Hi, Mr. Oropherson!” Zuhayra, the girl they’d met last night, waved at them. “Hi, Sigrid, hi, Tilda! Good to see you again! Oooh, Sig – you’ve got a crown! Nice!”

“It is good to see you again, too,” Thran smiled. “Tomorrow is the big day when we will hear you sing, yes?”

“Tonight’s pretty big, too,” she agreed. “We get to see you dance again! The guys told me you need about an hour to warm up tonight, right?”

Thran nodded. “I do. I hope that does not disrupt your schedule tonight.”

“It doesn’t. Tonight, it’s pretty much first come, first served. Tomorrow, though, we are doing a schedule. Do you have a preference for which dance you do first, and how long do you need between them?”

“I prefer to dance Midnight at the Carnival first, please. Tonight, I need only a ten-minute gap to change my costume and makeup, then I can dance The Doll. Tomorrow, I would prefer an hour between them, if possible.”

“That’s no problem,” Zuhayra nodded, scribbling a note beside the entries for Thran and the girls. “I’ve got that written down here. I don’t know where you’ll be, but if I had to guess, I think Ms. Ktinga and Headmaster L’Eärendil are going to put you nearer the end, to encourage people to stay longer at the Follies. You’re the big talent draw, from what I hear.”

“Ahh, that is because of my beautiful daughters,” Thran looked at each of the girls. “They get the best of me in our dances. One will convince me to run off with a ghost, and the other will make a very large fool out of me.”

“It’s fitting,” Sigrid winked at Thran. “You’ll be just the April Fool the Follies needs. Right, Til?”

“Right,” Tilda nodded firmly. “Except when he falls over me, then I’ll be the April Fool.”

“To the back hall with us, again?” Sigrid asked Zuhayra.

“That’s the place. Ingrid’s back there; when you’re ready, she’ll send you out.”

“Thank you,” Tilda murmured politely, drawing Zuhayra’s smile.

“You’re welcome. And break a leg, Tilda!”

The little girl grinned. “You break one, too, tomorrow!”

The trio retraced their steps to find Bard and the boys. When they spotted them, Thran found Kíllian, Finn, Tara, and Kíllian’s mate Derry with them. Sigrid exclaimed in surprise when she saw Finn in
his ubiquitous hockey jersey, reddening just a little when her aspiring beau waved at her.

“Hi, Sig! I’m up with Kíl for the weekend, and when he told me he had to do his bit with Derry tonight, I thought I’d come along to cheer him on.”

Kíllian snickered. “And it doesn’t matter to you at all that yon pretty lass and her sister are here to rehearse their dances, does it?”

Now it was Finn who reddened, but he gave Sigrid a wider grin. “I must admit that they’ll make a much prettier picture than you and Derry will, by far.”

That met with a chorus of hoots, and even the normally even-tempered Bard had to smother laughter.

“Maybe not,” Sigrid riposted through the laughter. “When next you see me, I’ll be a ghost, so there.”

“A pretty one, all the same,” Finn insisted, drawing more hoots. “So go on, then. Go do your dance, and I’ll see you afterwards, maybe?”

“It’ll be a bit,” Sigrid explained. “We have to do our makeup and then our warmup. But I’ll see you afterwards, whenever.”

“Okay,” Finn nodded.

“Papa,” Legolas murmured, and drew Thran a few steps away with Bain. Bard followed as a matter of course. “Kíllian and Tara said Bain and I could hang with them while you and Bard and the girls dance,” Legolas explained, and Bain seconded that with a nod. “So we’ll be together, with people, if you know what I mean, so you and Bard can stay with the girls.”

Thran knew exactly what Legolas meant, and a glance at Bard showed that he understood, too.

“Bard, are you comfortable with that?”

“I am, if you are,” Bard agreed.

“I am. But you and Bain must stay together with your friends, synok, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, Papa; yes, Thran,” the boys murmured.

“This is very serious. You cannot be casual about this.”

“We won’t be, Papa.”

“If you think you see something, don’t chase it,” Bard said. “Find the policeman in the lobby, or one of the teachers, if you can’t find us.”

“We will, Da.”

“Okay,” Bard exhaled. “Let’s get the girls. Lads, stay together, and we’ll see you soon.”

Thran waved to Sigrid and Tilda, who stood talking with Tara and Kíllian. Both came to join their fathers, and they headed to the back hall reserved for the performers’ preparations.

Thran felt at home as theythreaded their way down the back hall. How many dressing rooms, rehearsal halls, and performance venues had he seen with just this bustle, just this flurry of excitement? Here was a pair of giggling girl acrobats, sharing a joke while stretching in the most outrageous contortions. In one of the side rooms reserved for musicians was a pair of fiddlers, rolling up their sleeves and tuning their instruments. Many offered smiles and greetings as Sigrid headed to a
vacant space halfway down the hall where they could pile their things and do their makeup. Behind them, a laugh of greeting went up as Derry and Killian squeezed by to join the two fiddlers. Another side room was for singers, who warbled scales to warm their vocal chords. The din was happy and relaxed, and Thran’s excitement for the coming performance started to build.

“First the makeup, then the warmup,” Thran said to the girls. “Tilda, would you like to be first?”

“Yes!” she replied, an excited smile on her face. “Remember, pink cheeks.”

“Of course.” Thran nodded, folding himself down on his knees. “Sit here, *ma petite*, and I will make the pink cheeks.”

He opened his makeup box, which was just a portable paint box, and little different from the small toolbox that Bard kept in the back of his truck. Instead of screwdrivers or pliers or paintbrushes, his held small jars and pads of theatrical makeup, sponge applicators, cotton swabs, tissues, makeup brushes, and a jar of cold cream. He took out a clean sponge wedge, opened the pot of red, and dabbed the sponge gently into the pot.

“Make the nice smile for me, Kukla,” he invited, and dabbed the sponge over the apples of her cheeks until bright circles of color appeared. He handed her a round mirror. “See, the pink cheeks appear. Now for the bright eyes.”

He carefully drew thin, dark lines around Tilda’s eyes, then a little pale shadow on her lids, then smaller dark lines to exaggerate her lashes. The final touches were bright red lips in a Cupid’s bow. “*Et voila!* The mischievous little girl is ready to play with the big floppy doll.”

Tilda examined herself in the mirror, unable to resist a big smile. “The red goes with my pinafore.”

“It does,” Bard nodded, as Tilda got to her feet. “You look great, little doll. Exactly like the girl who’d sneak into the doll maker’s workshop to play with his latest creation.”

“You look so cute, Til,” Sigrid smiled. “Everyone’s going to love you.”

“Thank you,” Tilda said with great dignity, offering a curtsey. She snuck Thran a look. “I’ve been practicing my bow, Ada. It’s much better, I think.”

“It is very nice,” Thran chuckled with Bard and Sigrid. “Now it is Sigrid’s turn. Come, I will make you into a ghost.”

With a big grin, Sigrid scrambled to sit down. “Oh, this is so exciting, Ada. Tilda, hand me the mirror so I can watch what Ada does!”

“First, I turn you pale, but not too pale – we do not want the audience to think you are a skeleton! Just enough to match your leotard and tights.”

Thran used a fresh sponge to dab white over her face, neck, and upper chest and back where her white leotard didn’t cover. Thank goodness that Sigrid’s leotard had long sleeves, or he would have been painting for much longer to turn her exposed skin white. The interesting part was next, contouring her face with grey and black and blue. The hard part was to coax Sigrid to stop grinning as she watched the transformation take place – it was hard to turn cheeks hollow and gaunt when they were so busy smiling. As he worked, he was aware of Bard watching with an artists’ eye as he made shadows and lines, and Tilda. But several others around them came to watch, too.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” someone said in a hushed tone, as Thran blended two dark lines into the white to make a sharp shadow under Sigrid’s cheekbone.
“Geez, Sigrid!” a girl called. “You really look tired tonight!”

“I don’t know what it is, April, but I just feel dead,” was Sigrid’s joking return. “It must be something I ate.”

“Something you ate a hundred years ago,” another boy laughed.

“At least,” Sigrid returned.

“Just one more minute, and then you are done. Take this,” Thran said, dipping a swab into the black and handing it to Sigrid. “As you put on your usual lipstick.”

Sigrid quickly painted her lips black. “Okay?”

“Perfect. You are done.”

Sigrid admired herself in the mirror. “Positively ghoulish, Ada.”

“You look creepy,” was Tilda’s pronouncement.

“She will not look quite so creepy while on stage, Kukla,” Thran explained. “With all the lights, the audience who sits farther away will think she looks like a ghost, not the zombies your brothers are so enamored with.”

“Good,” Tilda decided. “Ghosts are okay, but zombies are creepy.”

“All right, Bard, it is your turn,” Thran beckoned.

“Me?” his husband blinked in surprise. “I’m just the guy who does the heavy lifting.”

“Just a little,” promised Thran. “Come, sit.”

“I hear and obey,” Bard murmured, taking Sigrid’s place, which drew Thran’s chuckle.

“Not here, put perhaps later,” Thran parried in a whisper, enjoying Bard’s spasm of laughter as he bent over his box. “Just a little base so that the lights do not reflect so badly...”

He sponged a flesh-toned color over Bard’s face, then made up his eyes with a little dark shadow and liner. He added a few darker lines for wrinkles, and a little silver in the edges of Bard’s hair, in his mustache, and in his beard tufts, then proffered the mirror for Bard’s inspection. “There, you are a bit older, that is all. All doll makers are old, or so they seem to be in every story I have read.”

“So now I match the stories,” Bard grinned. “I hope the doddering old fool isn’t so feeble that he drops the doll.”

“I trust that he will retain all of his vigor,” was Thran’s reply. “So the makeup is done. Now for the warmup. Sigrid, Tilda, I will do my stretches now.”

“Okay, Ada,” the girls chorused. Both had found friends nearby to talk to, so Thran began his slow flexing of ankles, toes, fingers, and wrists, then legs and arms, then neck, then back and hips. Bard sat on the floor nearby, keeping an eye on the girls as well as him, offering a smile now and again as Thran slowly warmed his body. As he extended himself, the two girl acrobats came up to watch, and soon the three of them chatted as they limbered. Those around him were kind enough to give him room to lengthen into splits on the floor, then up the wall.

“I never get tired of watching you do that,” Bard murmured as Thran slid his foot up the wall until he
was in a split, then grasped his foot to ease his torso flat against his thigh. “I swear you have no bones at all, or at least none of the joints us regular humans have. You’ve got elastic bands, if anything.”

Thran grinned as he altered his balance enough that he stood on one foot with the other stretched high above his head. He pulled his torso against his thigh again, then leaned gracefully forward until his hands were at his foot on the floor. “Perhaps so. Whatever the case, it feels good to stretch so deeply, so completely.”

He brought his other leg up to join the first, then curled first one leg, then the other, out of his handstand and over his head into a back bend, and up to his feet again. A scattering of applause rippled down the hall, which he accepted with a hand to his heart and a nod. He felt warm and centered, and well ready to dance.

“Sigrid? I am ready,” he called, and the older girl came forward with a big smile.

“All right! I’m ready, too – I did the warmups you showed me, so let’s go.”

“Kukla? We will go in perhaps ten or fifteen minutes?”

“Okay, Ada!” Tilda nodded vigorously. “Break a leg!”

“Thank you!” Thran replied with a laugh. To Bard, he offered a wink. “Off we go.”

“Til and I will run around to see your dance, then be back,” his husband said. “Enjoy, cariad.”

As Bard and Tilda hastened down the hall, Sigrid and Thran alerted Ingrid that they were ready. Thran kept himself in motion for the few minutes they had to wait for the previous act to finish, then it was their turn to take the stage. Just before they separated, Thran gave Sigrid’s hand a squeeze.

“Enjoy, ma chère. Have fun, and the audience will, too.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Sigrid grinned. “I can’t wait! Get ready to dance with a ghost, Ada!”

Sigrid flitted to stage left, leaving Thran to stand at the right side of the curtain, waiting for his cue. He had to smother a thrill of excitement as the announcer’s voice echoed in the auditorium.

“Next up, Sigrid Bowman and Thran Oropherson present *Midnight at the Carnival.*”

Thran slipped onto the darkened stage, took his reflective stance with his hands in his jeans pockets and looking up. He held the pose as the spotlight caught him, then walked towards center stage slowly, looking around himself. When he had almost reached stage left, he turned and retraced his steps, still looking about him. The change in the lighting told him that the second spotlight had slowly brightened, revealing Sigrid behind him. He took another couple of steps, seemingly oblivious to the spectre behind him, then turned, miming surprise and apprehension as he spotted Sigrid. How ghostly she looked! Her mostly white clothing and the pale makeup turned her into an eerie vision, yet the sparkles in her tiara and tutu gave her a theatrical glamour that her stance only reinforced. One foot slightly before the other, knee slightly bent, one hand on her hip, the other aloft asking for applause, head held high with a confident smile... Sigrid had become the spirit of a carnival artist.

The ghost circled him slowly, pirouetting once, then again, as he turned to keep his wondering eyes on her. Then she raised both hands, looked up, and brought her arms down decisively as the music started. She circled him again, capturing him with her allure. When she beckoned, he rushed forward to sweep her into a waltz. Around and around they went, and even the heavy makeup on her face
couldn’t disguise her utter delight in their dance. When they separated, she was no longer the fierce lioness of Clan Ffyrnig, but the teasing, enticing carnival spirit that drew a bedazzled mortal after her. Faced with such a beguiling partner, how could he not fling himself after her into the flashy C-jump, then sweep her into his arms again for one more waltz around the stage? She spun herself out of his arms, eluded his desperate lunge to prolong their dance, and flitted offstage as the music faded. Thran fell to his knees in despair, one arm stretched out after the vision that was no more.

When the spotlight faded, he got to his feet, found Sigrid at his side, and they joined hands to take their bow when the spotlight reappeared at center stage. Those in the audience applauded enthusiastically, but the cheering was from Finn, Kíllian, Bain, Legolas, Tara, and Derry. Bard and Tilda were there, too; the former whistled shrilly through his fingers while the latter jumped up and down as she clapped.

“One, two, three, bow,” Sigrid recited, grinning, and Thran fell into the count without thinking. Then he offered his partner a bow and applause, inviting the audience to reward Sigrid’s enthusiasm. She did a credible bow, then grabbed Thran’s hand to point at him and beckon the audience to applaud. They joined hands to take one more bow, waved, then exited stage left.

“That was so much fun!” Sigrid gasped, as they came out into the back hallway. “Oh, Ada, that is the most fun I’ve ever had!”

“You were magnificent!” Thran swept her up in a hug. “Such a ghost you made! And it is not even opening night!”

“You were amazing! That C-jump was over my head if it was an inch! And we just flew around the stage! It was incredible! Da! Da! Did you see us? We were wonderful!”

“Yes, you were,” Bard avowed, a huge grin on his face as he hugged his daughter. “You were fantastic – the best ghost ever! I am so proud of you! And this guy here, he was okay, too.”

Thran snickered. “I am glad I measured up to our lioness’s performance. It was an inspired one, to be sure.”

“Oh, Ada, you were perfection. Did you see that C-jump, Da? Did you see, it, Tilda? Wasn’t it amazing? It was over my head!”

“It really was!” Tilda offered, holding a hand about a foot over her head. “It looked like it was this high over Sigrid’s head, Ada!”

“Perhaps not that high, but high. Your sister was the best inspiration. Now it is our turn, Kukla, to make everyone laugh. Come, let me put on my funny nose, and paint my face, and then we will be ready.”

“I’ve got your costume,” Sigrid said, retrieving the bag and handing it to him.

“I have it. Now, let your Da take you to Legolas and Bain and your friends, before he carries the silly doll onstage.”

“Break a leg,” Sigrid quipped, as she went off with Bard.

Smiling, Thran quickly stripped off his trainers and jeans, revealing his white tights. Tilda handed him the baggy bloomers that reached only to his knees, then his dancing shoes with the red pompoms. Off came the burgundy Henley, on went his baggy top with the outlandishly huge red pompom buttons. As Tilda stuffed his clothes into the bag, he dove into his makeup box to draw the clownish red smile and exaggerated eyebrows, then on went his red nose and conical hat topped with
another enormous red pompom. He settled his braid at his back, and waggled his eyebrows at Tilda.

“We are ready, Kukla?”

“We’re ready, Ada,” she nodded with a smile as Bard trotted into view.

“Sigrid’s with the lads and their friends,” Bard panted as he came up. “All set?”

“All set,” Tilda nodded.

Thran held out his hand to Tilda. She took it, then her father’s, and pulled them towards Ingrid.

“We’re ready,” she announced. “Tilda Bowman, Thran Oropherson, and Bard Bowman with The Doll.”

“Tilda, Thran, and Bard up next with The Doll,” a smiling Ingrid repeated into her headset. She switched it off to tell Tilda, “A couple of minutes while the singers finish, then you’re up.”

A few minutes’ wait, then Ingrid waved them onto the stage. “You’re up.”

Thran led Tilda forward to center stage, finding the break in the curtain where she would peek out. Before he could squeeze her hand, she’d squeezed his.

“Enjoy,” she whispered. “If we do, they will.”

“Exactement, Kukla. Enjoy.”

He and Bard hurried to stage left. “Ready, angel?” Bard whispered, putting his arms around Thran’s waist in preparation.

“The doll is ready,” Thran grinned, as their introduction came over the loudspeaker.

“Next up, Tilda Bowman, Thran Oropherson, and Bard Bowman present The Doll.”

“Here we go,” Bard whispered.

Thran stiffened his pose as Bard hefted him in his arms to cart him out onstage. Laughter rippled, evidence that Tilda had stuck her head out from behind the curtain. As Bard lugged him out, she dove behind the curtain again, peeking out when her father set him down in the middle of the stage. Bard made a show of straightening Thran’s costume, even fiddling with his hat, then rubbed his beard as he considered his doll. With a nod of satisfaction, Bard exited stage left.

Another ripple of laughter revealed that Tilda had reappeared behind him. He stared straight ahead with a wooden expression as Tilda appeared. As the music began, she gave him a poke or two without getting a reaction, but with the third, he let his legs slide into a split, and leaned drunkenly over his leg. Another poke put his torso flat on the floor. A pull of the arm, he flopped over the other way, all as bonelessly as the rag doll he emulated. The war of wits began, with Tilda trying to get the doll upright again and the doll doing his best to get into the most ridiculous poses. At one point, when he managed to drape himself over Tilda, she gave the most exasperated sigh, which was so perfect that Thran had to smother a laugh. Finally, he let her get him to his feet, only to flail about the stage as she tried to get him to hold still. Here came the thunderous crash of crockery, and they both froze. Hastily, they mimed doing their best to hastily sweep up the bits, then shove Thran into his original stance. When Bard came out again with thumping steps, Thran was on his feet, but badly crooked. Bard mimed his cross-examination of Tilda, who was all innocence as she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders not once, but twice. As Tilda held Bard’s attention, Thran straightened
himself, then froze as Bard whirled around to glare at him. Again, Tilda protested her innocence, so after a thorough head scratching, Bard exited again with baffled exasperation. Behind him, Thran and Tilda mimicked delighted laughter at their misdirection, had a silly dance around the stage before they collapsed into a heap. The spotlight went out, giving Thran and Tilda time to get to their feet up at center stage. The light came back on, and the two took their bow. Thran beckoned to Bard, who joined them for another bow. Again, enthusiastic applause rewarded their efforts, led by their children and their friends. Tilda was beaming in breathless excitement, but remembered to offer her best curtsey when Thran and Bard applauded for her. Then they were off, and back stage again.

“You were terrific, little doll!” Bard gave her a big hug. “Just terrific! You didn’t let this silly doll give you a minute’s trouble!”

“No, you did not!” Thran agreed, holding out his hand for her to slap, which she did heartily. “The most mischievous playmate you were, my Russkaya Kukla! You looked as if you enjoyed yourself very much!”

“I did,” Tilda avowed, giving the firm nod that was her favorite gesture. “I did, a lot, Ada. We were good!”

“Very good,” Thran agreed. “Let us collect our things, and then we can go out with your brothers and sister and enjoy the performances that come after us.”

Thran collected his makeup box and bag, quickly exchanging his doll costume for his jeans, Henley, and trainers. He swiped a little cold cream over his face and tissued it off to remove the worst of his makeup, then offered to help Tilda take hers off. The little girl shook her head.

“I want to wear mine home,” she asked. “It’s the first makeup I’ve ever had on.”

“Of course,” Thran smothered a chuckle as Bard put a hand over his mouth to cover his amusement. “Sigrid likely feels the same way.”

“She wears it all the time,” Tilda shook her head. “I don’t.”

“Of course not,” Thran nodded, as they headed down the hall and back towards the auditorium doors.

“I wonder how long that will be true?” Bard murmured behind him, as Tilda took both their hands. Any reply Thran might have made died away as Tilda slowed just at the end of the hallway. She pulled her fathers to a halt, and looked around the corner at the auditorium doors cautiously. Thran scanned the area, as did Bard, but none of them saw anything.

“That’s where you saw him, Til?” Bard asked.

She nodded. “Right there. By the door on the right. But not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Bard repeated. “He’s not here tonight.”

“Good.” Tilda pulled her fathers forward and into the auditorium with quick steps, clearly not wanting to linger. They headed down the aisle and the group of teenagers waving to them. Tilda’s apprehension evaporated as the older children cheered her performance. Finn came out of the aisle to offer her a high five and an enthusiastic compliment.

“You were great, too, Mr. Thran,” Finn offered with a smile.
Thran nodded appreciation. “Thank you. I had two wonderful costars to dance with.”

“Yeah, Sigrid’s dance was amazing! You were both great.”

Thran thanked the boy again, but Finn’s smile had sobered as his eyes went to Bard.

“What is it, Finn?” Bard asked quietly.

“Um, Mr. Bowman, could I... talk to you a minute? In private?”

Thran’s eyebrows went up.

“Sure,” Bard said mildly, but his posture had tightened as only a father’s could.

Oh, gods, it couldn’t be that Finn and Sigrid...

“I have something to tell you,” Finn said lowly, as he and Bard moved away. “It’s about Lance Dunmont.”
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

The saint has an interesting conversation, then he and the angel engage in a little domestic bliss before the April Fool's Follies. The solarium begins to emerge. The cherubs are busy - the first helps Rahmiel acquire his feathers, the second introduces the third to the joys of a Trash Lunch, and the fourth shows she is truly a fierce lioness at heart.

Bard didn’t know whether to laugh or curse when Finn revealed what he wanted to talk about. He hadn’t really considered that he might be about to become a grandfather, but... well, wasn’t that every father’s knee jerk reaction when a boyfriend of his daughter, even as tenuous a one as Finn, made such a stammering request? When had Sigrid spent enough time alone with anyone outside of the family? Ohhhh, there was that one Saturday, when they’d said they were going to the cinema with Tara and Killian, but Sigrid had described the film so well afterwards that he’d never considered that they’d done anything else...

“Uh, Mr. Bowman?”

Bard jerked out of his reverie to find Finn regarding him with some concern. Okay, take a deep breath, no funny teenaged stuff, at least not this time, but decidedly unfunny teenaged stuff was tonight’s topic.

“What about Lance, Finn?”

“I just thought – I mean, I did come out to Killian’s this weekend to see him and Sig – Sigrid, I mean – but I’d hoped to see you, too. About Lance.”

“What’s he up to?”

“The rumors around school said first he’d gone to Florida to live with his gramma. His ma wanted him away from the gangs, because he’d started drifting that way. Then the rumors said that he’d already gotten involved with Angelo, and he’d fu – screwed up on some deal, and Angelo’s gang had it in for him. Then they said the gang had offed him. Sigrid told me a little of what happened on Christmas Day – not very much, so please don’t be mad at her. I wanted her to tell me, but she didn’t, just that it was bad enough that you all moved out here, and then she made me promise to keep my nose out of it. So I didn’t say anything. But I listened hard, and I pretty much figured out what happened. Lance was stupid, Angelo was even stupider, and Angelo ended up in jail, and now he’s dead, and the gangs that are left are fighting over his turf.”

“Ohay,” Bard nodded, unwilling to say more because he wanted Finn well out of the gang war that Angelo’s demise had fomented.

“But that’s not what I wanted to warn you about,” Finn hastened to say. “You already know everything I just said. But... you know Sigrid’s old school is pretty rough, right? It’s hard not to hear what goes on about stuff you don’t want anything to do with. Like where the potheads toke after lunch, and who’s selling one thing or another, or who’s recruiting. You know.”
Bard nodded. “Hard not to know, sure.”

“So it was hard not to hear some low-level runners talk about how Angelo tried to have Lance taken down in payment for getting him charged for attempted murder. But the guy Angelo got to do it... he said he did, got a nice bonus, then skedaddled. But he didn’t – I don’t know why – and Lance laid low. So after Angelo went down, the other gangs thought they owed Lance something for starting the whole thing, even though he fu – screwed up. So they won’t kill him, but not a single one will take him on, on account of how bad he screwed up. So he’s gutted because he’s nothing anyone wants. He’s not even worth killing. They call him Lance the... um, Fuckup.”

“So he bailed out of the city?” Bard murmured.

“Not completely. No one sees him for days at a time. No one knows where he goes. But when he’s in the city, he still has a friend or two, or so he thinks. Two of them are in my homeroom, and they aren’t his friends – they laugh about him. I just listened until they let drop what Lance said about everyone laughing at him for being such a, um, fuckup. And this is the part I wanted to tell you. I haven’t said anything to Sigrid, but... don’t let her go anywhere by herself for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because Lance blames her for what happened. She called him out, she broke his foot, she took him down. He doesn’t get that if he hadn’t been so stupid at the park, Sigrid would never have said or done boo to him. He doesn’t get it.”

“Do you know what he’s planning?” Bard said, fighting to keep his voice soft and even.

Finn shook his head. “No. I can imagine, though, and you better than me.”

“Has he been violent before?”

“A lot of fights, yeah. He’s got a chip on his shoulder about so many things it ought to be a tree trunk. Girls stay away from him because he’s mean. But I’ve never heard anything about him... doing more than mouthing off at them.”

“What does he get out of going after her? A place in a gang? Did a gang put him up to this?”

Finn shook his head again. “The gangs aren’t interested in you, as near as I can tell. Just like they think Lance gave them an opportunity to get rid of Angelo, they think you and yours did, too. Besides, you’re not there anymore, out of their territory. I don’t think that any of them will take on Lance, no matter what he does. He got the head of his gang killed and the rest of it scattered, Mr. Bowman. That isn’t something they forget.”

“So the good news is that the gangs aren’t in this. The bad news is that a humiliated lad is out to hurt my daughter for revenge. At least that narrows the threat.”

“It doesn’t make me feel any better,” Finn blurted, then reddened. “Well, it doesn’t. Not one bit. I like Sigrid, Mr. Bowman. A lot. She’s brave, smart, funny, stubborn, feisty...”

Despite his worry for Sigrid, Bard had to smother a smile at the awkward praise stumbling out of a short, stocky hockey player crowned with a shock of disarranged blonde hair. “She’s fierce, no doubt about it,” he agreed.

“That’s no lie,” Finn grimaced, darting a look at Bard to see if Bard were angry. When the boy realized that Bard agreed with him, he ventured a smile, then met Bard’s eyes straightly. “You should be really proud of her. She didn’t take shit from anyone in school, but she was nice to
everyone at the same time. She’s a good math tutor, too, thank the gods, or my parents would have had my ass over my trig grade, believe it. I really miss her – oh, for more than her math tutoring, I mean, but not like…”

“I am very proud of her,” Bard smiled mildly. Had he been that flustered about girls – or boys – when he’d been sixteen? Then again, Bard had never had to talk to a father about a stalker after his daughter, so Finn had reason to be flustered. “I’m glad you think so highly of her, too.”

“I do. So... just... look out for her. Just look out for her.”

“I will. Thanks for telling me. Just keep a heads up while you’re out here this weekend, if you would.”

“Oh?”

“Lance was here last night. Now we know why. So if you see him, tell the police.”

Finn’s eyes widened. “Oh, that’s why Legs and Bain said we had to stay together. I wondered – neither of them is a Nervous Nellie, not at all.”

“They’re doing what Thran and I asked them to do. No one’s to go off alone, or even in pairs, not until we know what’s up. Thanks to you, we know a little more. But still, stick together as much as possible.”

“Okay, Mr. Bowman,” Finn nodded. “Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

They rejoined the others without fanfare, but Thran locked eyes with him as soon as he was close, dying to know what Finn had said. While the teenagers and Tilda continued their rehash of the girls’ dances, Thran glued himself to Bard’s side.

“No, I am not about to be a grandfather,” Bard murmured, smiling perversely.

“Of course not,” Thran replied, so offhandedly that he had clearly considered that. With a few short words, Bard gave Thran a condensed version of what Finn had told him, drawing a growl from Thran. “Stupid. Understandable, but stupid. I think we should tell the police.”

“I’ll call Officer Kelso when we get home. Unless he’s here tonight, in which case I’ll talk to him, now. Can you hold down the fort here for a bit longer?”

“Of course. The children enjoy themselves, I enjoy to see them do so, and the acts in rehearsal are good. So see if Officer Kelso is in the lobby.”

“Righto.” Bard trotted up to the lobby, but the officer standing by the door wasn’t the one they’d seen last night, so he quickly returned to Thran and the children. “He’s not here tonight. I’ll give him a ring when we get home. I’ll likely get his voice mail; it’s almost nine-thirty now.”

“Then I suggest we go home,” Thran said. “If the older children want to gather, we can certainly host them.”

“That was my thought, too,” Bard agreed. “I think I have enough stuff in the kitchen for nachos if they’re hungry, or we can order pizza.”

“They are always hungry,” Thran exhaled.
They rounded up the children, invited Finn, Killian, Tara, and Derry over if they’d like to come, and headed out into the rain for the trip home. The children were still animated about the evening’s rehearsal, and when their four guests piled into the sitting room to consume a mountain of nachos, the rest of the evening passed quickly. At about eleven-thirty, Derry, Tara, Finn, and Killian made their way out to be home by their midnight curfew. Tilda was almost asleep, but she’d been determined to stay awake, delighted to be included in the older children’s gathering. It was hard to convince her to wash her makeup off her face – in fact, it was Thran who managed it by opening his makeup box and showing Sigrid how to use the cold cream and tissues to wipe off the white coating off. He got Tilda to help get the color off Sigrid’s neck, and when her sister was delivered from her ghostly persona, he wheedled Tilda to take off her pink cheeks.

“Very careful around the eyes, Kukla,” Thran coaxed. “See how Sigrid does it, one eye at the time? Keep it closed so that the cold cream does not get in your eye.”

“Will it sting?” Tilda asked dubiously.

“It doesn’t sting,” Sigrid assured her. “But it can get awfully blurry. Do you want me to help?”

Tilda nodded, so Thran held the jar of cold cream while Sigrid carefully dabbed.

“Okay, it’s all gone now. You just have to wash off the cold cream when you get a shower.”

“I’m too sleepy,” Tilda yawned. “Can’t I get a shower tomorrow?”

“Come on, little doll,” Bard picked her up and cuddled her in his arms. “Let’s get you through the shower before you think about it. Tomorrow’s a busy day.”

“Ohhhhh, Da,” she mumbled, drawing chuckles from Thran and Sigrid.

“I’ll get her started,” Bard said. “Lads, wrap up your game so that when Til and Sig are done, you’ll be ready for the shower, too.”

“Yes, Da; yes, Bard.”

Through sheer force of doing everything except the actual undressing and washing and drying, Bard coaxed Tilda through her shower and into bed. He managed to get Mr. Bun in her arms and a kiss on her cheek before her eyes closed.

“Sleep well, little doll,” Bard wished her.

“I will. I’m glad we didn’t see Lance Dunmont tonight. Maybe we won’t see him ever again.”

“Let’s hope not. Don’t worry about him anymore. I’ll see you in the morning, okay? Eggs or porridge?”

“Porridge,” she mumbled. “Maybe with peaches.”

“We don’t have any peaches yet, remember? Too early in the season.”

“Apple, then. Night, Da.”

“Night, Tilda.”

Bard tiptoed out. Sigrid was already in the shower, and the boys were upstairs to wait their turns. Bard headed downstairs to make the rounds of the house, checking doors and windows, a circuit that Thran soon joined.
“So how do we set the security system?” Bard asked, as Thran checked his mobile.

“It is very easy. See, we are inside now, and here are the modes, and so I choose the nighttime mode, which does not go off when we move around inside, but does go off if any of the outside windows and doors are breeched.”

Bard followed Thran back to the sitting room, where they sat together on one of the sofas. Bard leaned close to watch Thran set the system. “Oh, not so hard, then.”

“Not at all. What you see on the security panel display is the same as what you see here, or on the computer. Thank the gods that someone at this company understood that consistency is a virtue.”

Bard snickered. “The rare geek, indeed. Someone once told me that the definition of a geek is someone whose favorite phrase is, ‘wouldn’t it be cool if....’”

Thran snickered, too. “Apt, indeed. Though I have never heard Ori say that, and I believe he is a geek.”

“He’s a rare bird. Incredibly smart, and a nice guy. I’ll miss him when he doesn’t need to follow Irmo around anymore, or come here.”

“As will I. Oh, did you call our Officer Kelso?”

“I did, while the children were making nachos. As I expected, I got his voice mail, but I left a message. So I hope tomorrow sometime that I can pass on what Finn told me.”

“What should we say to the children?”

Bard exhaled, and put a hand on Thran’s thigh to massage it restlessly. “I don’t know. I don’t want to scare them, especially Sigrid. But... it’s not right to leave them clueless about Lance. At least we should tell them to be careful.”

“And they will ask to be careful about what, and out it will come,” Thran agreed.

“I won’t say anything until tomorrow, anyway,” Bard rubbed his eyes. “There’s no need to give them a reason not to sleep well, and we’ll have them under our eyes all day tomorrow. I suspect that Finn intends to glue himself to Sigrid’s side all afternoon tomorrow, too. So... I’d say let the children enjoy the excitement tomorrow. They already know to keep a watchful eye out. If we have to say more, we will on Sunday, assuming Officer Kelso doesn’t have something different to tell us.”

“A good plan,” Thran yawned. “What is it you always say? That you are knackered? I think I am, too, though I do not know what knackered means.”

Bard grinned. “In the old days, the knacker was the guy who rendered down dead or dying farm stock that wasn’t fit to eat. So being knackered meant that you were ready for the knackers to dispose of you.”

“So, very, very tired.” At Bard’s nod, Thran grinned. “Then I am not quite knackered, but quite ready for a shower and bed.”

“I’m right behind you.”

Bard and his husband turned out the lights and headed upstairs. Bain was reading in bed, and Legolas was just getting out of the shower. Sigrid was in her room, still smiling over the evening’s excitement.
“I think you have caught the performance bug,” Thran teased her as he offered his goodnight kiss.

“Maybe,” Sigrid gave him a teasing shrug. “It’s been the best fun dancing with you, Ada.”

“And with you, too, my ghostly dochka,” Thran replied. “Tomorrow, we will wow the audience, yes?”

“Yes,” Sigrid grinned. “I won’t out-cute Tilda, but I’ll out-ghost her.”

“To be sure. Sleep well.”

“Not so fast,” Sigrid gave Bard a look. “You haven’t told me what Finn had to say yet.”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Da!” protested Sigrid.

“Have mercy on your old doddering Da,” Bard protested right back. “I’m knackered, and have to find my pillow before I fall over.”

Sigrid’s snort was indignant. “What, did Thran’s paint give you an instant dose of the old man? Though the silver in your hair looks good.”

“Thanks,” Bard snarked.

“You’re welcome. And don’t try to tell me he had nothing to say, because I know you called that policeman when we got home.”

“Yes, I did. Finn confirmed that Lance is still among the living, and I wanted to pass along the word to the police. Happy now?”

“No, but that’s something.” Sigrid snorted in exasperation again, but her expression softened into a smile. “So go find your pillow so I can find mine. I’m knackered, too.”

“Finally,” Bard bent to kiss her cheek. “Sleep well, sweetness. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Da. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Bard and Thran retreated, tucked the boys into bed, and finally drew the doors of their bedroom shut behind them. Bard exhaled.

“We got off easy with Sig.”

Thran went into the closet to strip off his clothes. “We did. I am most relieved.”

“Me more than you.” Bard tossed his clothes in the hamper. “I’ll start the water.”

He got into the shower, scrubbed and shampooed the remnants of Thran’s makeup off his face and out of his hair, and quickly washed the rest of the day’s rigors away. Thran got in when he was done; his hair was braided and wrapped around his head to keep it dry; apparently he was too tired to indulge in his regime of washing and drying his mane tonight. Bard dried his hair quickly, and settled into the bed long enough to warm the sheets before Thran joined him. As they curled into their usual knot, Bard let out a long breath.
“No sighting today, but at least some information.”

Thran hummed. “It occurs to me, lyubov moya... Something I have learned over the years of being known.”

“What’s that?”

“The people who are intent on another, whether a celebrity, a dancer, or a fierce lioness... It is rare that they know where their quarry lives, so they go to the places where they know their quarry will be, the public venues. It is my name that has been in the media for the April Fool’s Follies, and Lance may have come to the school to find me in hopes that I would lead him to Sigrid.”

“That makes sense,” Bard agreed.

“So tomorrow I would expect Lance to appear at the school. So many people to hide among, and such a bustle and stir.”

“That makes even more sense. If I talk to Officer Kelso in the morning, I’ll mention that.”

“We should remain careful, and together. If Lance cannot get to Sigrid, he may decide that a strike at one of us would make her suffer.”

“Also valid. Mab i ast, angel – you’re not making it easy for me to get to sleep.”

“I am sorry,” was Thran’s contrite apology. “I am so tired. I feared that I would not remember to say this tomorrow morning.”

“I’m tired, too,” Bard admitted, yawning. “I hope I don’t have a nightmare tonight.”

“I hope not, my saint. Remember that all is well. The security system is on, and we are safe inside.”

“I know,” Bard rubbed Thran’s arm. “I know....”

His eyes fell shut without resistance, and he was gone.

* * *

Oh, now nice was it to wake and remember that today was Saturday, and there was no need to get up yet? Almost as nice as it was to snuggle back under the covers with his fine, muscular saint of a husband, to soak up his warmth, to smell the scent that was his alone, to feel his tangled curls tickle his nose...

“You’re decadent this morning,” came Bard’s drowsy mumble.

Thran curled at Bard’s back and brushed a kiss against his nape. “I merely enjoy the bounty before me.”

“Your cock is pressing against my back, hard as a rock.”

“You say that as if it were a problem.”

“The life of a dissipated dancer’s boy toy is almost as hard as the dissipated dancer’s cock.”
Thran snickered as he stroked Bard’s arm. “Such a story you begin about this boy toy! Tell me what happens to him when the dissipated dancer wakes up. Does the dancer get up to have a sedate breakfast in the kitchen, or does he get up to stay in bed for a decadent dessert?”

“Oh, gods,” Bard made a longsuffering rumble deep in his throat. “I know that soft little voice. It means that either the boy toy has to make the dissipated dancer’s breakfast, or he’ll be the dissipated dancer’s breakfast. Probably both. The only question is which of the dissipated dancer’s appetites does he have to satisfy first.”

Thran leaned away only long enough to fish the tube of lubricant from his nightside table drawer, then pushed Bard over on his stomach and laid atop him. When Bard sleepily drew his knees up to accommodate Thran between his legs, Thran slicked his cock quickly. He eased inside with a soft moan, then curled over Bard’s back and wrapped his arms under and around Bard’s shoulders to hold him close.

“Mmm, you are a sweet dessert,” Thran breathed, flexing deeply into Bard. He buried his nose in Bard’s hair, nipping at his ear. “Such a delicious toy, so willing, so submissive...”

He tightened his grip on Bard’s shoulders, humming at the tight warmth that gloved his cock so delectably. Each flex in and out drew a moan from him, a moan that only deepened at sight of the powerful body lying so willingly beneath him. He drew his knees up under Bard’s thighs, deepening the arch of Bard’s back – the perfect way to present Bard’s ass for Thran’s attentions. He wormed a hand underneath to take Bard’s cock in hand and stroked it slowly until Bard pushed up onto his hands to thrust his hips back over Thran’s thighs.

“Gods, angel, I can’t resist you,” Bard whispered. His head went back and his eyes closed as he rocked in rhythm to Thran’s thrusts. “So good, so good...”

“Such a picture you are,” Thran whispered back, loosing Bard’s cock to drag both hands down Bard’s flanks, not scratching deeply, but leaving long, red streaks that spiked his arousal even higher. Before today, Thran had resisted the urge to mark Bard’s skin, tacit acknowledgement of Bard’s care for Thran’s. But the red streaks across Bard’s darker, hairier skin were feral mating marks, claiming marks, driving Thran’s urges to something just as feral. Growling, he fell over Bard’s back, fingers digging into Bard’s groins as he thrust hard and fast into his prize. As his orgasm flooded through him, he bit Bard’s shoulder, sending a spasm through the body beneath his. He groped for Bard’s cock again, manhandling it until Bard stuttered into his own orgasm. As the body beneath Thran bucked and flexed, the pressure around his cock alternatively rose and fell to send more waves of pleasure surging through him. He wrapped arms around Bard’s shoulders again, holding his prize close as he milked the last drops of ecstasy from their release.

“I swear I’m taking away your vitamins,” Bard panted. “You’re an animal.”

“And you look like you just mated with one,” Thran grunted, unable to resist one more bite of Bard’s shoulder. “Mmm, such a turn on.”

“You bastard, you’ve left marks all over me. It’s a good thing you don’t have claws and canines, or I’d be in ribbons.”


Bard pushed up to sit back on his heels. Thran let him, but kept his arms wrapped around Bard’s torso to stroke and pet. Bard looked down at the red streaks slowly fading on his thighs and ribs and shook his head.
“You certainly do – and you’re not letting me go. Do you need to claim me again?”

Thran ran his teeth over Bard’s shoulder, and his hands down Bard’s ribs to massage his groins on either side of his cock. “You are well worth claiming, so yes, I am tempted to master you again. But better I restrain myself now. We clean the garage this morning, so I will think about how sweet it will be to savage a certain hunky handyman after we come home from the Follies.”

Bard wormed an arm around Thran. Before Thran could stop him, he’d laid Thran flat on the bed, taken both of Thran’s wrists in one of his to pin them over his head, and slid atop him. He kissed Thran thoroughly and stroked a nipple, grinning when Thran moaned under his attentions.

“Maybe I’ll master the Follies dancer first.”

“Oh, lyubov moya, if you kiss and caress me like this tonight, I will let you do anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything. I will be seer to your king, slave to your master, oda to your sultan. Whatever you desire.”

“I’ll take that as a promise. Right now, though, I need a wash and breakfast.”

“Both would be welcome.”

They rose together to clean up, dress, and make the bed, then headed downstairs to enjoy omelet and toast and tea. They still lingered over the last sips of their tea when Bard’s mobile chimed. Fishing it out of his jeans pocket, Bard glanced at the display, then at Thran.

“Officer Kelso,” he said, as he held the mobile to his ear. “Hello?”

Thran got up to take their plates to the sink as Bard relayed Finn’s information to the officer. He rinsed the plates and cooking utensils and put them in the dishwasher, washed and dried the silver flatware, and carefully washed the heavy cast iron pan that had held their omelet. By the time the kitchen was clean, Bard was just ending his conversation with the officer.

“My timing is impeccable,” Bard observed as he got up from the kitchen table. “I missed all of the kitchen cleanup.”

“You did most of the cooking. I did not mind to do most of the cleanup,” Thran shrugged. “What did the officer say?”

“About what I expected,” Bard exhaled, putting his mobile back in his pocket. “He thanked me for the information, and even admitted that we’re probably right that Lance is looking for Sigrid. But until Lance actually does something, the police can’t do anything. There will be police at the Follies today as part of the usual security for such things, so if Lance turns up, we won’t be completely unprotected.”

Thran tsked. “I am disappointed, but not surprised.”

“He did say he’d talked to Chief Inspector Oakland. The gang war is strictly a city stir. There’s no indication that it’ll blow out this far.”

Thran hummed. “That is good, I suppose. It means that our problem is only one angry teenaged boy, rather than an entire gang.”
“True. We’ll keep careful watch, that’s all.”

Bard’s posture was tight, mute evidence that their conclusion was far from satisfactory. Thran rubbed his back, but it was little consolation to either of them that Sigrid’s protection was on their shoulders until Lance Dunnmont actually presented a threat that the police could pursue.

“So we will,” Thran said at last. “Come, let us order the garage to distract ourselves.”

“Do you know what time you’re supposed to dance this afternoon, angel?” Bard asked. “We can work on the garage anytime, now that we’ve gotten the vehicles under cover. Today, your dances with the girls take precedence.”

“I was supposed to receive an email,” Thran said, pulling out his mobile. “Let me see if it arrived. Oh, suka blyad, the poor Follies organizers – the email arrived at two this morning. They have worked very hard to make the Follies a success. Yes, a schedule is attached. It will be easier to read on my laptop, so let me open it there...”

Bard followed Thran into the sitting room, where they perused the schedule the school had sent. “Look, angel – there must be forty or fifty or acts on that list.”

“Plenty to run continuously from one to six, indeed,” Thran agreed, scanning down through the list. “Ah there is Midnight at the Carnival at three, and The Doll at four fifteen. That is good. I have time to eat a sensible lunch before I must warm up. And we have time to see the auction and the craft booths before we dance.”

“Don’t forget the bake sale,” teased Bard. “All those frosted cupcakes and decorated cookies.”

“I leave those to the children,” Thran waved a hand. “So if we arrive at the Follies at one, we have an hour to look before I must warm up. So lunch at noon, and it is only eight now, so we have time to play in the garage.”

“What about Legolas’s fencing? Isn’t he going today?”

Thran tsked. “Sukin syn, I forgot the fencing. Yes, I will take him. And I must stop at Mrs. Mathom’s to pick up the screens for our solarium.”

“We can go in the truck and put the screens in the back.”

“Then the girls and Bain must come with us, and that is too tight a fit. No, I will take Legolas, and you stay here with the others.”

“That makes the most sense,” Bard agreed reluctantly. “I hate to miss a trip to the salvage shop, though. But we’ll be back there soon enough.”

“I will restrain myself at the salvage shop if you do not do all of the garage yourself.”

“Why is the garage such a fascination for you, angel?”

“It is not the garage itself. It is the chance for me to be part of our restoration. I want that.”

Bard put his arm around Thran’s waist and gave him a consoling squeeze. “Then here’s what we’ll do. You take Legolas to fencing, and get the screens. I’ll work on Rahmiel. Then tomorrow morning, we’ll have a big breakfast, and then spend all day playing in the garage. Oh, until Sam comes over to talk about our Japanese garden. You’ll have time to do your barre and yoga, and then the rest of the day you’ll be on the restoration crew.”
Thran’s lips curved into a pleased smile. “That would be very nice. Today we are the artists, and tomorrow we will be the renovators.”

“We have a plan, then – oh, hell. Now I’m the one to forget something,” Bard winced.

“What have you forgotten, lyubov moya?”

“I can’t do Rahmiel’s wings without feathers. I’d planned to visit this shop in the city – it’s in the garment district, and supplies all the theatrical companies. Rada says it’s got the best selection, and will likely have exactly what I want in stock. It opens at ten.”

“Then I will take Legolas and come home. Then you go out for the feathers and come home. Then I will get Legolas, who will help me get the screens, and come home. Then we will all be home, until we all go out again.”

Bard chuckled. “Now we really have a plan. We’d better roust the troops, then, if only to get them through breakfast before they have to eat lunch.”

“To eat is their favorite activity,” Thran sighed as they headed upstairs. “I do not think they ever stop.”

* * *

As Bard expected, getting the children up on a Saturday morning wasn’t easy. Usually they could sleep as long as they wanted, but given this afternoon’s festivities, an earlier wakeup was in order. Legolas got up easily, as he was eager to go to fencing. Sigrid and Bain were less sanguine about it, and Tilda was impossible. Given how late the youngest member of the clan had gotten into bed last night, Bard decided it was a good idea to let her sleep so she’d be fresh for her dance this afternoon. The rest of the children headed downstairs for porridge, then Thran and Legolas left for fencing.

Forty minutes later, Thran was back, and Tilda was up, if still sleepy. She grew more alert when she heard about Bard’s pursuit of feathers. That intrigued Tilda, so she came along with him, speculating during the ride about what a shop that sold feathers would look like. She was disappointed that it was not the exotic-looking shop she expected, but looked little different from a shoe repair or dry cleaners. Inside, though, her eyes brightened to see boas as well as packets of different colored feathers hanging on racks. A few bins offered a selection of unusual feathers. Bard didn’t linger over any of those, but went right to the small counter in front of a back room stacked with boxes. Rada had helped Bard make a list of the kinds of feathers he would need, and how many of each kind. Not only could he buy feathers individually, and by the pound and half pound, but also by left and right wing, important if he wanted Rahmiel’s wings to look natural.

In direct contrast to the bright packets of feathers around him, the rotund, rumpled man behind the counter was a grizzled character clad in dark green workman’s pants and a white polo shirt emblazoned with the shop’s name and logo on the breast. He had only wisps of dark grey hair around his ears, and his half moon glasses sat so low on his nose that they seemed ready to fall off at any second. He perched on his stool flipping through a stack of paperwork, but his hazel eyes skewered Bard as soon as the string of bells clattered on the back of the door. He took in Tilda, smiling slightly as she looked around her. Tilda met the man’s eyes with cautious reserve, then looked up at Bard.
“Where are all the other feathers, Da?” she asked Bard. “The kind you need?”

“I expect they’re in boxes in the back, little doll. Why don’t we ask the man behind the counter?”

“Okay.”

“We’ve got a lot of stuff in boxes in the back, Rosy Posie,” the man leaned on his elbows to regard Tilda over his glasses. “Lots and lots of stuff. What kind can I get for you?”

“Oh, they’re not for me,” Tilda demurred politely as she pointed to Bard. “They’re for my Da.”

“So what kind can I get for you, Da?”

“Goose feathers, I think. Black or dark brown, if you have them.”

“We got ’em in just about every color of the rainbow, including some colors that ain’t in the rainbow. You know what shape you want?”

Bard explained that he needed flight primaries as well as secondaries, in fact, all the kinds that made up a bird’s wing, enough for both a right and left wing. The man brought out various samples of goose, turkey, and chicken feathers, and before long Bard had bundles of fifteen primaries for each wing, and an equal number of secondaries. He also had boxes of the smaller feathers that covered the rest of a bird’s wing, and a few ostrich plumes for Rahmiel’s hair.

“What’re you making, Da, if you don’t mind me asking?” the clerk asked.


“No lie?” the clerk chuckled. “That’s a first. I’ve supplied feathers for every kind of production, Broadway, off Broadway, Lower Schlobservia, High Dudgeon, and everything in between, but this is the first time a sculptor’s come in here. Good luck with it.”

Bard handed over his credit card. “Thanks.”

The clerk rang up Bard’s charges, passed him the ticket to sign, and packed everything in a bag with a care that belied his casual air. He turned to consider the boxes behind him, opened one, and chose a long blue feather to hand to Tilda. “See ya around, Rosie Posie.”

“Really?” Tilda’s smiled in surprise as she took the feather. She dropped the curtsey she’d been practicing for her dance bow. “That’s very nice of you. Thank you very much.”

The man barked in laughter. “You’re a sweet little one, aren’t you? You’re welcome. Take good care of your Da, and tell him to come back soon, okay?”

“I will.”

“Thanks,” Bard nodded, taking his bag. “Ready to go, little doll?”

“Ready,” Tilda nodded, giving the man a wave. “Bye, Mr. Feather.”

“Bye, Rosie Posie.”

“He was nice,” was Tilda’s pronouncement as they walked back to the truck.

“Very nice. That feather he gave you is very nice, too.”
“Maybe it’d make a good quill pen, like the kind in the Harry Potter books,” she said, climbing into the truck. Bard shut the door, went around to the driver’s side, and climbed in.

“I think it would. It’s the same kind of quill, I think. All buckled?”

“All buckled.”

Bard pulled out his mobile. “I don’t think we’ll get back home before Thran has to pick up Legolas, so I’ll call to let him know.”

After making a quick call to let Thran know to take Sigrid and Bain with him when he went to pick up Legolas, Bard turned the truck towards home. They made good time, pulling into the driveway at about eleven twenty-five. They were just getting out of the car when Thran’s SUV pulled in behind them. Legolas sat in the front seat beside his father, and Bain and Sigrid were behind them. Everyone piled out of the SUV with calls of hello.

“Da!” Sigrid called. “These screens are wild! So pretty! That place is the most fun ever!”

“The call of the juvenile renovation junkie bird,” Bard teased, pulling his daughter’s braid. “How many did you get?”

“Four! So cool. I love them, and they aren’t even up yet,” Sigrid grinned. “What are you going to do with them? Hinge them together in a screen?”

Bard watched the boys help Thran unload the four panels from the SUV. “I have to see how everything fits, but I was going to put the archway on the wall opposite the windows, and the screens around them. The fountain would go on the wall in the middle of the archway.”

“And lots of flowers around the fountain,” Tilda came up beside her sister, blue feather in hand. “Look at this, Sigrid – the feather shop man gave it to me!”

“It’s beautiful, too. He gave you that?”

“He called me Rosie Posie and said I was sweet,” Tilda grinned. “All I did was be polite.”

“That was probably sweet to him,” Sigrid laughed. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I thought a quill pen, like in Harry Potter?” Tilda considered as she and Sigrid followed the boys carrying the screens into the house. Thran came beside Bard to kiss him hello.

“I hope you found more than one blue feather for Kukla,” Thran greeted.

Bard kissed Thran back, then hefted his bag. “I found much more than one feather. I found lots of feathers. Now, I just have to figure out how to attach them to the wings.”

“You will sort it out,” Thran assured him. “They will look wonderful. So will the screens. I am very happy with them. They are a lighter color than they looked in the email, but that makes them a good match for the archway and the fainting couch and the table. It is exciting to see so many pieces come together for our solarium.”

“Let’s see how they look in the solarium, then we need to get lunch before the Follies,” Bard invited, as they went inside together.

“Yes, the solarium comes together,” Thran enthused, as the boys propped two screens up on each side of the archway. “And look, the color of the wood is almost the same.”
“Bain, Legolas, if you’d set the table upright, under the windows? Now we’ll set the marble on top...” Bard took one end of the marble and the boys took the other, and they set it in place atop the wooden base. “Yes, that’s great.”

“Tilda, let’s move my chairs out of the way,” Sigrid invited, and she, Thran, and Tilda carried the three chairs that Sigrid had refinished for her upholstery class into the dining room. Bard rearranged two of the palms to flank the table and the others at each end of the wall of screens, and moved the ferns to ring the two palms against the lattice wall. The fainting couch, almost complete but for its gimp trim, angled near where the fountain would be. It was slowly, slowly becoming an exotic sanctuary.

“I think we must talk to Sam about more than the Japanese garden tomorrow,” Thran observed, looking around. “This is wonderful, and will be more so when we have greenery.”

“And flowers,” Tilda chimed in.

“I like those plants with the big flowers,” Legolas offered. “Hibiscus, I think? Aren’t those the ones with the big flowers? They come in red, yellow, a lot of bright colors?”

“They sound good,” Tilda nodded. “And nasturtiums. I like nasturtiums. They’re smaller, but red and yellow and orange. Sort of like marigold colors.”

“Maybe a banana tree!” Bain suggested. “Or maybe it’s too cold in here. I’ll look on the Internet, or Mr. Sam can tell us.”

“What about an orange tree?” Sigrid suggested. “Aren’t there small ones? Bain's right that it’d be neat to have a real fruit tree in here.”

“We’ll ask Mr. Sam tomorrow. He’s coming over to talk to us about the Japanese garden. But for now, let’s get our lunch, so our dancers have time to digest before they have to hurtle around the stage.”

“What’s in the fridge, Da?”

“Lots of leftovers,” Bard replied.

“Yes! Trash Lunch!” Bain exclaimed, pumping his fist.

Legolas’s eyebrows went up at Bain’s excitement, and so did Thran’s. “Trash lunch? We’re going to eat... trash?”

“That’s just what the children call the meal where I pile all the bits and bobs from the fridge onto the island, and everyone eats a little of this and a little of that until everything’s gone. The fridge gets cleaned out, nothing ends up in the trash, and tomorrow we get to eat new food. Trust Bain to call it Trash Lunch rather than Smörgåsbord.”

“Then let us pile.” Thran opened the fridge and peered inside. “All these bins, yes?”

“All the bins,” Bard confirmed. “The dishwasher always gets a workout after Trash Lunch.”

As Thran got out the bins, the children got out plates for the table and spoons for the various bins. Legolas dumped some of the leftovers into bowls, which Bain ferried in and out of the microwave to heat. Tilda arranged cheese on a platter, Sigrid washed fruit, and Thran poured milk. Bard combined the various bits of veg into a big bowl, and found salad dressing as well as the lemon that Thran used to dress his salad. In a few minutes, the kitchen island was piled high.
“Have at,” Bard shooed the children towards the plates, and serving began. Bard was right; no one had the same things on their plates, and some of the combinations were interesting.

“Nacho on saltines, Bain?” Bard shook his head.

“Tastes fine,” Bain mumbled through a mouthful. “We ate all the corn chips, didn’t we? Saltines work just fine.”

Thran ate mostly salad, but Bard was glad to see that he’d added a chicken thigh and a hard-boiled egg to his bowl, and had few slices of cheese with crackers on the side. Bard was content with the last of the farro mixed with chicken, salad, and fruit. No one went hungry, and when the carnage was complete, the pile of empty bins was substantial.

“I’ve got enough to get us through tomorrow, Monday breakfast, and Monday school lunches,” Bard said as he put away the few remaining leftovers, mostly cheese. “I’ll head to the market once the children go to school.”

“Any cookies?” Legolas asked.

“They’re done for,” Bain shook his head. “But there’s the bake sale at the Follies – the kids at school said the stuff is usually great, and there’s lots of it.”

“We’d best make our way there,” Bard said, loading the last of the bins and utensils in the dishwasher. “Thran and I want to look around before he’s got to warm up for your dances. Brush your teeth, all of you!”

The thunder of children running upstairs made Bard grin, an expression he shared with Thran as they followed at a slower pace. Thran dressed in his dance belt and tights, slipped his jeans and trainers and Henley on top, and combed and braided his hair. He made sure his costume and makeup box were in his bag, and then went to help Tilda collect her things. Bard stuck his head in Sigrid’s room to see how she was faring.

“Oh, tights, extra tights, shoes, leotard, tutu, tiara... I’ve got everything,” she said, packing things in a large bag. “I’m not going to wear my costume there, because I want it to be a surprise when I come out on stage.”

“Good idea,” Bard nodded. “Ready to go?”

“Ready. But before we go downstairs...”

“Yes?” Bard drawled.

“Finn’s going to be with me when I’m not with you and Thran and Tilda getting ready for our dances. Just so you know I’ve got some more backup.”

“Nice of him,” Bard nodded. “Quite the gentleman doofus, then.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Da...”

“Sig...”

“Okay, he is a doofus. But he’s a sweet one.”

“He seems to be a nice guy.”

“He said...”
“He said what?”

“He said he was trying to convince his parents to let him stay with Kíllian next year, so he could go to the Imladris Academy, too.”

“What do you think about that?”

“He’s smart. He shouldn’t be in that school – not that it’s that terrible, but parts of it are rough, and he could maybe get into a better college if he had a little more help.”

“And for yourself?”

Sigrid looked Bard right in the eye. “I wouldn’t mind seeing him more. But don’t get any ideas, Da. I want more than what we had in the city, too, and now that I have a way to get it, I’m going to take advantage of it. I want to go to college, a good one.”

Bard put his arms around his daughter. “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more until now. But we have it now, and I’m very happy that you want to take it as far as you can. I won’t ever stop telling you to do your best, just like always.”

“And I won’t ever stop doing just that,” Sigrid gave Bard a hard hug. “Ada calls me Clan Ffyrnig’s fierce lioness.”

“I call you that, too.”

“I am. And I’m going to be.”

Bard stroked Sigrid’s hair, determined to swallow the lump in his throat. “That’s my sweetness. So let’s go be fierce at the Follies.”

“Let’s go be ghostly at the Follies,” Sigrid snickered as she bent to pick up her bag. “Then I’m going to have a cupcake!”

Bard’s warm glow lasted until Clan Ffyrnig piled into Thran’s SUV and headed down the road. Then he thought about what Sigrid had said – Finn would be with her throughout the afternoon, backing her up.

Sigrid was no fool. Finn hadn’t told her anything, but he hadn’t had to. She’d figured out on her own that she was the one Lance Dunmont was after.
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

An angel, a saint, and a host of cherubs do their best to enjoy the April Fool's Follies. Will they succeed, or will a certain dark shadow cast a pall on the day's festivities?

By the time Clan Ffyrnig reached the Imladris Academy, Bard had reached a decision. As they joined the stream of people heading into the school for the festival, he drew Thran aside.

“Go ahead with Tilda, would you?”

“Of course,” Thran said instantly, without questioning the request, and took the little girl ahead with him.

“All right, you lot,” he said quickly, drawing Sigrid, Legolas, and Bain close. “There’s a chance Lance will turn up here today. He may look for any of us, but especially Sigrid. Finn already knows this, but you can speak to Tara and Kíllian if you need to, just so they understand why you need to stay together and be watchful. If you see him, tell the security people. Thran and I will be close by until it’s time for the dances.”

He dug into his pocket and pulled out three ten-dollar bills, passing one to each of the children. “Tilda doesn’t know about this, and I’d prefer to keep it that way so that she doesn’t get even more scared than she already is. Any questions?”

“Did you tell the cops last night?” Bain asked.

“I did. Until Lance does something stupid, the police can’t lift a finger. That doesn’t mean you provoke him. It means you keep yourselves out of whatever stupid thing he does. Do NOT go off anywhere alone – even the ladies’ room, Sig. Get Finn, one of your brothers, or one of your mates to wait for you. Keep Thran and me in sight as much as you can.”

He scanned faces. Had he put too much on their shoulders? They weren’t that much older than Tilda. But Sigrid’s jaw was set at its most stubborn, and Bain’s was no less resolute. Legolas was worried, but calm as he glanced at his siblings.

“We’ll be okay, Da,” Sigrid murmured. “That dickwad won’t mess with a pack of us.”

“Keep your eyes open, all the same.”

“Okay, Da; okay Bard.”

They headed after Thran, with purpose in their steps.
“Why is Da talking to the other children without me?” Tilda said, looking back at her father huddled with her siblings.

“I do not know, Kukla,” Thran hedged. He suspected, but he didn’t know for sure, so he hadn’t lied to Tilda. When Bard pulled out his wallet and handed some money to the children, he was relieved – he had something plausible to say. “Ah, that is the answer, see? He gives them some money for the bake sale, or the trinket booths.”

“Oh,” Tilda said, squeezing Thran’s hand. “But... does that mean that I won’t get any?”

“Of course you will. But you are with your Da and me, and the others will likely find Finn and Killian and Tara, so he gives them their share ahead of time.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.”

Thran breathed another silent sigh of relief. Sometimes, being a parent meant feeling protective and dishonest at the same time.

* * *

Bard let Sigrid, Bain, and Legolas move ahead of him before he rejoined Thran and Tilda. “What would you like to do first, Tilda? Maybe get a treat before you have to dance, then see the art?”

“Yes, a treat,” Tilda decided, smiling. “Sigrid said there were cupcakes.”

“Let us see, then,” Thran said as they came into the main school entrance. The auditorium was to their right, the central hall had the craft booths, and the hallway off to the left near the lunchroom had the bake sale. Even though the Follies had just opened, the halls were already full of people. Bard was pleased to see two uniformed police officers in the lobby, one of whom was Officer Kelso. He nodded and smiled at the officer, who returned the greeting, then Thran forged ahead, heading to the bake sale. Bard took Tilda’s hand and followed closely.

Tables set up down the corridor leading to the lunchroom were crowded with all sorts of treats – the expected cupcakes and cookies, but also small fruit tarts, bags of candied nuts and brickles, truffles and fudge, trail mix, brownies, fruit cups, and various beverages.

“So much sugar,” Thran tsked, as they filed past one display after the other. “What is it called – a diabetic coma? To breathe in too much is to risk one.”

“A truffle or two won’t hurt,” Bard grinned. “What looks good to you, little doll? Not too much, okay, because you have to dance in a bit.”

“I know.” Tilda craned her neck. “I was hoping for a coconut cupcake. But I don’t know if anyone made those.”

“Coconut cupcakes?” The boy manning the table they were just passing looked up at Tilda. “Try down at the end, on the left. See, just before the exit sign?”

Tilda craned her neck, then turned back to the boy. “I see it. Thank you!”

“No problem,” the boy grinned. “I like ‘em, too. Mrs. Hobbs’s booth. She makes really good ones.”
“Thanks,” Bard nodded in appreciation. “Let’s try down there, then.”

He turned back to find Sigrid, and found her with Tara, Bain, and Legolas in tow, and pointed down the hall. She nodded, and the children trailed along behind.

“Oooh! There they are!” Tilda exclaimed, pulling Bard forward. “All sorts of them.”

“Pick just one,” Bard asked, and after due deliberation, she chose a coconut frosted one. As Bard passed over the money, she looked back at Legolas and held up her cupcake.

“Coconut!” she called, pointing to her treat.

“Really? Coconut?” he said, blue braids swinging as he hurried over. “Hey, it is! I want one, too.”

Soon the rest of the children descended on the cupcake table, so Bard and Thran stood off to the side while the children made their choices. Out of the crowd came Finn, Killian, and Derry, so Bard had time to scan the sea of faces. So many people coming and going! It wasn’t going to be easy to spot anyone at any distance...

“What is a cheese straw?” Thran asked Bard.

“What?” Bard blinked. “Oh, a cheese straw? I have no idea. Where do you see those?”

Thran pointed at the next booth, where small bags of ribbon cookies lay next to the mysterious cheese straws. “They look like some sort of crisp wafer. I will ask.”

The woman behind the table gladly explained that the straws were a mixture of very sharp cheddar cheese, a little flour, and cayenne pepper, piped into thin wafers, and baked. Thran bought a bag of those and pronounced them quite tasty. He offered them to Tilda and Bard.

“Maybe we can find a recipe and make some, lyubov moya,” Thran said. “I like them.”

“Mmm, they are good,” Bard agreed, sampling a small piece of the treat. “Spicy.”

They moved on, following the older children ahead of them. Killian yelped as he passed a table selling homemade beef jerky, and quickly bought a bag.

“What? I love this stuff!” he laughed at Tara’s roll of the eyes. “Gives me the strength to hit all the notes in those Irish reels I have to play in a bit!”

He offered Legolas a piece, who’d never sampled it before. The tall blonde youth pronounced it very chewy, but delicious.

“Nothing for you, my saint?” Thran asked.

Truth be told, Bard was too busy watching the crowd to look much at the treats, but he’d already seen what he wanted on their way down the hall. “I’ll get some of the peanut brickle we passed on the way in. I don’t make a lot of candy, so that’s the treat for me.”

He got his bag of brickle, offering it to Thran, who chewed a tiny piece appreciatively. “Very buttery. I like that, too.”

“Sweet and salty at the same time,” Tilda said. “I like the cheese straws, too, Ada. Those are cheesy and spicy at the same time.”

“Delicious,” Thran agreed.
“How about if we look at the art now? Thran’s got to get ready to dance soon, so let’s give him a chance to see everything first.”

“Okay,” Tilda agreed. “On to the art!”

As they caught up to the older children, Bard leaned close to Sigrid to tell her they were headed to the lunchroom to peruse the silent auction offerings. She nodded, and pulled the older children after them.

The lunchroom was busy, but far less crowded than the bake sale tables. Bard paused as he saw the older children huddle. Tara’s expression was perplexed, then grim, then determined. She linked arms with Sigrid, and Finn stationed himself at her other shoulder. The other boys ranged farther away, but they wouldn’t make it easy for anyone to get close to Sigrid without passing them first. When Bard and Thran steered Tilda down the first row, the older children followed.

Despite his preoccupation with the people around him, Bard enjoyed seeing the entries for the silent auction. There were many beautiful pieces – pottery, paintings, encaustic tiles, textile wall hangings, sculpture, and more. A hand-painted silk jacket dazzled in greens and blues. A small wooden box was painstakingly inlaid with shell and jade in a twining pattern of leaves and flowers. Bard particularly liked a small lamp shaped like a beautiful blue water lily made from origami-like folds of silk, nestled on a base of green silk lily pads, with a small yellow light aglow in its center. He was pleased to see that his sketch already had several bids. He made sure to sign the urban art petition for Theodred’s class, and so did Thran.

“How do you plan to bid on anything, lyubov moyya?” Thran asked.

“I might,” Bard hedged. The truth was he’d seen several things he’d liked, but he wasn’t comfortable with spending Thran’s money on them. “What about you? Does anything pique your interest?”

“Other than the beautiful sketch of Aragorn and Arwen?” Thran winked.

“I will not bid on that, angel. I’ll give you any of the ones I kept. Or I’ll draw you something special.”

“I will not bid on yours, then, as much as I like it. But there was a small inlaid box I thought was very beautiful. It would make a good box to hold our wedding rings when we cannot wear them, such as when you weld and I dance.”

“The one with the jade and the shell? I liked that, too.”

“So let us bid on that one. And perhaps one other, one you choose.”

“The box is good enough for me.”

“Oh, it would not hurt us to try for one other, would it?”

“I guess not.”

“So which one did you like?”

“Did you see the lamp shaped like a blue water lily? Those flowers were sacred to the Egyptians. They’re in a lot of their temple carvings – the big columns at Karnak, for example.”

“I liked it very much. I thought it would be perfect for the solarium.”

“I saw it, too,” Tilda piped up. “It was pretty.”
“So we will bid on that one, too,” Thran decided. “Come, let us write down our names.”

They retraced their steps to the two items they liked. Bard waved Thran forward to make his bids, and he purposely didn’t look to see how much those bids were. He was reconciled to Thran having more money than he did, but he preferred to let Thran decide how much of it he wanted to spend on nonessentials. He took the chance to scan the people around him again, just to keep a wary eye out. The children lingered by the door, waiting for them to finish.

“I have made our bids, lyubov moyaa,” Thran announced. “Ah, the children are ready to move on. Where next?”


“Then let us go after them. What do you think we will find there, Kukla?”

Tilda considered. “If Miss Rosie is here, maybe she has a little sunflower sun catcher, like her big one, but smaller?”

“I think she does have a booth,” Bard replied. “Let’s see if we can find it. Usual rule – ten dollars and under.”

“Okay, Da.”

They followed the older children out of the lunchroom and down to the craft and art booths. The variety of offerings was even larger than what had been on exhibit in the lunchroom – several jewelry booths, etched wood, and leather goods among them. Rosie’s booth was near the front, and Tilda pulled Bard forward with a smile and wave to their neighbor.

“Hi, Tilda!” Sam greeted her with a big smile. “Hi, Bard, Thran! Quite the crowd this year!”

“That’s great!” Bard said, waving at Rosie who helped another customer. “You got roped into being an artist in something other than greenery today, did you?”

“The children are all at Gran’s, and I’ve learned that the garden center is not the draw in this village on Follies day,” he grinned. “Rosie’s pretty longsuffering when I work so late during the summer, so I like to return the favor when I can.”

“Wise move,” Bard grinned. “Tilda was hoping to find one of Rosie’s sunflower sun catchers.”

“We’ve got several flower ones,” Sam smiled at Tilda. “All kinds, all colors. That row. See if any of those suit you, Til.”

While Tilda perused with her usual consideration, Bard chatted a little longer with Sam while his daughter made her choice. She held up a yellow sunflower with an orange center and green leaves around the edge.

“This one, Da?”

“Good choice,” Bard nodded. “How much is it?”

Sam started to speak, but Bard flicked him a glance, so he fell silent as Tilda checked the reverse for the price sticker.

“Oh, good – it’s eight dollars. So with the dollar for my cupcake, that’s nine, so I’m still ten dollars or less.”
“You are,” Bard nodded, handing her a ten-dollar bill. “So give Mr. Sam your money, and he’ll give you your sun catcher.”

“Thank you, Tilda,” Sam took the money, gave her the change, wrapped her sun catcher in tissue, and stowed it in a small bag. “Nice to do business with you.”

“Nice to do business with you, too,” she said, tucking the bag under her arm. She handed Bard one of the dollars. “There, that’s for my cupcake, Da. So I have one dollar left. Maybe I’ll get another cupcake after I dance.”

“Good plan. Thanks, Sam. We’re looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. We’ve got some ideas about the Japanese garden, and our solarium’s coming along, too, so maybe you can offer some advice for that.”

“Glad to,” Sam nodded. “Enjoy the rest of the Follies. And break a leg for your dance, Til!”

“Thanks! Bye!” Tilda waved as they moved on.

Thran was instantly at Bard’s side. Bard tensed, but his husband was not upset or agitated; rather, he was excited. “Bard, come look at the next booth. They have something I think you will like.”

“Oooh, jewelry,” Tilda commented, drawn to the sparkly display. “Lots of earrings. Can I get my ears pierced, Da?”

“Not until you’re sixteen,” Bard said automatically. “You have to be old enough to take care of them yourself while they heal.”

“That’s what you always say,” Tilda sighed, regarding the rows of rings and studs and dangles.

“Until you’re sixteen, yes,” Bard ruffled her hair.

“Look there,” Thran pointed to a locked case full of earrings. “Do you like any of those?”

Bard followed Thran’s finger, and spotted a pair of small rings in the lowest row of the case. Each one was subtly faceted, reminding him of his wedding ring. When he pointed to them, Thran gave him a triumphant grin.

“The exact pair. I want to buy them for you.”

“They’re nice, angel, but you don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to. They are white gold, they remind me of our rings, and you need nice ones. So it is done.”

Bard smothered a chuckle. “You’re excited. Any minute now, you’ll start to wave your hands around and your accent will become very Russian, and you’ll talk very fast.”

Thran waved his hands at Bard, rattled off something in Russian, likely vulgar, and concluded his performance by sticking out his tongue. “There, silly welder. Now I will see about your earrings.”

Thran flagged over the artist, who was pleased to show Thran the earrings. After holding them up to Bard’s ears, they both liked them, so the woman carefully cleaned them before holding them out to Bard.

“If you want to wear them home, you can. There’s alcohol in the cleaner.”
He didn’t have to look at Thran to agree. The woman held a mirror for him to extricate his old ones and put in the new ones. These didn’t feel any different to wear, but they looked much better than his old ones, and Bard liked the bohemian air they lent him.

“They look nice,” Tilda said, looking up at him.

“Very nice,” Thran purred.

Gods, his cheeks felt warm. Was he blushing? Just keep moving, just keep moving...


“They suit you very well,” the woman smiled, handing him the small box that had held the earrings. “I hope you enjoy them.”

They thanked the woman, and continued their perusal. Belatedly, Bard remembered to look for the older children, but they were all still nearby, Sigrid and Tara poring over the offerings in another jewelry booth, and the boys checking out some braided leather belts. By the time they’d covered the rest of the craft booths, it was close to two, and time for Thran and the girls to get ready for their dances. They collected Sigrid to find their way to the back hallway. Finn and Tara came with her.

“Tara’s going to help me with my costume in the restroom,” Sigrid explained. “Then she’ll go with the boys to see Killian and Derry – they’re on in just a few minutes. They’ll hang out together until we’re done. Finn says he’ll stay in the back with me.”

The pleading expression on Sigrid’s face belied her casual words, so Bard nodded. “Good plan. Can you both help Tilda into her costume, too?”

“Absolutely,” Sigrid said, and Tara nodded. “Come on, Til. We’ll get dressed now.”

They all headed into the back hallway. Bard was relieved to see a table blocking free access to the area, and a pair of attendees behind it making sure that only performers and their helpers were allowed past them. That made sense, as the hallway was too small for any more people than the performers. Once Bard saw the girls safely ensconced in the bathroom to change, he snared Bain and Legolas to ask if they’d seen anything, but none of the group had. The boys asked if they could pay another trip to the bake sale, but agreed to wait until Tara was ready to go with them, and after they’d watched Killian and Derry’s performance. Thran went on ahead to find a vacant space for them, and Bard waited by the restroom door for the girls. When they emerged, Tara went off with Legolas and Bain, and Tilda, Finn, and Sigrid followed Bard down to join Thran. Bard and Finn collected all the bags while Thran did Sigrid’s makeup, then began his warmup. Time was shorter than they’d planned, but Thran was calm as he stretched and limbered. It was warm with all the performers coming and going, so Thran had peeled down to tights and tee, substituting dancing shoes for his trainers.

“Yes, time is a little short, but Sigrid’s dance does not call for so much flexibility,” he reassured Bard, stretching backwards and over into a backbend, rocking back and forth to limber his shoulders, back, and hips. That sent a murmur of comments rippling through the other performers who watched, and Finn’s mouth was agape, which gave Sigrid something to smile about. At times like this, his husband was at his most exotic, elegantly contorting himself into positions most people couldn’t think of, much less do, yet still able to carry on a conversation with ease. “Yes, the C-jump is extreme, but my spine and legs are ready. I will take a little more time with my hamstrings and quads before Kukla’s dance.”

Beside Thran, Sigrid did her much more sedate stretches, shaking her head at the tall dancer in his
backbend. “You were right, Da. Ada doesn’t have ligaments. Just rubber bands.”

Snickering, Thran flowed upright again. “Perhaps I am jointed like a marionette, then. Some of them have rubber bands.”

“Sigrid and Thran, Midnight at the Carnival, five minutes,” Ingrid called down the hall. Thran waved acknowledgement, then stripped off his tee. How provocative was it to see that lean torso exposed in such an industrial setting against a green-painted concrete block wall? Thran was serenely oblivious to the notice he attracted, though he offered Bard a small smile when he beckoned for his Henley. He pulled on his jeans and trainers, and settled himself with one more stretch. He offered his hand to Sigrid.

“Shall we dance, dochka?”

“Da, Ada,” Sigrid grinned, putting her hand in Thran’s.

“We’ll circle around to watch,” Bard said, and Tilda nodded.

“Break a leg!” Tilda called, as she and Finn helped Bard gather up their bags.

“Yeah!” echoed Finn. “Nail it, Sig!”

She laughed, as she and Thran found Ingrid. Bard, Finn, and Tilda shared out the bags between them, then hurried to the auditorium entrance to find seats to watch the first of Clan Ffyrnig’s dances. The place was so crowded that it wasn’t easy to get through the press, but just as the announcer spoke, they found seats on the outside aisle halfway down.

“Next up, Sigrid Bowman and Thran Oropherson present Midnight at the Carnival.”

Bard took a quick look around the auditorium before the spotlight revealed Thran. Nearly every seat was taken, and he thought he spotted a film crew in the back. So many people, so many people...

He spotted Officer Kelso and another female officer stationed at the door in the back, so he relaxed a little, and turned forward in his seat to watch his husband and daughter weave their spell. It didn’t matter how many times before he’d seen them practice, this was their first public performance, and the ripple of anticipation that ran up his spine echoed the excited murmur that went through the audience. Everyone was here to see his husband, the renowned ballet star, dance with his daughter. Beside him, Tilda bounced in her seat, just as caught up as he was.

The spotlight came up, Thran wandered, and Sigrid appeared as a glamorous and ghostly spirit. The eerie and compelling Carnival of Souls waltz began, prickling all of Bard’s skin into gooseflesh as Sigrid circled the bedazzled Thran. When he swept her into the first partnered steps, a gasp went up all over the auditorium. The pair circled and circled, the ghost flirting with her mortal partner as she wove her spell. Thran followed helplessly, too snared to realize that a ghost teased him. When she broke away, he flew into the spectacular C-jump, braid flying, arms outstretched, head back, so enthralled that his feet nearly touched the back of his head. That tore another gasp from the audience. When Sigrid abandoned him to flit off as the music faded, Thran fell to his knees, devastated that his ghostly partner was gone. As the spotlight faded, the place erupted into cheers. The spotlight came up again to reveal Thran and Sigrid at center stage to take their bows amid thunderous applause. Many people got to their feet, which brought a huge smile to Bard’s face. Beside Tilda, Finn was up on his feet to whistle and cheer.

“I can’t see!” Tilda tugged on his arm, so he stood up and pulled her into his arms to see Thran stand to the side, one hand behind him, the other offering Sigrid his recognition. She took a solo bow, then
her exuberance got the best of her as she did a little dance and pointed to Thran, urging the audience
to recognize him. They needed little encouragement to do so, which he accepted with a wide smile, a
hand on his heart, and a deep bow. He took Sigrid’s hand once more for another pair of bows, then
they retreated.

“Come on, Til,” Bard beckoned. “Time to get you ready.”

He bumped Finn, so the three of them threaded their way through the crowd and out of the
auditorium. The film crew was interviewing people about Thran’s performance, so he skirted that to
duck down the back hall. He found Sigrid and Thran in a knot of other performers who
congratulated them on their efforts. His daughter was breathless with excitement, still bouncing up
and down. Thran had stripped off his Henley, and was glad to dig a towel out of the bag Bard held
out to him to mop his face.

“That was amazing! Just amazing!” Finn exclaimed, enveloping Sigrid in a bear hug. That
spontaneous display disconcerted both of them, enough that Finn snuck a furtive glance at Bard.
Bard managed to return it with an understanding smile, but Thran chuckled as he pulled on his tee
and shed his jeans and trainers.

“Thanks,” Sigrid finally said. “It was pretty amazing, wasn’t it?”

“Stellar,” Bard pronounced it. “What’d you think, Til? Your sister did a pretty good job, don’t you
think?”

“You were a good ghost,” Tilda agreed. “Not like a zombie at all.”

“Thanks, Til. Ada, I’m going to take off my makeup, just in case.”

“I think that would be wise, ma chère,” Thran agreed, opening his makeup box and getting out the
tissues and cold cream. “There is a clean towel in my bag to help you wipe off all the white.”

“I’ll help you get the back,” Bard offered, before Finn could. Not that tissuing cold cream off his
daughter’s back was so enticing, especially in a crowd, but... such were a father’s instincts.

“Come, Kukla, it is time for the pink cheeks,” beckoned Thran, so while Bard and Sigrid worked to
banish the ghost, Thran and Tilda worked to create the mischievous little girl. Bard’s lined face and
silver hair were next, then Thran took back the mirror to make his doll face. After much wiping,
Sigrid finally got most of the white off, and as Thran began his warmups, Finn went to wait outside
the restroom while she changed out of her costume. Wisely, she’d brought a different top from what
she’d worn earlier, in case Lance had spotted her in the first one. She came back to their space in the
hall with Finn in tow.

“I want to see Tilda’s dance, Da,” she said, as Tilda joined Thran in some stretches. “So can Finn
and I sneak into the auditorium for it?”

Bard was already collecting bags, and he had Thran’s doll top, bloomers, and hat in one hand and
Tilda’s hair bow in the other. “I’d rather you be with a group, sweetness. Finn, do you think you can
round up the boys or Kíllian and Tara?”

“Sure, Mr. Bowman. Be right back, Sig.” The stocky boy jumped up and trotted off.

“I know, I know, keep my eyes open and so forth and so on,” Sigrid sighed. “I could just slap Lance
Dunmont, causing all this stir.”

“It’s a pain, but a pain I want you to take, Sigrid. It’ll be easier once Thran and Til are through their
dance, and we can watch each other’s backs a lot easier. Just stay with it.”

Surprisingly, Finn was back in a few minutes with Killian and Derry. “That’s because we set up a meeting spot,” the boy explained. “We’ve got seats in the middle of a row, too, and Legolas pulled up his hoodie so his blonde hair’s not too easy to spot. So we thought it out.”

“I appreciate that,” Bard nodded. “Okay, Sig – here, you’ll have to hold the bags until we’re done. Once we’re finished, we’ll meet back here, okay?”

“Aye, Captain Bard,” Sigrid nodded. “Hey, Tilda!”

The little girl looked up from her stretch.

“Break a leg when you out-cute them, okay?”

Tilda’s grin was pleased. “Thank you! I will!”

Bard’s jaw tightened as Sigrid retreated between Finn and Killian, with Derry just ahead. Such care, so many precautions... while his watchfulness hadn’t ruined the day, it had put a pall on his usual lighthearted enjoyment of such festivals.

“Tilda, Thran, and Bard, The Doll, five minutes,” Ingrid called down the hall.

Bard waved a hand in acknowledgement, and beckoned to Tilda so he could fasten the big bow in her hair. Thran pulled on his bloomers, top, and hat, added his red nose, and they were ready. They queued up before Ingrid.

The applause died for the act preceding them. With a wink at Tilda, Ingrid nodded them towards the door.

“You’re up.”

Thran led the way into the darkened backstage. Tilda went to the center of the curtain, and Bard and Thran headed left.

“Ready?” Bard whispered, putting his arms around Thran’s waist.

“To be sure,” grinned Thran.

“Next up, Tilda Bowman, Bard Bowman, and Thran Oropherson present The Doll.”

Bard craned his neck to watch Tilda stick her head out of the curtain, drawing chuckles from the crowd. When she pulled her head back in, Bard tightened his grip on Thran.

“Here we go,” he whispered, and Thran stiffened into his pose.

Bard hauled Thran out to center stage, fussed to arrange him in just the right stance, brushed his hands off, and retreated offstage. Again, the auditorium was packed to see Thran, but Tilda didn’t seem to notice, and went through her steps as easily as if she’d been in their ballroom at home. From the wings, Bard watched Tilda’s tiny girl and Thran’s huge, floppy doll engage in their battle of wits, laughing silently at their antics, proud when they got a swirl of laughter or applause from the audience. There came the crash of crockery, the frantic scramble to sweep up the evidence, and then the shoving and poking to prop Thran up into a semblance of his original stance. Bard stamped out, arms waving, pointing at Thran then at Tilda, who was all innocence as she stood with hands primly behind her, shaking her head. Of course not – how could she have managed to move such a huge
doll? Bard whirled and mimed surprise now that Thran had straightened into his original stance, and confronted Tilda again. She looked even more innocent than ever, so he threw up his hands again and stamped out in bewilderment. Back in the wings, Bard laughed to see Tilda and Thran so delighted to have put one over on him. The pair made their silly, exuberant dance, and collapsed in a heap right as the music ended. Down went the spotlight, giving the pair time to get in place to take their bows. As the applause and cheers swelled, Bard came out to join them for their second bows, proudly clapped for his daughter and his husband, and exited to leave them to their enthusiastic and well-deserved applause.

“Well done, Kukla!” Thran exclaimed as they came back into the hallway. “You were perfect! So funny!”

“You were great,” Bard praised, grinning to see his youngest child’s excitement. “There were a lot of people out there, and you gave them a good show, one and all.”

“It was fun,” Tilda smiled. “It really was fun.”

“Then you made it fun for all who watched,” Thran assured her, taking off his hat. “And you made it fun for me, too.”

Sigrid and Finn appeared, bags in hand. “Wow, Til, that was great!” Finn declared. “Was it tough to push Mr. Thran over like that?”

Tilda shook her head. “Ada did most of the work. I just had to look like it was hard work.”

“It was terrific,” Sigrid assured her. “The audience gave you and Ada a standing ovation.”

“Not bad for your first public dance performance, is it?” Bard observed.

“Not bad at all,” Tilda nodded. “It was mostly because of Ada, but it was still nice. I had a good time.”

“That is all that counts,” Thran said, taking his bag from Finn. “I will put the doll aside, cool a little, and then we can enjoy the rest of the Follies.”

“I want another cupcake,” Tilda said. “Sigrid, will you go with me to the bathroom so I can take off my costume?”

“Sure. Finn will wait outside for us, too.”

“Okay, good. Thank you, Finn.”

“No prob, Til. Come on.”

The children went off to the restroom, so Bard stayed with Thran to hold the bags while his husband exchanged his doll costume for his tee and did his cooling stretches.

“No aches or pains, angel?”

“It was an easy day for the body. All is well. After I change, I want to see how the silent auction goes for our two items.”

“Good idea. Good, here come the children.”

Tilda, Sigrid, and Finn reappeared, waiting patiently for Thran to complete his stretches. He slipped on his jeans, Henley, and trainers, hefted his bag, and held out his hand to his companions.
“We are through our performances for the day. Now we can enjoy the rest of the Follies.”

But that might not be the case – as soon as the group came out of the hall, a swarm of reporters clamored for Thran’s attention. A smooth expression flowed over Thran’s face as he realized.

“Protect the children,” he said quietly to Bard. “I will deal with them.”

Thran immediately steered a path through the group, heading for the main lobby. “Of course, I am glad to speak with you, but let us not ruin the time for those who enjoy the Follies, yes? A place that is out of the traffic will be better.”

Bard drew Sigrid, Tilda, and Finn off to the side, letting Thran and his trail of reporters pass them by to congregate outside, just past the lobby doors. Bard chewed his lip; should he stay close, so Thran wasn’t alone in the midst of that crowd, or should he take the children elsewhere, in case Lance was here to notice the stir? Before he could decide, Tilda grabbed for his hand.

“Da!” she screamed.

Lance Dunmont was across the lobby, as frozen as Bard was.

Everyone spasmed into motion at once – Lance’s face twisted in fury as he jerked towards the quartet. Finn, cursing, tried to push Tilda and Sigrid behind him and Bard. Tilda went; Bard made sure Tilda was behind him before he took a step forward. Sigrid, however, would have no part of retreat – she stood shoulder to shoulder with Bard and Finn as the tall boy with straight brown hair and angry black eyes raised his hand to point at her.

“I see you, Sigrid Bowman,” he spat. “You’re gonna pay for what you did. Pay.”

“You bring it, Lance Dunmont,” Sigrid spat back, bristling. “Just you bring it.”

Lance might have said something else, but a tall white-haired dancer rushed into the lobby from outside, eyes wide with fury. Lance flinched at Thran’s sudden appearance, and stupidly charged at him with head down and arms swinging. As two police officers converged on the lobby, Thran dodged the worst of the barrage, but Lance grabbed his arm – why? Did he think to use Thran to get away? Thran went with him, forcing the boy back, then shoving him away when the boy lost his balance.

“Hold him!” the police barked as they careened forward.

Belatedly, Thran tried to reel the boy in, managing to keep one hand on him as the police drew near. Balance restored, Lance twisted his arm hard, and yanked himself free, dodging through the confused gaggle of reporters with the police in full pursuit. Wincing, the tall dancer watched the pursuit through the door, shaking his hand and muttering under his breath.

“I do not think they will catch him,” Thran muttered, as Bard joined him. “Are the children all right?”

“We’re fine. What about you? Oh, gods, Thran – your arm.”

Thran’s left arm bore dark red bruises from elbow to wrist. From the ginger way Thran held it, bruises were not the extent of the damage.
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint are determined that an ambush will not ruin the end of their day at the Follies.

“Is it broken?”

Thran stared out of the lobby doors, tracking the police officers who raced after the elusive Lance Dunmont. As fast as the officers were, the wiry Lance Dunmont was faster. They wouldn’t bring their quarry to ground today.

“Thran. Is it broken?”

Blinking, Thran met Bard’s concerned gaze. “Is... what broken?”

“Your arm. Did he break your arm?”

The pain hit, then the noise, then the sight of so many people milling around him – reporters, a police officer, uncounted others, all talking and babbling at once. Bard’s arm went around his waist. Where were Tilda, Sigrid, and Finn? Yes, there against the wall, Tilda standing between the older children and clinging to both of them. What about the boys? Where was his son? And Bain? He shut his eyes against the overload before it overwhelmed him –

“Thran – look at me! Did Lance break your arm!”

“Papa! Let me through! That’s my father!”

“Mr. Oropherson, do you know your assailant? Was this a targeted attack or a random one?”

“Is there any truth to the theory that –”

“Why did you choose to dance at a school funct –”

“Please, move back, move back! Give him space!”

“Do you expect the police to catch your attacker, and if so, will you press charges –”

The cacophony grew louder and louder, so much so that when he focused on Bard’s grim face, he couldn’t hear his husband’s voice. The jostling and shoving grew more urgent, more dangerous –

“SILENCE!” he shouted. “ALL OF YOU! NOW!”

Everyone froze, and the din immediately around him was silenced. Oh, thank the gods –

“I am fine. My arm is not broken. Please, all of you, calm yourself.”

“Papa!”

“Where is my son?” Thran demanded, summoning his Prince of Ice glare. Under his adamant regard,
the crowd parted to let Legolas shoulder through to his side, unscathed.

“Papa, are you hurt?”

“I am fine. Please, everyone, calm down. I can tell you nothing of what happened. You must let the police do their jobs, so please help them however you can. I have nothing more to say.”

Two uniformed police officers moved through the crowd to disperse it, and Bard drew Thran back into the performers’ area to regroup. Office Kelso came after them, but Thran let Bard and Legolas ease him into a chair. He suddenly felt very tired.

“Do you want to lie down, Thran?” Bard’s face appeared, brown eyes full of worry. “You’re as white as your hair, and you’re shaking.”

“The joys of an adrenaline rush,” he managed to smile. “I will be fine. I am fine.”

“Do you want the EMTs to look at your wrist? It’s starting to swell.”

“It is a sprain or a strain, but it is not broken.”

“Then it needs ice. Lads, a couple of you go down the bake sale aisle and see if you can get some ice from the drinks booth.”

“I’ll go, Mr. Bowman,” Finn said. “Back as quick as I can. Come on, Bain.”

“Thanks. Until he gets back, Thran, prop it up on the table. Elevate it to keep the swelling down. Sigrid, get your spare tights out of your bag. I can wrap them around Thran’s wrist until we get him home.”

“Got it, Da.” She thrust them into her sister’s hands. “Give those to Da, Tilda.”

“Okay, Sigrid.” The little girl ducked under the table to appear beside Thran’s chair. She handed the tights to her father and gazed at Thran with worried eyes. “Does it hurt a lot, Ada?”

While Bard wound the stretchy tights snugly around his wrist, Thran gave the little girl and Legolas beside her a reassuring smile. “Not very much, Kukla. See, the wrap makes it feel better already. Do not worry.”

Finn appeared behind Officer Kelso, and slithered beside Bard with a cup of ice. Bain appeared at his side with a second one. The young hockey player pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket. “Here, Mr. Bowman. Bain’s got some more.”

“Great. Thanks, Finn. Bain, you and Finn get the ice into the bag...”

“Here, Da,” Bain passed over the bag. Bard unwound enough of the tights to bind the bag around Thran’s wrist.

“Okay, that’ll help keep the swelling down. Just rest your arm on the table. You’re good otherwise?”

“The rest of me is fine,” Thran mustered a grin at the waiting police officer. “I have a good family, yes?”

“You do, indeed. They make quite a medical team, I have to say. Not to mention a good security team, too.”

“Security team?” Thran repeated.
Bard pointed past the table. Thran followed his husband’s gaze to find Tara, Kíllian, Bain, Sigrid, Finn, and Derry forming a screen between him and the rest of the Follies crowd. He gave his husband a wry grin.

“They do,” Thran nodded. “Thank you, children. So, you have questions for me, Officer Kelso.”

“Just a few. A couple of the reporters got the whole thing on film, so we can see what happened. A couple of civilians got the initial confrontation on their mobiles, so we have that, too. That was this Lance Dunmont you called me about, correct?”

Thran nodded, and so did Tilda beside him.

“Who saw him first?”

“I did,” Tilda said, looking shamefaced. “I screamed. I’m sorry, Da. I didn’t expect to see him, and I just... screamed when I did.”

“It’s okay, Til,” Bard assured her. “It was likely the best thing, because you got everyone’s attention. That’s just what we needed.”

“Your father’s right,” Officer Kelso nodded. “What happened after you saw Lance?”

“Finn pushed me behind him, and so did Da. Sigrid got in front of me, too. I stayed behind them. I didn’t see very much, but I heard Lance Dunmont say he saw my sister and she was going to pay for what she did. Then Sigrid told him to bring it, just bring it, and then Ada came in, and there was a fight. Then a lot of people got in front of me so I didn’t see very much after that at all.”

“I was outside with the reporters, so that they would not bother the people who came for the Follies,” Thran took up the tale. “I heard Tilda scream, and ran back inside. Lance ran at me to grab my arm, we scuffled, I tried to pull away. The police officer yelled at me to hold him, so I tried, but he wrenched my arm and slipped out of my grip.”

“When we catch him, do you want to press charges?”

“Yes,” Bard and Sigrid both growled, drawing Thran’s rueful smile.

“Yes,” Thran echoed. “I do. He has caused enough trouble.”

Officer Kelso nodded. “I’ll have to photograph your injured arm, then. I’ll bring a camera around.”

The officer snared one of his fellows to fetch the camera, then he directed a few more questions to Sigrid and Bard. Other officers were questioning bystanders, getting testimony as well as mobile videos, so Officer Kelso didn’t have too much more to ask his family. His arm was duly unwrapped long enough to be photographed – gods, so many dark, terrible bruises! His arm was livid from elbow to wrist – then Bard carefully wrapped it again. Legolas brought him a bottle of water, which he welcomed. The bottle was iced, and the cold liquid felt so wonderful going down his throat that he drained it in a single draught.

“So much better,” he sighed, giving Legolas a grateful smile. “Thank you, synok.”

“I’m glad you’re better, Papa,” Legolas replied, looking easier. “You were so pale. Does your arm feel better now?”

“It aches, but nothing more. Thanks to you and so many others, I am much restored.”
“Then let’s get you home,” Bard urged. Gods, he looked so worried that Thran mustered indignity.

“Of course not! How can we leave the Follies before Tilda has had her second cupcake? Besides, I want to see how we fare at the silent auction.”

Bard regarded him with longsuffering patience. “You don’t have to prove a point, angel.”

“I don’t have to shorten my enjoyment of the Follies before it is over, either. Come, my arm is well cared for, and I want to finish the day as we wanted, not as a spindly miscreant wanted.”

“Okay,” Bard conceded with a shrug. “What do you think, Tilda? Do you think you can pick out another cupcake?”

“Yes,” Tilda nodded, and gave Thran a considering look. “I think a cupcake would help your arm a whole lot, Ada.”

Chuckling, Thran touched her nose with a fingertip. “Perhaps so. What of you, Legolas? Another cupcake?”

“I’ve had three,” he admitted. “But some of that beef jerky that Killian had would be good.”

“Yeah, beef jerky!” Killian turned around and gave Legolas a grin. “That stuff makes everything better!”

“Then let us go.” Thran stood up and cradled his left arm against his chest. Good, he was steady on his feet, and other than the ache in his wrist, he felt his usual self. As he came around the tables, the children, including Killian, Tara, and Derry, closed ranks around him. “Oh, children, you are most kind, but I do not think there is any more reason to fear the reappearance of a certain angry boy this afternoon. Please, go enjoy yourselves at the rest of the Follies.”

“There’s them,” Derry pointed at the flock of reporters swarming towards them.

“Oh, gods,” Bard groaned. “Vultures, the lot of them.”

“They are,” Thran sighed, as the horde descended.

“Mr. Oropherson, are you all right?”

“Is your arm broken?”

“Who was your attacker?”

“Is this another example of the lack of discipline that’s been responsible for so much youth crime –”

“I am fine. My arm is not broken, only a little sore. I thank you for your concern. I also thank my husband for standing by me today, and also my friends. Look at them, will you? You see that they are young, and they have nothing in common with those you blame for crime. They are caring, talented, and a pleasure to be with, just as are most young people. This wonderful school, the Imladris Academy, as well as many others, nurture equally wonderful children. So do not tar all of the young with that brush of yours. Everywhere, there are many children who merit our respect and guidance, many more than there are those who stray, and those who stray need more help than vitriol. Again, I thank you for your concern, and that is all I will say today. Please, let everyone enjoy what remains of the April Fool’s Follies.”

“Just a few pictures, Mr. Oropherson, with your posse –”
“Posse?” Kíllian snorted, shaking his head at the reporters. He spread his arms wide with his typical enthusiasm. “Do this look like a posse to you? A bunch of dancers and musicians? We’re a troupe, aren’t we?”

The children murmured in enthusiastic agreement, and Thran chuckled as he gave Kíllian a thumbs up sign with his uninjured hand. The boy’s exclamation served to break the tension enough that things began to calm. Smiling, Thran posed in the middle of the children for several pictures, and after a few minutes the reporters drifted away.

“At last,” Sigrid exhaled. “Gods, I don’t know how you’ve managed to put up with them all your life, Ada. You were even nice to them! One day, and I’m ready to run off the lot of them!”

“An annoyance, to be sure,” Thran agreed. “So at last they are gone, and we can enjoy ourselves again. Tilda, let us find your cupcake.”

“And the beef jerky,” Kíllian grinned at Legolas, as the group headed for the bake sale.

* * *

Keeping careful watch, Bard walked beside Thran towards the bake sale hallway. He was confident that Thran’s wrist had suffered only the sprain or strain that his husband said it had, but the pain was likely more than the ache Thran claimed it to be. It was hard to ignore how pale Thran had turned during the fight, as his body pulled blood from his limbs and into his core. It had made him an icy warrior, to be sure, but Bard didn’t want him to pay for it by collapsing after the fact. Still, Thran seemed calm and steady as Tilda found her cupcake – no more coconut remained, but a chocolate one with raspberry frosting was a good second choice – and Legolas and Kíllian and Bain indulged in bags of beef jerky. Bard bought a few truffles, thinking a small bite of sugar might energize Thran a bit; his husband must have thought similarly, because he took one without argument.

“Mmm, a coffee filling, yes?” the tall dancer considered his treat thoughtfully before putting the rest of it in his mouth.

He looked equally comfortable as they checked the silent auction – neither of their bids had been supplanted yet. They had only a few minutes left before the bids were closed, so they perused the offerings during the remaining time. At five, when the bids were closed, Thran seemed delighted that they would bring home the small inlaid box and the lotus flower lamp. But other than handing over his credit card and signing the tickets, he was content to let Bard and Legolas collect their trophies. The children had one to collect, too, a small, nearly spherical vase of clear and green glass swirled together.

“Sigrid, Bain, and I all put in money for it,” Legolas said, as the artisan wrapped the prize in bubble paper. “We thought Maman and Daphne would like it for our memory shelf, to hold the flowers.”

“That’s perfect,” Bard said. “That shelf will go up tomorrow, and I’ll get some flowers at the market on Monday. What kind would you like?”

The children discussed that on the way back to the SUV. Derry, Kíllian, Tara, and Finn invited the Clan Ffyrnig children to share pizza with them at Kíllian’s house, and given that Lance was likely in no position to bother them, Bard and Thran gave their blessing. They would follow Finn back to Kíllian’s house to drop off the children, then make their way home.
“I want to drive us home, angel,” Bard murmured as the children piled into the back, but he needn’t have spoken; Thran already held the keys out to him.

“Thank you, lyubov moya,” his husband murmured in reply. “You are the only one of us who can keep two hands on the wheel, as they say.”

Thran climbed into the passenger side, following the children’s patter with a smile, and quickly seconded Bard’s reminder that he’d pick them up no later than eleven-thirty.

“But our curfew’s midnight!” Bain protested.

“Tilda’s is eleven, so we’ll split the difference. Once all those carbs hit your system, everything that happened today will hit, too. By the time you get home, you’ll be ready to crash.”

“Do we have to shower when we get home?” Legolas asked.

“I think we can pass on that tonight. What do you think, Thran?”

“I think yes. The children have been brave and faithful and fun all day, and they deserve the pass.”

“We’ll wash tomorrow. In fact, we’ll wash a lot of things – us, the sheets, the mountain of dirty clothes. We need to do some cleanup of the house tomorrow, too, but then we’ll have the rest of the day free. Sound fair?”

The children grumbled a little, but the grumbling was half-hearted, more formality than anything else, drawing Thran and Bard to grin at each other. When they got to Kíllian’s house, his parents, Siobhan and Ian, came out to say hello. Finn came out to ask when the children needed to be home.

“I’ll come get them at about eleven-fifteen, if that’s not too late,” Bard said, looking at Siobhan.

“I’ll be glad to bring them home, Mr. Bowman,” Finn offered. “Derry and Kíllian will take Tara home, so I’ll bring Sig, Legs, Bain, and Tilda home.”

Kíllian’s head appeared behind Finn. “You’ll be doing my mom and dad a favor. After an evening with this lot, they’ll be glad to have half an hour of quiet.”

Siobhan laughed. “He’s right, the scamp. Finn’s a good driver, but I understand if you’d rather pick them up yourselves.”

“That’ll be great, Finn,” Bard agreed. “Thanks for offering.”

“Thanks, Da,” Sigrid leaned in to give Bard a kiss. “Take good care of Ada. Make him some chicken soup!”

“That cures everything,” Thran grinned. “You know the routine, yes? Behave yourselves, be polite, and help to clean up?”

“We know it,” Bain rolled his eyes. “Believe me, we know it!”

“Good,” Bard gave his son an eye. “Tilda, you have a good time, okay?”

She nodded vigorously. “I will. Finally, I get to be with the big kids!”

“And the kittens,” Kíllian said enticingly. “Oh, didn’t I tell you we have a new kindle of kittens?”

“Do you?” Tilda eagerly followed his crooked finger. “Can I see them?”
Tilda scampered off with Killian and Tara, drawing Siobhan’s laughter. “Don’t worry about your youngest, Bard. Killian and Tara have a thriving career as babysitters. They’re both really good at keeping their charges interested, so Tilda won’t be lost in the shuffle. And I expect that Killian and Derry will pull out their instruments for some singing. I hope your children like that.”

“They do. They know some Welsh songs that Killian and Derry might like to learn.” Bard looked at Thran. “Does Legs know any Russian songs?”

“Quite a few,” Thran nodded. “So I think they will have a good time together.”

“Wonderful,” Siobhan grinned. “Thanks for letting your children visit us. And both Ian and I loved your dances, Thran. It was sweet of you to dance with your children. You all looked like you had so much fun together.”

“I enjoyed it even more than the children,” Thran admitted. “I am glad that came through, and that you enjoyed it.”

“All right, we’ll see you later, then,” Ian waved.


“Bye, Da! Bye, Ada! Bye, Bard! Bye, Thran!” the children waved, and Bard pulled away from the curb.

“You can let down now,” Bard murmured, eyes on the road as he pointed the SUV towards home. “We’ll be home in fifteen minutes.”

The only sound from Thran was a long exhale. When Bard glanced over, his husband had draped his jacket over his chest, leaned his head back against the headrest, and closed his eyes. It was hard not to voice his concern, but Bard held his tongue, instead concentrating on the drive home. It wasn’t long before he turned into the lane, then into their driveway. He got out long enough to open the carriage house bay, then backed the SUV inside. He got out again to collect auction prizes and dance bags, and came around to tap on Thran’s door. His husband opened his eyes, smiling to see Bard so laden, and got out of the SUV.

“Give me some of the bags,” he beckoned as he shut the door of the SUV.

“I’ve got them, angel. If you can close the bay door, that’d be good.”

“I can close the door.” They came out of the carriage house, and Thran reached up to pull down the bay.

“Garage door openers,” Bard murmured. “So we don’t have to do it the old-fashioned way for too much longer.”

“It would be more convenient, but it is not that much of a hardship. Here, pass me your key, and I will open the mudroom door.”

Bard passed it over, and Thran soon had them inside. While Bard divested himself of dance bags, Thran keyed the security system to inside mode and hung his jacket on a peg. Bard put their auction prizes in the dining room, then ran upstairs fetch something from their closet. He ran back downstairs to find Thran still in the mudroom, unwrapping Sigrid’s tights from his wrist.

“Let me help you,” he urged, and Thran offered his wrist for Bard to unwrap the last bit. He tossed the tights onto the washer, and dumped the melting bag of ice in the sink. Thran’s arm was still
mottled with angry red bruises, and his wrist was still visibly swollen.

“We need to immobilize that,” Bard said, not reacting to the ugly marks. “Bain sprained his wrist playing soccer a couple of years ago, so I brought down his arm brace. It’ll help.”

He eased the brace over Thran’s hand and around his forearm, sensitive to any flinch or twitch his touch might elicit from his husband. But Thran bore it without apparent discomfort, merely smiling in appreciation.

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”

“Come on. Let’s sit you down.”

Thran went without complaint with Bard into the sitting room, and sank onto one of the sofas. When Bard sat beside him, he rested his right hand on Thran’s thigh, offering mute comfort. Thran folded his left arm in his lap and slid down until he could rest his head on Bard’s shoulder. As he sighed, his body relaxed, molding against Bard’s side, so Bard put his arm around Thran’s shoulders to ease him close.

“Long day,” Bard said.

“Indeed. Do you know what is the hardest part of such a day?”

“Not the dancing?”

“Never the dancing. Always the performance. Not the performance on the stage, you understand.”

“Not the stage part? I don’t see...”

“I speak of the performance of everything but what I present on the stage. To present the public face is hard to sustain for so many hours. There is always someone to take a photograph, or to overhear a conversation, or to make much from nothing, so one must smile, be pleasant, be unruffled, be poised. The state drilled all of its performers on how to present the public face so that it is second nature, but it still takes so much energy.”

“Oh, I see. You’re saying that it’s hard to ‘be on’ for so long.”

“That is it.”

Bard rubbed Thran’s arm slowly. “You don’t have to be on now, so let it go.”

“I don’t, and I have. I know you wanted to ask me six times if I were all right, or what you could do, or what I wanted. But you trusted me to say if I needed something more than the quiet, which is exactly what I needed. Thank you for such a gift.”

Bard chuckled. “I’m learning. So I won’t ask you if you’re hungry. I’ll just say that I am, and I’m going to see what’s in the fridge, so if you’d like something, say the word, and I’ll scrounge for two.”

“Mmm,” Thran rumbled softly. “But we ate all of the leftovers at lunch. What is left?”

“The question of the hour. I’ll go see.”

“I will come with you.”

They peered into the fridge, and found little but cheese, eggs, and half a jar of spaghetti sauce.
“I can dig out some chicken breasts and make you some soup, just like Sigrid suggested.”

Thran sighed. “Do we have pasta in the pantry?”

“We always have pasta in the pantry, cariad.”

“That would taste very good right now, lyubov moya. With lots of cheese. Perhaps a salad to go with it?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll put the water on.”

Bard filled a pot full of water and set it on to heat while Thran rummaged in the pantry. He came out with a box of flower-shaped pasta, drawing Bard’s chuckle.

“Do not laugh,” Thran said, handing Bard the box. This is the shape that cooks the fastest.”

“Good point. If you get the cutlery, I’ll chop the salad.”

With a nod, Thran saw to the table while Bard made their salads. He watched Thran surreptitiously as he worked, relieved that his husband moved thoughtfully, but without any physical distress beyond his left arm. He was learning how to tend his angel well, and it made sense that after so many hours of busy excitement, silence and calm were the only things Thran needed to restore himself. They sat down to supper in the same silence, content to enjoy their pasta together without the strain of unnecessary small talk.

“So good,” Thran sighed, sitting back in his chair when his pasta and salad were gone. He nibbled on a piece of the Pecorino-Romano cheese he loved so much. “I will likely fall asleep very quickly because I ate so much pasta, but it was very good.”

“Why don’t you get a shower while I clean up, angel? Or do you need help in the shower? I can get in with you and help you scrub.”

“You turn me into quite a self-indulgent man, lyubov moya. I would be grateful for help.”

There wasn’t much to clean, just the pasta pot and the silver flatware; the rest got rinsed and put in the dishwasher. Thran lingered in the kitchen while Bard tidied, maybe because he expected to fall asleep if he headed upstairs on his own. Once in their bedroom, he managed to get himself undressed, but he let Bard turn the water on for them. He didn’t take the arm brace off until the last moment, and then held his arm out of the way while Bard helped him wash. Bard did a credible job with Thran’s fancy shampoo and other potions, and Thran slipped out to dry off while Bard finished washing. Between the two of them, they got Thran dried off, his hair dry, and the brace back on his arm.

They were soon back downstairs in their sleepwear to await the children’s arrival home. Bard expected Thran to settle on the sitting room sofa right away, but instead, he detoured through the dining room to fetch the water lily lamp.

“It is a lamp for the night, yes?” he explained, holding it out to Bard. “I want to see how it looks in the solarium.”

Bard unwrapped the lamp carefully, and carried it into the solarium. Thran followed, pointing to the marble-topped table under the windows. “There. Can you see to plug it in?”

“I think so.” Bard crawled under the table to find the outlet. “Thread the cord down to me, from the back of the table.”
“Here it is,” Thran said, poking the cord down the gap between the edge of the marble and the window ledge.

“Got it. All right, it’s plugged in. It’s on a toggle switch...”

“Yes, I see it. Come out, and you can watch it come on.”

Bard clambered to his feet, and stood next to Thran, putting his arm around his husband’s waist. When Thran thumbed the switch, the yellow center of the lamp glowed.

“I like it,” Thran murmured. “When we have this room finished, with my Istanbul lamps hanging, and perhaps another one in among the plants, this will look beautiful at night.”

“It looks pretty good now,” Bard stroked Thran’s back. “Magical.”

Thran hummed agreement. They regarded it a while longer, then switched it off to go back to the sitting room. This time, it was Bard who detoured, heading to the kitchen to grab a bag of frozen peas and a kitchen towel.

“It’d be a good idea to ice your wrist again for about twenty minutes,” he said, holding out the bag of vegetables.

“What is this?” Thran said skeptically. “We do not eat frozen peas.”

“We don’t. I keep a bag around just for these occasions. It molds better to your arm than a bag of ice cubes, and it doesn’t make such a mess. So off with the brace, and on with the frozen peas for twenty minutes.”

“You fuss like a babushka.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere. Ice your wrist. Do you want some ibuprofen?”

“I think that would be wise, yes?”

“It’d reduce the swelling, yes.”

“Then I will take it.”

“Coming right up. And some tea.”

“You embarrass me with all this attention,” Thran said plaintively. “I am fine.”

Bard paused in his pursuit of painkillers only long enough to give his husband an assured look. “You will be, when I’m through with you. So you stop fussing about my fussing.”

He put the kettle on, fetched the pills, and soon presented them to his husband with a cup of water and a mug of hot tea. “Down the hatch with those beauties.”

Thran downed the pair of pills with a sip of water, then sat back with his tea. “So I ate my supper, washed, took the pills, iced with the peas, put on the brace, and now I have my tea. You are a most thorough doctor.”

“You still have to rest and keep your arm elevated. Good old RICE.”

“Rice? First peas, and now rice? Do you try to make a pilaf out of me?”
“RICE means Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. It’s how to treat strains and sprains.”

“Ah. I liked the pilaf idea better. Much more imaginative.”

“Maybe so, but my RICE will spare you a trip to the doctor better than your pilaf will. We got ice on your arm fast enough that you shouldn’t need any follow up.”

“As I said, you are a most thorough doctor.”

“I’ll send you a bill.”

Thran tsked. “Even if you send me a very expensive one, I will not care. You have seen to me most completely, and I am very grateful. I hope such care means that I can still play in the garage tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t expect to heave lumber around, if I were you.”

Thran tsked again, this time with more annoyance. “Suka blyad, this Lance Dunmont causes so much more trouble than he should! May the police run him to ground soon, though I do not expect them to.”

“That would be too easy,” Bard agreed, draping an arm around his husband’s shoulders. “At least we know what his issue is – it’s exactly what Finn said. He blames Sigrid for what he did.”

“He chose to appear at a public venue, so likely he does not know where we live.”

“He knows where the children go to school, though. Five days a week, he’ll know where to find them.”

“Perhaps he does; perhaps he does not. Perhaps all he knows is that I danced at the school for a festival. Even if he decides that our children attend the Imladris Academy and thinks to lurk nearby, on each of those five days the police will know where to look for him, while the children will be inside a secure place. I do not minimize our concern for our children, but he is on record for assault for the second time now. Though he has not been armed either time, the police still have reason to look for him, and to look out for our children.”

His husband was right. Bard’s worry wasn’t completely assuaged, but Thran had been through enough today, and agitating him about Lance would not help him rest, which he needed. Tomorrow would be a quiet and restful day, even if he had to sit on Thran to enforce it.

He grinned. Maybe after a good night’s sleep, Thran would feel good enough for Bard to tease him into staying a little longer in bed. Thran wasn’t the only one who could act like an animal in the morning.
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

The saint continues to care for his angel, which incites the angel to do a little caretaking of his own.

Despite how tired Thran was, it was not that late when he and Bard sat down on the sofa to drink their tea. Only a little time passed before Bard got up to lay a fire in the fireplace, and soon the soft crackle of flames and the pleasant smell of wood smoke cast their comfortable ambience over the sitting room. Thran retrieved the small box they’d bid on at the auction, and unwrapped it so he and Bard could admire the painstaking inlay work. The box itself was a medium brown wood, a fitting background for the jade stems and leaves with nacre-petalled flowers nestled between them. Inside was finished with mossy green velvet, and would be a good place to store their rings when professional demands precluded them from wearing them.

Once they put the box aside, he was content to slump on the sofa beside Bard, prop his feet up on the fruit crate coffee table, and gaze into the flames. His husband slumped beside him, knees drawn up to support his sketchbook as he recreated several scenes from the Follies. He drew Killian and Legolas chortling over their bags of beef jerky, then Tilda and Legolas mooning over coconut cupcakes. Another revealed Theodred and one of his urban art students earnestly explaining their petition to a Follies patron. Another showed Thran in his full C-jump, braid flying around him, and Sigrid looking back at him with a siren’s smile and beckoning arms. There were Finn and Bain, faces grim and intent when they’d brought ice for Thran, though Bard had drawn only their faces, not their hands. He’d even drawn Lance, his face transfigured with fury and hatred as he’d snarled at Sigrid. The last drawing depicted Thran’s face at its coldest and most menacing; it had likely looked like that when he’d confronted Lance, but Bard had cast him as an exotic, stylized king, vaguely Asian, and crowned with a diadem of swirling vines.

“Do you ever draw yourself?” Thran asked, as Bard turned to a fresh page.

“How soon you forget your pillow book,” Bard gave him a wink.

Thran snickered. “Other than in illustrations for my pillow book, do you ever draw yourself?”

Bard glanced at him with a perverse smile. “I’ll give you two. Here’s what you imagine welding to be.”

As he watched, Bard drew a well-muscled, bare-chested figure in work pants and boots, welding mask in place, sweat glistening as the welding torch spewed sparks far and wide. Thran purred in appreciation, drawing Bard’s laughter.

“I thought so. Now, here’s what welding really is.”

The next figure was the same pose, but the welder was covered from head to toe in heavy, shapeless protective gear, and looked like some underground gnome in an infernal workshop. Thran tsked.

“They are both well done. But the first is much more fun to consider.”
“I’d burn myself to a crisp without the protective gear, angel. The first sketch is nothing you’ll see in real life.”

“If you make me a present of that one, I do not need to see it in real life.”

Bard carefully tore the page out of his sketchbook and handed it to Thran. “With my compliments.”

Thran’s expression was entirely too gleeful, but he didn’t care. He sat up to press a kiss to his husband’s cheek. “It will go in my book. In fact, I will take it upstairs now. The children will soon be home, and it is not one I wish to share with them. And I will take our box, too. I will be back in a moment.”

Thran took box and sketch upstairs. The former went on his dresser; the latter he slipped into his pillow book. It was a struggle not to linger over the sketches that filled the first pages, but he was very tired, and he still had a parent’s duty to perform, to stay awake and alert until the children arrived home. He shut the book quickly so as not to be tempted, and went downstairs to rejoin Bard. He found his husband with his mobile in one hand, the TV remote in the other. He looked up as Thran came into the room.

“Your mobile just chimed, too. It’s likely Legolas telling you to turn on the local eleven o’clock news. That’s what Sigrid just sent me.”

As Bard found the right station, Thran checked his mobile. Yes, it was from Legolas, and the message was exactly as Bard had surmised. He settled on the sofa beside Bard to regard the TV.

“...the eighth annual April Fool’s Follies held at the Imladris Academy today was marred by an unprovoked attack on premiere ballet dancer Thran Oropherson. Mr. Oropherson was the star attraction at the Follies talent show, appearing in a pair of dances...”

What a surreal thing it was to see Lance Dunmont snarl and gesture at an off-camera Sigrid, then himself appear in the school lobby, then Lance charge at him. As the scene played out, the announcer continued to speak.

“The assailant is alleged to have threatened someone in the crowd, then to have attacked Mr. Oropherson. Upon arrival of officers on the scene, the alleged assailant fled on foot with officers in pursuit. The alleged assailant has been identified to police as a male juvenile, whose name has been withheld pending contact of his next of kin. Fortunately, Mr. Oropherson was not badly injured, and spoke to reporters after the incident.”

There he was again with the children around him, countering the reporter who had spoken about youth involvement in crime.

“...this wonderful school, the Imladris Academy, as well as many others, nurture equally wonderful children. So do not tar all of the young with that brush of yours. Everywhere, there are many children who merit our respect and guidance, many more than there are those who stray, and those who stray need more help than vitriol...”

“That was great for you to say that,” Bard murmured, rubbing Thran’s thigh. “My children went to the same school that produced Lance. We lived in the same neighborhood. I was a poor single parent, probably like his mother is. It’s not like every child in that situation grows up to be a thug. Sigrid and Bain remember being here before we were there, but Tilda doesn’t. She didn’t know anything but being poor in the city, and she didn’t turn out like Lance.”

Thran winced; trust Bard to feel sympathy for Lance’s situation, if not his vitriol. “Lance did not
have you for a parent. Likely he did not have even the few advantages that your children had, either. But that does not mean that I will let him harm any of our children with his vendetta.”

“No,” Bard said grimly. “Not at all.”

The scene switched to show Headmaster L’Eärendil, commenting how unfortunate it was that the scuffle had detracted from the otherwise great success of the Follies, and how pleased he was at the show of support for the students and parents of the academy. He reiterated Thran’s belief in supporting the young in their efforts, whether artistic or otherwise. It ended with a short clip of Thran’s dance with Sigrid showcasing his flashy C-jump, then another of Tilda poking him into a split.

The news went on to the next story, so Bard clicked off the TV. “The children will be a few minutes late getting home, but I say we give them a pass.”

Thran nodded. “They likely stayed to see the report, yes, so I give them the pass, too.”

Indeed, the mudroom door opened about ten minutes after eleven-thirty, revealing all four children plus Finn, who came into the sitting room with Sigrid.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bowman, Mr. Oropherson. We’re late because we stayed to see the news,” he started to explain. “We were all on it, from the Follies today. My aunt saw it, and...”

“Sig and Legs texted us,” Bard agreed. “We watched it, too. But thanks for coming in to explain.”

“Oh, okay. I need to get back, so thanks for understanding. Night, all!”

“Bye, Finn,” the three younger children chorused.

“I’ll see Finn out,” Sigrid said, and led her friend out.

“Did you see it, Papa?” Legolas asked. “And is your arm better? Why is there a bag of frozen peas on it?”

“Yes, we saw, and the peas are Bard’s improvement on messy ice cubes to better cool my wrist. Did all of you have fun at Kíllian’s house?”

“They had three kittens!” Tilda exclaimed, but her animation was quickly swallowed in a big yawn. “Kíllian let me hold them. They were so cute!”

“It was fun,” Bain nodded. “We had pizza, and we sang a lot. Legs sang this cool Russian folk song – Kalinka? He sounded like you, Thran.”


“What’s it about?” Bard asked.

“It roughly translates to red berry, red berry, red berry of mine, in the garden is a raspberry, raspberry of mine! The singer goes on to sing how he wants to sleep under a pine tree. A very popular ditty with Russian flash mobs in grocery stores,” Thran grinned at Legolas. “I am glad to hear that you have not lost your accent when you speak Russian, synok.”

“Of course not, Papa,” Legolas grinned, as Tilda tried unsuccessfully to hide another cavernous yawn.
“It’s time for Clan Ffyrnig to get to sleep,” Bard said. “Upstairs with you.”

“It’s not midnight yet, and Sigrid’s still out,” Bain, naturally, protested.

“She won’t be out for long, so just you lead the way upstairs, boyo,” Bard pointed at the doorway to the hall. “Tilda’s head is about to split open, she’s yawning so hard. I’ll go get Sigrid.”

“Bet she’s snogging a certain hockey player,” Bain muttered to Legolas, who snickered.

“Bet you’re grounded if you aren’t upstairs in twenty seconds,” Bard shot back.

“And a certain Russian blonde with him if he is not also upstairs in twenty seconds,” Thran added, giving Legolas a stare. As the boys took off, he gave Bard a grin. “I will leave Sigrid to you. Kukla, let us go upstairs and find Mr. Bun.”

Tilda was so tired that she took Thran’s hand without a peep.

Bard would likely not have so easy a time getting Sigrid upstairs. Imagining that gave Thran a reason to smile as he and Tilda climbed the stairs.

* * *

Bard made the rounds of the house before he went to check on Sigrid and Finn. Yes, everything was secure, so he had no excuse not to head to the mudroom –

What if Lance had sorted out where they were, and had been lurking outside when Sigrid went outside with Finn?

That brought him to the mudroom door in seconds.

He edged open the door cautiously, but it wasn’t Lance he interrupted. Just Finn and Sigrid, not embracing, but just at that second when the boy brushed a peck of a kiss on Sigrid’s cheek.

“You’re so brave, Sig. Don’t let that bastard hurt you. Just like you told me – stay out of his way. Please.”

“I’m doing my best, Finn. It’s not like I told him I was going to be at the Follies. He must’ve heard all the publicity about Thran, and decided to show up on the chance that I’d be there.”

“Probably so. Still...”

“I’m worried about my Da’s art show. There’s stuff on the TV and on the Internet, and every shop window in the village has a flyer with my Da’s name on it. If Lance stays loose long enough, he might try to interrupt that, too.”

“What if you don’t go to that?”

Sigrid snorted with typical teenaged distain. “And miss my Da’s show? Hell, no! I’m going to be there when he finally gets a clue about how good his stuff is. Not just his sketches, but his sculpture, too. You should see the angel he’s working on – it’s already amazing, and it’s not even finished. I want to see that moment when the rest of the planet realizes how amazing it is, too.”
“Okay, okay. But I’ll be there, too. So will Killian and Tara. If Lance shows up, we won’t make it easy for him.”

“That’s sweet of you, Finn. It really is. Have your parents said any more about letting you come out to your aunt’s for next year?”

“My aunt and uncle are okay with it. And my mom is. My Dad… he’s old school. Not so big on arts and stuff. Wants me to go to trade school after high school, be an electrician like him. A good, solid job, you know? I wouldn’t mind that, but… maybe I could go to college and be an engineer? Eh, you’ve heard this a million times already. I need to finish high school well, and I’d need financial aid no matter what school I apply to… you know the drill.”

“I know it. I’m there with you about the financial aid, too – Da’s got three of us to put through school, so I want to leave some for Bain and Tilda. We’ll keep looking, both of us. We’ll figure it out. So keep working on your Da.”

“I won’t just work on my Dad. Don’t be mad, but I went up to that headmaster of your school today.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“I told him I hoped to attend his school next year. I couldn’t pay much, but I was willing to work at anything, as long as it took, to make up the difference. Janitor, grounds maintenance, office help, anything.”

“Gods, Finn! You didn’t!”

The boy nodded. “Yes, I did. It was no lie, either. I’m not proud. I can be a janitor if that’s what it takes.”

“What’d Headmaster L’Eärendil say?”

“He said that if I was willing to work that hard, and my grades were what I said they were, then he was willing to find the means. So I just need to convince my Dad.”

“Oh, Finn.” Sigrid took Finn’s shoulders firmly in her hands, and gave him an equally firm kiss on the cheek. “It’d be great if you can work it all out. Really great.”

“You think so?” Finn’s grin was awkward. “Wow. That’s, um… that’s great, too. Really great.”

“So you better go home, Mr. Really Great. Before your aunt and uncle ground you before you ever get out here.”

“You’re right. I’ll see you tomorrow, maybe?”

“Hope so. I’ll call you.”

“Okay. Night, Sig. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“You, too. Night.”

Finn leaned forward quickly to brush another peck on Sigrid’s cheek, then got into his car and drove away. Once Sigrid headed back to the house, Bard left the door ajar and leaned against the washer to wait for her to come inside.

The smile on Sigrid’s face was considering, but she met Bard’s eyes straightly. “So how much did
“You hear?”

“Most of it,” he nodded.

“Are you upset?”

Bard shook his head. “He’s a decent lad, and you’ve got a level head on your shoulders.”

Sigrid snorted.

“I’m all for Finn trying to help his situation, too. But I hope he’s doing it mostly for himself, and not just because he likes you. I understand why he’s partial to you – I kinda am, too.” Sigrid snorted again, but she was smiling. “But the radical change he’s trying to make will be easier if it’s best for him, not just you.”

Sigrid leaned against the dryer, crossed her arms, and smiled. “You’re living proof of that, Da. You lived like a troll for Bain and Tilda and me for ten years and never said a word about how much of a soul killer it was. I’m glad we’re someplace that’s better for all of us, not just expedient. Speaking of the angel who helped to make that possible, how is Ada?”

“Tired, but okay. He’s not quite the hothouse flower you think he is.”

“He’s not a hothouse flower. He’s an artist and an athlete like no one else. His arm’s a wreck, though.”

“That pale skin bruises easily. I put Bain’s arm brace on him. He’ll be fine. So will you, after a good night’s sleep. So upstairs with you.”

“Is it okay if I shower? All that cold cream is sticky, and I’d rather wash it off now and sleep clean.”

“I don’t blame you. But we’re still washing all the sheets tomorrow, just so you know.”

“Ew, Da. Of course we are.” Sigrid rolled her eyes as she pushed away from the dryer. “And most everything in everyone’s closet, too. I’m down to a pair of ratty sleep pants and a torn tee shirt.”

“We’ll set to first thing. Or whenever you and the rest of the clan rouse. So you’re for the shower, and I’m for bed.”

“Did you hear what I said about your show?” Sigrid said, her gaze as penetrating as ever.

Bard nodded mildly. “I thought about Lance showing up there, too. We’ll keep an eye out.”

“Did you hear the rest?”

Bard smiled. “Don’t I always?”

Another snort. “You’re so clueless, Da.”

“Frequently.”

“Your stuff is good, Da. Rahmiel’s incredible. Everyone’s going to know it when you have your show. And I’m all for that. You’re every bit as good at your stuff as Ada is at his.”

Bard looped an arm around Sigrid’s shoulders. “I appreciate the kind words, sweetness. It’ll be good if I have a way to contribute to the clan again.”
Another snort. “You’re clueless about that, too, Da. I’ll tell Ada to explain the facts to you about that, if he hasn’t already. I’m just a teenager, and right now, I desperately need a shower.”

Chuckling, Bard gave his daughter a nudge towards the kitchen. “Off with you, then. I’m for bed.”

They went upstairs together, and he pressed a kiss on the top of her head before she went into her room.

“Night, sweetness.”

“Night, Da. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He stuck a head in the other children’s rooms, wished Legolas and Bain a good night, and offered the sleeping Tilda a kiss on the cheek after he tucked the blanket around her and Mr. Bun. Then he retreated to his bedroom, where Thran already drowsed in bed.

“Did they kiss?” his husband murmured sleepily when Bard crawled into bed beside him.

“Sort of. More a peck than anything else.”

“And how is Da about that?”

“I’m okay.” He summarized all he’d heard from Sigrid and Finn. “I think they’re okay, too.”

“I thought about your art show, too,” Thran murmured drowsily. “Oh – did you set the security system?”

Bard grimaced. “I didn’t. I’ll go back down and do it.”

“No need.” Thran rolled towards his nightside table and reached for his mobile. He woke up enough to call up the security system on the device, tapped several times, then held out the device to Bard. “Check me. It is set to nighttime mode, yes?”

“It is. All secure.”

Thran put his mobile back on the nightside table, then snuggled back into Bard. “We need to upgrade your mobile so you can set the system, too.”

“I’ll add it to the list. I swear the list grows faster than we can clear it out.”

“It will not always be so,” Thran murmured, unconcerned. “Do not worry.”

“How’s your arm?”

“It aches a little, but not as much as before. The brace helps. I hope I do not thump you with it during the night.”

“You’ll be fine.”

Thran sighed deeply. “I am already fine. I am here in bed with you, all is quiet, and all is well. I am quite ready to sleep.”

“Me, too. See you in the morning, angel.”
“My saint.”

Thran’s breath quickly deepened into sleep. Before too many heartbeats passed, Bard followed him.

* * *

Thran drifted slowly awake, but the lure of warmth, total ease, and rare laziness pulled him right back into slumber. He dreamed briefly of a king who named him seer, who banished all fear and pain with gentle touches of fingers and lips, who overwhelmed him with rising desire, and then held him close with complete, unconditional love. Perhaps he dreamed of war and bloodshed, of strife within a kingdom and without, but his king stood firm, and he stood just as firmly beside him. Then the images faded for the last time, and he roused again.

“Shh,” a soft voice urged him. “Everything’s fine.”

Thran smiled at that sleepy voice. “Everything is fine but my bladder. I must get up.”

“Come back to bed after,” the sleepy voice beckoned. “Please.”

“I will.” Thran got up, took care of necessities, had a swallow of water, and snuggled back into bed. Bard got up to tend to the same needs, then eased back against Thran’s back. A hand slid over his skin, tracing light circles over it until Thran’s eyes closed. The rush of endorphins lulled him into a trance until he was neither asleep nor awake, but completely relaxed. Everything blurred into mindless appreciation of warmth and softness for untold minutes. Even when he roused, he lay there without moving, soaking up his husband’s caresses, until guilt made him speak.

“You are too generous, lyubov moy. Let me reward you for so much attention.”

“My attention isn’t generous. It’s part of a nefarious plan.”

Thran grinned. “Is it? What is this nefarious plan?”

“A conspiracy to keep you in bed to rest. The R in RICE.”

“Ah, you and your RICE. But this cannot be a conspiracy, because there is only one of you. A conspiracy must be between two or more, yes?”

“This one is between me and your body; your brain just doesn’t know it. We conspire to make you feel so relaxed that you won’t want to get up. It’s already worked for the past hour.”

Thran’s eyes opened in surprise. “What time is it?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just relax and soak up what feels good. Be the hedonist you claim to be.”

“But, my saint –”

“Shh, or I’ll pull out the big guns.”

That sounded provocative, so Thran turned onto his back. “But –”

“Shh.” Warm brown eyes met his as Bard carefully moved Thran’s left arm in its brace out of the way so that he could lay his head on Thran’s shoulder. Bard’s left hand traced over Thran’s chest,
stroking his ribs, up his sternum, and up his throat. As he ran fingers along Thran’s collarbone, Thran’s breath caught, and he let out a silent moan. “That’s right. Just shut your eyes and let everything go. Try to see just how relaxed you can get. Try not to move at all.”

Any protest Thran might have made dribbled away as Bard’s caresses sent more endorphins flooding through him. Gods, when was the last time he’d been so cosseted in the morning? If he ever had been, it was likely Bard’s doing, but he couldn’t be sure – it was too hard to think under such a barrage. He half fell into his trance again, not quite completely out, but his thoughts blurred as his skin tingled under Bard’s fingers. Lips brushed kisses on his temple, his ear, his hair, then his shoulder, collarbone, and neck. He barely registered the warm body beside him shifting under the covers, moving over him to kiss and stroke his nipples, and one thigh pressed between his legs to rub against his cock. His ease vanished when light bites nipped down his flanks and groins; he tensed as a warm mouth engulfed his cock to suck gently. He lay under the covers, so warm and cocooned, but as that mouth licked and nibbled and kissed, the warmth grew suddenly too hot, and he pushed down the covers to reveal Bard’s dark hair masking all that happened below. Still, as fingers tempted, as lips and tongue teased, Thran bit his lips and tried to relax. That was impossible, and grew more impossible the longer he tried to resist it. He didn’t consciously intend to brush his fingers across his nipples, but once he did, there was no chance of him stopping. He held off his arousal as long as he could, but his body could bear only a few seconds of so much stimulation. Bard sensed it, and wound arms around Thran’s hips just as Thran spasmed in release. He clawed the sheets as his orgasm took him, breath stuttering out in a soft, deep moan.

His spent cock slipped free of its warm, slippery cocoon, and Bard slid up to lay his head on Thran’s shoulder. A hand massaged his abdomen in slow circles just above his pubic bone, drawing the last twinges of release from him in delicious waves.

“Gods,” Thran whispered. “Gods, you are such a gift.”

A soft chuckle. “A little spice for the RICE.”

Thran’s chuckle matched Bard’s. “You are a most delicious cook. And I am most relaxed.”

“Good. Go back to sleep. Make the most of it.”

Thran didn’t want to. He wanted to indulge Bard as thoroughly as his husband had indulged him, but the warmth, the gentle strokes, the strong body lying next to him urging him to ease all conspired against him, and he did blur out. Again he drifted, letting everything go without care or concern.

When he roused again, he was thoroughly relaxed – and thoroughly determined to stay awake. He shifted against Bard, but his husband refused to let him roll over.

“Let me go,” he urged, pushing at Bard’s arm across his chest.

“Uh-uh,” Bard mumbled. His eyes were closed and he refused to let Thran budge the arm across his chest. In fact, he rolled Thran over on his side and wrapped arms around him from behind, snuggling him close with a sigh. “Mine.”

Thran tsked in exasperation. “Sukin syn, there is an octopus in my bed.”

Bard’s reply to that was to slide a leg over Thran’s and snuggle him closer. “Still mine.”

“Of course I am. So please, let me up.”

“Say the magic word.”
“Ty grebanyy huiesos .”

Bard snickered. “I am a fucking cocksucker, yes. But that’s not the magic word.”

“Let me up, or I will make you change the sheets.”

“Today’s laundry day anyway.”

“And the mattress pad.”

Bard’s arms and leg slid away as he rolled over. “If you insist.”

Bard sighed, enjoying a stretch as Thran got up and headed to the bathroom again. He washed his face, smiling because there was nothing to wash lower down; Bard had seen to that. He combed his hair, then returned to find Bard sitting on the edge of the bed, stretching arms wide. Rib cage flared, arms flexed, head fell back... such an enticing sight was the saint who had treated him so well this morning. He was tempted to fall to his knees before him, and return the pleasure of Bard’s lips with that of his own, but something more compelling beckoned. He would let a little time pass to lull his husband into thinking he was safe from ambush, and then spring his trap. He leaned down to offer Bard a kiss, then padded to the closet for leggings and Henley.

“I am well ready for breakfast,” Thran observed. “What would you like?”

“The children will sleep for a couple more hours so we can have anything we want,” Bard said, ducking into the bathroom. When he came out, he rummaged through his dresser drawers, but didn’t come up with much. He scratched his beard in chagrin. “Sigrid wasn’t joking last night when she said everyone was down to rags to wear. I’m past that. I’ve got my night clothes, and that’s it.”

Thran pulled open a drawer, and held out a pair of sweats. “These are old, but they are clean, and I think they should be loose enough.”

“Thanks.”

As Bard pulled them on, Thran hoped they wouldn’t be all that loose. He’d enjoy the chance to admire the shape of Bard’s backside until clean clothes came out of the dryer. Ah, yes, they clung very nicely to Bard’s curves, very nicely indeed. His enjoyment must have shown on his face, because Bard took one look at him, then at his reflection in Thran’s dresser mirror. He snorted.

“Gods, Thran. We’ve got four children in the house.”

“They will be asleep for hours yet. We have time to have breakfast in comfort, then we will put on our jeans and boots and see what to do in the garage.”

With another snort, Bard ducked back into the closet and came out with one of Thran’s long sweaters over his old tee. Thran grinned, but didn’t speak.

“How’s your wrist?”

“It feels sore, but not nearly so painful as last night. The brace kept it supported and protected all night. I will wear it all today, too.”

“I want to put some arnica on all those bruises to help them fade. You know Irmo’s going to have a stroke when he sees them tomorrow.”

“Likely. I will not lift Charisse for a few days, to be sure. But the rest of me is still fit.”
Bard disappeared into the bathroom and came out with the tube of arnica, so Thran gingerly pulled the Velcro tabs free and eased off the brace. The previously livid red bruises were now purple and black, if possible looking worse than the red. Bard was impassive as he dabbed the arnica all over Thran’s arm. “Rub that in. I’ll leave the tube out to remind us to put more on later.”

“I will take it downstairs with me,” Thran agreed, rubbing gingerly. He bent his wrist carefully to gauge how sore it was. “Not so bad. I think it is mostly bruised rather than badly wrenched. Certainly better than how it felt yesterday.”

“That’s good,” Bard nodded as Thran eased the arm brace back on his wrist. “So, on to breakfast. What sounds good? I think I’ll mix up some waffle batter for the children so when they get up they can just pour it into the iron for a hot breakfast. I can make us some, or I can do eggs if you want more protein rather than carbs.”

“Such a hard decision you give me,” Thran observed as they went downstairs. “The temptation of waffles... the delight of eggs and cheese and vegetables...”

“I can make you a waffle for breakfast, and an omelet for lunch if you’d rather.”

“That sounds perfect. Maybe I will have a hard boiled egg with my waffle for the protein.”

“Make one for me, too.”

They set to in the kitchen, Thran putting on the eggs to boil while his husband mixed up his waffle batter. How simple was it for Bard to do that – the batter was ready before the waffle iron was hot enough to bake. Cooking so many things wasn’t as hard as it seemed, once Bard revealed his secrets. Of course, Bard added things to his batter that made it special – today it was cinnamon and nutmeg, wheat germ, vanilla, and a little flax seed. He set out honey, butter, and various jams on the counter to go with Bard’s efforts.

“Where are you going with the flatware?” Bard looked up from the waffle iron when Thran carried utensils into the dining room.

“The day is bright and sunny, and the dining room looks beautiful in the morning light. I want to eat there this morning.”

Bard’s eyes brightened. “That’d be nice. We haven’t had a chance to organize a meal there yet. The table’s too small, and most of the chairs are in the kitchen.”

“There is room for two. Would you like tea or juice?”

“A little orange juice would be great. But I still want my cuppa, too.”

Thran poured them both small glasses of juice, and got the teapot ready. He had the cups and pot on the dining room table, and put the boiled eggs in a bowl just as the waffle iron was done. Bard plated the waffles, and they were ready to add toppings.

“Do you want another waffle after that one? If so, I’ll leave the iron on.”

“Two with the eggs is enough for me.”

“Me, too.” Bard slathered his waffles with butter and orange marmalade, grabbed the bowl of eggs, and headed into the dining room. He paused to look around the room as Thran followed him. “You’re right. The light in here is nice, even if the room’s virtually empty.”
“It will not be for long.” Thran put his plate on the table and sat down. “Whenever you decide that you have done all you want to do inside, the paint and the plaster and the floors, we will enjoy ourselves with a search to find things we like to fill it. Hal has several friends who are designers of curtains and rugs and such things, and we can ask him to recommend one to help us if we want. That reminds me – I must call Hal and see if he is through our taxes. I want to sign them and send them off – a necessary chore that I am always glad to dispense with.”

“The deadline’s getting close,” Bard nodded, taking a big bite of waffle. “I’d just as soon get that bit of nasty necessity done, too. Waffles okay?”

“More than okay, my saint. Delicious.”

“Good. So you want to hire a designer?”

“Perhaps for draperies. I look forward to prowling the junk shops and antique stores for the things we want. Perhaps a bigger table in here, yes?”

“Agreed. This one’s not much, just something that was cheap and fit into the apartment. Not that we have to eat in here every meal, but Sunday dinners are something I’d like to do, and they’d be good in here. We can use our nice stuff.”

“All of our stuff is nice stuff,” Thran grinned, “but I understand what you mean. I do not want to hire someone to turn our house into some showplace fit only for a magazine spread. I want us to choose everything that goes in it, only things we like. But I admit that I do not know how to choose draperies. So someone to help with that, perhaps.”

“A good idea,” Bard agreed. “Right now, there’s not a curtain in the place, and most of the rooms are still empty other than the bedrooms and the sitting room. We’ll have quite a hunt.”

“I look forward to it,” Thran smiled. “The day we bought the desks for the children? I enjoyed that.”

“It was fun. I liked pottering around the day I got our flatware and the dishes and the fainting couch, too.”

“And our bed,” Thran added. “I am most intrigued to see that come together.”

“As soon as I get the rooms into shape, I’ll work on that. It’ll be nice to see the main room turn into something other than a junk room. We’ll have to clean it out sooner or later, especially if you get that sofa you like.”

“I asked for fabric swatches. And we need to measure whether it is big enough for our room.”

“I hope so. It fits you.”

“It will be the perfect place to ravish you when we christen that room.”

Bard grinned. “I hope there will be firelight, a little wine, and a very amorous angel involved.”

“I will make sure of that. But for now, we will enjoy this beautiful morning light and our waffles. And perhaps a bit more.”

Thran got up, angled Bard’s chair away from the table so that he could kneel in front of his husband. Before Bard could react, he had insinuated himself between Bard’s knees and put a hand on his crotch.
“Gods, Thran, I thought I took care of you this morning,” Bard protested weakly, hands gripping the arms of the chair. Thran grasped the two sides of the chair back to keep Bard in his seat.

“You did. Now I will take care of you.”

“The children –”

“Are asleep. Now do as you bid me – relax, and let me see to you.”

Thran didn’t wait to hear Bard’s reply before he’d pulled the front of his old sweats down to reveal Bard’s cock in its tangle of dark curls. He engulfed it in his mouth, humming and smothering a grin at Bard’s stutter of a curse.

“You bastard – gods, you bastard!”

Thran didn’t waste time on words, just attended to his husband well enough that in seconds his cock was hard and his curses took on a reverent tone. When Bard’s cock grew too large for Thran to take all of it in his mouth, he wrapped a hand around its thick base and stroked until Bard moaned.

A thump sounded upstairs. Someone was up.

“Thran – the children!”

Thran grinned. “We have time to finish. Concentrate.”

He intensified his attentions, until even Bard’s parental instincts were overwhelmed. As another thump sounded, Thran sped up, hardly able to keep himself from laughing at Bard’s battle between lust and parental devotion.

“You bloody cocksucker, you’re going to get us in so much trouble!” Bard panted, as yet more thumps echoed.

Thran’s reply was to fondle Bard’s balls. When he squeezed gently, Bard erupted in climax, even as the first steps clattered on the hall steps. Thran delayed just long enough to make sure he took every drop of Bard’s essence, then eased back into his chair. It was all he could do not to laugh as Bard scrambled to pull up his sweats as Bain and Legolas tumbled into the kitchen.

“You fucker!” Bard hissed, his face red as he wrenched his chair back into place. “You bloody fucker!”

“Da! Papa?”

“We are in the dining room,” Thran called in a calm voice, still grinning at Bard. “We enjoy the morning sun and our breakfast.”

“Good morning, Papa,” Legolas came into the room. “Oh, you’re eating something other than hard boiled eggs?”

“It was quite enjoyable to eat something different for breakfast this morning,” Thran said without turning a hair, though Bard was all but choking. “Bard made waffle batter, so all you have to do is turn on the waffle iron and bake one for yourself.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Bain said, coming in after Legolas. “I love waffles – are you all right, Da?”

“I’m fine,” Bard managed to spit out, though he sounded strangled.
“Your Da choked on a bit of his breakfast, that is all,” Thran explained, which sent Bard into a coughing fit. After Bain came to thump his father’s back, Bard calmed enough to shoot a glare at Thran.

“Thanks, Bain. I’m fine now.”

“Okay, Da. You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. The waffle iron’s still warm, so it won’t take long to heat.”

“Cool. Come on, Legs – waffles!”

The boys scampered back to the kitchen. As Bain explained how to tell when the iron was hot and the waffles were done, Bard shot a final glare at Thran.

“You are one bloody son of a bitch, you cocksucker,” he whispered.

Thran’s shrug was just as unrepentant as his grin. “I got you off, yes? And we christened this room in decadent fashion.”

Bard’s glare crumbled into embarrassment. “All right, you did, and we did. But gods, Thran!”

Thran speared a bite of his waffle. “I regret nothing. You made a most delicious breakfast, lyubov moya.”

Defeated, Bard swallowed, then took his last bite of waffle. When Thran glanced at him, his husband was smiling. Reluctantly, sheepishly, but a smile was a smile.

Thran enjoyed the last of his waffle with smug satisfaction.
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

The angel, saint, and cherubs dig into a mountain of domestic chores. When one of the cherubs feels put upon, the angel indulges in his passion for investigating a crime scene. Later, however, does he skirt the other side of the law with a call to a certain elusive personage?

Chapter Notes

Hal appears courtesy of johnnysmitten. Thank you, my dear!

It took effort, but somehow Bard managed to finish his breakfast with some semblance of calm – not easy, given that his decadent husband had just ambushed him and laid a blow job on him that had overwhelmed all resistance. No matter that children had thundered down the stairs, about to burst into the dining room – Thran had finished him off without mercy, then had smugly sat back and shot one double entendre after another at him while their sons had stood by oblivious. Thran was the devil incarnate with no semblance of shame, decorum, mercy...

What did that make Bard, then? He should be ashamed of himself for loving his husband’s decadence… but he wasn’t. Was Not. Not one bit. Thank the gods Thran had gotten him off before the children had learned just how depraved their fathers were.

Besides, it was cute to see Thran smile so smugly over his tea, too.

Bard shook his head, and blessed ancient radiators that had seen fit to break down in the middle of a snowstorm.

Sigrid appeared while the boys were in the middle of baking their third batch of waffles. Bard left them to negotiate whether Sigrid would eat two of theirs and bake another batch for them, and headed upstairs to check on Tilda. It was past nine, but the little girl was still asleep when Bard eased open the door. As he backed out, however, her eyes opened.

“Morning, little doll,” Bard greeted, coming to her side. “You slept a long time this morning.”

“What time is it?” she asked sleepily, stretching. When Bard told her, her eyes opened a bit wider. “Did I miss breakfast?”

“Course not. Waffles, or porridge if you don’t want waffles. I know they’re not your favorite.”

“Da!” Tilda scolded, sitting up. “They are, too, my favorite! Are there any left?”

“Plenty. By the time you wash your face and come downstairs, I’ll have a nice hot one for you.”

“Mmm,” she smiled. “I think I have to wear my nightclothes downstairs, though. I don’t have any clean clothes.”
“None of us do. You’ve got all your dirty ones in the hamper? I’ll start a load while your waffle bakes. Bring your sheets down with you, okay?”

“Okay, Da.”

Bard got the hamper from the children’s bathroom and carted it downstairs to dump the contents in the mudroom. The boys were between batches of waffles, so Bard put more on to bake for Tilda while Thran headed upstairs to get their basket of laundry and their sheets.

“Mega wash marathon today, children,” Bard called from the mudroom as he sorted the pile of clothes. "Go get everything you didn’t put in the hamper and your sheets, so it all gets in the queue.”

“Yes, Da; yes, Bard,” came the children’s replies as they headed upstairs. In a few minutes, enough clothing was piled on the floor to stock a store.

“We let things run a bit too long this time,” Bard exhaled, contemplating the heaps.

Thran hummed agreement. “What is it you say so often? Sooner started is sooner ended? Though this will not be sooner ended. So many piles!”

“Now you see why I got us the extra capacity washer and dryer,” Bard quipped. “All right, tees and jeans first, so everyone has something to wear before too long.”

“Will we finally get to the carriage house today? If so, then I will wear jeans and a shirt that are already filthy. There is no reason to wear clean ones only to get them dirty again.”

“I think we can get in there. Let’s set the cleaning duties first.”

Bard threw the first load of clothes into the washer, then they gathered the children around the kitchen table to settle who’d do what to bring the house back to order. Each would be responsible for his or her room – tidying, dusting, and sweeping. The boys would take care of the sitting room and half bath, given that they played video games there so often. Tilda would take the dining room, central hall, steps, and landing outside the bedrooms, and Sigrid would do the children’s bathroom. Thran would see to the ballroom, and Bard would take the kitchen. All of the children scattered except Tilda, who was still enjoying her waffles. Thran headed for the ballroom, and Bard worked on the kitchen so that he could keep Tilda company while she ate. There wasn’t much for Bard to do other than the floor, given that he was meticulous about keeping the room he spent so much time in clean. A few swipes along the counter behind the tea caddy, a few spills dripped down the cabinet doors, a scrub of the stove hood, and most of his work was done. The kitchen table was in a state, though – tons of crumbs, several spatters of one thing or another, and scattered condiment bottles left from previous meals. He put everything away, wiped up the crumbs, and then got a broom from the mudroom to sweep the floor clean. Tilda skirted his broom as she put her dishes in the dishwasher, and washed her knife and fork. She helped Bard with the floor under the table by moving all the chairs out of the way for him to sweep, then set them all back into place.

“Would you help me, Da?” she asked with a hopeful look as he mixed up a marinade for the pork chops they’d have for supper. “I can’t reach all the cobwebs in the hallway.”

“Cobwebs already? I just painted.” He gave a sigh. “Sure, I’ll do the cobwebs for you, little doll, then you can sweep. I’ll get started while you brush your teeth.”

Tilda was right about the cobwebs – a few spiders had decided that Bard’s renovations made the hall ceiling a perfect place to spin new webs. He escorted as many as he could outside, then cleaned off the webs from the hallway and dining room ceilings. He did the main room, too, just on general
purposes, and tidied the remaining boxes, bundles, and bits of bed frame against the wall. Thran stuck his head in from the ballroom to see what the stir was about.

“The ballroom is ready for tomorrow,” Thran announced, mop in hand.

“Do you remember the measurements for that sofa? We could lay it out on the floor, if you do.”

“I do not, but I can get them easily enough,” Thran called, ducking back into the ballroom to put his mop back. He trotted through to check his laptop; Bard headed for the mudroom to get a tape measure. Thran soon rejoined him with a slip of paper in hand. “I think it is very large, which is good for such a large room.”

Bard looked at the paper. “Okay, you take the tape measure and go that way, and I’ll tell you when to stop.”

When the tape measure had spooled out far enough, Bard held up his hand. He found the halfway mark, and matched that with the center of the fireplace. “Okay, that’s the center.”

“We should mark the ends,” Thran pulled at his lip. “Something small? Cans from the pantry?”

“Good idea,” Bard agreed. “I’ll get some.”

Cans in hand, they marked the ends, then the width.

“It looks like it’ll be the right size to me,” Bard said, eyeballing the cans. “You?”

Thran nodded. “I do. I will look to see if there is a place that sells it nearby so that we can look at it. If it is not suitable for me to ravish my husband on it, then I do not want it.”

“You’re in a mood today.”

“See what happens when you keep me in bed so long? I am rejuvenated.”

“Note to self – no more vitamins for Thran, and no more keeping him too long in bed.”

Thran made a sad face. “It will be your loss as well as mine, lyubov moya.”

“You’re right. Forget I said anything about your vitamins and how long you stay in bed.”

“Wise decision. Now, I am through the ballroom, and I hope you are through the kitchen, so can we finally see to the carriage house?”

“As long as we check on the cleaning crew, and put in another load of laundry on the way out.”

“Excellent!” Thran was gleeful –

“Da!” Tilda’s voice was full of outrage. “Da, Bain swept all of the dirt off his floor and into the landing upstairs after I’d already swept it!”

“I did not! You didn’t sweep it the first time!”

“I did, too, Bain! I already swept this whole part!”

“How could you have swept the landing? I’ve got the broom!”

“I used the brush from the dustpan! You just don’t want to clean up your dirt! Da!”
“Time out, both of you!” Bard took the steps two at a time. “One at a time – Bain, what’s your side?”

“Tilda says that I swept all the dirt out of my room out onto the landing. She just doesn’t want to sweep the landing, that’s all.”

“Tilda?”

“I swept the landing already, Da! Look!” She waved the brush in her hand and pointed to the dustpan full of detritus. “Then Bain swept all of the stuff off his floor out onto the landing, because he doesn’t want to use the dustpan!”

“Okay, both of you assume you know why the other one’s done something. You don’t know whether Til wants to sweep the landing or not, Bain. And Til, you don’t know whether Bain wants to use the dustpan or not. So strike both of those. That leaves us with Til saying she swept the landing, and Bain saying she didn’t, and Til saying that Bain swept all the stuff off his floor and onto the landing, and Bain saying he didn’t.”

“Ah!” Thran spoke up. “We can pretend this is a crime scene, yes? To determine just the facts. So first we must establish whether Tilda swept the landing or not. So I will look.”

Bard watched in amusement as Thran made much of looking around the landing. Bard watched the children – Tilda looked confident, and Bain didn’t.

“I see no detritus except in the dustpan and by Bain’s door, so clearly someone has swept at least part of the floor. Since Tilda has the brush, we know she has swept at least part of it. That brings us to the second task, to establish whether Bain swept his floor. So...”

He swept into Bain’s room, examined the floor, and came out. “There is no detritus on Bain’s floor. He has the broom in his hands, so clearly he swept his floor. But the detritus outside his door is in the characteristic scatter pattern that indicates it has been swept from Bain’s room out, so I can only conclude that Bain has swept the detritus from his floor onto the landing. Since I see no dust balls on the landing other than those in the dustbin, then Tilda must have swept the landing before Bain swept his detritus out. The conclusion is inescapable.”

The sound of a dust mop behind Bard brought everyone’s attention around to Legolas’s door, where dust scattered out from the door and onto the landing.

“See?” Tilda pointed in exasperation. “Legs is doing it, too!”

The boy noticed everyone looking at him – he had his earbuds in and hadn’t heard the exchange. He paused in his mopping, and pulled out one earbud. “What’s everyone looking at?”

“You and the detritus you put onto the landing,” Thran folded his arms across his chest. “Tilda has already swept it.”

“The evidence is clear here, too,” Bard took up the thread. “I find Bain and Legolas guilty of scattering detritus without regard to previous sweeping. I sentence both of you to clean the landing – which does not include sweeping the mess down the stairs. Court dismissed.”

Sigrid stood in her doorway, laughing as she applauded. “You two are hysterical. You ought to go into standup, I swear.”

“We’re appearing shortly in the carriage house. We’ll practice our routine in front of all that lumber that needs to be moved.”
“Can I help?” Legolas asked shyly. “I can help Papa because his arm is still sore.”

“Yeah, I can help, too,” Bain said. “I can show Legs how to climb up in the rafters of the barn. That’s where you’re going to put the lumber, right, Da? We can build a fort up there.”

“Up in the rafters?” Legolas said. “How?”

“All the lumber makes a floor, then we can –”

“Aren’t you both forgetting something?” Bard interrupted. “Clean your rooms, then the sitting room? Get that done before you get too excited about the barn and a lot of lumber.”

“Da!” Bain protested. “Helping you with the lumber’s helping, right? We can do the sitting room later!”

“Consider the sitting room and half bath to be the price of admission to the lumber amusement park,” Thran said. “What is it you call it, Bard, the rushed chores? No slapdash.”

“Exactly,” Bard nodded. “So chop chop, both of you. Tilda and Sigrid, carry on.”

“If I get my room and the bathroom clean, can I go to the movies with Finn and Tara and Killian?” Sigrid asked. “It’s the three o’clock matinee, so it doesn’t cost as much.”

Bard looked at Thran. “Get your chores done first, and then come out to the barn. We’ll talk about it.”

“Okay,” Sigrid said, and went back in her room to hurry through her tidying.

“What about me?” Tilda asked plaintively. “My room is clean already, and I’ll be done sweeping soon. Then what can I do?”

“Anything you want – within reason,” Bard amended quickly. “You can help in the garage if you want, or work on your drawing, or do you have something else in mind?”

“You said you got the broken shelf thing for me, the one in the main room?”

“The étagère that I brought home, yes?” Thran asked. “Yes, I thought you could use it for your toys.”

“I want to try to put it together. It doesn’t look that bad.”

“If you want to, sure,” Bard nodded. “You can bring it out on the porch if you want, or by the carriage house, so if you need help, we’ll be nearby. Sweep first, though.”

“Goodie!” Tilda took up her brush. “I’ll do the steps now.”

Thran and Bard did a quick look in all the children’s rooms, and found them all reasonably neat and swept, so the children scattered to their other tasks, eager to move beyond the mundane to the things that were more interesting.

“We must do our room, too,” Thran observed. “I will start. You see to Sigrid.”

Gods, less than three months after they’d gotten married, they were already able to read each other’s minds! Thran had understood his hedged response to Sigrid, and had accommodated accordingly. After a quick smile at his husband, Bard followed Sigrid into her room, where she was wiping a dust cloth over her desk.
“About the film,” Bard said lowly, so Tilda didn’t overhear. “I know it’s a pain, but you have to promise me that you’ll stay with all three of your mates – not just Finn, but Tara and Killian, too.”

“Because of Lance,” Sigrid exhaled.

“Because of Lance.”

“I can’t stop living because of that dickwad, Da –”

“I know you can’t, and I won’t ask you to. But I absolutely will ask you to take all reasonable precautions. Stay with at least two of your mates at all times, tell me exactly where you’ll be, and if plans change, call and tell me so before the fact. That lad is not fooling around.”

“I don’t guess the police have tracked him down yet.”

“If they have, they haven’t seen fit to tell us. But I’d hazard not.”

“Of course not. That would be too easy.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes and exhaled again, drawing a reluctant grin from Bard. “It would. So don’t you make yourself an easy target. Stay in public places, know where the exits are, and where the police are.”

“Okay, Da. Thanks for not getting all clingy.”

“Don’t give me a reason to start, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now I’m going to take the Russian out to clean the garage before he explodes. For some reason, he’s really hot about that.”

Sigrid giggled. “Ada is so funny – mostly when he’s not trying to be funny. I love how he gets all Russian and gesticulates with his hands. And that thing about the crime scene was hysterical.”

She demonstrated, drawing Bard’s snicker. “He’s one of a kind. We’re lucky to have him.”

“He’s just as lucky to have you, too. So let me finish all this busywork. I’ve got to chisel the bathroom before Finn and Killian and Tara come pick me up.”

“Already arranged, I see.”

Sigrid reddened. “I figured you’d see reason. And I already told them exactly what you just told me, so... we kind of figured.”

“Just be responsible, and careful. You’re all smarter than Lance. Let’s keep it that way.”

He left Sigrid to finish her room, and headed into his room to change into his work clothes. There was Thran, contemplating a microfiber dust cloth and a lamb’s wool duster. He looked up at Bard.

“Another thing I have never done – dust. Which of these to I use?”

The duster is quicker; the cloth is more thorough. Given how dusty everything is, use the cloth.”

Bard grabbed another one, and wiped off his dresser top. Thran studied him for a moment, then followed suit for his dresser, then his nightstand. “This is very boring and tedious.”
“Most cleaning is. That’s why no one does it very often. Then when you do, everything’s so filthy that it takes forever, which makes you even less inclined to do it, and around you go again. Cleaning the bathroom is worse.”

“Can we do that later?”

“What kind of example does that set for the children?”

Thran sighed. “True, but let us not dawdle about it. I will distract us with an idea I had about our ring box.”

“What’s that?” Bard ducked out to retrieve the broom that Bain had abandoned.

“When I dance, and I put my ring in our box, it will sit on your dresser. When you weld, and you put your ring in our box, it will sit on my dresser. So that we each see to the other.”

“I like that. But I’m about to throw a monkey wrench into the proceedings.”

Thran looked up. “What is this monkey wrench?”

“It means I want to know what we should do with our box when both our rings are in it, as they should be while we work in the carriage house?”

Thran hummed as Bard dusted the light bulb in his bedside lamp. “Good question. Why do you dust the light bulb, lyubov moya?”

“Because they get dirty, too, and then the bulb gets hotter and dimmer. Except that these are fluorescent, so they don’t really get hot. But they do get dim.”

“Hmm.” Thran dusted his light bulb. “Sensible. Are we done with the dust cloths?”

“More or less. How about if, when we both aren’t wearing our rings, we put our box on the children’s memory shelf – which I promised to hang today.”

“That is perfect. Go, go hang it. I will clean the bathroom. I will ask Sigrid to show me how to do that.”

“That’s easy. Bleach in the toilet - don’t spill it on the floor, or it’ll stain the marble. Baking soda in the tub and shower and on the sink. Mop the floor with water.”

“Ah. I will manage. Go hang the shelf.”

Bard changed into his work pants and shirt. The shelf was on the floor of the children’s study, so Bard fetched hammer, level, and measuring tape from the mudroom, and set about measuring where the shelf would go. Bain and Legolas heard him, so came in to help him place it. He screwed the brackets into the wall, set the shelf on top, and screwed the shelf into the brackets.

“And still even,” Bard said, eyeing the level one last time. “Done.”

“Kukla, Sigrid!” Legolas called. “Our shelf is up!”

Both of the girls came in, with Thran behind them. “It looks good, Da,” Sigrid pronounced. Where’s our vase?”

“Downstairs on the dining room table,” Bain replied. “I’ll get it. You get our pictures.”
“And we will get our old rings,” Thran added. Soon, everyone had something for the shelf. As the pictures and the vase found their places, Thran added the wedding rings he’d shared with Vileria, and Bard added those he’d shared with Daphne.

“All we need is flowers,” Tilda said, smiling. “Our Mams look happy.”

“They do,” Thran murmured, touching Vileria’s picture. He murmured something in Russian as he took his hand away, and Legolas swallowed hard. He quickly smiled, though, when Bain’s hand went on his shoulder, and his father’s arm went around his waist. “All is well, Legolas. Your Maman would be very happy to see this, and to know how well you remember her. And Daphne would be just as happy to see it, too. You are all good children.”

“You are, indeed.” Bard nodded. Daphne would be proud of them, indeed, especially to see them help with the cleaning. She’d liked such chores no better than the children, and had laughed about it often. He imagined her and Vileria watching over them from some other plane, comparing notes, and smiling at how happy their husbands and children were together. Regardless of whether his imaginings were serious or frivolous, he sent both women silent appreciation and thanks for their regard.

“Did your Maman like roses, Legolas?” Tilda asked. “Sigrid told me that we have a rose bush outside, so when it blooms, we can put some of the flowers here.”

“She liked all kinds, Kukla,” Legolas said quietly. He was having a hard time mustering an even voice. “Any-any kind would be good.”

“I’ll get some at the market tomorrow,” Bard promised. “What you don’t put up here, we can put in the kitchen, so we’ll enjoy them in both places.”

“Good idea,” Sigrid nodded, patting Legolas’s arm. “So, Ada, you need help in the bathroom?”

“I do,” Thran gave her a rueful smile. “What do I do with the baking soda?”

“You’re cleaning the bathroom?” Bain blurted.

Thran shrugged. “I have never done so before. It is time I learned.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Bain grinned in envy. “I wish I’d never had to clean a bathroom before! If you want to practice, I’d be glad to let you do the half bath downstairs.”

A chuckle dispelled the last of the somber mood. “You and Legs need to practice your technique,” Bard teased. “It’s not of the best, is it?”

“I have no technique at all,” Thran shook his head.

“I’ll help you do your bathroom, then you help me do mine, and we’ll call it square,” Sigrid proposed.

“Done,” Thran agreed, holding out his hand for Sigrid to slap. “Let us do so now, or I will never get to play in the carriage house!”

“II’ll vacuum the rug, then we’ll be out there,” Bard said. “Let’s go, troops.”

The family scattered. In a half hour the boring stuff was finally done, and the next load of laundry had gone in the washer. While Sigrid called Finn, the rest of the family put on boots and jackets and headed outside. Thran was so excited that he was almost giddy.
Wait until the tall dancer found out what a dusty and dirty job awaited him. How long would it take before the novelty wore off?

* * *

Finally, finally, the tedium of laundry and dust cloths and vacuums and bleach cleaner was done! A bright April day beckoned, brisk and sunny, and Thran was thrilled to finally feel the breeze on his face. Yes, he had put on his sunscreen, and yes, he had on his arm brace, and yes, his hair was braided out of the way. He even had put one of Bard’s bandannas around his forehead to keep sweat and stray hair out of his eyes as he worked. His wedding ring lay in the inlaid box with Bard’s and was on the children’s memory shelf, out of harm’s way. Everyone helped Tilda to carry bits of her étagère from the main room out onto the porch, and she took the broom to sweep part of the porch clean for her efforts. Then he and the boys heaved open the bays to the carriage house while Bard slid open the barn door.

“What a mess,” Bard shook his head, looking into the barn. “I shouldn’t have let this go so long, but...”

“It is no matter now,” Thran murmured. “Soon you will want to see to the Rahmiel you will make from your clay model, and you will arrange all of this as you see fit. For now, we will bring the carriage house into good use, and we are one step further along.”

“You’re right,” Bard nodded, shaking himself out of his reverie. “There’s a lot of work to be done in here, but for now, I just have to figure out how to get all the lumber from the carriage house in here without having to make more work for myself. Bain had the best idea, to put it all in the rafters. I just have to make sure it doesn’t get close to the forge. The last thing I need is a lot of wood right over the exhaust.”

“A sensible precaution. And we do not want to put it someplace now, only to have to move it again later.”

“Another sensible precaution. Let me climb up and see what’s what.”

Bard clambered up on the crates that let him reach his chin-up rafter. A dark stain Thran didn’t remember was smeared on the side of the lower crate. Oh, gods, that was Bard’s blood streaked across the wood, memento of the terrible Monday morning when they’d fallen so badly out of step. His skin recoiled into prickles, imagining the burn of those rough boards against his husband’s shoulder. It recoiled again to further imagine the pain of Bard’s hands when he’d pounded the upper crate in such fury. There was likely a second stain where Bard stood now, one that Thran didn’t want to see. Never again did Thran want to fall so badly out of step with his family.

That determination was only one reason why he wanted to help his family work in the carriage house. Yes, the lure of doing something so mundane yet so alien appealed to him. But just as pressing was his desire to work alongside Bard on the house, in no matter how small a capacity, so that he was part of this long reclamation effort.

“Okay, I think I’ve sorted it out,” Bard called. “I’ve got a couple of boards to move, but that’s a quick job. That’ll leave plenty of room on the right side to hoist the two-by-fours by the eave, and the plywood can go in the center. That’ll be far enough away from the exhaust to keep everything safe.”
“So what do we do first?” Thran asked.

Bard climbed down from the rafters with an easy athleticism that Thran savored, no matter how well his husband had tended him this morning. Watching that graceful body move was another joy of working alongside his husband.

“We’ll cart all the lumber out and pile it here,” Bard pointed to the space directly in front of the barn. “Then you and the lads can lift it up to me, and I’ll set in in the rafters. Shouldn’t take the four of us long.”

The procession began. Legolas and Thran teamed up to move their boards; Bain and Bard followed suit. When all of that was piled in front of the barn, the four of them maneuvered a sheet of the plywood out.

“Let’s see how hard it is to get that in the rafters,” Bard pointed to the plywood sheet. “That’d give me a good base to get the boards in place.”

“This is not very heavy, but it is very awkward,” Thran said, trying to hold his corner of the sheet with one hand.

“I think Bain and I can get it, Papa,” Legolas ventured. “If we stand it on end, and push up...”

“I follow you,” Bain nodded. “That’d be easier than three of us trying to fit in the space. Da, can you reach it?”

“Hang on... yes, I have it. Can you push it any higher?”

Legolas and Bain extended their tallest, then Thran came between them to lend the strength and reach of his right arm.

“Yes, that’s great. Got it!” Bard heaved the sheet of plywood up, and let it thunk down across a pair of the rafters. A few more shoves, and it was evenly set across three rafters.

“Okay, send up the boards.”

Those went easily up and across the rafters. That left three sheets of plywood to move, which the boys saw to. Those went up atop the first sheet, and the biggest part of the effort was done.

“There is already so much more room,” Thran observed.

“Time to make a little more,” Bard grinned. “I’ll move the truck out. If you move your SUV, we’ll have a lot easier time.”

“Of course,” Thran agreed, pulling out his keys. “I will park near the house to be out of the way, in case we must move more things between the carriage house and the barn.”

With the vehicles out of the way, Legolas and Bain washed the windows, not a simple effort given the years of accumulated grime, and Thran took a broom to the cobwebbed walls. When he was done, he helped Bard sort through the shelves full of accumulated stuff. They found a few more cans of dried paint, a few more flowerpots, and a few more empty cans and bottles. Both of the big trashcans were full.

Thran contemplated the shelf full of flowerpots. “There are so many! If we fill them all this summer, we will look like a tropical paradise.”
“Daphne and I both liked lots of flowers. She started seeds in the spring, which takes a lot of patience, but it’s cheap, and we had tons of plants all over the terrace and the front porch. It was beautiful.”

“Then we will fill them all,” Thran nodded. “But they need cleaning first.”

“Da, can I help, too?” Tilda stood in the doorway.

“What happened to your shelf, little doll? It didn’t go together?”

“It did go together. I figured out that it screws together, which is neat. But there’s one broken part that I need help to glue, and Sigrid’s busy, so can I come over here with you?”

“Course. Let me see if I can glue the broken part of your shelf, then you can help Thran stack up the flowerpots, or you can sweep.”

“Okay, Da.”

Bard went with Tilda to see about her shelf, so Thran busied himself with ordering all the bags of gardening supplies on the shelf. The boys were still scrubbing away at the windows, but their efforts had begun to show results, as the carriage house interior was brighter. The remaining windows were high up in the front and the back of the carriage house, so Thran had the boys brace the ladder for him to climb up with sponge and bucket and squeegee. He got both finished by the time Bard and Tilda reappeared.

“So much brighter!” Tilda exclaimed.

“It is,” Bard agreed. “Anybody but me ready for lunch? It’s going on one, and Sam’s coming over at three to talk about the Japanese garden.”

“How much do we have to do before we finish this?” Thran asked.

“Clean and stack the pots, sweep the floor, move the garden benches... that’s it.”

“I would rather finish, and eat afterwards,” Thran said.

“Okay with me. Lads, can you haul the two benches out to the gazebo?”

“Sure,” Bain looked at Legolas. “You get one end, and I’ll get the other.”

As the boys hauled away the benches, the rest brushed the clinging dirt from the pots and shelf, and restacked everything. Dust billowed out into the bright sunlight as the floor got a good sweeping, and at last they were done.

“We have a working garage again,” Bard grinned, as he finished brushing cobwebs from under the eaves.

“It’s not a garage, Da,” Tilda said. “It’s a carriage house.”

“That does sound more refined,” Bard chuckled. “But whatever we call it, it’s clean and tidy. A good day’s work, all.”

“Can we eat now?” Bain asked. “After all those waffles, I wasn’t hungry until you said you were, and now I really am.”

“I really am, too,” Legolas agreed.
“Lunch it is,” Bard nodded. “Cheese and veg omelets? Or there’s peanut butter and jelly.”


“I’m saving that for your school lunches tomorrow, little doll. So we have eggs and cheese and veg for today.”

“Omelet, then,” Tilda agreed. “Just cheese for me, please.”

“Bring the brooms in, lads,” Bard asked. “They go in the mudroom.”

Thran hurried to wash his hands in the mudroom sink so he could help Bard with lunch. As he took off his arm brace, Legolas grimaced at his bruises.

“It looks very bad, but it does not feel very bad,” he assured his son. “You know that bruises always look horrendous on my skin.”


“I will put more arnica on it. That helps bruises to fade. In a few days, it will not look so bad.”

“I hope not. And if I catch that dickwad, I will give him a few bruises for hurting you, and for threatening Sigrid.”

“You will not do any such thing, Legolas,” Thran said firmly. “It is one thing to protect yourself when attacked, and another to be the attacker. He is dangerous, and if you try to hurt him, he may hurt you, because he has no scruples to hold his hand. Leave him to the police.”

“But is isn’t fair to let him get away with hurting you.”

“It is not. That is why the police pursue him. They are professionals. Let them catch him, and then we will see that he faces charges for what he did yesterday.”

From Legolas’s expression, Thran’s words hadn’t satisfied him. Such anger... how hard was it to see that on his son’s face? He would call Mr. Nori, both to check on the welfare of that mysterious person, but also to see if he had any information that would bring Lance Dunmont into custody any sooner. The longer he remained on the loose, the more it would wear on everyone.

Lunch appeared in waves, as Bard made a series of omelets. Cheese was first, which Tilda and Sigrid shared, as the latter expected to leave shortly when Finn, Kíllian, and Tara arrived to go to the cinema. Cheese with various vegetables appeared in succession – the boys and Thran wanted theirs with everything; Bard liked his with onion and chives. Finn, Tara, and Kíllian came in about halfway to say hello and collect Sigrid. After doing the dishes and cycling more laundry through, the boys settled to one of their video games. Tilda looked after the boys, not saying anything, but Thran was not the only one who noticed her sigh. Bard pulled his mobile out of his pocket, tapped in a number, and put the device to his ear.

“Sam? Hi, it’s Bard. Yes, we’re still on. I wondered if you’d like to bring Elanor with you? I’ve got a little girl over here who’d love to have a visitor, if Elanor is inclined. Yes? Okay, great! We’ll see you both in a bit. Thanks, Sam.”

“Is she coming?” Tilda asked, smiling.

“She is. So think about what you two would like to do.”
Tilda’s smile widened. “Goodie! I can’t wait!”

She scampered upstairs, leaving Thran to smile at his husband. “You are a very observant Da, and a very thoughtful one.”

“She’s been patient all day. Sigrid’s starting to be with her friends more, and the lads have each other, so it’s easy for her to feel left out. But do you know she sorted out that étagère all by herself? She realized that the posts threaded through the shelves and screwed into the finials, so the pieces weren’t so much broken as disassembled. One of the posts was broken, but a little glue fixed that. Eventually I’ll strip it for her if she wants to paint it, but for now, she’s got a complete shelf for her stuffed toys.”

“She was a good helper in the garage today, too.”

“Carriage house,” Bard amended.

“As Tilda said,” Thran grinned. “How soon before Sam arrives?”

“About a half hour.”

“Then I will call Hal about our taxes, and then I will call Mr. Nori. I will inquire as to his situation, and also tell him of ours. Perhaps we can help each other to bring the saga of Lance Dunmont to a quicker close.”

“Good idea. Give both of them my regards. I’ll jockey a little more laundry.”

Bard headed to the mudroom, so Thran retired to the ballroom to make his calls. Hal picked up immediately, and was his usual flamboyant self.

“Thran! Hello! Don’t tell me, I know why you’re calling. Yes, your taxes are done, and so are those for your very hunky husband. How is your very hunky husband? Well, I hope?”

“Very well. He sends his regards.”

“Such a sweetie you’ve got! Listen, my dear, your taxes are pretty run of the mill this year, nothing out of the ordinary, so if you prefer, I can email you the files – password protected of course. You can review them, and just send me back the efile signature page. But I’ve been baking today, and I’d love to bring you and yours a few things to thank Bard for his to-die-for muffins. Anytime late tomorrow afternoon works for me. I just need to know four things.”

“What four things, Hal?” Thran asked, smiling at his friend’s usual ebullience.

“The favorite cupcake flavors of your very hunky husband and his beautiful children, of course! How hard is that?”

Thran chuckled. “Tilda loves coconut, as does Legolas. Anything with chocolate pleases Bain and Sigrid. Bard is partial to chocolate, too, but paired with orange is his favorite.”

“Perfect! You’re still partial to chocolate raspberry, of course.”

“You know me well, Hal. I would welcome a visit. It would be good of you to go through Bard’s with him, so that he understands everything. I will have tea ready. Four o’clock, perhaps?”

“Perfection, my dear. I’ll see you then, treats and taxes in hand. The latter might be a pain, but I promise that the former will ease the pain.”
“Then until tomorrow, mon cher.”

“Until tomorrow. Ciao!”

Thran disconnected the call with a smile, but sobered as he rang Mr. Nori. He waited for the usual gruff man answering the call to get Mr. Nori.

“Nori.”

“Thran Oropherson. I hope you weather the current situation well.”

“Well enough.”

“Your people are safe?”

“I appreciate you asking after them.”

“I take that to mean that your situation is volatile.”

“Not as much as it was.”

“I have some information for you.”

“Lance Dunmont.”

“The same.” Thran described yesterday’s events, the deductions he and Bard had made about Lance’s appearance at the Follies, and Lance’s resentment of Sigrid.

“The kid’s not with his mother. She doesn’t know where he is. No one’s seen him in his usual digs that I’ve heard, but I admit I’ve had bigger concerns. Between the warring factions and the politsey, some parties are in hiding, some are out of commission, and a lot of the rest aren’t talking. You’re right that no one wants to take on your piss ant, so you’re clear of the rest of the factions as far as I can tell. Keep your security system on in case he finds out where you live.”

“He has not been armed thus far. Is that likely to change?”

“He won’t get anything from the factions. That doesn’t mean he won’t resort to breaking and entering if the opportunity presents itself. I’ll keep my ear to the ground, as much as I can given everything else.”

“I appreciate that. Your brothers are well?”

“I appreciate you asking after them. Your husband’s offer to Ori was kindly made.”

“Bard is a good man. I am concerned that the boy will decide to make another attempt at his art show.”

“A valid concern. Mention that to Oakland and Fundin. You’re not in their jurisdiction, but both of them might develop a sudden interest in art. Bard’s show might be very interesting to both of them.”

Thran grinned. “Perhaps so. I appreciate the pointer.”

“Keep me posted, then.”

“I will. Bard sends his regards, as do I.”
“Mine to both of you.”

The line went dead, so Thran switched off his mobile. He stood still, venturing a wry smile. Bard might tease him about being in the Russian mafia, knowing full well he wasn’t. He could only imagine what Bard would say about Mr. Nori.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

The saint does his best to concentrate on happy plans for Clan Ffyrnig, despite his worry about a vengeful renegade.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bard didn’t let Thran’s description of his conversation with Mr. Nori detract from his anticipation of Sam’s visit – Lance already preoccupied him more than was comfortable. Gods, how terrifying had it been yesterday afternoon when Sigrid had stood with him and Finn, her brown eyes flashing, her voice calm and low and absolutely implacable as she faced Lance without fear? Terrifying, yet exhilarating at the same time. His daughter was truly the lioness that Thran had named her, and while he was proud of how well she’d kept her head, her poise had likely infuriated Lance all the more.

Would he have preferred her to cower? Of course not. This was one of those moments that he knew too well – one with no good path to take, only paths that were bad and worse. Of all those they could have taken to deal with Lance, at least they’d taken the unified, unafraid, resolute one.

Too bad Lance had taken one that was so malicious.

He hoped Mr. Nori and his family – literal, as well as... associates? – would continue to fare well. He suspected that that ginger fox was used to periodic crises, soon weathered without much cost to life or limb, whether personal or associated. Bard would reserve most of his concern for his own family, because they didn’t have Mr. Nori’s resources.

Thankfully, Sam came by with Elanor before Bard could brood too deeply on the fallout of vicious teenaged stupidity. Tilda was delighted to have a visitor her age, and they clattered up to her room to play.

“I’m glad you called,” Sam confided, as Bard escorted him into the kitchen. “Rosie’s in the middle of a really complex piece of glass for a commission. It’s due Tuesday, and she’s tearing out her hair. Her sister’s over to handle the small ones, but Elanor doesn’t take to that. I was glad to get her out of the house, and me with her.”

“I know that grind,” Bard winced. “What kind of tea can I get you, Sam?”

“Straight black or green, whichever you’ve got.”

“Black it is.”

As Bard put on the kettle, Thran appeared from the laundry room, a basket of clean clothes in hand, and a grin on his face. “Welcome, Sam, to the Clan Ffyrnig laundry. We have opened our own business, as you see.”

Sam’s laugh was rueful. “Oh, we have one of those, too. Four children under ten, an artist, and a gardener – the washer never stops running.”
“It doesn’t get any better as the children grow up, either,” Bard said, measuring the loose tea into the pot. “The clothes get bigger, so the washer gets fuller.”

“I was afraid of that,” Sam grimaced.

“I will dispense with this,” Thran said, indicating his basket, “and be back. I would like tea, too, please, lyubov moya.”

“I’ve got your cup,” Bard called after Thran, who had headed upstairs with the basket of clean clothes.

“I see Thran’s got an arm brace,” Sam said, lowering his voice. “I heard what happened, of course. It was on the news last night, too. How is he?”

“Well enough to help clean the carriage house this morning,” Bard grinned. “He’s mostly just bruised, and should be fine in a few days. Thanks for asking. Mugs are in the same place.”

“I’m glad bruises are the biggest part,” Sam said, opening a cabinet and getting out three mugs. “Was it just a random happening, or did that boy have something against Thran?”

Bard weighed what to say, but Sam was a good friend, and a close neighbor. He also had four small children. “We’ve acquired a stalker of sorts.” As he gave a brief summary of what had happened Christmas Day and afterwards, Sam’s eyes got rounder and rounder. “I don’t think he’s figured out where we live yet, but he hasn’t been the smartest egg in the basket, so just keep an eye out. I don’t want you or your children hurt because of this boy’s wounded pride.”

“Course I’ll keep an eye out. Rosie wondered what was up when she saw the security system truck outside your house on Friday. That’s why you cleaned out the carriage house, too, right? To get your vehicles under cover.”

Bard nodded. “Thran had a ball, though. He’s funny – he’s one of the world’s best dancers, but he couldn’t wait to get out there and mess about like one of the guys.”

“No lie?” Sam snorted in laughter. “Oh, that’s funny! I’ve got a garage so full the roof goes up an inch every time you manage to get the door closed. Send Thran over and I’ll put him to work!”

“Call us when you need help with that. I’ve got two teenaged boys and a very tall dancer, plus me. We can help you move just about anything.”

“Don’t say that – come fall, Rosie will get it into her head again that the garage needs a weed out, and then you’ll be sorry you offered to help.”

“We’ll make a day of it. A little grilling, a little beer, some potato salad and brownies, and it’ll be fun,” Bard said, pouring water into the pot. “Let’s go into the solarium and you can see how it’s coming along, and where we’d like to put the Japanese garden is just outside. I hope you can recommend some good plants for us to put in there. Legolas mentioned hibiscus?”

“Those are great plants, if you know how to take care of them,” Sam began, following Bard into the solarium. “Oh, my, you’re busy in here!”

“It’s sort of an informal art studio right now,” Bard confessed. Tilda’s drawing things lay on the fainting couch, and Sigrid’s upholstered chairs were in the far corner, and his covered model of Rahmiel was under its sheet in the near outside corner. “We’ve collected some pieces for what we want it to become. Thran got the table off the street in the city, believe it or not – just needed stripping, waxing, and a little glue. The screens and doorframe are from Mrs. Mathom’s, and will go
on the inside wall with the fountain. The fainting couch was in pieces in a junk shop, so Sigrid and I are working on it. We’re taking an upholstery class together, so we’ve almost got that redone. The walls and ceiling need some work before I put up the door frame, the screens, and the fountain, but I think it’ll look great after that.”

“It certainly will!” Sam exclaimed. “So you want a few tropicals, I’m thinking?”

“Nothing too maintenance heavy,” Bard shrugged. “Bain wants a banana tree, but I don’t know how feasible that is. Legolas, as I said, remembered hibiscus. Tilda wants bright flowers. I like a lot of greenery with the flowers. But before that, I want to check the windows. I expect a lot of them need to be reglazed. I just hope they all don’t need to be completely redone.”

Sam took a close look at the windows that stretched from the top of the marble-topped table to just six inches from the ceiling. There were four of them, turning the whole outside wall into a nearly uninterrupted view of the terrace outside. The short walls to either side of the windows had matching windows, narrower but just as tall; they met the window wall at an angle, about one hundred and thirty-five degrees rather than the expected ninety. The ceiling featured a pair of skylights to bring even more light into the space, welcome given the room’s northern exposure.

“A few panes do look like they need reglazing,” was Sam’s opinion. “If you’re planning to strip and repaint them, you’ll catch all of that. But given how much glass you’ve got across this wall, you might think about replacing them altogether with something more energy-efficient. These old windows are murder on the heating bill in the winter, and murder on the cooling bill in the summer, no matter how well you reglaze them, because they’re just single pane. We replaced the ones on our sun porch last year with double-paned glass – it made a big difference in our heating bill, even though we didn’t touch the ones in the rest of the house.”

“Custom windows aren’t cheap,” Bard said.

Sam shook his head. “Windows in general aren’t cheap. But neither is heating and cooling. I’d rather see the smaller monthly bills, to be honest.”

“I’ll put it on the list,” Bard agreed.

They chatted about plants for the solarium until Thran joined them, recapping their discussion for him so he could add his ideas as he chose. They had a whole list of plants to consider before they headed outside to show Sam where they wanted to put the Japanese garden.

“Yes, you can make a beautiful garden here. I made a couple of sketches. One’s more traditional. The other’s less formal, with some different plants mixed with the traditional.”

He opened the folder he’d carried outside, and passed a sheet of paper to each of his hosts. “Thran, you’ve got the traditional one. I put a dwarf red maple over there, and a couple of rhododendrons – I don’t know your color preferences, but there are some beautiful deep red ones, all the various pinks and purples, whites, and some mixes. Very pretty in the spring, and nice foliage for the rest of the year...”

He went on to describe the rest of the design, from sculpted bushes and feathery evergreens.

“That is a beautiful plan,” Thran nodded. “I am glad you included pictures of the plants. I know little about them, so it is much easier to visualize the design with pictures.”

“So I’ve got the nontraditional one?” Bard passed Thran the sheet.

“You do.” Sam went through that one in just as much detail; it was hard not to get caught up in his
enthusiasm for his subject. This plan included some tropical elements for the summer, such as huge elephant ear plants flanking Bard’s pine tree sculpture, and more kinds of ferns. If Bard had to characterize the difference between the two plans – both of which were beautiful – the traditional was more formal and elegant, while the other was more flamboyant and playful. Both, however, included plants with sculptural forms so that the winter display would not be completely barren.

“We’ve got at least six weeks before we can plant a lot of these outside,” Sam pointed out. “So think about which design you like, or if you’d rather do something else entirely.”

“I like the nontraditional one more,” Thran said right away, looking at Bard. “We are not very traditional, and I like the elephant ears. So large!”

“I agree,” Bard nodded. “They’re both beautiful plans, but I like the playful one more, too. And it has the shrubs with the red bark. Think how amazing they’d look in the snow.”

“They do look amazing,” Sam nodded. “I put one outside our kitchen window over the sink, and it’s a pretty thing to take your mind away from washing the dishes, all winter long.”

“An extra benefit,” Bard chuckled. “Do you have time to look at the front along the porch, Sam? The bushes are pretty straggly, and probably need replacing. It gets a lot of sun, so it’s a hard climate.”

“Sure! And I have some ideas for your wild Welsh garden outside the ballroom, too.”

Bard and Thran spent another hour outside with Sam, discussing what plants they liked, how much time they wanted to devote to upkeep, and even landscape lighting to make the most of the plantings. Sam would make up a plan for all of the areas around the house, and a list of the work that needed to be done to prepare the beds. Sam and his employees would do the prep and the planting, with an eye to Bard and Thran doing the upkeep thereafter with monthly visits during the growing season to keep everything in shape. When he and Elanor headed home, Bard savored his anticipation of how the outside of the house would soon be transformed.

“It will all be beautiful, my saint,” Thran agreed, as they came in from the porch. “Not fussy or pretentious, but down to earth, and beautiful.”

“Add some porch repair to the list,” Bard exhaled. “We’ll have to wait a few weeks for that. The inside’s got the half bath, the main room, and the sitting room to go. I hope the marble mosaic tile comes in soon. I’ll probably start on the tea paper this week.”

“Tea paper,” Thran mused. “Why is it called that, when it looks nothing like anything that would hold tea?”

Bard chuckled. “I have no idea. This stuff’s not even tea paper, when it comes down to it. I was looking for real tea paper online, but I found this website that described what a nightmare that was to use as wallpaper because it was too thin and wrinkled like all hell. It pointed me to this stuff that looks like plain, silvered origami paper, but it’s heavier, and can handle wallpaper paste without wrinkling. So that’s what I got. It’ll still look hand applied.”

“And beautiful, as does everything you have done here.”

Bard smiled. “I’m glad you think so. This has been a long time coming, but the place is starting to look even better than I imagined it.”

“That is because you have tailored it to all of us who live here. Not only does it beautiful, it fits us very well.”
“I think it does,” Bard conceded with a smile as they came into the kitchen. “I suppose I’d better start supper. Tomorrow the children go back to school, you go back to *Immortal*, and I go back to renovations. We ought to get to bed a little earlier tonight.”

Thran sighed. “As much as I love the dance, I do not love the thought of how hard it will be to calm Irmo tomorrow. He will be agitated because we have not worked since Friday, but he will be even more so when he sees my arm.”

“How does it feel, after working so hard today?”

Thran tsked and waved a hand. “I hardly worked. I did enjoy it, though – the beautiful day, the arrival of spring, the reward as we returned the carriage house to useful purpose again, and mostly to work alongside my family. Legolas has never seen me do such things before.”

“That’s all great, angel, but I hope you aren’t avoiding my question – does your arm hurt?”

“It is still tender, but it improves. I was careful not to use it when I lifted anything bigger than a small flowerpot. I still marvel at how many flowerpots you collected, Bard! Dozens, from this big to immense!”

Bard laughed as Thran made a small circle with his hands of about eight inches across, then widened that circle to at least three feet across. “I don’t remember buying so many. They’ve been in there undisturbed for at least eight years... maybe the big ones bred a batch of the small ones.”

Chuckling, Thran eased off his arm brace to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. “That must be the answer. Now that they are clean, comfortable, and nested together, we must check in a few days to see if we have gained any more.”

“We’ll do that,” Bard grinned, as he got the bowl of marinating pork chops out of the fridge. He and Thran had to work to come up with a complete supper, given how sparse the stores were; that would be Bard’s first task tomorrow after the children left for school and Thran settled to work in the ballroom. Still, by the time Sigrid returned from the cinema, they had salad in progress, farro cooking, muffins for the oven, and chops on the grill. Supper was its usual lively feast of food and conversation, spiced with Sigrid’s description of the silly animated film she’d seen with her friends. Cleanup progressed as Bard cycled yet another load of laundry through the mudroom.

“How much more is left?” Thran exhaled, as Bard carted another basket of clothes through the kitchen on his way upstairs.

“One left in the dryer, and one in the washer. The one in the washer is your stuff, so it gets hung up when it’s done. That’s the last of it. After the kitchen’s clean, everybody upstairs to put your clean things away. No heaps on the floor.”

“Can we read after that?” Tilda asked.

“What comes after clean clothes? Clean children,” Bard grinned. “Except for Sigrid, all of us are filthy from the carriage house. So if there’s time after everyone’s washed, we’ll read.”

“Me first!” Tilda called, rubbing her dishcloth over a plate with more speed. “I want to find out what happens next!”

“Hair, too, little doll. You’ve still got cobwebs in it.”

“Yes, Da,” Tilda sighed with longsuffering exasperation, drawing Sigrid’s suppressed laughter. When Tilda had dried the last plate, handed it to Legolas to put in the cabinet, and hurried upstairs,
Sigrid gave her amusement full rein.

“She’s not the only one with cobwebs in her hair. But I take it you got the carriage house back to form?”

“We did,” Bard nodded. “What, you didn’t stick your head out the window to laugh at us while you cleaned your room? You had the perfect view.”

“My room took ages,” Sigrid sighed. “I had my mobile to my ear half the time, trying to explain trigonometry to Finn. That’s a lot harder on the mobile than it is in person, but I think he got it. He’s got a big test tomorrow, and he’s kind of nervous about it.”

“All of you will be back to the homework tomorrow,” Thran observed. “That will be hard, after a week off.”

“That’s no lie,” Bain groaned, and Legolas murmured in sympathy. “I didn’t miss pre-algebra homework, not one bit.”

“Or writing essays in French class,” Legolas continued.

“At least you actually speak French,” Sigrid pointed out as she wiped off the stove. “The verb tenses are so much easier for you than me.”

“That is all well and good,” Legolas shook his head. “But you are a better writer than I am. I can’t think of what to say in any language.”

“Just pretend you’re telling someone about what you’re going to write, then write that down. That’s a big help,” was Sigrid’s advice.

“I’ll try that. Even if I come up with not much of anything, it’s better than nothing at all.”

The children finished tidying the kitchen, put away their clothes, and cycled through the shower. While Thran got the last of his laundry hung on the mudroom line, Bard used the last of the wood they’d cleared out of the yard to kindle a fire in the sitting room fireplace. Everyone appreciated the chance to calm from the day’s efforts by enjoying the fire while they read the next chapter in their Harry Potter saga. Before long, it was time for bed. All of the children headed to bed with reluctance; the past week had been so full of excitement, most of it good, and they were sorry to head into a week that settled back into the pre-Follies routine...

Except Tilda.

“Is Lance going to try to hurt Sigrid?” she asked Bard as he came to tell her goodnight.

Gods, how to answer that, and just before bedtime, on top of it?

“He’s not very smart, little doll,” Bard finally said. “He got into big trouble with the police at Christmas, and then he got into even bigger trouble at the Follies. The police are doing everything they can to find him, so he doesn’t hurt anyone else. He doesn’t know where we live, and he can’t get to you at school, so it’s going to be very hard for him to even find Sigrid, much less get near her. So try not to worry.”

“I’ll try.” Tilda pulled Mr. Bun a bit tighter. “He looked kind of scared at the Follies. Am I bad because I was glad he was scared?”

Bard suppressed a swallow as he smiled at his youngest child. “No, I don’t think you’re bad, Tilda.
Lance is a bully. Most bullies aren’t very brave on the inside – that’s why they pick on those they think are weaker than they are. On Saturday, he found out that we’re not weaker than he is. We stood together – that’s what scared him. I don’t blame you for being glad that we’re stronger than he is.”

“Okay,” she nodded, smiling a little. “Okay, I’m glad I’m not bad.”

“You’ve got a good heart, and a kind soul, little doll. Sleep well.”

“Love you, Da.”

“Love you, too. See you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning.”

As Bard switched Tilda’s light off and pulled the door ajar, he clenched his jaw. He hoped the police ran Lance Dunmont to ground soon. He was running out of measured words with which to reassure his children.

Chapter End Notes

Technical Note

Just a note about Bard's silver "tea paper" wallpaper - I had a specific look in mind, but did not find anything in my research that did the job exactly as I wanted it to look. I did some test runs of my own with origami paper and Modge Podge, which produced terrible results, as the thin paper ripples when it gets wet. So I did what every good writer does - I waved my hands, intoned, "make it so!" and invented the heavy paper squares Bard talks about. I can't believe someone hasn't come up with this, but I suppose they prefer to sell stuff in rolls and sheets, such as the "Erte" wallpaper from Brunschwig & Fils.

So do not attempt this with regular origami paper and Modge Podge, or you'll get one big, wrinkled mess!
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint are determined to carry on with life, despite a pall that neither can shake entirely.

Chapter Notes

The fabulous Hal Galadhrim appears courtesy of johnnysmitten. Thank you, my dear ❤❤❤! If you'd like to see pictures of the wallpaper and floor tiles that Bard chose for the half bath, please check my Tumblr page - eldritchmage.tumblr.com

Thran was in the closet getting undressed for the shower, when Bard came into the bedroom. He threw his dirty clothes into the hamper and came out with robe in hand, but his teasing welcome for his husband died on his lips. Bard’s back might be to Thran as he drew the pocket doors to their bedroom closed, but his disquiet was obvious in his tight posture, his downcast eyes, his long exhale. Thran dropped his robe onto the bed and laid a hand on Bard’s shoulder.

“What is it, lyubov moyя?”

Another sigh, then a shake of the head that was not negation but regret. “Tilda asked me if Lance were going to hurt Sigrid. I won’t lie to her, but I won’t make her live in fear, either. So I said the police were looking for him, and we’ll stand together, but it... doesn’t sound like much.”

“It is all we can say,” Thran offered, but that was hollow reassurance – no different from how Bard regarded his own words.

“I know.” Bard’s expression was unsatisfied. “She said she thought Lance looked scared, then asked me if I thought she was bad for being glad that he was scared.”

“Oy, chert,” Thran winced. “Ten years old, and worried about the state of her morality. I would not have known how to answer her. What did you say?”

“I told her that Lance was a bully, used to picking on the weak, and he got scared when we stood together, when he realized that we weren’t weak. I said I didn’t think she was bad for being glad that he realized we were stronger than he was.”

Thran’s hand tightened on Bard’s shoulder. “That is a good answer. I would not have thought of it. But it is true, all of it. And it does not make her feel guilty because she recognized the courage to confront a bully.”

Bard looked no more reconciled. “I stood next to my sixteen-year-old daughter when that bully threatened her. She didn’t waver, and neither did the boy on the other side of her. I didn’t know
whether to be terrified, or proud.”

“Be both, but more of the second than the first. Sigrid is our lioness, and Finn is her warrior. She has you and me and Bain and Legolas, too, and also Tilda in her own way. That gave her some of that strength you saw.”

“I know that,” Bard said, but he sounded as if he were reminding himself, not agreeing with Thran. “We’ll come through this, I know we will. But we can’t let any of us face that wretch alone. I know it’s a pain, but we’ve got to make sure that none of us is alone when there’s a chance of Lance being about. If he can’t get to Sigrid, one of us in an off moment might offer him just as good a chance to take his shot.”

“True,” Thran agreed. “So we will plan accordingly. One of us will always be available for the children. That will go a long way to reassure them, and thwart Lance. Maybe once he sees that over and over again, he will decide he would be far better served to return to Florida and his grandmother.”

“I hope so,” Bard nodded. “That would make sense, so... maybe he’ll see sense.”

Bard turned from the door and slowly shed his clothes, but his preoccupied mien showed that while Bard had nothing more to say about it, his thoughts still wrestled with the subject. Likely he didn’t expect Lance to back off any more than Thran did.

How typical – Bard was an expert at silent worrying. But as Thran got into the shower with his husband, he was no less concerned. If Lance had relied on the public notices to know about Thran’s participation in the Follies, then likely he’d seen the notices for Bard’s art show, too. That would be the next chance for him to confront Clan Ffyrnig.

Tomorrow, he would call Detective Oakland, as Mr. Nori suggested. And Sergeant Fundin, too. Maybe he could interest one or both of them in Bard’s art show, and the potential appearance of a certain shadow.

Lance.

* * *

Monday dawned, rainy and dreary. The children were equally unenthused about the start to another school week, so breakfast was quiet and glum, and poking them to get dressed and out the door wasn’t fun. Thran was not much more motivated, but at least he smiled when Bard offered him an umbrella to escort the children to the bus stop. The other children and their parents were no more animated, so once the bus lumbered down the lane, everyone made do with shrugs and commiserating waves before they drifted home.

Was Bard the only person happy to start the morning? The weather didn’t bother him because he’d start the renovation of the half bath off the sitting room today. This small room was in the physical center of main floor, without windows or skylights. Whether the outside world endured rain, snow, sleet, or sun, it all looked the same from the half bath.

Before he got started on that, however, he had one unpleasant chore to do. He called the Imladris Academy and asked to speak to Headmaster L’Éärendil. As soon as he gave his name, he was put right through. It sounded as if the headmaster half expected Bard to complain about security at
Saturday's Follies, threaten to remove the children from the school, or contemplate legal action, but Bard quickly disabused him of all of those. He told the headmaster how much all of the children loved the school, but wanted to alert him of Lance’s vendetta, and the possibility that he might try to attack any of the children at the school. He also asked that school personnel refuse to release his children to anyone other than him, Thran, or the Gamgees. The headmaster was quick to reiterate that that was the school’s policy, and that he’d inform all of the sport teachers to keep a sharp eye out for anyone lurking near any of the outside athletic sessions. Bard felt a little better to hear that, so he assured Headmaster L’Eärendil that he’d convey his best wishes to Thran for his recovery, and disconnected his mobile.

Thank the gods, it was on to the half bath.

Originally, Bard had thought that because the half bath had no external light, it would be the perfect room to dazzle in deep Rembrandt red walls and a dark marble floor. But as he looked for tile, he’d been seduced by beautiful white and grey marble mosaic tile, cut in triangles that made beautiful snowflake patterns on the floor. The style wasn’t the same, but the colors and the materials reminded him of the Taj Mahal. Those tiles led to matching silver tea paper walls, and a glossy white ceiling to reflect light from flamboyant silver and crystal light fixtures, so the room would be a source of light rather than a consumer of it. As soon as he saw Thran off to the ballroom, he moved a lamp from the sitting room to the half bath to provide light, put his exotic Middle Eastern CD in the player to set the tone, and went to work.

He sanded and dusted the walls and ceiling, got out the paint tray, roller, and brush, and primed the ceiling. After working so long on the ballroom, it was a relief to work on a room where he accomplished something in an hour, rather than days. To see the ceiling go from patched white and grey to a smooth, unblemished white so quickly was a gratifying improvement. He climbed down from the ladder to greet Ori, Luka, Charisse, Irmo, Abebe, and the rest of the company back to their regular routine, then, since Thran was far from alone in the ballroom, he set off for the market. That was likely his favorite chore, given how much he enjoyed cooking good food. Mountains of food later, he was back at home, stowing staples in the pantry, veg in the crisper bins, meat in the special drawer, and the children's flowers in a vase on the kitchen table. He put on chicken breasts for Thran’s soup, then hurried back to his painting. He got the ceiling coated with its bright glossy white by the time a heavy knock sounded at the front door. He opened the door to find boxes of his long-awaited mosaic floor tiles being stacked on the porch. Once he confirmed that everything he’d ordered was there, he offered to sign for it, but the deliveryman shook his head.

“Got a few more boxes for you,” he said, heading back out to his van. What was this? It wasn’t until the remaining cartons appeared on the porch that Bard recognized the company name – these contained the antique fixtures that would appear in the central hall above Hope. Bard signed his name with anticipation, and hauled everything inside. More of the house would soon be in place.

Thran wandered through the kitchen as Bard chopped veg for the day’s soup, gracing him with a smile.

“You look happy, lyubov moya,” he observed, detouring long enough to brush a long, elegant hand over Bard’s hip. “Because you have been to the market, yes? You are always happy when you have been to the market.”

“I am, but that’s not the only good thing about a rainy Monday. The mosaic tile was delivered, and so were the light fixtures for the central hall. And the ceiling’s painted in the half bath. Tea paper this afternoon.”

“Ooh, the tile is here?” Thran craned his neck for a look down towards the hall. “Where is it?”
“In the sitting room. Take a look – one of the boxes is open. It’s exactly what I wanted.”

“I will – I was on my way to the half bath anyway. Back in a moment.” Thran disappeared into the sitting room, reappearing quickly. “It is beautiful, like pieces of colored ice. And the ceiling is brighter. It comes along.”

“It does. How was Irmo this morning?”

“Suka blyad.” Thran waved his hands as if he still tried to forestall a tirade. “I did not even show him the bruises, only the arm brace, but it was still such a volcanic eruption that I had to glare at him, even though he was very careful not to insult. Charisse and Luka and Abebe – in fact, half the company – were no less alarmed, but none of them were so crass as to descend into hysterics. It was not as if I injured myself willingly, or did something foolish. That Lance Dunmont has caused me more trouble than should be possible. I am sure it would give him spiteful amusement.”

“I’m sorry I missed Irmo’s performance. I hope you’re able to work around your bruises – I imagine you’ll want to wait a day or so before you try to lift anyone.”

“A few, yes. And of course Irmo was already irate about no work on Immortal for two and a half days, so he was in full voice. He works us hard this morning, to be sure.”

“Please, cariad, don’t let him push you faster than your body can handle. Remember that, okay?”

“I have learned my lesson, Bard. I will not let him or Immortal consume me so badly again. I promise you this.”

Bard nodded gratefully. “How’s Ori?”

“He seems untroubled. I hope he is. But he has enough of his brother’s circumspection about him that I would not recommend that anyone play poker with him, if in fact he plays.”

“That’s my sense, too,” Bard grinned. “I’ve got soup brewing for lunch. What time do you think you want to break, so I know when to put in the veg?”

Thran looked at the oven clock. “It is twelve now – perhaps at twelve-thirty? Much of the company breaks now, while Irmo works on the pas de trois with Luka, Charisse, and me. After that, the work continues on the troll market. Oh, and Hal comes with our taxes at four.”

Bard scraped the slices of carrots and onions into the pot, laying the shreds of bok choy beside the pot to go in at the last moment. “Soup at twelve-thirty then, and Hal at four. Biscuits with the soup?”

“Delightful,” Thran nodded. “Of course, you will remember to eat your share of this bounty despite your lust to lay a beautiful mosaic floor, yes?”

“Tea paper first, then the floor. The floor won’t go down until tomorrow, maybe. Everyone will have to troop upstairs to the children’s bathroom until I get tile down, grouted, and sealed.”

“We will adjust,” Thran assured him, snaring an errant carrot slice on the counter to munch it. “So back I go to the dance. I will meet you here for lunch before long.”

“Dance well, cariad,” Bard wished his husband.

After Thran headed back to the ballroom, Bard busied himself making biscuit dough and watching the soup. As he slipped in the shreds of bok choy and chopped scallions, Ori wandered in, sandwich in hand, looking none the worse for wear for his sojourn with his cousins. He was still with them, but
seemed unconcerned.

“They’re a good pair, if a bit fonder of late hours than I am. But their guest room is quiet, and this time they remembered to stock the kitchen with more than energy drinks and junk food. I do a lot of the cooking, which they can’t be bothered with, so they’re happy to have me because they eat a lot better than when they have to fend for themselves. This time, they’re even happier – I’ve stolen half a dozen of your soup recipes, so they’re eating even better.”

Laughing, Bard put the pan of biscuits in the oven, then got out a pair of soup bowls from the cabinet. “You’re welcome to them. Both your brothers are well, I hope?”

“Dori’s having a wonderful time in the Bahamas. Wherever he is, they serve British tea every day, so he’s in his element.” Ori sat down at the kitchen table to unwrap his sandwich. “He’s so enamored with British tea that I’d hoped Nori would send him to the British countryside, maybe the Lake District, but Dori wanted warm, so he got the Caribbean.”

“How is Nori?”

Ori’s smile didn’t falter as he chewed a bit of his sandwich, but his eyes sharpened a hair. “He says he’s fine. I believe he is – Nori’s never been one to stick his neck out like a common fool. But the fallout of this gang war has been slow to settle, which tells me that it was a bigger shakeup than any of us expected.”

“Maybe Angelo’s turf was worth more than anyone realized, and it’s still being fought over?”

“I expect that that is exactly the case,” Ori nodded. “The proverbial fence is very crowded with people waiting to see who ends up with what. So far, as soon as someone claims anything of Angelo’s, someone else challenges, a fight ensues, and soon another claimant appears. It’s gone through three changes of hands already.”

“So a lot of your brother’s people are probably leery of doing anything until things settle, so they don’t find themselves on the wrong side of whatever power structure prevails.”

“Then you’ve got the boy who started this whole thing after you, too.”

Bard gave Ori a look. “Is there anything you can tell me about that?”

Ori shook his head as he swallowed his mouthful. “Other than he’s not with his mother in the city, he’s not in Florida with his grandmother, and he’s not in his usual digs. But he got out to your children’s school twice.”

Bard nodded.

Ori considered as he took another bite of his sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. “I had a thought...”

“Anything.”

“He was there Thursday and Saturday, but not Friday that you know of.”

Bard nodded.

“What was different about Friday?”

Bard shrugged. “I don’t know – likely a thousand things.”

“Maybe so. But what comes to my mind is that it rained Friday night. Not Thursday, and not
Saturday.”

“Which means... what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he didn’t want to schlep through the cold and the wet. Which makes me wonder... maybe he’s on foot.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “Interesting. Maybe he’s alone, having to rely on what he sees on the media for where we’ll be, then he’s got to walk there.”

Ori nodded. “That’s plausible.”

“I think so, too.”

“Are there any gangs out here?”

Bard shrugged. “I would think so, but I haven’t seen any sign of them, and the children haven’t said anything. Two of them know the signs, and I think they’d have said something about it. But I’ll ask them tonight. Why do you ask?”

“Maybe you should talk to the police officer whom you talked to about Lance. Ask him if any of the local gangs have seen him. If he’s on his own, he might try to find a port in the storm.”

The oven timer dinged, but Bard gave Ori a respectful look before he took out his pan of biscuits. “That’s a good idea. I’ll do that.”

He turned off the burner under the soup, then put out the crock of butter, some jam, and the bottle of honey on the table with the biscuits. He ladled out a big bowl of soup for himself, and sat beside Ori to talk about inconsequentials while they ate. Ori was an easy companion, and Bard enjoyed having his company. Before long, Thran, Charisse, and Luka came in to take their break, and enjoyed a very brief few minutes of eating, followed by a few more of conversation and relaxation. Irmo must have remained as intense as Thran had mentioned earlier, for none of the dancers ate much, sure sign that they’d be back in action before long. When they rose to go back to the ballroom, they took Ori with them, so Bard prepped a couple of whole chickens to roast in the oven for tonight’s supper. Then he was back in the half bath, ready to start the tea paper.

Once he drew his level lines, and figured out how wet to make each square, he made good progress. He didn’t have much cutting to do except at the top and bottom of the walls. There was no woodwork in the room, but he planned to put both crown and base molding, so his cuts didn’t have to be so exacting as to be a pain. He’d have to take the sink and toilet out to do the last bit of wallpaper behind them, but since he’d have to remove both before he put down the floor tomorrow, he’d do the last few squares then.

He’d gotten all of it in place before a knock sounded on the front door – that must be Hal. Sure enough, he opened the door on the flamboyant financial planner with his R-8 parked behind him in the driveway. The tall, slender blonde was resplendent in a sleek, form-fitting black leather jacket with blue jeans, kiltie loafers, a crisp white shirt, and a lavender suede vest. Today his cufflinks were small, golden cupcakes, to match his pastel lavender tie embroidered with small, pastel cupcakes. On anyone else, this combination would look ridiculous; on Hal, it was the height of chic. He had his usual briefcase in one hand, and a gold foil box was carefully balanced on the other.

“Bard!” Hal greeted with a delighted smile. “How wonderful to see you again! Oh, my god, I’ve interrupted you in the middle of something, I see! More renovation?”

“It never ends around here, I’m afraid,” Bard grinned. “It’s good to see you, too, Hal. Come on in.
Put your things in the dining room, and I’ll grab the dancer from the ballroom.”

“T’ve you will,” teased Hal, as he set the box carefully down on the table and then his briefcase. “How is the world’s most elegant and ethereal dancer?”

“He’s well,” Bard replied, heading for the ballroom with Hal in close pursuit. “Come on, let’s see if we can pry him away from things for a few minutes.”

Bard and Hal came into the ballroom to find Thran in his pointe shoes, moving as easily as if he were floating. When he balanced in an ethereal arabesque, Hal’s mouth gaped and his eyes were wide as he put one hand to his heart, and the other on Bard’s shoulder.

“Oh. My. God,” Hal breathed, then swallowed. “That should be illegal. Oh, my god, so illegal.”

Bard smothered a chuckle, and hoped that the price for such unbelievably airy, alien grace wouldn’t be the permanent crippling of at least one long, slender foot. “As you said, the world’s most ethereal dancer.”

“And the hottest,” Hal said without apology, drawing Bard’s chuckle. “Absolutely the hottest.”

Hal was right, but Bard wasn’t about to say so in public.

Thran finished the sequence of steps, and came out of character to listen to something Irmo said. Charisse spotted them at the door, waved a greeting, and pointed them out to Thran. Thran gave them a smile, then spoke to Irmo, who looked disgruntled, but waved a hand in dismissal. Thran crossed to them with a small, wry smile on his face at Irmo’s displeasure, but it widened as he drew closer.

“Welcome, Hal,” he met Hal’s hug with his own as they came into the main room. “It is good to see you again, my friend.”

“I can’t tell you what it’s like to see you in pointe shoes, Thran,” Hal exclaimed. “Oh, my god, you just about gave me a heart attack! You look like an angel!”

Thran chuckled as he pulled on a pair of leggings to keep his muscles warm. “I take that as the highest compliment, Hal. It is not easy to balance so much of me on toes alone. I cannot contemplate it too much, or I am not able to do it at all.”

“It’s spectacular. You’re spectacular. Is this for this new ballet of yours?”

“It is only an exercise at this point, trying to get more deeply into my character. He is very tall. But whether pointe work is safe enough for me to include it in any sort of regular performance schedule is a different story. It takes a great deal of strength.”

Bard didn’t say anything. As far as he knew, Thran was expecting to put his pointe work into a single scene of the ballet. But his husband had also told him that Hal was a notorious gossip about everything except his clients’ finances. Until the ballet was finally set, Thran wouldn’t want to commit himself to dancing on pointe.

“It looked divine, Thran. Absolutely divine. You’d have the ballet world groveling at your feet in those pointe shoes if you’d do it.”

“You are kind to say so, Hal,” Thran nodded, shrugging into his sweater, and wrapping another around his ribs. “Now, I am sorry that I cannot linger over your visit as I would like to, but my choreographer is already most annoyed with me for daring to take the weekend off, so perhaps we
could see to our tax papers?”

“Of course, Thran,” Hal nodded understandingly. “We’ll get right down to it.”

Bard’s mobile chimed. At Thran and Hal’s inquiring looks, he explained, “Thran, the kettle’s hot. Why don’t you pour Hal a cup of tea and start on yours? I’ll get the children at the bus stop, and be back in a moment.”

“Oh, I was hoping I’d get to meet your children, Bard,” Hal smiled, patting the gold box he’d carried in with him. “I brought treats. I bake in my spare time, you know, and I wanted to bring you something to thank you for the muffins you made at my last visit. They were over the top.”

“Hal is a very good baker, too,” Thran affirmed, smiling. “Cupcakes.”

“Always,” Hal pointed at his tie. “The perfect little gems. I never get tired of them. So I brought along a few for you and yours.”

“That’s kind of you, Hal,” Bard said in appreciation. “I’ll be back with the children, and they’ll be your friends for life.”

Hal looked pleased at Bard’s prediction, drawing his husband’s smile, too. But as Bard made his excuses, Thran gave Bard a sober look.

“Take Ori with you, lyubov moya. He expects you.”

Bard’s expression didn’t change, but he nodded in agreement as he headed to the ballroom.

Lance.

* * *

As soon as Bard left the dining room, Hal’s happy expression sharpened. His blue-green eyes met Thran’s without a blink.

“Since when does your very hunky husband need an escort to the children’s bus stop?”

Thran didn’t try to evade Hal’s question. “Since we have acquired a stalker. The aftermath of our fight on Christmas Day.”

Hal listened impassively to Thran’s brief explanation as he got out the papers for Thran’s tax return. “I assume Nori Goldman’s aware?”

Thran told him of Mr. Nori’s situation.

“The boy’s a rogue, then.”

Thran nodded.

Hal sighed, all flamboyance forgotten. “Security system on the house, I assume? And no one goes anywhere alone?”

Thran nodded again.
“So your children are protected most of the time. Sensible. You know to watch for those one-off moments, I’m sure.”

“I expect the next one-off, as you call them, to be Bard’s art show on April 30 at the Ilithien Gallery.”

Hal nodded. “So would I. It might be interesting to attend it myself.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I must ask... how long has it been since you were in a karate studio, Hal?”

As the front door opened, signaling the arrival of Bard and the children, Hal’s face waxed with its usual teasing grin, and he waved both his hands. “Oh, pfft, Thran. Don’t expect me to save the day for you with any of that. I’m only looking out for myself, you know – or don’t you? Honestly, it’s not rocket science, Thran! Art shows are the best places to meet artsy men! I’m always happy to meet more of those!”

Thran laughed at his friend’s joke as the children tumbled into the kitchen. Hal meant what he said about enjoying the chance to make new acquaintances. Still, he’d had to deal with too many incarnations of anger over the years, just because he was open and unapologetic about who he was. His claim of rusty karate skills, then, was a lie.

Lance.

* * *

“Nobody should go out alone, that’s what Thran said,” Ori shrugged, as he and Bard slipped out the front door to head for the bus stop. “And I don’t mind a breath of fresh air, even if it is still raining. It is nice to get away from Irmo for a few minutes. He still takes a lot of concentration.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Bard admitted as they headed out of the front door. “So much energy, a focus that’s nothing but sharp, and so many ideas.”

“It’s not so bad now, because he’s learned to trust Thran, Charisse, me, Abebe – even poor Luka, believe it or not. Luka’s settled down a lot, and Thran’s bringing him along very well. Your husband is very smart with him.”

“Smart how?”

“He ignores the stupid bits, and rewards the good bits, and Charisse does the same thing. So even a puppy like Luka figures out to stop the stupid bits and do more good bits, because he gets a reward. He’s going to be really good before long, if he’s smart enough to keep listening.”

“Do you think he is? Smart enough, I mean?”

Ori nodded, breaking into a grin as they headed out of the driveway and down the lane. “Irmo isn’t insulting the way he was before you threw him out, but he can be terribly scathing. When Luka does something stupid that attracts Irmo’s wrath, no one says a word, and Luka’s just got to put up with whatever Irmo dishes out. When Luka does something smart, and Irmo gets in his face, everyone jumps to Luka’s defense. That’s strong incentive not to do something stupid.”

“It is,” Bard smiled.
The children arrived in a few minutes, greeting Ori and Bard with glad waves. They chatted with Bard and Ori on the short walk home. Homework had resumed, which made none of the children happy, but at least Monday was over, and they had a few minutes’ respite before they had to worry about tackling their assignments. Ori went back to the ballroom with a wave, and the children dove into the kitchen, intending to get out their usual snack of cheese, crackers, and fruit, but Bard put a hand on the fridge door before Tilda could get it open.

“Hang on,” Bard asked. “We’ve got a guest in the dining room, and he’s brought you a present. So let’s go in and say hello. Remember your manners, all.”

“Who is it?” Sigrid asked. “That policeman?”

Bard shook his head. “No, this is our financial planner. He’s here for Thran and me to sign our tax returns. He was nice enough to bring treats.”

“What is it? Food, I hope?” Bain asked hungrily.

“Is it Mr. Galadhrim?” Legolas asked with an eager expression on his face.

“That’s him.”

“The cupcake man!” Legolas exclaimed. “He makes the fanciest ones I’ve ever seen. They’re good, too. Really good.”

All of the children oohed, even Sigrid, drawing Bard’s grin. “Don’t drool, okay? Don’t be grabby, say please and thank you, and don’t wolf whatever he’s brought you down like you’re starving.”

“I am starving,” Bain groaned. “Where are they – I mean, where is he?”

“Dining room. Sedate walk, please.”

The children walked briskly into the dining room, where Thran and Hal were sipping tea and shuffling papers. Bard tried not to snicker at how quickly four sets of eyes went right to Hal’s gold foil box sitting temptingly to one side of all the paperwork. The man smothered a grin, but he was as excited as the children were, so Bard didn’t drag things out.

“This is Mr. Galadhrim, children. Hal, you know Legolas; this is Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.”

“Hi, Mr. Galadhrim,” the children chorused.

“Oh pfft,” Hal waved a hand. “That’s my father. Just call me Mr. Hal. Your father makes the most delicious muffins, so I thought it was only fair to bring him a cupcake in appreciation. But it’s so silly to bring just one cupcake, so I brought a few more, on the off chance that some of you might fancy one.”

“I already told everyone how good your cupcakes are, Mr. Hal,” Legolas said. “So I don’t think whatever you brought will go lacking.”

Hal laughed outright at Legolas’s bluntness. “I’m glad to hear that, Legolas. So go ahead, let Uncle Hal spoil your dinner with a little treat.”

The children all looked to Bard and Thran, who both nodded assent. Bard wasn’t about to deny the children after such a buildup, so Hal chortled as he opened his box. Legolas was right – Bard had never seen such beautifully frosted and decorated treats. Two were lavishly covered with frothy coconut frosting, then sprinkled with small gold stars. A raspberry nestled atop swirls of white and
dark chocolate frosting. A candied orange slice perched in the middle of small dark chocolate rosettes. Candied violets were sprinkled over more curls of paler chocolate. The final one had a spiral of peanuts circling more chocolate frosting.

“Wow,” Bain breathed. “I’ve never seen cupcakes like this.”

“Told you,” Legolas gave Bain a sideways look.

“Yes, you did,” Bain nodded.

“They’re almost too pretty to eat,” was Sigrid’s comment.

“No, they’re not,” Tilda said firmly. “Mr. Hal, may I have one of the coconut ones?”

“You certainly may, Tilda!” Hal waved a hand. “The other coconut one is for Legolas. There are two chocolate ones for Bain and Sigrid – the chocolate peanut, and the other’s chocolate cherry, which are boring as decorations, so as I’m celebrating spring, violets are perfect for that one. The chocolate orange is Bard’s, and the chocolate raspberry is Thran’s, of course. Please, enjoy!”

The children didn’t have to be asked twice, and while Bard had decided he’d defer his treat until after dinner, he didn’t have the heart to deny Hal the pleasure of watching them enjoy his efforts. Even Thran had his, and seemed to enjoy every bite of his cake. If the children’s hums were any indication, they were just as entranced. As a baker himself, Bard appreciated the taste of excellent chocolate combined with the deep, nuanced flavor that spoke of orange liqueur, essence, and oil. The frosting was rich, the cake was dense and moist – the combination was devastating. No one would need dessert after supper tonight.

“That was awesome,” Bain breathed, as he licked the last bit of chocolate and peanut icing from his fingers. “Completely and totally awesome.”

Hal’s smile was wide. “Thank you, Bain. That’s the best compliment a baker can have.”

The other children were no less effusive, which pleased Hal no end as they drifted back to the kitchen to clean out their backpacks. The delectable treat did make it a bit easier to go through the tedium of reviewing his tax return. The papers reflected a pathetic existence, but it was a past existence, and Bard refused to allow it to dampen his spirits or the lingering taste of his treat. Life was different now, and would only improve, so he didn’t care how little he’d made last year. If his show did well, he’d make almost as much from it as he did in any six months of last year.

He sat through the review of Thran’s return, understanding more than he expected, if not everything. He was learning, then. He signed his papers, consigned them to Hal, and after a few minutes of chatting, he and Thran walked Hal to the door with profuse thanks, both for the completion of an onerous chore as well as for the cupcakes. The children appeared to offer their repeated thanks for Hal’s treats, which the financial planner met with a promise of more treats next time he came to visit.

“Thanks for thinking of the children, Hal,” Bard offered his hand as they stood on the porch to bid Hal goodbye. “That was above and beyond.”

“I bake a lot,” Hal shrugged as if it were no consequence. “It’s my therapy. Nothing’s better to cheer you up than a blingy cupcake.”

“You could open a catering company,” Thran told him. “Custom blingy cupcakes for every special event.”

“Maybe I will,” Hal said coyly as he went down the porch steps. “Though god knows who could
afford me. I’m a very expensive baker!”

Thran laughed. “You have lots of clients who can afford your blingy cupcakes, Hal. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“I do,” he admitted with an unapologetic smile. “So keep in touch, love birds. Ciao!”

Hal got into his blingy car, offered a wave, and drove off.

“Such a character,” Thran shook his head fondly.

“He is,” Bard agreed. “It was kind of him to think of the children.”

“He is a very good uncle. He has always been so, despite a precarious and difficult path in his youth. A good friend, a good heart, a good soul... I am glad to know him.”

Thran’s thoughtful voice drew Bard. “What?”

Thran stared after Hal for a second or two more, then headed back inside with Bard. “I merely consider another who has trod a precarious and difficult path, but he is neither generous nor thoughtful.”

Bard exhaled. “There’s no rhyme or reason to it.”

“There is not. Nor is there much else to say about it.”

Thran’s hand came to rest on Bard’s shoulder as they came back into the kitchen. It was a kind gesture, but it didn’t chase away the spectre of an angry child who wished them ill.

Lance.

* * *

Thran went back to the ballroom, so Bard intended to start on supper preparations when he came into the kitchen. The children, however, had spilled into the sitting room to discover Bard’s boxes of floor tiles sitting by the half bath door.

“Oooh, Da!” Tilda exclaimed, holding one up. “They’re like dominos, except hexagonal!”

Sigrid was in the half bath, studying the walls. “Wow, the wallpaper’s up, too! This looks so amazing, Da, like little silver tiles.”

The other children had joined Tilda to take a few tiles out of the box, and soon the boys and Tilda were laying out tiles on the wooden floor, arranging them in different patterns. “They’re all different,” Legolas commented, holding one up. “So... there’s no pattern to how you put them down, I guess?”

Sigrid came out of the half bath to watch them. “It looks like a pattern to me, Legs. See, look, when you put them next to each other, they look like little boxes stacked up, like that quilt pattern, Tumbling Blocks.”

Legolas looked up. “Really? I think they look like diamond shapes, put together like flowers.”
“No, they’re triangles,” Tilda insisted. “A lot of triangles.”

Bard laughed. “They look like all of those. That’s why I liked it, because it looks different any way you look at them. And the marble colors are amazing. It’s called Zebra.”

“It does look sort of like a zebra pattern,” Tilda said, turning her head this way and that. “But Legolas is right; they’re all different. So how do you put them together?”

“Just like Legolas thought – any way you want. I’ll just lay them as they come out of the box. Then you can make all sorts of patterns, every time you look at them.”

“They’re gorgeous,” Sigrid declared, kneeling down to put a few more tiles beside the ones her brothers and sister had arranged. “And such cool colors.”

“Reminds me of geometry,” Bain said. “Which is a million times more fun than pre-algebra. I miss it.”

“Me, too,” Legolas groaned. “Next year’s real algebra. Yuck!”

“So you’re doing the floor tomorrow, Da?” Sigrid asked, grinning at the boys’ complaints.

“It’ll take a couple of days for the floor, so you’ll have to hike upstairs until it’s done. A lot of sticking and sealing and grouting and more sealing to do.”

“But it’ll look so worth it when you’re done,” Sigrid encouraged. “It already does look amazing.”

“Thanks,” Bard tugged Sigrid’s braid. “So put all the tiles carefully in the box, please. Make sure you don’t scratch them, so put the paper inserts back between them. So who are sous chefs tonight?”

“I am,” Bain said.

“I am, too,” Legolas looked up. “What are we making tonight, Bard?”

“Roast chicken, sweet potatoes, green beans, kale, and fruit salad.”

“Roast chicken,” Bain hummed, smiling hungrily. “My favorite.”

Bard laughed. “You say that for every meal. And that’s not a complaint. So let’s get started, all. The chickens take an hour.”

The children separated, Sigrid and Tilda to start their homework, and Bain and Legolas to help Bard prepare supper. When the prep was done, the boys got the vase from their memory shelf and joined the girls around the kitchen table to fill it with some of the flowers from the big vase. Once they’d arranged the yellow and white tulips to their satisfaction, they took the vase upstairs, then worked on homework until it got close to suppertime. They put their books and papers aside to set the table, and by the time the ballet company appeared to go home, supper was close at hand. Thran ran upstairs to get out of his dance things and into comfortable leggings and Henley and socks, and appeared in time to sit down with the rest of the family.

It was just a Monday night, devoid of fanfare. The food was delicious, but nothing fancy. Why, then did Bard look around the table so often to savor the conversational trivialities as if they were treasures, from reports of upcoming tests and school projects, to a silly joke from Luka, to comparison of cupcake flavors, to guesses about what to do with leftover marble floor tiles?

Because a shadow hung over Bard’s thoughts.
Lance.
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint are determined not to let a shadow keep them from making the most of their lives.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all. Welcome to Chapter 100! Who expected a holiday tale to take on such a life of its own? I certainly didn't!

Thank you for being such generous readers who leave me so many wonderful comments - it's such a thrill to see them appear in my inbox. Also, thank you for loving our ethereal angel, hunky saint, choir of cherubs, and cast of eccentric supporting characters so much. They've all been the best playmates!

Muffins all around!

After supper, Thran, Sigrid, and Tilda worked in the kitchen, putting the few leftovers away, washing the silver flatware and pots, loading the dishwasher, and tidying everything to Bard’s usual immaculate standards. How funny it was – Bard worked this beautiful kitchen as hard as professional chefs worked theirs, but when he wasn’t cooking, it always looked as if no one ever ventured here. When Thran had teased him about it, he’d gotten a grin in return.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? I cook a lot more when I don’t have to clean up the previous meal first.”

No one could argue with that. So Thran and the girls scrubbed and dried and wiped until everything was ready for Bard’s next foray.

As the girls joined the boys to work on their homework, Thran brought his tea into the sitting room, but he didn’t expect to see Bard at work on his sketchbook. All during the kitchen cleanup, the high whine of a drill and a saw had punctuated the proceedings. Indeed, the half bath sink and toilet languished like Dada-esque sculpture in the corner of the sitting room, and thin grey something now overlaid the wood subfloor. His husband sat in the middle of the grey expanse, setting out the floor tiles.

“Children play with blocks. Their parents play with floor tiles,” Thran quipped, squatting on his heels to peek into the half bath.

Snickering, Bard took another tile out of the box. “We have just as much fun, too. Maybe more.”

“So it seems. The wallpaper is beautiful.”

“Thanks. I just got the last bit up where the toilet and sink were, just before I put down the backer board. I like the way the tea paper turned out. Tomorrow, it’ll be completely dry, so I can put up the
sconces and the chandelier. Then it’ll really sparkle.”

Bard got to his knees to reach the cardboard box that sat in the corner. He unwrapped tissue paper from the contents and held up a silver sconce with a ring of crystal prisms dangling at the bottom. “Daphne found these in a junk shop a long time ago. I liked them, too. There’s a small chandelier that’s a close match, so they’ll look great in here. Lots of light.”

“I like them, too. There will be room for a chair or a stool, yes?”

“Uh-huh.” Bard set the sconce aside, but didn’t meet Thran’s eyes as he went back to placing the tile.

“Ah. You have found one worthy of this beautiful setting.”

Bard’s expression was chagrined. “That’s the second time in twenty-four hours that you’ve read my mind.”

“Have I?” Thran worked to keep his voice casual as he came to sit beside Bard. He studied the floor, then reached into the box of tiles, took one out, and placed it beside a row of other tiles. “I improve, then. You already read mine so well.”

“You knew I wanted to talk to Sigrid about going to the cinema yesterday. Now you know I saw the perfect chair to go in here.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s not out of a junk shop, and it’s expensive.”

“That is hardly descriptive. What does it look like?”

“I repeat, it’s expensive.”

“So what?” Thran shrugged without heat as he placed another tile. “Food is expensive. We still buy it.”

Bard exhaled. “All right, all right. It’s beautifully shaped, it’s got a Rembrandt red seat cushion, and... it’s transparent.”

“Transparent?” That had not been what Thran had expected, not at all. The surprise made him smile as he met Bard’s eyes. “Ah, I have it! It looks as if it were carved out of ice, yes? Or crystal, like the pieces of the sconces? Already I like this chair! You have a picture, I assume?”

“I have a picture.”

“Show me.”

Bard got up to fetch Thran’s laptop from the sitting room. He resumed his seat beside Thran as he called up a picture of exactly what he’d described – a traditionally styled arm chair cast in utterly transparent acrylic, with a tufted mohair cushion in the rich red Bard liked so much.

“Think of how beautiful Charisse will look perched on this chair, Thran, fixing her pointe shoes. That’s what did it for me.”

Thran wrapped his arm around Bard’s waist as he peered at the picture. “Your vision is perfect, lyubov moya, and so is this chair. We will find one.”
“There are three places in metro New York where we can get one.”

“Put it on the list.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I like it. You have worked so hard on so much of the house, Bard. We can buy a few new things that add to your perfection. This is one such. I attend my pointe class in the city tomorrow, and afterwards I expect to stop at the shop that has the sofa I like. Perhaps they sell this chair there, and I will see it at the same time. If not, I can stop on another day at another shop.”

“That sounds great. Just make sure the chair is sturdy enough, and looks like it’s made of crystal, not cheap plastic. You know elegance – that’s what we want.”

Thran nodded, pleased that Bard trusted him to decide if the chair suited them or not. “Where are the shops that sell this marvel?”

When Bard looked it up, they discovered that the shop with the sofa Thran liked also carried this chair, so tomorrow Thran would evaluate both after his class. They discussed the tile as they laid it in place, checking to see how best to align it to that it looked well arranged. Bard gave him a quick summary of all the steps to put in this floor, which he expected would take at least two and likely three days until everything dried completely.

“So the company will need to venture upstairs for those days,” Thran surmised.

“Have to, yes – no sink or toilet down here. It’s not the work that takes so long, but the drying. Just like the floor upstairs.”

Thran hummed. “It may be prudent to hold our session in the UVB studio for those days, just so that so many people do not wear a path through the house. On the other hand, that would leave you alone in the house, which I do not like.”

“We have a security system. If you work in the UVB studio, I’ll set it to the nighttime setting. Most of the day, I’d be inside, anyway – I can put up the central chandeliers, paint the second and third floor landings, stencil our bedroom, put our bed together –”

“Or work on Rahmiel,” Thran interrupted, laughing. “You cannot forget your art, Bard. I hope that you finish Rahmiel enough to have it appear in your show. It is wonderful, and would be the best incentive to get people excited about your sculpture. Which of your finished pieces do you plan to show?”

“The rings would be the easiest to move. Sea Spot Run won’t be, but it’s the kind of work I like to do. Or maybe the pine tree, because of the moving parts.”

“Have you heard from Bilbo?”

“Not for a few days. He knew we were tied up with the Follies.” Bard looked up from the tiles to catch Thran’s eyes. “You know, I was so wrapped up in our business at the Follies that I forgot to find out how much my sketch brought, or if it even sold.”

“I am sure it sold, lyubov moya. Perhaps you can ask Mr. Rohan when you go to the school this week.”

“I will. I go Wednesday this week, so I’ll be sure to ask him.” Bard exhaled as he eyeballed the tiles he and Thran had laid. “See, that ends up with more half tiles on both of the side walls. So if we slide
everything over half a tile...”

Thran helped Bard to shift the tiles they’d put down, then his husband stood up to eyeball everything again.

“That’s better,” he cocked his head as he considered. “More full tiles on both sides.”

“Ah, I see what you mean,” Thran agreed, as Bard pulled a pencil out of his shirt pocket to scratch out a mark on the backer board and make a new mark to show the new starting point. “It is good that you thought to lay everything out first before you glued.”

“You’ve heard the expression, ‘measure twice; cut once,’ yeah? When it comes to tile, the saying is, ‘dry fit first, then glue.’ That avoids a lot of wasted tile and torn out hair.”

Thran snickered. “Prudent. Oh, put a different tile down for that dark one. The one next to it is also dark, and the combination stands out too much. A lighter one would look better.”

Bard swapped the offending tile with a lighter one. “You’re right. Better?”

“Much. How will you know which ones to put where?”

“I’ll lay out the whole floor, make sure that we like the layout, then I’ll number all of the tiles so they go back down the way we liked them.”

“So much work!”

Bard shrugged. “It doesn’t take long. Better than being unhappy about two dark tiles next to each other for the next fifty years.”

Thran looked up at Bard. “Fifty years. Imagine what it will be like when we have lived here together for fifty years.”

Grinning, Bard continued to lay down the tiles. “As long as I don’t have to imagine you complaining about those two dark tiles next to each other.”

“Or that you complain about two light tiles next to each other.”

“That’s why I’m laying them out, cariad. So neither of us has a reason to complain.”

“We will be forced to think of something else to talk about after fifty years, then.” Thran lowered his voice to a whisper. “How I fucked you on this cool marble floor in the heat of summer, perhaps.”

Caught off guard, Bard flushed red as he paused in the laying of tiles. “Now there’s an image I won’t get out of my head for a while.”

“I will give you the reality behind what you imagine on the first hot day when we are alone.”

“Not if I nail you first.”

“Even if you nail me second, it will be a wonderful thing to smile about fifty years from now.”

“I’m smiling right now.”

Thran glanced out of the half bath towards the kitchen, but the children were intent on their homework; Sigrid was explaining some point of math to the boys. He took advantage of their preoccupation to insinuate his right hand behind Bard’s nape and draw him close to kiss. “So am I.”
“You’re a menace.”

“If I did not have this brace on my arm, I would not merely kiss you.”

“What, would I get a little of this?” Bard kissed back, fingers stroking Thran’s crotch.

“Now you are the menace.”

“I bet you won’t complain about that fifty years from now.”

“No more than I will now. But I suggest you stop before you find yourself upstairs in bed on your back with me about to desecrate your ass.”

“Da? Can I have some cheese and crackers?” Tilda called.

Thran snickered at how red Bard blushed as he struggled to answer his daughter. “Are you through your homework?”

“Not yet. I’m too hungry.”

“So am I,” whispered Thran, drawing a whispered curse from his husband.

“How much do you have left to do?”

“I have new French words, and I have half of my geography map to do.”

“Finish your map first, then you can have your cheese and crackers while Ada does your words.”

A long sigh. “Okay. I’ll do the map first.”

“Thank you, little doll.” Bard shoved Thran’s shoulder, smiling ruefully. “No thanks to you, you fucker. You’re determined to get us in trouble with the children.”

Thran grinned. “You are funny when I make you blush. Such a shy man you seem then.”

“Don’t push it, bastard. Or you’ll find out how shy I’m not in private. You’ll be too sore to dance in the morning.”

“Such temptation,” Thran purred. “But I will behave myself, if you insist.”

They went back to lay the last batch of tiles, then spent a few minutes rearranging them until they had a layout of the varying stripes that pleased them. Thran came out into the sitting room to listen to Tilda recite her French vocabulary words, leaving Bard to pull out his pencil again and label all the tiles. He stacked each row of tiles up carefully outside the half bath in preparation for tomorrow’s effort. He had a length of board, the bucket of mastic, and a bag of small things he called tile spacers ready, so he’d be able to start work as soon as the children were off to school.

As Tilda came in with her cheese, crackers, and vocabulary list, Bard took the box of sconces and chandelier into the mudroom to clean and polish so they’d be pristine when he put them up tomorrow morning. Sigrid headed upstairs to shower and study for a physics test. Thran moved to the other sofa to let Tilda, Bain, and Legolas play Dinky Farm; when Bard came back with the cleaned light fixtures, he and Thran took the boys’ places so they could cycle through the shower after Sigrid. At the end of the game, Tilda headed upstairs to take her shower, leaving Thran and his husband alone in the sitting room.

“Before you ravish me on the sofa,” Bard said, putting a hand on Thran’s chest to forestall the kiss
he was about to bestow, “I called the children’s school today to tell them about Lance.”

Thran sobered. “I should have thought to do that, but I did not. What did you tell them?”

“Just that the boy had a grudge against the children, but might strike at anyone, and not to release the children to anyone but you, me, or the Gamgees. Headmaster L’Eärendil said he’d alert the sport instructors to keep an eye out for anyone who hangs around.”

“I am glad you called, my saint. I am glad the school will watch out for all of the children. Now I have my own confession to make.”

“Yes?” Bard turned concerned eyes on him.

“I did not think to call the school, but I did think to call Detective Oakland, and Sergeant Fundin. This was not entirely my idea; Mr. Nori suggested it when I talked with him last.”

“We’re not a city jurisdiction out here, angel, so I don’t know that they’d be able to do anything for us.”

“You are right – officially, they cannot. However, I called to suggest that as intelligent and discerning people, they might well find a display of beautiful artwork worth their perusal.”

Bard laughed outright. “Gods, angel! That’s hilarious! What did Mr. D have to say to that?”

“I admit it – he laughed. Very loudly. But he did not say no. He did ask if there would be food.”

“There’s always food at an art show. Around here, it used to be that the grungier the art, the more elegant the food. I’ll talk to Bilbo and see what he has in mind. Usually, it’s what the children call party food – little bites of things, stuff that doesn’t need utensils, or heating or chilling, and won’t sully the art. It’s stuff that I imagine Hal would love. Mr. D, not so much. Too fiddly for him.”

“At least I told him there would be food. I said nothing about alcohol.”

“That’s a loaded gun, to be honest. Sparkling cider looks fancy, but doesn’t send people careening out into the streets afterwards. I’ll bet Bilbo opts for that. I would.”

“Wise,” Thran nodded. “I do not know if either will come, but I let them both know about our suppositions and why we think it is likely that Lance will appear. To their minds, he is a very small fish, not worth bothering about. But Mr. D asked that I offer you and the children his regards, so perhaps he will out of friendship.”

“He’d do something like that,” Bard admitted. “That reminds me – Ori had a good suggestion for me this afternoon, but I forgot to follow through with it. He suggested I call Officer Kelso and ask him about any local gangs. If Lance is on his own, he might try to find a place with one of them.”

“I had not thought of that,” Thran agreed. “Yes, I think you should call him, too. We do not presume to tell him his business, but it does not hurt to offer a suggestion, either.”

“I’ll call him now, then, and leave him a message.” Bard pulled out his mobile, checked for the officer’s number on his caller ID, then called it. He got the officer’s voice mail, summarized what he and Thran had just discussed, left his number, and disconnected the call.

“We’ve done everything we can think of to do,” Bard exhaled.

“One more thing,” Thran prompted, pulling out his mobile and pushed a few buttons. “The security
system is armed now. We are as secure as we can be for the night.”
“Y’ll still make the rounds,” Bard said, rising. “Just to say I have.”
“And I with you,” Thran nodded.

They circled the house, from sitting room and solarium; to kitchen, mudroom, dining room, and central hall; to the main room and the ballroom; and back to the central hall to go upstairs. Tilda was ready for bed; Sigrid continued to study for her physics test. Legolas and Bain were in Bain’s room with a pre-algebra book open between them.
“I remember it when I see it written down,” Bain explained, holding up a sheet of paper. “Sigrid wrote it all out for us. I just... can’t remember it when I’m not looking at the paper.”
“So I’m helping Bain to memorize it. I have a hard time with it, too.”
“Not as hard as me,” Bain groaned. “What’s Step Four, again?”
“Divide,” Legolas prompted.
“Divide!” Bain grimaced. “Why can’t I remember the divide!?”
“You can make a memory word for each step, then remember each of the memory words,” Thran offered. “So if the first step is...”
“Group the terms,” Legolas said.
“So that is Group. The second is...?”
“Add the terms.”
“So that is Add. Step three is...”
“Put one term on one side, and the other on the other side.”
“Hmm. We will call that Separate. Step Four is Divide. What comes next?”
“Substitute the value for the first term into the other equation, then solve for the second term, then put the second term back in the first equation, and solve for the first term.”
“You’re still having trouble with that?” Bard observed.
“In the worst way,” Bain agreed.
“So after Divide, you have Substitute 1, Solve 1, Substitute 2, Solve 2.” Thran mulled. “So Group, Add, Separate, Divide, Substitute 1, Solve 1, Substitute 2, Solve 2. Eight memory words.”
“That’s about six too many,” Bain snorted.
“So make a word out of the first letters of the memory words?” Bard suggested. “G-A-S-D-S-S-S-S? Hmm. Maybe not so good. Too many esses.”
“Yeah, but I can remember that,” Bain brightened. “Gas Dee Esses. Yeah, I can remember that!”
“That is a lot easier,” Legolas remembered. “So can you get all the steps now, Bain?”
“I think I can, Legs... Group, Add, Substitute – no, Separate! – Divide, Sub 1, Solve 1, Sub 2, Solve
“Excellent!” Legolas gave Bain a high five. “I can remember that, too. Gas Dee Esses. Thank you, Papa and Bard.”

“Yeah, a big thank you from me, too. That’s stellar. Just brilliant.”

Thran’s grin was pleased. “I have no idea what any of these steps mean, but I am glad that we helped you to remember them.”

The boys’ goodnights were profuse and relieved as they put their book away and separated to get into bed. Before long, Thran and Bard could retreat to their room.

“Fifty years from now, I will still not know what Gas Dee Esses means, but I will remember the silly memory words,” Thran chuckled as he got into the shower and let the warm water rain over him.

Bard came in behind him and shut the door. “Maybe I should give you some other silly words to remember.”

“What words?”

Muscular arms eased him back against an equally muscular chest, and light fingers stroked his hair slowly. A kiss pressed against his shoulder. “Oh, I don’t know. How about Getting a little Ass, ‘Specially A Divinely Shaped One, in the Shower is Seductive?”

Hands traced down Thran’s flanks to massage his groins, and a hairy torso pressed against his back, making it hard to talk. “Th-that is too m-many Aaas and Ells and Ohs, and not-not enough Esses.”

“Trivialities.” Bard’s voice was low and caressing. Kisses pressed against Thran’s nape, shoulders, spine. “There’s just one thing missing from your divinely shaped ass.”

“Oh, g-gods,” Thran stuttered, as Bard’s hands ran up from his groins to massage pectorals and nipples. Expensive body oil splashed over and between Thran’s glutes, and a well-oiled cock slid inside him, one fraction of an inch at a time.

“This is what happens when you tease me so badly in the middle of a construction site.”

Thran propped his elbows on the shower wall and pushed his hips back against Bard, savoring the warmth of water splashing against his back, of Bard filling him so completely. “Oh, lyubov moya, if-if th-this is how you – oh, gods – you reward my teasing, then I will n-never stop.”

“Never?” Bard’s voice silked over him. Hands ran just as softly down his back, around his ribs, and down his flanks to engulf his cock. “Not even in fifty years?”

“G-gods, oh, gods – n-never.”

“Promise?”

“Oh, you fucker, you royal f-fucker – I-I p-promise!”

“That’s quite a promise, beautiful dancer. Maybe I should reward you very, very well.”

“You are about to kill me, you bastard!”

Hands pulled his hips back, impaling him so deeply on Bard’s cock that he gasped, then slipped around his hips. One hand engulfed his cock, the other his balls, and the thighs pressing against his
glutes slapped hard as Bard’s thrusting grew faster. Thran widened his stance and arched his back, craving the deluge of sensations that flooded him until there was no resisting them further. As Bard tore orgasms from both of them, he gasped and his knees buckled. But Bard held him steady as his overwhelmed body spasmed in waves of pleasure.

“You are no saint, but the devil’s child,” he rasped, as Bard slipped from inside him and pressed a kiss against his nape.

A soft chuckle whispered against his shoulder. “And your angel’s wings are as black as the devil’s heart.”

A grin twitched at Thran’s lips and he shut his eyes to better savor the last lingering pulses of pleasure coursing through his body. He eased around, leaned against the shower wall, and gathered Bard into his arms to engulf his lips in a deep kiss. “Then we are well matched.”

His saint’s warm brown eyes softened in a smile. “Now, and for the next fifty years.”

They helped each other wash and dry, and soon were nestled in bed in their preferred tangle of arms and legs.

“Sleep well, my saint,” Thran murmured, drawing Bard close until his unruly curls tickled Thran’s nose.

“Beside you, angel... always,” Bard replied, stroking Thran’s ribs with a light caress. “Garu di.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya.”

Thran didn’t resist the secret smile that pricked at his lips as he fell asleep. For two who accused each other of alliances with the devil, their goodnights were soft, tender, and not demonic at all.

* * *

Tuesday morning... the children’s breakfasts and school lunches, a lunch for Thran in his bento boxes, shared omelet with cheese and vegetables, the trip to the bus stop, then Thran’s rummaging as he packed his dance bag for the day’s session at the UltraViolet Ballet studio. Bard got the half bath crystal sconces up and had almost finished with the chandelier before Thran padded through the house to bid him goodbye.

“Ready, angel?” Bard looked down from his perch on the ladder as he held the chandelier in his hands.

“I have a few minutes,” Thran replied.

“Can you lend a hand, then? Just hold the chandelier up while I connect the wire?”

Thran stretched up both arms to take the chandelier out of Bard’s hands. “High enough?”

“That’s good. Just have to fit the wire nuts...” Working quickly, Bard got the three sets of wires twisted together and safely capped with the wire nuts. “That’s it. All right, I’ve got it...”

He threaded the chandelier bolt onto the mounting bar that spanned the electrical box, tucked the capped wires into the electrical box, and fit the chandelier canopy over the electrical box. The
chandelier was finished.

“Beautiful,” Thran pronounced it with an elated smile. “Shall I fetch the bulbs?”

“They’re on the sofa,” Bard said, climbing down. “The sconce bulbs are there, too. We just have to screw them in, then I’ll reset the circuit breaker, and if the gods are with us today, we’ll have lights.”

Thran put in the two sconce bulbs, then handed him the five small chandelier bulbs. A quick trip to the cellar to throw the circuit breaker, then he ran back upstairs. “Okay, angel, give it a switch!”

“Come watch, then!” came Thran’s reply. When Bard reached the sitting room, Thran pressed the toggle switch, and all the lights came on. “As I said, beautiful. See how the light dances off the prisms and onto the walls and ceiling?”

“One more step,” Bard nodded in satisfaction. “A good one. Just the floor, and it’ll be spectacular.”

“Indeed. You have made a dark hole light and beautiful.”

Bard grinned. “The story of this old place, in a nutshell.”

Thran offered a grin of his own as he stroked a long, elegant hand over Bard’s back. “It is a beautiful home, and grows more beautiful each day. So I am off, and I am leaving, too, lyubov moya. Remember to set the security system after I am gone. I will text you when I arrive at the studio so that you know I am well.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll text you if I plan to go out, or if anything comes up.”

“Remember to call Bilbo, and to work on Rahmiel.”

“That’s my plan, angel. I’ll get the tile down first, then I’ll do artist things.”

Thran and Bard walked to the mudroom for Thran to collect his bag and his jacket. “Remember that I have my pointe lesson today at one, then I will visit the shop with the sofa and the chair. I will ring you with what I find out.”

“Then we’ve both got a plan. Dance well, angel.”

Thran kissed Bard goodbye, and stroked a hand over Bard’s tangled hair. “I will. You tile well, make angel wings well, and do whatever else your day brings you well. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Bard grabbed his house keys as he walked Thran out to the carriage house and opened the bay for him. With a wave and a smile, Thran headed off to the UVB studio. Bard closed the carriage house, jogged back inside, locked the mudroom door, and set the security system.

For a few seconds, he listened to the uncharacteristic quiet that settled over the house. Yesterday’s rain had given way to a pale spring morning, and light shone in through the front windows of dining room and main room. The kitchen faced north, but despite that, enough light from the big windows by the table cast a warm glow. Everything was slowly, slowly coming together.

Enough savoring. On to the tile.

Because he’d taken such pains yesterday to fit and number all the tiles, the actual laying of the floor went quickly, as Thran’s text that he’d arrived safely at the UVB studio interrupted him only briefly. He had to cut the tiles he needed to fill in the sides and around the toilet pipe, but all in all, he was
done before lunchtime. Even with tiny tile spacers sticking up and grout not yet in place, the floor was stunning. He sat back on his heels by the door, smiling at it all. In another couple of days, another room would be finished.

Completing the floor so inspired him that he opened the box that contained the set of three fixtures that would hang in the central hall. The central roof beam ran right over the center of the hall, sturdy enough to support the combined weight of the three brass fixtures Bard planned to hang from a central chain. The bottommost one would hang over Hope; the second would illuminate the bedroom floor landing, and the third would light the third floor landing. He’d have to rig a heavy hook to one side of the point where the combined fixtures would hang, so that he could manage the weight of the fixtures while he hooked up the wires. He also had some fiddly measuring and test fitting to do to make sure each of the three fixtures would hang at the right level on each of the floors. That would call for at least Thran and the boys to help hold and measure the distances between the fixtures. That meant a weekend rather than a weekday chore, because he wouldn’t take time from the children’s homework. He also wanted to make sure he had lots of spotters to make sure he didn’t fall off a ladder or a scaffold trying to hang the things.

Today, though, he’d at least make sure everything was wired properly. Antique fixtures usually meant antique wiring, and he’d rather replace that from the start rather than having to do it at some point once the fixtures were already up. Sure enough, all three of the pieces needed rework, so he fiddled with that for a while until his stomach growled too loudly to resist any longer. He made himself a thick sandwich, which was tasty enough that he made himself a second one. He mixed up two pans of brownies for the children’s lunches, then pulled out his mobile to call Bilbo while the brownies baked.

“Bard! Hello!” Bilbo’s cheerful voice answered. “How are you? I saw on the news about Thran at the Follies Saturday. I hope he wasn’t hurt badly.”

“I’m well, thanks. Thran got a bit of wrench, but he’s more or less back to normal. He was very lucky.”

“He certainly was. I’m glad it was nothing worse than a wrench, though that’s bad enough. Have the police run the boy to ground?”

“Not yet. That’s one of the reasons I called.”

“Oh?” Bilbo’s voice sobered. “You’re not canceling your show, are you?”

“No! Not at all!” Bard assured him. “Never. But I wanted you to be aware...”

Bard gave Bilbo a summary of the trouble his family had had with Lance, and their speculation about whether Lance might try to interrupt Bard’s art show.

“It’s a valid concern, yes,” Bilbo agreed, but his voice was reluctant. “I’d hate to cancel your show at this late date, especially since you don’t want to cancel it, either. I’ve already ordered the food, and of course all the publicity is up. I’ve had several strong indications of interest, even from the city, so I want to hold it if at all possible. It’s not in me to let a bully have the satisfaction of thinking we’re afraid of him.”

“No more than I am. But I might have a way to stack the deck a bit more in our favor.”

“What’s that?” Bilbo asked at once.

Smiling, Bard said, “That depends on what kind of food you’ve planned for the show.”
“The food?” Bilbo sounded baffled. “Well! It’s certainly not the old cliché of plastic cheese cubes on a plastic tray and red wine out of a plastic box, you can be sure of that! Alcohol is problematic, but I’ve got some nice sparkling cider. As for the food, how do ham buns, cheese tartlets, four kinds of gourmet cheese with water crackers, crudités and hummus, a basket of fruit kabobs, and a selection of mini éclairs and cream puffs sound?”

Bard nodded. “Delicious. I think Mr. D could make a meal out of that.”

“Who’s Mr. D?”

“A hungry off-duty policeman, and a friend. I think he might develop an interest in art for the night, if the food’s right.”

“Ah, I see,” Bilbo chuckled. “By all means, tell him the menu. Based on the interest I’ve seen, I’ve ordered enough for a hundred. Your Mr. D will be welcome.”

“I’ll pass the word. And if I happen to slip him a case of good beer after the fact, no one will complain.”

“Not at all. Everything’s arranged, then, but for moving the sculpture.”

“I can bring that, if you let me know when...”

Bard and Bilbo discussed which pieces would be best for Bard to bring in his truck on the Thursday morning before the show. Bilbo would meet him at the Ilithien Gallery at eleven to help him get the pieces in place, and to put the last touches on the display of sketches.

“Not too long, now,” Bilbo said. “Hope for good weather, my boy. We’ll have everything in place on Friday, night, so we can pick up traffic from the Saturday swell all day long. Good weather on a spring day always brings a big crowd throughout the village.”

“I will. Thanks for working so hard on the show, Bilbo. This has been a long time coming, and I’m grateful for all you’re doing to help me make the most of it.”

“Just promise me you’ll do everything you can to have Rahmiel ready to bring in. That piece alone, even just as a clay model, will generate a lot of interest in your sculpture, Bard. The combination of your sketches and your sculpture will show you as a multitalented artist to a lot of potential patrons.”

“I’m working on him this afternoon. He’s got wings now, all but the feathers, and I’m placing those today. So yes, Rahmiel will be ready. I’m excited at how well he’s coming along.”

“Send me a picture, would you? Just as he is now. I can talk more about him if I can see how he’s progressing.”

“I will, right after this call. Text me to let me know that you got it, would you?”

“I will. I’ll talk to you soon, Bard.”

“Thank you, Bilbo. Picture on the way.”

Bard disconnected the call, and went into the solarium to ease the swatch from Rahmiel. He took several pictures, sending each one to Bilbo –

The oven timer dinged. Brownies.

Bard hurried to set his pans of cookies on wire racks to cool. His mobile chimed, so as the smell of
chocolate mint and chocolate orange brownies filled the kitchen, he dug out his mobile again.

*Magnificent!* Bilbo’s text message read.

*Thanks,* Bard texted, but that seemed woefully inadequate. So he added, *So many thanks.*

Even that didn’t do Bard’s gratitude justice, but he didn’t send any more messages.

Instead, he got out his bag of feathers and his sheets of high-density foam, and perched on his stool. It was time to make Rahmiel as magnificent as Bilbo had called him.
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

The angel dances, strategizes, negotiates - and falls.

Thran’s early morning passed in seeming seconds. Barre, yoga, the work on *Immortal’s* choreography with Irmo and the company... such a familiar routine, but Thran loved it as much today as he had every day since he first set foot in a dance studio thirty years ago. It had been his mother’s idea, born of desperation when she couldn’t stand an energetic four-year old thumping around the house anymore in imitation of the musical variety shows that were her standby to get through what he now realized was a dull and bare existence. Every Monday, off they would go for his dance lesson – he looked forward to them even more than his mother did. How many times had he cried when the lesson was over, because it would be another interminable week before he came back? It had been a relief for both of them when he’d turned six, and his teacher had suggested that his parents let him try for a place in a ballet school – not just any school, but one that would lead to the Vaganova four years later, but he hadn’t known or cared about how rarefied his path was. All he’d cared about was that if he did well for the group of frowning adults, he’d get to dance all day, not just the meager hour here and there. So dance well he had, and he’d never lived at home with his parents after that.

From then forward, he’d danced, whether sick or healthy, sore or not, every day, even all day when it hadn’t damaged his body to do so. He’d danced harder when he’d started to grow so tall, fighting to adjust his technique to a changing body. His height, his startling hair, his emerging sexuality... the dance had been his anchor and his constant when everything around and about him had changed. Even now, even with his family to anchor him, there was still nothing that compared to his excitement and anticipation when he set foot on the dance floor. Time suspended, all else vanished. All that existed was the dance, and his endless pursuit of the perfection to express it.

After Thran’s barre, his yoga, his work on the scene where Death led the Soldier into the Underworld, Irmo switched gears, deciding to work with the dancers who would populate the Underworld scenes. Thran took the opportunity to talk to Lettie about the logistics of bringing *Immortal* to life. This was a much less entrancing way to spend his time, but it was a necessary one. He was grateful that he didn’t have to lead the effort – Lettie was an able and tireless administrator and booster. Already she’d worked out the details of having the Imladris Academy theatre students work on the lights, sound, and set construction for the ballet. She’d also set the company’s public relations team in motion, issuing initial press releases and drumming up interest.

“We’ve gotten a good response on those efforts so far,” Lettie said. “It’s time to up those efforts, so you know what’s coming... interviews, meetings with donors, publicity photos of the *Immortal* principals, and so forth.”

Thran nodded. He was well used to this, after so many years in a state company with a following that bordered on the fanatic. “The cult of personality. How does Rada proceed with his costumes?”

“He’ll have final drawings complete in a day or two, so once you and Irmo sign off on them, we’ll schedule fittings and so forth. After that, you know the routine – photos in costume to boost the PR.”

Thran nodded. “I know.”
Lettie leaned forward. “I hesitate to bring this up, but... have you made a decision about whether you’ll include your pointe work in the ballet?”

“I want to,” Thran nodded. “But it is not a question of desire. I have only a few hours of lessons to my credit, and I do not yet dance on pointe with the ease and the abandon that the role should embody. Death must cast all caution aside, all concern about how to balance on the toe, when He woos the Maid. I do not yet do that.”

“It’d be one more way to draw interest, but I don’t have to tell you that. You know as well as I that half the audience will want to see you dance on pointe, and the other half will want to see you fall when you attempt it.”

Thran’s nod was philosophical. “That is always so. Will the gladiator fall under the lion, will the Formula 1 driver crash in flames, will the dancer break his foot? The question varies, but the morbid fascination is always the same.”

“Sadly, yes.”

“I go for my lesson this afternoon. I will ask Mme. Morgelle what her assessment is. Though to be honest, it may create much more stir if you do not make any official statement about it, but merely hesitate each time you deny such speculation.”

Lettie’s smile was sadly cynical as she nodded understanding. “Use rumor and intrigue to our advantage.”

Thran shrugged. “Why not? Rumor and intrigue will happen whether we want it to or not. If they concern themselves with whether I will dance on pointe or not, that is better than whether Irmo has created havoc, or we are over budget, or it is idiocy to make an offseason debut at an arts festival.”

When Lettie winced, Thran didn’t telegraph the tightening of his gut. All of those things were true, but he had done his best to minimize them. Irmo was under rein, at least for the moment. Dancing in the ballroom had greatly reduced rental fees for rehearsal space, though the tangle that would result on his taxes bore no consideration. As for the idiocy of debuting offseason at an arts festival, at least that minimized competition, and using the school venue and student crews had reduced the production budget.

“We will survive,” he said in encouragement. “We will more than survive. Our ballet is wonderful, and soon everyone will agree with us.”

“I’ll let you know when Rada’s got his final drawings in, so he can get them underway. Once we get the preliminaries done, we’ll schedule the photos, and then the round of promotion begins.”

Thran nodded. “That is well. Irmo is through with me for the morning, and I have my pointe class shortly, so I will see to that. I will likely see you tomorrow, as Bard will not have the half bath finished for another day or so.”

“What’s he up to now? Plumbing, too?”

Smiling, Thran summarized the time needed to let floor tiles, sealer, and grout properly dry. Then he bid Lettie farewell, dropped into the changing room long enough to pull jeans and trainers on over his tights, and headed out to his SUV.

He was happy to encourage Lettie in this mad venture. He would have liked similar encouragement for himself, but he would not worry Bard with this, nor would he worry anyone in the company. Ballet dancers were not fools; they knew how tenuous resources were for any artistic troupe. But to
make that worry more overt would only affect their performance, and none of them could afford that.

Any distraction from these worries must come from within.

Thran grinned as he got behind the wheel of his SUV. Perhaps a little shopping therapy would work for him as it had for Vileria. Her preference had been for clothes. Today, his would be sofas and chairs.

He sat in the SUV for a few minutes to wolf down the lunch Bard had made him – chicken, raw vegetables, a small clutch of raspberries. He’d have time to let it settle before he attended his pointe lesson with Mme. Morgelle. Then he drove into the city, to the furniture shop where he hoped to find an unusual blue sofa and a crystal chair. The city streets were full of traffic and people, a bustle that put off many people, but not him. He liked the vibe of a big city, where it was easy to lose himself in the excitement that flowed down every block. Would he find a bit of that excitement in this oh-so-modern furniture store?

This shop was all studied emptiness and isolated specimens of the furniture makers’ arts, and flooded with natural light that streamed in from multiple skylights. It would likely be staffed with pretentious clerks, but Thran had his own methods to deal with such things. So he registered the artsy young man – honestly, how long would it take before the head-to-toe black attire down to thick glasses frames, nerdy gawkiness, and a terribly self-conscious urban trendiness wore themselves out? – who languidly came forward to greet him. Thran took out his mobile and tapped a few keys.

“I have come to see this,” he said pleasantly before the clerk could mouth a greeting, holding up his mobile with a picture of the sofa. His tone was calm and cultured, not preemptory, but used to being obeyed.

“Uh – oh, yessir, that’s the Firenze sofa, it’s right over there –”

Thran didn’t wait for the clerk to escort him, but made his purposeful way without rushing. Yes, there in the corner was the sofa he’d come to see. Large, but the streamlined design kept it from looking too bulky; stark, with few seams or divided cushions to detract from its elegance. The cushions that lined the center back, but not the last seat at either end, were sensuously plump without looking overinflated. The upholstery was not leather, which would be sticky in summer and icy in winter, or hackneyed tweed, which was harsh on the skin as well as ugly. Rather, it was linen velvet, softer than mohair, but almost as durable.

It was modern, but nothing like the thin, uncomfortable pieces that reminded Thran of cold airport lounges. So far, so good.

Without waiting for an invitation, Thran sat himself in the middle of the sofa, shifting to settle himself in the cushions. Yes, the seat was firm, but giving, and the back cushion flexed to offer comfortable support.

“It’ll seat a crowd in style,” the clerk offered.

“The fabric is linen velvet? Not silk?”

“Yessir, it’s linen. Not that many people ask, but the linen wears well. It’s treated to be stain resistant, too, so if someone spills a cocktail or a canapé on it, you can clean it up easily if you’re quick about it. Of course, if the stain sits a while, it’s a bit more problematic.”

Thran slipped off his trainers and stretched out, flipping his braid out behind him. The clerk’s eyes flickered, but more in recognition than affront.
“It’s pretty comfortable, isn’t it?” the clerk offered, smiling a little. “It’s big enough that the curve doesn’t make it hard to stretch out, even for tall folks such as you.”

“It is,” Thran offered a smile in return. “That is one of the most important qualities of a sofa, I think – it must accommodate a good nap.”

The young man’s smile widened, giving him a friendlier mien that was far less pretentious and trendy. “I think so, too. This sofa’s pretty good for that. We had one Italian model in here a while ago that looked really hot, but man, was it a brick to lie on. Maybe people like that to chase people out of their parties when it starts to get late.”

Chuckling, Thran sat up and replaced his trainers. “I have been to parties like that. So dull! The advantage to be a guest at such a thing is that I can leave at my convenience.”

“Not much fun,” the clerk nodded.

“What colors do you offer for this?”

The clerk reached for a ring of fabric squares that lay unobtrusively on the side table that flanked the sofa. He sat down beside Thran to offer the samples. “It comes in three leathers, if you like that. The leather’s more durable than the linen velvet, but it’s a different look – a bit harder, a lot more aggressive. There are four linens, too, for those who want the other end – that Newport casual, status wrinkles thing, you know. The velvets are the most popular – we offer five of those. This is an unusual sofa, because it’s modern, but not so sharp and angular. It’s comfortable, but not Dad’s Old Den. It’s elegant, but not pretentious. There really aren’t a lot of sofas with that combination. It just lends itself to the velvet texture, I think, and the colors aren’t muddy or trendy. More timeless.”

“Ah, a company that has carefully considered its market. It will likely go bankrupt because it does not follow any of the trends you mentioned, but seeks to make the best of them all. That would be a tragedy.”

The clerk smiled appreciatively as Thran looked at the samples. “I hope not. They’re pretty popular, though this sofa’s a bit larger than typical. You won’t find it in every living room on the planet, which is good, just enough of them that the company stays afloat.”

The samples that Thran looked through showed linen velvet in caramel, muted forest green, pale charcoal grey, muted burgundy, and a wonderful frosted amethyst – but no blue. When Thran asked about that, the clerk nodded reluctantly.

“Everyone asks about that blue. It was a great color – my favorite, actually. But apparently there were issues about the colorfastness of the fabric, and so the maker chose not to offer it in that color rather than produce a product that wasn’t up to their standards. I admire that, but so far, they haven’t found another supplier. The grey’s got blue undertones in it, though, and it’s a great color. Blends with a lot of other colors, not so obtrusive that you’ll get tired of it after a year or two, and ages well. I’ve got a bigger sample in the back – let me get that so you get a better idea.”

He headed off, giving Thran a chance to test the sofa cushions a bit more aggressively – bounce on the seats, pummel the back cushions, make sure that the workmanship on the back of the piece was as expertly done as it was on the front – ignoring the one or two other patrons who stared at him while they perused the shop. He imagined his husband’s muscular body draped over the cushions, perhaps with a magazine over his face as he napped – as if such a thing would happen. Bard was no more inclined to take a nap than Thran was... but perhaps this sofa would give them both a reason to change that. While he waited for the clerk, he read through the small flyer about the nature of the foam cushioning with its down cover, and the origin of the linen for the velvet. It was not an
inexpensive sofa, but it was well made, and beautiful. All that remained to discern was if he liked the grey velvet as much as the blue.

The clerk came back with a length of fabric large enough to drape over the back and seat of the sofa. It was pale, with a few of the blue undertones that the clerk had mentioned, but Thran liked the silver highlights more. He fished the sample card of the grey-green hall paint out of his wallet. Yes, that was a nice match. He flipped the smaller samples to the amethyst velvet and put it atop the grey.

“I like the grey and the amethyst together,” Thran observed.

“That’s a great combination,” the clerk agreed. He pointed to the three small burgundy oblong pillows that punctuated the caramel sofa. “The toss pillows come with the sofa. You can get them in any of the fabrics, so if you like the grey for the sofa, you could get the pillows in the amethyst.”

Thran nodded, holding out his paint sample card. “Both colors blend well with this color. This is the color of the hall, which leads to the room that would hold the sofa.”

“They do. What color are the walls around the sofa?”

“Bare plaster, as yet. It is easier to choose a paint to match the sofa than the reverse,” Thran replied.

“You’ve got that right,” the clerk nodded. “Even if you have to mix a custom color, a few gallons of paint isn’t anywhere near the cost to reupholster furniture.”

“Exactly. I am also interested in this chair.”

He displayed the picture of Bard’s crystal chair on his mobile to show the clerk, who nodded at once.

“That’s an incredible chair. The Contessa. It comes as an armchair or side chair, and the seat’s mohair. Five beautiful colors. It’s over here. Six or eight of them make a stunning dining room. One makes a very striking specimen piece, such as in a hallway or foyer.”

“A specimen piece, as you call it, is what I look for. The armchair in red,” Thran explained, as the clerk led the way to the display of dining room furniture. There it was, paired with its matching side chair. It sparkled under a nice spotlight, showcasing the utter transparency of the acrylic material. The sample chair had the red cushion, and it was a clear, deep cranberry, not a tomato red. Yes, Bard would like this chair, and it would be perfect in the half bath. It was generously sized, and felt comfortable when he sat down. The clerk told him about how it was made and how sturdy it was, and how to keep it from scratching floors or from being scratched, all very useful information. But he needed to say nothing about how elegant the chair was. It looked every bit as if it were made of ice or crystal, not the cheap plastic that Bard had feared, and the red was the rich color that Bard liked so much.

“I will excuse myself to confer with my husband,” Thran explained, to which the clerk nodded in understanding. “We are in agreement on the chair. I want to see what he thinks of the grey for the sofa.”

“Why don’t you take a picture of it and send it to him? It’s a great color, but I’m sure both of you want it to be the right one before you buy it. It wears well, so you’ll be living with it for a long time.”

“Exactly so. And thank you for the suggestion about the picture. I will do that.”

“Take your time. I’ll be here when you need me.”

“Thank you.”
The clerk took himself off to see to other patrons, so Thran went back to the sofa display and took a picture of the grey sample fabric still draping one of the seats. He sent it to Bard with a message to call him, and sat on the sofa to wait.

His mobile chimed immediately. “Hello, angel.”

Thran smothered a pleased smile. No matter how many times Bard called him that, it still delighted and humbled him. “My saint. You are well?”

“I’m working on Rahmiel. He’s getting fledged. Doesn’t look half bad. How’re you?”

“I am well. The chair is exactly as we hoped. The red is beautiful, and the frame looks like the purest crystal. So that is fine. The sofa is also all that I hoped, but for the color. There is no blue.”

Thran explained about the issues about the blue, and listed the colors that remained. “The one I sent you is a very nice silver grey, very slightly blue, but the blue is hardly noticeable. I like it, but wanted you to see it. It comes with the three oblong pillows in the same velvet. I like the amethyst ones. Both colors look beautiful with the hall’s grey-green.”

“Did you check the colors in natural light, not just fluorescent? The colors can look different in different lights.”

"The shop is full of natural light rather than fluorescent, so yes, the colors look as they would in our house."

"That sounds perfect, Thran. If you’re good with the grey, then I am, too. That’d probably be a better choice than the blue, because you could just change the color of the pillows and draperies and such to get a new take on the room, and not have to reupholster the sofa and repaint the walls. A lot faster."

“Do you tire of your paintbrush, then?” Thran teased, smiling as he imagined his husband sitting on a ladder somewhere to talk to him.

“Not yet, but I will be once I finish the entire house,” bantered Bard. “You asked about delivery and such?”

“Not yet, but I will. I wanted you to see the color first. Did it come out well? You can see that it is grey?”

“I can. The purple looks great, too. Like sugared fruit.”

“What an image,” Thran teased. “Then I will order both, lyubov moya. Then I have my pointe lesson. I will be home after as soon as the traffic allows.”

“Be safe. You know where I’ll be. The floor looks amazing, by the way.”

“I am eager to see it. Before long, then. Ya lyublyu tebya, lyubov moya.”

“Garu di, cariad.”

Thran ended his call. The clerk who’d helped him was busy with another patron, so he continued to look around the gallery while he waited. There were many interesting pieces to look at, none that interested him as much as the sofa and the chair, but he was entertained while the clerk finished talking to the other patron. When he was done, Thran caught his eye, and the clerk came over.
“How’d it go?”

“We agree on the grey with the amethyst pillows. And the chair.”

“That’s great. I’ll write up the tickets. If you’d follow me…”

Thran was glad to see that the clerk was meticulous about specifying the pieces and the exact colors that Thran wanted, and about collecting Thran’s information. The chair would arrive at the house in anywhere from two to four weeks. The sofa would take longer, about eight weeks. That would give them time to clear the main room’s current collection of boxes and bits out of the way, and to get the floor refinished. It would also preclude Bard from having to paint the main room right away; better to see the sofa in the room before choosing a color. That meant that Bard could work on the solarium sooner, a room that Thran awaited with anticipation.

He could wait to christen his saint on a grey sofa. In an exotic solarium... that needed to happen sooner rather than later.

After offering warm thanks to the clerk for his help, Thran headed to pointe class in good spirits. He was a few minutes early, but didn’t complain about the extra time to relax and warm up. He took especial care to limber toes, ankles, and knees, but hips, shoulders, neck, and spine all received his usual attention. He felt comfortable and relaxed when Mme. Morgelle bid farewell to her previous student. She waved to Thran as he continued to warm up in the corner, then let herself out for a few minutes’ respite. Thran waved back, settled on the floor to put on his pointe shoes, then continued with his familiar, comforting routine.

Five minutes later, Mme. Morgelle was back to briskly see to Thran’s lesson. More of the careful rolling up and down on the toes, the careful work at the barre, the delicate steps in the middle of the floor. He repeated movements designed to strengthen his ankles, and exercises to refine his balance, all the while paying constant observation to his reflection in the mirror to marry muscle memory and appearance. Despite his fit conditioning, nearly an hour of such concentrated work had his feet and ankles aching, his legs trembling, his back and shoulders tight because of the unfamiliar redistribution of weight, balance, strength. New skills were always a struggle to build, especially in a body so attuned to flatwork and demi-pointe. His body was not ideal to endure such intense stress on toes and ankles, but he had only to manage seven minutes of it, only seven minutes –

His left ankle rolled over, too tired to hold the position, and he fell off his toes. He threw out his left hand to catch the barre before he fell completely, but the brace on his arm kept him from getting a firm grip on the wood, and he stumbled badly, banging a knee on the floor, hissing when an all-too-familiar pain flooded his ankle.

"Suka blyad!" he swore, grabbing the barre with his right hand before he fell completely flat. "Chert, chert, chert!"

“Rolled right over,” Mme. Morgelle tsked in concern, stooping quickly beside Thran’s ankle as he held it off the ground. Her hands took his foot firmly, feeling for a break. “Thank the gods, there’s no break that I can feel, Thran. I’ll get some ice. Down with you, then. Sit, sit!”

Thran eased himself to the floor, grimacing as the intense pain flooded through him. That rush of pain was little different whether the injury was sprain, strain, or merely a twist, so he shut his eyes and breathed deeply, willing the sensation to ease. He slid over to his bag, digging out sock and trainer, unlacing the ribbons of his pointe shoe only when he had its replacement in hand. Off with the pointe shoe – yes, his ankle was swelling, turning purple – and on with his sock and trainer, which would offer more support than the pointe shoe. Mme. Morgelle hurried back with a bag of ice chips, which she wound around his ankle with an elastic wrap.
“I intended to ask you what you thought my prospects were to include a short section of pointe work in a performance. But perhaps I have my answer before I ask it.”

Mme. Morgelle sighed. “You’re very tall, and even as lean as an eyelash, you’re too heavy to push your feet this way, Thran. I wouldn’t advise it even for our lessons. Perhaps a half hour rather than our usual hour, but even that... my recommendation is that you don’t. You’re a marvelous dancer – more than that, you’re an angelic and important one. Dancing on pointe is not worth the risk to your body or your career.”

Thran hummed, not surprised to hear her blunt assessment. “I appreciate your candor. I will take myself home, and ice my ankle as soon as I get there. I will call you about our Friday lesson. Perhaps only a half hour then.”

Mme. Morgelle sat back on her heels to regard him with a resigned but intent expression. “No role is worth this, Thran.”

He smiled; the pain had cleared a little, and so he could hope for merely a twisted ankle rather than a sprained one. “This one is.”

A philosophical sigh. “Why are the best ones so intent on flying into the sun?”

Chuckling, Thran bent forward to unlace his other pointe shoe. “Because it is hard, it has never been done before, and it will look unbelievable. Why else?”

Mme. Morgelle hummed, her expressive hands gesturing – why else, indeed, she meant. “Sit for a few minutes. I don’t have another student until four, so let your ankle rest for a few minutes before you get in the car to go home. It’ll start to swell as soon as you put any weight on it.”

Thran leaned over to his bag and pulled out his jeans. He maneuvered them gingerly over his iced ankle, got them buttoned, and put on his other sock and trainer. “Better to get in the car sooner and home sooner.”

Mme. Morgelle shook her head again. “I don’t know why I say these things to mad dancers. They never listen.”

Thran smiled impishly. “I thank you for saying them, nevertheless.”

“Where are you parked?”

“Just a block down.”

“I won’t fuss about you not listening to anything else I’ve said to you. But you will listen to me about this – you will let someone help you to the car, or you will do real damage to yourself. No argument.”

“No, Madame,” Thran said meekly, smiling. And so he found himself between two male dancers who half carried him to his SUV. They put him into the front seat and his bag beside him, and sent him on his way with wishes for a quick recovery.

He hoped so. Despite the ice and the elastic wrap, his ankle hurt, not quite to the point of nausea, but badly enough. Thank goodness it was his left ankle, or he would not have been able to drive home. As it was, he was glad to reach the turnoff for the lane, and then the beckoning driveway. He parked as near to the mudroom door as he could, switched off the SUV, and considered the distance from vehicle door to mudroom door.
He sighed, shook his head, and pulled out his mobile. Bard answered quickly.

“Hello, angel. Where are you?”

“I am just outside the mudroom door. I am sorry, but I need your help to come inside. I have twisted my ankle, and –”

His mobile went dead as the mudroom door flew open. Bard stuffed his mobile in his front jeans pocket and hurried out beside the SUV, his face tight with worry. Thran disconnected his mobile, and offered his husband a chagrined smile as Bard opened the SUV door.

“It is not that bad –”

“Just bad enough that you can’t walk on it,” Bard cut him off, eyeing Thran’s left leg. “Can you slide out? I’ll take it from there.”

Thran slid out carefully. Bard was there to slide a shoulder under his arm, supporting most of his weight as he limped inside. Once they were out of the mudroom and into the kitchen, Bard picked him up and carried him into the sitting room to ease him down onto one of the sofas. Oh, thank the gods, propping his ankle up on the sofa felt immeasurably better, and so did Bard’s bag of frozen peas supplementing the ice already wrapped around Thran’s ankle. The relief must have shown on his face, because Bard relaxed a little.

“You’ll be all right while I get your SUV into the carriage house? I’ll get the children from the bus stop, too…”

“I already have the ice and the compression of your RICE, and now I have the rest and elevation. That is exactly what I need for now. I will be fine.”

Bard pretended that he wasn't worried by plastering an impassive look on his face, but he didn’t argue, merely nodded. “Won’t be long. I’ll bring you a cup of tea after.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya. I am sorry to be such a worry.”

Bard’s impassive expression slid into a crooked smile. “You’re a right trial, you are. But you’re cute, so you’re safe.”

Thran favored Bard with an exaggerated look of contrition. “I am relieved.”

Chuckling, Bard gave a tug on Thran’s braid before he let himself out to see to Thran’s SUV and collect the children. Thran let his head flop onto the back of the sofa, and he breathed a big sigh. Now that his ankle wasn’t the lowest part of his body, it didn’t throb so badly, and his stomach eased. But before he got too comfortable, he got up, leaning on the sofas until he could look into the half bath. He stood carefully on one foot as he switched on the light to better admire the floor. Even unfinished, the marble was stunning, and would be the perfect backdrop for the Contessa chair that would soon arrive. Smiling, he switched off the light, and hopped back to the sofas. This time, he made his way around to the other side of the room to the solarium. He stood in the doorway to see a scattering of black feathers strewn across the floor. His eyes sought Rahmiel in the corner to the left of the door –

His breath caught. There stood Rahmiel, no longer just loops of wire and lumps of clay, but sculpture. Dark bronze feathered wings flexed high above the angel’s head, straining to carry a divine creature down to the mortal plane, where he would comfort the small, despairing figure at his feet.
“Oh, lyubov moy,” Thran whispered, as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat.
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Angst, so much angst! Who will suffer it most - the angel, the saint, or their cherubs?

Shit, shit, shit! Thran was going to kill himself trying to dance in those damned fucking pointe shoes! Even he hadn’t thought this was the best idea, even he said Irmo was crazy, even he said he was too tall and too heavy to manage so much weight on his toes! I am going to chain him to the bed and MAKE him rest until whatever he’d done to himself heals, I am going to call Irmo and tell him to forget about such a stupid, dangerous idea, I am going to –

Bard leaned back against the outside of the mudroom door and took a deep breath.

What he was going to do was... calm down. Just... fucking calm down.

If Thran were seriously hurt, he’d be in the hospital, not sitting on Bard’s ratty sofa after driving forty-five minutes from the city to get home. He’d iced his ankle, he’d put a compression bandage on it, and he’d asked for help to get inside to keep his weight off it. He’d done everything anyone could have asked him to get home safely.

He shouldn’t have put on those damned pointe shoes in the first place. The rest wouldn’t have been necessary, if he just hadn’t done that in the first place.

That wasn’t Bard’s call to make. No matter how much Bard thought it was a lunatic idea for a six-foot, five-inch dancer weighing one hundred and eighty pounds to balance on the long, slender toes of his long, slender feet, Thran had a different idea. Thran was the dancer, not Bard. Thran knew his body’s capabilities, not Bard. So Bard would just have to do the best he could to take care of Thran, and make the best of whatever Thran chose to do.

What if Thran chose to drive that exquisite body of his into the ground?

He’d come close to doing it once already.

Bard gritted his teeth, and pushed away from the door. He housed the SUV, collected Thran’s bag, and headed for the bus stop. He was a few minutes late, and the bus passed him a couple of houses down the lane. As children tumbled out, his quartet waved goodbye to their friends, and ran up to Bard.

“You’re late, Da!” Tilda caroled with a big grin. “Late, late, late!”

“And welcome home to you, too,” Bard grinned back, ruffling Tilda’s hair. “How’s everyone? Good day at school, all?”

“Stupid pre-algebra,” Bain snorted, waving his arms wide. “It’s just so stupid!”

Legolas snickered, cutting eyes at Bard. Bard gave them both a mild look. “Ah. Aced your quiz, did you?”

“Oh, Da, you ruined the surprise!” Bain protested, but he was grinning. “But yeah, I did, and so did
“Legs. That Gas Dee Esses did it. That is so cool!”

“Congratulations to both of you,” Bard offered his hand for them both to slap. “Well done!”

“Is that Ada’s?” Sigrid asked with her usual sharp look at the bag slung over Bard’s shoulder. “Why do you have Ada’s dance bag?”

“Because I just put his SUV in the carriage house, and his bag was in it,” Bard hedged. “As a certain someone noticed, I was running late, so I just carted it along to meet the lot of you.”

“And why couldn’t Ada put his SUV away himself?” Sigrid kept on.

Legolas’s face tightened. “Is Papa all right?”

Bain and Tilda sobered, too, and all four children looked among themselves with alarm.

“Did Lance hurt Ada again?” Tilda gulped.

That ratcheted up the tension tenfold. Before the children panicked, Bard held up his hands. “No,” he said emphatically. But you don’t know that for sure. “Thran got home just a few minutes ago. I think he turned his ankle in class, that’s all. He drove himself home, he’s not in a lot of pain, and he’s got ice on his ankle. There, you know as much as I do.”

Sigrid snorted, and Legolas with her. Both of them, with Tilda close behind, ran ahead to the house. Bain fell into step with Bard.

“Sigrid’s going to yell again,” Bain said lowly.

Bard was inclined to let her, but that wasn’t the thing to say to Bain. Instead, he smothered all reactions – no flinch, no exhale, no tightening of lips. “Guess I’d better get in there and hold her off.”

He sped up to a trot, Bain keeping pace beside him. By the time they got into the house, he expected to hear Sigrid’s voice at volume, but the murmur of voices was low. Still, the tableau in the sitting room was what he expected – Thran sat on the sofa with his leg stretched out and the bag of peas atop his ankle, Sigrid stood with arms akimbo and an exasperated look on her face, Legolas sat beside his father to adjust the bag of peas, and Tilda stood beside her sister, looking nervously back and forth between everyone, her lips downturned.

“– pointe shoes?” Sigrid was saying.

“Sigrid.” Bard came into the room. “Thran doesn’t need an inquisition.”

“He’s too tall and he’s too heavy,” Sigrid said without apology. “He’s as skinny as a rail, but he’s still too heavy to put all that stress on his feet. Those don’t make an inquisition. Those are facts.”

“Enough,” Bard said firmly. “I know you’re worried about Thran. But give him some space. Why don’t you all make your plate of cheese and crackers and fruit, and relax for a few minutes? Hang up your jackets and collect your back packs, too – right now, everything’s all over the kitchen floor.”

When Bard made shooing motions, the children went into the kitchen, but with varying degrees of reluctance and several backwards glances. He sat beside Thran, who was biting his bottom lip. Bard leaned close.

“The first thing that Tilda asked was whether Lance had hurt you again. It crossed my mind, too. Did he?”
Thran grimaced, but out of concern for Tilda, not whatever pain he felt. “He had nothing to do with it. I twisted my ankle in class.”

“On pointe?”

Thran sighed. “It was the end of a hard hour, my ankle was tired, and it went over.”

“I agree with Sigrid. You’re too tall, and you’re too heavy. But that’s all I’ll say about it. What do you need? More ice? That cup of tea I promised?”

Thran sighed again. “I would like to get out of my tights.”

“I’ll bring you some clothes. The children can stay in the kitchen until you’re changed.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya,” Thran said meekly, but Bard shot him a look before he headed upstairs.

“You don’t fool me, you know. You’ll do exactly what you want, no matter what anyone says.”

Thran’s smile was small, if unrepentant. “About the dance, yes. Nothing else. I am sorry.”

“You aren’t, but I forgive you. Back in a tick.”

Bard fetched underwear, long-sleeved tee shirt, and leggings for Thran, and kept the children in the kitchen while he helped Thran change. Except for being careful about his ankle, Thran moved easily and without discomfort. Bard put the discards in the mudroom laundry basket, and came back with the tube of arnica.

“While you’re tending to things, it’d be good to tend to your wrist, too,” he said, tossing Thran the tube. “Now for tea.”

“Your answer to many things,” Thran observed as he caught the tube, but his smile was affectionate.

“Because it works,” Bard returned, and headed into the kitchen. The children were busy assembling their plate of cheese, packages of crackers, and bowl of fruit, so Bard put on the kettle and got the teapot ready. Shortly, he carried in a tray with the teapot, cups, and saucers, and the children followed with their snacks. Legolas, Bain, and Sigrid settled on the other sofa. Bard sat down beside Thran and propped his sore ankle on his lap. Tilda squeezed in at the end of the sofa beside Bard. Thran had left the arm brace off his arm after he rubbed on the arnica, and had his arm cradled comfortably in his lap.

“Your arm looks much better,” Legolas ventured.

“It is much better,” Thran agreed, regarding it. He flexed his hand, turning his wrist this way and that. “It does not hurt, and the bruises are not so bad.”

They still looked livid, but purple fading to yellow and green were an improvement over the black, red, and purple that had discolored Thran’s arm yesterday. That seemed to mollify some of the children’s concern, but Sigrid still looked angry as she leaned forward to take a piece of cheese and a cracker from the plate. Legolas regarded his father with clear worry, and Bain kept looking at the other boy with concern. Beside him, Tilda snuggled close, draping Bard’s arm around her shoulders.

Maybe he should tell the children to back off.

No. Not this time.

This time, Thran would have to assuage the children’s concern all by himself. If he wouldn’t listen to
sense from Bard, maybe the children could guilt him into it.

“Such long faces, and such accusing eyes,” Thran said at last, with an apologetic smile.

“You deserve it,” Sigrid muttered, not looking at Thran as she took a cluster of grapes from the fruit bowl.

“Yeah,” Bain mumbled, with a guilty look at Legolas. “Legs worries about you.”

“I do, Papa,” Legolas nodded. “So do they. And Bard. We all worry.”

“We all do,” Sigrid went on.

Thran’s eyes went to Bard, half pleading for help. Bard’s smile had a hint of perversity as he nodded to Legolas. “We do.”

Thran offered him a martyred expression; Bard let his smile widen just enough for his husband to know that he enjoyed Thran’s predicament. It waxed even wider as he leaned forward to snare some grapes for himself, offering one to Tilda, who opened her mouth for him to pop it inside. Thran regarded them all, but no one’s gaze relented. Finally, he gave a thwarted sigh.

“I merely turned my ankle. It is not broken, not even a sprain or a strain. It will be fine in just a day or two, without repercussions. Please, do not worry. All is well.”

“So it wasn’t Lance?” Tilda asked, looking around Bard at the dancer.

Thran shook his head. “No, Kukla. No one and nothing else contributed to this but me. I was in class, and my ankle turned because I still learn how to dance in this new way. I overbalanced, that is all. It merely means that I must be more careful, and proceed more slowly.”

“But you’re still going to dance on pointe,” Sigrid said flatly.

“I have not yet convinced myself that it is impossible, no. I make this promise to you all. The moment I am convinced that this is too dangerous to continue, I will stop.”

“That’s what every addict says about giving up his drug of choice,” Sigrid muttered.

“That,” Bard growled, “is over the line. It’s one thing to disagree, but entirely another to be insulting. Whatever plans you had for Saturday, they’re right off, because you’re grounded for the day. Apologize, please.”

“I’m sorry, Ada,” Sigrid looked down at her hands.

“I accept,” Thran murmured softly. “I am very sorry to worry you, ma chère. I know you only wish me to take care of myself. I do my best.”

The silence in the sitting room was painful, fraught with Sigrid’s upset and Tilda’s worry and the boys’ disinclination to say anything, though they were quick to trade uncomfortable looks. Bard exhaled; once again, it would be up to him to dissipate the tension.

“Finish your snack, children. We’ve got an hour before we’ll start supper, so you can start your homework if you want, or just relax. I’ll call the sous chefs in a bit.”

The children murmured one thing or another in acknowledgement. Sigrid looked no more reconciled as she got up and disappeared upstairs. The boys opted to play a video game upstairs, and Tilda went into the solarium to fetch her sketchbook and art workbook before following her siblings upstairs.
Thran remained impassive only until the children left, then he slumped against the arm of the sofa.

“*Chert*, they are worse than any inquisition. All sad puppy eyes and downturned mouths.”

Bard prodded the bag of peas with a finger. “I’d better put these back in the freezer. They’re thawed. Your bag of ice is nothing but water, too.”

He unwrapped the sloshing plastic bag and carried it into the kitchen to drain. The peas went back in the freezer, then he returned to the sitting room, where Thran had gingerly removed his trainer and sock. His ankle wasn’t black and blue as Bard expected, thank the gods, mostly red from the pressure of his shoe, with a slight stain of purple. Not so bad.

*This time it wasn’t. What would it look like next time?*

Thran flexed his toes experimentally. His face eased, so it didn’t hurt as much as he’d expected. Bard sat down beside him again, beckoning for the elastic wrap.

“I am glad you came back from the kitchen. I am not yet completely ostracized, then.”

Bard put gentle hands on Thran’s foot, probing gently to check the swelling. He was forced to admit that the damage wasn’t as bad as he’d feared, so he wound the elastic wrap around Thran’s ankle to support it.

Thran tsked. “Please. Say something. Even if you must chastise me. That would be easier to bear than this silence.”

“I’m too busy praying like hell to talk,” Bard finally said. His words were blunter than he meant, so he didn’t continue until he was sure that he could keep voice soft and calm. “I promised that I wouldn’t tell you what to do about your dancing. I’m praying that you can keep your promise not to let your dancing consume you. That same worry is behind all those sad puppy eyes and downturned mouths, too.”

“I realize that,” Thran exhaled. “I am sorry to worry all of you. I am sorry I have given you reason to doubt me.”

“You family loves you, angel. No one wants you to hurt yourself any more than we want Lance to hurt anyone.”

“Do you want me to stop the pointe work?” Thran asked wearily.

“You decide that, not me. Either way, I will support you. But don’t ask me to help you push yourself so hard that you never dance again.”

“I will not do that,” Thran protested. “I *will not*. This is not a break, not a sprain, not a strain. A misstep only, a small twist only. It does not merit so much worry.”

Bard’s bare nod elicited an unhappy grimace from his husband. Could he find words to explain the children’s concern so that Thran would understand it?

“I can’t speak to what Legolas feels,” Bard ventured. “But I can tell you why my children think your small twist merits so much worry. They’re too used to living on the edge, and not enough time has passed yet that they take our life here for granted. They know that I can’t support them yet, that you’re the one who does. So yes, they love you and care about you, but they also worry that all this will end if something happens to you. Right or wrong, it’ll be a long time before that worry eases. If anything will give you pause about the risks you take when you dance, then let the children be it.”
Thran swallowed hard, but he met Bard’s gaze steadily. “I know that I do not fully fathom how hard it has been for you and your children, but I see their worry in their eyes, I feel it in my heart. I do. I will not let this consume me as before. I will not cripple myself. I am not yet convinced that the pointe work is beyond me, but I will proceed slowly and carefully, to keep myself safe.”

Thran’s voice was quiet, but emphatic, and Bard tried to take comfort in it. “And if you find that it’s beyond you, will you stop?”

Thran sighed. “I did not lie to Sigrid, and I do not lie to you. If it is beyond me... then yes, I will stop.”

Thran’s sigh, his bearing, the regret in his voice, told Bard the truth – Thran would go to the very edge of hell before he’d give up, but he’d go no farther.

If the edge of hell stopped short of broken feet and failed ballets, Bard would count that as a blessing for both of them.

* * *

Bard sat in silence, doing his best to hide his worry as he gently wrapped the elastic bandage around Thran’s ankle, but Thran knew Bard too well to be fooled. Bearing the pain of his husband’s unrest hurt more than his ankle did. Again Thran regretted his earlier lapse to Immortal’s rigors, which had caused his family to worry that he would lapse again. Sigrid’s accusation about addiction hurt even more because her father had made the same accusation in the depths of his fury only a few days ago.

It wasn’t an inapt analogy, either. If his own misgivings weren’t enough, then Mme. Morgelle’s should be – she was an excellent teacher, and well familiar of the demands of pointe work given her long and renowned career. There was no excuse for his refusal to heed her assessment, much less his own, or that of his family, no matter how unknowledgeable the last one was.

Still, if he could manage seven minutes, a mere seven minutes...

He shut his eyes. He was mad. That was the only name for it. Pure madness –

No, there was another name. Bard had said it first, and now Sigrid had, so he could not dismiss it, no matter how unpleasant he found it.

Addiction.

Not to a drug, only to the dance, but addiction nevertheless. How ironic would it be if he had achieved such dominance in the dance because he was no different from any junkie who craved his next high –

“Tired, angel?” Bard’s soft voice soothed over his restless thoughts.

Blinking, he found his husband regarding him with concern as he rubbed Thran’s shin slowly. “I am fine. I merely reflect.”

“Okay. Just checking.”

“I looked at the floor in the half bath,” he offered, hoping that would allay Bard’s concern as well as his own. “It is magnificent, even without the grout.”
Bard’s face eased into a smile. “I’m glad you like it. I think it’s the most amazing marble tile floor I’ve ever seen. Even better than the one in our bathroom upstairs.”

“They are beautiful in different ways. The one upstairs is serene and calm. This one is showy and stunning, magical with the tea paper and the crystal lamps. The Contessa chair will look wonderful with it. It looks like the clearest ice, poised to melt in the next second, but somehow it does not. The red cushion is wonderful, too. It looks to be suspended in air.”

Bard’s expression grew more animated. “I’m glad it lived up to its picture. It could easily have looked like a plastic lawn chair. An expensive plastic lawn chair.”

“It should be called the Cinderella chair. A crystal chair to match her crystal slippers.”

“Tilda will like that,” Bard agreed.

“The floor is not all I looked at before you arrived with the children. I looked at Rahmiel, too. Such a sweep of wings, filled with motion and energy, so light and full of grace. I have no words for him. He is beyond all words…”

Thran’s throat closed. He had been Bard’s inspiration for that heavenly angel alighting on the mortal plane to bestow his grace. But Thran wasn’t heavenly, and he had no grace to bestow. He was a madman driven by a compulsion he couldn’t resist. Despite his husband’s worry, his children’s fears, his teacher’s recommendation, and his colleagues’ concern, he had no intention of stopping his pursuit of all that the Lord of the Underworld demanded. He would make Death live like no role before or since.

What would that gain him? What would he do if he achieved this impossibility? How could he ever take Immortal on the road, where he would have to dance the impossible however many times a week? There were no gods in heaven that would help him do that.

Yet on he went, intent despite all concern, even his own.

He was nothing like Bard’s angel of love and mercy. He was selfish, irresponsible, and gambling with his family’s happiness.

He didn’t have to. All he had to do was consign his pointe shoes to someone else, and tell Irmo that this was too dangerous and foolish to attempt.

But he could not.

“Gods, Thran,” Bard’s voice came to him. “You just turned white as a winding shroud. What’s wrong? What hurts?”

Thran gulped, and his eyes closed. As his husband scrabbled to grab his healthy wrist, searching for a pulse, Thran took his hands. “Nothing hurts, Bard. I am only ashamed of myself. So ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” Bard’s voice was incredulous. “Why? Because you turned your ankle?”

Thran shook his head. “Because I am nothing like your Rahmiel. Nothing at all. And I am so sorry. Forgive me.”

Bard scooted forward on the sofa to enfold Thran in his arms. Thran wrapped arms around Bard and buried his face in the crook of Bard’s neck, and tried to swallow down guilt, shame, helplessness. Hands rubbing softly against his back tried to soothe him, but they intensified his dismay more than allayed it.
“You can’t give up the pointe shoes, then.”

Thran shook his head.

The ribs under his hands flexed in a long exhale. “Do what you have to do. Just... don’t hurt yourself so badly that you can’t dance. The rest of us can survive that. You can’t.”

Whether Bard knew it or not, his stark assessment was likely the only thing that could penetrate the depths of his madness. He had to take care, or he would lose much more than a role in a single ballet – all roles in all ballets going forward. Then the best he could hope for would be to live vicariously though the work of students and colleagues. He felt a little better, for his single-mindedness paused for however briefly, considering a future without dance practice, much less performance. He took a deep breath, and eased away until he could meet Bard’s eyes.

“You are right. I will be very careful, and very cautious.”

“And you will rest,” Bard added firmly. “Are you planning to go to the studio tomorrow? Because if you are, I intend to hide your car keys.”

Thran sighed. “I will not dance, though I intend to do as much of my barre as does not stress my ankle. I should ring Lettie and Irmo, and inform them. Lettie tells me that the PR campaign for the ballet begins, so perhaps there is something I can do there.”

“I don’t envy you those conversations,” Bard gave him a pained look. “Lettie’s one thing, but Irmo...”

“He will be furious,” Thran agreed. “I should ring them sooner rather than later, given the hour.”

“Go ahead and talk to them. I’ll clean up my stuff in the solarium, then get supper started,” Bard said. “When you called from the driveway, I scattered a few feathers getting out there. I might need them, so I want to get them off the floor before they get trampled.”

“I understand, my saint. And that you understand me, support me... I am most grateful. I will not abuse your trust.”

Bard gave Thran’s braid a tug, and brushed a kiss on Thran’s hair before he got up and carried the tea tray into the kitchen. When he was out of sight, Thran winced. It was one thing to say that he would not abuse his husband’s trust. It would be entirely another to keep the dance from abusing him.
Cups and saucers into the dishwasher, tea tray into the butler’s pantry, leftover cheese and fruit into the fridge, crackers into plastic bags and then into the pantry...

Tidying did not bring Bard the solace of order and peace that it usually did.

He went into the solarium to collect the feathers that had scattered when he’d bolted outside at Thran’s call, carefully tucking them into their bags and boxes. Rahmiel remained in view, poised in his landing; his wings were too delicate to be covered with anything, even gossamer spider silk.

It had been tricky and frustrating to figure out how to anchor Rahmiel’s feathers – the sheets of high-density foam he’d fastened to the wing armatures had not been rigid enough, so the feathers had flopped this way and that when Bard had tried to set them in place. Foam core board hadn’t worked either; it was too rigid to bend, which forced the feathers into a flat array rather than a realistic, three-dimensional one. In frustration, he’d wandered out to the barn to clear his head. A lot of the stuff he’d used throughout the renovation was piled in a tangle and a twist, because he’d been too intent on completing the house for his family to arrange his materials with his usual neatness. He’d have to remedy that before the barn would be a proper workshop again. A huge pile of paint cans, some empty, was over there, and a stack of plate glass left over from repairing windows was on the workbench. Buckets of joint compound, tubs of plaster repair, and pots of window glazing were scattered willy-nilly among the paint cans. He’d nudged aside a box full of tubes of bathroom caulk and aerosol cans of...

Foam insulation?

Bard had found a piece of old window screen, cut a rough rectangle out of it, and sprayed the foam insulation over it. The stuff had bubbled and expanded, but within minutes had set into a rigid but light blob. It had been easy to ply a sheet rock knife to trim it into a sculpted shape. Bard had grabbed the two cans of foam insulation and the roll of screen wire, and hurried back to the solarium. Was it worth the risk to cut the sheets and boards of foam off the armature of Rahmiel’s wings, on the chance that maybe, just maybe, the screen and foam insulation would provide the stable base he needed to hold the wing feathers in place? If not, he’d have to replace everything he’d torn out...

Twenty minutes later, Bard had smiled in triumph. The thin screen had gone within the armature, the foam had gone on top, and when the foam had solidified he’d used a serrated steak knife to carve the excess away. Now, the feathers...

Success! The foam had held the feathers exactly in place! He’d used tiny squirts of more foam to seal each row, carved away the excess, and gone on to the next row. It hadn’t taken long to finish the first wing, though it’d seemed otherwise. Feeling more confident, he’d placed most of the feathers for the second wing before he’d received Thran’s call.

Looking at Rahmiel now... maybe he’d used unorthodox means to fledge the angel, but the resulting
organic sweep of wings matched what Bard saw in his imagination. This was the best sculptural model he’d ever made.

Why, then, was his stomach still tight?

He passed through the sitting room, on his way to start supper in the kitchen. Thran was still stretched out on the sofa, mobile in hand as he talked. His tone was calm, but his body was a disconsolate slump, his head was propped up on the arm of the sofa, and he rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. If he talked to Irmo, he probably did have a headache. Bard didn’t linger to overhear the conversation.

By the time he reached the kitchen, Bard’s stomach had tightened even more.

He opened the fridge to pull out his old staple, chicken, cut it into small bits, and scraped it into a bowl. A quick hoisin sauce went in the bowl to coat the chicken, then Bard put the mixture into a pan to roast in the oven. He started a big pot of brown rice, chopped up veg, and set the table. A bowl of mixed fruit salad went on the table, then Bard got the big skillet ready to stir fry the veg. When the chicken and rice were almost done, he called up to the children.

“Ten minutes to supper, all! Wash your hands!”

“Already?” Legolas appeared at the top of the stairs. “I thought you were going to call the sous chefs?”

Bard had been grateful for the time by himself in the kitchen, forcing him to focus on something other than his unsettled state of mind. It hadn’t calmed him, though, and he was no closer to understanding what needled him. He kept his upset out of his voice, though, when he answered Legolas.

“I was on a roll. Round up the rest of the clan, and come on downstairs.”

“Okay, Bard.” Legolas disappeared, so Bard stuck his head into the sitting room.

“Supper’s almost ready,” he said, when Thran looked up. His husband met his gaze with a pale smile. He looked so subdued that the knot in Bard’s stomach tightened a little more. “I’ll get everything on the island, then I’ll give you a hand while the children load up. Or I can help you to your chair, and make a plate for you.”

“I will manage,” Thran replied quietly.

A tall, pale dancer was no more settled than Bard was.

Veg went in the skillet, chicken and rice went on the counter, and as the children came down, the stir-fried veg went beside the chicken. The children filled their plates; Thran followed slowly and gingerly, favoring his ankle, and he didn’t linger over making his supper. He sat silently, listening to the uncharacteristically muted conversation that passed back and forth, but he didn’t engage in it. He wasn’t the only quiet one – Sigrid simmered, staring at her plate as if she wanted to melt it into the table, and Tilda looked back and forth between everyone, aware of the tension but unwilling to counter it. Legolas and Bain murmured to each other, and at length Legolas braved the silence to tell his father of his excellent results on today’s pre-algebra quiz. Brightening, Thran congratulated his son and Bain on their success, which lightened the children’s mood. Why did it worsen the knot in Bard’s stomach?

“Mr. Rohan gave me a letter to give you,” Tilda murmured.
“Did he?” Bard managed a smile for his youngest. “Is it to tell me how well you’re doing in your new art class?”

“I don’t know,” Tilda shook her head. “He said it was important, though, to make sure I gave it to you.”

Before Bard could say that he’d look at it as soon as they got through supper, Tilda had slipped out of her chair and gone to find her backpack. She trotted back with an envelope in her hand. It had the formal school logo and address in the upper left corner, and his name neatly typed on the front.

“It looks very official,” Bard observed, turning the envelope over, then back again. He unsealed it and shook out the single page inside.

It was a tax receipt for his donation to the Follies silent auction – a donation of four hundred dollars.

Bard’s mouth fell open.

“What is it, Da?” Bain asked in a worried voice. “Is something wrong?”

Four hundred dollars? Four hundred? Someone had bought his sketch for four hundred dollars?

Bard closed his mouth. His eyes fell on Thran, who gazed back warily.

“Um... you didn’t... buy my Follies sketch, did you?”

Thran’s face was mystified. “No. You asked me not to bid on it, so I did not.”

Bard smothered a reverent but profane exclamation. “Um... someone bought it for... four hundred dollars.”

The atmosphere turned electric as everyone’s eyes flew to Bard. The boys hooted in triumph, and Sigrid’s smiling eyes shone with pride. Tilda clapped her hands and exulted with her brothers.

“I am very happy for you, lyubov moya,” Thran said without hesitation. His smile was wide, warm, and affectionate, and his earlier withdrawal was forgotten. “And so, so proud of you.”

At those quiet words of affirmation, everything snapped into place. Of course Bard was unsettled! How could he not be?

“Thank you, cariad. And I owe you an apology. I’m sorry I didn’t give you the same support today as you just gave me, even though I said I would.”

If Thran regarded him with confusion, so did the children. “What is this?”

“I’m a sculptor, but with your encouragement and support, I’m going beyond that. I’m doing my sketches, and I’m adding feathered wings and hair to Rahmiel, and who knows what I’ll do after that? That’s what every good artist has to do – he has to risk going beyond the norm, or he’s just recycling what’s already been done before. You understand that, and you’ve supported all of my efforts to do that.”

The children looked even more confused. What Thran felt was less clear, but Bard pressed on.

“You’re an artist, too – a great one – so of course you have push Immortal to go beyond the norm. My risk is to give Rahmiel wings and hair so he’s unique. Yours is to dance on pointe so the Lord of the Underworld is unique, too – something no one’s seen before, and likely never will again. Now I understand why you want to take that risk, and why I should support you the way you’ve supported
“Da, no!” Sigrid protested, all but erupting out of her chair. “You can’t say that! You can’t! He’ll hurt himself, he’ll –”

“Maybe he will,” Bard agreed, which made all the children gasp; Thran put his chin in his hand to regard Bard with incredulity. “Maybe he won’t. None of us wants him to hurt himself, but none of us has the right to dictate whether he takes that risk or not.”

“But what if he does hurt himself?” Sigrid argued fiercely. “What if –”

“What do Thran and I say to each of you every morning, when you get on the bus?” Bard asked.

“Do your best, just like always?” Tilda murmured, looking up at Bard.

“That’s right. That goes for Thran and me, too. So telling Thran not to do his best on his ballet is like telling me not to work metal because I might burn myself, or Tilda not to go into a more advanced art class because it might be hard, or Legolas not to try to get to the Olympics with his archery or fencing, or Bain not to try out for the soccer team, or Sigrid not to write a paper that makes a case for an unexpected premise.”

“But the pointe stuff is stupid!” Sigrid argued. “It’s stupid and unnecessary –”

“It’s not stupid, and it’s not unnecessary,” Bard said in a quiet but deliberate voice. “I know you’re worried about Thran, but your bigger worry is that if he hurts himself, then we’ll have to go back to a grotty apartment in the city, isn’t it?”

If the panic on Sigrid’s face was answer enough, the fear on Tilda’s was doubly so.

“B-b-but Lance Dunmont is there!” Tilda gasped.

“Shit!” Bain muttered, then clapped his hands over his mouth when Legolas stared at him aghast and tried to shush him. “Oh, gods, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that –”

“Stop. Everybody stop.” Bard looked around the table. “All of you, take three deep breaths. Calm down.”

When everyone had, Bard leaned forward over his elbows folded on the table. “Nothing Thran does for Immortal will make us move from this house. Nothing. This house is ours. We have money, we have each other, we have everything we need to take care of each other. If Thran and I never work another day, we’ll still have more than enough. So there is no reason why Thran has to do less than his best to make Immortal the best.”

The children looked at each other, but Bard willed them to believe him when he met their gazes without flinching. When they were calmer, he met Thran’s eyes.

“I’ll still worry about what might happen if your body can’t handle the pointe dancing. But I understand and support why you have to try it. So do it. Just be smart about the cost. That’s all any of us have the right to ask.”

Thran sat with his fingers steepled over his mouth. As the children turned to regard him, he bowed his head to press his mouth against his folded fingers. He swallowed before he looked up with a crooked smile so full of love and appreciation that Bard gave himself a mental kick for not figuring this out sooner.
“I am quite overwhelmed, lyubov moya. I do not know what to say, other than thank you.”

“You’re welcome, cariad.” Bard gave Thran an equally crooked smile, then glanced at the children. “Everyone all right?”

“We won’t ever have to move away from here, then, right?” Bain asked.

“No,” Thran and Bard chorused.

“No matter what happens?” Tilda said in a very small voice.

“No,” Thran and Bard chorused again.

“You understand now, Legolas? Sigrid?” Thran asked softly. “You are all provided for. You will never go back to the grotty apartments. Here we are, and here we stay.”

“I understand, Papa. I’m glad. I love it here.”

“Sigrid?”

Their oldest child swallowed, still looking at her lap. “I... apologize to you, too, Ada. For being so scared of you getting hurt. Not just because of what it might mean to me, which was selfish, but because of what it would mean to you, too. And... I apologize to you, too, Da, because I was worried that you... hadn’t had time to get back to your art, and... that was selfish, too.”

“In a few weeks, I’ll officially be a working artist again, sweetness. The Follies piece was the prelude, and the main event begins with my show in just a few weeks. Everything’s coming together.”

Gods, he hoped that were true, and not just for Sigrid’s sake – for his own, too. But Sigrid looked up at him with a proud smile.

“It’s going to be wonderful,” she said firmly.

“It will be, yes,” Thran echoed, smiling at Sigrid. “Go into the solarium and look at Rahmiel, and then try to tell me otherwise.”

“You did the feathers?” Sigrid scrambled out of her chair, and disappeared into the sitting room.

“Did you?” Tilda looked up at Bard.

Smiling, he nodded. “Most of them.”

“I want to see, too.” Tilda followed her sister.

Bain gave Legolas a look and a shrug. “Come on – I want to see this, too.”

“Right behind you.”

Bard and Thran were left at an otherwise empty table. They shared a private smile, and then Thran shook his head, chuckling silently to himself.

“It still amazes me, this ability you have to conjure the worst disquiet into resolution. It always ends well.”

“I guess this is where I offer to bring you a dish of ice cream.”
“To end the supper well, too, of course,” Thran nodded. “I would like that, my saint. Coconut?”

“One scoop or two?”

“Just one. But with the chocolate syrup.”

Bard grinned as he got up to collect plates. “Living large at last, I see.”

Thran went to get up to help, but Bard waved him to stay in his chair. In a few seconds, the children tumbled back into the kitchen, exclaiming over Rahmiel’s feathered wings, which gratified Bard that his trial and error had produced such a good result. Bard put the children to work cleaning up the supper dishes, since he’d done all of the prep alone, so he and Thran retreated to the sitting room with tea and ice cream. As they sat side by side on the sofa, Bard squeezed Thran’s knee.

“I’m sorry I didn’t sort myself out sooner,” Bard exhaled.

Thran exhaled, too. “Your concern was not entirely misplaced.”

“How do you mean?”

“You called the dance my addiction when we had our fight, and today Sigrid said the same thing. You would not have told her that part of our fight, so she used that word on her own. To hear it twice means I must give it attention, no matter how ugly a word I find it. I worry that you both might be right. Some days... the difference between pursuit of the vision that an artistic muse bestows, and pursuit of a junkie’s next fix, is very small.”

Bard considered. “I have to say that’s true of my art, too, though I take physical risks only when I make the piece. You take yours very time you perform.”

“That is why, Bard, for my sake, you must not to return to your silence that came before our fight. I appreciate that you understand why we both take risks to make our art live. But please, continue to watch out for me. I have already ventured into the land of the obsessed once. Despite all I want for Immortal, I do not want to venture there again.”

Thran’s voice might be a low murmur so that the children didn’t overhear, but his expression was somber. Bard rubbed his husband’s thigh again in reassurance.

“I’ve got your back, angel. I might need yours before long, too. If my art finds an audience –”

“When your art finds an audience,” Thran inserted.

Bard shrugged acceptance. “Okay, when my art finds an audience, I’ll need you to help me through all that that entails. Keep me from making a fool out of myself.”

“We will see to each other,” Thran sighed, looking down at his dish of ice cream. “It is a great relief to have each other, because we will tell ourselves the truths no one else will.”

Thran’s kiss on Bard’s hair was soft, but still conveyed the depth of Thran’s emotion. Without conscious thought, Bard put an arm around Thran’s shoulders and hugged him close.

As long as they kept talking, they’d be all right.

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* * *
The rest of the evening passed smoothly. The atmosphere was lighter, and the children worked on their homework and got their showers without upset. Thran stayed on the sofa to rest his ankle, so Bard brought the refrozen peas to ice his ankle for a few more minutes. Thankfully, the swelling had gone down, and the bruising looked minimal. After his shower, Thran wrapped it with the elastic bandage for support while he slept, and seemed to sleep through the night without disturbance. The next morning, he awoke refreshed, and followed Bard downstairs to start the children’s breakfasts and lunches.

“How does it feel this morning?” Bard queried as they laid out the bread on their waxed paper sheets.

“A little tight, a little sore, but only a little,” Thran replied, coming behind Bard with the packages of ham and turkey. “I could dance on it if I had to, but better that I refrain from most exertion today. Tomorrow, it will be fine.”

“So you’ll be at the studio today, or here?”

“I will go there. I can help with the chorus, or answer costume questions, or set design questions, or likely many other kinds of questions.”

“The fount of all knowledge,” Bard teased. “Just stay away from cryptic couplets, or they’ll call you the Delphic oracle.”

Chuckling, Thran said, “That would only raise more questions, and then nothing would get done.”

“I’m sure.”

“You go to the school today to help the art classes?”

Bard nodded. “I’ll seal the half bath floor tiles before I go, so I can grout when I come back.”

“You seal them so that the grout does not stick to the tiles, yes?”

“That’s right. I’ll have to do it again once the grout’s dry, but this first coat will keep the grout from dulling the finish.”

“A good precaution. I like how the tiles shine so well, like ice.”

“Grout today, seal tomorrow... I hope to get the sink and toilet back in there tomorrow night, so Friday you can have the company back here if you want.”

“If we must wait until Monday, we will survive.”

“I hope Saturday I can have you and the children help me with the hall chandeliers. Mostly I need help to support them while I figure out the spacing between them. And spotters are always good when you’re trying to work thirty feet off the floor. Not the thing to do when I’m in the house alone.”

“No,” Thran agreed, adding cheese to Sigrid’s sandwich. “Please, do not do that.”

“I won’t. I want to get the bedroom and the third floor landings painted, since we won’t paint the main room until the sofa gets here, because we have to match the paint. And clean up the pecan paneling in the sitting room. That just takes a lot of oil soap and elbow grease. Then I’ll finally get to
“I admit I am eager to start work on the solarium,” Thran gave Bard a smile. “With the screens and lamps, and then Sam’s plants, it will be wonderful. But do not exhaust yourself, Bard. We have time.”

“I’m pushing to get done before my show, because if my show is a success, I want to be the artist full time again, angel. Just like you miss the dance when you don’t do it, I miss the art when I don’t do it. Still, it’s a kind of art to turn the house into what we want it to be. I enjoy that.”

“I think we should get the floors redone in the hall, main room, and dining room before the sofa arrives. It is very large, and solid, and will be hard to move, even if it can be divided into pieces to move it.”

“That’s a good idea. The hall steps should get done at the same time. Let’s hope we don’t have to spend a night in a hotel, or camped in the sitting room while the finish dries. I think the process has come a long way in the past few years, so maybe it can go down and dry all in one day now.”

“We will adjust. If we must stay in a hotel, we will find someplace to visit on a day trip, and make a holiday of it.”

“That’d be fun,” Bard nodded. “I’ll make some calls in a day or so about the floor. Once I paint the landings, we can schedule that any time the workmen can come.”

“So it progresses,” Thran nodded.

Bard gave Thran a grin as he brought out the fruit for the children’s lunches. “Do you think you can learn to live in a house rather than a construction site?”

“I think I will manage well,” Thran’s lips curved up in a sly smile. “Perhaps I will find more opportunities to seduce my husband after the children go to school when he does not work so hard on the house.”

“I’ll be out in the barn to work on the art.”

“Even better. What is it you call it – my grunge kink? I will have the chance to show you just how much I savor grungy welders.”

Bard grinned. “If you go too far with that, you’ll end up a grungy dancer.”

Thran hummed, ogling Bard up and down. “Such a hardship? I do not think so.”

Bard edged around the kitchen island until it was between him and Thran. “I think I’d better stand over here for a while.”

“It will not save you.” Thran followed Bard to press a kiss on his neck, and fondle his glutes. “I will restrain myself now, but when you are back in the barn, I will not. Be ready.”

“Hmmmm, cleaning the barn just moved higher on the to-do list,” Bard teased.

“Good. Where are the children? They are late today.”

“You’re right. I’ll go roust them if you check the porridge.”

Legs and Bain came down the stairs just as Bard went to run up, and he heard both of the girls rummaging, so with a call to breakfast, Bard went back to the kitchen. Tilda and Sigrid soon
appeared, breakfast was consumed, the children went to the bus stop with both fathers in tow, and Bard and Thran walked slowly back. Thran headed upstairs to collect his things for his day at the UVB studio, and Bard shed his boots to paint tile sealer on the marble. He was about a quarter of the way through when his mobile rang.

“Sean Kelso here, Mr. Bowman.”

That was the police officer who had been with them at the Follies last Saturday. “Good morning, Officer Kelso. I left you a message last Sunday.”

“You did, and I’m sorry for not returning your call before now. But I followed through with your suggestion about checking the local gangs about your husband’s attacker. It was a good one – our boy’s been in contact with two of them.”

Bard scrabbled to put down his small brush, and hurried upstairs to flag down Thran. “Has he? Does anyone know what he’s up to?”

Bard put his hand over the mobile speaker to mouth to Thran, “Lance has been seen.”

“He was looking to join either of them, but the first has had a rash of trouble, and frankly thought our boy was a plant from a rival, so they turned him down flat. The second one is smaller, on the way up, so they’re recruiting, and was more amenable. We passed the word to both factions that this kid is in big trouble with both sides of the gang world in the city, which is a poison they don’t need. They also know that if they can deliver the kid to us, we’ll look kindly on some of their concerns. I hope that’ll cut down on the safe harbors our boy can hide in.”

“So he’s in the area, at least some of the time. Do you know if he’s staying here?”

“I don’t have much to tell you about that, Mr. Bowman. But my take is that he’s looking for a spot, and I can fathom why as well as you can. We’re on the lookout for him in abandoned barns, houses, that kind of thing, in case he decides to squat. Just be watchful, and don’t let any of your family go anywhere alone. The boy might be most interested in your daughter, but it’s clear he’ll take a shot at whichever one of you he can along the way.”

“We’ve been careful,” Bard assured the officer. “We’ll continue to be. Did any of your contacts say whether he’s armed or not?”

“Not so far as they could see. That the best we can do for now. We’ve got people actively looking for the boy, so I hope we’ll have better news soon.”

“I appreciate that, Officer Kelso. I’m glad I could help with a suggestion.”

“So am I. I’ll let you know when more develops.”

“Thank you, sir. Goodbye.”

“What did he say?” Thran asked excitedly, so Bard quickly relayed everything that Officer Kelso had told him.

“So he is still at large, but more people are on the watch for him,” Thran mulled. “So progress of a sort.”

“A bit.” Bard exhaled. “I know what he said about not going anywhere alone, so do you want me to drive you to the studio? I’ll head to the school after that, come back here, then come get you when you’re ready?”
Thran rubbed the back of his neck. “I suppose that would be prudent, but... suka blyad, so much annoyance on the account of a single angry boy! I think we will be all right, me to go to the studio, and you to go to the school. You will watch me leave here, and I will call you when I am on my way home so you can watch for me to arrive. And I do not think the boy will be so foolish as to try to tackle you. You are too strong for him by far.”

“As long as he isn’t armed,” Bard amended. “But since Officer Kelso says he doesn’t seem to be, I think we’ll be all right. I just have to remember to be careful when I go out to the barn. I blundered out there yesterday, and never thought once that he might lurk about.”

Humming in concern, Thran offered Bard a wince. “Because you were in the arms of your muse. Please, at least look when you go outside, yes? The artist’s reverie is just the thing to offer Lance the moment he needs.”

“You’re right. Mab i ast, you’re right about this being such a pain. I’ll put a note on the mudroom door so I don’t fly out there without thinking first.”

“A good idea. Now, I am almost ready to go to the studio, so I will make myself a lunch while I wait for you to seal the rest of the tile. Then we can leave together.”

“That’d be great, angel. Won’t take me long. I’ll get back to it.”

Bard took his usual pains, but painting the sealer over the tile took little time, and soon he and Thran ventured outside.

“I want to stop on the way home from the school and get some garage door openers,” Bard told Thran as they locked the house door. “I can put those in this weekend when there are a lot of us around.”

“Is it complicated to do that?” Thran asked.

Bard shook his head. “There’s one in there already, but it’s never worked. Jerry wasn’t the best at keeping things up when he got into trouble. I looked at that one, and the mountings are okay, just the unit needs replacing. So I’ll get three and a lot of angle iron to hold them, and then we won’t have to get out of the vehicles to move them in and out.”

“That would be safer, and a welcome luxury on rainy days,” Thran observed. “I leave that to you, lyubov moya, but I will be glad to provide cheap labor to help the Clan Ffyrnig general contractor this Saturday.”

Chuckling, Bard gave Thran a quick kiss as they headed to the carriage house. “You may be sorry you offered. There will be three to install.”

“I am sure that I can think of ways for you to reimburse me for my efforts,” Thran teased back. “Now, we are off, and we are leaving, too.”

Bard hauled up the two bay doors. “Do your best, just like always.”

“And you. See you soon, my saint.”

“You, too, angel.”

They traded hugs, then got the vehicles out of the carriage house. Once Bard closed the doors, Thran armed the security system. Thran offered a wave from behind the wheel of his SUV as Bard got into his truck, and they headed down the lane.
Bard saw Thran into the UVB parking lot, then continued to the children’s school. Today he would help Theodred in a couple of his classes, Tilda’s included. His daughter greeted him with an excited wave when she came in, and he had a good time working with her and the other students on Theodred’s lesson about perspective. His second class was for older students well versed in clay sculpture, which he enjoyed a great deal. One or two had an innate sense of the material, but he enjoyed watching them all work on their pieces. When class was over, he had a few minutes’ chat with Theodred on the success of the April Fool’s Follies.

“How did the petition for your urban arts class turn out?”

Theodred’s grin was delighted. “Better than all of us expected. We got six hundred signatures! I’ve already told Headmaster L’Eärendil, so he’s agreed to look at a plan for the class. Diana Glorfindel’s excited about it, too, so she’ll help me. She offered to teach some of the painting sections.”

“That’s great!” Bard congratulated the young art teacher. “The more art, the merrier.”

“Absolutely,” Theodred nodded. “And congratulations on your sketch selling so well. We had several big sellers this year.”

“So you know who bought it? Not that it matters, but I’m curious.”

Theodred grinned. “I think the Gondors bought it. They both really liked it. It had a nice medieval vibe to it with the swords, the queen and her knight, courtly love, and all that. A great piece.”

“I’m... honored,” Bard grinned crookedly. “That’s a great compliment, when your subjects like your work enough to buy it.”

“Agreed. So, you’ll be in next Wednesday?”

“I’ll be here, Theodred. I enjoy being with the children, and being around any kind of art.”

They discussed the couple of sculpture students that Bard had noticed for a minute or two, then Bard bid Theodred goodbye. He made a run to the homeowners’ mecca that had the garage door system he’d decided would work for their carriage house, and headed home with the mechanics as well as enough heavy angle iron to hang the drive units. He did remember to look carefully around him before he got out to put the truck in the carriage house, but he got that done, the door openers stowed on a shelf, and into the house proper without problem. With a few taps on the keypad, the security system was armed.

A quick lunch went down his throat, then he opened the tub of grout and carefully filled the gaps between the marble tiles, wiping off as much excess as he could so as not to mar the tile surfaces. Once that was done, he had three hours before the children and Thran would be home, so he patched the plaster dings in the second and third story landing walls. The ceiling above the third floor landing was in decent shape, so he primed it with a long roller. Sand the patches, paint the ceiling, prime the third floor landing walls and woodwork. At least he didn’t have to scrape this woodwork; he’d replaced the cheap pine trim with nice oak way back in December, when Thran had first brought Legolas to fence in the ballroom. That was four months ago, but it seemed far longer, given how much everything had changed since then. It gave Bard something to smile about as he wielded his paintbrush.

His mobile chimed, alerting him to the children’s impending arrival. He hurried to prime the last little bit of the wall, then headed out to the bus stop –

Wait, take a careful look outside... okay, all clear. So off he jogged. He was late, but the made it to
The small, curly blonde mimicked grabbing handfuls of hair and pulling it in frustration. “Oh, Bard, everything that could have gone wrong with that dratted thing did! If it looked half as elaborate as the trouble it caused, it would have been twice the size. Never, ever, ever, do I want to do anything like it again! But thank all the gods, the client was happy with it, and paid on the spot, so I’m relieved.”

“Some of them go like that,” Bard agreed, grinning in commiseration. “I hope the next one’s an easy one. Tilda loves her sun catcher, by the way. It’s hanging in the window of her room.”

“Oh, I’m glad. She got the sunflower, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“It’ll look better than a real one when the sun hits it. I hope she enjoys it. Sam told me you’re working on a sculpture already? That’s great – and I’ve seen two of your interviews on TV for your upcoming show. So exciting!”

“It’s coming up,” Bard widened his eyes in exaggerated anticipation. “I’m trying to get most of the house done by then, so I can start full time in the barn. Not too much more left to do.”

They chatted briefly about their various home projects until the bus came, then each collected their quartet of children to head home. Tilda was excited about seeing Bard in her art class today, and Sigrid was happy about doing well on a pair of tests. The boys, however, were a bit subdued.

“Got something to tell you at home,” Bain leaned close to whisper while Sigrid got Tilda to tell her about what she and Bard had done in her art class. “Sig knows. Don’t want Til to hear.”

That meant it was about Lance.

Bard gave Legolas a look, who nodded when they met eyes. So the boys were both in on this. Neither looked particularly worried, so Bard banked his concern. He let them all in the house, and the usual scramble to shed jackets and shoes and backpacks and lunch bags flurried between the mudroom and kitchen.

Bard’s mobile chimed again. Thran. He was leaving the UVB studio, and would be home in about twenty minutes. Bard relayed that to the children as Tilda and Sigrid got the cheese and crackers ready. He gestured the boys back into the mudroom.

“Can your news wait until your Papa gets home?” he asked Legolas.

The boys traded considering looks. “I think so,” Legolas offered. “It’s just twenty minutes. There’s nothing about to happen, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then sit tight. Your Papa will want to hear it, too, so you’ll have to say it just the once.”

“Okay, Bard,” Legolas whispered back. “One of my mates at school told me something, and I told Bain and Sigrid before Tilda met us to catch the bus.”

“I’ve got some news, too,” he confided. “So we’ll get it all sorted soon.”

“Okay, Bard; okay, Da.”

The boys came out of the mudroom and made a beeline for the plate of cheese and crackers with
Tilda none the wiser. Bard followed after them, snared a piece of cheese for himself, and contented himself to wait by asking the children about their school day. He watched the three older children, but none of them seemed particularly distressed, so he decided that whatever the boys had to tell him, it wasn’t critical.

Then again, everything related to Lance Dunmont’s whereabouts and intentions where critical to Clan Ffyrnig.

Bard hoped that today’s traffic between the UVB studio and home was light.
Chapter 104

Chapter Summary

Despite a sore ankle, the angel makes good progress on his ballet.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all! It's Olympics season, so work on this story will be spotty for the next couple of weeks as I get my biennial fix of world sport. I will be back regularly at the keyboard once all the excitement is over. Please join me in cheering on all the athletes, regardless of country. They've all worked so hard to get to Rio, so best wishes, deep salaams, and much love to them all ❤️!

For once, Thran wasn’t thrilled that the morning traffic was light, and wouldn’t keep him from reaching the UltraViolet Ballet studio in good time. He didn’t savor the uproar that would ensue only moments after he’d walk through the company’s doors, when Irmo would erupt in exasperation because Thran’s ankle would not allow him to dance safely today. While Irmo had been the one to urge Thran to attempt dancing on pointe, he did not understand that just because he wanted it to happen did not make it happen. So much more strengthening, so much more practice, remained before Thran would be fit to dance those crucial seven minutes in Immortal’s Act III, Scene i.

How many years did ballerinas labor to learn and refine this delicate art?

He had five months.

Listening to Irmo castigate him for carelessness or inattention wouldn’t help anything, but knowing the tirade was coming allowed Thran to put it aside. The harder part to ignore would be Lettie’s silent worry. UVB’s fortunes rode on Immortal, and Immortal rode on Thran, and any injury he suffered made her nervous. He would reassure her that his ankle would plague him only a day or two, and he would be quickly back to work without any repercussions. During that day or two, he’d be available to help her with the logistical demands of bringing Immortal to life, which she would appreciate.

Still, just because he knew what awaited him and had a plan to manage it did not make him look forward to it.

He pulled into the UVB parking lot, took a careful look about him before he got out of the SUV, and walked quickly inside. Once he was within, he slowed his pace to keep his ankle as stress-free as possible. He was early, and went right to Lettie’s office, where he found Ori already talking to the company’s artistic director.

“Good morning, Thran!” Lettie greeted with a relieved smile.
“Hi, Thran!” Ori offered his usual bright and open smile.

“Good morning, Lettie, Ori,” Thran gave both a warm smile.

“How’s your ankle this morning?” Lettie queried, looking at his foot.

“Much better. I will modify my barre this morning, and I will not dance, but I will be back to my usual in a day or so. Until then, I am your willing assistant to deal with the logistics and whatever else you would have me do.”

“I’ve got lots of that,” Lettie agreed with a relieved expression. “Ori and I were girding our loins to endure Irmo’s displeasure when he arrives this morning.”

“I considered that on my drive in, too,” Thran offered his companions a wry smile as he sat beside Ori.

“Lettie called me last night to warn me.” Ori cradled his knee in his hands and leaned back in his chair to consider thoughtfully. “At some point, Thran, you’ll be in the middle of the effort to publicize the ballet, talk to donors and sponsors, and so forth. A lot of your part of the choreography is in good shape, so I wondered if we could cast this as a chance to get an early push on the publicity? Irmo won’t like that you can’t dance today, but we might divert him if he knows you’re helping to get the word out about *Immortal*. He can’t say that isn’t a good use of your time.”

“That’s a good idea, Ori,” Lettie nodded. “I can head Irmo off if I tell him that I’ve wanted to get Thran more involved with that, and this is the perfect opportunity to do so.”

“I agree,” Thran nodded. “We have the principal dances mostly choreographed, and Irmo has several more things to decide about the troll market scenes. We need to get Círdan and Rada to refine his vision with the set and the costumes, so that the characters take better shape, and then Irmo can refine his choreography even more.”

“All good points,” Lettie nodded. “Rada’s nearly done his final sketches. I’ll call him and see if he can come in with those in the next day or so. He’ll have more of the troll market costumes to do once he sees what Irmo’s put into place for the modern dancers. And Círdan and I need to get over to the Imladris Academy to look at the space, and talk about how to set up the internships for the students. So we have many things to work on, which should mollify Irmo a bit. You dancing isn’t the major focus right now.”

“Just so,” Thran agreed.

“I have to ask, though,” Lettie leaned over her desk, and unconsciously lowered her voice. “About the pointe work. Is it in or out?”

Thran sat back with a sigh. “I will be honest with both of you, though this goes no further than this room. Mme. Morgelle is not sanguine. I do not yet have the strength to keep my height and weight from unbalancing me when I am on pointe. Even at strength, my balance will be precarious – if I am even the slightest bit off center, I cannot hold the pose, as I confirmed yesterday.” Thran circled his foot gingerly. “I must add much more strength work for my ankles and legs – flat work, not pointe work – to prepare as best I can. This does not mean that I think it is impossible. If it is at all possible, I will do it. I give myself another month to strengthen myself, and then I will decide.”

“Irmo acts like it’s a done deal,” Ori murmured.

Thran nodded. “If it is not, then he will have to live with it. I would rather dance Death on demi-pointe than not at all.”
“So would I,” Lettie nodded. “More to the point, UltraViolet cannot afford for you to injure yourself so badly that you can’t dance.”

“I am well aware, and so I will take care. So for now, we have our plans. Come, let us look at our logistical efforts, to see what we should do first.”

The three bent their heads to the effort, and by the time Abebe and the rest of the company appeared for morning barre, they had a good idea of how to proceed. Thran changed into his dance attire, but made no secret of the wrap on his ankle as he took his place with the other dancers to begin. Still, he made sure his manner was relaxed and open as the dancers joined him, and so Abebe began. About half an hour into it, Irmo made his presence known with a lot of noise, but when he appeared in the studio with Ori close behind, he took in Thran with the other dancers, and the noise abruptly stopped. Thran nodded to him, but kept his place, and Irmo retreated with Ori whispering in his ear.

Good. Let Lettie and Ori take the brunt of Irmo’s irascibility this morning. Maybe they could blunt it by the time Thran finished his barre and yoga...

Then again, maybe not. When barre work was done, Thran remained in place for his yoga, but Irmo came with determined steps through the door and headed right for him. With perverse satisfaction, Thran upended himself into a handstand, lowered his legs into a split, and held the pose without wobble or strain. Irmo could talk to Thran’s feet if he chose, but Thran didn’t make that easy, either, tilting his split legs so that first one foot touched the floor at his back, then the other touched the floor at his front. He scissored his legs to split the other way, repeated the touches to the floor, planted his right foot over his head, and flowed upright.

“Good morning, Irmo,” Thran greeted with serene calm, internally smiling at Irmo’s exasperated expression and agitated posture. “I trust you are well.”

“And do I hear that you are not? You cannot dance today?”

“I turned my ankle in pointe class yesterday, yes. I will let it rest for the most part today and perhaps tomorrow, so that I do not make a simple twist a sprain or strain. Lettie tells me that she has very much for me to do to publicize the ballet, so this is a good time for me to help her. She has ambitious plans for the next few weeks. As I expected to be needed for them, anyway, this is a good segue.”

“I need you for the choreography!”

“You work mostly now on the extensive needs of the troll market scenes, yes? So much work remains there so that it is as spectacular as we all want it to be. So your place is there, and my place is with Lettie for a short time to bring Immortal to the world’s attention.”

Ori appeared through the doors, and hurried to Irmo’s side. “Good news, Thran, Irmo – Rada’s got final costume sketches for the principals done. And Círdan has his drawings of the set design. They’ll be in this afternoon, so we’ll need both of you to review them.”

Ori winked at Thran out of Irmo’s sight, so Thran followed the young man’s prompting at once. “Excellent! It will be good to see the world we create for Immortal become real, yes?”

That served to divert the choreographer into a better humor, and he went off with Ori to see when Lettie expected the set designer and costumer to arrive. Thran managed to complete his yoga and cooling stretches before he found himself swept into the ado. As he didn’t plan to dance further today, he changed to more comfortable jeans and shirt, and then sat down with Lettie to review the list of promotional activities that she’d planned. The list was crammed with the usual things – a fundraising dinner, a series of radio and television interviews, visits to donors, and so on. These
performances had been a staple throughout Thran’s professional life, though for the state their focus had been to garner political glory rather than to raise money; here, in his adopted country, it was the reverse. Both were performances, regardless of what they hoped to accomplish, and they were necessary evils in a country where artistic endeavors received no state support.

Once again, Thran appreciated the chance he’d been given to leave a socialist state, and have a better life in a new country. This one was often confusing, frequently infuriating, and its inhabitants consistently fought amongst themselves with the ferocity of cats and dogs. It was not perfect. But it had made room for so many, he and his husband among them, and he appreciated his better life.

Still, Thran would not allow the unrestricted access to his family that the state had required. For how many fundraising events had he and Vileria been forced to trot out baby Legolas in one adorable outfit or another, the state’s shameless attempts to engage patrons through sheer cuteness and the mirage of a “traditional” family? Bard would’ve liked that no more than he, nor would he like the scrutiny their children would be subjected to in similar situations. He would understand why Thran would attend all of Immortal’s fundraising events alone.

Rada and Círdan arrived, the former with full-color costume sketches, and the latter with a three-dimensional model of the Immortal set design. Both reflected a great deal of thought and consideration as well as creative inspiration. Círdan’s set was a study in opposites. The mortal world was echoingly empty, stark lines, and little color beyond black, white, grey, and red – how ironic, for they were the colors of war and death, not life. The Underworld, land of the dead, in contrast, teemed with the color, complexity, and trappings of a thousand cultures. The reversal was intended, for one of the core themes of the ballet was to show how temporary and sparse the land of the living was in comparison with the ancient variety of the land of the dead. Even Rome, the living city that rested on the remains of so many kingdoms, both ancient and modern, would look pale compared to the Underworld with its countless layers of patina.

The set was round, and built on a rotating stage. The complex Underworld – what everyone had dubbed the troll market – covered two thirds of the circle. The remaining third was the sparse mortal world. This meant that all the set crew needed to do was to rotate the set to change the scene, rather than constantly dress and redress the same space. This would also provide for a much quicker and more elegant change, which in turn would detract far less from the audience’s belief in what they saw.

“This is brilliant,” Thran complimented Círdan. “Changes between the two sets will be easy and fast. My only concern is whether the Imladris auditorium can manage the mechanism to rotate the set.”

“I went out to the school to discuss this with their theatre department,” Círdan replied. He was a big, burly man with a deep, rumbling voice, and with his neatly trimmed brown and grey beard and shaggy hair he looked like a Viking seafarer. “They have a beautiful facility, but not a sophisticated stage such as you’d find in the city at the Met. But I have compensated for that. The stage will be a rotating platform, but it does not need a motor to turn it. The central gimbal will be the point of rotation, and the edge will be supported on wheels. All the set crew has to do to rotate the platform is to push it. It will take perhaps fifteen or twenty stagehands to provide enough strength, but that eliminates the need to mechanize it. Dressed in black, they will not be noticeable. This means a lower cost as well as a simpler design – both of those are good, and offer less chance of breakdown.”

“I like it very much,” Irmo nodded. “Such a simple, elegant design! Well done, indeed!”

“Thank you!” Círdan beamed at the mercurial choreographer’s praise. “There is more to the mortal side, as well – because it is so plain, we can make use of the school’s projection system to project images of different Underworld enclaves as Death leads the soldiers from the mortal surface. That
gives us another way to suggest the vastness of the immortal realm. And during the battle sequences, we can also project different backdrops of the fighting, to suggest the violence of the fight – rearing horses, perhaps, or swarms of soldiers racing up hills, and so on.”

“Perhaps we can project film clips,” Ori suggested. “Little snippets of the battle, like those swarms of soldiers racing up the hill. That would give it a lot of life and motion.”

“I like that,” Irmo, Círdan, and Thran chorused, drawing laughter from the others.

“Yes, again, it simplifies the set without sacrificing the life,” Lettie nodded. “Perhaps some of the Imladris students could make the film loops as well as the static scenes?”

“We can ask,” Thran nodded. “Círdan, this is a wonderful set. Simple to manage, I hope simple for the high school students to build, and an elegant presentation.”

“Yes, yes, beautifully done,” Irmo nodded vigorously. “You have given more of the space to the Underworld without shorting the mortal world. That will work very well.”

The group discussed a few more particulars, but by and large the set design was well underway. Lettie and Círdan expected to talk to the Imladris theatre department on Friday to see if the design was within their capabilities.

Rada stepped forward with his sketches. The Maid was just as Thran envisioned her, all sweetness and grace in a short gown with long sleeves and embroidered bodice, its filmy skirt falling from the Empire waistline to a few inches below the knee. The Soldier uniforms were generic enough not to point to any specific culture, with trousers tucked into tall boots, and vaguely military tunics that could have been from any of a hundred cultures. There were peasant costumes for the few mortals who would attend the dead on the battlefield, all in dull, muted colors of grey, beige, off white, cream, and taupe, enough to show variety with little color. Small LEDs at the heart of each costume burned brightly when the mortal was alive, died when the mortal fell, and then settled to a low glimmer once the dead arrived in the Underworld. Their costumes slowly washed with more color in that kingdom.

Death’s costumes, however, were all stunning. The battlefield armor was silver highlighted in an otherworldly electric ultraviolet – a tongue-in-cheek visual pun on the name of the ballet company, perhaps? A thin, gauzy veil over Thran’s face removed all sense of mortality from the character. Armored gloves featured very elongated fingers, reminding Thran of ancient mandarins with their long fingernails.

“How easy will that be to dance in?” Thran questioned Rada, pulling at his lip dubiously. “It is a stunning design, but Death must move fluidly, as if His armor is his skin.”

“It will look metallic because the fabric has a very hard shine to it, but it’s a synthetic knit that’s lightweight and flexible. The plating is a molded material used to make costume armor, so it will look quite formidable yet be very lightweight. It will be easy to move in it.”

The headdress that went with the armor got a thorough discussion all its own. Thran had little to say about it, as he liked the spiky, alien design. His only concern was that the veil must not obscure his vision. Death could not stumble and fumble across the stage like a myopic teenager. Laughing at Thran’s analogy, Rada assured him that he would be able to see quite clearly, so the discussion moved on to Death’s other costumes.

Death’s costume to preside over the denizens of the Underworld was rich and elaborate, with a cream colored base richly embellished with glittering jewels and multicolored embroidery. He would
be the brightest creature in His kingdom.

Then came the shocker – the costume Death would wear to woo the Maid. Rada had sketched two versions. Both featured gloves with elongated fingers, and a headdress that was less crown than device to make Thran’s face and head more elongated and alien. The difference between them was the body of the rest of the costume. One was a simple nude body stocking with a small loincloth. The other dispensed with the body stocking entirely, leaving only the loincloth to cover little more than Thran’s dancers’ belt.

“Either one makes a spectacle of me,” Thran teased the quiet costume designer. “Does Death seek to tempt the Maid to His side with sheer animal magnetism?”

“Very funny, your pun about sheer animal magnetism,” Rada grinned at Thran. “But I do have a reason for such a spare costume. Death will be at His most vulnerable in this scene with the Maid. He will not seek to scare her in His armor, or dazzle him in His robes of state. He will woo her only with what He is, not with trappings. So I drew the simple body stocking first, which would remove almost all features from the character. That perhaps is too stark, and so I considered the minimal one. If you intend to dance on pointe, Thran, then the minimal one will remove all distraction from it. Death throws Himself at the feet of the Maid he loves, he balances so precariously, he wavers this way and that, desperate for her regard. I quite liked that risk.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Lettie spoke up. “This costume, or lack of one, would sell a lot of tickets because of the body in it. It would be sensational. But is it the right one? Does it make Death look too much like a mortal? I think it would be wise to keep more of the alien about Him.”

“I ask myself the same question,” Irmo nodded. “Sensation is one thing, valuable in its place. But I want the audience to see how different Death is from the Maid he woos. Though... I wonder – Death is the brightest creature in the Underworld – he glows brighter than his subjects, but not as brightly as the living. Could the body stocking be infused with an allover glow, yet one fainter than the glow of the living? Blue, like his armor? So the gloves and the pointe shoes and the crown would distort Death’s body proportions into the alien creature I seek, and the glow would reinforce that?”

“If not with lights, perhaps with fabric, or some combination of both...” Rada scribbled in his sketchbook. “Yes, I think that is a good solution. We will get the long, attenuated figure, and the alien netherworldliness, too. Let me consider that. Perhaps the body stocking could be painted with luminescent paint...”

“Yes, yes, I like that!” Irmo exclaimed. “Then we may add details to further delineate and accentuate Death’s figure, also!”

“I like that, too,” Thran agreed. “So we have a little work to do with this costume, but the others are well on their way.”

The group continued to work out details of the principal costumes, then Rada and Irmo went into a huddle to discuss costumes for the troll market. Círdan and Lettie began to bat ideas around about how to work with the school. There was little more that Thran could contribute to either discussion, so he checked his mobile. It was already past four-thirty, far later than he expected, which showed how engrossed he’d been in the exciting details Círdan and Rada had revealed. He made his exit, called Bard from the lobby of his imminent arrival, and set off for home, elated at the progress that the day had brought.

In twenty minutes, Thran pulled into the driveway of the Clan Ffyrnig home. Legolas and Bain came out as soon as Thran maneuvered the SUV in front of the carriage house; Bain hauled up the bay door, and Legolas pretended to be an airline ramp agent, waving his arms to direct Thran as he
backed the SUV into its bay. He got out, laughing as Legolas and Bain continued to wave him forward through the bay door so that Bain could haul it back down.

“Hello, Legolas; Hello, Bain! You both have fine careers ahead of you as directors of planes!” he teased the boys, as Bard came through the mudroom door. “Hello, Bard!”

“Welcome home,” Bard greeted. “Before we go in, the boys have something to tell us.”

When the boys’ expressions turned serious, Thran sobered, too.

“A boy in my history class told me that he saw Lance at the Follies,” Legolas said. “Scottie said Lance was asking whether Sigrid attended the academy, and where she lived. He also said that one of his friends saw Lance talk to a couple of boys who’d caused a lot of trouble in the past.”

“Did either boy hear Lance say anything other than to ask where Sigrid lives?”

Legolas shook his head. “I asked Scottie that. Lance said he was supposed to meet Sigrid, but had missed her in the crowd. But the people Lance talked to didn’t know Sigrid, so he didn’t learn anything from them. Scottie didn’t know what happened after that.”

“We got a call from Officer Kelso this morning along the same lines,” Bard said. “Apparently Lance made a pitch to join a couple of the local gangs. The word’s gone around that Lance is no asset to anyone, and if the gangs turn him in, the police might cut them a little slack.”

Bain gulped. “Can’t the police grab him because he hurt Thran? And he threatened Sigrid? Everybody heard him. Isn’t that enough?”

“It would be, if they could catch him,” Bard exhaled. “Apparently catching him isn’t so easy.”

“Of course not,” Bain growled. “That creep has got it out for my sister, and nobody’s doing anything about it!”

“They aren’t doing nothing,” Bard consoled.

“Not at all,” Thran agreed. “But it is that adage in action – to find a needle in a haystack.”

“Exactly,” Bard went on. “Lots of places to look, but only one boy to find.”

“Maybe so,” Legolas shook his head. “It’s just... so frustrating.”

“Worse,” Bain growled, kicking the grass. “It makes me want to hit something.”

“Maybe a quick dash around the back yard with a soccer ball would help,” Bard suggested. “Might be good for all of us.”

“I just got off the soccer field,” Bain grumped. “I don’t need to kick any more soccer balls. I need to kick Lance Dunmont!”

“It’s hard to sit and wait,” Bard agreed, looping his arm around Bain’s shoulders. “Just hold on to your patience, boyo, and we’ll come through it all right.”

Bain ducked his head. “I don’t know how to do that, Da. That bas – creep is after my sister!”

Bard and Thran locked glances. “He is. But he’s alone, and we’re not. We’ve got the six of us, plus the police. As long as we stand together, Bain, Lance will have a very hard time getting through us.”
Bain let Bard jostle him into a little lighter mien, finally smiling, if only a little. Thran took heed of the exchange and nudged Legolas. “Just as you have proved, Legolas. You heard something from a boy at school, you passed it on to us, and we are forewarned. We will pass it on to the police, and they will be forewarned, too. Lance has no one to pass him information about anything.”

Legolas’s lips curved in a gratified smile as he took Thran’s bag for him. “I hope not, Papa.”

The boys were calm enough to walk into the house with their fathers, and Thran pulled the back of Bard’s shirt to keep him in the mudroom as the boys ran ahead.

“I assume we discussed this outside because of Tilda,” he said lowly as he hung up his jacket.

Bard nodded. “I don’t like keeping her in the dark, but she’s been so scared that I guess it’s better not to tell her.”

Thran hummed. “It is hard to know what to do.”

“It always is,” Bard shook his head as they came into the kitchen. “Did everything go okay at the studio today?”

“It did. Rada and Círdan came in with designs for the costumes and set, and both were amazing.”

As Bard opened the refrigerator, Thran perched on the stool at the end of the kitchen island to describe the afternoon’s excitement. Tension diffused as the conversation turned to more positive topics, and soon Tilda and Bain came in to begin the day’s sous chef duties. Sigrid came in long enough to give Thran a happy welcome before she headed upstairs with her homework. How self-possessed she was, able to smile and laugh and concentrate on homework despite the threat of an angry and vengeful boy intent on mayhem.

Exactly what satisfaction did Lance think he’d gain against Sigrid? No matter what he did to her, it would not restore his standings with the gangs he sought to join in the city. Why wasn’t he smart enough to cut his losses, return to Florida, and make a new start there?

Thran sighed. The more he learned of Lance Dunmont, the more foolish his actions became. Dumb, as the boys would call it. Yes... Lance might be dumb about going after Sigrid, but so far he was smart enough to stay out of police hands.

Thran didn’t want to think about what that said about either party.
Chapter 105

Chapter Summary

The saint's public debut draws near, but he still has time to bring beauty to his family's house. Meanwhile, the angel offers a new take on "tradition."

Bard watched Thran closely as he started supper. Was he still limping, or holding his arm so carefully against his chest? He was gratified to find no sign of discomfort. The arm brace was off now, and Thran moved easily about the kitchen to make a big salad for the table. While Tilda assembled individual cups of fruit and Bain made farro, Bard seasoned two pans of rainbow trout fillets with garlic, spices, and pecans, and stuck them in the oven to bake quickly. Flatware, glasses, and condiments went on the table, then everyone queued up by the kitchen island to fill their plates. Conversation around the table was animated and happy as Thran talked about the stage and costumes for *Immortal*, the children chatted about their day at school, and Bard described the day’s renovations. When Bard said he expected to have the half bath finished tomorrow, Legolas shook his head in amazement.

“Everything’s getting done so fast,” Legolas commented. “Every day, it’s like coming home to a new house!”

“Thank our master craftsman,” Thran agreed, offering a playful salaam to Bard at the other end of the table. “He will have us in a magic castle in no time.”

“I want to get as much done as I can before my gallery show, so I can get back to being a full time artist,” Bard explained, reddening at Thran’s praise. “I’ve got a big piece of renovation on deck for this weekend.”

He described the logistics of hanging the chandeliers in the central hall, and how he’d need everyone to help him with it.

“Even me?” Tilda perked up. “Finally! I’m always too small or too light or too young. What do I get to do, Da?”

“You’ll write down all the measurements,” Bard explained. “I’ll be on the scaffolding, and the rest of us will have to help hold things, but the measurements are very important so that we get everything at the right height.”

Tilda regarded Bard dubiously. “That doesn’t sound like much, just writing down a bunch of numbers.”

“There are three chandeliers all strung together, little doll. They all have to hang at the right height. If we don’t keep good track of all the measurements, the whole thing looks off, and it has to be done over. We don’t want everyone who comes into the hall to think it looks funny.”

“I didn’t think of that,” she admitted, brightening. “Okay, so I get to do something important at last.”

“So you do,” Bard grinned, glad that Tilda understood that her job wasn’t just a sop to make her feel important, but actually *was* important.
Before long, Sigrid and Legolas organized the supper cleanup, and then the children settled to their homework. Thran and Bard retreated to the sitting room to discuss the next steps of the renovation as well as the ballet until the children joined them to read the next bit of Harry Potter. The only reminder of their trouble with Lance came when Tilda went upstairs to take her shower; Bard left Officer Kelso a voice mail that summarized what Legolas had learned from his classmate. Once the children were tucked into bed, Bard and Thran were quick to make their rounds, set the security system, and enjoy a warm shower together. Again, Bard scrutinized Thran as they showered, but aside from the bruises still mottling his pale skin he seemed to be in no discomfort. His husband didn’t wrap his ankle before he got into bed, though he did carefully rub arnica on both wrist and ankle, but that was likely more to help his bruises fade more quickly than to relieve any pain. Once Bard turned off the light, he snuggled Thran in his arms.

“I think I am through with the arm brace,” Thran murmured, rotating his wrist experimentally.

“The ankle wrap, too, it seems,” Bard replied. “On the mend, then.”

“On the mend.”

“Good. I assume you still plan to take it easy on it tomorrow?”

Thran hummed in affirmation, then tsked. “Tcha, I forgot to look at Rahmiel today. Are his wings fully fledged now?”

“They’re the same as yesterday. I wanted to get the half bath along so the company can come back. Then I went into the school to help Theodred, and then I got on with the painting. I’m getting close to the end, Thran. I can taste it – half bath will be done tomorrow, the landings in another day or so, the chandeliers and maybe the garage door openers this weekend... The main room has to wait until the sofa comes in, so next week, I’ll scrub the sitting room paneling, and then finally get started on the solarium. That’ll be exciting. Then we can get the floors refinished. By the time my show comes around, the inside will be done, all but the main room and the solarium. We’ll be on to getting the outside painted, the gardens started, the barn up to snuff... I can’t tell you how excited I am that we’ll have two fulltime artists in residence – by June at the latest.”

Thran rolled over to kiss Bard thoroughly. “Everything about the house is beautiful, and grows more so every day. But please, my saint, you must make sure you finish Rahmiel’s wings, and his hair. He is such a vision. As popular as your sketches will be, he will be more so. I want the rest of the world to see him, and know what wonders you have yet to create.”

“He’ll be ready,” Bard replied, struck at the conviction in Thran’s voice, and humbled by it. “I want to do more pieces like him, too. How amazing would it be to do a life-sized one? Though I don’t know what I’d do for feathers – they don’t make ones big enough for him.”

“You will figure out what to do,” Thran said, kissing Bard again. “I am sure of it.”

Bard stroked Thran’s cheek. “Do you know how often I thank the gods for lousy apartment radiators, lazy-ass landlords, and nasty November rain? If you hadn’t been cold, wet, and pissed, I never would have met you that night, and everything that’s happened since would never have been.”

Chuckling low in his throat, Thran returned Bard’s caresses with his own. “The gods must be very amused at the perversity of mortals, then, because I thank them for the same things just as often. Out of bad pipes, bad landlords, and bad weather came grace, love, beauty, and happiness.”

“Quite the fairytale,” Bard rumbled. “One that I’ll do my best to keep going.”
“As will I, lyubov moya,” Thran breathed. “I love you. Sleep well, my saint.”

“I love you, too, my angel.”

Bard savored the slow caresses that Thran brushed over his skin, that he returned with his own, until warmth and comfort and love blurred into sleep.

* * *

The next three weeks raced by. Bard finished the half bath, which earned him admiring compliments from his family, as well as the UVB dancers when they resumed their practice in the ballroom on Friday. The walls of the second and third story landings got their coat of grey-green paint, and the wood trim was waxed to a warm glow to match the beautiful stained glass pocket doors to Bard and Thran’s bedroom.

The chandeliers went up in the central hall, an effort that took most of the day and all of the family to get the chain of three separate chandeliers properly spaced, wired, and hung. Despite the effort to erect so much scaffolding, then the tedium of repeated measuring and fitting, the end result was worth the trouble – three polished brass fixtures resplendent with candle bulbs brightened the open space beautifully. What a feeling of accomplishment it was when Bard and the boys dismantled the scaffolding and stowed it in the main room. Almost everything in the house that had required it was done.

The sitting room walls and coffered ceiling got a thorough scrub back to their original brightness, and a coat of paste wax to protect them. In the main room, Bard hauled all of the boxes that still hadn’t been unpacked up to the empty third floor room. The Indonesian bed frame and blue inlaid table that he’d bought at the junk shops so long ago went temporarily into the end of the ballroom. He painted the ceiling of the main room, stripped and cleaned the mahogany woodwork, and patched and primed the walls. Once Thran’s big sofa arrived, they’d choose a mantelpiece and a paint color to finish the room.

It was finally time for the last step in the restoration of the public rooms. Bard, Thran, and the children moved everything out of the sitting room and into the ballroom, then workmen arrived to clean, wax, and polish the inlaid floors. It took three days to restore so many – main room, dining room, sitting room, central hall, all of the stairs, and the second and third floor landings. Fortunately, the workmen staged their efforts so that the family didn’t have to move out, though no one wore anything but socks for the duration, and Thran’s company practiced at the UVB studios. Bard spent most of the time in the barn, tackling the mess that his years of absence and months of renovation work had generated. He was pleased to banish dirt and disorder, and prepare the tidied space for future work.

When the floor refinishers left in midafternoon, Bard left the barn and returned to the house. For the first time in a long while, the house was silent and still, and Bard was grateful that the children and Thran weren’t here. He didn’t have to explain the emotions welling within him, or speak of memories. It was a pretty April afternoon outside, and sunlight filtered in through clear windows, illuminating all that had been restored. How different it had been twelve years ago when Daphne had stood here beside him in the central hall, skeptically shaking her head at the disrepair around them when they’d first moved in with two small children. They’d had just two years of hope together. For ten years after her death, he’d been the one to shake his head, but in despair, wondering how he’d manage to rescue the house, the children, or himself from their dire situation. However improbably,
five months ago, he and an ethereal Russian dancer had met, fallen in love, and begun a new life here, rescuing themselves and their children, as well as the house along the way.

For just the briefest moment, Daphne seemed to stand beside Bard in the central hall again, still shaking her head – but without skepticism. This time, she smiled with appreciation and pride because he’d coaxed so much beauty out of the ruin, and made a new life for the family she’d had to leave behind. She was happy for him, and the new life he’d made.

“Thank you, my darling,” he whispered, smiling. “I love you, too.”

As sense of her faded, Bard appreciated anew how Hope the Lope basked in the glow from elegant chandeliers and light filtered through stained glass. Iron balusters echoed the same color as the floor’s dark inlays, and the fluted glass globes on the balusters gleamed. Underfoot, the restored floors were silky smooth, and shone like satin. He wandered through the adjoining rooms, where restored woodwork once again revealed carving long hidden under layers of sloppy paint, and beautiful plaster ceilings once again looked like fancifully decorated cakes. The sitting room was a warm and cozy nest; the half bath was a hidden jewel.

It didn’t matter that the rooms were emptier than not. Bard, Thran, and the children would have the best time prowling the junk shops for material treasures. The rooms were already full of Clan Ffyrnig’s laughter and love, and the heart of the house was restored.

So was Bard’s.

* * *

The day of Bard’s art show grew near. Though one room still remained to be restored – the solarium that everyone in the family so eagerly awaited – Bard turned more of his attention to his art. At Bilbo’s request, he stockpiled sketches, because offering unframed sketches for sale at his show would attract buyers who couldn’t go to the expense of framed ones. He sketched the restorers working on the floors, Legolas at his fencing, Thran at the ballet, Sigrid at a track meet, Bain and Tilda giggling over Dinky Farm, all of the children laughing over pizza. He captured a wonderful juxtaposition of Legolas and Thran in the ballroom, the former in his fencing gear as he feinted at his father, the latter in his dancewear as he made a spectacular jeté over Legolas’s épée. He sketched a single delicate Siberian iris that appeared in the yard, then a shattered tree, but most of his sketches reflected his favorite subjects – people of all shapes and sorts. One of his best depicted a pair of cheesmongers in Tilda’s preferred shop, laughing over a shared joke. Thran said it reminded him of a scene in Paris.

Rahmiel had not been neglected. His wings were completely fledged now, and he had a full head of long, wafting hair. Those drifting tresses had been almost as much work as his wings had been. At first, the strands of dark brown ostrich feather had refused to stand up the way Bard wanted them to. Then Tilda had dropped her pen while working on her homework, and the tiny parts bouncing over the kitchen floor had given Bard the idea he needed to finish Rahmiel’s hair successfully. He’d gone to the office supply store, bought six dozen cheap pens, and stripped them of their small internal springs. Those springs had anchored the filmy strands of feathers in the clay atop the angel’s head. He had wound other strands with very thin, stiff, transparent optic fiber. The combination of springs and transparent fibers had made Rahmiel’s hair stream and drift around his head, just as the backwash of air from outstretched wings would disarray it as he alit upon the earth. The picture Bard had sent to Bilbo of the finished angel had so excited the artist’s rep that he’d come out to take
pictures to send around in last-minute publicity announcements for Bard’s show.

As magical as life for Clan Ffyrnig had become, it was not completely carefree – there had been no progress on tracking down Lance Dunmont. Neither the local hooligans nor the police had seen him since the April Fool’s Follies. He hadn’t been spotted shadowing the children’s sport activities in the afternoons, nor had he been seen around Greenwood Dale on the Lake, nor had he turned up in any of his haunts in the city. The police thought that the boy had gotten in his licks and had taken himself elsewhere, whether Florida or elsewhere. Sigrid flatly didn’t believe that. Neither did Bard, so he continued to meet the children at the bus stop each day, kept an eye out during the family’s travels, and kept the security system armed.

The other nagging concern was Bard’s alone – the toll that *Immortal* took on Thran. Some days he seemed so exhausted, but it took Bard several days to puzzle out potential reasons why. His husband continued to work on his pointe work, but he had not had any more mishaps. The terrible bruises on his arm faded, and his wrist gave him no trouble. He never missed his barre or yoga or strength training, and no matter how strenuous his workouts, Thran was energized and happy when he completed them.

The issue wasn’t physical exhaustion, then. What else could it be?

Around the children, or in the company of others, Thran was smiling and content. But when he was alone with Bard, Thran dispensed with public displays of ease and confidence. He slumped on the sofa or lay in bed like a limp rag, and soaked up all of Bard’s little attentions and considerations, not as if he took them for granted, but as if he was grateful beyond words for them. He craved far more cuddling than sex, which declared his need for comfort and reassurance clearer than if he’d shouted it.

Of course, the first thing that came to mind was Bard’s old nemesis – money. But the household accounts were in such good shape that Bard had started to interview painters to work on the exterior of the house. He would also have them strip all of the internal doors of paint, which would save him hours of grueling manual labor. Depending on the state of the doors underneath all the paint, Bard could decide how to refinish them at his leisure. In addition, he was still debating whether to strip and refinish windows, or replace them all completely to improve the insulating quality of the house. But he digressed – the point was that the household accounts had plenty of funds for whatever he decided about exterior paint and windows.

Was the problem the cost of *Immortal*?

Stage productions were horrendously expensive to put on, so that was feasible. But if that were the problem, then surely Thran would have said something, wouldn’t he?

Maybe not, if Thran thought such a revelation would worry Bard.

What else could it be, if not money?

This time, Bard wouldn’t wonder in silence. He’d learned his lesson with the fiasco over Luka.

This time, he’d ask.

* * *
Thran pried his eyes open. Bard stood on the other side of the fruit crate coffee table, holding the tray of the teapot and cups for their favorite after-supper brew, plus a small plate of cookies. Today’s presentation simmered in the black iron teapot, with two small porcelain cups – all three were Japanese, which probably meant jasmine green tea. That was Bard’s favorite. Thran sat up from his slump on the sofa, and leaned forward to clear a spot on the coffee table for the tray.

“Thank you, lyubov moy,” Thran smiled up at Bard. “Once again you look after me far better than I deserve.”

“No, I don’t,” Bard exhaled, setting down the tray. He sat down beside Thran, and stretched one strong hand over Thran’s thigh to squeeze it gently. “You deserve everything I can give you. Have a cookie.”

Bard offered him the plate. Thran considered the thin wafers, half dipped in chocolate. “This is a new recipe, yes?”

“Chocolate orange slices. I thought they sounded decadent. Hope they are.”

As Bard poured their tea, Thran sampled one of the treats. “Mmm – no, I mean tcha, these are horrible, I do not recommend that you or the children waste your time with these. I will sacrifice myself and eat them all so that none of you have to.”

Snickering, Bard gave him a wink. “Oh, that line won’t work on me, cariad. The children have tried that so many times that when I hear it, I know the recipe’s a keeper. But I’ll see for myself.”

He managed to snitch a cookie from the plate that Thran held so protectively, chewed thoughtfully, and nodded.

“I cannot eat them all myself, I see,” Thran made a sad face.

“I don’t think so. These really are decadent. Worth every minute it took to dip them in the chocolate ganache.”

“I am sure you hated to lick the ganache bowl clean when you were done.”

Bard’s grin would have looked at home on Tilda’s face. “Oh, yes. That was truly a fate not to be endured. Here, let go of the plate. I want another one.”

“If you insist,” Thran sighed, handing Bard the plate. He picked up his teacup, then snuggled at Bard’s side. He took a sip of tea, then a bite of cookie, and shut his eyes. It was such a gift to let everything go but the delicious taste of the cookie and the comfortable closeness of his husband’s strong body.

“Another long day,” Bard murmured, munching his cookie.

Thran rumbled in response.

“Would you tell me about it?”

Interviews, logistics, decisions, and so, so many questions; and so little of the dance to leaven the rest...

“Angel, I’m sorry I can’t think of a way to make this a question rather than a flat statement, but I’m
worried about you.”


An arm went around his shoulder, and a hand rubbed his upper arm slowly. “Because you’re exhausted so much of the time. I don’t think it’s physical. I hope it’s not money issues. Whatever it is, you seem so drained, but you don’t talk about it. What can I do to help?”

Thran sighed. “I am sorry to worry you.”

Bard kept rubbing Thran’s arm in slow, soothing strokes. “And I’m sorry to bother you. Now that we have our usual posturing out of the way, would you please tell me what’s worn you out so badly?”

Thran mustered a sheepish smile at the humor in Bard’s voice. “You are right that I am not physically drained, funny saint. In fact, I do not dance nearly as much as I would like. No, I am not overly concerned over money, though yes, the price to bring a ballet to the stage is high. No, I do not try to hide anything from you, and if I am silent, it is because you already do so much of exactly what I need, and I savor all of that.”

Bard digested that as he ate another cookie. “So no physical issues, no money issues... what’s left?”

“Perhaps it is a kind of... mental exhaustion?” Thran ventured. “It will likely seem very self indulgent to you. But I am just... talked at, all of the day. I seem never to have a minute’s peace without someone who asks for a decision about this, or an opinion about that. I do not dance full time – I talk to donors to plead for money, I give interviews, I pose for photos in costume, I make decisions about costumes or set design or public relations or sponsorship... It seems never to end. So yes, I am exhausted. By the time I come home, I cannot bear to hear another word, even from the people I actually want to talk to. I cringe when I hear anyone’s voice, mine among them.”

“I don’t think it’s self indulgent,” Bard said. “It makes perfect sense. It’s no wonder all you want to do is hibernate in bed in the quiet and the dark. You’re suffering from sensory overload. Mental fatigue.”

“If that is what it is called, then that is what ails me. I confess that I was not prepared for it, Bard. The rigors of the dance are physical, yet internal at the same time to understand the character I am to dance. This is exactly the opposite – completely unphysical, and very external. So much talk! So very much talk! I do not understand why so many people think I am the one to decide so many things.”

Bard snickered, but not unkindly. “You’re the Russian with the rubles and the Prince of Ice glare, angel. No one wants to incur your wrath.”

Thran winced. “Likely so. I do my best, but... there is so much of it, lyubov moya. I do not know how Lettie manages – she handles far more of it than I do, and she is always there to advise me. But even with her help, I am pulled in so many directions that I have taken Ori from Irmo to help me. He is so efficient, so well organized, so calm. When Immortal is done, I want to ask him if he’d consider a permanent position with the company. He would be a wonderful addition.”

“He would,” Bard agreed. “I like Ori a lot. He’s a decent person as well as a genius. His brother might be loath to let him go, though.”

“Perhaps. I will ask him, anyway.”

“Is there anything I can do to help, other than keep pouring the tea and offering back rubs?”
“Perhaps you can teach me some of your Welsh curses. I run out of Russian ones.”

“That I can do. I wish there were something more I could do.”

“Your show is this Saturday. Your focus should be on that.”

“It doesn’t feel quite real yet. I suppose it will tomorrow. I’m taking a couple of my sculptures over to the gallery.”

“Which ones? Rahmiel, of course.”

“Sea Spot Run, the Ring Thing, and Rahmiel. Bilbo’s sending over a couple of men to help me get Sea Spot Run in the truck. That one’s a bastard to move.”

“Then just two days until your show. I am excited enough for both of us.”

Bard was silent, but the faint slowing of his hand over Thran’s arm telegraphed his hesitation. “You aren’t?”

“I am,” Bard agreed. “But I... wonder if we won’t get a visit from our elusive stalker.”

Thran hummed. “I hope not, but I resign myself to expect so.”

“So do I. I called Mr. D to make sure he still planned to come to the party. As I expected, a case of good ale swung the deal. He’ll be there. For a fifth of good scotch, he offered to bring Inspector Oakland with him.”

“Cheap at the price,” Thran murmured. “Are there more cookies?”

“A couple.” A cookie waved under his nose, so he opened his mouth to take it from Bard’s fingers. “Like I said – a keeper recipe.”

Thran hummed in heartfelt agreement. “A dangerous one. They are so good that they make me into a glutton.”

“Three cookies don’t make you a glutton.”

“I hope not. Oh, you talk of who will attend your show. Our friend Hal sends his regrets. Saturday is the birthday of his best friend, and he plans a small fest for him.”

“Understandable. I’m sure he’ll be baking all day.”

Thran grinned. “Likely so. I shudder to think of the mayhem.”

“I take it he isn’t the neatest in the kitchen,” Bard chuckled.

“Far from it. When do you move your sculpture tomorrow?”

“After lunch. I’ve got a lot of sketches to take with me, too. Hmm. I guess I am getting excited.”

Thran took his last bite of cookie and rubbed Bard’s leg. “Good.”

Bard lapsed into silence, perhaps out of consideration for Thran, but it was a comfortable silence, and Thran felt no pressure to break it. His eyes closed again as he savored the lingering taste of chocolate and orange, the quiet murmur of the children as they worked at the kitchen table, the solid presence of Bard beside him.
“It’s okay if you want to head into the shower, even soak in the tub if you want.”

“I will not abandon you to do the homework duty alone.”

A snicker. “It’s been weeks since either of us have had to answer anything for anyone.”

Thran’s snicker echoed his husband’s. “True. I will go. Just a shower, though. I do not want to fall asleep in the tub.”

“If you’re not out in twenty minutes, I’ll come find you.”

“A wise precaution. Thank you, my saint.”

Thran took himself upstairs to wash, settling into bed when he was done. He drifted into a doze until it was time to bid the children goodnight, then returned to bed. Downstairs, Bard roamed through the house to make his usual rounds and set the security system, then came upstairs to shower. Thran heard the water start to run, but the next thing he was aware of was Bard slipping into bed beside him.

“You are out of it tonight, cariad,” Bard murmured, when Thran sleepily reached out an arm to draw Bard close.

“Tomorrow will be better,” he mumbled. “I have pointe in the afternoon, so less talk, more dance.”

“For me, it’ll be better, too. The sculpture comes out of the barn and goes into a gallery.”

“The sketches, too.”

“The sketches aren’t in the barn.”

“Of course not. Why would you think that? You are silly tonight.”

Arms went around him, drawing him close, enfolding him into Bard’s warmth and affection. A silent chuckle rumbled in the chest beneath his ear.

“You’re too sleepy to make sense, silly Russian. So go to sleep.”

“As you wish...”

Sleep overwhelmed him before he finished the thought.

* * *

Thursday morning. Two days before his gallery show. Despite Bard’s protestations to Thran last night, anticipation coiled in Bard’s solar plexus as soon as he got up. He was through the bathroom and into his morning clothes in seconds, and went downstairs with purpose, leaving Thran asleep in the bedroom. As tired as the dancer had been last night, Bard thought it best to let him sleep as long as he wanted this morning. So Bard started on breakfasts and school lunches by himself. In another six or seven weeks, the school term would be over, and the children would have the summer to relax, that being a relative term. Legolas would be in fencing and archery camps, Bain would be in soccer camps, and Sigrid wanted to get a summer job at one of the village shops, or perhaps an internship at the local gazette office. Tilda wanted to attend an art camp. Thran, of course, would be deeply into
rehearsals for *Immortal* by then, probably on site at the Imladris Academy at least part of the time. As for him...

Better to wait until after Saturday before he sorted through what he’d be up to this summer. His solar plexus tightened in anticipation, then the rest of his body followed suit. Gods, this was what Sigrid felt before one of her track events, or maybe Legolas before a fencing bout, or Thran before a performance...

Gods, to spend the next two days so keyed up, to agitate over so many endless questions – would his show be well attended, and would his sketches sell, and would anyone would like his sculpture enough to offer a commission? There was nothing left to do to entice people to attend. Bilbo had done a marvelous job of publicizing the event, from notices in publications, teaser videos and notices on the Internet, and flyers in almost every shop in the village. This morning, Bard would get his sculpture to the Ilithien Gallery, and tomorrow he’d go in to make any last adjustments. His work would be on display all day Friday and Saturday, and the actual reception would be Saturday evening.

So much hope rode on this, but not just hope for his artistic future. Bard wanted to be the partner equal to his dancer husband, the partner that Thran deserved...

Couldn’t think about that. Couldn’t think about any of it. Gods, he needed a distraction so, so badly!

Think about the solarium. Yes, that was a good distraction, the room that everyone in the house awaited with such anticipation, the room that he’d planned to work on weeks ago, until practical considerations led him to focus on the less exciting but more necessary tasks of painting landings and hanging chandeliers and restoring floors. All of those, thank the gods, were finally done. Now came the fun room.

The solarium would be more than the same old patching and priming and painting of plaster. This would reclaim a room that had begun life long ago as an afterthought, tacked on to the rest of the house, perhaps at the whim of a previous owner who wanted a garden room to savor during the cold New York winters. For this room at least, Bard had opted to follow Sam’s advice to replace the old windows completely, but it would be some weeks before replacements would be ready. He could still work on the ceiling, walls, and floor –

“You must have gotten up early, my saint,” came a sleepy voice. “The breakfast is ready, and the lunches are done.”

Bard jerked back to reality. Yes, the children’s lunches were all made and in their bags on the counter. The pot of porridge simmered gently on the stove. Sigrid’s bagel was ready in the toaster, and Tilda’s apple was sliced and waiting in her cereal bowl. Bard looked up to find Thran leaning on the kitchen island beside him, smiling.

“Um, yes, lunches done, porridge on. What would you like for breakfast? Eggs? Porridge? I can make you an omelet if that suits you.”

Thran offered a light good morning kiss. “What would you like this morning? I want to practice what I have learned so well. The Egg Puff, with cheese and onions and chives?”

“That’d be great,” Bard nodded, returning Thran’s kiss. “It looks like someone got a good night’s rest.”

“I did. And I get to dance today more than talk. It is a good day for an Egg Puff.”
“Have at, then. The children ought to be down in a few minutes.”

“They stir. There was a race for the bathroom this morning, but as I was up, I sent the loser into ours. I think we must let Bain try the tub out soon. I think he lost on purpose, just so he could go into our bathroom and ogle it.”

“The next time he comes home aching from sport, I’ll dump him in there. He might not be so eager once he hears that he has to shower first, and clean it out when he’s done.”

“I heard that,” Bain said, bouncing into the kitchen. “I’ve got soccer for sport after school today. So I can I try out the tub when I get home?”

“Shower first, clean out after,” Bard reiterated. “Porridge is on.”

“Sweet,” Bain murmured, pumping his fist. “I’ll make sure I’m good and grimy.”

“One more time, Bain,” Bard repeated. “Shower first, clean out after. That’s what’ll get you time in the tub.”

“Okay, Da.” Bain shoveled porridge into a bowl, clattered to the table, and proceeded to dump raisins, cinnamon, and milk on top. Bard shook his head, smiling at the production. Legolas and Tilda came in, and finally Sigrid.

“I get to use the tub this afternoon after school,” Bain poked Legolas with an elbow. “Sweet, huh?”

Legolas’s eyes went immediately to Thran. “Does that mean I can use it sometime, too, Papa?”

Thran’s eyes met Bard’s with resigned laughter. “There are rules. Shower before, and clean the tub after. But yes.”

“I want a turn, too,” Tilda piped up, sprinkling cinnamon on her apples and porridge. “So when can I go?”

“We’ve created a monster,” Bard shook his head.

“What is the adage?” Thran winked as he worked on his Egg Puff. “Perhaps we should sell tickets?”

“We’d be rich,” Bard agreed, as the children clamored in protest, or at least three of them did.

“Nope, doesn’t tempt me at all,” Sigrid laughed, sticking her tongue out at Bain. “Too full of guy cooties!”

“Hey, I don’t have guy cooties!” Tilda protested in injured tones, which set all of the children off laughing and teasing. By the time they sorted themselves out, Thran’s Egg Puff was on plates, and he and Bard sat down to eat it while the children ran upstairs to brush their teeth and make their final preparations for school.

“Not bad for a sous chef,” Bard teased Thran as he took a big bite. “Light, fluffy, golden brown on the bottom, cheese perfectly gooey, onions nicely sautéed, a good sprinkle of chives. I give it an A plus.”

“I improve, then,” Thran held up his index fingers in mock celebration. “Number one in the Egg Puff. Next, I will learn brownies. Or perhaps those cookies from last night. Both are outrageous.”

“Brownies are easy. Mix in a bowl, dump in a pan, bake. And chocolate. What’s not to like?”
“Nothing,” Thran agreed. “Ah, the horde descends. It is like a herd of rhinos thunders down the
stairs every morning.”

“Time for the bus run,” Bard agreed, getting up to take his plate to the sink. “Give me your plate.”

Together they tidied up the kitchen detritus, then escorted the children to the bus stop.

“Good luck moving your stuff, Da!” Sigrid wished him as she waved goodbye at the door of the bus.
“Bye, and we’re leaving, too!”

“Do your best, just like always!” Bard and Thran chorused in reply as they waved to all of the
children. After the bus pulled away, Rosie came over to say hello.

“Saturday’s the day,” she grinned, rubbing her hands together in anticipation. “So exciting! You’re
moving your sculpture pieces this morning, I gather?”

“That’ll be entertaining,” Bard smirked. “I’ll likely have to make three trips. Sea Spot Run’s a bitch
to move, so that’s one trip all by itself. The Ring Thing’s not so heavy, but it takes up a lot of space.
And Rahmiel... I may decide to take him in Thran’s SUV tomorrow, because I can take the seats out
to keep him upright. Those wings won’t withstand a lot of bumping.”

“Do you need help with any of it?” Rosie asked. “Rahmiel might fit perfectly in Sam’s garden van,
and you and I can help keep Rahmiel steady while he drives. Oh, no, it’s not all altruism, Bard. To
be honest, I can’t wait to get a look at him now that he’s finished.”

“I’ve got a couple of big burly guys to help me wrangle Sea Spot Run and the Ring Thing, but if I
need help with Rahmiel, I’ll give you a call. I’d hate to have him damaged in transit.”

“Just ring,” Rosie nodded, “and we’ll be over. Sam’s working on a couple of garden designs at home
today, so he’ll be around whenever you need us.”

“Thanks, Rosie. I’ll see how the big pieces go. If these guys can take the proper care, I’ll use them. If
not, I’ll ring.”

“Okay, Bard. Good luck! See you later, Thran!”

Rosie headed home, and so did Bard and Thran. Thran got ready for his day’s work at the UVB
studio and his pointe class, so Bard headed out to the carriage house to get the SUV out, then opened
the barn to dust off his two sculptures again. He must have wiped them down six times in the past
two days, so neither needed it now. Just nerves. He’d give both of them a final wipe when they were
in place in the gallery.

“We must find places for both of them after your show,” Thran said, appearing by the door. He had
on his jacket, and his bag was over his shoulder. “Or do you already have places for them in mind?”

“If we had a fish pond, or a lily pond, that’d be the perfect site for Sea Spot Run,” Bard mused. “I
don’t know how much work that would be to maintain. We can ask Sam. As for the Ring Thing,
maybe outside the big ballroom windows?”

“In the midst of your Welsh garden? That is a good place.”

“We’ll see. Gods, I finished most of the house, but there’s still a lot to think about.”

“It comes in its time. The house is so beautiful inside, and Sam will come soon to work his magic on
our gardens.”
“Painting comes first. We don’t want to have Sam go to all the work of planting everything only to have painters stamp through it.”

“True. You said you have talked to painters?”

Bard heaved the barn doors shut, and locked them. “I have. I have two coming out Monday. So I hope that can get started soon.”

“What should we do about the windows?” Thran asked as they walked to the SUV. “I leave the decision to you, but if you think they should all be replaced, that is fine. We will spend more on replacements, but less on energy.”

“It’ll be a horrendous expense either way, whether we refurbish or replace. I’ve got a window company coming Tuesday. If we’re going to replace them, we should do it before we paint.”

“Sensible,” Thran nodded, as Bard opened the SUV door for him. “I leave it to you, then, my saint.”

“I hope all goes well today. Less talk, more dance,” Bard leaned forward to give Thran a kiss goodbye.

“Mmm,” Thran breathed, smiling at the caress. He returned it with a longer one, tracing fingers down Bard’s back and squeezing his glute. “On Sunday, perhaps we can indulge ourselves to make up for too many busy days.”

“I’d like that,” Bard agreed at once, easing Thran against him. When he rubbed his hips against Thran’s, his husband hummed deep in his throat.

“Do not be a bastard, or I will drag you into the back seat and fuck you as if we were in high school.”

“You’re the bastard, conjuring up an image like that. I never fucked anyone in high school in the back seat of anything.”

“That is a tragedy,” Thran purred, slipping hands under Bard’s shirt to stroke his nipples. Bard gasped – it’d been days since they’d last made love, and his body responded instantly to Thran’s teasing – but he got no sympathy, only a wicked smile, and a seductive whisper. “I want to see you spread out on the back seat, hear you too consumed to smother your moans, and feel you sweat because I light such a fire in you.”

“You first, you fucker,” Bard growled, grabbing the back of Thran’s jeans, then the handle of the passenger door behind the driver’s door. He jerked open the door, and shoved Thran towards it. “Let’s see you spread out on the back seat, moaning and sweating.”

Thran threw his bag into the front seat like a shot, vaulted into the back seat, and yanked Bard after him. By the time Bard tumbled in after him and shut the door, Thran had shed his jacket, torn off his trainers, and stripped off his jeans and underwear, then he yanked at Bard’s clothes. As soon as he got Bard’s jeans open, Thran manhandled Bard’s cock hard, slicked it with spit, then pulled it into him with a groan.

“Oh, yes, yes, it has been too long since we played, ty grebanyy huiesos,” Thran panted, biting at Bard’s lips. “Chert, ty zastavlyayesh’ menya konchit.”

As long fingers raked his sides, Bard bared his teeth to bite Thran at the base of his throat, teasing a moan out of his entranced dancer.
“You like getting nailed in the back seat like a horny teenager, you bastard? Not too angelic today, are you?”

“Hell, no,” Thran snarled, grinning at Bard as he yanked him deeper inside him. “Fuck me hard and fast, like your horny teenager. Like you mean it. Make me moan.”

Long legs went over Bard’s shoulders, and hands dug into his glutes, driving him deeper into Thran. Bard muscled his husband into a better position, then dove in to bite Thran’s throat again. Shutting his eyes, he gave Thran what he wanted, stroking hard, fast, and rough, until Thran whimpered.

“Ohhh, yeah, angel, you sing so sweet,” Bard crooned, biting Thran’s shoulder. “I love to hear you moan.”

“You fuck like a kitten,” Thran sneered, biting at Bard’s lips. He curled around Bard as well as the car seat would let him. “So pretty, so cute, so delicate. Where is the tiger? The savage? That is what I want. Make me scream.”

“You won’t sit down for a week once I’m through with you,” Bard snarled, scratching his fingers over Thran’s nipples. At his husband’s gasped curse, Bard stroked faster, harder, deeper, until Thran writhed underneath him.

“Hard enough for you now, fucker?” Bard rasped, thrusting hard enough that Thran whimpered with each one. Fingers clawed down Bard’s back and over his glutes, leaving trails that stung and throbbed.

“Never,” Thran gasped, so close to release that he could barely speak. “Give me all of you, you slacker, not just half of you. Make me come.”

It took just two powerful thrusts to bring Thran to climax. As he erupted with a howl, the tight pressure around Bard’s cock spasmed into uncontrolled waves, dragging Bard to release. He hauled Thran onto his cock one last time, muffled his curses against Thran’s quivering chest, and let everything explode.

After so much profane posturing, release was beyond sweet. Bard pressed a kiss against Thran’s heaving chest, and managed to prop himself up on his elbows. Thran brushed Bard’s tangled hair out of his eyes, and kissed his lips tenderly, drawing Bard’s laughter.

“Oh, now you want to be gentle and shy.”

“I am properly fucked. I like to show my appreciation to the animal who did so.”

Bard snickered as he grasped the knees that rested on his shoulders. “Let’s just hope the neighbors aren’t either applauding or calling the police. We made a right racket.”

With a giggle, Thran eased his legs off Bard’s shoulders, then winced as he and Bard managed to disentangle themselves. “If they are watching, then they will get an eyeful when I dash inside the house. I cannot appear in the studio like this.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s glute. “At least you don’t have bloody streaks over your back and ass.”

“Neither of us have such marks,” Thran grinned, leaning in to snatch a kiss from Bard. “Though I admit that you have red marks over your back and ass. Such a nice ass, too.”

Laughing, Bard reached back to retrieve Thran’s jeans from the rear seat, and plunked them in Thran’s lap. “At least put your pants on your nice ass before you dash into the house. And your
trainers. You don’t want to step on a rock and hurt your feet.”

Chortling like a couple of schoolboys, they managed to pull on enough clothing to dash into the house. Thran had more to wash, but he seemed no worse for the wear after their feral pairing. When Bard expressed concern, Thran gave him a quelling look.

“Do not mar such an outrageous fucking with inquiries about your conquest’s health,” he proclaimed. “I am fine, you are fine, and we are both AFO.”

“Not quite,” Bard gave Thran an evil leer. “But I can wait until you get home tonight.”

Thran snorted as he resumed his underwear and jeans. “Should I skip my pointe lesson? I can have you on our virgin marble floor.”

Bard wiggled his eyebrows and grinned. “Should I call Bilbo and tell him to send his men to help me with my sculpture tomorrow?”

Thran exhaled in mock exasperation. “Chert, the demands of life continue to conspire against us, so we are still not able to fuck ourselves blind. I will go to class, and you will move your sculpture. If we are still hungry after that, we will make do after the children go to bed.”

“We have a plan,” Bard agreed. “Come on, I’ll help you destroy the evidence.”

“Quickly. I am so late.”

“You’re the boss, angel. The boss is never late.”

“Everyone will know why I am late.”

“Only if you keep grinning like that. Try to glare a bit, and no one will be the wiser.”

“Wise advice.”

Snickering, Thran and Bard quickly mopped up the SUV, and lingered only long enough to exchange a last pair of kisses.

“May all go well with your sculpture today, lyubov moya,” Thran offered through the window.

“May all go well with your pointe shoes, too, angel. Be safe, be strong, and come home in one piece.”

“You, too.” A sexy grin spread over Thran’s face. “You are the most fun, my saint. I will smile all day.”

“So will I.”

Thran offered a final wave before he headed out of the driveway and down the lane. Bard stood still a moment, then headed back inside. As he poured himself another cup of tea, he winced – his balls ached, his skin burned where Thran had clawed it, and his shoulders ached from contorting himself in such cramped quarters. What Thran felt like after such a rough pairing bore no consideration. If either of them had anything left once they got into bed to night, he’d be surprised.

Still, wouldn’t it be fun to find out?
Chapter 106

Chapter Summary

Both the angel and the saint make progress - the former on his toes, and the latter towards his public introduction.

Thran headed down the road to the UVB studio with a grin that had nothing to do with physical comfort. He had a nasty rug burn on his tailbone, a twinge in one hamstring, and scraped nipples; as for inside... that bore no consideration. Still, the price of goading his husband out of his usual serene demeanor was nothing compared to feeling that muscular body heave and strain against his, seeing that feral light in Bard’s brown eyes, smelling sweat and essence smeared over their bodies. To be lusted after, then opened and taken and driven to release with such savagery, was delirious. It was all Thran could do not to turn the SUV back towards the house. How decadent would it be to storm through the house, hunting down the man who’d so possessed him, then enslave him and repay that possession in kind?

Sadly, duty called.

With a sigh, Thran continued to drive to the UVB studio. At least he could consider all the ways he might reward Bard for his indulgence this morning.

His hamstring twinged again, and more than his nipples stung. He might have to wait a day or two before he retaliated. It would be wise not to play so roughly so soon, too, but that was no burden. There were other ways to goad Bard past his composure. Thran’s retaliation would be less frantic – the better to savor it – but just as thorough. A long, slow, tease...

Perhaps he should do more than just threaten to chain Bard to the bed.

* * *

Bard’s morning was spent getting his sculpture moved from house to gallery. As he expected, Sea Spot Run, his tall column of intertwined fish, was a bear. It was seven feet tall, and despite its slenderness was heavy enough to require Bard and two burly men to get it into the back of his pickup. With proper padding and careful driving, they delivered the piece safely to the Ilithien Gallery. Bilbo was already there with the owner, Celebrían L’Eärendil, both of them wisely staying out of the way as the three men edged the column into a prominent position in the center of one room of the gallery. After a quick trip home, Bard and Bilbo’s helpers brought the lighter but more awkwardly shaped Ring Thing to place in the center of the gallery’s second room. Bard decided he’d take Rosie up on her offer to help move Rahmiel in Sam’s garden van rather than risk the fragile clay and feather sculpture falling over in the back of his pickup, so after a quick ring, Rosie promised she and Sam would be ready to help by the time he got home.

Sure enough, Bard pulled his truck into the driveway to find Sam’s van already waiting. Rosie and Sam stood beside it, waving as he got out.
“Hello, Rosie, Sam!” Bard lifted a hand in greeting. “Thanks for coming over.”

“Are you kidding?” Rosie exclaimed, drawing Sam’s chuckle. “I can’t wait to see your Rahmiel!”

“And that’s no lie, Bard,” a grinning Sam held up his hands at his wife’s enthusiasm. “Rosie’s talked about nothing else since she came in from taking the children to the bus stop.”

“Come on in, then,” Bard waved them towards the mudroom door. “I hope he measures up to the hype.”

Both Sam and Rosie oohed and aahed over the glimpses of Bard’s renovations as they headed for the solarium. “You’ve done so much work, Bard!” Sam said, looking around. “I’ve always liked this house. It’s not so fancy that it looks stiff and pretentious, just fancy enough to look special as well as comfortable. You’ve done it up right – not flibbity at all. The house shines through.”

“Thanks, Sam. It’s still empty for the most part, but we’ll get there. Easier to get all the work done without a lot of furniture around.”

“It looks like you’re almost done,” Rosie said, looking down the center hall. “Oh, you’ve done the floors! The inlay just shines now.”

“Just finished a couple of days ago,” Bard nodded, following Rosie into the central hall. “Got the chandeliers up at last.”

“That must’ve been a bear,” Sam said, looking up as Bard turned on the lights. “Chaining them together like that? Wow. It’s beautiful.”

“It sure is,” Rosie nodded, and stuck her head into the main room. “What color are you going to paint in here?”

Bard described Thran’s sofa that would arrive in a few weeks, and how they’d wait to see it in place before they chose a paint color to go with it. “We need a mantelpiece, too, but again, we want to see the sofa in place before we go down that route. Maybe wood? Maybe stone? Whatever Thran decides he likes. This room is his to play with.”

“Something glamorous, I’d guess,” Rosie grinned. “That’s his style.”

“A little of his glamor’s rubbed off on me,” Bard admitted, beckoning the two into the sitting room. He opened the half bath door and turned on the lights.

“This is a wow, too,” Rosie murmured. “Oh, Bard, it’s beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

“It is, that,” Sam agreed. “A real stunner. I wish we had time to see the whole place, but we’d better see to your Rahmiel before the gallery wonders where he’s flown off to.”

“You’re right. Maybe you’d like to come over Sunday for a cookout? Chicken, maybe? Nothing fancy, but it should be warm enough that we can sit on the terrace, and if not, there’s always the kitchen table.”

“I think we can do that, if it’s for supper,” Sam raised his eyebrows at Rosie, who nodded agreement. “The garden center’s heating up, so I’m open until four on Sunday.”

“We can do that,” Bard replied. “Come on, let’s take care of Rahmiel, then I’ll stand you lunch in the village.”
“That’s a deal,” Sam agreed.

Bard ushered his friends into the solarium, where both of them were quick to lavish praise on Bard’s beautiful angel. With Rosie to hold open doors and direct Sam and Bard around obstacles, they got Rahmiel and Bard’s work stand into the delivery van. Rosie and Bard kept the statue braced as Sam drove them slowly to the gallery, hazard lights flashing. Then they carefully maneuvered Rahmiel on his board out of Sam’s van.

“Oh, my goodness,” Celebrían breathed when Bard and Sam appeared with Rahmiel between them. The gallery owner’s deep-set brown eyes widened in astonishment. “You did show me a picture, Bilbo, but it didn’t do the reality justice. This is spectacular.”

“Isn’t he?” Bilbo folded his arms over his chest to survey the scene with proud satisfaction. “I’ve never seen anything like him.”

“Thanks,” Bard nodded in appreciation. “He’s been a labor of love, but I like the way he turned out.”

“So do I,” Celebrían agreed in a soft voice. Bilbo had told Bard that the tall, willowy gallery owner was a wonderful painter in her own right, as well as the wife of the Imladris Academy’s headmaster. She had deep reddish brown hair, the color of polished mahogany, that she wore piled atop her head in a loose, elegant twist. Soft, stretchy fabric printed with a small floral of green, russet, and apricot gave her capped-sleeve, calf-length dress a graceful swirl, and she wore small earrings, necklace, and bracelet, none of them matching, but all featuring twinkling garnets in gold fittings. “We need to put your beauty someplace where visitors can admire him, but not get close enough to touch. I’d hate for anyone to mar the clay. Hmm, yes, in the window, I think. He’ll look stunning from out on the sidewalk. We’ll hold off his admirers in here with some velvet roping.”

Rosie came forward to set Bard’s work stand in the center of the bowed window. Celebrían draped the stand with a long swath of cloth to present a more aesthetic appearance, then Sam and Bard bolted Rahmiel’s base to the draped stand. Bilbo and Celebrían positioned him to best effect, then Bilbo leaned an attractive sign against the front of the stand that listed the angel’s name, Bard’s name, and the time and date of his show on Saturday. Even Bard thought the arrangement looked glorious.

By Saturday, the entire gallery would look glorious, if he were honest. Two of the gallery’s four rooms would feature nothing but his pieces, and to see his framed sketches going up on the wall was wonderful. Frodo stayed intent on arranging Bard’s framed sketches on the gallery walls, but Bilbo looked up from where he backed each loose sketch with cardboard and wrapped the combination in clear cellophane to keep the pencil strokes from smearing. He offered Bard a warm smile as he arranged the wrapped pieces in cradles for easy perusal.

“Quite a nice arrangement, I think,” Bilbo said, nodding at Frodo when Bard came to stand beside him. “I hope you’re not too attached to any of these. I expect your show to do quite well.”

“Just the sculpture,” Bard shook his head. This was almost an out-of-body experience, or perhaps one of those silly teen movies where two people traded bodies. Because surely he wasn’t the artist whose work was so beautifully displayed, was he?

He was. This was his work, his passion, his talent on display. No one else’s.

“I assume you’d be delighted if someone offers a commission, either for the sculpture or the sketches?”
“That’s... an understatement,” Bard smiled self-consciously. He caught himself before he ran a hand through his hair. “Within reason, of course. I don’t think I want to draw, um... some subjects.”

Bilbo didn’t turn a hair, but merely nodded. “Of course not. I think we can keep interest focused on worthy subjects. There are certain kinds of patrons to avoid, as well, but we’ll steer clear of those, too. Well, most of the work is done, my boy. I expect we’ll have a fair amount of press to dip in and out tomorrow and Saturday morning. Frodo and I will keep close tabs on it.”

“I’ve asked a couple of friends to make an appearance Saturday,” Bard ventured, and explained that Mr. D and Inspector Oakland would be on hand in case Lance decided to make an appearance. Bilbo looked relieved, and noted that the local police were aware of the show and would make extra patrols tonight and Friday in case Lance decided to strike early. Bard took one more look around, offered his thanks to Celebrían, Bilbo, and Frodo, and left the gallery with Sam and Rosie.

“Look at him,” Rosie slowed as they passed the window where Rahmiel perched. “He’s the best thing you’ve done so far, Bard.”

Bard smiled. “I think so, too. He’s everything I hoped he’d be.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder, and Rosie gave him a proud smile. “Welcome back, then,” Sam said in his comfortable, down to earth voice. “He’s a glorious new start.”

So was the angel who’d modeled for Rahmiel, but Bard kept that to himself. He gave Sam and Rosie a grateful smile as they walked down the sidewalk.

“Come on, you two. Time for lunch. Anywhere you want.”

* * *

Thran managed to escape from the UVB a little early today. He needed it – the spate of talking had begun as soon as he’d walked in, and he’d never gotten to the barre for his morning routine, much less his yoga. From now on, he’d take time for these necessities in the Clan Ffyrnig ballroom before he ever left home, just to make sure he got them in. Lettie must be hard pressed if she had to take precedence over his barre; as a dancer herself, she knew the importance of the morning routine to ensure as much mental peace of mind as physical. Consequently, Thran didn’t complain or insist, but merely did all that she asked of him. He even ate his lunch during their meetings without complaint. But when the spate of details was over for the moment, he took his leave without delay. Mme. Morgelle wouldn’t mind if he arrived early and indulged in a long, slow warmup before his pointe lesson.

Ah, how good it was to stand at the barre! He shut his eyes, grateful to let everything but the dance slip away. No longer director of a company, approver of set designs and costumes and choreography, beggar pleading for money from donors and sponsors. No more smiling face to the media trying to drum up interest in the midst of so many others craving the same attention. He was only a dancer, alone in a corner, who coaxed his body into the same positions that hundreds of thousands of other dancers did every day. Relief washed over him – thank all the gods, every one of them, that he could let everything else fall away, and dance.

He took his time, as if each movement were precious, as if each movement were the last he would ever do. His sore hamstring eased; his cramped shoulders did likewise. Before he knew it, the tension
of so many meetings and discussions and debates had melted away, and he felt calm, centered, and happy. Mme. Morgelle came towards him with a nod of approval.

“Yes. You have settled yourself well.”

“I have,” Thran replied simply. He sighed, then offered the instructor a smiling bow. “Bonne après midi, Madame. What will you have me do today?”

“I had thought to continue with your strengthening exercises, but seeing how settled you are today, I would like to see about this ballet of yours.”

Thran blinked. The ballet instructor stood before him, her hands on her hips, but with her fingers pointing backwards and down, which made the pose more considering rather than challenging. Despite her casual stance, Mme. Morgelle’s posture and bearing spoke of her years of training in the same discipline that had shaped Thran. Though she was in her fifties, she was still as slender as a ballerina, though her bowl-cut steel grey hair, red-framed glasses, and chic green wrapped sweater channeled a more playful mien. Under her sweater, she wore a lighter green tee and black leggings. She also wore white pointe shoes – she was not one to merely explain what she wanted from Thran, but she showed him as well. She stood before him now, however, looking more thoughtful than ready to dash into exercises.

“It is a ninety-minute endeavor, Madame,” Thran ventured.

Mme. Morgelle waved her hand dismissively. “I am interested only in the parts that put you on pointe, mon cher. Tell me of those.”

“There is only one part, and it is only seven minutes. But perhaps it is the most pivotal scene for my role,” Thran began. He sketched the bones of the story behind *Immortal*, then the scene where Death revealed His love for the Maid, and why Thran thought that dancing the scene on pointe would enhance it. Mme. Morgelle listened closely, nodding, asking an astute question here and there. When he was done, she folded her arms across her chest and dropped her chin to her chest as she considered.

“Seven minutes, then, to convey an alien love that is doomed before it begins,” Mme. Morgelle mused.

“Worse than that,” Thran replied. “The Maid is so entranced with her Soldier that she hardly notices Death’s appeal.”

Mme. Morgelle nodded. “I want to see these seven minutes. Slowly. Not on pointe. Do not fling yourself into it, as you must when you dance it. Merely show me the steps.”

Thran took a moment to compose himself, settling into the frame of mind that Death would evince when he tried to woo His Maid. As Mme. Morgelle asked, he went though the steps with control, talking through what would go on in the rest of the scene, when he would be on pointe, how Death would abandon all reserve. Along the way, the ballet instructor asked for clarification of Death’s character and emotions, where the other dancers would be in relation to Thran, what the accompanying music was, and so on.

When he’d run through the scene, Thran regarded Mme. Morgelle with a questioning look. “And your considered opinion, Madame?”

“I think it is doable,” she said at once, without fanfare. “Your legs will be strong enough, and your balance improves. But to be effective, you must be more than workmanlike, Thran. The pointe work
can enhance the scene exactly as you would like it to, but only if you are not tentative or conservative. To merely go through the motions will pull the audience out of the fantasy. It will no longer be Death they see. It will be Thran Oropherson trying to do a parlor trick. You must appear unaware of the effort you make, or you must not do it at all.”


Mme. Morgelle beckoned to him with both hands. “From the beginning.”

For the next half hour, the ballet instructor worked Thran through his pointe scene, breaking it into segments. The few flat segments, Thran already performed well; others with only a few steps on pointe, were adequate. That left three segments that consisted entirely of pointe steps, and those left much to be desired. Rather than feeling discouraged, Thran was pleased; it was much easier to mentally accept that almost half of his seven-minute scene was already within reach.

“Enough,” Mme. Morgelle declared, after Thran had danced the scene again, though slowly through the pointe sections. “We will work more on this next time. For now, you have done enough. Continue your strengthening exercises each day as I have told you. I will see you again on Friday.”

“Yes, Madame,” Thran replied, offering her the slight bow that she liked so much. As her lips curved up, so did his. “Merci.”

“Pas de quoi,” she shrugged, pretending royal disinterest, but joined Thran in a chuckle. “Go. You make me late for my next student.”

“Oui, Madame. À Vendredi.”

Thran ducked into the restroom to remove his pointe shoes, and exchange his dancer’s belt and tights for more comfortable jeans and underwear. He made a quick check of his mobile – oh, thank the gods, there were no calls from anyone – then packed his bag to head home. He took the indirect route to the highway through some residential areas on the off chance that he might find another treasure on the sidewalk free for the taking, but he had no such luck today.

No matter. He might not have any physical treasures to bring home today, but Mme. Morgelle had given him a mental one. He knew what he had to do to make Death live.

* * *

Bard enjoyed a lighthearted lunch hour with Rosie and Sam. On their recommendation, they visited the Blue Mountain Bistro just down the street from the gallery, which specialized in stuffed sandwiches made with a variety of breads baked in house. Indeed, the aroma was mouthwatering when they came through the door. The shop also had a nice selection of soups, salads, and other side dishes in addition to their sandwiches, so the hardest part was deciding which treat to order. After due deliberation, Sam happily dug into a big bowl of potato soup and a ham and cheese hero on cheese bread. Rosie had half of a turkey sandwich on honey wheat and a cup of vegetable soup, and Bard tried an Italian hero on – what else? – Italian Parmesan bread. Gelato made a good dessert, then Sam drove them home. Bard waved goodbye from their driveway, and walked the short distance across Sam and Rosie’s back lawn, then across the Whitfoots’s lawn to his own. He remembered to keep a cautious eye out as he went, but the only item of interest was how green the shrubs were getting, and where sprigs of plants that might be more than weeds poked up shoots and leaves. He
came inside, energized from the seeing his show come together, and from having a good time with friends. It was the perfect frame of mind to tackle a new project.

But what to do? Rahmiel was finished, and he was now in a gallery with other pieces of Bard’s sculpture and his sketches. Bard was too fidgety to want to sit in the sitting room to sketch or plan a new sculpture. The barn was more or less cleaned up, but he needed to catalog what supplies he needed to replace before he could start his metal work. That was not the effort he wanted to make today, either.

Renovation, then?

There was nothing more to do on the main room until the new sofa arrived.

The two attic rooms? Both needed the usual cleaning and renovating, but he was in no hurry to do either. The empty one held all the leftover boxes from the main room, which would be hard to work around. As for the one holding his old bed... it had been the perfect setting for an erotic rendezvous between a dodgy artist and a sexual vampire. Gods, the jolt that went through his loins when he recalled Thran in leather pants and heavy motorcycle boots bore no consideration. The chance to revisit that erotic adventure was too tempting to remake the stage of it just yet.

That left the solarium.

Everyone in the family was eager to see that oasis come to life, but more than the desire to create a beautiful room spiked Bard’s anticipation. Thinking about his rendezvous with Thran in the attic room had given him an idea for the next game he and his husband would play. Upstairs, their play had been rough, feral, and gritty. Their beautiful oasis, then, would be the perfect place for a pairing that was as far removed from rough, feral grittiness as could be imagined.

Renovation first, though. He had to create the setting before anyone played anything.

He considered the work that needed to be done while he mixed up a pan of peanut butter brownies. When they went in the oven, he seared slices of pork in a big Dutch oven, added sautéed onions, spices, and molasses, and set the concoction to simmer. In a few hours, the mouthwatering smell of pork barbeque would greet the family when they arrived home. When the brownies came out of the oven, they smelled so good that he pried one out of the pan while it was still hot and gooey, blowing on it until it was cool enough to stuff in his mouth. Good thing the children weren’t around to watch him, or the rest of the pan would be gone under their assault.

Supper and snacks under control, Bard fetched spackling compound, putty knife, and ladder, and headed into the solarium. Why was the first step always to patch walls and ceiling, prime, and paint?

He had a lot to think about as he patiently patched and smoothed. The solarium might have been added on to the house as an afterthought, but the materials that had gone into it were solid. The floor was a nice limestone with a solid base underneath, mostly in good shape, though one or two of the tiles were cracked. Tilda and Thran had pored over Bard’s book of Islamic tessellations together, wondering if they could make one or two – to replace the broken limestone ones or to hang on the wall, maybe? Thankfully, the walls and ceiling were solidly built, so Bard wouldn’t have to add any insulation to either. Just as fortunately, no one had slathered layer upon layer of thick paint over the trim work, so cleaning that down to bare wood wouldn’t take as long as it had in so much of the rest of the house. He planned to stain it to match the wooden panels they’d gotten from Mrs. Mathom’s.

But what color to paint the walls? The wooden screens and the archway would cover only the inside wall; the two side walls and the window wall would be left exposed. Maybe a pale green would enhance the lush greenery? It would have to be one that harmonized with the Majorelle blue velvet
on the fainting couch, and the blue glass of Thran’s lanterns from Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar. Definitely a blue for the ceiling, and clouds, to reinforce the sense of the room being a beautiful hidden garden, fit for an even more beautiful odalisque.

An odalisque with long, white hair.

Bard worked quietly away, smiling as once again thoughts of an angel made light work as he coaxed an old house back to new life. He had a couple of hours to himself before the mudroom door opened.

“Bard, I am home!” Thran called.

“In the solarium!” Bard replied, climbing down from his ladder.

“Mmm, the kitchen smells good!” Thran crossed the kitchen and came into the solarium. “And what is this? You work on the solarium? I thought you moved your sculpture today.”

Bard gave his husband a welcome-home kiss. “Sculpture’s all moved, angel. Bilbo’s helpers made quick work of Sea Spot Run and the Ring Thing. Then Sam and Rosie helped me move Rahmiel in Sam’s delivery van. I stood them lunch, and invited them and their children over to grill on Sunday.”

“How does he look in the gallery?”

Bard didn’t try to keep the excited grin off his face. “Better than you can believe, angel. He’s in one of the gallery’s front windows, and he looks as great from outside as he does inside up close. Then to see the sketches go on the walls, too...”

Thran enfolded him in his arms to deliver a loving hug. “I cannot wait to see him, lyubov moya. In a gallery, with all your sketches and Sea Spot Run and the Ring Thing to complement him... but that will not be the most wonderful thing that I will see there on Saturday. That will be you when you see how many others realize what an amazing artist you are.”

Lips pressed a kiss on Bard’s hair, then fingers ran through it. “Tcha, I should have thought to call Rowan for you. You have not had a haircut since you first visited her.”

Bard chuckled. “I thought about it, but decided to hold off until afterwards.”

Thran’s silver grey eyes met his with surprise. “What is this? The haircut after the show?”

Bard’s chuckle grew into a laugh. “I can’t look too neat, Thran. People expect their artists to be a bit rough around the edges, not like some immaculate soccer dad.”

Thran’s surprise melted into arousal. “Ah. So I am not the only one who indulges a grunge kink around artists. One particular artist.”

Bard rolled his eyes. “I’m not showing up looking like your dodgy garret artist, Thran. A lot cleaner, for one thing.”

“What a pity,” Thran purred. “I would not suggest you smoke, either. That was erotic beyond words.”

“Around my artwork?” Bard gave him a skeptical snort. “Not a chance. My sketches wouldn’t last long around fire, and neither would Rahmiel.”

Thran suppressed a shudder. “Oh, gods. I should have thought. I am sorry, my saint. I suppose I understand our game in the garret a little better. You smoked to show your disregard for more than
your lungs.”

Snickering, Bard squeezed Thran’s glute. “I smoked because I wanted to see if the same thing that
snared my wife might also snare a vampire.”

Thran giggled. “What, not a husband?”

“I already had the husband. I was after a vampire on the side.”

“You are not a saint.”

“This is where I shamelessly steal my husband’s favorite line. You love me that way.”

“I crave you that way,” Thran purred. “Such a man you are. You nail me against a wall, in the back
seat of my SUV, on the bare attic floor. I cannot wait until we devise our next game.”

“I thought about that while I spackled the walls,” Bard said.

“Did you?” Thran looked around in interest. “Ah, I see, the walls and ceiling progress. What about
those prompted you to think about a game? Oh, you devise a game for our oasis, yes?”

“Only the beginnings of one. But before we get into that, tell me about your pointe lesson. Your feet
are all right?”

“All is well,” Thran agreed, as Bard led him into the kitchen. Thran described how his pointe
instructor had had him go through Immortal’s crucial pointe scene, and how she’d divided it up into
pieces to help him know where he needed the most work. Bard stirred his pork barbeque, now
falling apart into shreds quite nicely, and got out a package of buns from the freezer to thaw before
supper.

“So this will help her know how to help you, as well as help you manage that scene better?” Bard
surmised.

Thran nodded. “Very much so. I am encouraged. That smells very good, my saint. What is it?”

“Pork barbeque. More of a dish you’d find in the southern states than up here, but a friend in college
put me onto it, and it’s great. Want a taste?”

“Of course.”

Bard got a spoon to scoop out a bit for Thran and held it out. “Better blow on it. It’s hot.”

Thran bent to do just that, then nibbled the sample. “Mmm! So spicy! Lots of cumin, yes?”

“Among other things. That’s more Indian than Southern US, I suppose, but I like it.”

“Very good. It goes on a bun?”

“Usually, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to. I can make farro if you’d rather have that.”

“I am still thinner than I prefer. Do we have whole wheat buns?”

“We do.” Bard pointed to the package thawing on the counter. “I’m looking out for you, angel.”

Thran kissed Bard’s ear. “You take very good care of me. I am humbled.”
“We promised to look out for each other. Giving you a whole wheat bun rather than a plain one is part of that.”

“And for my part, I will play the proud husband Saturday at your show. But that will be no chore. That will be entirely my pleasure. You must give me a few of Bilbo’s business cards to hand out for you, in case anyone seeks to talk to me.”

“They will, just because of who you are. You don’t have to go, you know.”

“Tcha, nothing can keep me away. Nothing! This will be a triumph, and I want to be with you to see it.”

Bard’s cheeks warmed. “I want you there, too. But I’d toyed with thinking it might be better for the children not to be there... because of Lance.”

Thran sobered. “You will not have an easy time of that. Sigrid will insist to be there.”

“She will, which is why I didn’t think about it very seriously. The other thing that came to mind is that if the children are elsewhere, then there’s the off chance that Lance will find out where they are, and try something while I’m at the gallery. So better that we’re all together.”

“We stay in force,” Thran nodded. “Plus we know that Mr. D and Inspector Oakland will be with us. That strengthens us while we are there.”

“That clinched it,” Bard nodded. “But I wanted to at least offer you the chance to stay clear of Lance. I can’t imagine that he won’t make an appearance at some point.”

“I think as you do. But we will be prepared. I will stay very close to Tilda – all of our children, of course, but especially her. I do not want Lance to frighten her again.”

“We have a plan,” Bard exhaled.

“We do,” Thran nodded firmly. “Good. Now you can tell me about this new game you devise for us.”

“It’s not like anything we’ve done before,” Bard warned.

“All the better. We try something new.”

“It’s not a couple of predators having at.”

“Do not play coy, lyubov moya,” Thran looked at Bard from under his lashes, an anticipatory smile tugging at his lips. “Tell me what you want of me for this new game.”

Bard paused for effect, until Thran was as intent on him as a cat on an oblivious mouse.

“I want a geisha.”

Thran’s eyebrows went nearly to his hairline, and he blinked at Bard for several seconds. Then his gaze sharpened.

“A geisha? Do you know what you ask? They are not what most people think they are.”


Thran nodded. “You are well informed.”
“I try to be.”

“And what part do you play in this game?”

Bard matched his husband’s anticipatory smile. “I let the geisha decide.”

“Ooh,” Thran’s eyes widened. “Delicious. I will consider.”

“You’ve got plenty of time,” Bard reminded Thran as his mobile alarm chimed. “I’ve got a ways to go before the geisha’s beautiful garden is ready.”

“But not a ways before supper,” Thran grinned, pointing to Bard’s mobile. “Time for the bus run, yes?”

“Yes,” Bard agreed, turning off the oven burner under the pot of barbeque. He followed Thran to the mudroom to head out to the bus stop. “But while we wait for the children, I want to tell you about this idea I had for the solarium ceiling.”

“Whatsoever your plan, it will be beautiful,” Thran gave him a wink to accompany the soft caress on his glute. “Worthy of all the delight that will come after.”

Bard’s chuckle was silent. No matter how much care he lavished on the solarium’s renovation, it wouldn’t come close to the pleasure he and his husband would share when it was complete. How glorious was that?
Chapter 107

Chapter Summary

The cherubs look forward to the future, and the angel savors the moment. Meanwhile, the saint does both of the things he does so well - look after his family, and worry.

I don't hold any rights to Big Bird or Sesame Street, but I do love all of the Muppets!

The children bounded into the house with their usual enthusiasm, delighted to be free of their classrooms for the day. Thran never failed to smile at their exuberance, but watching them brought him more than simple amusement. He also had to swallow down the lump in his throat each time tall, blond Legolas appeared amid his shorter, darker-haired siblings – how much of a gift was it to see his son every day, no matter how busy they both were? Even after four months together, his elation to welcome his son home every day had not dimmed. And to see him happy, with a family who supported him, was an even greater pleasure.

Today being Thursday, Legolas was full of excitement about the Gondors’ fencing lesson. He was even more excited about the summer intensives that his instructors would hold starting in June after the end of the regular school year. Of course, Thran wanted Legolas to attend just as much as his son did – he delighted to see Legolas’s skill at his favorite sport grow. There were also archery camps in the offing, which Legolas wanted to attend with Tara and Killian. Bain embraced a similar enthusiasm about soccer camp, so it was clear that both boys would be busy during the summer.

“What about you, lasses?” Bard asked Sigrid and Tilda as they all gathered around the kitchen island for their pre-supper snack. “Sports for either of you?”

“I was thinking I’d get a job,” Sigrid offered. “Maybe in the village? In one of the shops, maybe, or maybe the local newspaper offers an internship for writing or journalism? Or the library? If nothing comes of that, then maybe the writing intensive at school, and running camp.”

“All good choices,” Bard nodded. “There’s your driver’s class, too.”

“Lucky,” Bain muttered under his breath, which got a commiserating murmur from Legolas.

“I want to see whether I can get a job or an internship first,” Sigrid said, poking her tongue out at Bain. “If I do, then I’ll hold off the driver’s class until next fall. If I don’t, then I’ll take the driver’s class and something else this summer.”

“I can take you Saturday morning to make the rounds in the village if you want,” Bard offered. “It’s a bit late in the year to be looking for a summer job, but maybe you’ll get lucky. It’ll have to be early, as I don’t know if they’ll need me for something at the gallery before my show.”

Thran leaned on the kitchen island beside Bard and glanced at him. “Or I can take our Sigrid when I take Legolas to fencing, if you like.”

“We’ll make it happen, either way,” Bard nodded. “I’m sure we’ll need something in the village that needs a run.”

“Cheese?” Tilda piped from her perch on the stool at the end of the island where she arranged three
kinds of her favorite treat on a plate. As her family laughed, she pushed the plate into the middle of the island. As hands dove toward the plate, she offered a mischievous grin. “We always need that. See?”


“That’s what Til will do all summer – eat cheese,” Bain teased.

“I will not!” Tilda protested through a mouthful of cheese and cracker, drawing even more laughter. “I have the same flyer you do, and it has a whole bunch of art things this summer. I’d like one of those. And swimming, maybe?”

“Ooh, swimming!” Bain perked up. “That’d be cool, too!”

“How is there swimming at the school?” Thran asked in surprise. “There is no pool!”

“I expect that the Y in the village is the place for swimming lessons,” Bard explained, looking at the sheet that Bain had handed him. “But the school seems to offer just about everything else you could possibly want.”

“The Imladris Academy does not stay still for a moment,” Thran observed. “Much like your old boarding school, Legolas.”

His son snorted – how much did he sound like Bain? “There’s no comparison, Papa. The summer sessions here include so many fun things, not just boring school subjects. People go to these because they want to, not because they have to.”

“The theatre department’s got three special ones that start the day after school’s out,” Sigrid added. “Lighting and sound crew, set design crew, and stage crew. Seems there’s some ballet going on in mid July that everyone’s hot to work on.”

Thran blinked as everyone’s gaze fell on him. “Is there? I have no idea what that is about.”

This time, everyone sounded like Bain, drawing his laughter. “Ah. I see I must work on my poker face.”

“It won’t help,” Bard poked Thran in the ribs with an elbow. “When all the people in the room know you just uttered a bald-faced lie, no poker face can convince them otherwise.”

“I suppose not,” Thran gave an exaggerated sigh. “Though such a tactic seems to work well for many politicians.”

That observation got a lot of hooted agreement. “Funny dancer,” Bard quipped, grinning.

“The politicians are not funny,” Thran grimaced. “But there is nothing to do about them – they are like mosquitoes, a constant menace. So we will leave them. I think we should look at the flyers for the summer classes, decide what everyone would like to take, and then we will see what the schedule becomes. Perhaps I will be able to deliver children to the school in the morning, as I will be in the final rehearsals for this mysterious ballet I know nothing about. But I do not know when such programs end during the day, so we must make sure that Bard can manage pickups. He will be a busy artist by then, and will have many demands on his time.”

“Maybe I should take the driver’s class, Da,” Sigrid noted. “If I took an early one, I could help drive people around.”
“As opposed to just drive us all crazy?” Bain needled.

“You’re just envious because I get to learn to drive before you do, twerp,” was Sigrid’s pert reply.

“Respect, both of you,” Bard inserted quietly.

“Yes, Da,” both children murmured, but Bain wasn’t quelled for long.

“It’s not like you’ll get to drive Thran’s fancy SUV around,” the boy riposted. “You’ll be stuck in Da’s truck.”

“That’s exactly the way I want it,” Sigrid said with a superior smile. “It’ll improve my street cred.”

“Street cred?” Bain gave his sister an exaggerated, gaping look of astonishment. “Street cred? This ain’t the city, Sig!”

“No, it’s not,” Legolas said soberly. “But from what all of you have told me, your city school had something in common with my boarding school – so many people postured and jockeyed and tried to one up everyone else. So many cliques! The Imladris academy is a lot more relaxed, and the people don’t put on so many airs.”

“More down to earth,” Bard summarized.

Legolas nodded, but a smile touched his lips. “That’s not to say that people don’t care about their image, or it’s not important to have good friends. Killian knew me from archery, and he knew Sigrid through Finn, and he and Tara are in several of our classes. So he and Tara included all of us in their group pretty quickly. But even without that, Sigrid’s got a pretty strong reputation.”

“Oh, do I?” Sigrid challenged, but her cheeks were red.

“You know you do, Sig,” Bain snorted. “How many times a day does somebody ask you to bring it?”

That was what Sigrid had said to Lance at the April Fool’s Follies.

The older girl darted a quick look at Tilda, and Bain winced as he, too, glanced at his younger sister. Tilda bit her lip in response.

“They stopped doing that ages ago,” Sigrid tossed off with studied nonchalance.

Tilda shot her a look. “They still say it on the bus,” the little girl murmured, and everyone fell quiet. Tilda looked around and gave a shrug that was just as studied as her sister’s. “Well, they do. And I know you talk about Lance when you think I can’t hear you.”

“We don’t want you to worry, Kukla,” Legolas said, his lips turning down.

“I know,” Tilda admitted. “But... it’s kind of hard not to worry, because you all keep talking about him, so... maybe there’s something to worry about? Anyway... I think I’d rather know what you’re talking about. Then I’d worry about just one thing, instead of everything.”

The three older children did exactly as Thran expected – they all looked at Bard. Despite the serious subject, Thran had to smother a grin. Whenever anything worrisome came up, everyone looked to Bard to sort it all out and make it right again. Bard met Thran’s eyes, divined exactly what he thought, and set about calming everyone with characteristic gentleness.

“There’s a saying about that, little doll,” Bard said easily as he leaned his elbows on the kitchen
“Better the devil you know than the one you don’t.”

“If that means I’d rather know what’s going on about Lance than not know, I understand it.”

“It can explain why some people are afraid to take a risk, but this time, yes, it means that you’d rather
know what’s going on than not. So what would you like to know?”

“The police haven’t caught Lance yet, have they?”

Bard shook his head. “Not yet. No one’s seen him anywhere near here, or in the city in our old
neighborhood, either.”

“Maybe he went to Florida?” Tilda asked with a hopeful light in her eyes.

“Maybe he did. But we don’t know for sure.”

“But we have the security thing to protect the house now, right?”

Bard nodded. “We do. So no one but us can come in here, or the barn, or the carriage house, without
the police knowing about it.”

“Okay,” Tilda nodded, taking a deep breath. “That’s good. So maybe he’ll leave us alone now.”

“I hope so,” Bard agreed. “But we’ll keep watch for a while longer, just to make sure everyone’s
safe. That’s why tomorrow evening, we’ll all go to my art show, so we’ll all be together. And I heard
from an old friend – Mr. D’s going to stop by.”

“Mr. D?” Tilda’s face lit up. “I’ve missed seeing him. It’ll be fun to see him again. Maybe we should
bring him a sandwich.”

If the older children took anything from that other than a visit from a fixture in their old
neighborhood, none of them revealed it – surely to keep from upsetting Tilda.

“There’s going to be food at the show, but we’ll eat supper ahead of time. We want to leave all the
little nibbles to the people who come to the show.”

Both the boys groaned under their breath at that, drawing Thran’s smile.

“I have a consolation prize for hungry children who generously leave the small snacks to art
patrons,” Thran said, his smile widening into a grin as the children’s eyes all riveted on him. Bard’s
eyes, however, were more mystified than eager. “Tomorrow is Bard’s show, and Monday is his
birthday, yes? So Sunday would be a good day to celebrate both, yes? Perhaps to see my friend
Kasim for a big lunch?”

How gratifying was it to see Bard’s eyes wax with warm affection? “I’d like that a lot, angel. We
had such a good dinner there. It’d be great to go back.”

“Then we will,” Thran nodded.

“Is that the place with the raw oysters?” Tilda asked.

“That’s the one,” Legolas nodded vigorously. “And so many other good things, too, Kukla – wait’ll
you see! So many kinds of fish, and the best tiny octopus in sauce, and clams, and this great beet
salad, and these special tiny muffins –”

“Muffins?” Tilda interrupted. “What kind of muffins?”
“All kinds. Two different kinds, every time. I like the cherry ones.”

“Cherry muffins?” Tilda repeated, giving that serious consideration.

“Better than Da’s?” Sigrid asked with a bit of a territorial skepticism that made Thran snicker.

“Well... not quite,” Legolas conceded tactfully. “They’re different flavors than Bard’s. But very good.”

“I’m in,” was Bain’s decisive answer. “Muffins, octopus, it sounds great.”

“I don’t have to eat any oysters or octopus, do I?” Tilda said dubiously.

“Of course not, silly,” Bain snorted. “It’s a restaurant. They bring you stuff you want, not stuff you don’t want.”

“I’m not silly,” Tilda corrected, frowning at her brother. “I just don’t want to eat... squirmy things.”

That sent a laugh around the table.

“You do not have to eat any squirmy things, Kukla,” Thran assured her. “They have a nice dish of small shrimp with a lemon butter sauce, or a small fish pie with a crust like your Da’s pot pie, or salmon, or many other things. And if by accident any squirmy things should appear on your plate, you will have several of us to eat it for you. Kasim also makes a most delicious crème brulée au chocolat avec des framboises, which I know you would enjoy very much.”

“Chocolate crème brulée with raspberries?” Tilda translated, her eyes widening. “Ooh! Yes, I’m in, too!”

“Me, too,” Sigrid nodded, laughing at her siblings. She poked out her tongue at Bain. “And I might just try one of those squirmy things. Maybe an oyster, or a piece of octopus. As long as none of it’s still moving.”

“Ewwwwww!” Tilda made a horrified face and clapped her hands over her mouth. “That’s disgusting!”

“Wow, I bet it slithers all the way down!” Bain teased.

“Yuck! Stop it!” Tilda put her hands over her ears. “I don’t want to hear anything about slithering, squirmy food!”

“That’s enough, Bain,” Bard cautioned, laughing. “Don’t worry, Til. Kasim will take good care of you, and make sure no slithering, squirmy food comes your way. It’ll be fun.”

“Okay,” Tilda agreed. “Even if anyone else gets squirmy things, I don’t have to, and there’s crème brulée, so I’m ready.”

“Then I will call Kasim tonight and make a reservation for lunch on Sunday for us. We will have a good time.”

“All right!” Legolas cheered, sounding almost as boisterous as Bain. How the past four months had changed his son, and for the better! Legolas was still quieter than Bain and Sigrid, but he was more open with his thoughts and feelings, and he laughed more than Thran remembered since before his mother’s death. Their new family had brought his son as much happiness as it had Thran.

As the children bustled about to pull out lunch bags, unpack homework, and ask about supper duties,
Thran stroked a surreptitious hand over Bard’s back.

“What?” Bard murmured, turning his gaze on Thran.

“Life is sweet,” Thran murmured in reply. “Nothing more.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s glute in mischievous reply, and his smile was impish. “That’s good. That’s all we need.”

It was.

* * *

Bard was glad that supper was a busy affair, as was the long discussion after homework about which child wanted to sign up for which summer program. It was a distraction from his rising anticipation – all right, his worry – about his upcoming art show. He managed to get to sleep reasonably well, but he thought he dreamed a lot, though what those dreams were about, he couldn’t recall. He was further distracted Friday morning, as Thran, Imo, Ori, and the UVB dancers were back in the ballroom, and there was a lot of going and coming. He threw a pan of chicken into the oven for Thran’s lunch, then retreated to the solarium. He moved most of the room’s contents into the main room and laid down drop cloths all over the limestone floor so that he could prime the ceiling and walls without worrying about paint staining anything. His nervous energy was enough that he got the primer on before lunchtime.

After lunch, he headed to the homeowners’ mecca to look for paint that would match the scrap of velvet left over from reupholstering the fainting couch. He had a couple of leaves from the palms and ferns, too, as well as a piece of one of the screens to see what greens would work best with the wood and the plants.

Nothing there matched his samples as closely as he wanted, but they had the metal primer paint he wanted, so he bought that. Then, with some trepidation, he headed to the fancy designer paint store. He found a premium color that exactly matched the velvet – of course it was called Ultraviolet – so he got a gallon of exterior gloss for all the garden furniture. He also got a quart of the same color in interior matte, because he’d mix that with white in varying amounts to make his cloud-strewn sky.

The green was an interesting challenge. The woman helping Bard listened to his description of the room and the impression he wanted to make, looked at the pictures of the solarium he showed her on his mobile, and studied his samples of fabric, wood, and leaves. The paint card she pulled out of the rack showed a vibrant lime green with a tinge of yellow in it. It was much brighter than Bard expected, and Bard said so.

“It is,” the woman nodded. “But you won’t see much of it, really. You’re going to cover the house wall with your screens and archway, and your tall windows cover most of the facing wall. The other two walls both have a doorway in them. Your palms and other plants will further screen those walls, so that only the tops of them show. The vivid green will help bounce the light around, and make it a little more tropical.” She laid the sample card next to that for the ultraviolet paint, and Bard had to admit that the combination was striking. “You could buy a sample-sized pot, try it on the wall where it shows most, and see what you think.”

Bard nodded. “That’s a good idea. You’re right about how it makes the blue look so much more
vibrant, so I’ll see how it looks on site. If it’s right, I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here,” the woman smiled, as they walked over to the cash register.

The price of the blue paint and two sample pots of the green nearly took his breath away, but Bard handed over his credit card without a tremor. Paying less for the wrong color was stupid, because every time he’d go into the solarium, he’d wish he’d bought the right one. The right color, then, was worth more than what it cost.

Heading home, Bard stopped at the market for the week’s groceries, got home to stow everything away, and got his truck snugged away in the carriage house. Thran and company were still dancing away, so he headed back to the solarium. It took only a couple of minutes to smooth one sample pot of the green onto a side wall. He fished out the bit of blue velvet to hold it against the green. It looked good so far, but he wanted to wait until it was dry before he made his final decision. He wanted to see the color as the light changed during the day, too.

He still had an hour before the children’s bus would arrive. He was still too antsy to sit, so he brought one of the garden chairs from the gazebo up to the terrace. Another drop cloth went down, the wire brush came out, and Bard scraped the intricate ironwork of the chair down to as much bare metal as he could manage. A small grinding tool from the barn helped him get the stubborn bits of paint out of the crevasses. He brought the chair into the solarium, where he gave it a good coat of the metal primer. After it dried for twenty-four hours, he’d repaint it with the ultraviolet blue, and then he could better judge whether the unexpected green was the right color or not.

It did look great peeking out from behind the Moroccan screens...

His mobile chimed, so he cleaned up the painting things before he made his run to the bus stop. From then through the rest of the night, life was too busy for him to think about his show. Bain was a grimy mess from soccer, part of his plan to encourage Bard to let him have his turn in the soaking tub, so Bard sent him upstairs to clean up while the other children helped get supper ready. Bain reappeared, much cleaner and certainly better smelling, in time to sit down to grilled salmon, farro, various stir-fried veg, and fruit with the family. Discussion around the table was extra-animated – all of the children were excited for the weekend, and what they wanted to do during the summer, and could they please bring in their signup fees and forms to school on Monday so they made sure they would have first choice at the spots? Thran was full of details about the ballet, how the set would soon be built, and when costume fittings would begin. After supper, everyone was still too excited to settle down to read Harry Potter, so the video games got a heavy workout. Bard didn’t say much throughout, but he was glad to laugh at all of the stir. He did have to moderate a discussion about the green paint on the solarium walls; the jury was still out, mostly because the dimming light wasn’t enough to do the color justice. When at last he fell into bed, he was grateful to be physically as well as mentally tired, and fell asleep quickly.

A couple of hours later, though, he was awake with mind churning and stomach fluttering. Waiting until something happened was the worst thing to endure, because no one could speed time on its way. Bilbo hadn’t called him all day – was that good, or bad? Maybe he should stop into the gallery tomorrow morning when he took Sigrid around the village – or would that make him look nervous? Eager? Desperate? Or outright egotistical?

Beside him, Thran slept quietly. Bard held himself still, not wanting to wake his husband. Or maybe he should – a comforting word might calm him a little, unless it made him feel worse...

Gritting his teeth, Bard shut his eyes, and forced his breathing to be deep and even. Ugh – this was pointless! He was not the least sleepy. He’d end up lying here like a board all night –
Music wound its way into his ears. Morning already? He had fallen back to sleep, then, thank the
gods. Thran roused beside him, rolled over to give him a good morning snuggle, then padded into
the bathroom. Bard followed him in, and they dressed quietly. Bard was aware enough to notice that
this morning Thran didn’t pull on his leggings with his tee, but a pair of blue athletic shorts. They
weren’t the long, baggy things that were so popular with many of their children’s friends, but were as
well fitting as anything else in Thran’s wardrobe. Honestly, his husband could wear a plastic garbage
bag and look elegant and ethereal –

“What?” Thran looked up as he pulled on his shorts, his beautiful white hair sheeting around him like
silk.

“You’ve got the longest legs on the planet,” Bard shook his head.

“Ah,” Thran smiled as he put his hand to his heart and offered Bard a pleased bow. “Thank you, my
saint. It is good to hear you speak. You are very preoccupied this morning. Did you sleep at all?”

Bard gave his husband a look of chagrin. “I thought you were asleep. How long did I keep you up?”

“You did not. But the time or two I stirred, I think you were awake. I did not want to intrude.
Perhaps I should have.”

Bard ran both hands through his hair. “Gods, I don’t know myself. I’m sorry, angel. I thought I was
quiet.”

“You were. But I am familiar with pre-performance excitement, you understand.”

“I used to be.”

Thran came to enfold Bard in his arms, and stroked his back slowly. “This will go well, lyubov
moya. You have worked hard, your sketches and sculpture are brilliant, and Bilbo has outdone
himself for you. You will see.”

“I hope so.” Bard didn’t speak of his anxiety, mostly because saying it aloud might make it more
than he could bear. Instead he soaked up the comfort of Thran’s embrace. “Gods, I need to stay busy
so I don’t think about it. What would you like for breakfast?”

“Hmm, let us consider. Legolas must have a good breakfast before his fencing. I will not fence
today, because I am well exercised from the ballet. If I delay my barre, we may all eat together, and
then I can go into the village with you and the children. Tilda and I can visit the cheese shop, and
Bain will like the bookstore and the used game store, and you can shadow Sigrid on her rounds. So
we need a big breakfast for so many endeavors. Perhaps eggs and muffins? No, we will have
muffins tomorrow with Kasim. Biscuits, then.”

“Eggs and biscuits are good,” Bard nodded. “Let’s roust the troops.”

The children soon joined them in the kitchen. Bard stayed busy boiling and frying and scrambling
eggs, and shuttling both plain and cheese biscuits in and out of the oven. He wasn’t hungry – mute
testimony to his nerves – but just when he thought no one had noticed his lack of appetite, all of the
children badgered him to the table. A soft-boiled egg and a couple of biscuits settled his stomach a
bit, and trying to jockey four children into dressing and moving towards Thran’s SUV was
engrossing. They delivered Legolas to the Gondors’ studio, then headed to the village’s main
thoroughfare. Thran, Bain, and Tilda set off for the cheese shop, and Bard and Sigrid began their
rounds of the shops where Sigrid might find a summer job.

In deference to Sigrid, Bard didn’t stick to her shoulder. He let her decide where and how she
wanted to ask about a job, and stayed outside while she went inside. He’d brought a sketchpad and pencils with him, which gave him something to concentrate on while he waited for Sigrid.

That’s not to say that he didn’t also keep an eye out for a certain angry teenager, but so far, Lance was nowhere to be seen.

“Da! Da!” Sigrid called as she hurried out of the Blue Mountain Bistro, the shop where Bard had stood Sam and Rosie lunch before his show. “This place offered me a job on the spot, but only if I can work on the weekends before school ends. I want to. Is that okay?”

“They did? What’s the story?”

“Don’t worry, I asked,” Sigrid replied, her eyes dancing with excitement. “The lady who runs the place was expecting to need help soon because one of her employees is pregnant, but the baby came six weeks early, so she’s short-handed. She says I can have a summer job if I can start now on weekends for the breakfast and lunch crowd. I’d be a barista and a waitress, and I’d make up salads and sandwiches, too. It smells really good in there, too, not that that means one thing or another. And she was nice. So what do you think?”

“The food’s good, without a doubt. What do you think about the owner?”

“A lot of the customers know her by name, and she remembers a lot of their usual orders by heart, if the fifteen minutes I’ve been talking to her is any indication. She smiles a lot. And even though she’s a little frantic right now, she still took the time to answer everything I asked. She asked me good questions, too.”

“We’ll need to get you there and back. What do you think about that?”

“What if I got a secondhand bicycle? It’s just a couple of miles, so I could take care of that.”

“What about your driver’s test?”

“There’s an afternoon class the first two weeks of the summer session. So I could still do both.”

“What about Finn?”

“That’s the hard part, yeah,” she admitted. “But I’ll still have Saturday and Sunday afternoons free when he makes it up to Killian’s. And if he can convince his Da to let him go to the Imladris Academy next year, I’ll see him every day. I want to save up a little money for college, at least for some textbooks, so it doesn’t all land on you.”

“I appreciate the thought, sweetness. Just one more thing to think about – it’s important to keep up your grades for college, so will having a job interfere with that?”

Sigrid nodded eagerly. “I thought about that before I said I wanted to look for a job. I know I’ll have to work hard, but I’m willing to do it, and not just to make a little money. Having a job might help me when I apply to college, because it shows I know how to work hard.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought it through,” Bard nodded. “I think we can swing it.”

“I need a loan for the bicycle, but I’ll pay you back when I get paid.”

“That’s a good plan.”

“So it’s okay? She wants me to start next Saturday.”
“It’s okay by me. Just make sure you understand what you’re committing to, and can do what the job requires. It’s not fair to the owner if you can’t.”

“I can do it,” Sigrid said firmly. She gave Bard a quick hug. “Thanks, Da. Thank you!”

Sigrid bounced out of his arms and back into the bistro, leaving Bard to smile. His fierce, sweet daughter was on her way into the world.

Twenty minutes later, Sigrid reappeared, flushed with success. She’d filled out the proper paperwork, so was all set for her first day next Saturday morning. When she and Bard caught up with Thran, Bain, and Tilda, she was still excited.

“You’re willingly going to get up early every Saturday and Sunday morning?” Bain exclaimed. “Boy, that is so not me!”

“I’ll be done by three, every day. Lots of time to do stuff,” Sigrid said stoutly.

“Like nap,” Bain rejoined. “That is so me!”

“You sports camp doesn’t start much later than that,” Bard pointed out. “Nine a.m.”

“Seven and nine are two hours apart. Two hours of sleep apart,” Bain pointed out. “Two very important hours of sleep, I might add. And it’s not for all summer. Just eight weeks.”

“It’s too hot to run around outside all summer,” Tilda said, munching a bit of her latest cheese purchase. “I’d rather be in the shade like Sigrid.”

“That’s right, Til,” Sigrid grinned. “You ought to smell it in there – coffee, cinnamon, bread, the best smells outside of Da’s kitchen. Miss Dís has gelato, too.”

“That is the lady who owns the bistro?” Thran asked.

Sigrid nodded. “Dís Durin is her name. But everyone calls her Miss Dís.”

Bard pulled out his mobile to check the time. “We have to pick up Legolas before long. I want to check in with the gallery to see if there’s anything they need from me, then we can go. On the way back, we can check the bike shop to see if they have something Sigrid can use.”

They made a quick stop at the gallery. Celebrían nodded when he came in, and greeted the rest of the family with a pleased smile and handshakes all round.

“No, everything’s in order, which is typical of Bilbo,” the gallery owner shook her head at Bard’s inquiry. “I think tonight’s show will go well, Bard. I’ve already sold a pair of your loose sketches, believe it or not, and several people have expressed interest in some of the framed pieces. Of course, we’ll hold those until the show. But the biggest stir is over Rahmiel. He’s drawn several people in off the street already.”

“Of course he causes a stir,” Sigrid said as if it were obvious. “He’s amazing.”

Celebrían laughed. “He certainly is. Bilbo will be here at about four-thirty or five. So I’ll see you shortly after that, I hope.”

“I’ll be here. With entourage,” Bard waved his hands at Thran and the children.

“The more the merrier,” Celebrían nodded, laughing. “Until later, then.”
“Until later,” Bard echoed, and the family trooped out.

“Wow, Da, the framed stuff looked amazing,” Bain commented as they walked back to Thran’s SUV.

“I liked the angel,” Tilda said. “Are you going to sell him?”

“No,” chorused Sigrid and Thran in emphatic voices.

“I guess not,” Bard said mildly to Tilda. “I think your Ada and your sister want to keep him around.”

“I do, too,” Tilda said, slipping her hand into Bard’s. “I like his wings and his floofy hair. I wish my hair did that.”

“You need a floofy Muppet hat,” Bard teased. “But a brighter color. Maybe red?”

“Bright green, like that paint you bought, Da,” Bain teased. “With some yellow and orange mixed in.”

“That’d be cool,” Tilda said. “Or maybe that green with purple and turquoise. Ada, you could get a white one with red.”

“Better than a yellow one,” Thran deadpanned. “Otherwise, someone might mistake me for the tall bird on Sesame Street? Big Bird?”

That got a laugh as they piled into the SUV. Legolas was soon in the back beside Bain, and they made their way to the bike shop. Nothing hit their fancy, so they headed home. While Thran disappeared into the ballroom to do his barre, Bard mixed up jambalaya for lunch. Sigrid and Legolas made a quick raisin and cardamom snack cake for dessert, while Bain and Tilda made salad. By the time Thran was through his work, the kitchen smelled delicious.

Lunch didn’t last long. Not for the first time, Bard wished the food lasted as long as it took to prepare it, but as long as Clan Ffyrnig remained so busy, appetites would remain healthy. During the cleanup, the lime green paint of the solarium came up, and everyone had to troop into the room and weigh in on what they thought. On such a bright, sunny day, the lime green glowed, even when one of the wooden screens went over it. Bard and Tilda dabbed the new blue paint over the chair he’d primed yesterday, which everyone liked. The boys carefully brought in the fainting couch to see how well it matched the chair, and suddenly the room came into focus.

“Yes, the blue paint matches the velvet, and yes, the green paint makes the most of both of them. The palms, too,” was Thran’s conclusion, as Legolas trailed in with another palm, and Sigrid brought in one of the ferns. “Yes, it is a very unexpected color in the store, but it looks wonderful here.”

“I like it,” Tilda nodded. “Not shiny. That would look weird. But this looks soft.”

“You mean you like the matte finish better than a gloss finish,” Bard said.

Tilda nodded again. “Yes. It’ll look like a big green forest, not like car paint.”

Everyone laughed, but no one disputed Tilda’s characterization.

“You’re going to put clouds on the ceiling, too, Bard?” Legolas looked up. “That’ll look amazing.”

“Cool,” Bain pronounced it.

“Very cool,” Sigrid nodded. “So yeah, I thought the green looked a little weird last night, but in the
sun, it's wow.”

“The pundits of paint have spoken,” Bard teased. “The green stays.”

“Awesome,” Bain grinned. “So, Legs, maybe soccer in the back yard?”

“Sure,” the blonde boy agreed. “Aragorn’s told us we need to work on our endurance, but it’d be a lot more fun to do that playing soccer than just plain running.”

“Can I play, too?” Tilda asked plaintively.

“Sure, Til,” Sigrid said. “I'll come, too. Just let me put my shorts on.”

As the children headed outside, Thran helped Bard move the fainting couch back into the main room, and the plants next to the big windows in the ballroom. He got a big package of chicken out of the freezer to thaw in the fridge for tomorrow’s feast with the Gamgees, and decided hamburgers would be good for tonight’s supper. Thran helped him make a big pot of beans, then Bard looked around for something more to do.

Arms went around him from behind. “What you need,” purred a silky voice in his ear, “is for me to haul you to bed and fuck you dry, until you cannot muster the energy to worry. We would not eat, we would not rest, we would not get out of bed until the last second before your show. But that would scar our children for life, so we must find another way to distract you.”

Bard stroked the forearms that held him so close, and rubbed his cheek against the lips that offered him a lingering caress. “For any reason other than the children, I’d let you. But... gods, angel, this waiting, this fucking waiting...”

“I know,” Thran sighed. “But we will find something to do. We have the supper in hand. There is no painting we can do right now. Ah, there are many more garden benches, yes? We can begin on the next one. Or we can look at the gazebo. Perhaps it needs to be swept, or... something?”

“It needs a lot of something,” Bard admitted, leaning against Thran. “Too much to sort out today. But we can scrape a bench or two, if you want. That’s reasonably therapeutic.”

“Then let us do so.”

Thran urged Bard out to the terrace, so Bard fetched another bench, set it on the drop cloth, and then showed Thran how to scrape off all the loose paint with a wire brush. Thran kept up a running line of patter as they scraped to distract Bard from worrying. Between the two of them, they got the bench down to bare metal, brought it inside, and coated it with the rustproofing primer. By then, it was time for everyone to cycle through the showers before supper. Hamburgers and beans went on the table quickly, disappeared even more quickly, then at long last, they were back in Thran’s SUV and heading for the village.

As Thran drove, so many emotions flitted in and out of Bard’s thoughts until he felt like a very small boat in the middle of a very large, seething storm. Was it better to wish the gods would strike him dead now out of mercy, or to wait until he found out that his show had been a dismal flop? It hardly seemed possible to believe that it would end up otherwise, no matter how many times Thran or the children or Bilbo or Celebrían told him how distinctive and beautiful his stuff was. Ten years had passed since he’d had the balls to call himself an artist – what if he didn’t have the right to do so anymore?

What if he wasn’t Thran’s equal, or able to see to his children? What if he was fit for nothing other than scraping woodwork and priming garden benches?
Don’t let the past ten years make you doubt. Your stuff is good. It’s better than good. Believe in it. Believe in yourself.

It was one thing to say that. It was another to shake off the pall of ten years of misfortune, where hope had been nothing more than bait that attracted shattering disappointment.

Bard clamped his mouth shut, and shut his eyes as he marshaled his strength. Somehow, he had to get through the next three hours.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

The saint's art show has arrived. Expect to see a flurry of friends.

Will a malevolent sprite show up as well?

Thran cast a quick glance at his husband. Bard stared out of the window of the vehicle, silent and nervous. His poor saint had been distracted and apprehensive all day, though he had managed food with his usual care, and bench scraping with reasonable thoroughness. All that proved was that Bard had cooked and made home repairs for so long that he did both well without thinking, because today all the poor man could think about was the impending failure that he feared awaited him at his gallery show. Everyone in the family, even Tilda, knew how keyed up he was. Why else would he have forgotten about Lance Dunmont when Sigrid proposed bicycling alone into the village for her job? As soon as Thran had figured out why they’d stopped at the bicycle store, he’d gathered the younger children aside before any of them spoke their worry aloud. He’d reminded them of Bard’s show, and assured them that he would take up the matter soon enough. He was glad that they hadn’t seen a bicycle at the shop that Sigrid or Bard wanted to buy. That meant Thran hadn’t had to speak up immediately, which would have added the family’s concern with an angry teenaged stalker to the anxiety that roiled Bard’s thoughts.

If only Thran had been able to keep Bard in bed for the afternoon! If the children had been older, and if Lance Dunmont’s whereabouts hadn’t been a concern, he would have sent them to the cinema, then made sure that Bard would be too exhausted to waste energy on worry. But he’d managed to divert Bard by asking so many questions about painting a garden bench, and how he would hang the Moroccan screens and the archway on the solarium walls, and whether they should paint a trompe l’oeil mural around the lion’s head fountain, and how to replace the cracked floor tile with the tessellation he and Tilda wanted to make. He asked anything that would make Bard think about something other than everything that could go wrong with this evening’s show.

Thran had never felt nervous about performing. If dancing in rehearsal, or even standing at the barre, was a pleasure, then performing was ten times more of a delight. The fanciful costumes, the smell of hot lights and theatrical makeup and sweat, the swell of the music, and the gasp of the audience when he executed a jeté were aphrodisiacs in everything but name. Even the most difficult ballet became a love affair once the performance began, and he didn’t feel the bruised feet, the cramping calves, the aching lungs, or the overstretched back until the curtain fell.

Bard didn’t have that act of creation to look forward to tonight. Where Thran’s ballet performances were ephemeral, never to be experienced in the same way again, Bard’s performances had taken place days and weeks and months ago when he drew and sculpted. The results of his performances, however, were preserved as Thran’s were not – they left pictures and figures behind, not memories. Tonight, then, was not a performance, but a judgment of the results of many performances. The closest thing in Thran’s world that might be comparable was if someone had filmed one of Thran’s performances, and now held a public critique of it.

Ah, no wonder Bard was so worried. Anything deemed a flaw, a misstep, an incorrect interpretation, was preserved in Bard’s sculpture and sketches for all to see, and couldn’t be changed. There was no
Thran took a marshaling breath. There were no missteps in any of Bard’s distinctive sketches, his expressive sculpture. His saint’s art was beautiful. A single glance would make that obvious –

To anyone but his husband, that is. Bard had endured so much disappointment, and his nervousness tonight showed that he still didn’t dare hold faith that his situation would change. Very well – Thran would hold faith for both of them. Tonight would be the recognition and acclamation that Bard deserved. Tonight, people would see the same magic that Thran did, and nothing would prevent Bard from finally, finally believing in his visions. No art critic would dare demean his saint’s work, and no one would resist Rahmiel’s appeal for love and mercy.

No fucking wastrel of a want-to-be street thug teenager would ruin tonight, either.

Bard liked to tease Thran about being a covert operator for the Russian mafia. He was not. But if Lance Dunmont tried to interrupt one second of his husband’s show tonight, he would face more than a deathly glare from the Prince of Ice. After everything this pathetic excuse of a child had done to terrorize his Kukla, threaten his fierce lioness, and incite a drug lord to shoot lyubov yego, Thran craved any chance to make Lance Dunmont beg to be turned over to the nearest policeman. Thran would oblige him... eventually.

He parked the SUV in the big lot behind the row of shops that included the gallery, and everyone climbed out.

“How do you want to take Mr. D’s present in with us?” he asked Bard before he locked the SUV.

“What?” Bard gave him an absent-minded look. “Oh, the case of ale and the Scotch. Gods, I’d forgotten about both of them.”

“I did not. Both are in the back of the SUV.”

“I think it’d be better to leave them here. We can deliver them after the show.”

“So we will. Children, remember your books and your games.”

Bard shot him another distracted look. Thran had been the one who’d asked the children to bring something with them, in case the novelty of looking at art patrons palled, because Bard had been too preoccupied to do so.

His poor saint.

Thran duly locked the SUV. Clan Ffyrnig walked up to the main street, turned right, and headed for the Ilithien Gallery.

“Ooh, look, Da!” Tilda caught Bard’s hand to pull him forward. “Your angel is all lit up in the window!”

He certainly was. Celebrían had framed the display window with white novelty lights; each bulb was veiled in wisps of organza to look like floating seed puffs, or perhaps small sprites. Whichever the case, they made a whimsical accompaniment to the angel with outstretched wings. A can light at the base of Rahmiel’s stand cast warm light up and over the full stretch of the feathers, and beautifully illuminated his face so that he seemed to smile. Why hadn’t Thran noticed before how Rahmiel held one hand out to the saint’s upstretched arm? The two limbs made a strong diagonal line that told a story of the saint’s plea for help and the angel’s response.
Thran’s throat knotted. Despite the misunderstandings that had destroyed the first Rahmiel, Bard had recreated him with more beauty and depth. The angel was not quite so physically perfect, but he was warmer, more immediate, more alive. So many things came to mind that he needed to tell Bard – how beautiful Rahmiel was, and how humble Thran was to see the concrete evidence of Bard’s regard for him. But no words came out, and his eyes stung.

“He’d look better if I’d done him in darker clay, but the stuff doesn’t come in any other color,” Bard shook his head.

“Do not say one word in criticism,” Thran murmured. “Not a single one. He is divine, and I will not let you say otherwise.”

“I won’t, either,” Sigrid said with a gulp. She turned a fierce glare on Bard. “He’s amazing and spectacular and wonderful, and anyone with eyes knows it. You’ve got eyes, so why you and you alone haven’t figured it out yet is beyond me.”

“Yeah, Da,” Bain said stoutly.

“He is very beautiful,” Legolas agreed. “I’ve never seen anyone make anything like him.”

“No one else can make an angel with feather wings and floofy hair,” Tilda said to Legolas. “Nobody at all. Just my Da.”

Bard’s face eased into a sheepish smile. “Um, I’m glad you all like him. He turned out pretty well.”

Sigrid’s snort was supreme disgust. “Oh, ye gods and little fishhooks, Da, you’re dense! Come on, let’s go in.”

When Bard preceded everyone into the gallery, Sigrid shooed the rest of the children in front of her, then gave Thran a high five before she followed her siblings. Thran gave a quick look up and down the street before he trailed his family, but he saw nothing and no one untoward.

As Thran shut the gallery door behind him, Bilbo came forward to greet Bard with a warm, wide smile. He had a word for each of the children, and Celebrían appeared with a glad expression. As they chatted, Thran took the moment to look around the gallery. The entrance room and the room off to the left were tastefully staged to showcase a variety of art, from oils and watercolors to small ceramics and sculpture. Another room behind the room on the left spoke of more display space, but Thran didn’t venture there. The rooms on the right were the ones where Bard’s work was displayed, and he wanted to see how Bilbo, Frodo, and Celebrían had arranged the sketches and sculpture. He offered a warm smile of welcome to Celebrían as she greeted him.

“How nice to see you again, Mr. Oropherson,” Celebrían said, holding out her hand.

He took her hand, and offered his usual small bow over it. “Please, call me Thran.”

“Thank you. I’m Celebrían.”

“My husband’s angel Rahmiel looks divine in the window. Thank you for such a beautiful display.”

“The piece creates its own divinity, really,” the gallery owner shrugged with an appreciative smile. “I can’t tell you how many people stopped in today, just on the strength of Bard’s stunning angel. I’ve sold eight of his loose sketches already, and I hope to sell many more tonight.”

“That is wonderful,” Thran smiled. “It is the most amazing thing to watch him make those sketches, Celebrían. I understand you are a painter, so perhaps you understand how he is able to draw the
“His work is so spontaneous,” Celebrían nodded. “Much more so than mine. The thing I like most when I work in oils is how much depth it offers. I love the different effects I discover when I layer the colors, so my work is a discovery over time, rather than an immediate revelation. Bard’s sketches come so fast, Bilbo tells me, and yet that spontaneity endures in the sketch itself. It’s a wonderful gift.”

“I cannot wait to see how the framed pieces look together on the gallery wall,” Thran said.

“I’m more than pleased. Bilbo has a good eye, and his nephew, Frodo, is following right in his uncle’s footsteps. Some of his framing choices are inspired. Please, enjoy the show.”

Celebrían excused herself to speak to new arrivals, so Thran checked to see where the children were. He found them circulating in the two rooms featuring Bard’s pieces, looking at the sketches and commenting on them, so he took a minute to scan the art for himself. Yes, Frodo’s frames were lovely; some were simple and stark while others were very elaborate, but each was tailored to the subject of the sketch. Several people were already clustered around Rahmiel, even though there was still a few minutes before the show officially started. The Ring Thing and Sea Spot Run had also attracted attention. Frodo knelt by the former, adjusting a small fan behind it to keep the rings in gentle motion. Someone had threaded a string of small point lights down the middle of Sea Spot Run to illuminate it from within, an effect that Thran liked very much. He came to stand beside Bard as he talked to Bilbo.

“You don’t want to know how nervous I am,” Bard was murmuring to the artist’s rep.

“You look quite calm,” Bilbo soothed. “I don’t believe you have anything to worry about, Bard. Everyone I’ve talked to, or heard talking about your pieces, has been very positive.”

“All will be well,” Thran agreed. “Frodo has done a masterful job of framing your pieces, and Bilbo and Celebrían have arranged everything so perfectly.”

Bard’s swallow wasn’t too obvious, but Thran’s stomach tightened in sympathy all the same. “You’re right, Thran. Everything looks perfect.”

Tilda appeared at Thran’s side. “Da, may we please have one of the little cakes? Just one apiece?”

“Not to worry,” Bilbo gave the little girl a warm grin. “I thought one or two of you might accompany your father tonight, so I set aside a few things just for you. What do you think about that?”

Tilda’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, yes, please! Thank you very much!”

“Right this way, then,” Bilbo held out his hand, indicating a small room at the back of the gallery. “Miss Celebrían’s kindly offered her office so you and your brothers and sister can have your own private party.”

“Please be polite and courteous, and do not rearrange the papers,” Thran said hastily, following along behind.

All of the children looked affronted except for Tilda, who looked up at him quizzically. “Why would we do that, Ada? That’s too much like homework, and I don’t think I can do Mrs. L’Eärendil’s homework very well.”

“An excellent point, Kukla,” Thran nodded. “I am sure you are correct. I thank you for your
consideration.”

“Look, there’s Mr. D!” Sigrid pointed.

Thran turned, and sure enough, there was the short, squat Scotsman shouldering his way through the growing crowd like any old rugby prop half. Mr. D had on his usual jeans and heavy boots, and his plain black tee revealed a variety of colorful tattoos that stretched from knuckles to shoulders. His permanent glower lightened a hair when the children rushed over to say hello.

“Hello, ye bonny lasses, ye braw lads! ‘T is good to see ye all!”

“Hi, Mr. D!” Tilda gave him a big smile. “I wanted to bring you a sandwich so you’d remember who I was, but my Da said he had a present for you, and Mr. Bilbo made sure to order some good stuff to eat that you’d like. It’s ham biscuits. I know you like those.”

“Aye, lassie, I do,” Mr. D replied. Thran managed to catch his eye. “Thran, good to see ye again. Not so pale this time, are ye?”

“I am not,” Thran agreed with a smile. “Children, I must take Mr. D from you for just a moment, so that Bard knows he is here.”

“Okay, Ada; okay, Thran; yes, Papa,” the children chorused, and let Thran draw Mr. D away.

“Tilda does not know that Lance might be here tonight, but the older children do,” Thran murmured lowly to the much shorter policeman.

“I thought that might be the case. I’ll stay mum around the wee one, then,” Mr. D rumbled in reply, his usual grim visage returning to his face.

“Bard is quite preoccupied, which is only natural. I, however, am not. I will not let Lance ruin tonight. If you need me, I am here.”

“Good man,” Mr. D gave him a glower, but it was a conspiratorial one rather than a confrontational one. He nodded to the taller man behind him. Thor Oakland had on nice trousers, a polo shirt, and brogues, which did no more to dispel the air of off-duty policemen than his smile did, but at least the smile was sincere. “Ye remember this bonny lad, I’d guess.”

“I do,” Thran nodded, offering his hand to the officer. “Chief Inspector Thor Oakland. I am grateful that both of you have stopped in. We have a small token of appreciation for each of you in our SUV.”

“Good to see you again,” Thor said, shaking Thran’s hand, but he gave Mr. D a sharp look. “And what’s this about a small token?”

“Ach, don’t get yer knickers in a twist, Thor,” Mr. D growled. “Just a thing between old friends, ye ken.”

Thran smothered a grin as Mr. D returned Thor’s look with impassive nonchalance. “Yes, just between friends. I know some patrons of the arts prefer a more substantial beverage than sparkling cider to accompany their hors d’oeuvres, and made provision for that.”

“Aye, that’s a bonny way to look at it,” Mr. D nodded sagely. “I thank ye kindly.”

“I see,” Thor gave his sergeant another look. “I’m glad you clarified that so quickly.”
“Indeed,” Thran said. “Come, Bard is just over here, and I know he will want to greet you.”

Thran caught Bard’s eye as he talked softly to Bilbo, so led the two policemen over. “Bard, here is Mr. D, and you remember Chief Inspector Oakland, yes?”

“Good to see you, Mr. D,” Bard nodded with a welcoming smile. He was calmer now, thank the gods – or thank Bilbo, more likely. Thran resisted the urge to repay Bilbo’s calming influence with a bear hug. “And Chief Inspector, I’m glad to see you under better circumstances this time.”

“Ye look a lot more chipper today, laddie, that’s for sure,” Mr. D growled, as Thor nodded a hello. “No problem with those stitches, I hope.”

“No a one,” Bard confirmed. Beside him, Bilbo’s eyes had grown round, and his hand strayed to his mouth.

“St-stitches?” he stammered. “Er... that sounds serious.”

“It could have been,” Bard allowed. “Chief Inspector, Mr. D, this is Bilbo Baggins, my artist’s representative. Bilbo, this is Chief Inspector Thor Oakland and Sergeant Dwalin Fundin, Mr. D to his friends. They’re the two policemen I invited here tonight because of those earlier circumstances that weren’t so ideal.”

Bilbo’s eyes got rounder. “Oh... er, yes, those circumstances. Um, I’m very glad to know both of you, and to see you here tonight.”

“I’m just here for the food,” Mr. D growled. “And to make sure yer bonny lads and lasses are still to the good.”

“They miss seeing you, Mr. D,” Bard grinned. “Tilda wanted to bring you a sandwich.”

“So the wee lass said,” Mr. D nodded. “She knows the way to an old rugger’s heart, she does.”

Said wee lass wormed her way to Mr. D’s side and pulled on his hand. “Come on, Mr. D. I’ll show you where the ham biscuits are.”

“Will ye, now?” the sergeant let her tug him away from the group. “A wee bite would be welcome.”

Thor shook his head at the sight of his sergeant’s retreating back. “It’s all becoming clear.”

“What is?” Bard asked.

“Sergeant Fundin has never professed interest in art before. I should have known that children and food were the bigger draws.”

Bard’s laugh was unforced, which eased a little of the tightness that had coiled in Thran’s gut. Good, his saint was relaxing a bit more. “Not a huge art fan, is he? Other than the kind he wears, that is.”

“No.” Thor’s word was rich with exasperation as well as grudging fondness. “I can’t say that I’ve been in a lot of galleries myself. I’m not used to this modern stuff. A lot of self-indulgent blather, most of it.”

“Oh?” Bilbo piped up, his eyes bright with interest. “Then I’d say that you’ve come to the right gallery, Chief Inspector. Bard’s work embraces both the modern and the ancient, and it’s very accessible. Very engaging, really, no matter what kind you like. I’d be glad to take you around and show it to you, if you’d like.”
Thor gave Bilbo a very formal look, but maybe Bilbo’s warmth touched something within, for he offered a stiff nod. “Very gracious of you, Mr. Baggins.”

“Call me Bilbo, Chief Inspector. Mr. Baggins is so formal.” He put a gentle hand on Thor’s elbow, and steered him towards the first gallery. “Now, you like art that’s more representational than symbolic, I gather, so I think this sketch might appeal to you. It’s of Bard’s children…”

Frodo came up to them, his eyes wide with interest. “What’s this? Uncle’s talking to an attractive man? Who is he?”

Bard and Thran locked eyes, and Thran smothered a grin. Bard folded his arms over his chest to look after Bilbo and Thor with a benevolent grin.

“That,” Bard murmured, glancing at Frodo, “is Chief Inspector Thor Oakland from the New York City Police Department.”

“Is it?” Frodo’s lips twitched with suppressed laughter. “He’s quite handsome, isn’t he? It’s been ever so long since Uncle looked at anyone like that. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look at anyone like that before.”

Bilbo gestured at Rahmiel, talking quietly but with animation, then gazed up at Thor with interest as the taller man offered a thoughtful reply. As the conversation continued, both men drew a little closer.

“Maybe your uncle will make an art convert out of the inspector.”

Mr. D appeared beside Frodo, following everyone’s gaze to take in his superior’s interaction with the slight artist’s rep. He snorted, but quietly.

“Well, that’s it for him. He’ll be no damned good to me now,” Mr. D grumbled. He cut Thran a glance. “Maybe ye can help me with something, laddie. Bard, Mr. Baggins, ye will excuse us.”

Mr. D jerked his head toward the children, so Thran followed him. A cluster of patrons pounced on Bard, which gave Thran a reason to offer his husband a triumphant smile before he saw to Mr. D. The gruff sergeant was grumbling to himself.

“... swear I’ll keep his fifth of bloody fucking Scotch for myself.”

“Shall I fetch the bloody fucking Scotch for you now?” Thran teased.

“Oh, hell, no,” Mr. D waved a hand. “I like my Scotch, and his, too, for that matter, but I dinna drink when I’m working. Come on. Ye and I will ‘case the joint,’ as the parlance goes.”

“Of course,” Thran grinned. “I have already studied the inside of the gallery. There are two rooms to the left, two to the right, and the center hall offers a restroom and Celebrían’s office, a narrow stair up, and an exit to the back of the building. There is no basement.”

“Not bad for an amateur,” Mr. D gravedled, sounding truculent as well as dismissive, but Thran’s grin didn’t diminish. “Good to know if the bastard gets inside. The trick, laddie, is to make sure the bastard doesn’t get inside.”

“Excellent point,” Thran agreed, following Mr. D down the narrow central hall to the back door. He gave a good, hard look at the steel door. “Door’s fine, good deadbolt in place, but the frame’s wood, not steel. Still, it’s heavy enough – it’d take a right lot of heaving to jimmy that open. Yeah, good – heavy chain on it at night. All right, laddie, I’m poking me head outside, so just ye keep yer head,
They went out of the back door, but the line of service entrances to the left and the right of the gallery was deserted. A dumpster sat in the parking lot near the edge of the line of shops, and Mr. D gave it a hard stare.

“Stay by the door,” he ordered, and strode out to have a gander. He circled it warily, then scanned the parking lot. Aside from a few pallets stacked outside of the wine shop, there was nothing that would offer any cover to anyone hoping to sneak up on the gallery. The parking lot beyond was lit well enough that Thran easily picked out his SUV. A few cars circled slowly, and one or two people made their way up to the street. Nothing seemed untoward.

“Aye, looks clear,” Mr. D rumbled, striding back towards Thran. “For now.”

“So I am not the only one who thinks Lance will appear tonight.”

Mr. D shook his head. “The lad’s not the brightest bulb in the box, is he? I dinnae expect that to change tonight.”

“I am disappointed that no one has seen him since he appeared at the school a month ago. Where does a child hide so well that no one can find him? And no, I do not think that he has given up and taken up with his grandmother in Florida.”

“He’s not there,” Mr. D confirmed. “He’s not at home, not that I fault him that. No father, mother who’s nothing but the same mean streak that her son will be in fifteen years, if he lives that long, and persona non grata with the turf lords for getting his overlord killed.”

“I cannot imagine.”

“Verra few can. And those that do think a lot of soft words and hand wringing will get them gratitude. That lad is little better than the feral cats that roam the street, and he ain’t grateful to anyone for anything. Sooner cut ye from stem to stern than anything else.”

“So what becomes of such children when they are caught?”

Mr. D’s sigh belied his fierce expression. “Some find redemption in a wilderness program. Ye use real wildness to tame theirs. The nearest one is in the Catskills. ’T isn’t an easy way, ye ken, but sometimes Mater Nature can knock sense in a few. The ones She can’t set straight... once the prison system gets them, it’s usually too late.”

Thran hummed in commiseration. “I pity them, then. But as I told my husband – no matter how much I pity them, I will not let them strike at my family again.”

Mr. D clapped Thran on the arm. It was a weighty, forceful blow, but without anger – Mr. D was just a very physical man. “Fucking right. Now, we’ve given it the once over. I’ll check every fifteen minutes, so stand by.”

“I will,” Thran affirmed as they came back inside the gallery. “I will circulate with eyes open. I will back you as you need.”

“Excellent. Now, perhaps a few more ham biscuits...”

Mr. D winked at Thran, for all that his expression never changed. Thran wouldn’t be the least surprised to find out that the scowling sergeant volunteered at the Catskills wilderness camp he mentioned. If anyone could help Mother Nature impress a wayward child to think about the stupidity too...”
of his ways, Mr. D could.

Legolas, Bain, and Tilda looked up from their seats in Celebrían’s office as he went by, smiling and waving. Their tray of treats still had several examples of food nirvana on it, and they were happy to describe all the different kinds to him. Thran thanked them for their recommendations, and their good behavior, before he went back into the public areas.

The gallery had gotten much busier while Thran and Mr. D had been outside. He spotted Bard with a group of patrons by his Ring Thing, describing how he’d put the patina on the metal. His saint was relaxed and attentive, his usual gracious self, all to the good. He paused a moment to admire how nice his husband looked in the comfortable trousers and shirt they’d bought on their New Year’s Day shopping excursion. His only adornments were the earrings Thran had bought for him at the Follies, and his wedding ring, but he needed nothing more. And yes, Bard had been right not to get his hair trimmed back to Rowan’s vision; the two extra inches of tousled locks curled around his earrings created just the right bohemian appeal.

That was interesting – Bilbo was still talking with Thor, and the tall police inspector seemed fully engaged, listening intently, even smiling faintly. Thran smothered a gleeful smile. Was something more than polite conversation in the offing? There did seem to be an extra intensity to Thor’s regard, and a brighter spark to Bilbo’s usual affable ease.

Before he had a chance to ponder it further, Sam, Rosie, and their children came through the door to call a greeting. As they stopped to greet Thran, Finn, Killian, and Tara passed outside by Rahmiel’s window. Sigrid had stationed herself by the angel, and she waved to her friends as they passed by. The three young people met her at the door with happy words, and Finn gave her a big hug. Sigrid looked over Finn’s shoulder to flick Thran a glance, but he gave her an amused shrug.

"They grow up fast, don’t they?" Sam said, grinning.

"They do. But it is an amusing process. One moment the boyfriend is a doofus, and the next he is a sweet charmer."

"Your turn will be here before you know it, Sam," Rosie laughed. "And won’t that be fun to watch?"

Sam groaned as Rosie pulled him into the first gallery room.

Seconds later, he was caught up in a flurry of patrons who recognized him, and wanted to talk about this ballet he was rumored to be working on. No, not all of them were art patrons; at least one was an art critic, angling for substance to add meat to the skeleton of the rumors that swirled about Immortal. Thran was pleasant, but circumspect. At length, Mavis Davis, the TV personality who had interviewed both Thran and his husband for her *Heartbeat of the Art Beat* program, saved him with a glad herald. She looked her usual stunning self in a simple mandarin jacket of pale peach silk over darker peach slacks, jeweled sandals, opulent coral and jade earrings, and a pale green silk stole. Thran’s white mandarin shirt and grey trousers were a nice complement to her attire, and he quickly found several cameras snapping pictures of them together. Yes, there were representatives from a couple of newspapers and wire services, and they quickly surrounded Bard. Thran excused himself to Mavis, and went to stand behind the representatives. As tall as he was, he could offer a wink of encouragement over the heads of the throng. He didn’t venture closer; he had no intention of diluting Bard’s moment by inserting himself in it. The last thing he wanted was to see a headline anywhere that cast Bard in the light of a famous person’s lesser skilled partner. The cameras could snap as many pictures of Bard as they wanted, but none with Thran at his side.

Bard met his eyes with an amused grin, but was quickly drawn into another question, another photograph. Thran drifted away, pleased to note that several of Bard’s sketches were missing from
the gallery walls. Another passed him on its way out through the gallery door, clutched in the arms of a buyer. He saw Theodred Rohan wave from across the room, but Sigrid came up to him with Finn at her side before they had a chance to speak.

They love Da’s stuff, Ada!” Sigrid said quietly, but her smile was gleeful. “They’re badgering Da to sell Rahmiel every three minutes. But don’t worry – he’s not budging on that.”

“Good,” Thran nodded. “Hello, Finn. You are well?”

“Very well,” the boy nodded. “Any sign of you know who?”

“So far, none,” Thran agreed. “You saw Mr. D, yes? I need to ask him something.”

“I did. He’s been in and out a few times since we got here, but right now he’s making inroads on the ham buns.”

“He is allowed,” Thran snickered, as Tara and Kíllian passed by with glasses of sparkling cider. “Please, would you keep Tilda, Bain, and Legolas with you for the next few minutes?”

“Sure,” Sigrid nodded. “Any reason?”

“Mr. D and I make the rounds outside. Your Da is busy, and I do not want any of you to be alone while we are gone.”

“We’ll get them right now,” Sigrid nodded, glancing at Finn. “We’ll get Tara and Kíllian, too, so we’ll all be together.”

“Good. Thank you.”

Thran let himself get drawn into a discussion about ballet and art and the gods knew what else as the children unobtrusively slipped back to the office. When he could politely do so, he excused himself and found Mr. D looking for him.

“Rounds again?”

Mr. D nodded. “Yer bairns are safe?”

“Three of the older children’s friends are with them. So they are together in the gallery office.”

“Righto. Won’t give anyone the time to slip off – we’ll go round from the front this time. Let me drag Thor away from his new friend.”

They threaded through the crowd, some snacking, some sipping sparkling cider, and all filling the small rooms with a steady buzz of animated conversation, until Mr. D nudged Thor. He was still in conversation with Bilbo, but his face sharpened at the murmured words from his sergeant. The three of them slipped through the front door of the gallery into the quiet of the street. The gallery was two shops down from one end of the street, and seven from the other. Thor headed down the longer way, so Mr. D and Thran took the shorter way. They rounded the corner, traveled down to the edge of the parking lot, and cut across a small, grassy plot lined with ornamental pear trees to reach the back of the buildings.

A figure was bent over a pile of something beside the gallery’s back door.

Before Thran could point to him, the pungent smell of gasoline hit his nose. The figure got to his feet – yes, the dark hair identified him as Lance – and proceeded to try to jimmy the gallery’s back door
open with a crowbar.

“The little fucker,” Mr. D swore under his breath as the sound of splintering wood reached their ears. He pushed Thran back under the trees. “Stay here.”

Thran did so as the policeman ran straight for Lance. The sound of his heavy boots brought the boy up short, and he spasmed up to dash away in the opposite direction, crowbar in hand.

“Stop right where ye are, Lance!” Mr. D roared. “Give it up right now!”

The boy didn’t slow – but Thor barreled down on Lance from the opposite direction. The boy swung his crowbar, barely missing Thor, but the wild strike unbalanced him enough for Thor to wrench the crowbar away. As Lance dodged back, Mr. D pounded behind, shouting, but without avail. Lance twisted away from both of the officers to veer across the parking lot. A departing car nearly ran over him, and with both officers in pursuit, Lance had to dash back towards the buildings. He sprinted towards Thran, cursing and swearing.

As the stench of gasoline reached him again, Thran’s fury flared. The boy had hoped to strike at his family with fire? Toss a Molotov cocktail inside the broken door to burn the children just inside? Destroy all of his husband’s artwork? Only the gods knew what he’d try next time – no, Thran would not allow him a next time. He would not let this elusive boy escape again to lie in wait for another chance to attack his family.

He waited until Lance was too close to avoid him before he flung himself into the air – no grand jeté, but martial arts side kick. His boot caught Lance full in the ribs, and sent him careening into one of the tree trunks. He hit with an audible crack that shook the tree from top to bottom and scattered a swirl of flower petals over the grass, and then ricocheted to the ground in a heap. Before he could groan, Mr. D was atop him, wrestling his wrists back into handcuffs, spitting the required statement of Miranda rights at him as if each word was a curse.

“Nicely done,” Thor stood beside Thran to watch Mr. D subdue their quarry. He pulled out his mobile to dial 911. “I’ll let the locals know we’ve got someone for them.”

“Don’t either of you move,” Mr. D snarled. “I want a colleague and a civilian to testify that this little beastie didn’t have his wee rights violated by me or anyone else when he got caught for attempted arson. Did ye, ye little bit of –”

“Understood, sergeant,” Thor cut in smoothly as his call connected. “Yes, I want to report an attempted arson at the Ilithien Art Gallery on Lakefront Road...”

“Take a picture of the fucking tree, too,” Mr. D growled. “And my knuckles. I want it clear as Scottish mountain air that our wee beastie didn’t get his conk on the noggin from me.”

“I will remind your colleague,” Thran promised, as Thor spoke to the 911 dispatcher. In a few minutes, two police cars came into the parking lot, and a great stir and bustle began. Thran watched with great satisfaction as a groggy Lance was loaded into the back of one police car. Mr. D and Thor handled most of the discussion with the local police, though Thran did receive a cursory interview before he was allowed to go back into the gallery. He had no idea how much time had passed since he and Mr. D had first ventured out, so he jogged back around to the front of the block. Bain was waiting for him at the gallery’s front door, and signaled to someone inside as he came in.

“Where’s Mr. D?” Sigrid asked breathlessly. “Did something happen? It must have. You’re panting. We heard this cracking sound outside the back door. Was it Lance?”
Legolas appeared right behind Sigrid. Thran gave his three oldest children a triumphant look.

“Lance is in the back of a police car. I helped to catch him.”


“Mr. D, his detective, and I found him at the back door of the gallery, trying to break it open. Mr. D tackled him, and the detective called the local police. Lance is on his way to jail.”

“And what did you do?” Sigrid gave him a stare. Thran gave her a stare back.

“He tried to get away. So I kicked him into a tree trunk, and when he fell down, Mr. D jumped on top of him and put on the handcuffs.”

“Wow!” Bain gaped. “Wow, you kicked him into a tree trunk? Gods, Thran, that’s awesome. You kicked him into a tree trunk!”

“Shh,” Thran urged, as people turned towards the group. “I will tell you more later. Let Bard have the end of his show in peace, in triumph. It still goes well?”

“The walls are just about bare,” Bain nodded.

“He’s had tons of people begging him to sell his sculpture, but so far, he’s holding firm,” Legolas added.

“I’m so happy for him. So happy,” Sigrid gulped. “And you, Ada – kicking Lance Dunmont into a tree trunk is the perfect ending.”

Thran found himself engulfed in a big hug. “I hope so, dochka. Where is Kukla? She is safe?”

“She’s with Da,” Bain grinned. “She decided he needed a dose of cuteness, so she’s been attached to his hip for the past ten minutes. The camera people are eating it up.”

“And Finn, Kíllian, and Tara are also safe?”

“We’re all fine, Ada,” Sigrid gave him a grin. “Everyone’s fine, Da’s show is a big hit, and you caught the elusive Lance Dunmont. The perfect trifecta.”

Before Thran returned Sigrid’s wide grin with his own, he offered silent but heartfelt gratitude to the gods. Finally, after four months, Clan Ffyrnig could breathe again.
Chapter 109

Chapter Summary

After a most eventful evening, the saint lays down a heavy burden.

Bard didn’t know how he got from home to gallery parking lot. Thank the gods for Thran, who’d kept him busy all day, who’d helped him pick out clothes to wear, who’d rallied the children and drove the SUV and even remembered the gifts for Mr. D. Bard had all he could do just to follow along. No wonder so many performers had entourages to keep them distracted yet on track! Maybe not – ego was probably at the root of so many people surrounding themselves with so many hangers-on, not worry.

Just relax.

He couldn’t relax. If he relaxed, he took things for granted that he couldn’t afford to take for granted. Nothing was sure. No sooner did he think something was sure than it failed, and he was left to scramble to take care of his children. Better to treat everything as temporary, and keep half a dozen contingencies in his back pocket against need.

But so many people have told you that your art is good, and your show will be successful –

Thran was his husband. Sigrid, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda were his children. Bilbo was his artist’s rep. Rosie and Sam were friends. Of course all of them would say that his sketches and sculpture were good, even if they weren’t –

Bilbo wouldn’t have taken you on if your art was no good. Celebrían, the owner of the Ilithien Gallery and an artist in her own right, wouldn’t have agreed to host your show if your art was no good. Mavis Davis wouldn’t have interviewed you so extensively for her broadcast if your art was no good. Rada Brown wouldn’t have asked to work with you on the costume sketches for Immortal if your art was no good. Even you can’t think of a reason to dismiss those people and their interest and belief in the quality of your art. So just fucking relax!

That was impossible.

Then at least get a fucking grip on yourself so you don’t start to blither like an idiot!

By the time he got himself in hand, he and his family were in front of the gallery, and there was Rahmiel in the window.

Oh, gods – Rahmiel looks incredible. Everything you poured in to him shows. Everything.

He mumbled something about the color of the clay. When he would cast the angel in bronze, he’d add a darker patina to the metal to match the feathered wings and hair, which would look better than the tan clay. To his surprise, all of his family jumped to the angel’s defense, which embarrassed him. He mumbled appreciation for their regard, and then found himself inside the gallery. Bilbo latched onto him at once, and while Bard didn’t register the exact words the artist’s rep said, he felt calmer after hearing them. Bilbo and Celebrían led him around for one last check of his artwork – he nudged one of the frames a bit straighter, and then helped Frodo connect a string of white lights that the
young man had strung down the center of Sea Spot Run. When they got the lights lit, it revealed so many details of the sculpture that Bard was dazzled. What a difference that simple strand of holiday lights made! Frodo wanted to put a fan on the Ring Thing to spin the circles into motion, which was another brilliant idea. The rings of copper, purple, and blue wafted in slow cycles, undulating just as they would under the influence of a gentle breeze, and looked wonderful.

The first of many people came up to him to exchange a few words. Bilbo stayed with him, but now that the show had begun, his usual calm returned, and Bilbo faded into the background. People were so complimentary of his sketches, and wanted to know about the mechanism that made the Ring Thing spin, and asked about the punny name of Sea Spot Run. So many, many people wanted to talk about Rahmiel. How many times did he explain about the immortal angel of love and mercy, alighting on the earth to offer salvation to the mortal saint?

How many times did people urge him to sell it?

He explained about how he’d made the angel, that it was just the model, and how he’d make the molds from the clay that would allow him to cast Rahmiel in more permanent metal.

Several people begged to buy Sea Spot Run and the Ring Thing. Bard gently declined.

Mavis Davis greeted him like an old friend. Maybe there was a brief interview with her? She was so complimentary of his sketch of Thran’s hand. A lot of cameras seemed to be on display. Bilbo brought by two patrons interested in sculpture commissions. An art critic whose name Bard recognized came over to exchange a word. He was surprisingly positive. Where were the children? Oh, there were Sigrid and Finn greeting Tara and Kíllian, and Legolas strolled by with Tilda’s hand in his. He caught a glimpse of Thran’s head sticking over the back of the group of people gathered around him, smiling encouragement. He was asked repeatedly about his drawing process, if it was as spontaneous as it seemed, or if he thought hard about it first. Someone put one of his loose sketches in his hand with a pen and asked if he’d sign the back of it, even though the sketch bore his signature on the front.

To Sara, best wishes, Bard Bowman, he wrote.

How surreal was this? How unbelievable was this?

Don’t think about that now. Stay in the moment, pay attention to all that happens around you. You can reflect later.

Bilbo and Thor Oakland seemed to spend a lot more time talking in front of one of his framed sketches than Bard expected. He wished he had his sketchpad – how the tall inspector leaned forward to consider something the shorter, slighter artist’s rep said was worth capturing. He’d have to remember it to sketch later.

Thran and Mr. D seemed intent on something – ah, likely Thran had told Mr. D about the case of ale. Good; the Scotsman deserved it for trekking all the way out here.

More people came close to talk. A professorial gentleman wanted to know if Bard had studied Chinese calligraphy, so Bard trotted out his story about the mixed media artist who’d told him about it and how it’d helped him develop a looser style. Then he asked if the several mirrored images Bard had drawn were metaphysical references to Aristotelian philosophy.

He had no idea how he answered that question, but it seemed to satisfy the gentleman.

Someone – Frodo, Bard thought – put a glass of sparkling cider in his hand. That was welcome – so
much talking had dried his throat. Despite all the talking, the swirl of people, the number of mobiles and cameras and recording devices, he noticed how many of his sketches, both framed and loose, left the gallery in the arms of buyers.

Buyers.

The walls were emptier than they were full.

The number of people diminished for a moment. Tilda appeared at his side to offer him a small cheese tart, but he wasn’t hungry, so she ate it for him, then stayed by his side. She ended up in his arms for a couple of photographs, then answered a couple of questions that one person or another directed at her in jest. She opined that her favorite piece was Rahmiel, but she liked the sketches her Da did of her and her siblings a lot, too. Yes, cheese was her favorite snack, particularly Double Gloucester, and yes, she hoped one day to be an artist like her Da.

“He’s very, very good, though, so it’ll take a lot of work before I’m as good as he is. But that’s okay. I like to draw, so it’ll be fun,” she said artlessly.

“What do you like best about your father’s work?” someone asked, angling to get another cute reply from the little girl.

“I like the animals in his sculpture. I like the things that move. And I really like the feathers he put on Rahmiel. His sketches are different, though.”

“Different how?”

“Mostly they’re about people. I like how they make each person look interesting and special. They look like pictures out of a story that you want to hear more about.”

“You’ve got quite a career ahead of you as an art critic,” someone chuckled.

Tilda looked at Bard, then looked back at the person doubtfully. “Thank you, but I’d rather draw pictures than talk about them.”

“So would most art critics,” someone else quipped, drawing a laugh.

The group shifted again as it had so often during the evening, and a new group of people drew near. During the shift, Bard caught a glimpse of Thran grinning and talking excitedly with the children. Sigrid gave Bard a big smile as she waved at him. He waved back. Tilda slipped out of his arms to join her siblings, leaving Bard to concentrate on his answers to another round of questions. So many were ones he’d already answered, but he was gratified at the interest, so he took pains to answer each one thoughtfully. He explained again how he chose what to draw – “everything that’s in front of my eyes, to be honest” – and whether Rahmiel was a metaphor for anything – “he’s the angel of love and mercy, that’s what his name means” – and who he looked up to as a mentor – “anyone who creates something and is brave enough to show it to the world.” He was asked why he chose pencils over pastels – “less laundry to do when I carry pencils in my pockets rather than pastel chalks” – whether he had a favorite subject to draw – “people are always interesting” – and whether there were subjects he’d never draw – “never is a dangerous word, but for the most part, I stay away from advertising logos and political figures.” More queries flew at him, but he answered patiently.

When people finally drifted away and no more replaced them, blank gallery walls stared back at him. Almost all of his framed sketches were gone – there went another one under someone’s arm, wrapped in thick brown craft paper. Celebrían and Bard chatted with a few last visitors; just beyond, Bilbo continued his conversation with the chief inspector. Thran and the children had gathered in a
corner by Rahmiel to talk quietly; Tilda was bouncing up and down as she talked to Mr. D, who squatted down beside her. Bard was about to join them when Bilbo broke away from Thor and intercepted him.

“Bard, congratulations!” the artist’s rep wrung Bard’s hand with satisfaction. “I felt sure that you’d do well tonight, but I’m delighted to see that your art attracted even more interest than I expected. There aren’t more than six or eight of your loose sketches left, and only two of your framed pieces. Well done, my boy!”

Bard glanced at Bilbo. Had he heard Bilbo correctly? He scanned the walls – yes, they were still empty. He scanned the table that had displayed his loose sketches – yes, it was still mostly empty, too. So...

He’d sold almost everything that hadn’t been nailed down.

That was too amazing to grasp.

*Then don’t think about it now. Just get through the last bit, and you’re home free.*

“Thanks,” Bard replied calmly. “Thank you very much, Bilbo. You put on quite a show for me, and I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done.”

Bilbo looked at him strangely, but patted his arm. “You provided all the incentive anyone could ask with your sketches and your sculpture, Bard. It was my pleasure.”

Celebrían appeared at his other side. “Your sketches just flew off the wall, Bard. I don’t think there are more than the two framed pieces and perhaps seven of your loose sketches left. Would you allow me to hold onto those? I wouldn’t be surprised if those would sell, too, if you’d allow me to display them.”

Bard looked to Bilbo with a question in his eyes.

“We’d be quite happy to accept your offer, Celebrían,” Bilbo smiled. “It’s kind of you to offer.”

“It is,” Bard nodded. “That’d be great.”

“You’re very welcome,” Celebrían nodded with a warm smile, handing him a folded sheet of paper. “Here’s an accounting of what sold tonight. Congratulations, Bard. I hope all of your shows will be as successful as this one was.”

“Thank you,” Bard nodded, folding the paper again and stuffing it into the back pocket of his pants. “Between Frodo’s framing, your beautiful gallery, and Bilbo’s promotion, you all made my sketches look so good. I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome. I hope you’ll want to show your future work here. It’s like no one else’s.”

“You have a great gallery, Celebrían. I’ll let Bilbo know when I have more things.”

The gallery owner nodded a pleased smile at Bard’s praise, and took her leave to tidy the remains of the hors d’oeuvres from the serving table.

“Come on, my boy,” Bilbo steered Bard towards Thran and the children. “Let’s get you back to your biggest fans.”

“They are my biggest fans,” Bard agreed quickly. “I don’t know what I’d do without them.”
“Here he is, safe and sound,” Bilbo said cheerily to the collected family and friends. “I think he’s a bit stunned yet, but he’ll calm down soon enough.”

“You do look kinda pole axed, Da,” Bain grinned. Beside him, Legolas and Finn smothered smirks. “Quick, Sig. You’d better ask him now, before he falls off Cloud Nine.”

“Ask me what?” Bard bent a mild look on his daughter.

“Finn, Kíllian, and Tara are going out for pizza, and asked me along. So please, may I go?”

Bard frowned at the big grin on Sigrid’s face. There was a clear joke lurking in this somewhere, but Bard couldn’t divine it yet.

_Gods, you’re slipping. Best try to brass it out._

“You know the routine, Sig. Until Lance Dunmont is off the streets, you have to stay together, and be home by midnight.”

“Wellll... even though Lance Dunmont is off the streets, and therefore nothing any of us has to worry about anymore, we’ll still stay together, and I’ll still be home by midnight,” Sigrid shrugged with cavalier nonchalance.

Bard blinked. “Um... I really must be out of it. I thought I heard you say that Lance is off the streets?”

“I did say that,” Sigrid nodded calmly.

Bard narrowed his eyes at his daughter, but it was Bain and Legolas and Kíllian snickering that alerted him to everyone grinning – except for Mr. D.

“Ach, fer love of the highlands, put the lad out of his misery,” the scowling Scotsman whuffed under his breath.

That resulted in nothing but wider smiles and more chuckling. It was a happy, relieved sound, which served only to confuse Bard more. “I don’t...”

Mr. D smothered an imprecation. “We got Lance, Bard. He’ll not bother ye for a while to come.”

It took several seconds for that to sink in, but when it did, Bard’s eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped. “Oh, gods, Lance was here? What in all the hells happened? Is everyone all right?”

“Everyone is fine, _lyubov moya,_” Thran gave him a wide smile. “The only one who suffered from Lance’s stupidity tonight was Lance himself.”

“The wretch tried to put on a show to ruin yers, Bard, ’t is true,” Mr. D explained. “But he wasnae prepared for the wee reception committee we had ready for him. For his trouble, he won a pair of bracelets and a private ride in the back of a police car for an extended personal tour of the local hoosegow. When they’re through with him, yon inspector and I plan to offer him a similar tour of the city hoosegow. So, let the bairns have their pizza, and I’ll take that case of ale with a clear conscience.” He gave Thor a stern glare. “And the Scotch, too.”

The world was running by entirely too fast. “Tha—that can’t be all there is to it. What happened?”

“Let us go home, and we will tell you everything,” Thran urged.

“Make sure yer braw husband tells his part in the tale.” Mr. D nodded at Thran, and offered a half
“Thran?” Bard gasped. “Gods –”

“Your husband is fine, Mr. Bowman,” Thor assured him. “You can be very proud of him.”

“Oh, gods –” Bard gulped.

“I am fine, Bard,” Thran soothed. “Come, let us go to the SUV, and give Mr. D and Thor their presents, and then we will go home, and savor all of the good things that happened tonight.”

Bard found himself swept towards the gallery door in the midst of seven happily chattering children, two grinning police officers, and his triumphant husband. He managed a wave to Frodo and Bilbo before the throng drew him down the street and behind the row of shops to the parking lot. A pair of police cars was stationed there, and uniformed officers busied themselves near the back entrance of the gallery. He didn’t have time to ask any questions before Thran brought them to his SUV, where a case of ale and a fifth of good Scotch were bestowed upon the squat police sergeant and his inspector colleague. Through all the chattering, Bard divined that Thran, Thor, and Mr. D had run the fleeing Lance to ground, and that he’d been in no condition to resist when he’d been handcuffed and loaded into the police car for his trip to jail. Bard’s thanks to the police officers were profuse and sincere.

“Anytime either of you’re in the village, I’ll stand you one of those,” Bard said, nodding at the case of ale in Mr. D’s hands. “Anytime.”

“I appreciate that,” Thor nodded.

“Aye, I’ll take ye up on that, laddie,” Mr. D nodded. “Now, I’ll just see this lot safely snuggled into the boot, then Thor and I’ll see what else we can tell the local constabulary. Good night to ye both, and to all of yon bairns. Thran, pleasure doing business with ye.”

“Good night,” Thor murmured, nodding, and retreated after his sergeant. Bard had just a second to see Thor veer off his path to intercept Bilbo who was carrying an armload of things to his car before Sigrid swept him into a big hug.

“I’m heading out with Finn, Tara, and Kíllian,” she said. “I’m so proud of you, Da. Your show went so well. I’ll be home at midnight.”

“Thanks, sweetness,” Bard hugged her back. “Have a good time. I’ll wait up for you.”

“You always do,” Sigrid rolled her eyes, but she was smiling.

The four young people headed across the parking lot to Finn’s car, all calling good wishes to the rest of the clan. Thran shooed the remaining three children into the SUV, and held the front passenger door open for Bard. Before Bard climbed inside, he put a hand on his husband’s shoulder.

“You do work for the Russian mafia, don’t you?”

Thran snickered. “If I were to reveal all of my secrets, I would have to kill you, lyubov moya.”

“That’s answer enough,” Bard grinned. “Though you’d make a good Black Butler, too.”

Thran looked blank. “What is this Black Butler?”

“A classic Japanese manga character. He’s a demon who makes everything happen. You, to a tee.”

“I shall look up this creature on the Internet. He sounds interesting. But first, I must take us away
from the night’s excitement.”

“Then home, James.”

Thran laughed at the classic request to a chauffeur, and offered a suitably low bow. “Of course, my lord. Right away.”

Bard climbed into the passenger seat, Thran shut the door behind him, and took his place behind the wheel. As they drove home, the children badgered Thran for details of what had happened with Lance, but Thran demurred.

“I will tell all when we get home. For now, you tell which of the small snacks were the best ones. Were there small cheese pastries, Legolas?”

“There were, and Tilda ate six of them,” Legolas teased.

“I did not! You ate six. I had only four. The ham biscuits were nice, too.”

“Did you see how many of those Mr. D ate?” Bain exclaimed. “At least a dozen!”

“He could have had all of them,” Thran declared. “He deserved each one. Were there no sweets, then?”

“These small cheesecake things, and raspberry tarts,” Bain replied. “I didn’t like the cheesecake – there was some weird taste in the filling.”

“I think it was amaretto,” Legolas observed. “It was okay, but I liked the raspberry tarts better.”

“You’d just had supper,” Bard turned around to look at the children. “How were you still hungry?”

“It was a party, Da,” Bain shrugged. “There’s always room for party food.”

“Yes,” Legolas nodded. “Party food goes into a different stomach from regular food.”

“It does?” Tilda frowned thoughtfully, then turned around in her seat to stare at Legolas. “Wait – there isn’t a party stomach and a regular stomach, Legs!”

“There ought to be,” Legolas sighed.

Bard and Thran laughed as the turnoff to the lane drew near. In a couple of minutes, Legolas and Bain got out to pull up the bay door to the carriage house, and Thran backed the SUV into place. Soon, the family was inside the house, shedding shoes in the mudroom. As Thran and Bard settled in the sitting room on one sofa, Bain flopped down on the opposite one.

“So what happened?” he asked simply, as Legolas sat beside him with eager eyes fixed on his father. Tilda crawled between her brothers to look just as eagerly at Thran. The tall dancer described how he and Mr. D had checked the parking lot, finding Lance outside the door the second time. Mr. D had charged at the boy as he worked to pry open the door, driven the boy towards Thor, then into the parking lot, then towards Thran.

“I would not let Lance get away again,” Thran concluded, “so I let him come close. He did not see me until too late, and I kicked him very hard into a tree. He fell down, and was so stunned that Mr. D put on the handcuffs without the least trouble. So it was done.”

“That’s it?” Bain challenged. “Just like that, you kicked him, and he was done?”
Thran nodded triumphantly. “Just so. One kick, and he was done. I am quite proud of myself. What is the saying? No fuss, no muss?”

“That’s so amazing!” Bain exclaimed. “You rock, Thran!”

“And Lance will go to jail now, and he won’t get out?” Tilda asked.

“He will be there for some time,” Thran nodded. “We do not yet know for how long. But he is not free to bother us now.”

“I’m glad,” Tilda sighed. “I’m very, very glad.”

“So am I, little doll. Your Ada’s done a very brave thing for us.”

Tilda got up and kneeled on the sofa beside Thran to plant a firm kiss on his cheek. “Thank you very much, Ada.”

“It was my pleasure, Kukla,” Thran gave her a hug and a big smile. “It was very much my pleasure. Now, let us forget about Lance Dunmont, and instead think about what a wonderful thing your Da’s show was. He sold almost all of his sketches! Bilbo said he got three very solid requests for commissioned works.”

Bard blinked as he regarded his husband. “He did?”

Thran’s nod was firm. “He did. He was most delighted. He told me to tell you that he would speak to you on Monday about them, and ask how you want to proceed. That is wonderful, lyubov moya.”

“Yeah, Da, you rocked your show,” Bain grinned.

“I’m glad you didn’t sell Rahmiel,” Tilda said, sliding out of Thran’s arms to sit between him and Bard. She twined her fingers in Bard’s. “I like him too much.”

“He’s just the model, but he’s important,” Bard told her, giving her hand a squeeze. “I can’t make molds for the metal casting without him. So I won’t sell him, ever.”

“Good,” Tilda nodded.

“So we will have much to celebrate tomorrow when we visit Kasim,” Thran said. “And then for supper we will celebrate again when Sam and Rosie and their children visit us to grill.”

“Two parties in one day?” Tilda looked back and forth between Bard and Thran. “That’s a lot for an unbirthday day.”

“I think everyone should sleep in, get up in time to have a piece of toast or something small, then we’ll have Kasim’s good lunch, and we’ll have a picnic with the Gamgees,” Bard suggested.

“That’s got my vote,” Legolas said quickly. “Especially if it means that we can stay up late playing the zombie game tonight.”

“The same rule that applies to our Sigrid applies to your bedtime,” Thran replied. Bard smothered a grin – his husband had picked up good parenting quickly. “No later than midnight.”

“Agreed,” Bard said, when Bain started to protest. “Midnight. You’ll likely sleep until ten as it is.”

The boys grumbled, but quickly figured out that arguing with their fathers cut into game-playing time, so they rumbled upstairs to set to. Tilda was happy to accept her fathers’ offer to play Dinky
Farm with her, and they spent a good hour playfully competing in carrot growing and honey production. At length, Tilda’s yawns took on monumental proportions, so Bard and Thran escorted her up to bed.

“It was a good day today,” Tilda yawned as she settled Mr. Bun in her arms. “I played soccer with the big kids, and a lot of people came to see your art, Da, and Ada caught Lance, and I played Dinky Farm.”

“Good all around,” Bard nodded with a smile. “Thanks for being so good at the show tonight, and eating the pastries for me. I was too busy.”

“I can do that any time you want, Da,” Tilda dimpled. “They were cheese!”

“They certainly were,” Bard gave her a big kiss on the cheek. “Sleep well, little doll, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Da. Night, Ada. Thank you for getting Lance.”

“That was my pleasure,” Thran avowed, kissing the top of Tilda’s head. “So you can sleep well tonight, and wake up tomorrow ready for more cheese.”

“Do you think Kasim has any?” Tilda asked curiously.

“We shall see what wonders he has tomorrow. But sleep first.”

“Okay. Love you, Ada. Love you, Da.”

“Love you, too, Kukla, little doll,” Bard and Thran murmured.

They slipped out, ducked into Bain’s room long enough to check on the boys, then Thran excused himself to the shower.

“Just a quick wash. My prowl around a parking lot has left me too grimy to sleep comfortably,” Thran sighed.

“I’m going to perch in the sitting room,” Bard replied. “Just to let everything soak in.”

“Understandable. Perhaps you would like to share a little nalivka with me when I come down?”

“That’d be great. See you in a bit.”

Thran stroked Bard’s cheek with long, elegant fingers, and offered him a kiss on his temple. He disappeared into the closet to take off his clothes, so Bard headed downstairs.

The sitting room was quiet as Bard sat in the middle of his old sofa, propped his feet up on the fruit crate coffee table, and slumped comfortably – hmm, not entirely comfortably. His wallet was still in his back pocket, and so was a crumpled bit of paper. He pulled out both, and put the wallet on the coffee table to remind him to take it upstairs when he went up to bed. The crumpled bit of paper he almost tossed on the table beside his wallet, until he remembered that it was the accounting sheet Celebrian had handed him at the end of his show.

Before he shied away from it, he opened the paper.

Almost all of his sketches were listed – so many of them! Yes, he’d known how many pieces Frodo had framed, and yes, he’d known how many loose sketches he’d provided, but to see all of them listed in such stark terms, almost filling the page...
He didn’t dare look at the price column. He’d told Bilbo to price them as he saw fit, and had never really had the nerve to look at what those prices were. He’d studiously avoided looking too closely at the little cards Celebrian had pinned beside each sketch with the name of the piece, the medium, and the price. He knew what the names were, and that they were all pencil on paper. The rest...

*Don’t be such a coward. This is the moment where you know how the rest of your life will go. Your sketch at the April Fool’s Follies sold for four hundred dollars. Four hundred. Bilbo knew that, so these didn’t go for ten and twenty dollars a pop. So look at the prices. Just do it.*

He forced himself to look at the figures listed beside each sketch. Not scan them, but stare at them hard until they registered.

The amounts took Bard’s breath away.

He looked at the bottom of the page at the total.

It was a lot.

It was thousands of dollars. Not hundreds of dollars. Thousands.

It was so much more than he’d hoped for.

Oh gods oh gods oh gods –

He got himself off the sofa, through the solarium, and outside onto the terrace while he could still see. Once he was safely away from the eyes and ears of his family, he sank to his knees on the flagstones. He gulped and put his hands over his mouth, but nothing could stop the all-consuming wave of relief that overwhelmed him. Pure relief. After ten years of worry and want, desperation and despair, after carrying on without ever daring to believe in hope, he could finally, finally believe that the worst was over. What a relief it was to let go of so much fear! To know, really know in his bones, that he could take care of his children again. That they were safe. That they would not go wanting. He finally had the wherewithal to send them to a decent school and then on to college, to nurture Bain’s soccer and Tilda’s art and Sigrid’s writing and math. He could feed them well, make a good home for them, and be on hand when they needed him rather than away, hosing out Steffen’s grotty sewer lines, or working clandestine scab jobs on dodgy, dangerous welding sites...

Oh, gods oh gods oh gods –

Arms went around his shoulders, and gathered him close. “My brave saint. *Zoloto moyo.*”

He tried to say something, anything, but his sobs precluded that.

“It is not important to talk, *lyubov moya.* You are safe, and you have worked so hard, and I have you. Let your sorrow go.”

For once, Bard took the comfort he was offered without guilt. He shut his eyes and let down as his husband urged, trusting his body to know when it could calm. Thran didn’t protest, merely offered the comfort of his arms around Bard. Soft words soothed over his release, some in Russian, some in French, some in English, but all full of love and compassion.

“*Ya lyublyu tebya. Ty velikoye zoloto moyo,*” Thran crooned softly. “I love you, and you are my great treasure, *lyubov moya.* You have been brave for so long. All is well. All is well.”

Slowly, slowly, his emotions calmed. His sobs eased, then stopped. His breath evened out of its gasps. He swallowed again without his throat spasming in protest. He heaved a great sigh without
dissolving into tears again. Thran held him quietly, rubbing his back slowly.

“I think I need to change Rahmiel’s name,” he graved.

“Do you?” Thran murmured, smiling.

Bard nodded. “He’s just a statue. You’re the real angel of mercy and love.”

“Tcha, lyubov moya. I am nothing so lofty. I am the husband who loves you, who is proud of you. Not just tonight, but always. You have always seen to our family and me so well; you have always been a gifted artist. All that has changed tonight is that the rest of the world knows what I have known since I first saw you... oy, perhaps one more thing has changed.”

“What’s that?” Bard whispered.

“You know, without doubt or denial, that your children are safe. You do not have to worry. You can see to them as well as you have always wanted to.”

The knot was back in Bard’s throat, and his eyes filled again, but this time, his relief didn’t overwhelm him. This time, it was a quieter emotion, not a flood that swept him away.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Gods, yes.”

“I am happy for you, and proud of you. I love you more than I can tell you.”

Bard sighed. “I still think I should change Rahmiel’s name to Rahmiel the Second.”

A soft chuckle. “And what does that make me? Rahmiel the First, Supreme Angel of Mercy and Love on High?”

“Something like that.”

“That is a very cumbersome name, funny saint.”

“But apt.”

A kiss pressed on his hair. “Must I dub you Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, then, because you thought yours was lost and yet never gave up? I confess I like Bard better than Jude, no matter how apt Jude might be.”

“I like Thran, too.”

“So perhaps we can dispense with the urge to rename either of us.”

“I guess we can.”

“So you will remain my saint Bard, just as I am your angel Thran.”

“Always.”

“Then all is well.”

It was.
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

The saint has weathered his release. Now it's time for all the sweetness that Clan Ffyrnig can bestow upon him.

Thran finished his quick shower, well pleased with the evening’s events. A young miscreant was captured, and his husband’s gallery show was a success. And what a success – in the space of two hours, nearly all of Bard’s beautiful sketches had flown out of the gallery as if they had wings as powerful as Rahmiel’s. And such a stir that glorious angel had caused! He’d looked wonderful in the gallery window with wings at full extension, smiling down on his despairing saint. The lights had gilded those wings until they looked alive, and the gallery had certainly been alive with his admirers’ marveling conversation. Bilbo had said that he’d gotten three very strongly worded offers of commissions for sculpture in large part because of Rahmiel’s shining appeal.

What a powerful message that would send to Bard – that his art was as glorious as everyone had told him, that he was eminently capable of magic as well as craftsmanship. How good it would be to see Bard’s confidence wax, and his worry wane. That gave Thran much to smile about as he shook his hair out of its braid, combed it smooth, and found comfortable tee and leggings and socks.

As he came downstairs, he ducked into the butler’s pantry to pour small cordial glasses full of nalivka, and brought them into the sitting room. Bard, however, wasn’t there. The only signs of his husband’s presence were his wallet on the coffee table, and a piece of paper discarded on the sofa. Thran set down the glasses and retrieved the paper – ah, the accounting of Bard’s show. He scanned it quickly, smiling proudly at the total listed at the bottom. Indisputable proof of Bard’s triumphant return to his craft, and a promise of more triumphs to follow!

But where was Bard?

Thran circled the house, through the kitchen, dining room, hall, main room, ballroom, before he returned to the sitting room. Not even in the solarium – but the door to the outside terrace was ajar. Thran slipped outside –

Bard was folded on his knees, face buried in his hands, silently sobbing.

Thran’s throat tightened in sympathy. Of course, he should have divined this. What had Bard always needed? Not outside acknowledgement of his talent – he didn’t have an ego that craved that. Not confidence in himself as an artist – he was fully aware of how good his work was. Not money for itself – that was only the material symbol for what mattered most to him. No, what Bard craved most was the assurance that he could provide for his children. Tonight’s show, then, had given Bard back his faith that he could care for Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.

He went to his knees beside Bard, and eased him into his arms. “My brave saint. Zoloto moyo.”

Bard didn’t have the breath to speak, but he tried.

“It is not important to talk, lyubov moya. You are safe, and you have worked so hard, and I have you. Let your sorrow go.”
Bard collapsed in Thran’s arms and let his sobs consume him. Oy, so many years of struggle that needed to be released! His husband mumbled a fragment of something, perhaps a mention of his children.

“Ya lyublyu tebya. Ty velikoye zoloto moyo,” Thran murmured. “I love you, and you are my great treasure, lyubov moya. You have been brave for so long. All is well. All is well.”

Slowly, slowly, Bard’s emotions waned, and his sobs eased until he breathed evenly again. Thran held him quietly, rubbing his back. At long last, Bard sighed. He mumbled something about Thran being the real angel of mercy and love rather than his sculpture, but Thran gently reaffirmed all the things Bard did so well, and reiterated what Bard held most important, that his children were safe.

At length, the body in Thran’s arms relaxed, and Thran pressed a kiss on Bard’s hair. “This has been a very emotional day for you, lyubov moya. Come inside with me, so that I can properly see to you. A warm shower, then a sip of nalivka, will help you relax.”

“Gods.” Bard’s voice was raspy, and his body trembled as he sat up. “I feel like I’ve run a marathon.”

“You have. Ten years is a long time to struggle as you have. It is only natural to feel so weary.”

Bard’s chest spasmed again, and he put his hands over his mouth. “I... just want to take care of my children, Thran. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Thran slid closer to put his arm around Bard’s shoulder again. “It is all any good father wants. You are the best one I know.”

“Sometimes I wasn’t.”

“You were to the best of your circumstances. I know that, and the children know that. Now, your circumstances are better, and you can be at peace.”

Bard’s chest heaved again, and he drew a long, shuddering breath to calm himself. “I can. It’s been a long time coming, but I finally can.” He put a hand on Thran’s thigh. “Thank you for making that possible.”

“You are welcome. You have made so many things possible for me and Legolas, too, so I thank you for those. We have both brought so much to each other and our family. And now we are happy.”

“We are.” Bard heaved another sigh, but even in the dark it was easy to see that he hung his head. “The difference is that now I deserve to be.”

“Ah,” Thran smiled, squeezing Bard’s shoulders. “We come to the second part.”

Bard looked towards him. “The second part? What part is that?”

“You accept that you can care for your children. That is the first part. The second part is that you accept that you are a worthy partner in our marriage, and deserve all that we have together. Your show tonight was such a emphatic success that perhaps you can acknowledge that now, yes?”

Bard chuckled softly. “I’m still coming to grips with that. I sold almost everything I showed. It’s...”

“It is wonderful. What is the vernacular... it is fucking amazing?”

Another chuckle. “Um, yes, even I have to say that it is truly fucking amazing.”
“So you see, my saint? You are the wonderful artist, and my worthy partner. Your show proved both without doubt.”

Bard exhaled deeply. “Yes, it did. So... I am.”

“See? I have been right all along. I am smarter than you think.”

Bard leaned over to kiss Thran’s lips. “I think you’re pretty smart. And an angel to boot.”

They got up together, and came back inside. Bard’s face was ravaged – red eyes, tear-streaked cheeks, and red nose. But his expression was peaceful, and Thran took that to be the true measure of the evening.

“Come, a warm shower will feel good,” Thran urged. “Then comfortable clothes and a sip of something. Are you hungry? You ate nothing at the show. I can make you a snack.”

“Maybe a shortbread cookie.”

“I will take you upstairs, and then I will make you a plate. Come with me, my sweet saint.”

Thran drew Bard upstairs, and saw him into the shower. Then he returned to the kitchen to rummage for the tin of shortbread in the pantry. Tcha, how did Bard manage to bake yet another pan of cookies with everything else he did? Because he didn’t treat it as a chore, but as something he enjoyed, just as he did much of the renovation work he did – his sketching, too, for that matter. Bard was happiest when he created something to be enjoyed, whether a beautiful room, or a sketch, or a humble pan of cookies. Thran arranged a few of the small treats on a plate and bore it into the sitting room. He didn’t have long to wait; Bard soon reappeared in clean tee and sweats, barefooted, with his dark curls still damp from the warm shower. His face looked less haggard, if tired, but he was at peace.

“Better?”

Bard nodded as he sat beside Thran. “Much.”

“Good.” Thran offered him the plate. “Your shortbread, lyubov moya.”

With a smile, Bard took a cookie, and held it up to Thran. “These are guaranteed to cure all ills in the world.”

Thran grinned as Bard nibbled the edge of his cookie and hummed in appreciation. “How can that be, my saint? There is no chocolate.”

“They have the next best thing.”

“What is that?”

“Butter.” Bard nibbled another corner, humming again. “Lots and lots of butter. They’re very good with your nalivka.”

“Tcha,” Thran scoffed gently, teasing. “I will be the judge of that for myself.”

Bard passed the plate back. “I warn you, I’m not responsible if you suddenly find yourself craving more than one of these little gems.”

Thran nibbled one of the cookies, and quickly found himself humming as much as Bard had. “Oh, you are right, Bard. Such a buttery crispness, and the perfect foil for the sweet cherry of the nalivka.”
Leaning forward, Bard retrieved his small cordial glass to sip its contents. “One of the many comfort foods in this house.”

“That is all you know how to make. Delicious food, yes, and healthy food, yes, but also comforting food. So much better than boiled chicken breast and steamed broccoli.”

Bard smiled. “It’s funny – you like so many kinds of food, and you know about so many kinds of food, but you never learned to make much beyond boiled eggs, boiled chicken breast, and steamed broccoli. Not that I’m complaining – you make my cooking look good.”

Thran took another small bite of his cookie, then a sip of his nalivka. “There was no need to learn in Russia – Vileria and I did nothing but dance. We had a babushka to care for Legolas, and a maid who cooked and cleaned for us. When we traveled, we ate in restaurants or in embassies. When Legolas and I came here, we had a live-in maid until Legolas went to boarding school, and then I ate mostly in restaurants. There was no time to learn, and very little need. I did not suffer.”

Bard hummed. “It might be fun to eat in restaurants all the time for a while, but I think I’d get tired of it.”

“As I said, I did not suffer,” Thran shrugged. “I ate to dance, not for pleasure. Just one of the many reasons I enjoy what we eat here. You take the pains to provide the right things for me, so I still eat to dance. But I enjoy it so much more.”

“It’ll be fun to watch the children at Kasim’s tomorrow,” Bard smiled in anticipation. “Legolas already has an educated palate, but the rest of the children don’t. It’ll be fun to let him lead the way for once, and for the others to try new things. Sigrid will be adventurous, and Bain won’t want Legolas to show him up. Tilda will be the cautious one.”

“No squirmy things,” Thran chuckled.

“No squirmy things,” Bard echoed. “But that’s okay. She’ll watch everything with great interest, and ask lots of questions, and long as no one tries to trick her into anything, she’ll edge out of her comfort zone, which is all I ever ask of her.”

“Wise,” Thran mulled, munching his last bite of cookie. “Encourage, but do not dictate. I learned that with Legolas. Neither Vileria nor I ever demanded that he eat something. But he would watch us to see what we liked to eat, and then he would be curious to try something. Some things he liked, and some he did not. I was very proud of him the first time he tried something that I did not like, because he did not let my dislike turn him away.”

“Oh? What did he try?”

“Eggplant.”

“Ugh,” Bard shuddered. “I don’t like that, either.”

“Neither does Legolas. But I was proud that he tried it. So it will be fun to see him with Tilda tomorrow.”

“She trusts him more than she trusts Bain. Except when they knocked on the study walls while I was working on her room, Legs has never tried to trick her about anything.”

“Our Kukla is very sweet. It would most difficult to want to trick such a child.”

“She’ll cute you to death,” Bard chuckled. “Exactly the opposite of Sigrid. She’s so like Daphne –
fierce lioness, indeed. Her birthday’s in August, appropriately enough. A true Leo.”

“When are Bain’s and Tilda’s birthdays?”

“Bain’s the next one after mine, the eleventh of June. Sigrid’s next, thirteenth of August. And Tilda’s is the ninth of September. Yours is October 2. When is Legolas’s birthday?”

“The twenty-third in November. His is another appropriate one – Sagittarius, the Archer.”

“Do you do anything special for birthdays?”

“Sadly, we have not for some years, as Legolas was in boarding school. But when he was younger, we had presents and cake.”

“We do cake, too, and little presents. I never had a lot of money to spend on them, so we did outings to places that didn’t cost much to visit – a free park or a museum, or the market to buy a special treat. The bigger presents I saved for Christmas, not that I had much for those, either. I don’t want to change that much, even if I have more money now. I want to put money aside for school, or new computers, or things like that.”

“We will have enough for small presents and small treats and small lunches,” Thran assured Bard. “Mmm. You are right about the shortbread. So addictive!”

“Extremely,” Bard snickered as he helped himself to another cookie. He took a bite, and barely managed to chew it before a big yawn took him. “Gods. The day’s caught up with me.”

“It is close to midnight. Sigrid will be home soon, and then we can go to bed. Or you can go to bed now, and I will wait for our lioness.”

“I’d never hear the end of it if I crashed before Sigrid got home,” Bard yawned again. “How long before she’s due?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“I’ll make it.” Bard finished his cookie, and then the last of his nalivka. He slid down to rest his head on the back of the sofa, leaned against Thran’s shoulder, and shut his eyes. “That doesn’t mean my eyes will be open the whole time.”

Thran snickered and patted Bard’s thigh. “I will put away the cookies and wash the glasses, then I will be back.”

Bard straightened up. “I’ll help you.”

“I will see to this. Sit.”

Reluctantly, Bard let Thran urge him back against the sofa to rest while Thran put the remaining cookies back in their tin, washed the cordial glasses, and replaced them in the cabinet in the butler’s pantry. By the time he came back into the sitting room, Bard was almost asleep. Thran reseated himself beside Bard, urged him to lie down with his head in Thran’s lap, and took his husband’s hand to massage gently in the silence. He got a hum of appreciation, so he continued to massage fingers and palm gently until the mudroom door opened.

“Sigrid is home,” Thran murmured, and Bard roused. By the time Sigrid called to her father softly, he was fully awake.
“In the sitting room, sweetness,” Bard replied, sitting up. “How was the pizza?”

“Really good. It’s that brick oven place in the next block over from the gallery.” Sigrid came into the sitting room to regard her parents. “What, no celebratory wine, or whatever?”

“We had celebratory cookies and nalivka,” Bard smiled.

“Huh. Living large, aren’t you? I guess selling all your sketches and hearing how amazing Rahmiel is was too much for you to stand too much more excitement, Da.”

“That was pretty overwhelming,” Bard admitted without rancor. “Nothing would top that, anyway, so shortbread and nalivka were perfect.”

“Gods, Da, your shortbread would be a party for anybody,” Sigrid affirmed. “So is everybody else is in bed?”

“Kukla is asleep. The boys dispatch zombies,” Thran grinned. “But they must go to bed when you do, so that will not last much longer.”

“Do I have enough time to ask what happened with Lance, Ada? Finn and Tara and Killian didn’t know, and I got a lot of ribbing for going out with them before I’d gotten the lowdown on the excitement first.”

“There is little to tell,” Thran shrugged, but gave Sigrid the same story he’d given the other children and Bard earlier, leaving out the part about the gasoline. Only he needed to know about that now; he’d tell Bard when his husband had recovered from the night’s emotions.

“I’d tease you about subduing Lance with a tree, but I’m too glad that you did it at all to care about how,” Sigrid stretched and yawned. “I’m for bed.”

“Everyone’s sleeping in tomorrow,” Bard informed his daughter. “Toast around nine or ten, then we’ll head for Kasim’s after. When is our reservation?”

“Eleven-thirty,” Thran supplied.

“So we’ll leave about ten-thirty, have lunch, and head back here. The Gamgees are coming over to grill at about six-thirty.”

“Got it,” Sigrid yawned. “I still have a little homework to do, so I’ll finish that after lunch tomorrow.”

Bard got up with a stretch. “I’m for bed, too. I’ll see you in the morning, sweetness.”

Sigrid came around the coffee table to give Bard a big hug. “I’m so happy about your show, Da. Everyone said so many great things about your stuff. That’s so amazing. You’re back doing what you ought to be doing.”

Thran’s throat tightened to see Bard hug his daughter close. “Thanks, Sigrid. I’m happy it all went so well.”

Sigrid hugged back hard, and didn’t let him go for a long moment. She gave him a peck on the cheek. “You deserve it, Da. You so deserve it.”

She eased out of Bard’s arms with a smile. “See you in the morning, Da. Sleep well.”

“You, too.”
Sigrid came to Thran and hugged him, too. “Thanks,” she whispered softly, before she pushed away. In a louder voice, she went on. “You sleep well, too, Ada.”

“I will, thank you,” Thran replied, returning Sigrid’s hug with his own. “Good night, lioness.”

A chuckle accompanied Sigrid as she headed upstairs. Thran and Bard did their usual round of the rooms and doors, set the security system, and climbed the central stairs together. They got the boys settled in bed with minimal fuss, then settled in their own bed with sighs of relief. Tonight, Bard was happy to bask in the comfort of his husband’s arms. Thran didn’t urge anything more provocative – soon enough, there would be time to enthrall his husband as he’d wanted to earlier. For now, it was more important to hold him close as the treasure he was, to offer him the comfort he’d needed for so long.

“My saint,” he breathed, stroking Bard’s still damp hair, and his arm. “I love you very much.”

Bard roused enough to give him a long kiss, then snuggled beside him with a sigh. “I love you, too, angel. More than anything.”

Nothing more needed to be said. Thran shut his eyes, and sent a silent thank you to the gods, wherever and whoever they were, for finally smiling upon his saint. Then he fell asleep with a smile.

* * *

Bard roused slowly, reluctantly. Mmm, it felt so good to lie in bed with every muscle loose and eyelids heavy. What day was it? Sunday? Yes, Sunday. Good. He didn’t have to get up, then. He let himself drift away again, thoughts as diffuse as air, drifting and blurring without focus or pattern. Dimly, from far away, water ran briefly, then stopped. The shower? A low hum followed... yes, a hairdryer... hmm, Thran’s hairdryer. That soon fell silent, too. He lay with his eyes shut, floating slowly back to awareness until the bathroom door opened. He cracked an eyelid open enough to register the beautiful naked dancer who appeared. So divine, with long, white hair cascading over his shoulders and down his back and chest like silk. Such long legs and arms, elegant fingers, lean and chiseled torso, glutes to die for, and that angelic face, all high cheekbones and striking silver grey eyes. Bard hummed in appreciation, drawing those silver grey eyes to his.

A smile crossed the angel’s lips as he sat on the side of the bed. Fingers insinuated themselves in Bard’s hair, stroking and caressing until Bard hummed again.

“You’re so beautiful,” Bard murmured sleepily. “Such a beautiful angel.”

“And you are a sleepy treasure in my bed with your soft eyes and mussed hair, and a delicious body that begs to be touched,” Thran purred, leaning over to brush a kiss on Bard’s hair. “Oh, how you draw me, sweet saint.”

Bard reached out an arm to find Thran’s, and rolled onto his side, drawing Thran with him. A long, spare, but divine body slid under the covers beside his, pressing close to scatter kisses over his cheeks, lips, throat, chest. At the sweet touch of lips on his nipples, Bard shut his eyes and moaned.

“Oh, gods, angel... I can’t resist when you do that...”

“What else can I do when I find such a morsel in my bed?” Thran whispered. “You burn so brightly, mortal saint. So tempting, so delicious, so vital and alive as an ethereal angel is not.”
Bard bit his lips, trying to suppress a gasp. “Oh, gods, you’ve got me, beautiful angel. Whatever you want, you can have.”

Thran ran his lips over Bard’s nipple again, and his fingers stroked down his abdomen to massage his cock. “Today I am the angel of light, not dark. I do not take, only give, for you are my most loved jewel, and you deserve all the bliss I can give you.”

A well-lubricated cock eased into him, stroking slowly in time with the hand that caressed his cock. What a vision his pale angel was, kneeling over him, his beautiful white hair drifting with each stroke, his divine face full of both arousal and love. When he leaned forward to kiss Bard’s nipples, white hair tickled over his face and chest like the lightest blanket. Bard filled his hands with those perfect glutes and matched his rhythm to Thran’s, letting Thran’s ministrations urge him closer and closer to release with each lick, each stroke, each thrust.

“You’ve got me, you have me, I’m going...” Bard stuttered.

“Then come to me, my saint,” Thran breathed as he kissed Bard’s cheek, his jaw, his throat. “I love you so much.”

Lips nuzzled his nipples, fingers tightened hard on his cock, and inside... gods, inside... there was no resisting so much pleasure. Bard spasmed, unable to keep himself from pulling Thran’s cock as far inside him as he could take it. No matter how he bit his lips, a whimper still trembled past them, then a second as his climax consumed him.

Not only he was consumed – the sounds of Bard’s release were the final embellishment that teased Thran after him. The pale angel hovering above him arched back in ecstasy and his fingers clutched Bard’s thighs. Bard could almost see soaring angel wings stretched high behind his husband; the consumed look on his face was real, though, not imagination, and no less worthy of a benevolent angel. Thran’s hips lurched a few times more as he milked every drop of pleasure out of their lovemaking, then he sighed and opened his eyes to meet Bard’s loving gaze.

“You are so good to me,” Bard breathed, rubbing Thran’s knees under his legs. “Five months, and I still can’t believe you’re mine.”

Thran smiled, but shut his eyes and stroked Bard’s thighs. He bent over Bard’s chest as he savored the last tremors of his release, then pressed a kiss on Bard’s sternum. “I am yours as you are mine, lyubov moya. We belong to each other. It is my joy.”

“Mine, too.”

Thran slipped out of Bard, and he got to his hands and knees to kiss Bard’s lips. “I will wash, and come back.”

Bard enjoyed a deep, slow stretch, and clambered out of bed to follow his husband into the bathroom. “I guess I’d better wash, too. What time is it, anyway?”

Thran let himself into the shower cabinet to ply the handheld showerhead. “Just after ten.”

Bard’s eyes widened. “That late? Gods, I had no idea!”

Thran looked at him over his shoulder with a smug grin as he washed. “Good. You needed a long rest to properly recover from yesterday’s tension. That made you ripe for me to remind you most deliciously that your angel loves you. You are better off for both, yes?”

With a chagrined smile, Bard had to admit that he was, which widened Thran’s smug smile.
“I thought so. Please, come in with me, and we will wash.”

Bard let Thran rinse him off, then he dried and brushed his teeth. At Thran’s inquiring look as he got out of the shower, Bard shrugged. “It’s too late to bother with toast, isn’t it? We need to leave about ten-thirty to get into the city, so I’d just as soon roust the children and be on our way.”

“I am very hungry,” Thran admitted. “I got up just after eight to do my barre, so a small bite of something would be wise before I go into the city.”

“The boys will likely feel the same way,” Bard agreed. “I’ll go roust them, assuming they’re not already up.”

“None of the children were awake before I came up to shower.”

“I’ll change that,” Bard grinned as he ducked into the closet to find a clean shirt and pants. “Prepare for the deluge.”

With Thran’s laughter in his ears, he quickly dressed in one of his nice shirts and pair of trousers, then hit the children’s rooms, one by one. Sigrid was up, talking on her mobile to Finn, so she offered Bard a wave and nodded when he asked her to get dressed for their upcoming lunch. Tilda was also awake, propped up in bed and reading a book. She bounced off the bed to find clothes, excited about their upcoming adventure. Bain and Legolas were just about to start the zombie game, but put the game console aside when Bard appeared. Everyone assembled in the kitchen for a quick bite of toast – Thran had peanut butter on his for the protein – and in a few minutes the family set out for the city.

Conversation was animated as Thran drove them towards the city. Tilda asked Legolas whether anything on Kasim’s menu had cheese in it, which sparked a detailed discussion with all four children about the delights they expected to see. Legolas had eaten there before, so he was kept busy describing everything he’d tasted or seen there. Bard just listened, still basking in the glow of yesterday’s successful gallery show, and the assurance it had given him about his ability to care for his family. His husband’s delightful attentions had calmed him, too. His stomach rumbled softly as he thought about the upcoming feast. They found a parking spot close to the restaurant, and piled out of the SUV. The children were so excited that Bard and Thran found themselves pushed and pulled down the sidewalk towards the small restaurant.

“Oooh, it smells good in here,” Tilda murmured, sniffing appreciatively.

“Look, there’s the raw bar,” Bain said, nudging Legolas. “Wow, look at how fast that guy is, shucking those oysters!”

“It’s always the same man,” Legolas nodded. “When I was little, I asked Papa whether he lived here.”

“Maybe so,” Bain returned, watching the man expertly slice open shells and arrange the mollusks in their shells on plates. “Amazing.”

Kasim, clad in his usual spotless white shirt and long white apron, came towards them with a big smile on his face. He was about Bain’s height, bald, stocky without being fat, and held both arms out wide in welcome. “Thran! Bard! Welcome! So good to see you again! And what is this? Look how tall your son is! Legolas, you are six inches taller than when I saw you last! And now you have three companions? Hello, children!”

“Kasim, it is good to see you, too,” Thran said, exchanging a handshake with the chef. “Yes, here is
Bard, and our so tall Legolas. May I introduce Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda, my husband’s children? They are very excited to meet you.”

Kasim shook hands all around. “Welcome, welcome! I am glad to meet you all. Please, I have your table ready, so come make yourselves comfortable.”

Kasim led them to the pair of tables he’d slid together in the back of the tiny dining room. Baskets of the much-anticipated muffins – today’s flavors were corn and almond apricot - already sat atop the blue-gingham tablecloths, blue-handled flatware was ready at each place atop blue gingham napkins, and water glasses were full. Because the only other customers were a pair of diners seated at the raw bar, Kasim lingered to chat as everyone settled – how was Legolas’s archery, and what things were the other children interested in, and was today a special occasion?

“Tomorrow is Da’s birthday,” Tilda volunteered. “And it’s Sunday, so he’s not supposed to cook for us today – it’s our turn to cook for him. So we want to give him a very good lunch.”

“And of course you would come here – I am Kasim, and this is the best place for the most excellent of birthday lunches!” He struck a comical pose, winking at the children. He handed small menus around. “There are, of course, all the good things listed on the menu. Shall I tell you what else is good today?”

At everyone’s eager assent, Kasim launched into an animated description of appetizers – the last of the season’s oysters, the calamari that Bard had enjoyed so much, small skewers of grilled shrimp, other skewers of grilled scallops, small samples of grilled octopus. A special chilled salad of scallops, the beet salad, the mixed seafood salad. The day’s catch that could be sautéed, baked, or grilled – never breaded and fried, as that was “an insult to the sanctity of seafood” – and casseroles of seafood in various combinations with various sauces. All of the children listened intently, but Tilda was especially intent. She’d insisted on sitting next to Legolas so he could explain all of the things that she wasn’t familiar with. She studied the menu just as intently, and asked her tall brother about scallops and squid and mussels. Even when everyone else had selected a dish, Tilda still hadn’t made up her mind, but her hesitation didn’t bother Kasim.

“Of course you may take as long as you like to decide,” he assured her. “Tell me what your favorite things are, and maybe I can help you to decide.”

“Well...” Tilda hesitated, “mostly, I don’t like squishy, squirmy things. So which of these are not squishy?”

“Ah, the infamous squishy things,” Kasim nodded understandingly. “The raw oysters, the mussels, the clams. I will not bring you any of those. I can bring you a nice piece of salmon in an orange glaze. That is not squishy, but very buttery and nice. Or if you want to be a bit more adventurous, perhaps you like the shrimp, the scallops?”

“I like shrimp, and Legolas says that I’d probably like scallops. And I like most kinds of fish, but I don’t think I’m ready to try any octopus.”

Kasim nodded. “Then I will make you a nice casserole, Tilda. A little shrimp, a little scallop, a little crabmeat, a little fish, perhaps a small bite of lobster just to taste. Would you like that? In a nice lemon butter sauce, or just for you, perhaps a nice cheese sauce?”

“Cheese?” Tilda brightened. “I love cheese!”

Kasim spread his hands wide. “We have a decision. I will make a new dish, Tilda’s Special Seafood Casserole, with a nice cheese sauce.”
“That sounds great, Kukla,” Legolas nodded, looking torn.

“Ah, should I make two?” Kasim teased.

Legolas debated. “No, I’ll stick to the scallop scampi. That’s so good.”

“One of my favorites, too,” Kasim nodded. “So we are decided. I will bring your appetizers and salads.”

Kasim whisked away with the menus, humming to himself as he set about preparing their lunch. Very soon, plates of raw oysters, crispy sautéed calamari, and very small octopus bits in sauce arrived, then a beet salad for Bard and Tilda to share, arugula salad for Thran, and mixed greens for the rest. Tilda eyed the oysters with skepticism, but after seeing Bard, Thran, and Legolas down one apiece, Bain and Sigrid tried them. Tilda watched in horrified fascination as her siblings slurped down the mollusks, and pronounced them not bad at all.

“You really ate that?” she breathed as Legolas chewed his with gusto.

“I really did,” he nodded. He speared the last one on the appetizer plate with his fork and cut a miniscule piece of it off. “If you want to try it, maybe just a little piece will let you see how it tastes without being so squirmy?”

Tilda eyed the tiny bit on Legolas’s fork with suspicion, then eyed Bard. “I don’t have to eat it, do I?”

“Of course not,” Bard assured her. “Only if you want to.”

Her face tightened in resolve, and in one quick motion, she leaned forward to take the bite off the fork. She mouhted it gingerly, ready to spit it out at the first indication of squishiness, but her expression turned thoughtful, as she swallowed. “Hmm. It didn’t taste like what I thought it would at all. It tasted like the ocean smells, like salt.”

“More?” Legolas asked, ready to cut a bit more for her, but Tilda shook her head.

“I think I’ve been adventurous enough,” she demurred. “But thank you for letting me try it.”

“Yay, Tilda!” Sigrid grinned at her. “You tried an oyster!”

“Just a little bit. That’s easier than a whole one. I don’t think I could do that,” Tilda shuddered.

“It’s not that hard, Til,” Bain teased her. “I mean, you eat beets. They’re a lot nastier than oysters!”

“They are not,” Tilda said with great dignity. “They taste good, and they’re pretty! Red, yellow, and white, and there’s a striped one, too. I’ve never seen striped beets before.”

“They’re still yucky,” Bain grimaced. “Hey, next you’ll have to try the calamari, Til. That’s pretty good. It’s crunchy, not squishy.”

“He’s right, it’s not squishy,” Legolas assured her. “Some places, it’s kind of rubbery, but Kasim knows how to make it tender and crispy. I like it a lot.”

“Maybe I will,” Tilda said, leaning forward to spear a small ring to dip in the marinara sauce. “Mmm, I like that. I like that a lot. What is a calamari, anyway?”

“It’s squid,” Bain snorted, laughing because he thought he’d fooled Tilda into eating something she wouldn’t like. But Tilda stuck her tongue out at her brother.
“It’s nice and crispy squid,” she informed him, “and I still like it.”

That sent a laugh around the table, Bard’s among them. It was good to see his children enjoy themselves as they tried new things, and to see Legolas get a chance to be the knowledgeable one. He shared a smile with Thran at the opposite end of the table, who was equally pleased at how much fun the children were having as they worked their way through all of the appetizers. Tilda demurred the chance to try the octopus – “too many tentacles!” she declared – but the other children were daring enough to follow Legolas’s lead.

With his typical clairvoyance, Kasim reappeared at just the right moment to take away the empty plates. Next came their entrees. Sigrid had opted for shrimp scampi, Legolas for scallop scampi, Bain for sautéed redfish topped with crabmeat, Thran for baked grouper, and Bard for mixed scallops and shrimp in lemon-butter sauce. Kasim set Tilda’s special casserole before her with a flourish.

“Enjoy, Tilda,” he smiled.

“I will,” Tilda gave him a big smile. “It smells so good.”

“Of course it does,” Kasim winked at her. “I do not allow anything in my restaurant that does not smell good.”

He went away with a smile, but as Tilda took up her fork, Bard caught him hovering within view, waiting to see whether his creation was met with approval or not. The big smile on Tilda’s face was answer enough and Bard gave him a surreptitious thumbs-up. Kasim raised both arms in triumph as he disappeared back into the kitchen, drawing laughter from both Bard and Thran.

As everyone began the main courses, several bites were traded back and forth to accommodate whoever wanted a small sample of another dish. Bard traded a buttery shrimp for one of Tilda’s cheesy ones, and both agreed that the two versions were delicious. Tilda’s cheese sauce was light and mild, a good foil that didn’t mask the delicate seafood flavors; the buttery lemon sauce was the perfect enhancement for Bard’s dish, too. From the hums of enjoyment going around the table, the rest of the family enjoyed their dishes just as much.

“That was delicious,” Tilda told Kasim, as he came to take her empty casserole dish. “Thank you for making it for me. I liked it a lot.”

“You are very welcome,” he gave her a gratified grin. “Did you know that you are the best patron to cook for, Tilda? Why? Because you are very quick to thank your chef. That is the best way to get the best food. Be lavish with your praise. Thank you very much.”

The rest of the children were quick to add their praise, until Kasim was beaming. “Ah, Thran, you have the most excellent taste in families as well as food. They are a delight to any chef. But we are not yet done, I hope? There is still dessert!”

“La crème brulée au chocolat avec des framboises!” Tilda clapped her hands. “Oh, I hope that’s on the menu today!”

“Listen to you!” Kasim put his arms akimbo to regard Tilda with astonishment. “Vous parlez français!”

“Mon Ada et mon frère Legolas m’aident, mais oui, je parle un peu français,” Tilda came back. “All of us except Da.”

“They have an unfair advantage, talking behind my back in a foreign language,” Bard chuckled.
“Ah, perhaps so, but you are still the Dad, and yes is yes and no is no regardless of the language,” Kasim comforted him. “But yes, we have la crème brulée au chocolat avec des framboises today, as well as a coconut flan, and an orange syrup cake studded with chocolate curls. All very decadent.”

“Coconut flan?” Legolas looked up. “Ooh, that’s for me.”

“Coconut?” Tilda asked. “That sounds good. But I don’t know what flan is.”

“It’s custardy, like crème brulée,” Legolas explained. “But soft, without the crust on the top.”

Sigrid opted for cake, and Legolas for flan, but everyone else opted for the chocolate crème brulée. Kasim reappeared with a trayful of their desserts, plus small cups of espresso for Thran and Bard. Tilda tapped her spoon on the top of the crème brulée, confirming that it had the proper crust, then tapped it again until she reached the creamy chocolate underneath. Legolas traded her a bit of her treat for a bit of his flan, which she pronounced delicious. Sigrid’s cake was thick and moist, covered with a scattering of chocolate curls and a piped chocolate icing rosette on top.

“It’s divine, and I’m not sharing it,” she teased. “Da, we are so learning to make this.”

“I’ve got my orders,” Bard grinned at her. “It looks just as decadent as Kasim said.”

“More.” Sigrid took another bite and shut her eyes to better enjoy it. “Sooooo good.”

All too soon, the desserts were gone, leaving behind only very empty plates and sighs of regret. Kasim came to take their plates away, laughing to see so many sad faces.

“Now you know my secret,” he teased them. “I make everything so good that you are sad to be finished, and so you will vow to come back very soon. I love to see my friends often.”

“It’s a really good trick,” Bain nodded. “Because everything was amazing. Even the octopus.”

“Ah, I have made a convert!” Kasim grinned. “And perhaps another, Tilda? You liked the special casserole I made for you?”

She nodded. “It was the best seafood casserole I’ve ever had. It’s the only one I’ve ever had, too, but you know what I mean. I liked it a lot.”

“Then I am happy,” Kasim nodded. “You are most fun to cook for.”

“You are the most generous host,” Thran said as he took care of the bill. “You never fail to outdo yourself, Kasim. Each time I visit, I think you cannot do any better. But each time I come back, you prove me wrong.”

The chef drew himself up. “Of course I do. I am Kasim!”

His theatrical response got a laugh from the clan, and they trooped out with waves and thank-yous and farewells. As they walked back to the SUV, Bard savored a full stomach and the pleasure of the delicious adventure Kasim had given them.

“That was soooooooo good,” Bain moaned as he climbed into the back seat of the SUV. “The best breakfast I’ve ever had in my life.”

“That’s the truth,” Legolas sighed, settling beside Bain. “Coconut flan..... sooooo good.”

“Everything was soooooo good,” Sigrid agreed. “Even the oysters.”
“Hmm, they were... okay,” Tilda admitted. “But my casserole was amazing, and so was the chocolate crème brulée. Kasim is the nicest chef I’ve ever met.”

“He is,” Thran agreed, giving Bard an amused smile. “But of course he was, because you were so nice to him. As he said, he does his best for the nicest people.”

“Then we all must’ve been really nice,” Bain groaned in the back seat. “Because I’ve never had anything so wonderful in a restaurant before. Who knew octopus could taste good?”

“I didn’t,” Bard turned around to give his son a smile. “That’s the best birthday lunch I’ve ever had.”

“Can we come back here for my birthday?” Bain asked. “That’s next month.”

“What, you don’t want pizza for your birthday?” Bard teased.

“Before today, I thought I did,” Bain admitted. “But after that... wow. Lots better than pizza.”

Bard turned back to look out of the front window, smiling. If Bain decided that he really did want to come back to Kasim’s for his birthday, Bard would have the wherewithal to make it so.

That was the best birthday present of all.
Chapter 111

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint continue to savor many things on the day after a certain triumphant art show.

Thran drove home from the city well satisfied. The children had had a wonderful time, thanks to Kasim’s generous personality and his fascinating food. He had so enjoyed Legolas having the chance to lead the other children, describing all of the different seafood in such delicious, beguiling terms. He hadn’t even disparaged eels or mussels, neither of which he liked. How gratifying was it to see Tilda clamor to sit next to Legolas so that she could ask him questions? Or to count how many times Bain and Sigrid leaned across the table to ask about one thing or another, too? Bard’s children were naturally curious and eager to sample new things, whether food or experiences, but they were also kind, because they never thought to tease Legolas for knowing so much.

The best part was how much Bard enjoyed the children enjoying themselves, because now he was convinced that he could provide such treats, without merely relying on Thran to foot the bills. It was still a mystery why Bard had felt that Thran was the only one who contributed to the family’s support – how hard had Bard worked on the house, lavishing so much attention and effort on it because he wanted it to be worthy of his family? Thran had no idea how much they would have had to pay someone to do all Bard had done, but it was substantial, more than enough to offset a few lunches in Kasim’s delightful restaurant. But no matter – after last night, Bard had begun to understand, even savor, how much he brought to Clan Ffyrnig. May the next several days only reinforce that understanding.

The children were a bit let down when they reached home, because chores loomed. Bard’s preoccupation and their trip into the village yesterday had not given the children much incentive to tidy their rooms before now, and after today’s wonderful lunch, it was hard for them to forsake their festive mood and return to mundane tasks. But with the enticement of supper with the Gamgees’ ahead of them, they settled quickly. Thran supervised the collection of laundry while Bard doled out mops and dust cloths.

While the children scurried to clean their rooms and tidy the rest of the house, Bard, of course, chose to work in the kitchen in preparation for the Gamgees’ arrival. A call to Rosie had confirmed that yes, they would arrive at six-thirty with four children, a baked bean casserole, and a big salad in tow. Thran was put to work mixing up a couple of marinades for the chicken – mild Italian and spicy Southwestern – while Bard made blueberry crumble. The chicken went in the marinade and then into the refrigerator, and the crumble went into the oven. It seemed to consist of little but fruit and raw oatmeal and butter, but Bard assured him that it’d turn out delicious. The truth of that was quickly born out as the concoction cooked, for a delicious aroma permeated the house. While it baked, Bard decided to dab a quick coat of paint on the garden bench he and Thran had cleaned and primed yesterday, so Thran helped with that. Once the crumble was done, they had a turn around the yard, envisioning the gardens that Sam had planned for them.

“Are you still okay with white paint for the house and black for the shutters?” Bard asked, as they stood in the front yard to regard the house. “I’ve got two house painters coming tomorrow to talk about it. And a window company on Tuesday.”
“I agreed with Tilda when she said she liked the white house. I still like that, too. It will look very nice with the grey roof. And yes, a red door. And pale blue on the ceiling of the porch, as you spoke of from one of your friends?”

Bard nodded, gratified that Thran had remembered. “Yes to all of those.”

“Then the shutters should be a color that harmonizes with all of those. Mostly white and grey, with a little red, and a little blue. Black, or a dark grey?”

“Both will fade after a while, so probably better stick to black. Grey would fade more. At least there aren’t many shutters,”

Thran hummed. “Did you tell me there were shutters in the carriage house that you moved to the barn?”

“I did.”

“Where were they on the house? There does not seem to be room for any?”

“There isn’t, to my mind. At some point, someone put shutters on all of the second floor windows, which wasn’t original to the house. I thought they looked too crowded, and they were falling apart, anyway, so I took them down.”

“So were any of them original to the house, and could you tell which ones were?”

“Only the ones for the two round windows in the central hall, I think. I like those – the shutters are half moons.”

“I have never seen shutters that shape,” Thran mused. “But it would be a shame to cover up such interesting windows. They let in so much light into the hall.”

“The shutters are only decorative, so they stay fastened to the outside wall,” Bard explained. “I think both windows were stained glass at some point, but they were taken out and sold, or broken, or something. The replacements aren’t so great. I should’ve thought to measure them when I had the scaffolding in the hall to put up the chandeliers. We could see if Mrs. Mathom could get us replacements, or maybe Rosie would make us some.”

“I would like that, too,” Thran agreed, looking up at the two round windows. “Something with lots of colors. Perhaps we could ask Rosie later?”

“Let’s. Depending on what she tells us, I can always get the ladder out and measure from one side or the other, whichever’s easiest. Maybe she’d tell us to put in a plain window and hers would go inside it. That’d be good to keep it from the weather.”

Bard was so at ease that Thran was loath to speak about a darker subject, but he had yet to tell Bard all the details about Lance’s aborted attack last night. He wanted to do so while they were alone.

“There is something I must tell you,” he said softly, stroking Bard’s hair.

“Anything,” Bard said without thinking. His eyes fell on Thran, sobering when he took him Thran’s serious expression. “Um. I’m not going to like this, am I? Is it about the ballet?”

“Not yet,” Thran offered a wry smile. “Though we are ten weeks from our premiere, and that means much work, but we will discuss that later. This is about last night.”
“About Lance?” When Thran nodded, Bard’s posture grew tight. “I thought your story seemed a little... cut and dried. He didn’t pull a knife or something on you, did he?”

Thran shook his head. “All that Mr. D and Thor and I did last night happened exactly as I described. It is what Lance did before that I did not tell you. That is why he made me so angry, and so when he ran towards me, I made sure he went no farther.”

Bard gave him a long look. “What was he up to?”

“I smelled gasoline when Mr. D and I found him behind the gallery. I thought he intended to pry open the back door and throw in a Molotov cocktail – you know what such a thing is, yes?”

Bard paled, but he nodded soberly enough. “I know what such a thing is. He planned to firebomb the gallery.”

Thran nodded. “Mr. D told me that the evidence agreed with my guess. Lance had a crude one ready to light, but the back door to the gallery was stubborn when he tried to pry it open, which gave Mr. D time to run at him. When I stood in the trees to watch, I thought about our children, and you, and so much of your artwork, all so close to that door, not to mention so many other people just beyond, and the other shops that would be in danger if any fire spread. So when Lance ran at me, I was as hot as the fire he hoped to light. I did not let him see me, and I was very... unforgiving with my blow. So was the tree he crashed into after I finished with him.”

“Gods.” Bard wrung both hands over his face. “I wish you’d told me last night.”

“After you have waited so long for your triumphant return to your art, I had no intention of letting an angry child ruin your moment. You saw nothing of Lance last night, so the police had no reason to talk to you, and I had no need to burden you when you were so exhausted. Better I tell you as I do now, when we are both calm and rested.”

“Do the children know?”

Thran shook his head. “I did not want to frighten them last night. I cannot decide if they need to know or not. It might terrify Tilda, and she is already frightened enough. The older children... perhaps we should wait to see how Lance progresses through the juvenile justice system.”

“Maybe so... but I still wish you’d told me.”

“There was nothing you could do whether you knew or not, lyubov moy. That boy has ruined too many moments for us, and I did not want him to ruin another. That is the only reason I did not tell you last night. I wanted you to be happy, to celebrate, to savor. I am sorry if I did not tell you as soon as you would have liked.”

Bard looked away, and his posture remained stiff and wary. Thran bit his lip. Oh, gods; what if what he had done started another argument? He didn’t want to be at such odds with his husband again, so he took Bard’s hand in his to stroke Bard’s wedding ring.

“Please, Bard, I am sorry if what I did upsets you. That was not my intent. I wanted you to have your moment after you have waited for it for so long.”

Bard forced himself to take a deep breath, and his fingers tightened around Thran’s. Grimacing, he hung his head, but after some seconds, he offered a nod. “You’re right. There was nothing I could have done, other than be angry, and that would have put a pall on the day, to be sure. So thank you for letting me savor yesterday. It was amazing.”
Thran let out a long sigh of relief. “Oh, thank the gods. I could not have borne it if you had been angry at me.”

As Bard finally met his eyes, a slight smile crossed his lips, and he stroked Thran’s braid with appreciative fingers. “I think it’s finally sunk in that I should think before I jump to another contusion. You were looking out for me and the children last night, and today, too. That’s a gift, not something to get angry about.”

He drew Thran’s hand up to his lips for a kiss, making Thran smile. It was likely a ridiculously relieved expression, but he didn’t care – to be in harmony with his husband was worth the humor of a silly expression.

“So now we can go back to the consideration of paint and shutters,” Thran prompted. “Or perhaps we have finished with those, and can consider the windows. You have someone who will see us about them on Tuesday, yes?” Bard nodded. “You have explained about the windows before. To restore them is tedious and time-consuming, and when they are done they will still not be energy-efficient. To replace them is expensive, but we will pay less to heat and cool the house. So I would be inclined to replace them.”

“That’ll cost close to thirty thousand dollars,” Bard warned.

“And to restore them?”

“Probably half that.”

“But consider the cost benefit analysis. Over fifty years, would we spend more than fifteen thousand dollars to heat and cool the house?”

Bard grinned. “You’re pretty good with that money stuff, cariad. I’ll see how much it’ll cost to replace the windows, then.”

They continued to walk around the yard, considering what needed to be done to the porch and gazebo to restore them – Bard said mostly lumber and labor, then paint. The gardens would come after the house was painted. They decided that the Ring Thing would look beautiful outside the ballroom windows. Sea Spot Run had a similar dark bronze patina as Bard’s pine tree, so that would make a good anchor for the other end of the terrace outside the kitchen windows.

“I hope you decide to light the inside of Sea Spot Run as it was in the gallery,” Thran told Bard as they perched on one of the railings inside the gazebo. “I liked that very much. The small lights made so many more details visible.”

“That was amazing,” Bard agreed. “Frodo’s got a great eye for that. Rigging the fan to make the Ring Thing turn was something, too. I hope it’ll catch the breezes outside the ballroom in the same way.”

Thran slid over to drape an arm over Bard’s shoulders. “So many plans, and so many beautiful visions. This is all so exciting, Bard. I have never lived in such a beautiful place.”

“I didn’t imagine it’d ever turn into anything this amazing,” Bard admitted, looping his arm around Thran’s waist. “Imagine what it’ll look like at Christmas. Everything will be finished then. We’ll have a big tree in the ballroom, and maybe a small one in the sitting room, and greens and poinsettias around Hope the Lope, and greenery and ribbons along the balustrade...”

Thran chuckled. “It will be very festive. It will also be beautiful this summer as we find furniture to fill it. The solarium will be our Moroccan paradise, and the terrace will be green with Sam’s
plantings, and we will put bright flowers in all of the pots in the carriage house for the porch and the terrace, and you will have your Welsh garden full of bright flowers to accent the Ring Thing, and we will have lemonade and tea cake in the gazebo.”

Nodding, Bard gave Thran a sideways look. “I’m relieved to find out that my husband is just as much of a sap about this stuff as I am.”

“Tcha, I am merely a romantic, and so are you. There is nothing sappy about the love of beauty, or to share that beauty with one’s beloved.”

“You’re right. There isn’t. It means a lot to me that we’re both so entranced by simple things – good food, beautiful surroundings, being together. And doing our art. Once the house is mostly finished – one never really finishes a house, you know – that’ll be how we spend our time every day. You’ll dance, and I’ll sculpt.”

“Perfection, indeed. It is already so.”

“It is.”

A herald rang out from the house – Legolas and Bain appeared with a soccer ball between them.

“Housework all done, lads?” Bard called back.

“All done,” Legolas said with satisfaction.

“What about Tilda and Sigrid?”

“Tilda’s done,” Bain replied, toeing up the soccer ball to bounce it on his knees. “Sigrid is, too, but she said she wanted to get started on the paper she said her English teacher will assign tomorrow, so she’s in her room.”

“A little two on two, then?” Bard gave Thran an inquiring look.

“Of course,” Thran assented, and the foursome spent a vigorous half hour trying to send the soccer ball past one pair or the other. They played Bard and Bain against Thran and Legolas, then Bard and Legolas against Thran and Bain, and finally fathers against sons. The boys were faster, but the fathers were more strategic about their teamwork, so they were evenly matched all three times.

By the time the Gamgees appeared across the back yard, Thran and Bard were ready to retire from the fray, and let the children take over. Both Gamgee parents were laden with pots and pans of one thing or another, so clearly they bore more than beans and salad.

“I brought some deviled eggs, and some rolls,” Rosie said. “I know this lot is nothing but bottomless pits, so I wanted to do what I could to fill them up, as if that’s possible!”

“We’ve got two kinds of chicken marinating, and a big blueberry crumble, so that ought to put a dent in them,” Bard returned, laughing, as Tilda ran outside to greet Elanor and her brothers and sister. “Just in time, Til! You can have my place in the soccer game!”

Little Merry was only four, and too small to keep up with the older children, so the six other children split into teams of three to start a new game. Thran was gratified to see Bain and Legolas moderate their enthusiasm so that six-year-old Rose and eight-year-old Frodo got to play as much as ten-year-old Tilda and Elanor. Sam passed his big pot of beans to Bard and the carton of beer to Thran, then he hauled Merry over his shoulder.
“You’re just a big old sack of oatmeal, aren’t you, Merry-Merry?” Sam teased, dodging one of Merry’s small blue trainers when the boy squirmed gleefully.

“Are you oatmeal?” Thran teased Merry as he lay over Sam’s shoulder. “I have never heard a sack of oatmeal giggle so much before.”

“He’s the giggliest oatmeal in the world, aren’t you, Merry-Merry?” Rosie laughed as they headed inside.

“Wiggly, too,” Sam dodged another small blue trainer. “Hang on, there, wiggle worm, before your dear old Dad drops you by accident!”

They left the Gamgees’ salad and beans in the kitchen, then Bard gave Rosie and Sam the tour of the house he’d apparently offered when they’d helped him move Rahmiel to the Ilithien gallery on Thursday. Seeing Bard’s work through the Gamgees’ admiring eyes increased Thran’s appreciation of how much his husband had accomplished since they’d moved here. When they got to the center hall, Rosie was glad to answer their queries about how to replace the two round windows with stained glass. The upcoming work on the solarium was the subject of a lot of discussion, too, just because it was such a different undertaking, and a gardener was involved. By then, the children were tired of their soccer, and Bain and Legolas peppered Sam with questions about banana trees and fruit trees, which he was delighted to entertain. Sigrid came down when she heard all the to-do, and was drawn into the discussion about Rosie’s stained glass as everyone marshaled supper. Rosie asked about his ballet, given her work on the local arts council, so Thran explained about the internships the Imladris students could take on to work on the set and stage crews. Conversation continued in the kitchen as Bard grilled chicken and Rosie saw to the beans, while Sam and Thran kept them company to set the table, and collect enough chairs to seat everyone. It was fun to see Bard and Sam enjoy bottles of beer, while he and Rosie savored glasses of wine. The kitchen island was full of good things to eat when the adults called the children to the table.

“I love deviled eggs,” Bain mumbled through a mouthful of the same as he went through the line. “These are so good, Miss Rosie.”

“Thanks, Bain,” Rosie laughed. “You’re lucky to get one with Elanor and Frodo around. They’re both gluttons.”

“I would be, too, and that’s no lie,” Bain nodded. “I like ‘em with pickle relish. The best.”

“Leave some for everyone else,” Bard asked, when Bain went to snatch a third one off the plate. “Have some salad.”

“It’s a feast, Da,” Bain protested. “You don’t eat salad at a feast.”


The boys groaned, but both put an ample helping of salad on their plates. Conversation flagged only until everyone had taken the edge off their hunger. Frodo eyed Legolas and Bain sandwiching pieces of chicken in Rosie’s rolls, which he decided seemed like a good idea, especially when that meant he didn’t have to use a fork. Tilda chatted away with Elanor, oblivious to the laughter that surrounded them when Merry tried to stuff an entire deviled egg in his mouth, only to find his mouth so full that he couldn’t chew. He was finally distracted from the egg plate when Bard brought out the blueberry crumble and vanilla ice cream, and the conversation calmed once again while everyone indulged in the treat. Once everyone was through, the adults pitched in to clean up the kitchen.
Despite the revelry, the Gamgees didn’t linger long after dessert. Tomorrow was a school day, and they had four small children to get bathed and settled for bed.

“I know you’re having a good time, Rose, but we have to get you ready for school tomorrow,” Sam explained for the seventh time. The gardener was as patient explaining this to his daughter as he’d been the first time.

“We’ve got to get ready for school tomorrow, too,” Bard stooped beside Rose. “Next time, we’ll get together on a Saturday, so you and Elanor can play with Tilda longer, all right?”

“You better,” Rose turned an accusing and disconsolate face on her parents. “It’s no fair that we have to go home early because of school! You don’t have to go to school!”

“That’s because I have to go to work, remember, Miss Rosy Toes?” Sam gave Rose a benevolent expression, refusing to let her bait him into ill humor. “Mr. Thran, Mr. Bard, your Mom, and I all have to go to work, which is longer than school. So we’ll come back again soon, or maybe we’ll have Tilda and her family over to our place.”

“Soon?”

“Soon,” Sam nodded. “So let’s head home, and let Tilda and her family get ready for school and such tomorrow, too. Say thank you for the chicken, and you’ll see them again soon.”

“Thank you for the chicken AND the blueberry crumble,” Rose said primly with a pointed look at her father. “And I hope we get to eat supper together again soon.”

“Thank you, and we’ll get together soon,” Bard nodded. “Thanks for all the good stuff, Rosie, Sam. Up to snuff, as usual.”

“We had a great time, Bard, Thran,” Sam collected Merry over his shoulder again, and took Rose’s hand as they came outside. “Congratulations about your show yesterday, Bard, and Thran, keep us posted about the ballet. Sounds exciting.”

“More than exciting – thrilling,” Rosie exclaimed. “I can’t wait to see it first hand.”

“Neither can I,” Thran gave an exaggerated sigh, drawing laughter. “Ten weeks seems like so much time, but it is not. It will be very busy.”

“You know it,” Rosie waved as they crossed the yard. “Thanks again, you two. Everything was delicious!”

“It was!” Bard sent back, waving. “See you at the bus stop tomorrow, all!”

The Gamgees sent goodbyes as they headed home, leaving Thran and Bard to shoo their children inside to start on the round of baths and backpack checking and paper organizing.

“I am full,” Thran sighed, once he and Bard had followed the children to bed. “So much good food, first with Kasim, and then with our friends. It was very hard for me not to eat too much, because everything was so good.”

“I did eat too much,” Bard lay flat beside Thran with his eyes closed. He heaved a deep sigh and grinned, even though he kept his eyes closed. “What a way to go.”

“With such good food on the table, gluttony becomes a very attractive sin.”
Bard chuckled as Thran turned out his nightside light. “No argument here.”

“Your blueberry crumble is decadent, even without ice cream.”

“Everybody else thought so, too. There isn’t any left.”

“There was nothing left of anything. How did so much food disappear so completely?”

“Eight hungry children, and four adults who all work very hard. Not a piker in the patch.”

“Indeed.”

Bard reached out an arm to gather Thran against his chest, and they settled into their usual close embrace.

“Lyubov moya?”

Bard rumbled an inquiry.

“I had a thought this afternoon.”

“Something about the house?”

“Something about our family. Something that we must do.”

“What’s that?”

“We need to get our medical insurance in order. We have been very lucky that none of the children has gotten sick, or either of us, for that matter. So tomorrow when I come home from the ballet, I will look at what I must do to make sure that you and your children are listed on the medical insurance. I should have done this before now, but life has been most busy.”

“I should have thought about it, too,” Bard roused. “Gods, after going so long without insurance, you would’ve thought I would’ve remembered to do something about it. You’re right about how lucky we’ve been. I thought sure all of the children would have gotten sick as soon as they started at the Imladris Academy, because it was a new set of germs.”

“So I will do this tomorrow for us. There is more we need to do.”

“What else?”

“We must write wills so that if anything happens to you or me, we and our children are protected. That is easy to remedy – Kell will help us see to it. But along with that, I wonder if you would consider one more thing.”

“What?”

“I wonder... because you want to protect your children as best you can, and I want to protect Legolas just as much... we both think of all our children as our children, yes? Not as children and stepchildren, only children. But the law, what the authorities think, is another story, so perhaps... perhaps we should adopt each other’s children, so that they are as much our children to the authorities as they are to us.”

Bard was silent for a long second, and Thran thought he’d overstepped himself. But Bard pulled him close, and pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair.
“You’d do that? You’d adopt my children?”

Thran raised up on his elbow to regard Bard in the dark. “You would adopt Legolas as your own, too. It would not change how either of us regards our children, I think. But it would protect them, and I hope it would show them how much we love them.”

“You want to get us so entwined that we’ll never get divorced, don’t you? As if that'll ever happen.”

“That will never happen. I won’t let it.”

Bard swallowed. Did his breath quaver just the smallest bit? “You must be serious. You never use a contraction unless you’re really serious.”

Thran snorted. “Tcha, now is not the time to debate a Russian’s English grammar. The next thing you know, you will want me to use that most ridiculous of verb tenses, the gerund. I am going, I am eating, I am waiting for anyone to tell me why the gerund is so prevalent in this country. I am standing in the hall proclaiming that I am going to the market, when clearly all I really do is stand in the hall and proclaim, which does not get me to the market at all. Better to say I will go to the market later, or I go now. No standing, proclaiming, going.”

“Are you going to gesticulate now?” Bard’s soft voice revealed the fond smile he hid in the dark.

Thran took hold of Bard’s wrist and shook it back and forth. “There. We have both gesticulated.”

Bard chuckled. “That makes it official, then. You are serious. Contractions, gesticulations, a long declaration... I stand humbled at the depth of your seriousness.”

Thran gave Bard a raspberry as he lay back down. “At least you did not say that with a gerund. So foolish. I gesticulate in its general direction.”

Bard’s arms went around him. “I don’t have any words that can tell you how floored I am that you’ve offered to adopt my children. Three children are a lot to take on.”

“You would take on another, too. Then we would both have four. We do already, but to adopt all of them as ours, not merely yours and mine, would see to them in the event that one of us cannot. So please consider it.”

“I don’t need to. If you will, I will, too.”

Thran’s smile spread across his face, and he stroked Bard’s chest slowly. “Then I will talk to Kell about it, as well as how we should make our wills.”

“Okay.” Bard pulled Thran even closer. “I wish I knew what I did to deserve you, angel, because whatever it was, I’d do it again ten times over. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. Now you’re the best thing that ever happened to my children, too.”

“You are my salvation too, my saint. We are good for each other.”

“And our children, too.”

Thran smiled in the dark. “Our children, too.”

A patch of Thran’s hair was damp, but he didn’t mention it. There was no need.
Chapter 112

Chapter Summary

The saint’s rosy glow translates into a renewed sense of purpose. While the cherubs prepare a celebration, the angel and the saint consider the future, including the practical, the familial, and the carnal.

Bard awoke on Monday with a renewed sense of purpose. He had so many reasons to feel good, to forge ahead – the success of his Saturday show, the emerging beauty of the house, the happiness of his children, and a loving husband he still wondered how he’d been so lucky to find. Last night, that husband had spoken about adopting their children, which was the most unselfish, loving, brave, generous, trusting, and hopeful act Bard could have expected. Just thinking about it put a lump in Bard’s throat. If ever he worried that Thran might have reservations about their marriage, his pitch for them to adopt each other’s children nixed them all.

Gods, he had so much to live up to, to be the equal of a divine Russian ballet dancer! No matter how often Thran told him that he was, he still didn’t quite credit it. But he was getting there. At least now he was down to thinking Thran was out of his league only twenty percent of the time.

Getting there... Bard chuckled. Thran had been at his most endearing last night when he’d riffed on the silliness of the English gerund verb tense. Every time he launched into such a declaration, Bard melted. The rapid-fire, Russian-accented stream of words, the animated delivery, and those gesticulating hands... his beautiful Russian dancer was funniest when he didn’t realize he was being funny –

Gods, another gerund. If Thran could hear Bard’s thoughts, he’d be apoplectic, and hilarious.

Thran wasn’t at the house this morning to rattle about Bard’s verb tenses, however; he’d headed off to the UVB studio soon after the children had left for school. Work on the emerging ballet would soon become more intense, because in a few days, Thran and company would no longer develop Immortal’s choreography – they’d rehearse it. Soon the Imladris Academy’s auditorium would be home to armies of students and their professional mentors to build the set, rig the lights, and record the sound that would bring Death’s story to life. That meant afternoon and evening rehearsals, rather than morning ones, to accommodate the primary use of the school building until the end of the school year.

Bard headed into the solarium. He wanted to finish the family’s Moroccan oasis before Thran’s rehearsals and his artwork became too intense, so he’d have a chance to tempt a geisha to visit after the children left for school. As he plied steel wool and stripper on the wood trim, he wondered what Thran would ask of him to please the geisha. Gods, it’d been months since they’d veered into fantasy, which he’d missed. They needed to make this one worth the wait, as well as the exotic surroundings. Not that that would be hard. They’d managed more heat than Bard could have imagined in a completely empty garret, then again in an almost empty garret. Imagine what they’d come up with in here!

The day progressed, even if Bard’s work on the solarium wood trim didn’t. The two painters came to estimate the exterior painting. Bilbo called about the three potential commissions for sculpture that he’d gathered Saturday, and next steps for his promotion campaign. Bard needed to update his
portfolio, schedule client meetings, talk to Bilbo about pricing and time frames, and so forth. The window company made a mistake and arrived to do their estimate a day early, but Bard was just as glad to have all the interruptions in one day. In the middle he managed to grab lunch, then after the window company left, he drove to the market to replenish the depleted kitchen stores. He came home to find all of the children in the house, an hour and a half earlier than they usually were. All four helped him haul in the sacks of groceries and put things away.

“Didn’t any of you have sport today?” he asked in a concerned voice. “Did something happen at school that they sent you home early?”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “It’s your birthday today, Da, remember? We decided to come home early to make supper for you.”

“It’s a good thing you went to the market first,” Legolas said, setting bags of flour and sugar on the counter. “We had a hard time deciding on what to make because the refrigerator was so empty.”

“I got more than a ton of food,” Bard said, handing Sigrid a bunch of mixed blossoms. “Would you put these in water so they keep until you can put some upstairs on your memory shelf, Sig?”

“Sure, Da. Which ones are the daffodils?” Sigrid ducked into the butler’s pantry to find a vase. “Or are they narcissus?”

“I think the small ones are the narcissus,” Legolas offered as he carried the flour and sugar bags into the pantry to transfer their contents into the big storage bins. “The big ones are the daffodils.”

“The carnations looked peaked, and the roses were kind of droopy,” Bard commented, sliding one of the cloth grocery sacks towards Tilda at one end of the island, and another towards Bain at the opposite end. “These were nice and bright. I thought your mams would like that.”

“Springy,” Tilda pronounced, sniffing them as Sigrid went by.

“Ooh, more potatoes!” Bain exclaimed, pulling a plastic bag of tubers out of the sack. “Shepherd’s pie tonight!”

“It’s Da’s birthday,” Tilda prompted. “He should get to choose what he wants for supper. Just like we get to.”

“You do?” Legolas came out of the pantry with the empty paper sugar and flour bags.

Tilda nodded vigorously. “We all get to choose on our birthdays. I had macaroni and cheese last year.”

“I had chicken pot pie,” Sigrid smiled in remembrance. “And yes, Bain had shepherd’s pie.”

“So you’ll have to think about what you want, Legolas,” Tilda summed up.

“I have a ways to wait – all the way until the end of November. I think Papa and I have the latest birthdays in Clan Ffyrnig. His is October second, and mine is November twenty-third.”

“August thirteenth,” Sigrid said.

“September ninth,” chimed in Tilda.

“And mine’s next after Da’s – June eleventh,” Bain chortled. “And I so want to go back to Kasim’s.”
“We went to Kasim’s for my birthday yesterday,” Bard reminded the children. “So do you think I need a second birthday supper?”

“That was lunch,” Tilda corrected. “This is supper, and it’s our supper. From us. So what would you like that we know how to make?”

“I’m making cake,” Sigrid announced. “Chocolate with chocolate icing.”

“Mmm,” both Bain and Legolas chorused, drawing Sigrid’s chuckle.

“Cake is good,” Bard nodded. “We need a lot of veg for your Papa, Legs, so he stays strong.”

“But not chicken, please?” Legolas asked. “We had chicken yesterday. Two kinds.”

“Can I make that gelatin fruit yogurt thing?” Tilda asked. “Orange?”

“That’d be good for tomorrow’s supper, little doll; there’s not enough time for it to set before supper tonight.”

“Oh, I forgot,” Tilda confessed. “I can make mashed potatoes, then. Legolas showed me how.”

“Mashed potatoes are good,” Bard agreed. “Maybe sweet potatoes rather than white ones? You make them the same way.”

“Yeah, with cinnamon,” Legolas amended. “That’d be good, Kukla.”

“Then I’ll do those. What main dish do you want, Da?”

“What about hamburgers?”

“Can I grill?” Bain asked quickly.

“That leaves me with the vegetables,” Legolas sighed.

“You two decide. The rule is that whoever grills this time, the other grills next time.”

Tilda gave Bard a hopeful glance. “I’ll help you with the veggies, Legolas. I can peel and chop everything when I do the potatoes, and then you can wiggle them in the pan.”

“You would?” Legolas looked at Bard, too, waiting to see what he’d say about Tilda using the big chef’s knife.

“Why don’t you peel the veg for Legs, and he’ll put the potatoes on the stove for you, and I’ll help you chop?”

“Because it’s your birthday, and I want to do it myself,” Tilda protested.

“That’s sweet of you, little doll. Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Let’s let Sigrid make the cake down at that end of the island, and I’ll give you a lesson about how to use the knife at this end. That way you’ll have all the veg cut up for supper, and then you and Legs can cook the potatoes and the veg at the same time.”

“Is that okay with you, Legolas?” Tilda asked.

He nodded. “Okay, I’ll do the veggies. Are you going to give Bain a grill lesson after the knife lesson? Because I want to watch that one, too.”
“Good idea,” Bard agreed. “Knife lesson first, then grill lesson.”

While Sigrid tended to her cake, the other children got out carrots, potatoes, onions, red peppers, and bok choy. Then Tilda sat on the stool in front of the cutting board to have her first lesson with the big chef’s knife. Under Bard’s tutelage, she carefully sliced one half of a potato, then the other. Carrots were a bit trickier, being round and therefore harder to steady, but Tilda acquitted herself well. Bard explained how to peel the onions under running water, then slice them quickly to avoid the dreaded teary eyes, but they still had to cover the bowlful of slices with a kitchen towel to keep them from making everyone weep.

“Ugh,” Sigrid waved at the onion fumes as she slid two filled cake pans into the oven. “This might be a chocolate onion cake!”

That raised a groan from the children and a chuckle from Bard. “I hope not. I like both, but not together.”

Tilda made a face. “Double ugh. Quick, put the onion bowl in the fridge!”

Peeled and sliced vegetables went into the fridge, then Bard had four attentive students as he explained how the oven-top grill worked, how to cook the meat properly, and how to prevent a grease fire. The last part about how to clean the grill after it cooled wasn’t received with as much enthusiasm, but Bard was firm – if the children wanted to grill, then they had to clean up afterwards. That put only a slight damper on Bain’s enthusiasm.

The next lesson, of course, was which spices to mix in the ground beef. Sigrid and Tilda already knew this part, so they worked on cake icing while Bard guided the boys to mix and shape the patties. By the time Thran came through the mudroom door, everything was prepped for the evening’s supper.

“Such industry!” Thran exclaimed, venturing into the busy kitchen with his bag over his shoulder. “It seems we will have a mighty feast for Bard’s birthday tonight.”

“Including cake!” Tilda said triumphantly, pointing to Sigrid’s iced layer cake waiting on a platter on the counter by the fridge. “Sigrid made it, and I helped mix up the icing. And I learned how to use the chef’s knife, and all of us learned how to make the grill work.”

“You all have been very busy,” Thran gave Bard a quick kiss on the cheek, then gave Legolas a hug. Bain sneaked under Thran’s other arm to give him a hug, which he returned, then Sigrid came over to offer hers. Bain watched this without saying anything, but Thran gave him a grin all the same. “Such a touchy-feely clan we are when we all arrive home, yes? It is very nice to be so welcomed. But perhaps you prefer a handshake, or the fist bump, or a wave?”

Bain offered a sheepish grin. “Um, maybe...”

The boy held out his fist, which Thran tapped with his own. “Thank you. I am properly home now. And what part do you make for this feast?”

“I’m the hamburger griller,” Bain said, relaxing enough to take a superhero stance. “And the bun slicer.”

“Kukla and I are potatoes and vegetables,” Legolas added. “But I get to grill next time.”

“You have left nothing for me to do,” Thran made a sad face.

“Oh, yes, we have,” Sigrid refuted with a sharp look at Bard. “You take Da into the sitting room and
keep him out of the kitchen. Otherwise, he’ll be in here, supervising.”

“Yeah, Da, you need to get out of the cooks’ way,” Bain grabbed a spatula to shake at Bard.

“Hmm, I could do that more often,” Bard teased. “You do know to put the potatoes on first, then ten minutes later put the hamburgers on the grill and heat the skillet for the veg. Put the veg in the pan when the potatoes are done, and you’ve flipped the hamburgers to the second side.”

Sigrid made shooing motions with her hands to urge Bard out of the kitchen. “We’ll sort it out, Da. I’m here to set the table and get the timing right, so everything’s covered. So go.”

Bard held up his hands. “I’m going. Yell if you need anything.”

“We won’t,” Bain chortled, brandishing his spatula. “We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, Da,” Tilda agreed. “We can do everything. All I need is the potato smasher.”

“Third drawer, on the left,” Bard supplied, which met with groans.

“Papa, please make Bard go away so we can cook the supper,” Legolas shook his head, smiling.

Thran put his arms akimbo and gave Bard a quelling glare. “You have heard the children. You must go.”

“Gone,” Bard grinned. “Happy cooking, all.”

Thran followed Bard into the sitting room, still carrying his dance bag and chuckling at the children’s endeavors.

“They are very funny, our children,” was Thran’s comment.

“They are very sweet, our children,” Bard amended. “They all skipped sport today so they could come home early to muster supper. That’s as much a present as the actual cooking.”

“It is,” Thran agreed, dropping his bag on the sofa.

“Well played with Bain, too,” Bard said as he went into the solarium.

Thran trailed after. “He and Legolas have a harder time to know how to treat us than the girls. I have wondered what I should say to them to help them be more comfortable, but this is the first time I have thought of what to say when the moment came. I hope it was not too awkward.”

Bard exhaled. “It’d be awkward any way we tried to handle it. I figured the best thing for me to do was to let Legolas decide how close he wants to get. I won’t push.”

“Nor will I push Bain. I try to play the video games so that we have something to do together.”

“Me, too. Maybe we want to rethink all the sports camps this summer,” Bard mused, looking up at the solarium ceiling. “Choose some, but not book every minute of the school break. We want to give ourselves time to have fun together. That might help the lads feel more comfortable. Maybe make some day trips to various places, or do something outdoors. I always wanted to try one of those whitewater rafting trips. Tilda’s old enough now.”

Thran looked dubious. “Is that where you hurtle down an enraged river in a small inflatable raft and scream in terror just before you are dumped out onto the rocks?”
“That’s the one.” Bard gave Thran a brash grin. “Oh, come on. It sounds like fun.”

Thran considered for some seconds. “Perhaps you should clean out your ears.”

Laughing, Bard turned to his husband to poke him in the ribs. “You’re such a city dweller.”

“I admit it,” Thran shrugged, unperturbed. “I have never wanted to live in a tent or do without a shower for extended days. Also, I am too tall for the cots, and there are too many mosquitoes that make sleep impossible. But I do like to hike, and be outside, and cook over the fire. So perhaps this adventure in a raft would not be so terrible, as long as we can come home to our soft beds and warm showers afterwards.”

“That’s fair. And we’ll choose something reasonable, nothing at flood stage. It might improve our mojo with the lads, too.”

Thran hummed agreement, then looked back up at the ceiling. “What do we look at, lyubov moya?”

“I started to scrub down the woodwork this morning, before the mobile and the doorbell decided to ring without end.” He described the tradesmen who’d visited, and noted that Bilbo had called about the commission inquiries.

“The commission inquiries come first, of course,” Thran nodded firmly. “Just as the ballet comes first for me, so your art comes first for you. There is no debate about that.”

“Just one little niggle,” Bard ventured, and gestured around the room. “The paint and the screens and the arch won’t take too long. I want to finish those, and then the muse of sculpture can have me full time.”

Thran looked around with Bard, and his serious expression gradually melted into a sly smile. “I admit that I am eager to christen this room.”

“So am I,” Bard stroked Thran’s back. “We haven’t played a game in quite a while. I’ve missed that.”

Thran’s hum was more purr than anything else, and the fingers roving over Bard’s glutes were as soft as a kitten’s fur. “I am eager for the new one you started. I have so many questions to ask you about it.”

“What kind of questions?” Bard gave Thran a considering look.

“Later, when we are in private. For now, tell me about these commissions.”

“I’ll go into Bilbo’s office tomorrow to talk about them, as well as some other things. Frodo thinks I need an Internet web site about who I am and what kind of art I do, and he wants to augment the information he put on their Shire Hills website. Then there’s whether I want to write a contract with clients – I do; Daphne taught me that – and what I need to do to help promote myself, and fee structures, and my portfolio, and schedules, and a raft of other things.”

Thran looked surprised. “I thought some of this was already done when you signed the contract with Bilbo.”

“That was the mostly about the contract between me and Shire Hills. This is to sort out the contract between me and whoever offers me a commission. Bilbo’s ecstatic about how well the show went, so he wants to keep the interest going. I’m grateful, to be honest. I’m not a good self-promoter, so I need all the help I can get. This will allow Bilbo to do a lot of the business negotiation for me, but
not all, by any means. It’ll also help me know what things to think about from the business end, so I get more comfortable. I’m glad that Bilbo and Frodo are so patient with me.”

“Will he go with you when you have meetings with the people who want commissions?”

“Probably not. He’ll do the upfront contact and negotiations, and I’ll visit the client about the actual work. So I won’t have to do as many cold calls. I’ll have a reason to be talking to someone other than to yell, ‘hey look at me, buy my art.’”

“It is all very involved,” Thran conceded. “I had no idea that it was so involved.”

“So many things to do,” Bard exhaled again. “I have a lot of work to do out in the barn to get that up to snuff. After the solarium, that’s next on the list.”

“That is the last big thing to do inside,” Thran agreed. “When the sofa for the main room comes, we can choose a paint, and that will be done, too.”

“The house has come a long way since New Year’s Eve,” Bard smiled. “Soon we’ll be down to traipsing through the junk shops like the rest of the tourists to find stuff to fill the house.”

“That will be our pleasure,” Thran brushed a kiss on Bard’s hair. “As the ballet allows, of course. Full rehearsals will begin soon.”

“Busy time for all of us.”

The subject changed to Bard’s impressions about the contractors he’d seen today. They were still in the midst of that discussion when Sigrid called them to supper.

“It smells pretty good,” Bard teased. “No burnt buns, or meat, or anything else.”

“If you’d wanted blackened food, you should’ve ordered blackened food,” Sigrid riposted with a grin.

“I never understood blackened food,” Thran said, with a sidelong glance at Bard. “To order good food, then ask for it to be charred? It seems absurd.”

“I think that’s Cajun, right?” Legolas said, as they came into the kitchen. “Don’t they blacken redfish?”

“Burnt redfish?” Tilda grimaced. “That you have to eat? That sounds yucky.”

“I think it’s just the spices that turn black when you sear it in the pan,” Bard offered. “But even so, a black piece of anything on my plate does sound yucky.”

“That’s good,” Bain declared, pointing to the platter of cooked hamburgers. “No black hamburgers.”

“Or veggies,” Legolas and Tilda chorused, pointing to the bowls of potatoes and vegetables.

“Then it’ll be a good supper,” Bard ruffled their heads.

“So start, Da!” Bain urged. “I’m hungry.”

“Are you ever not?” Bard teased, but started through the line. When he got to the table, he noticed several small presents piled on the windowsill by his chair. “And gifts, too?”

“Course, Da,” Bain snorted as he put his plate down with a thunk. “But you have to eat first.”
“That won’t be hard,” Bard shook his head. “Everything looks and smells great.”

Bard didn’t have to pretend to enjoy his supper. The children had done a solid job of producing juicy hamburgers on toasted buns with lots of condiments, crisply stir-fried vegetables, and cinnamon-laced sweet potatoes – clearly Tilda had decided a dose of Legolas’s favorite spice would add a festive touch to her humble tubers. The children seemed to enjoy their sandwiches more than usual, too, because they’d prepared it all. Sigrid’s chocolate cake was the final flourish to the meal.

“No, you can’t cut it yet, Bard!” Legolas protested, when Bard took up the knife. “We’re going to sing, aren’t we?”

“We certainly are,” Sigrid agreed, and launched into the tune. The effort was a bit ragged as everyone joined in, but strengthened by the second line. Bain was the one who kept singing after the rest, adding the variation about smelly monkeys.

“You know what that smells like, boyo,” Bard razzed back. “You know what a sock monkey is? You’re the original sock-er monkey.”

“Ha, ha,” Bain mugged. “So slice the cake, and open your presents!”

“Pass ‘em down, then,” Bard said, as he put the first slice on a plate and handed it to Bain.

Once a slice of cake sat at everyone’s place – even Thran indulged – Bard unwrapped the gifts the children had gotten him. A jar of cashews from Bain, a box of chocolate orange crèmes from Legolas, a big wedge of cheese from Tilda, and a box of peanut brickle from Sigrid soon festooned the table. Thran had followed the children’s lead, and provided a big box of cheese straws to accompany the other treats.

“I’ll have to throw another party, with all of this,” Bard surveyed the bounty. “It was great of you to give me all my favorites. Thanks, one and all.”

“Now cake!” Bain chortled, taking up his fork. “The smell’s enough to drive me crazy!”

“That’s a compliment, I think,” Sigrid laughed, but she was no slower to take a bite of her slice.

“If it’s not, this is,” Legolas said through a mouthful. “So good!”

The chocolate cake was delicious, with two thick layers of cake and decadent ganache icing. How long would it take the children to come down from the sugar high this indulgence would give them? Maybe they’d burn it off while they cleaned up the kitchen, which all of them proceeded to do once they were through their cake. They settled to their homework afterwards, leaving their fathers to return to the sitting room and resume their discussion about contractors.

“Why did you talk to only one window contractor?” Thran asked with more curiosity than disagreement.

“I talked to Sam about who’d done his windows a while back,” Bard explained. “I also used one of those online business rating services, and the one Sam used had very high reviews. I’d had a couple in when I was interested in replacing the solarium windows, and this is the one I chose, so I just called the same one again. Very professional, and he offered a substantial discount to do the whole house. He’ll be back out Wednesday to measure all the windows and get them ordered.”

“Sensible,” Thran nodded. “And the painter?”

“One’s a bit more expensive than the other, but she also got a high customer rating. She made a point
to say that she was careful to keep the paint chips out of the flowerbeds. I liked that attention to
detail. So I’ll probably go with her.”

“And which goes first, the windows, or the paint?”

“I’d prefer to do the windows first, but that’d push the paint into late spring or early summer, and
then scheduling gets to be a problem. So I’ll probably go with the painting as soon as the contractor
says she can do it. One more thing out of the way.”

“Agreed. At least you will not have to do it, only oversee it.”

“I wonder if I’ll be able to stand it?” Bard leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees, then rubbed
the back of his head. “To watch someone else do the work?”

Thran stretched out a hand to rub Bard’s back in consolation. “If the feeling is too much for you, you
can go out to the barn and work while they paint, lyubov moya.”

“First things first. I’ll meet with Bilbo and Frodo tomorrow morning, then I’ll finish in here. In a few
days, I’ll be back in the barn fulltime. It’s time to be an artist in metal again, rather than in paint,
spackling, wood stripper, plaster, and carpentry.”

“Mmm.” Thran quirked his eyebrows in anticipation. “I cannot wait. We will have our game with the
geisha to consecrate the solarium, yes. It will be exotic and beautiful and refined. But you will
forgive me if I anticipate a much less... refined ritual for the barn when it comes back to life.”

“You and your grunge kink,” Bard breathed, looking back at his husband with a sly smile. The hand
stroking his back paused, then strayed over his hair, playing with a curl that threatened to fall into his
eyes. Bard leaned into the caress, but kept his eyes locked on Thran’s.

“You and my grunge kink. Such an irresistible and divine pairing.”

“Filthy, but divine.”

Thran’s smirk was unrepentant. “Of course. The best of both. We deserve no less.”

Despite Bard’s anticipation for the elegant rendezvous he and Thran would make in the solarium, he
also looked forward to a more primal celebration in the back of his workshop.

First chance he got, he’d stash a tube of lubricant in the workbench drawer.
Chapter 113

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint consider the sensibilities of the cherubs, a house and a ballet progress, and chicken soup has a reason to make an appearance.

The racy banter between Thran and his husband stopped when Tilda came in with her usual Monday list of French vocabulary words. As much fun as it was to tease each other, it was not something either of them did when their children were present. It was hard for any child to think of parents as anything other than nurturing creatures, with little life that extended beyond the day-to-day concerns of caregiving. That was fine with Thran – he loved his son, and he was grateful that they were finally able to live together in the same house again. He’d come to love Bard’s children, too, and now it was his responsibility, as well as his pleasure, to see to them as well as Legolas. He’d have time to tease Bard later, when doing so wouldn’t discomfit their children.

Discomfited children... his earlier exchange with Bain in the kitchen might have been an example of that. Both Tilda and Sigrid had been so quick to take to Thran, which humbled and pleased him. How much richer his life was with his excellent co-conspirator Sigrid as his ally, and his little Russkaya Kukla as his delightful fellow cheese sampler. But Bain was trickier, not so easy to get close to. Bard had found the same to be true with Legolas.

How much of this had to do with the sometimes-problematic relationship between boys and their fathers, and how much had to do with the even more problematic relationship between boys and their stepfathers? And then there was the gay factor...

All of these made any discussion about adoption just as problematic.

It was unreasonable to expect Bain to love Thran as much as the boy did Bard, or for Legolas to love Bard as much as he did Thran. Neither he nor Bard expected that. Happily, both boys seemed content to live with them as a married couple. Legolas was very impressed with Bard’s renovation skills, his artistic talent, and his cooking, and he appreciated Bard’s easy guidance. He’d never showed signs of being uncomfortable around Bard. But would he accept Bard’s offer to adopt him? Or Thran’s offer to adopt Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda?

How would Bain feel about the reverse?

It didn’t feel right to spring this on all the children at once. Any confusion or hesitation on anyone’s part might cause misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and damage the good relationship the children shared. The better thing would be for him to talk with Legolas alone first. Similarly, Bard would talk with his children; whether separately or together would be his call.

When he and Tilda had finished her French words and she went upstairs to shower, Thran got up from the sofa where he’d worked with Tilda, and sat beside Bard on the other one. As usual, Bard had his drawing pad on his lap and a pencil in hand, sketching, but for once Thran didn’t look at the image. He entwined his left arm with Bard’s right, and leaned close to Bard’s ear.

“I think about our idea to adopt the children,” he murmured lowly.
Bard leaned close, but kept one eye on the door to the kitchen and the other on his sketchpad. "Tell me."

As Thran described his musings in a soft voice, Bard listened intently, nodding along the way.

"What do you think, lyubov moyu?"

"I think you’re right," Bard said without hesitation. "You talk to Legolas, and I’ll talk to Sig, Bain, and Til. We’ll see what they think, and then decide where to go from there. The salient points are that we love them the same whether we do this or not, but doing it protects them in case something terrible happens. I don’t want any of them to end up as foster children because of some messed-up bureaucratic thing."

"You have no other family?" Thran asked. "I know you said your parents are dead, but what about Daphne’s?"

"Her father died just after we graduated from art school. Just dropped dead from a cerebral hemorrhage one day. Evan was in good shape, very calm, and a great guy, no indications at all that anything was wrong. It was a devastating blow to all of us, but of course Moira was the hardest hit – she was never the same after. Still strong, still supportive, but no more bubbly Gran, even around the children, no matter how much she adored them. She soldiered on, though, even if she never lost that sadness.

“But when Daphne died...” Bard winced, and rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Moira was a lifesaver for the first year, staying here to help with the children, but... she faded pretty quickly after that. She decided to move into a nice assisted living facility, where she had her own space as well as people to help her. But no matter how nice the place was, the move wasn’t easy for her. I think that was the final straw. She’d lost her husband, her daughter, so much of her strength, and now her longtime home. A lot of people in that situation fail. In fact, it’s called ‘failure to thrive.’ So... three years into it, Gran was gone. Tilda was four. I never told her that I’d had to move to the city. That would’ve been another blow."

Thran hummed sympathetically. "It could not have been easy for you to watch that, either."

Bard shook his head, and his lips tightened into a wince. "Beyond grim. I felt like... well, you don’t want to know what I felt like. What about you? Are Vileria’s parents dead, too?"

Thran nodded. "She was an orphan, and never knew her parents. All they had left her was her name, not even the knowledge of whether she had brothers or sisters. She told me that she did not miss them, because she had never known the traditional family. She was fortunate that someone noticed how much she loved to dance at the slightest provocation, or imitate the great Russian gymnasts when she saw them on television. So she was sent to the state school for dance as I was, and there we made our friendship, and later, our family. She so delighted in it, despite its contrivance, especially when Legolas was born. She said it was magical. I did not think so at first, because of the obvious reason. But she made me understand that what she delighted in so much had nothing to do with the act of sex, or one’s preferred sexual partner. It was the reassurance that an orphan without family now had one. She belonged to something."

Bard’s pencil stilled over the paper, and he swallowed. The warm, brown eyes that met Thran’s were somber. "That’s how we should explain this to the children, Thran. Just like Vileria, we have no family but this one, and no matter what happens, we want to this one to last. No foster homes."

"Yes. Let us say these things as we can in the next several days, and then we will decide what to do next."
“Do you know what’s involved legally? Maybe we should hold off to talk about it until we know whether we even can do this.”

“Hmm. Good point,” Thran nodded. “I called Kell this morning, and he will find out what we must do, and if the children must consent – not that I want to do something that the children do not like. I will tell you what he discovers.”

Bard’s hand tightened on Thran’s. “Okay.”

“I did hear from Officer Kelso this morning about Lance,” Thran went on.

“Oh?”

“He is in the juvenile jail, and faces several charges, including those for the April Fool’s Follies fight. I do not know what happens next, but Officer Kelso did say that both Mr. D and Chief Inspector Oakland were involved.”

“Did they say that Lance might get bail?”

Thran shook his head. “I do not think he was offered it. Apparently Lance was most angry about all he thought had been done to him, so much that he felt justified to risk everyone else in the gallery if it allowed him to punish Sigrid. Arson is a serious crime, and so is an indiscriminant attack on a public place. So this has moved beyond the threat he poses only to us.”

Bard considered that, rolling his pencil between his fingers. “I have to say I’m relieved. Maybe we’ll have some peace. But if they try him as a juvenile, he’ll likely get out at some point, and we may go through this all again.”

Thran’s nod was unhappy. “Perhaps so. But he does still not know where we live. In two years, Sigrid will be in college, and it will not be easy for him to find out where she is. So she will be more protected.”

“Maybe he’ll see counselors to help him get past what happened. Juvenile offenders do work with them a lot, so I’ll keep my fingers crossed.”

“Mine with yours,” Thran agreed, holding up both hands with all of his fingers but his thumbs crossed, then he linked his thumbs together for further emphasis. Bard laughed, and the conversation drifted to less fraught topics.

Maybe the gods would send a counselor who could penetrate Lance’s obsessive fixation on Clan Ffyrnig as the sole cause of his troubles. But Thran wouldn’t count on it.

* * *

The next several days were busy for Thran and the UVB company. So many meetings! Irmo’s choreography was largely done, though he would make refinements once the company began their rehearsals in the Imladris Academy’s auditorium. That would happen only once the *Immortal* set was built, so Thran met with Círdan and his seconds to discuss their progress to set up the internships with the students. Other gatherings detailed how light and sound crews came together. Rada was in full swing with his costumes, and the principal costumes were nearly done. Every morning, Thran did his barre, his yoga, and his strengthening regime for his feet and legs. His continued work with
Mme. Morgelle led to progress in his pointe work, though he was still not satisfied with it, but at least his feet continued to bear the strain, though they were a bit ragged looking. Endless meetings with potential donors, lawyers, and public relations representatives loomed. He, Luka, and Charisse posed and danced for promotional shots, film clips, and interviews. Never had he spent so much time working on a major ballet while dancing so little. How would he gain the stamina to dance a major role this way?

The cost of all this, even using unpaid student labor, was breathtaking. The tickets they’d sell for the three performances during the festival week would not come close to covering their costs, but that was true of every ballet. That’s why patrons and donors were so important to every company. A promising new investor who would have brought a welcome infusion of money into the effort backed out, citing the off-cycle schedule. So around Lettie and Thran and Ori went to find and attract others to take up the slack. If Thran broke even, he’d be ecstatic. Even if he didn’t, if the losses weren’t too severe, he’d be content. Getting *Immortal* off the ground was only the start of a long, complex campaign to position Ultraviolet Ballet as an innovative company with a fresh take on a classical art that could draw a devoted audience. Licensing fees, touring companies, companion books – Bard would be perfect for those – and future ballets would follow, but only if *Immortal* rose like a phoenix from the ashes of all the money that had been burned on it.

Lettie was forced to bow out for a few days as she coped with her ailing father. Thran and Ori jumped into the breach despite everything else they scrambled to handle. Thank the gods for Ori’s eidetic memory and superb organizational skills, or they would have not have navigated Lettie’s absence so well. Thank the gods again for Ori’s calm throughout the effort, because his thoughtful and methodical approach to any question, no matter how bizarre, helped to narrow the focus for Thran, so he was not so frazzled. Even so, much of the time he felt like a hapless crab stretched between three octopuses.

Not everything was fraught with worry about money, aching feet, and logistics. Mr. Nori sent word through Ori that his situation had stabilized because the ruckus over the late, unlamented Angelo’s business was finally settled. Bilbo sent word through Bard that why, yes, he had struck up an interesting acquaintance with a handsome chief inspector from the city. Legolas’s archery efforts began for the spring now that the weather was warm enough to keep the archers from shivering. Sigrid’s outdoor track program also began, and Tilda was back to Double Dutch jump rope. Bain’s soccer had given away to lacrosse, which he was not enamored with, but the running kept him in good condition for next fall’s soccer.

At home, Bard’s renovation efforts slowed because he spent several mornings with Bilbo to get his artistic endeavors underway. He had an attractive website now that showcased many examples of his work, including pieces he’d sold in the past. His physical portfolio was up to snuff, and he had meetings scheduled with all three of the clients who had expressed interest in commissions. Sea Spot Run and the Ring Thing came home from the Ilithien Gallery and found homes on the terrace and side garden respectively. Rahmiel was back, too, now ensconced in the main room until Bard could make his casting molds. The remaining completed sculpture in the barn, the knot of rebar that Bard had dubbed Alexander’s Downfall – a playful poke at the Gordian knot that Alexander the Great was rumored to have solved by slicing it apart with a knife – went into the Ilithien Gallery with another collection of sketches. Interest in the artistic endeavors of a certain Bard Bowman was certainly on the rise.

In and around Bard’s artistic efforts, he pressed on to bring their house closer to completion. The beautiful Contessa chair arrived and took its place in the half bath. Windows were on order, and the painters would start on the exterior in a week. Inside, Bard refinished the solarium wood trim to match the exotic wooden screens, and reassembled the scaffolding to turn the ceiling and the top of the wall into a most realistic blue sky, shaded and swirled with clouds, and dotted with a pair of
darting swifts. He smoothed the lime green paint on the walls, then stripped the hideous scabs of peeling lavender paint off the arched doorway, and anchored it to the wall.

His next effort would be to hang the carved wooden screens to either side of the arched doorway. He’d added another three screens to the four they’d already bought. Two of them were damaged, but that hadn’t deterred him, given the low price. Bard expected to dismantle some of the screens to fit the walls, anyway, so he’d work around the broken bits.

If Thran ignored the rising cost to bring *Immortal* to life, life progressed beautifully. But even things that progressed beautifully encountered bumps, as he discovered when he came downstairs one morning to help Bard with the children’s breakfasts and lunches. He found that while breakfasts were well in hand, lunches were still in progress. Bain sat at the table shoveling down porridge with his usual intensity, but his concerned expression was for Legolas, sitting beside him. Bard stood beside Legolas, his hand on the boy’s forehead.

Thran’s brow wrinkled. “What is wrong?”

“Legs is sick,” Bain mumbled though his porridge. As if to punctuate those words, Legolas pulled up the hem of his tee and buried his face in it to smother a hard sneeze.

“It’s nothing serious,” Bard reassured both Legolas and Thran. “A slight fever, that’s all.”

“I feel dizzy,” Legolas graved, leaning his elbows on the table to support his head in his hands.

“Is something going around the school?” Bard asked.

“A lot of colds and stuff,” Bain confirmed.

“If he has a fever, he cannot go to school,” Thran ventured. “I remember that from our first talk with Headmaster L’Eärendil.”

“That’s right. So you’re in for the day, Legs.” Bard looked over the boy’s head at Bain. “Can you and Sigrid collect Legolas’s homework assignments for him? Bring any of his textbooks home you think he’ll need?”

“What’s wrong with Legolas?” Tilda asked, coming into the kitchen. “You don’t look very good, Legs.”

“I’m sick,” he sniffed. “My head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton.”

“Oh-oh,” Sigrid commented as she followed Tilda into the kitchen in time to hear Legolas’s sneeze. “You’ve got the spring crap cold that’s gone around school. A lot of students are out with it. It sounds like one of those three-day things.”

“I just asked Bain if you and he could collect Legolas’s assignments for him today,” Bard repeated.

“Sure,” Sigrid dished Tilda a bowl of porridge, then another for herself, and sat down with her sister. “I’ll get French, history, and English, Bain, if you get math, science, and computer lab.”

“I’ll tell Mr. Faramir that he won’t be in archery,” Tilda offered. “I go past his office on the way to the lunch room.”

“That is very kind of you, children,” Thran thanked them. “Bard, what is your schedule today? I can stay here in the morning if you planned to be out —”
“No need, angel,” Bard said easily. “I don’t have any reason to go out today. I’ll work on the screens in the solarium, and then some sketches for one of my commissions, so Legs can keep me company in between naps if he wants. Maybe some hot soup for lunch, then?”

“That sounds good,” Thran said.

Legolas nodded. “Can I play video games?”

“Good luck with that,” Bain exhaled, as Sigrid and Tilda both shook their heads.

“The house rule has been no video games,” Bard explained to Thran apologetically. “I don’t think they’re the best things to help children rest when they’re sick. And it’s never happened that children try to stay sick for an extra day or two so they can stay on the game console,” he shot Bain a telling look, which Bain met with a sheepish smile and a shrug. “I learned that when Bain was in fourth grade.”

“It is a good house rule, then,” Thran agreed, smiling. “Better to nap between chapters of a good book, yes?”

“Reading books, puzzle books, and quiet music are all good, but the best is lots and lots of liquids, and lots and lots of naps. And warm food, like soup and porridge.”

“I’m not very hungry,” Legolas admitted in a clogged voice.

“Have your juice, then,” Thran asked, “and then go back to bed. Rest to help your body fight the germs.”

“I’ll get you some acetaminophen to help lower your fever,” Bard said, heading upstairs. “You can take it with your juice.”

“Okay,” Legolas nodded.

“Hope you feel better soon,” Tilda wished him.

“Thank you,” the boy tried to smile, as Bard returned with the two pills. Legolas scarfed them down with his juice, then got up to go upstairs. As Thran went with his son, Bard already had his head in the freezer, looking for chicken to make soup.

“What?” Bard asked, when he heard Thran snicker.

“You are so predictable, **lyubov moya**. You will fight the evil spring cold with warm chicken soup.”

“Of course I will,” Bard winked as he dumped the frozen chicken into a pot and added hot water from the teakettle. “The stuff works.”

“Even if it does not, there are few more delicious remedies,” Thran grinned. “I will tuck Legolas into bed, and sit with him until you take the rest of the children to the bus stop.”

“Righto,” Bard waved a hand as he went back to the children’s lunches. “Do you want some hot tea to keep by your bed, Legs?”

“That would be nice. Thank you,” the boy replied, preceding Thran down the hall.

“Lemon ginger’s good for colds, but any kind is helpful.”

“Lemon ginger, then.”
Bard bustled to get the tea ready, then passed it to Thran. “Have a good snooze, Legs.”

“Thank you. Bye, everyone,” Legolas with a snuffle as he and his father headed upstairs.

“Bye, Legolas; bye, Thran; bye, Ada,” the children chorused in reply.

“Brush your teeth before you get into bed, please,” Thran asked, when they had climbed the stairs and gone into Legolas’s room. He extricated Legolas’s sleep tee and shorts from the bedding and handed them to his son. “And you will be more comfortable in your pajamas than your school clothes, I think.”

Legolas took the clothes from Thran and shuffled towards the bathroom. “Okay, Papa.”

Thran put Legolas’s tea on the nightside table, then busied himself unwinding the tangle of bedding before Legolas returned. Honestly, how did one boy manage to make the bedclothes look like a snarled magpie’s nest? He plumped the pillows, and straightened the sheets and blankets. The lumps at the bottom of the bed turned out to be a paperback copy of Mary Stewart’s *The Crystal Cave*, and a thicker hardbound copy of Howard Pyle’s *Adventures of Robin Hood*, drawing him to smile. As Legolas shuffled in, he set them beside the tea.

“You read exciting books, *synok*.”

That got a little smile from his ailing son. “*The Crystal Cave* is about Merlin. Sigrid loaned me that one. The *Robin Hood* one is from Bain. They’re both good, Papa. I don’t like having a cold, but I won’t turn down a chance to read more of them.”

“Rest must come first, please,” Thran said, as Legolas clambered into bed. He pulled the covers up over his son’s legs and chest, then helped him to plump the pillows at his back. “If you tire of your bed, you can rest in the sitting room. Stay warm, and be sure to drink your tea. We also have lots of juice and water.”

“Yes, Papa.” Legolas tried to roll his eyes, but he sneezed in the middle of it, and ended up looking miserable more than anything else.

“I think I must bring you a box of tissues.” Thran got up to fetch one from the linen closet in the children’s bathroom. He put it on the bed by Legolas’s knees, then retrieved Legolas’s discarded jeans and shirt from the floor. As he returned the clothes to the closet, Legolas snuggled into the pillows with a sigh.

“Oh, that feels better,” his son sighed.

“Good.” Thran sat on the side of the bed to give Legolas’s braid a little twitch, drawing a pale smile from the boy. “Rest as much as you can. Bard makes you a nice chicken soup with vegetables for lunch, so it will be ready whenever you wake up.”

“He makes good soup,” was Legolas’s sleepy comment. “Maybe he’ll make those biscuits to go with it, too.”

“I am sure he will do so gladly.”

“I hope this goes away soon. My head feels as though there’s a pillow stuffed inside it.”

“I hope so, too. It sounds most uncomfortable.” Chuckling, Thran gave one more twitch to Legolas’s braid, and smoothed one last fold in the sheet. “Rest well, Legolas.”
“All right, Papa. I hope the ballet goes well today.”

“Thank you. Enjoy your books, synok. Bard will bring you anything you need. I will see you later.”

Thran gave Legolas a comforting smile of farewell, then took himself into the bedroom to dress in his dance clothes. He also arranged a pale grey shirt and his Armani suit on a hanger, and packed appropriate accouterments in a small bag to take with him downstairs. Bard was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for the soup pot.

“The children are on the bus?”

Bard nodded. “Safely away. How’s Legolas?”

“In bed with his tea, several pillows, and at least two books. He is very sleepy, though, so I do not think he will get far in the adventures of Merlin and Robin Hood until later. He hopes you will make biscuits to go with your chicken soup for lunch.”

Bard’s smile was pleased. “Glad to.”

“I gave him a box of tissues.”

“Much more practical than a handkerchief, no matter what my old gran used to say.”

Thran sighed, drawing Bard’s glance. “I feel guilty to leave Legolas here for you to watch over.”

Bard gave him an arched eyebrow. “Why? It’s just a cold. He’ll be fine, and no, I won’t have to change anything I intended to do today.”

“You seem unperturbed. That reassures me.”

Bard’s grin was wry. “I am unperturbed, as you say. All the times I didn’t have the wherewithal to stay home with my children when they were sick... now we do. That reassures me, too.”

“What did you do when they were sick?”

“Thank the gods they weren’t sick often. Sometimes, I could get one of the neighbors to look after them. Ori’s brother, Dori, is a good soul. The Ur brothers are good, too, especially Bo, and none of them minded to sit with the children. A time or two, I resorted to the sick children daycare that one of the city hospitals runs during the school year. I didn’t like to do that because it’s so expensive, but it’s cheaper than not working. So this is a luxury. Besides, Legolas isn’t hard to look after. We’ll be fine.” Bard nodded at the stacked bento boxes on the island. “I made your lunch. The chicken wasn’t ready, but there’s farro, the usual veg, a hunk of cheese, and some grapes. I hope that’s enough.”

“It will be plenty,” Thran assured him, then indicated the hanger that held his shirt and suit. “I may be late tonight, lyubov moya. Lettie and I go to see a potential donor at three. I will text you when we finish, but do not hold the children’s supper for me. I will eat when I get home.”

“I’ll have something warm for you,” Bard nodded. “Don’t know what yet. Probably salmon or trout.”

“Either will be delicious,” Thran came around the island to give Bard a kiss. “I appreciate that you will see to Legolas today.”

“He’ll be fine, and so will I,” Bard said easily, returning Thran’s kiss. “Think about Immortal with a clear conscience, cariad. What is it you always tell me? ‘All will be well?’ This will be, too.”
Thran gave his husband a sheepish grin. “As you say, I am off, then, and I leave, too.”

“Do your best, just like always,” Bard gave the standard reply, but he gave Thran’s glute a pert squeeze.

“Oh,” Thran hummed. “If I do, may I expect a reward?”

“I’ll do my best, just like always,” Bard smirked. “Off with you, then. I can’t concentrate on the soup when you hum like that. You don’t want to mess up your son’s soup, do you?”

“No, lyubov moya. The chef, however, is another story. But we will have to wait for that. Until later, then.”

“Love you, angel.”

“You, too, my saint.”

Thran came out of the mudroom with a smile, as well as his collection of bags and hangers and bento boxes. He let himself into the carriage house by the side door, locked it behind him, and loaded his things into the back seat of his SUV. With great satisfaction, he got behind the wheel, thumbed the small control now clipped to the visor, and enjoyed a silly feeling of power when the garage door opened for him to drive out. That had been Bard’s project this past Tuesday, when it had rained so hard that Bard had come out with Thran to close the bay door after he’d gotten the SUV out. By the time Thran had come home, Bard had installed the openers for all three of the bays, so no one had to huddle under an umbrella to open the bays anymore.

Thran headed to the UVB studio, grateful once again that his husband was more than a loving, thoughtful man and a talented artist. Bard was adept at so many practical things that made their lives better, be it installing garage door openers or painting or making soup. He was also a devoted parent who would admirably see to Legolas and help him though his cold. Thran was relieved to leave his son in such good hands.

He was a little envious, too.

***

Bard dumped the last of the potatoes, carrots, celery, and onions into the soup pot, added a scattering of peppercorns, and then tossed in a handful of candied ginger bits. He set the heat to simmer, and cleaned up the cutting board and the knives. The soup would soon be ready for whenever Legolas wanted some of it. He headed upstairs to brush his teeth and put on his working clothes, and ventured a quick look in on Legolas. The boy was sound asleep, but his teacup was empty, and a few crumpled tissues already dotted the floor and his bed. Bard moved the wastebasket from under Legolas’s desk to beside the bed, tossed in the tissues that had landed on the floor, and eased out.

On to the solarium! Bard was eager to see how he could arrange the collection of screens around the arched doorway. When Mrs. Mathom had emailed him about the second set, she’d been very upfront about how damaged they were, so he hadn’t been sanguine about them. But from the pictures, each of the three looked to be nothing more than two similar motifs joined with some other stray pieces into a single rectangle. On closer inspection, he figured out that he could take the two broken ones apart, put the pieces along the bottom of the wall on either side of the archway, then place the screens he already had above them to extend almost to the ceiling. The new screen that wasn’t broken could
fit above the archway all the way to the ceiling. So he got out his pliers, pry bar, and tack hammer, and carefully began to disassemble the damaged screens.

Once he got everything apart, he turned the components this way and that until he found an arrangement that put the heavier medallions from the broken screens near the floor with the more delicate whole screens above. Two such columns fit well on either side of the arch, with only a gap of a few inches on either side by the edges of the walls. The medallions from the third screen fit above the archway, and the fragments from the edges of the broken ones made a nice border on top. For each piece, he carefully marked where the anchor bolts would go into the wall. Once Legolas woke up, Bard would drill the pilot holes in the plaster to hold the anchors that would let him screw the panels into place.

“Wow,” a sniffling voice rasped by the doorway. Bard shifted atop his ladder to see Legolas standing in the doorway to the sitting room. “Did one of them fall apart? Or maybe two? There are a lot of pieces on the floor.”

“Hi, Legolas,” Bard greeted. “No, nothing fell apart. Two were broken, but I had to take them apart to get them to fit anyway, but I’ve got that much done. I just have to set the anchor bolts, and then I can hang all the pieces. How are you? Feel better after your nap?”

Legolas nodded. “I do feel better. Not quite so stuffy.”

Bard guided the panel he held down to the floor, then climbed down from his perch. “Ready for some more tea? Or lunch?”

“I’d like tea. But I’m not very hungry yet.”

Bard pulled out his mobile. “It’s not quite noon. You don’t have to eat yet. Where would you like to settle? Back in bed for another nap, or down in the sitting room?”

“Are you really about to hang up all the screens? I’d like to watch.”

“Sure, we can make you a perch in here. You can be the first person to try out the fainting couch. But go get some socks and a sweater, and a blanket. It’s important to keep warm to help your body fight the germs. I’ll get your tea, and make you a nesting spot.”

“Okay, Bard,” Legolas nodded, and disappeared back upstairs. Bard got out the teapot and a couple of mugs, and made a big pot of lemon ginger tea. When Legolas came back down, he had on leggings, socks, and a hoodie, and he carried one of his fleece blankets, a couple of pillows, and a book. Bard angled the fainting couch so Legolas would have a good view of the proceedings, and set the tea tray down on the marble-topped table by the windows. He retrieved the thermometer from the kitchen table, and held it out to Legolas.

“Check your temperature before you have any of the tea,” Bard asked. “Let’s see if your nap helped to bring it down.”

Legolas nodded, and put the thermometer under his tongue, holding it there until it beeped. He took it out, looked at it, and held it out to Bard.

“A little less, but still a fever.”

“About a degree’s worth,” Bard nodded. “But better. Come on, bundle up.”

He helped Legolas arrange his pillows on the fainting couch, then spread the fleece blanket over top. When the boy was settled, he handed him a mug of hot tea.
“You said you had to take the screens apart?” Legolas asked, looking at the pieces.

After Bard explained what he’d done, Legolas was interested enough to ask about how he’d anchor the pieces to the wall, so he explained that, too. He retrieved his drill from the tools arranged in the corner, and squeezed the switch briefly to make sure it was properly working. Then he lined up the partial panel against the right side of the archway to check that the markings still lined up correctly. When they did, he drilled the pilot holes, and slipped in the anchors. Next, he drilled small holes in the panel, threaded the screws through, and set them in the anchors.

“First one done,” he said, looking over at Legolas. To his surprise, the boy was sitting up on the end of the fainting couch to watch him closely.

“That was fast,” Legolas offered. “It’s not as hard as I thought it’d be.”

“It takes a lot longer to do paint and trim and such,” Bard agreed, smiling. “Too bad you’re running a bit of a fever, or you could help with the next one.”

“I would,” Legolas looked disappointed. “I like to know how things go together, but I haven’t had much chance to learn. Papa’s not very interested in that.”

Bard slid the ladder over, took one of the full panels, and held it above the one he’d just installed to check the anchor markings. They were still true, so he put the panel down, changed to the bigger drill bit, and drilled the first anchor hole. “I don’t know that your Papa isn’t interested so much as he’s been so focused on his dancing for so long. In some ways, he hasn’t gotten to see or do a lot of things in his life.”

Legolas crossed his legs under him, clearly interested enough to stay perched at the end of the fainting couch. Bard gave him a look.

“Does it bother you if I talk to you while you do that?” Legolas said instantly.

Bard shook his head. “Not at all. Just wrap up in your blanket, so you stay warm.”

Legolas pulled his blanket over his shoulders. “You’re right about Papa. All he does is dance.”

Bard drilled the next hole. “He’s very good at it.”

“He is. He ought to be – he works so hard at it.”

Bard slipped in an anchor and moved to the next hold to drill. “I don’t think he sees it as work all the time. All the business to put on *Immortal*, yeah, that’s work, but the actual dancing part isn’t. He loves that. He’d have to, or he wouldn’t do it so much.”

Legolas hummed. “I guess so.”

Bard glanced at him, then put in the next anchor. “You love your archery and your fencing a lot. Doing those isn’t work like doing homework is, right?”

A clogged snort was half laughter, half drippy nose. “Absolutely not. I’d much rather spend the school day on either or both of those instead of pre-algebra and history.”

“So the way you love archery and fencing is the same way your Papa loves dancing.”

“I haven’t thought of it that way before. It was just something Papa did. But it makes sense. What are you doing now?”
Bard carried the drill over to show Legolas. “This is a drill bit, the part that makes the holes. The wall needs bigger holes than the screen. So I take the big bit out like this.” He did so, and handed it to Legolas. “Here, hold that. Then I put in the smaller one for the screen like this.” He slipped in a much thinner bit and tightened it. “Then I can drill the holes in the screen.” He placed the four holes, then showed Legolas the screws he threaded through the holes. “Now all I have to do is slip the screws into the anchors and tighten them.”

“What do the anchors look like?”

Bard fished one out of his pocket. “It’s just a plastic sleeve that helps the screw hold in the wall. When I tighten it, it compresses a bit, which makes it fatter around the middle, which wedges it even more tightly into the wall, so it can’t pull out.”

“Oh, I see,” Legolas nodded.

“So, up with the screen.” Bard carried the screen up the ladder, lined it up, and fastened it to the wall. “See? Not too hard.”

“No, that was easy,” Legolas nodded. “So now you’ll do the next bottom piece?”

“That’s right,” Bard nodded. “Just like the first one.”

He got the bottom panel and the full one above it put up on the right side of the one he’d just installed.

“It’s starting to look like a real doorway already,” Legolas nodded.


“I’m a little hungry, but I’m more interested to see you do the screens.”

“Okay, I’ll do the other side, then we’ll eat.”

“That’d be good.”

“Okay.”

Bard checked his markings, and started on the bottom panel to go on the left side of the archway. He drilled pilot holes, threaded in the anchors, put the screw holes in the screen, and anchored it in place.

“You love to do all the house stuff,” Legolas said, when Bard stepped back to admire the screen.

“I do. It’s a kind of art.”

“Art you live in.”

He chuckled. “Absolutely. Useful art.”

“Does it feel the same when you do the house stuff as it does when you do your art stuff?”

“Inside, you mean?” Bard queried. At Legolas’s nod, he replied, “A little. I feel a certain way when I know a line in a sketch is right, or the clay is the right shape. I get a bit of the same sense when the paint color matches what I envisioned, or the chandelier’s at the right height.”

“I get this feeling when I aim my bow, when it’s just at the right place to send off the arrow,” Legolas said. “Or when I know which way to parry to score when I fence.”
“Makes sense,” Bard nodded. “I’d bet that your Papa feels something like that when he dances, to know just how to extend a foot or lift the ballerina or something.”

“I know he does,” Legolas nodded. “He’s told me that many times.”

“So you’re an artist in archery and fencing,” Bard grinned. He got the next tall panel anchored above its base. “Which one do you like better?”

“Whichever one I’m doing,” Legolas gave a garbled chuckle. “It’s going to be hard to give up one or the other before long.”

Bard paused to look at him. “Why do you have to give one of them up? Don’t you do fencing in the fall and winter, and archery in the spring and summer?”

“At the high school and college level, yes. But they’re both summer Olympic sports, and if I want to reach that level of skill, I’ll have to decide which one and practice accordingly.”

Bard checked the alignment of the next bottom screen. “That’s a hard choice. Your Papa says you’re amazing at both already.”

Legolas smiled proudly. “He’s always been the best encouragement.”

“You give him a lot of talent, skill, and dedication to encourage. He knows from his own life as an elite dancer how much of all three it takes to be the best in anything.”

“He does. He tells me that whichever sport I choose, he’ll support me.”

“He’s cool like that,” Bard nodded as he anchored the last bottom panel. “Okay, just one more to go, then we’ll have lunch. Which do you think you’ll keep, the archery or the fencing?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to decide. Archery’s so still, so much concentration. It’s very inward. Fencing’s just the opposite – always in motion, constant movement that’s become instinct, so you’re very in the moment. I hope I can still do both for as long as possible, but right now, I think when I have to choose, I’ll choose fencing.”

“What makes you lean that way?”

Legolas shrugged. “The Gondors. They’re both Olympic caliber, and they’re here. I won’t have to move someplace to receive their instruction. I’d have to move to receive the same level of archery instruction. That might not be so bad, if I knew Tara and Kíllian were going to be at the same place. But I don’t, and...”

Bard paused in his drilling. “And... what?”

Legolas darted a quick look at Bard. “The Gondors are great. I really like them, and they’d teach me a lot. I’d have a huge shot to be on the Olympic fencing team if I studied with them, absolutely. And they’re right here. I’d be home every night. I’d see Papa, and the other children... and you... and I’d be at the same school, at least for the classes I need to graduate.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought about it a lot.”

Legolas nodded. “I did before we moved here, but after meeting Kíllian and Tara... if I’m honest, Kíllian’s better than I am at archery. Really good. He’s got this amazing instinct. I’ve actually learned a lot from him already, and he’s a year younger than me. As good as he is with his archery, I learned that I’m just as good with my fencing. So I’d have an edge there...” He sighed. “I could learn to be as
good an archer as he is. But... I don’t want to go away to learn it. It’d be another boarding school. I like it here, in a family.”

Bard threaded the last screw through the screen, and gave Legolas his full attention. “I’m glad you like it here. I do, too. Clan Ffyrnig is something special.”

Legolas offered him a crooked smile of agreement.

“So let’s see how the last screen goes up.” Bard said, returning Legolas’s smile. He positioned the screws in their anchors, and screwed them into place. “There. Sides are done. No screw-ups so far.”

Legolas gave the screens a critical look, and nodded. “I don’t think you’re supposed to say that. Or you jinx the rest of it.”

“Maybe so. So I might as well double jinx it. I like it. It looks like a real archway.”

“It looks great. There, I’ve triple jinxed it.”

“We’re in real trouble now. Better stop for lunch, and let all the jinxes evaporate. Plain biscuits, garlic chive, or cheese with your soup? Your choice.”

“I like the garlic chive ones?”

“Coming right up.”

Bard washed his hands in the kitchen sink, and quickly put together the biscuits. Legolas snorted and sneezed though several tissues to clear his runny nose, but came into the kitchen as Bard put the pan of biscuits in the oven. He leaned over the steaming pot of soup, breathing in deeply.

“Oh, that helps,” he groaned. “I’m so clogged!”

“Just don’t drip into the soup,” Bard teased, but gently. “Some more tea might help. What kind this time?”

“Chamomile. I think I’ll need another nap after lunch.”


Despite Legolas’s claim of a reduced appetite, the boy filled his bowl full, and carried it carefully to the table. Bard brought butter, honey, blackberry jam, and pepper jelly to the table, then his own bowl of soup and spoons and knives. He sat opposite Legolas in Sigrid’s place.

“It’s been five hours since you had anything for your fever, so you can have some more in about an hour.”

“Okay.” Legolas had a sip of his soup. “Ugh. I can’t taste it very well, but the steam and the warmth feels good.”

The oven timer dinged. “Maybe a little garlic will help.” Bard got up to fish the biscuits out of the oven, and placed the pan between them.

Legolas took one, buttered it, and nibbled the edge of it. “I can taste that a little better, so something’s working.”

“That’s good. Tonight you can take a hot shower to steam you open a little more. Or maybe you’d like a soak in the tub this afternoon after your nap.”
“Can I?” Legolas brightened.

“Sure. Just make sure you stay warm, and get out before you get chilled.”

“That’d be great. Lots better than saying I have to take a nap. Sounds like I’m a kindergartner all over again.”

“Don’t diss a good nap. They’re golden.” Bard took a biscuit, split it open, and buttered it. “Just like these.”

“Where’d you learned to make them?”

“My Gran, back in Wales. I don’t remember her very well now, but she wasn’t much bigger than Tilda. She used to tell me to eat a lot of mutton to grow tall.”

“Mutton?” Legolas’s brow wrinkled. “That’s... sheep? Lamb?”

“Mutton is old sheep. Tough, old sheep. But it’s good if you put it in stew, if a bit strong. Lamb like we get in the store these days is a lot better.”

They chatted about inconsequentials as they ate. They both had a second bowlful, and a few cookies afterwards. Legolas got sleepy once the hot food hit him, but he insisted that he wanted to see the last bits of screen go up over the top of the archway before he napped. So Bard made a big pot of chamomile tea and got Legolas ensconced back on the fainting couch, then pieced the remaining sections of the broken screens into place. This took longer than the other pieces, because now that the side sections were in place, the measurements altered just enough that he had to redraw a few of the anchor holes. But in an hour or so, he got the last section in place.


“Thanks. I like it, too. It came together well. Now, you need to burrow into bed, Legs. You can hardly hold your eyes open.”

“I haven’t finished my tea yet,” he protested.

“Then bottoms up, and go brush your teeth. You can crawl into bed after that.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Admire my handiwork for a few minutes, then I thought I’d work in the sitting room on the sketches for one of my commissions.”

“Will it bother you if I stay down here, too?”

“Course not. Take your pick of the sofas. I’ll take the other one.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Legolas managed to summon the energy to finish his tea, brush his teeth, and settle in the sitting room with his box of tissues close by. But not five minutes after he got himself swathed in his fleece and his book in his hands, he nodded off, and the book fell aside. Smiling, Bard kept still on the other sofa, keeping watch until he was sure the boy was sound asleep. He laid The Crystal Cave on the coffee table, made himself comfortable on the other sofa again, and opened his sketchbook.

His first sketch would not be for his commission. There would time soon enough to coax the blank
paper to reveal a Japanese maple at the first flush of spring. Bard already saw the image in his mind that would appear for that. But the sleeping boy opposite him was a more ephemeral vision, and wouldn’t wait.

Bard gave himself to the sketch with a smile.
Chapter 114

Chapter Summary

Conversation consumes both the angel and the saint.

Chapter Notes

I don't own rights to "The Dark Crystal," the wonderful Muppets, "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen" graphic novels or film, or the Lara Croft games or films. I just enjoy them very much.

Thanks to johnnysmitten for letting Hal figure into this chapter ❤️.

On my way home, see you in 20, Thran tapped on his mobile, then pressed Send. He put his mobile in the cup holder in the console beside the driver’s seat, then rubbed his forehead in a futile attempt to dissipate the ache in his temples. What a frustrating afternoon it had been – no, it had been frustrating before that, almost from the moment he set foot in the studio. All the details that had to be settled to put on this fucking ballet had interrupted his barre, had kept him from dancing most of the morning, had even canceled his pointe work with Mme. Morgelle. All these details were important, but how was he supposed to actually dance the ballet when these so-important details kept him from preparing for it?

He picked up his mobile again. Don’t warm supper. Nothing is wrong. Will explain when I see you, he typed, and pressed Send again.

He drove home. For someone who’d just reassured his husband that nothing was wrong, he certainly didn’t feel like nothing was wrong. Thank the gods that traffic was light through the village, though the flip side of that was that it was late, probably after six. He turned onto their lane, and then into the driveway with relief. Thank the gods again that he could just push a button to open the carriage house bay, pull straight in, and push the same button to close the bay behind him. He collected his bags from the back seat, locked the carriage house door behind him, and came into the mudroom with a sigh.

“I am home,” he called, when he heard voices in the kitchen. There was no clothing to unpack from his bags given how little he’d been able to dance today, so he carried them into the kitchen. “Hello, children. How goes the homework?”

“Hi, Thran; hi, Ada,” Bain, Sigrid, and Tilda chorused. They sat around the kitchen table, and looked up from their schoolbooks and computer screens as he came in.


“Sometimes, it’s boring,” agreed Tilda with a sigh. “I already know how to find the area of a rectangle, so it’s not very interesting to do it over and over.”
“You look nice, Ada,” Sigrid grinned, nodding at Thran’s clothes. “Suit, tie, even a vest!”

“You do.” Bard came in from the sitting room. He looked behind him, back through the doorway. “Legs, your Papa is home.”

“Hi, Papa,” a gravelly voice drifted in from the sitting room, followed by a muffled sneeze.

“Hello, Legolas,” Thran called, unpacking his bento boxes from his bag. Bard favored him with a casual kiss as he took the boxes to wash them. “Hello, my saint. How was Legolas today?”

“He was great. Slept a lot, ate his soup, drank his tea, and kept me company in the solarium while I put up the screens. His fever spiked a little around four, but only a degree, and we drowned as many germs as we could in juice and tea and water. So he’s doing well.”

“That is good news,” Thran said, offering the other children a wave as he went in to see Legolas. He found his son amid pillows and a blanket, with one of Bard’s art boards on his lap as he worked on his homework. He leaned over to press a kiss on Legolas’s head. “Do you feel better, synok?”

“I didn’t late this afternoon, so I had some more acetaminophen and took another nap. That was my third one today, but I feel better now,” Legolas grinned. “I got to eat supper in here on a tray. That was cool.”

Thran snickered. “Excitement abounds. I am glad you feel better. Bain and Sigrid brought your assignments, I see.”

Legolas nodded. “I didn’t miss much that was new, which is good. But I missed archery, which is bad.”

“I missed my favorite thing today, too,” Thran said. “Meetings, meetings, meetings! All day, meetings! I did not dance at all today. I did not even get to finish my barre. Most frustrating.”

“Does that have anything to do with why you texted me not to warm your supper?” Bard asked.

Thran nodded. “I should have texted Do not warm supper yet. I will eat, but I must spend time in the ballroom first to do what I could not do earlier – dance. Otherwise, I will be unfit to dance the ballet when we get to the ballet.”

Bard nodded. “As long as you eat eventually, that’s okay.”

“Of course. I have learned my lesson. I must not miss meals. But today, one must be later than usual.”

“Then take yourself off to the ballroom, cariad. Sooner started, sooner ended, and all that.”

“I hear and obey,” Thran gave Legolas a wry grin, who grinned back. “You see? I have homework, too. So off I must go to do it. I will return soon, synok.”

“Okay, Papa,” Legolas settled back into his pillows to consider his worksheet.

When Thran headed upstairs to change, Bard trailed behind him. “Sounds like you had a long, frustrating day, angel. Did the suit help?”

Thran slipped off his suit coat, and laid it on the bed. He went into the closet, sat on the stool to untie his shoes, and slipped them off. “A little. We did meet with a receptive audience, and we did get a donation, but it was half what Lettie had hoped. I had no expectations either way, and something is
better than nothing, but the more times UVB must trot me out like a circus pony to entice a donor to the ballet, the less time I have to prepare to dance the ballet. I did not even complete a whole barre this morning, Bard. Nor did I Monday. I will soon become the proof of what Rudi Nureyev said.”

Bard leaned on the doorjamb to watch Thran hang up his suit. “What did Rudi Nureyev say?”

“‘When I miss class for one day, I know it. When I miss class for two days, my teacher knows it. When I miss class for three days, the audience knows it.’ Thran intoned, ‘I have missed class twice this week. I know it. My teacher, Mme. Morgelle, does not know it only because I could not attend her class today, but likely the entire UVB company knows it. So I must remedy that in the ballroom so that an audience does not know it, and then I will eat supper. I will be at least an hour and a little more.’”

“Take the time you need,” Bard said easily. “I’ll have something hot for you when you’re done.”

Thran put his hands on Bard’s shoulders and gave him a grateful kiss. “I am sorry to be so much trouble, lyubov moya.”

“I’m sorry the ballet is so much trouble to you. This is the first time you’ve been on anything other than the dancing side, which has to be a big adjustment.”

Thran nodded. “More than I expected. But if I can balance it all for the next nine weeks, then so many more things will be possible.”

“Such as?” Bard asked, settling himself to listen as Thran took off socks, shirt, and underwear to toss them in the hamper.

“Oh, so many things. Perhaps a tour with Immortal, perhaps a book about it – I would like you to do one, if you are so inclined – and of course more ballets. But you have so many things to tell me, too. How was Legolas today, and will he go to school tomorrow, and did you get to work on your commissions today, and did you say the screens are up in the solarium?”

“We do have a lot to talk about,” Bard admitted with a regretful chuckle. “So get yourself into the ballroom, and do what you need to do to take care of yourself, and then we can talk over supper.”

Thran sighed as he tried to go past Bard into the bedroom. His husband, however, snared him in an embrace.

“I won’t take advantage of a naked dancer on a mission, but I do want you to know that you’re hot even when you’re intent on business.”

Thran sighed again, but allowed himself to melt when Bard nuzzled his neck. “Oh, lyubov moya, for three rubles I would beg you to take me to bed and keep me there until tomorrow. But I am desperate to coax a little dance out of the day. If the children can spare you, perhaps you would come into the ballroom with me, and we can talk as I work.”

“Can you talk and dance at the same time?” Bard snickered, but the sound was affectionate, and accompanied by a soft kiss on Thran’s hair.

“Can you sketch and talk at the same time?” Thran put his hands on Bard’s arms to massage gently.

“Hmm, point taken.” Bard conceded with a shrug. “I’ll bring my sketchpad. Then we’ll see if either of us can do art and talk at the same time.”

“Perfection,” Thran grinned, sneaking a hand behind Bard to squeeze his glute. “I will dress, and I
want to see the solarium, but then I will dance.”

Bard backed out of the closet, drawing Thran with him, and dipped in for another kiss before releasing him. “I’ll go turn on the lotus lamp in the solarium. I got your Istanbul lamps up, too, so we can get the full effect.”

“Ooh...” Thran hurried to his dresser to find a clean dancer’s belt, tights, and shirt. “I will be right down. I cannot wait to see them!”

Bard grinned as he headed downstairs. Thran fumbled into his clothes, grabbed his dancing slippers and leggings and sweaters and wraps, then took the stairs two at a time. As he flitted through the sitting room, he found Legolas in the solarium, looking up at the faceted glass lamps he’d bought in the Istanbul Grand Bazaar. On each side of the archway, Bard had anchored two gracefully curved iron hooks between the wooden screens to hold the lamps. On the opposite wall, the lotus lamp glowed atop the marble topped table. The fountain wasn’t installed yet, and the wall under the arch was still featureless white, but already the effect was magical.

“This is spectacular,” Thran breathed, as the other children came in behind him. Tilda and Sigrid both oohed, and Bain muttered, “Wow!” under his breath.

“Wow, indeed,” Thran agreed. “I thought you would hang the lamps from the ceiling, but this is so much better.”

“That’s what I originally thought I’d do, too,” Bard agreed. “But then I painted a sky on the ceiling, and if I hung the lamps from there, it’d ruin the illusion. So then I thought I’d hang them on the side, but the electrical outlets are on either the screen wall or the outside wall, not the side walls, so I’d have to run the cords all hither and yon. So Legolas suggested that if I put them on the screen wall, the screens would hide the cords, and then it all looks like it’s done with magic. And the lamps look amazing against the screens.”

“You made a most excellent choice, synok!” Thran gave Legolas’s hair a playful twitch. “I give you both high marks in set design.”

Bard and Legolas exchanged fist bumps, which gratified Thran. Legolas might have missed school today, but it seemed that the time he’d spent with Bard was more than an even trade. He would look for the chance to have such time with Bain. But now, all had to be put aside, even the consideration of their emerging Moroccan sanctuary, while he deferred to the dance.

“I am sorry I cannot enjoy it more now,” Thran exhaled. “But I did not dance today, and I cannot prepare for Immortal if I do not. Forgive me, children, but today, I have homework, too.”

The children offered sympathetic murmurs as they filed out of the solarium. Bard thumbed off the lotus lamp, then proudly flipped the wall switch to turn off Thran’s Istanbul lamps.

“Not only is it magic, but it’s instant magic,” he quipped, as the solarium returned to darkness.

“Quite impressive,” Thran replied in an admiring tone.

“I’m going to sit with Thran for a bit, children,” Bard said, as they passed through the sitting room. “I’m still homework help, so I’ll be in the ballroom if you need me.”

“Okay, Da; okay, Bard,” the children chorused. Legolas settled back on the sofa, Sigrid went upstairs to work on her paper in her room, and Tilda and Bain went back to the kitchen table. Bard lingered to make sure Legolas had tea and Tilda had notebook paper, then he fetched his sketchpad and pencils from the coffee table and followed Thran into the ballroom. He padded in on sock-clad
feet, blinking in the bright light that illuminated every inch of the ballroom, and settled on the floor against the wall, halfway down the room, opposite Thran’s barre. He didn’t open his sketchbook yet, but gave Thran a smile.

“Shall we discuss domestic affairs before we tackle international ones?” he teased.

“Domestic matters should always take precedent,” Thran teased back. He started his stretches slowly, relieved to finally throw off the day’s tedium and indulge in more important things. “How is Legolas? Will he be fit for school tomorrow?”

“He’ll be home at least another day.” Bard replied. “He was still running a fever this afternoon. That seems to be the time of day when everyone’s spikes, so I’m not surprised.”

“I trust he behaved himself. Did he sleep all day?”

“He slept most of the morning, then he kept me company in the solarium. I enjoyed that. He wanted to know about how the screens went up, and I showed him how the drill worked, and we talked about his archery and fencing. We had lunch, then he napped on the sofa while I worked on my sketches. I have a couple of good ones of him I think you’ll like, along with some for one of my commissions. When he woke up, he helped me figure out about your lamps. I hadn’t thought to put them on the screen wall, but they look better there than hanging freeform from the ceiling as I originally thought. We had a good time.”

Thran’s hum was pleased. “I am sorry he is sick, but I am glad that you and he could spend time together.”

“He’s a graceful lad, and not just because he’s an athlete, or his father’s son,” Bard observed. “He reminds me of one of my mates in art school. Zameer. He was the son of a Bengali diplomat, and had lived in several countries. He was the most socially adept person I’ve ever met – courteous, tactful, able to quickly put someone at ease, a good listener. He did canvases as well as sculpture, but all in paper pulp with incorporated elements. Some of it was pretty wild, and some of it was very pointed politically, and it occasionally attracted some rude comments at shows. No matter what shit someone said about his art, he was always gracious. He said he’d lived in too many cultures to think any of them were the only way to live, so he was very philosophical about people who had a narrower or a different view than he did.”

“A wise man,” Thran agreed, bending into a plié. “Legolas has not lived in so many countries, but he has lived in more than this one, and he has met many artists from around the world, so yes, he has been schooled in a kind of diplomacy. We have been in this country only seven years, and citizens for only two. So in some ways, we are like your mate, because we are still something of the outsiders.”

Bard hummed. “I was in Wales until I was fourteen, but we moved a lot – my Da had a restless soul. We came to Canada, and stayed pretty much in one place until I was eighteen when I came to the States for college. I’ve been here since. I didn’t became a citizen until I was twenty-six, but I’ve lived here for twenty years. So I suppose I feel more American than Canadian or Welsh, but if I had to move someplace else next week, I’d adjust.”

“You have moved many times, then,” Thran mused.

“Too many to count,” Bard nodded. “Daphne called me a nomad, but once we came here, I wasn’t. I’ve lived other places longer, but this is home.”

Thran gave Bard a look. “I have lived here only a few months, but I call it my home. I am grateful
that Legolas and I are here with you and your children.”

“I’m glad we’re all here,” Bard said simply. “It’s finally worthy to be called a home, too. The solarium just needs the fountain, and a bit of paint on the wall around the fountain, and that room’s done.”

“Then we will have our game,” Thran purred, smiling in anticipation. At Bard’s chuckle, he quirked an inquiring eye at his husband.

“You look like you did that first morning,” Bard said with a rueful gleam in his eye. “I had no idea what I was getting into.”

“I did,” Thran grinned, shutting his eyes as he arched back. He straightened, and traced the same figure he had made to seduce Bard into their first kiss, which won him a snort from Bard.

“You were a fucking bastard that day, and you still are.”

Thran arched his neck and looked at Bard from under lowered lashes, but his smile was much less demure. “You were delicious then, and you still are. I look forward to our new game very much. I have many things to ask you about it, lyubov moya, but I will wait until I hold you in bed to ask them of you. Let us dispense with the rest of the domestic and international debriefing first.”

Bard chuckled as he opened his sketchbook. “Hmm, how am I supposed to concentrate on anything with a provocative tease like that?”

“You will manage.”

“I guess so. Let’s see, you’ve seen the solarium and were suitably impressed. I’ve told you about Legolas – oh, not entirely. He told me that he expects he’ll have to choose between archery and fencing at some point, because they’re both Olympic summer sports, and he can’t compete in both because of the amount of training that’s involved.”

Thran paused in his forward bend, then resumed it. “Yes, I had expected that, though I wish it were not the case. He enjoys both, and is highly skilled in both.”

“He said he thought Kíllian was a better archer than he was. He thought he was a better fencer, that he has an instinctive feel for it that he doesn’t with archery, and working with the Gondors would make him all but a shoo-in on the Olympic team. So he’s leaning towards fencing rather than archery.”

“I am somewhat surprised. Master Schroeder had dampened his enthusiasm to an unconscionable degree this past fall. I would like to slap that cretin because he spoils the sport for so many young hopefuls. I must thank the Gondors because they compensated for Master Schroeder’s incompetence so well.”

“The Gondors are partially responsible, yes. It might interest you to know what else is.”

Thran leaned over to grasp one leg while he stretched the other over his head in a standing split. He looked over to meet Bard’s eyes. “What?”

“He said that if he wanted to, he could develop the same level of instinct and competency in his archery as he already has in his fencing. But he’d have to move away to do so, and he didn’t want that. He wanted to stay here, with us, in our home, and not go to what amounted to another boarding school. That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me since a certain rarefied dancer agreed to marry me.”
Thran straightened out of his split to regard Bard somberly. Despite his best efforts, he swallowed and looked away.

“Oh, gods, angel – I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you’d be happy to know that Legolas is happy here.”

“I am, very much so. But I cannot help but regret the time that I forced him to spend in those boarding schools.”

Bard was by his side in an instant, his hands on Thran’s shoulders shaking gently. “Hey, you’re not allowed to infringe on my territory. I’m the one in the family who specializes in guilt, not you. I’ll call in the union if you keep it up.”

Thran mustered a soft laugh. “As a specialist, you should understand why I feel the same way. I only emulate my betters.”

“Both of us have been in circumstances that offered no good solutions, only bad and worse ones. We have more options now.”

“True. I merely regret that the children, yours and mine, have had to endure the results of those circumstances without good solutions.”

“I could mouth some platitudes about how those circumstances built character in our children, but neither of us would like them. So focus on our better circumstances instead. The children are all right, give or take a few germs.”

Thran repaid his husband’s urgings with a quick kiss and a smile. Reassured, Bard released him so he could resume his barre.

“So we have discussed the children, and the solarium,” Thran continued in a light tone. “You said you worked on your commissions?”

“I did,” Bard nodded. “They’re wildly different, but very interesting so far. You might be interested in one more than the others – it’s for Hal.”

“Hal, our financial planner?” Thran blinked in surprise.

“Hal, our financial planner,” Bard nodded.

“But he was not at your show,” Thran said in a puzzled tone.

“He wasn’t. His request is in addition to the three that Bilbo received at the show. Hal took the time to look me up on Bilbo’s web site, and then again when Frodo got my site out there. He saw my pine tree that’s out on the terrace, and called Bilbo about it. He wants me to do a tree for him. Smaller, thank goodness, so I can cast it myself – maybe three feet tall. He wants a Japanese maple growing out of a rock with a single leaf on it. The tree’s suffered lightning damage and looks dead, but for that leaf.”

Thran mulled that over. “Did he tell you anything more about this piece, why he wants it?”

Bard gave him an interested look. “He was a bit vague at first, other than about the rock – it had to be either malachite or white quartz. He didn’t know what kind of tree, other than it had to have leaves, not needles, and the trunk couldn’t dip down, like the Japanese bonsai I originally thought he wanted – it had to rise up. When I asked about the leaf color, he said whatever I wanted, the color wasn’t important. So I told him the color would change the entire meaning of the piece – if the leaf
were red or gold or orange, then that meant fall, and the leaf and maybe the tree were dying. If the leaf were green, though, that meant spring, and the tree was coming to life despite the winter and the damage done to it. That’s when he started to get excited. He said yes, absolutely, he wanted a green leaf. So I suggested that if he wanted the piece to speak of a new start, then the tree could show some growth over the lightning damage, that it was on the mend. He got even more excited about that, so I was able to talk him out of the malachite in favor of the white quartz.”

“Why did you choose one stone over the other?”

“Malachite’s a stunning stone, very showy and beautiful. But if Hal wants the emphasis to be on the tree and its leaf, then a malachite base would take away from that. The white quartz will provide a nice angular, craggy base for the more organic tree, and the green leaf will stand out more. The tree will be metal, with some nice roots growing over the stone, and a grey green finish, lighter on the lightning scar and darker over the rest. The leaf took a little figuring, as Hal wants the leaf to move realistically, like the needles on my pine do. So that cut out malachite for the leaf, which isn’t a spring green, anyway. Silk might work, and could embody that pliability that brand new leaves have. But it frays, which doesn’t look leaf-like. I think a thin artisanal paper would work well, because I could paint it realistically, and it’d look fragile, which is what Hal’s after. There’s a practical advantage to paper, too – if it ever tears or comes off, you can easily put on a new one. I’ll provide several with the piece, and instructions on how to replace the old one with a new one.”

“This is fascinating, lyubov moya,” Thran said. “It will be very beautiful. Hal is a great appreciator of beautiful things...”

Bard looked up from his sketchpad. “But?”

“But this piece is not his style. I do not think it is for him. I think he means for it to be a gift.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Any ideas for whom?”

“His best friend, I would hazard. Your tree would be very much his style. I do not know the particulars, and I do not pry, but Hal’s friend is sorely troubled. I know you will be considerate. But the metaphor is clear, which is clearly applicable to Hal’s longtime friend. Hal is a good soul to commission such a piece for him.”

Bard tapped the end of his pencil on his lips. “That’s good to know. My sense is that the piece should be a bit ritualistic, very naturalistic, and positive in a Zen way.”

Thran nodded, then leaned over to stretch into another split. “You have it well in hand.”

“I think so. One aspect of so much Japanese art is to embrace the imperfect, the ephemeral, and appreciate the fleeting beauty in both. That’s what I’ll do with the lightning scar. Out of damage comes grace and beauty. I’ll talk to Hal again, to make sure that’ll work with what he envisions.”

“I am sure you will make it beautiful. You said Bilbo had three other commissions?”

“He did. I haven’t talked to one of the clients yet, so I don’t know what that one’s about. One of them sounds like a wonderful mechanical challenge. Do you know what an orrery is?”

Thran upended himself on his hands. “I do not.”

“Did you ever see one of those mechanical things that shows the motion of the planets? You turn a crank and all the planets move around the sun?”

“Oh, yes! I have seen one of those! I remember a film that Legolas liked when he was small, from
the man who invented the Muppets – *The Dark Crystal*. I think there was one in that film?”

“There was one in the first Lara Croft film, too. Both were huge.”

“Will this one be so large?”

“No, thank goodness,” Bard grinned. “The gentleman liked the Ring Thing, but it sounded like he wants to veer into steampunk.”

“Steampunk?” Thran gave him a look. “What is this steampunk?”

“Think of an alternative Victorian England, where steam powers a lot of science fiction machinery, such as great airships. There is a whole genre of stories and graphic novels that riff on it. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was a film that captures the look of the thing – it’s got a beautiful version of Captain Nemo’s Nautilus submarine in it. Steampunk machines have lots of gears and handmade details, brass and wood where we would use form-stamped metal, and so forth. It’s intrigued me for a long time, but I’ve never done anything with it before. A steampunk orrery would be a great project.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Thran nodded.

“The other one... inspiration hasn’t struck yet on how to do it, but the idea’s simple enough. It’s the Andromeda galaxy, turning. In metal. That one will take some thought.”

“An entire galaxy in metal, turning?” Thran frowned. “I have no idea how to do that.”

“I don’t, either,” Bard agreed, but he looked more thoughtful than worried. “It’s not like an orrery, where you attach each planet to a pole and have it twirl around the center. A galaxy has millions of stars. So I’ll have to think long and hard about that one... hmm... maybe a ton of different-sized anodized aluminum spheres... they’d be lightweight, and the colors are amazing...”

“You have much to work on now.”

“The barn will get a thorough cleanout as soon as I get the solarium done. I need to think about my commissions and do the preliminary sketches first, which will give me time to get the barn in shape. So that’s the last of my domestic news. What’ve you got in the international ballet arena?”

Thran grinned at Bard’s allusion. “I will reveal all in a few minutes. I must do the steps and the jetés now, which are not so easy to talk through.”

“I’ll be forced to sketch, then,” Bard winked. “Or depending on how long you think you’ll be, I’ll put your supper on. I saved a piece of the salmon to grill when you got home, so it’d be a real supper and not leftovers.”

“Perhaps forty minutes?” Thran estimated. “To do the steps and jetés, then to properly cool.”

“I’ll sketch for a few minutes more, then get your supper,” Bard decided. He waved a hand at Thran. “Step and jeté away.”

“I hear and obey,” Thran teased his husband with a smile, and gave himself to the dance. Bard sketched quietly until Thran finished his grand jetés, then excused himself with a wave. Thran methodically worked through his yoga and his cooling stretches, and when he came at last into the kitchen, his frustration with the day had vanished. Bard was at the stove, grilling Thran’s salmon, but he wasn’t too busy to give Thran a pleased grin.
“You look better. You’ve got time to put on your comfy clothes, then your supper will be on the table.”

“I fly,” Thran grinned back, and was soon seated at the table with a warm plate in front of him. Bain was the only child still at the table; he sniffed deeply.

“Mmm, that smells good,” he offered wistfully.

Bard laughed as he put a dish of raspberries beside Thran’s plate. “You’ve already had yours, boyo.”

“I’m still hungry.”

“There’s still a lot of peanut butter toast, cheese and crackers, bread and butter, bananas, other fruit, and milk in the fridge.”

“Mmm, maybe peanut butter toast,” Bain mulled.

“Finish your homework, please, then you can eat.”

“I’m too hungry to do math,” he grumbled. “What about a bowl of ice cream?”

“What about you finish your math and then have peanut butter toast?”

Bain snorted in plaintive disgust. “You’re harsh, Da.”

Legolas appeared in the doorway, his blanket wrapped tightly around him. He smothered a sneeze. “May I get in the tub now, Bard?”

“Sure,” Bard nodded. “You know the routine – shower first, then get in the tub. You get a reprieve from the scrubbing afterwards since you’re sick.”

“Okay, thanks,” Legolas shivered, but he mustered a smile for Thran. “I was supposed to get in the tub this afternoon, Papa, but I helped Bard with the lamps, and then I fell asleep.”

“It has been an eventful day,” Thran conceded, smiling. “Go soak and get warm, synok – I see that you are cold, and that is not good. Turn on the water to the tub before you get into the shower, and then it will be full when you get out. And better that you do not wash your hair until you are no longer sick – a wet head will not help you.”

“Okay, Papa,” Legolas smiled gratefully. “Enjoy your supper.”

“Thank you. Enjoy your soak.”

“There!” Bain exclaimed, as Legolas disappeared down the hall. “Finally done! Now for the peanut butter!”

“Clean up your things first,” both Bard and Thran chorused, which drew a chuckle out of both of them, as well as a groan from Bain.

“Geez, both of you!” he complained, piling his papers and books messily together. “A guy can’t catch a break at anything!”

“If you know that, then why do you think that you can smush everything together like that and expect to pass muster?” Bard asked mildly. “Put everything away the way you know it should go, then you won’t have to come back and do it again later.”
“All right, all right,” Bain muttered as he rearranged his papers neatly in folders and loaded his books and folders into his backpack. “There. Done. All neat and tidy. Now may I have something to eat?”

“Have at,” Bard waved a hand at the kitchen. “And I don’t have to remind you to clean that up when you’re done, right?”

“No,” Bain exhaled. “May I use the broiler?”

“Because...?” Bard asked.

“Because I like to toast the peanut butter, too. It tastes different that way. Nuttier.”

“Go for it,” Bard agreed. He carried a cup of tea to the table and sat in Legolas’s usual chair to sip it. “Domestic crisis averted. Now, for the day’s international news, we go to our Russian correspondent.”

Thran snickered, then summoned a pseudo-serious expression, as if he read for a news broadcast. He affected a sonorous voice to answer Bard’s question. “The day’s activities ground to a standstill as all parties convened around the UltraViolet Ballet conference table. Discussions encompassed set design, costume design, lighting design, and sound design. The result of these discussions were all good, but at times the duration of the conference seemed designed to keep principal dancer Thran Oropherson from the barre, the yoga, and the dance.” Thran dropped his talking-head impression to throw up both hands. “How am I supposed to back up costumes and lights and sets and music if I am not fit to dance?”

Bard leaned over his folded arms to consider. “Maybe you need to take a page from Irmo’s book, and throw a tantrum.”

Thran speared a bite of salmon, chewed, and swallowed. “I might do that tomorrow. Better, perhaps I should stay home, do my barre and yoga here, and then go to the studio.”

“That works, too. I’ll grab a bit of rebar from the barn and chase off anyone who tries to interrupt.”

Snickering, Thran took a bite of the stir-fried vegetables that accompanied his salmon. “What is the expression? I would pay a dollar to see that?”

Bard slid his gaze towards Bain, who still rummaged in the kitchen to make his peanut butter toast, then leaned forward. Thran leaned forward in response.

“I didn’t say I’d do it without a shirt,” Bard whispered.

Thran smothered laughter. “I would pay much more to see that.”

“You would. I don’t work cheap.”

“Stop,” Thran chortled. “I try to do justice to my supper. It is very good, I must say. An orange glaze this time?”

“Thanks. Yes, orange and a little ginger. Just olive oil on the veg, and nothing on the farro.”

“I admit I like butter on the farro. No, sit,” Thran urged Bard to keep his seat. “You were kind enough to make my supper. I get the extras for myself.”

He fetched the butter and returned to his seat. He ate in silence for a few minutes, savoring each bite, so carefully prepared, so flavorful. Bard was content to sip his tea and commune silently with his
thoughts, so Thran took his time, unwilling to bolt everything down with abandon, for that would be
crass after the effort Bard had made to prepare it. When he was done, he got up to rinse his dishes
and load them into the dishwasher, again gesturing for Bard to keep his seat.

“The dishwasher is full, so I will turn it on,” he observed.

“It’ll wait for you to have a cup of tea and some dessert if you want,” Bard said. “There’s ice cream
and a few cookies left. I’ll have to make some more cookies tomorrow.”

“Those orange ones with the chocolate?” Bain piped up as he licked peanut butter off his knife, then
washed it, dried it, and put it back in the flatware drawer. “Those were amazing. Tilda liked them,
too.”

Thran looked at Bard. “Where is Tilda? In her room?”

“She was in the sitting room with Legs,” Bard got up to stick his head in the other room. “Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh?” Thran paused in his rummaging in the pantry for cookies. “What does uh-oh mean?”

“It means that Tilda’s asleep on the sofa.”

Thran got his cookies from the tin, shut it, and hastened after Bard into the sitting room. He found
Bard beside Tilda, rubbing her back.

“Little doll?”

Tilda made a soft moan as she sat up. “Da?”

“You fell asleep on the sofa, Til. It’s only eight o’clock. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay,” Tilda rubbed her eyes as Bard put his hand on her forehead. “Just tired.”

“Why don’t you go get your shower, and then crawl into bed? You don’t have to wash your hair
tonight.”

“Okay,” the little girl agreed, rubbing her eyes again. “Hi, Ada. I fell asleep.”

“So I see,” Thran nodded. “A warm shower will feel good.”

“I’ll help you get organized,” Bard encouraged, as Tilda got to her feet.

“That’s good,” Tilda agreed, sighing. “I’m still tired.”

“Up with you, then,” Bard took her by the shoulders to guide her towards the hall. He gave Thran a
look as they went by. “Back in a few minutes, angel.”

Thran waved a hand as Bard steered their youngest upstairs. He sat on the sofa to sip his tea and
nibble his cookies until Bard returned. Bain came in, chewing the last bite of his toast.

“Bet she’s sick,” Bain said.

Thran nodded. “It is not like her to fall asleep this early.”

Bain shrugged. “Maybe she’s just going through a growth spurt. I did when I was ten. I was always
falling asleep because I was growing so fast that I couldn’t keep up. I’m kinda going through one
now, I think. I’m hungry all the time.”
“Legolas grew vary fast last year,” Thran offered. “Six inches in four months. He still grows very fast, but not as fast as last year.”

Bain brightened. “Cool. Maybe I’ll keep growing. I want to be taller than Da. Legs is almost taller than him now.”

“Legolas wants to be taller than I am, too,” Thran grinned.

“That’d be really tall. Would it affect his fencing?”

“A tall épée fencer has an advantage,” Thran shrugged. “He must still be very skilled, but given two fencers with equal skills, the taller would have an edge. It becomes less of one as the skill of the fencers increases, of course.”

Bain thought about that. “So if Legs grows taller than you, that’d be good.”

“It could be. A few épéeists are almost as tall as basketball players.”

“Wow.” Bain looked impressed. “It helps to be tall for soccer, too.”

“For many sports. But not for gymnasts and ice skaters.”

Bain snickered. “No, not for them. I guess dancers are usually shorter than you?”

“For the most part, they are. The great Baryshnikov is only five-eight. Shorter dancers have less to launch into the air than I do. So it is important to take good care of the body, especially the feet and joints.”

Bard reappeared, drawing Bain’s eyes as well as Thran’s. “Is she sick?” Bain asked.

“Not yet. Just very tired. She said her legs hurt, so it might be a growth spurt. We’ll see come morning. How do you feel, Bain?”

The boy held up both hands. “I’m fine. Besides, I can’t be sick tomorrow, Da. I’ve got this English test I want over and done with.”

“Good enough. Tilda won’t be in the shower long, so you be on deck to get in right after her.”

“Okay, Da. I’ll head up now. And yes, the kitchen’s clean.”

“Good lad,” Bard grinned, sitting beside Thran. “Sig’s still working on her paper, so be courteous.”

Bain’s reply was a good-natured wave as he went upstairs. As soon as the boy was out of earshot, Thran cocked his head at his husband.

“Is she sick?”

Bard exhaled. “I’d give it another day or so. Tomorrow morning, I’ll call Rosie. With four children, she’ll be a font of knowledge about a good pediatrician. We may not need one right now, but the day will come that we do. Better to be prepared ahead of time.”

“Wise,” Thran agreed, munching his cookie.

“So, to resume about the ballet...” Bard paused with a meaningful look at Thran.

“I have nothing more to tell of it today,” Thran waved a hand. “You saw most of the day’s ballet in
our ballroom before supper.”

“You alluded to what you want to come after Immortal,” prompted Bard.

“Ah, that,” Thran nodded. “Yes, I think of more than all these thousands of problems and questions and details that beset me. I keep in mind how you prepared for your art show. You sketched, you moved your sculpture, knowing that your show was only the prelude to what you hoped would come after – your commissions, new works, new chances. So all the details to make Immortal are important in the same way, because Immortal’s premiere is the prelude for me, too. There are immediate things that will come – perhaps an Immortal tour, perhaps a book – I would like you to do one, if you are so inclined. But I want long-term things to follow, too – new works, like your commissions. If UltraViolet can position itself as an innovative company, a source of new ideas, then we infuse new life in a classic art. We help it evolve and remain fresh.”

“It sounds exciting. You’re the perfect one to bring that fresh take on a respected tradition. But you’ve got to get Immortal onstage to get it all started.”

Thran nodded.

“And it’s all on your shoulders.”

Thran heaved a long sigh, and nodded.

Bard rubbed Thran’s thigh. “It’ll be a grind, but that won’t matter, angel. It’ll all happen, just the way you want it to. Nothing can stop you or Immortal.”

Bard’s words were few, but the conviction in them was unshakeable. Even though they were the same words Thran had told himself so many times, to hear lyubov yego voice them so firmly was both comfort and affirmation. He leaned into Bard and shut his eyes to better appreciate his husband’s solid warmth. Bard wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and they sat quietly together, listening to the water running upstairs. When it stopped, Bard patted Thran’s arm and sat up.

“I’ll start the dishwasher, then see how Tilda’s doing.”

Thran sat up, too. “And I will see if Legolas has disappeared down the tub drain.”

Bard snickered. “Let’s go, then.”

By the time they got upstairs, Bain came out of his room with his pajamas in hand to take his turn in the bathroom. The light was off in the master bathroom, so when Bard ducked into Tilda’s room, Thran went into Legolas’s. His son was curled in bed with his book.

“How was your soak, Legolas?” Thran asked as he sat on the edge of his son’s bed.

“That tub is amazing,” the boy grinned. “I got in all the way up to my neck, and it was so warm. Maybe if I’m still sick tomorrow, I can get in again.”

“You must stay home again tomorrow,” Thran confirmed. “The rule is that you must be without a fever for twenty-four hours before you can go back. But you may not be the only one to keep Bard company tomorrow. Tilda was very tired tonight.”

Legolas’s lips were downturned. “Oh, no – did she catch it from me?”

“Likely both of you caught it from all of the other sick children at school. No matter how many sneezes everyone smother, the germs go around. There is no way to avoid all of them.”
I guess not. But I hope she’s not sick.”

“We have been very lucky to have gone so long with all of us so healthy. We will weather this with little problem. You must do your part and rest as much as you can.”

“And soak in the tub,” Legolas grinned. “That’s pretty cool.”

“Of course,” Thran gave him an affectionate smile. “Do not read too long, please. Sleep lets your body fight the cold better than anything.”

“Bard said I should have some more acetaminophen before I go to sleep.”

“I will get it. Then rest.”

“Okay, Papa.”

Thran fetched the two pills and a cup of water from the bathroom, and returned to Legolas’s room. He saw the medicine down Legolas’s throat, then straightened the sheets and blankets that covered his son. “You have your tissues and your water, so I will leave you to settle, synok. Rest well.”

“I hope this is gone soon,” Legolas sniffed. “I hate being so clogged!”

“No fun, indeed.” Thran pressed a kiss to the top of his son’s head. “See you in the morning.”

“Night, Papa.”

Bard stuck his head in. “You got your acetaminophen, Legs?”

“Yes, Papa gave it to me.”

“Okay. Sleep well then. That’s the best thing.”

“I will. Night, Bard.”

Thran followed Bard out of his son’s room, and he pulled the door ajar behind them. “How is Tilda?”

“I hope she’s just very tired. She said so many children were out of sport this afternoon that she overdid the Double Dutch. She says her legs ache, and she doesn’t have a fever, so if she stays that way overnight, I’ll write her a note to skip sport and come home on the early bus.”

“Prudent,” Thran agreed. “How is Sigrid?”

“Deep into her paper,” Bard replied. “And she says she feels fine.”

Bain came out of the children’s bathroom, clad in his sleep pants and tee. His hair was damp, but not soaked, mute testimony that he thought a dry head was wise for him as well as his siblings. “Legs and Til in bed, then?”

“Both in bed,” Thran nodded.

“Sig’s still working on her paper,” Bard added.

Bain snorted, but with a smile. “She’ll be a writer one day, I swear. Or a drill instructor. I still can’t get over how tough she was about Lance.”
“She’s the house lioness,” Bard grinned, looping an arm around Bain’s shoulders to hug him close. “And you’re the house bottomless pit. Did you fill up enough to get through the night?”

“A bowl of ice cream would fill up the last few crannies, Da,” he wheedled.

“So would a bowl of cereal. Get one if you need it.”

“Ugh, that nut and twig stuff that Sig likes,” Bain grimaced. “I’m good.”

“Okay. You can read if you want, but don’t stay up past eleven. It’s still a school day tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and I’ll get that rotten English test out of the way,” exhaled Bain. “Night, Da. Night, Thran.”

“Night, Bain,” both men chorused, as Bain slipped into his room.

“Shower?” Bard gave Thran a sideways look.

“Bliss,” Thran sighed. “You start. I will say goodnight to Sigrid and Tilda, then be in.”

“Righto.”

Tilda was already asleep, and Sigrid was immersed in her computer screen, so Thran was quick to follow Bard into their bathroom. Bard had just given a quick scrub of baking soda over the tub so it’d be ready for whoever used it next, so they got into the shower together. Despite the pleasure of his husband’s water-slicked body so close to his, Thran didn’t linger long in the shower cabinet. They exchanged a few caresses, but as Bard seemed as interested in getting out and drying off as Thran did, they were soon back in the bedroom.

“Bed, or sitting room?” Bard asked, as he contemplated his sleep pants.

“Either is welcome. Wherever you feel most inclined to tell me about this geisha.”

Bard’s lips curved up slyly. “Hmm. Depends on how... rousing a conversation you want.”

“If it becomes that kind of conversation, then the location will not matter.”

“Been that kind of day, has it? Better the bed, then. Less to clean up.”

Chuckling, Thran padded to his side of the bed and drew down the sheets and blankets. “You are a practical man, my saint.”

“And you’re a curious one. What do you want to know?”

Thran waited until they had settled side by side, with Thran’s head resting on Bard’s shoulder and his arm draped across Bard’s chest. As the dark settled around them, he sighed.

“Such a way to end the day,” he murmured, rubbing his hand over the dark hair on Bard’s chest, savoring the tickle against his palm. “So much better than endless meetings.”

“It’s still two people talking,” Bard chuckled as he twined his fingers in Thran’s hair.

“With fringe benefits. Soft sheets, warm blankets, hunky welder. No meeting can compare.”

Bard pressed a kiss on Thran’s hair. “I hope not.”

“Of course not. So... these geishas. What about them appeals to you?”
Bard sighed. “They’re exotic. So elaborate, like mysteries. So refined. So beautiful. I know they’re Japanese, and our solarium is more Moroccan or Indian or tropical, so I’m mixing up different cultures, but for some reason, I just thought of them. I thought it’d be fun to pretend we were in an exotic fairytale.”

“As you said, the geishas are not courtesans. So do you seek one who stays true to her calling and offers you a chaste meeting, or do you seek a tryst with an exotic partner in an exotic setting?”

“Mmm,” Bard hummed, tracing figures over Thran’s flank, his glute, his ribs. “The second. Definitely the second.”

“Are you enamored of only the geishas, or would you consider an exotic from a different culture?”

“Hmm. Do you have one in mind?”

“You seek mysterious, exotic, seductive, yes?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What of the Indian subcontinent? Saris, beautiful jewelry, henna, heady perfumes... and so many forms of seductive dance.”

Bard’s hand paused in its light tracing over Thran’s skin and tightened on his glute, drawing Thran’s secret smile.

“Ah. Something of interest, then.”

“A tryst with a mysterious dancer? Hell, yes, angel.”

“Good. I like this, too. I have already worn a kimono in our games, but not yet a sari. I like that.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Because you are as eager for new things with me as I am with you. So I have one more thing to ask you.”

“Anything.”

“The geishas... in the modern world, there are no male geishas.”

“That’s right,” Bard said easily, then paused. “Um... what’re you getting at?”

“You are bisexual; the female as well as the male appeals to you. I want to know if you ask your exotic to offer... feminine aspects.”

Bard tightened, but Thran leaned up to press a kiss at the base of Bard’s jaw. “Stop. It does not bother me if that is what you ask for, whether consciously or not. I take no slight from it. In fact, I find it intriguing to think that I might learn to seduce my husband even more completely than I do now.”

“I... hadn’t thought about that, but... there might be something to what you say.”

“Something, as in yes, you are still attracted to the female, which is nothing new and concerns me not in the least, or yes, an exotic with female as well as male aspects sounds exciting?”

“You’re not bi.”
“So? If you think your gay husband cannot tempt you with more than masculine allure, you do me a disservice. I would enjoy it, but only if it appeals to you, too.”

Bard lay quietly beside him, considering. Thran shut his eyes and stroked softly, thinking of richly embroidered saris, beautiful jewelry, seductive, smoky eyes, rouged hands and feet. So many possibilities for pleasure, so many ways to tease Bard out of his quiet control and into unrestrained passion...

His hum was more purr than anything else.

He found himself on his back, his no longer quiet and controlled husband on top, stroking soft kisses over his throat. Hands ran over Thran’s ribs, down his abs, then back up again. As hips rubbed against his, fingers caught his nipples to roll and pull.

“You’re such a fucking bastard,” Bard breathed, as Thran groped to open his nightside table drawer for a tube of lubricant.

“Always,” Thran grinned as he set about teasing Bard further away from his quiet and control.

He had his answer – a most delicious one.
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

The saint receives a double reminder of his appeal, but remains focused on the things most important to him.

Chapter Notes

I don’t have any association with the wonderful tribal fusion dancer, Rachel Brice, or with YouTube. I do, however, enjoy Rachel’s wonderful dancing as viewed on YouTube :-).

Bard woke up with a smile, courtesy of his husband’s thorough ministrations last night. He hadn’t enjoyed going to bed early so much in a long time, not that he’d gotten to sleep for at least an hour after he’d crawled under the sheets. Thran and his seductive words about trysts with mysterious Indian dancers had made mere sleeping no part of his thoughts. But more than Thran’s allusions to the exotic rendezvous they planned had kept him awake. There also had been his unexpected offer to pique Bard’s... dual nature, for want of a better term.

He’d never thought of Thran as feminine, but as soon as Thran had mentioned saris, he’d imagined his tall, pale dancer in a blue one and ornate silver jewelry, his beautiful hair loose over his shoulders, hips undulating slowly, fingers beckoning to him with arcane gestures. How compelling would Thran be when he veiled his powerful dancing in seductive draperies, provocative glances, and sinuous gestures? It would be tribal belly dancing at its most erotic, that’s what it’d be.

Thank the gods that the lights had been off last night, or Thran would have realized just how interested Bard was in Thran’s gender bending – or combining – offer.

_Whether the lights were on or off made no difference, fool. You nailed him to the bed like you hadn’t gotten any in a month, and all he did was egg you on, trilling like a damned cheetah over a meal. He owns you body and soul._

Bard’s smile turned sheepish.

His husband was a fucking bastard. Such a fucking bastard, and Bard loved him for it.

It was just a couple of minutes before six, when the alarm would go off. He switched it off, and got up – or tried to. A long arm wound around his ribs and nestled him against a pale, muscled chest, and a nose nuzzled into the angle between his shoulder and neck. A kiss pressed against his back, a soft, lazy voice hummed softly in his ear, and a hand stroked the hair on his chest.

“Mine,” came a throaty whisper.

Damn. The fucking bastard had read his thoughts.
Bard snared the hand tickling his chest and raised it to his lips to kiss. “It’s six, angel. Time to get the children ready for school.”

With a discontented growl, an insistent dancer snuggled closer.

“It’s okay if you want to stay in bed. I’ll see to the children.”

“Mine.”

“I am. Owned like a slave. So let your property go so he can see to the children, your majesty.”

That roused a snicker. “I like it better when you call me a fucking bastard.”

“What’s gotten into you this morning? I still have to see to the children, no matter what I call you.”

Another snicker. “You were into me last night, up to the root. It was delicious. Do not fault me because I still savor it.”

“Never. Savor it all you want while I put on the porridge.”

A long-suffering sigh. “You are a devoted father. I hope our children appreciate how well you see to them.”

“They do. So don’t make me disappoint them. Let me go so I can make the porridge.”

Long arms unwound from around him. Rolling over, Bard buried his nose in the hollow at the base of Thran’s throat and stroked fingers down his ribs, flank, and hip. He caught a bit of the skin over Thran’s collarbone between his teeth, let it go, and rolled back over to get out of bed. He carried his sleep pants and tee into the bathroom with him, tended to necessities, and came out to find Thran still lounging sleepily in bed. He looked like the reclining cheetah Bard had called him, or the languid ruler after a night of pleasure – tousled hair, drowsy eyes, and a sensuous hand draped over the edge of the mattress. Gods, imagine how decadent he’d look on that Indonesian bed frame that languished in the upstairs garret room. Now that the house was almost done, fixing that bed frame would be a good weekend project.

Bard grinned. In this house, there was always something to do on the weekend.

He gave a gentle tug to a lock of Thran’s hair, getting a rumbling murmur in response, then headed downstairs. On went the teakettle and the porridge. Out came the raisins, the cinnamon, and the milk for the table, then the bowls and spoons to stand ready by the stove. Wax paper sheets for the sandwiches, bread on top, then lettuce, cheese, meat, and mustard, or peanut butter and jam. Fruit, cookies – he needed to make more today – water bottles. Everything into the lunch bags lined up on the kitchen island – only three, as Legs would be at home today. He hoped the long sleep had refreshed Tilda, and she wasn’t suffering from the same thing that plagued Legolas.

The kettle was hot, so he made himself a cup of lemon ginger tea, dished a bowl of porridge, and sat at the table to eat his breakfast.

Bain was down first. He was his usual self, clattering through the kitchen to fill his porridge bowl and teacup. He plunked down beside Bard already shoveling his mouth full, offering a wave of greeting. Bard saluted him with his teacup and a grin, then eyed Tilda as she came in from the hall. She looked quieter than usual, but not sick. Tilda was a trouper, though, and so Bard called to her as she came in.

“Morning, little doll. How’re you this morning?”
“Sleepy,” she yawned. She stood on tiptoe to reach the porridge pot on the back stove burner, filled her bowl, and came to the table. “Is there any apple?”

“We have apple. Half? And tea?”

“Yes, please.”

Bard got up to retrieve an apple from the fruit bin in the fridge, cut half of it into pieces, and brought the cutting board and Tilda’s tea to the table. “Here you are, Til. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay,” she sighed, putting the apple pieces in her bowl and sprinkling cinnamon on them. “Just sleepy.”

“Sleepy, or tired?”

She thought about it, then reluctantly admitted, “Tired.”

“If you want to come home on the early bus, I’ll write you a note to excuse you from sport.”

She thought about it some more. “Okay.”

Tilda’s willingness to come home early wasn’t lost on Bard. Maybe she felt more or less okay this morning, but by afternoon, maybe she wouldn’t. Bard found a sheet of notebook paper and a pen, wrote the note for Tilda, and tucked it into her backpack.

“If you feel okay in the afternoon, you can stay and come home with Sigrid and Bain on the late bus,” Bard said. “If you don’t, take the early bus and come home. I’ll be here either way.”

“Okay,” Tilda nodded, and concentrated on her porridge.

“Sigrid’s late this morning,” Bard observed, as Thran came into the kitchen. He had on his tights, dancing slippers, top, and various wraps. “Morning, angel. Did you hear whether Sigrid is up?”

“She is in the bathroom and will be down soon,” Thran confirmed, pouring himself a big mug of tea. “Legolas was awake, but I told him he could go back to sleep if he wanted, so he decided he would.”

“Does he feel any better?”

“A little. Many coughs and sniffles, so the cold progresses. The good news is that he has no fever.”

“Good,” Bard nodded. “Just the snorts and snuffles to get through.”

“I hope so. Do you need me to take the children to the bus stop today?”

“I’ve got it,” Bard said easily. “Take yourself off to the ballroom, angel.”

Thran bent down to kiss Bard’s cheek. “Thank you, lyubov moya. Have a good day at school, children.”

“Bye, Thran,” Bain and Tilda chorused, as Thran took his tea down the hall. He barely missed running into Sigrid who hurried towards the kitchen.

“Oh, I am sorry!” Thran exclaimed, barely getting his teacup out of the way. “I did not splash you, did I?”
“I’m sorry, Ada,” Sigrid said hastily. “It’s okay, nothing got on me.”

“All right, good. Have a good day at school, lioness. I am off to the barre.”

“Bye, Ada.” Sigrid hurried into the kitchen. She grabbed a bowl to dish some porridge and carried it to the table. “Morning.”

“Morning, sweetness. Everything all right?”

Sigrid nodded quickly. “Just running late. I stayed up late to work on my paper, so it was hard to get up this morning.”

She shoveled down her porridge, more like Bain rather than her usual decorous self. Bard gave her a close look, but kept quiet. Her brother, however, was not so silent.

“Bet you were talking to Finn.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Sigrid said sharply. “He had a government test, and I had the paper, so we talked all of three minutes at about eight o’clock, and not a second after that. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Ooh, touchy, touchy,” Bain jibed, rolling his eyes and holding up his hands. “What, did you and the hockey player have words?”

“Shut up!” Sigrid snapped.

“Why?” Bain needled.

Sigrid’s eyes flashed, and she looked to Bard. “Da, tell him to shut up!”

“Da, tell her to stop yelling at me!”

“Both of you,” Bard said mildly. “Bain, leave your sister alone. Put your dishes in the dishwasher, and go brush your teeth. Sigrid, a milder tone for your brother, please.”

“Yes, Da,” two voices murmured. Bain got up from the table with an exaggerated flounce, but subsided when Bard’s gaze sharpened on him. Sigrid looked unhappy, but kept her eyes on her food. When Bain had gone upstairs, Bard leaned forward.

“Everything okay, sweetness?”

Sigrid swallowed. “I’m fine, Da. Everything’s fine. I just stayed up too late because of my paper, and I’m tired.”

That made two tired children who’d soon head off to school.

“Okay. If you want to come home on the early bus, I’ll write you a note.”

“I’ve got one,” Tilda piped up.

“No, I’ll be fine. If I’m not, I can bring an excuse note tomorrow.”

“It you decide to come home, text Bain so he’ll know not to look for you on the late bus.”

“I will,” Sigrid glared at her bowl. “Even if he is a brat.”
“Enough,” Bard growled. “Whether he’s a brat or not, you don’t have the right to make him worry about you, and he would.”

Sigrid looked like the last spoonful of her porridge had gotten stuck halfway down her throat. She forced it down with a wince. “I’m sorry, Da. You’re right.”

“Apology accepted. Finish your breakfast, sweetness. You, too, little doll. The bus will be here in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Da,” the girls chorused. Tilda finished first, put her dishes in the dishwasher, and went upstairs to brush her teeth. Sigrid was just a few moments behind her, leaving Bard to rinse his bowl and put it in the dishwasher. He ducked into the ballroom to let Thran know they were about to go to the bus stop, then he shepherded the three children down the lane. Just before they boarded the bus, he reminded Sigrid and Bain to get Legolas’s assignments for him.

When the bus headed for school, he trotted back home. Thran was still in the early stages of his barre, and looked up at Bard’s entrance.

“Neither of the girls are themselves this morning, so I expect one or both of them back on the early bus, if not before,” Bard said. “I don’t want to leave Legs home by himself when he’s sick, so I’ll dash out to the market while you’re still here. I want to stock up on juice and soup stuff, and I have a couple of things to get at the homeowners’ mecca.”

“Good idea,” Thran nodded. “Poor girls. Sigrid seemed very disordered this morning.”

“She and Bain snarked at each other at breakfast, so she’s definitely out of sorts. Come to think about it, she was scarce last night. Bain said something about her and Finn having a disagreement, but I don’t put much stock in that. Anyway, I’ll head out, and be back as soon as I can so you can get to the studio.”

“I will take care of my dance first, in the proper time,” Thran assured him. “And I will see to Legolas if he wakes up. Take the time you need.”

“Okay. Back soon.”

Thran made an elegant turn and drifted to Bard’s side with a pair of dance steps, arched into an arabesque, and dipped close enough for a kiss. “Adieu, my saint.”

Bard kissed his husband back, then smiling, headed for the solarium. He hefted the lion’s head fountain into his arms. In the mudroom, he stacked cloth grocery sacks atop the fountain, snared his keys, and let himself out. Once the fountain and bags were safely arranged in the front passenger seat of his truck, he headed down the lane to the homeowners’ mecca. Into a cart went the fountain, and he wheeled it inside. At this hour, the only other customers roaming the aisles were contractors, so he quickly found the concrete adhesive and rubber tubing he needed. Then it was on to the paint aisle. That took him past the discounted, discontinued, and seconds section, so he scanned the offerings out of long habit. Yes, there were the usual cans of returned paint, the incorrectly cut window blinds, the returned appliances and wheeled carts and closet shelving, and a huge bucket full to overflowing with rolls of discontinued or returned wallpaper. No, there was nothing he could use. Onward to the paint aisle.

Bard pulled his cart up to the display rack of paint sample cards. He wanted a grey that matched the color of the fountain as closely as possible. When a clerk saw what he was doing, she came over.

“Hi there. Are you looking for a contrast color, or an exact match?”
“Oh... hi, yes, I want an exact match, if I can find it.”

“I can help you with that. We’ve got this amazing color-matching wizard thingie that lets me analyze a sample and calculate the pigment needed to match it exactly.”

The young woman smiling at him had lots of freckles, bright jade green eyes, and a nametag that read Janice. Her long, straight, carrot-orange hair clashed terribly with the red store tee shirt she wore, but it didn’t dim her sunny demeanor – in fact, she made the tee shirt look bad, rather than the other way around.

“Really? That sounds amazing. But...” Bard pointed to the fountain in his cart, “that’s the sample.”

“You’re a big strapping guy, right? If you can hold your spouty lion for the camera, I can make you paint to match.”

“Fair enough,” Bard nodded. “Where’s the, um, amazing color-matching wizard thingie?”

She chuckled. “Behind the counter. Just so you know, there’s secret paint info back there, so if you see any of it, you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Holding up three fingers, Bard solemnly intoned, “Scout’s honor.”

“All right, you’re in. Let me show you the thingie first before you haul over the spouty lion.”

The woman led Bard behind the counter and explained where the camera lens was and how the device worked. Bard hefted the fountain and held it patiently while the woman made sure it was properly lit for the camera. She tapped on the keyboard to start the analysis, and in a few seconds, a big square of grey appeared on the computer screen.

“Hmm,” she said typing rapidly. “Let me calibrate the monitor to make sure it displays the color properly... yeah, thought so. It’d gone kinda too red. That’s better. Can you hold up your spouty lion near the screen?”

Bard shifted it carefully, angling his head to see the color on the screen next to the fountain.

“That looks pretty good, yeah?” she asked.

He nodded. “It does indeed.”

“Great! You can put it down now. How much paint do you need?”

“Just enough for part of a wall, so a quart.”

She looked thoughtful. “Mind if I make a suggestion?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“If you want your wall to look like stone to match your fountain, get two quarts, a sample pot of black, and a sample pot of white. For the first coat, paint the wall the solid grey. For the second coat, mix some kinda lighter and some more kinda darker, so you have three colors. Then sponge the three over the first coat, kinda mottled. That’ll get you a more stony look.”

“I like that,” Bard nodded, putting the fountain carefully into his cart. He fished out his wallet to retrieve the samples of lime green paint and blue velvet, and pulled out his phone to find the picture he’d taken of the screens in place. He described the solarium with the screens and the archway, and how the fountain would hang under the archway.
“That looks and sounds amazing!” the young woman enthused, bending to see the picture on Bard’s phone more clearly. “You’re doing it all yourself? Wow, so talented! Yeah, the mottling will be a cinch for you, and it’ll make your wall look great. It won’t be boring, but it won’t compete with your beautiful screens, either.” She pointed to a rack holding brushes and sponges, and led him over. She chose a rough natural sponge and held it out to him. “You want a kinda rough textured sponge to give you good mottles. Does your fountain have a base?”

Taking the sponge, Bard gave it an experimental squeeze as he described the half circle basin that would rest below the fountain to catch the water.

“Oh, that’ll be cool. They make some really small water lilies now – one would look great in the basin, if it’s deep enough. And you could add a little green mottling to the wall, like moss is growing on it, just near the basin. That’d give you some subtle atmosphere.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ve got some of the green left, and I can mix it with the black until I get the right shade. So yes, I’ll take two quarts of the grey. I’ve got plenty of white at home, so I need just the sample pot of black.”

“Coming right up,” the woman smiled, and she bustled to mix Bard’s paint. She recommended he use a bathroom base paint that would resist moisture, so soon he added the sponge, two quarts of grey paint, and small pot of black to his cart.

“Thanks very much for the help,” he nodded as he headed for the checkout line.

“It’ll look awesome!” she grinned. “Would you take a picture when you’re done? I’d love to see it the next time you come in.”

“Will do,” Bard agreed. “I’m in here so often that people are starting to think I work here.”

“Oh, that’d be no bad thing,” she winked. “Take care, and hope it all goes well!”

“Thanks. I appreciate the help.”

Bard headed for the checkout. He was halfway back to the truck before he realized that Janice had been flirting with him, big time. For the second time today, his grin was sheepish.

Next, the market. Despite his lengthy sojourn at the homeowners’ mecca, the market was still far from crowded, and he quickly picked up a bag of onions, a big piece of fresh ginger, and two bunches of scallions for soup. More flour, because he expected to bake cookies sometime today or tomorrow. Aluminum foil, more almond milk, more cows’ milk, more eggs, and a package of chicken breasts. Four cans of frozen orange juice concentrate, two bottles of cranberry grape juice. He got everything into the truck, and headed home.

Than stood at the sink in the kitchen when Bard came through laden with the bags from the market.

“The soup ingredients arrive,” Thran greeted as he rinsed his hands. “Are there more bags? I will help you carry them.”

“This is all the food,” Bard replied, as they unloaded the bags. “I’ve got the homeowners’ mecca stuff still in the truck, but that’ll wait until we get the stuff in the fridge. How’s Legs?”

“Still asleep.” Thran handed Bard the veg, juice, and chicken to stow in the fridge, then the orange juice concentrate for the freezer. “I had the rest of the porridge and two of the hard boiled eggs. Do you want tea? I will refill the kettle.”
“Tea’s always good. Thanks. I’ll get the rest of the stuff.”

“Do you need help?”

“You’d save me a trip, so yes, help would be great.”

Thran put the kettle on the stove and padded after Bard. He slipped on his trainers by the door and came outside to take the cans of paint and bag of other supplies that Bard handed him. When Bard got the fountain into his arms to bring inside, the dancer’s eyebrows rose in curiosity.

“Oh, did you need to replace a part to the fountain?”

“I did, but the main reason I carted the fountain with me was so I could match paint to it.”

“Oh,” Thran nodded. “So that the fountain will look as if it belongs on the wall.”

“Exactly.”

Thran’s grin was pleased. “See? I learn. So you will paint the wall today?”

“I will.” Bard thought about the clerk who’d flirted with him and smothered the same sheepish grin that had plagued him all morning. It did no good, of course; Thran’s eyes narrowed in speculation as they came into the house. Bard carried the fountain into the solarium, and had just set it gently on the floor out of the way when Thran padded in barefoot after him.

“You blush,” his husband said, setting down the bag and cans of paint. He cocked his head at Bard with an amused expression on his face. “Why is that, lyubov moya?”

“Um, the clerk in the paint aisle... flirted with me.”

“Oh,” Thran nodded sagely, his smile widening. “You blush more. Tell me about this clerk.”

“She had this amazing red hair and freckles, and beautiful green eyes, just lovely,” Bard teased. “She told me how use this,” he pulled out the sea sponge and pointed to the pot of black paint and paint cans, “and those to make the wall look like stone to match the fountain. And then she quite obligingly mixed me a custom color that exactly matches the fountain. She even invited me into her inner sanctum behind the paint counter. All delicious. What? Stop smirking at me.”

Thran’s grin widened even more. “I do not smirk. I merely enjoy my husband’s embroidered story of adventure. Did you flirt back?”

Bard’s snort was self-deprecating as he dropped his teasing. “Oh, you have to kill my fantasy, don’t you? Don’t laugh, but I was halfway through the parking lot before I realized that she’d been flirting. So I missed my chance to flirt back.”

Thran laughed. “Oh, my innocent saint. You are adorable.”

“She asked me to take a picture to show her how the wall turns out, so maybe I’ll have my chance next time.”

“Perhaps I should go with you. I will linger in the background to see how she flirts with you, and how you flirt back. It will be research for my role in our game to christen this room.”

“Oh, I’ve got something better for you to research,” Bard grinned.

“Do you?” Thran gave him a look of anticipation. “I cannot wait to hear it.”
“Tribal fusion belly dance. Look up Rachel Brice. Her costuming is amazing, but made me think of her last night was the control she shows when she dances. You’ve got such amazing control when you dance, too, so I’m sure you’ll appreciate her. You’ll like her attitude, too.”

“Ooh, I look forward to see her. She is on YouTube?”

“Lots. She’s amazing.”

“How is it you are familiar with her?”

“Daphne, of course. She was into a lot of exotic stuff. Astrology, the Tarot, belly dancing, metaphysics – and quantum mechanics, believe it or not. Very interested in the mystical side of life. I can’t explain the quantum mechanics part to you, so you and I will just have to trust her when she insisted it correlated with some other mystical stuff.”

“I take her word for it,” Thran waved a hand. “And she knew of this Rachel Brice?”

“Absolutely. Tribal fusion style isn’t for everyone, but I understand why she liked it. I liked it, too. Powerful stuff.” Bard quirked his mouth at his husband. “Ought to be right up your alley, angel.”

Thran mirrored Bard’s expression back at him. “Perhaps so. I will research as you suggest. Now we must come up with your part of this game.”

“I asked for the mystical geisha, who’s become the mystical dancer. So you have to come up with my part.”

“Perhaps the mystical dancer wants to thank the handsome and talented artist who has crafted such a beautiful sanctuary.”

“Perhaps the artist has crafted the beautiful sanctuary for the beautiful dancer.”

Thran drew Bard to him, rubbing his hips gently against Bard’s. “Perhaps the dancer has not appeared during the construction, and the two meet by accident on the day the sanctuary is finished.”

Bard filled his hands with Thran’s glutes. His husband still had on his dancewear, so only thin, stretchy tights covered the firm muscles that filled Bard’s hands. When he stroked slowly, those firm muscles flexed, and Thran hummed softly. “Perhaps the artist has caught a few glimpses of the enigmatic dancer, and lingers on that last day in hopes that they will meet.”

“Perhaps the dancer has watched the devoted artist, and comes early on that last day, in hopes that they will meet,” Thran murmured.

“Mmm,” Bard hummed. “We have a plan.”

“A delicious one.”

“Very. Not that this isn’t delicious, too.”

Thran sighed as he stroked Bard’s hair out of his eyes. “You tempt me so, my saint. But I have ignored three calls from UVB already, and I cannot linger here much longer, no matter how much I want to.”

“It’s all right.” Bard’s hands stroked up Thran’s back. “Better I keep you a little hungry while I’m still working on the solarium. Sating you now might dull your enthusiasm for the christening.”

Thran’s eyes narrowed. “Such challenges are dangerous, lyubov moya. If you indulge in too much
silly talk about certain kinds of hunger, you will find yourself stripped naked on our new marble floor, where I will give you another reason to call me a fucking bastard.”

“Promises, promises,” Bard grinned. He squeezed Thran’s glutes once before he urged his husband away from him. “Off you go, and I’ll get on with the paint. It’ll dry while I make another pot of soup.”

“I will look in on Legolas before I change,” Thran said, as he backed out of the solarium.

Bard waved assent as Thran slipped away. Bard already had on his work clothes and boots, so he unfolded his paint cloth and moved the ladder nearby, then retrieved his paintbrush and roller from the mudroom. Before he started to paint, however, he carefully affixed painter’s tape on the edge of the doorway. The wood was old, and if Bard inadvertently brushed any paint on it, it’d likely soak it up before Bard could wipe it away, so he preferred to take the time to protect it. That took only a few minutes, so he was up on the ladder to paint the top of the wall by the time Thran came back into the room.

“Legolas is still asleep, Bard,” Thran informed him. He had on comfortable pants and shirt, and he had his dance bag over his shoulder. “I will see you this evening. I hope all the children will be well when they get home tonight.”

“Oh, wait,” Bard climbed down from the ladder. “You need a lunch.”

“Tcha, so I do,” Thran realized with chagrin. “No, lyubov moya, keep on with your paint. I can make myself a lunch.”

“Promise me you’ll make yourself a good one,” Bard put his arms akimbo.

Thran held up his hand as if he took an oath. “I will try to live up to the high standards of a Bard Bowman lunch.”

“See that you do,” Bard snickered, climbing back on his ladder. “I’ll be in to inspect in five minutes.”

Thran stuck his tongue out at Bard. “Suka blyad. Idi k chertu.”

“You’re welcome,” Bard snarked, and resumed his painting.

Thran rattled through the kitchen, eventually appearing with his bento boxes. “I have chicken, several kinds of vegetables, brown rice, and grapes. And cookies.”

“Cookies? Oh, my – you’re living large, angel.”

“I am sorry to say that your shortbread has cast a spell upon me.”

“It does that.”

“So now I am off, and I leave, too.”

Bard leaned down to return Thran’s kiss. “Hope all goes well today, angel. Do your best, just like always, and remember that your best means you dance.”

“I hear and obey,” Thran nodded. His lips widened in a perverse smile. “The UVB company will hear and obey, too.”

“Good. See you tonight, cariad.”
Thran gave him a smile and a wave as he left, and Bard was alone in the solarium.

He turned back to his painting, and the plain white wall soon wore its first coat of grey. After Bard left his brush and roller to soak in the mudroom, he busied himself in the kitchen to make the day’s soup and cookies. While the chicken simmered in its pot, Bard chopped veg, then started on the cookies. He didn’t have time for fancy sweets today, so he made brownies and a quick applesauce raisin sheet cake. Brownies out of the oven, veg into the pot, cake out of the oven. Ginger, scallions, and a few herbs went into the pot, and there came Legolas down the hall, rubbing his eyes.

“Morning, Legolas,” Bard greeted. “How’re you and your cold today?”

“I think I’m winning,” the boy smiled sleepily, “because I feel better, and the cold doesn’t.”

“Excellent. What would you like for breakfast? Porridge? Eggs?”

“Fried eggs?” Legolas graved. His voice was raspy, but he seemed in good spirits. “Mmm, brownies – and is that raisin cake?”

“It is. You must be on the mend, if you can smell the cake. How many eggs?”

“Three, please. I can smell a little, thank goodness. Mostly soup. I’m tired of being so clogged!”

“Kettle’s hot. Make yourself a cup of tea.”

“I liked that lemon ginger. Where is that?”

“Pantry with the rest of the tea. Are you good to eat at the table, or do you want a tray in the sitting room?”

“I’m okay for the table.”

“Okay, eggs’ll be up soon.”

Legolas rummaged for his tea, and Bard put his eggs in front of him with salt, pepper, and toast. He wolfed them down, making Bard smile. While Bard finished the soup, Legolas cleaned up his dishes, brushed his teeth, and brought his blanket, pillows, and book down to settle in the setting room. While Legolas read, Bard worked on sketches for his three commissions, rang the fourth one to leave a message that he was available to talk about what the client wanted, and checked on the soup. Legolas fell asleep and slept until lunchtime, then wolfed down two bowls of soup and several slices of bread, then a brownie and more tea. By then, the solarium wall had dried, so Bard could hold the fountain up to the wall to see how it’d look. Yes, the paint was an excellent match, if flatter than the textured fountain. He mixed a few small cups of darker and lighter paint to sponge on the wall until he got the feel of the sponging. Once he figured out how heavily to cover the wall to his satisfaction, he mixed up enough of the darker and lighter for the whole wall, and had at.

“That looks great,” Legolas came in to perch on the fainting couch. “The color’s perfect, and the splotches match the fountain almost exactly.”

“It’s about as close as I can make it,” Bard agreed, stepping back to eye the wall. “Just that lower left corner to do.”

As Legolas watched, Bard sponged the last portion of the wall. “There. Does it look even?”
The boy nodded. “I think so. How long does it take to dry?”

“Thirty minutes to the touch, solidly in a couple of hours. I won’t put up the fountain until tomorrow, to make sure it’s completely dry.”

Legolas looked around. “This will be so amazing in the winter. No matter how cold and icy it gets outside, it’ll still be tropical in here.”

“Exactly. It’ll be great all year round, but we’ll really appreciate it in February when it’s the nastiest weather of the year. It won’t be so bad being snowed in when we have this to remind us of summer.”

Legolas gave him an impish grin. “It’s never bad to be snowed in, no matter where you are.”

“As long as there’s food in the fridge and wood for the fireplace, I agree with you.”

“That’s true,” Legolas conceded.

Before their conversation could continue, the mudroom door opened. As Legolas craned his neck to look into the sitting room, Bard pulled out his mobile – yes, this was the time that the early bus dropped off children.

How many of the Clan Ffyrnig children had it dropped off?

Bard and Legolas looked towards the sitting room to find out.
Chapter 116

Chapter Summary

Two members of Clan Ffyrnig throw tantrums. While one is calculated, the other is full of disappointment only a saint can ease.

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to the film "White Christmas." I do, however, have a long-standing ritual to watch it every holiday season with friends and a million plates of tacos!

“I am fine,” Thran replied to Ori’s anxious inquiry, made right in the parking lot of the UltraViolet studio. The young man had stationed himself by the front windows of the lobby, watching for him, and had dashed outside as soon as Thran got out of his SUV.

“You’re sure nothing’s wrong? You’re so late this morning –”

“I am NOT late,” Thran cut Ori off. When the young man winced at the sharp tone, regret surged through Thran. He should not bark at the young man for being worried – he’d probably borne the displeasure of at least one person this morning because he had not been able to produce Thran on command. Likely Irmo, who despite improvements in his attitude was still subject to snappish behavior when something didn’t agree with him. Poor Ori! Thran would be three times as harried as he was now if Ori weren’t beside him to keep so many details organized and on track. He was indispensible for more than his organizational skills, too – some days, he was the only one who kept a calm head amid so many agitated people.

“I am sorry, Ori. I do not mean to snap. I assure you, I am not late,” Thran said in a softer, more reassuring voice, gratified when Ori’s expression eased. “I am not sick, or distressed, or anything else. I wanted only to save my career as a dancer. I stayed home to do my barre and yoga, because it has been impossible for me to do them here.”

Ori’s face eased a little more. “Oh, good, Thran. That was smart. I was worried that something had happened. You said your son was sick.”

“He improves, though perhaps the other children will not before long. But they are in good hands, as you know. Better that you save your worry for what will happen if I do not dance more than I have lately. All this stir to put on our ballet will be for naught if I am not strong or practiced enough to dance it.”

Ori winced again. “It’s been a very hectic few days, indeed.”

“How are the finances? Do they improve at all?”

Ori’s hum was neutral. “What’s that quote from White Christmas? ‘Right between ouch and
boing?"

Thran and Ori traded pained glances.

“Difficult, then, but not impossible,” Thran shrugged, hefting his dance bag. “We will manage.”

“Nori sent along a little something,” Ori said.

“Did he?” Thran paused, giving Ori a surprised look. “That was kind of him, but you know that I do not sell shares in the ballet profits. Please, send his money back with the most abject of apologies.”

“If you would sell shares, we’d have more money than we’d know what to with,” Ori said.

“Probably so. But you know I reserve the shares for those of us who make the effort, who take the risks. We cannot afford to allow others to demand changes, or certain dancers in certain roles, or a thousand other things. UVB cannot make its future if we serve up only the whims of investors. It would be a mishmash.”

“I agree with you, Thran,” Ori nodded simply. “But we won’t have to send Nori’s money back, because he didn’t ask for a share of the profits. That shocked me, to be honest. He never invests in anything that he doesn’t think will pay off exponentially in time. On the rare occasion that he does, he always insists on a hefty percentage of the profits. But this came gratis. I nearly fell over in a faint when he handed me the envelope. Cash, of course. He said he wanted to express appreciation that you inquired after him, and stood by him during the gang business. He appreciated Bard’s offer to let me stay with you for a while, too. He says you’re both good folk. He doesn’t say that about many people.”

Thran regarded Ori with surprise. “I have no words. That is very kind and generous of your brother. I will write him a note.”

It didn’t escape Ori that very few people chose to give anything to his enigmatic brother in writing, and he offered an appreciative smile. “That would mean a lot to him.”

“I will bring it tomorrow, if you would be so kind as to convey it.”

“Of course.”

“So what awaits me inside? Clearly someone has given you reason to rush out to greet me this morning.”

“Oh, the usual stir-that-is-Irmo is front and center. Actually, he’s upset about the same thing you are – no dance time with a certain principal dancer. So you might be able to use that as leverage against the rest of the clamor – liability insurance for the school, how much to charge for tickets, the license fees for one of the pieces of music went up while another went down, and so forth and so on.”

Thran sighed. “I had hoped that by now more would have settled. What can we do about it? Bard suggested I throw a tantrum, but that may not be the wisest idea.”

Ori snickered. “I think it’s a great idea. If you want a suggestion as to what to throw a tantrum about, I’ve got a good one.”

Thran gave his slight right-hand-man a perverse smile. “I await the wisdom of the oracle.”

“It’s right out of Management 101. The classic game goes like this – someone confronts you with a problem they want you to solve for them. You look at them and say, ‘I don’t pay you to bring me
problems! I pay you to bring me solutions! Where are your solutions? Are you saying you can’t do
the job?” And then they must go away to solve the problem themselves.”

“So how to you propose I adapt this to our situation?”

“Well... what’s the one thing that only you can do? Only you can dance Death, Lord of the
Underworld, in Immortal; other people can do everything else. But what’s the one thing you can’t do
right now? Dance Death, Lord of the Underworld. So wait until six or seven people clamor at you –”

“That will take less than two minutes after I walk in,” Thran grinned.

Ori grinned, too. “If that, then throw your tantrum. Say you thought they were the experts in their
areas, but here they are asking you to make their decisions. Was your impression of their expertise
misplaced? If you must do their jobs, then you can’t do yours, and if you can’t dance Death, Lord of
the Underworld, then all of this is for naught. That ought to make most of them blanch.

“You can’t stop there, though. Before any of them rally, announce that you will be in the studio
working on your part – the dance. At two o’clock, you will chair a meeting to think about how to
solve this or that problem, so you expect them to come with suggestions. Then leave – don’t look
back – and go into the studio with Irmo and the company, and dance.”

Thran eyed Ori thoughtfully. The young man’s words had been sober, and he didn’t smile. So this
was no prank he suggested Thran play on their colleagues. “This is delegation, yes?”

Ori nodded. “You can’t do everything, and it would be better if we can push decisions down to the
people who ought to make them. You’re a wonderful dancer, but you don’t need to decide where the
set crew gets the lumber for the set design. You set guidelines about reasonable costs and being able
to justify the costs that we accrue, but you don’t need to pick one lumber firm over another. Círdan
can do that.”

“And better than I can,” Thran agreed.

“For what it’s worth, I suggest that you hold daily summary meetings to go over the decisions that
everyone has made, perhaps late in the day so you have the mornings to dance, and everyone else
can run around and do what they’re supposed to do. That gives everyone a time they know they can
bring things up to you, so they don’t interrupt you every three minutes.”

“Agreed. And I think I will ask Lettie to schedule donor meetings for only once or twice a week, if
possible. Or perhaps all on the same day.”

“Another good one, though if potential big donors want to see you, go whenever they ask.”

“Agreed again. Thank you, Ori. Once again you have brought order to the world. I cannot tell you
how much I rely on you. I wonder... once Immortal is off the ground, and if we do not all burn in the
process, perhaps you would consider an offer to stay with UVB permanently?”

“I would like that, very much,” Ori said at once, without guile. At Thran’s surprised expression, he
grinned. “Oh, maybe you expected me to be coy about it. Nori would, no doubt. I love my brother,
and I’ve done a lot of interesting work with him, but there’s a certain... tension associated with his
projects. Working with you has been frantic and long and tiring and maddening, but it’s... a different
kind of tension, and I like it, and you’ve been straightforward with me right from the start, which
Nori’s work rarely is. So yes, I would like to stay. Nori will just have to get himself another data
analyst.”

“I appreciate your candor. Keep your fingers crossed. We have yet another reason to hope that
“Immortal goes well.”

“I won’t say anything to Nori until after,” Ori promised.

“That is likely wise. If he does not appreciate that I want to steal his brother, he might ask for his money back.”

“I can’t give it back. I deposited it this morning before I got here,” Ori said.

Thran snickered. “That was certainly wise, and I thank you for it. So let us go in, and see if I can throw an epic tantrum.”

“It’ll be stellar,” Ori assured him, as they made their way to the studio door. “Do you want to surprise them, or do you want me to go first and sow seeds of apprehension by saying you’re in a mood?”

Thran laughed. “You intend to enjoy this, I see.”

Ori grinned. “Absolutely. You’re not the only one everyone drives crazy to handle all the stuff. I’m your assistant, so I am, too. So help us both, okay?”

Thran offered Ori a wink. “I have my assignment. And no, we will not warn them. Better we come upon them unawares.”

Ori’s expression was entirely too gleeful. “All right. If you need anything during your performance, just pitch me a line. I can usually improvise pretty fast.”

Thran nodded. “I will change into my dance things and go into the studio, or try to. We will see how far I get before I must perform.”

“Got it. Good luck.”

They came into the UVB lobby, and Ori ducked into the lunchroom while Thran strode down the hall to the changing room. He managed to get into his dancing belt and tights before Irmo burst into the room. Before the choreographer could say a word, Thran held up his hand and skewered him with a pointed stare.

“I will be in the studio in two minutes.”

“How are we to put on a ballet if you do not dance? How can –”

“The very question. Two minutes.”

“But –”

“We agree violently, Irmo. Two minutes.”

The choreographer paused in mid word with mouth agape. Smiling, Thran held up two fingers and his dancing slippers. The absurdity of Thran’s last calm statement brought a delighted grin to his face, and he nodded with great satisfaction.

“Yes, then. Yes. Two minutes.”

Irmo retreated. Thran resumed his dressing, pulling on his top and easing his feet into his slippers. He folded everything else in his bag, hefted it, and went into the studio after Irmo. Finally! Just to step onto the dance floor was calming. Most of the company was there, most in the last stages of their
barre. Thran moved off to the side to warm up. Abebe hurried over to him, racing Irmo to get to him first.

“You missed the barre –”

“I did mine at home, just to ensure that I was not interrupted,” Thran informed Irmo and Abebe. “I will take a few minutes to warm up, then I will join the company. What do we dance this morning?”

Both Abebe and Irmo looked elated. “Act One – the battlefield and Death’s dance after,” Abebe said quickly. Irmo seconded quickly with a vigorous nod.

“Then begin,” Thran urged, nodding at the door to the studio. “Before the deluge begins.”

“You’ve got it,” Abebe nodded firmly. He turned away, clapping his hands briskly to attract the dancers’ attention. “Quickly, everyone, while we’ve got Thran to ourselves! Battlefield, right now! Right at the end of the scene, just before Death steps onto the field!”

As the dancers scattered, arranging themselves over the floor, Luka and Charisse hurried over to Thran warming up on the side.

“What’re you doing, mon cher?” the little ballerina regarded him with arms akimbo as he bent and stretched.

“I try to dance,” he gave her a small smile. “Without the cloud of gnats that plague me.”

Luka grimaced. “Oh, gods, Thran; they’ll come thundering in here any minute.”

“Let them,” Thran replied, calmly working his legs to warm them. “I will send them out again. What else can I do? If I am not fit or practiced to dance our tale, then where will we be?”

“Exactement!” Charisse exclaimed. “They must let you dance, or all is lost.”

“That’s no lie,” Luka glanced nervously at the door. “It’s been days.”

“I danced at home last night, so I hope that I will be respectable today. But if I am not, then I will have even more reason to insist that this is where I must be.”

“Luka!” Irmo shouted as the music started, pointing onto the dance floor. The dancer bolted into the scene, taking his place in the ranks of soldiers, lunging and falling among the wounded and the dead. Charisse patted Thran’s arm.

“Go. They won’t interrupt once you are in the scene. If they try, I’ll stop them.”

“Do not, ma chère. Let them interrupt,” Thran said.

“What? After you make the statement that you will dance, you will let them stop you?” Charisse gave him a frown.

“I will let them try,” Thran amended. “And then I will... well, we will see what I will do after that.”

Charisse’s lips curved up. “This I will like to see.”

“I hope so. Now, there is my cue. Off I go.”

He grabbed the prop knife that he wielded in the scene, fastened the belt that held it around his waist, and took his opening stance with excitement. Irmo had made a wonderful dance for this scene, where
Death alit, surveyed the devastation that mortals had inflicted upon one another yet again, and then collected the souls of the fallen. Death’s entrance would be spectacular – Irmo had this wild idea to suspend Thran from the rafters of the Imladris Academy’s auditorium, and fly him down onto the stage, but Thran didn’t worry about that risky entrance now. At the first terrible chord that heralded the start of Prokofiev’s chilling music, he became Death. At the second, Death set foot on the battlefield proper, and began His grim task.

At first, Death merely surveyed his temporary domain in the mortal world, walking among the bodies. Soon, however, He paused by a soldier who had died. He drew his knife to cut the soul’s connection to the body, and the fallen rose to follow Death through the carnage. All too soon, He had several soldiers from both forces in thrall behind Him. Those who had not died cringed from His regard as He passed. When He came upon a mortally wounded soldier, He stood patiently, as if in contemplation, until life faded, then added the soul to the others that trailed Him. Another lived long enough for the civilians now edging onto the battlefield to find him, but when the soldier died in their arms, he rose to follow Death despite their screams and cries. Throughout the scene, Death was dispassionate, patient, and methodical, seemingly serene, but His calm only reinforced how inexorable Death was – always unrushed, always waiting, always victorious.

It wasn’t until Death stooped with His knife to gather one more soul that His dispassion crumbled. Onto the other end of the battlefield ran the distraught Maid, eluding the searchers who would have kept her from the carnage. Death paused to watch her frenzied search through the remaining bodies, searching for her Soldier. Something about her drew him. He abandoned the soul he had been ready to gather, and approached the Maid to dance beside her. He was no more than a hand’s breadth away from her, but as one of the living, she was oblivious to His presence. What was this little creature, so frantic that she danced like a wild thing through the bodies? Perhaps it was the strength of her agonized spirit, or perhaps her beauty. Whatever it was, Death’s curiosity grew with every second that passed, until it was desire. The Maid, however, knew nothing of the spell she cast on the Lord of the Underworld – all that mattered to her was to find her Soldier, and she threw herself from one body to the next, hoping to find her Soldier still alive.

At last she fell on the body that Death had abandoned, crying and sobbing. But at the sound of her sobs, her Soldier rallied, and the Maid’s dance changed from lament to joy. As she helped her Soldier rise, nearly overbalancing him with her frantic kisses and hugs, Death circled them, but touched neither. Once the Soldier grew stronger, the Maid helped him off the battlefield, one slow, painful step at a time. Death watched them retreat, but His demeanor was no longer so dispassionate. One hand reached out as if to touch the Maid’s hair as she helped her Soldier past Him.

When they were gone, He turned to resume charge of the souls he’d gleaned from the battlefield. Before he led his new charges to the Underworld, however, He cast a long, lingering look after the Maid. Then he, too, left the battlefield.

“Yes!” Irmo raised his arms in triumph. “Yes, that is it! The contrast between the mortals and Death is clear. Thran, can you angle your head a bit as you study the Maid, to appear more alien?”

Thran took his stance as Death, arching his back more and cocking his head to one side. Luka perked up at this.

“Hey, have you seen any of those dinosaur movies? The velociraptors? They have this really unnerving way they cock their heads – try that!”

“No, no, no!” Irmo snorted. “No dinosaurs!”

“Hang on,” one of the other dancers spoke up. “No dinosaurs, but Luka’s right about how the raptors had this weird way of cocking their heads.” He demonstrated. “Just a little of it might add that
“I will try it,” Thran said over the stir. He’d seen only a fragment of the film they talked about, just what he’d seen one night with Legolas some time ago. He tried to recall the raptors, and angled his head a bit more –

The studio door opened.

Thran ignored whoever came in, and concentrated on what he remembered about velociraptors. If he couldn’t remember much about the animals, he understood reptilian coldness, and gave Charisse an experimental look. He danced around her, trying out this new element.

“Yes, yes, you are right, that is better,” Irmo waved his hands. “Now, I want to see the pas de trois again –”

“Thran, if you’re at a break, I really need to talk to you about this insurance contract,” Lettie called to him. Her voice was reluctant; she had been a dancer once, too, and of all the people clamoring for his attention, she understood the cost. He was sorry that she would bear the uncomfortable burden of his annoyance, but better she did now before he was unfit to dance.

“I am not at a break.” Thran held his pose, arms stretched wide, back arched, head thrust forward. He altered it subtly to be more threatening; why not take advantage of the role to help him make his point? He rotated on one foot to face Lettie; Rada, Círdan, and Rúmil were arrayed behind her. Belatedly, Ori slipped in behind the others to remain by the door. “I am in the middle of the morning’s practice.”

“This won’t take but a minute,” Lettie pleaded.

“And how long will everything that they want take?” Irmo accused, waving his arms in frustration, then pointing at the three people behind Lettie. “How am I supposed to put on a ballet when I cannot have my principal dancer to work with? How?”

“How are we supposed to put on a ballet when we cannot have our primary investor and business director to make the decisions needed to put on that ballet?” Rúmil, the public relations rep, shot back. “Honestly, Irmo, this isn’t just about you! We need sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and then press, adequate liability coverage –”

“What need do we have of public relations or anything else if there are no ballet dancers?” Irmo shot back.

“You’ll have your ballet dancers. But there are decisions to be made –”

“It’s just a few minutes, about the contract –”

“Costume changes won’t take long –”

“And what about the schedule for the set design –”

Irmo stamped forward to argue his point, but Rúmil wasn’t ready to back down, and in seconds, the lot of them was talking loudly and not listening. Thran let them get entrenched in their frustration as he glanced at the dancers, most in various stages of pained silence. Behind the combatants, Ori gave him a nod, so he drew himself up, and summoned his most formidable glare.

“ENOUGH!” he shouted. “Every one of you – SILENCE!”
Silence fell. The full weight of everyone’s regard riveted onto Thran.

“This is NOT the way our company behaves! This is NOT the way we conduct ourselves! I am outraged at such disregard, such rudeness, such disparagement! You will never do this again! NEVER!”

Thran hadn’t thought that the silence could deepen any more, but so it did. It was as if everyone had forgotten how to breathe. Good. He had the perfect stage. He focused a fierce glare on each of the arguers.

“Each of you is so caught up in your concerns that you do not see that everyone else has concerns, too. You fight among yourselves about which concern is more important, and now you come to me to tell you what you should already know – that each of us does things vital to Immortal’s success. But do all of you forget what I must do? I am the one who dances the lead in this new ballet. No one else. Me. I must be perfect, or we are just another company with ideas bigger than its abilities. Yet three times this week, I have not been able to dance here because of your clamors – I have had to dance alone, at home. But I cannot dance alone to be ready, much less perfect – I must dance here with the company. Is this hard for you to fathom?”

Rúmil and Lettie and Irmo all drew breath to speak, but he glared all three into silence. “NO! Not one word, for I am not done! It is not time for you to ask me anything – this time, I ask you something. Tell me – are you not the experts in your areas, not me? Can you not follow the guidelines we set up when we started this effort to make most of the decisions about sets, costumes, lights, PR, insurance? Why are you in this company if you expect me to solve your problems? I expect you to bring me solutions! DO THAT! Do that, and let me I dance so that I do not let down the rest of you!”

Lettie tried to speak again, but with a slash of his hand, Thran cut her off. “I lay down the law. Every morning, I will dance. Each day at noon, I will sit down with you at lunch to hear of the day’s progress – a succinct report, you understand? I will hear your recommendations, and I will make what decisions you require. Then we will decide how to proceed further. Three days a week, I will continue my pointe lessons. The other days, I will dance again in the afternoon. I will also delegate some duties. Ori can make decisions about contracts. He will continue to help you to condense matters down to important points. Each of you who needs Ori’s help will take pains in all ways so that he helps you expeditiously. Lettie, I understand the need to see to donors. Please consolidate these duties to one or at most two days a week. Dancers, please prepare your roles as you so ably do. And Irmo and Abebe, you will respect the need for me to attend to other things, and schedule rehearsals for scenes where I do not dance for the times you know I will be away.

“All of you,” Thran raised his voice, and gave everyone without exception a glare. “I want efficient action. Efficient action. Do not waste my time or that of others. We cannot afford this. Ori will be my gatekeeper. Only he is allowed to interrupt me when I dance. You understand this?”

There were nods all around. Rada covered his mouth with a hand; he likely hid a smile. He had not been one to make unreasonable demands on Thran’s time, but he understood Thran’s predicament, and took it in stride. Ori’s expression was carefully neutral, mostly hidden because he appeared to stare at his shoes. Abebe and Irmo both looked mixed; they were happy to have Thran so much of the day, but because it wasn’t all of the day, their happiness was incomplete. Lettie bit her lip, she wasn’t happy, but perhaps Thran’s point about how he had to dance perfectly for Immortal to pay off resonated with her. Rúmil looked put out, but that was his normal demeanor. Círdan had folded his arms over his chest, and seemed to study a freckle on one wrist.

Had he made a fool of himself, or had he made them feel foolish? No one met his eyes, so perhaps
the latter.

“So. It is over. The stir is done. I will dance now, and I will meet at noon for the discussion you need.”

The silence remained, but Thran did not smile. He hadn’t enjoyed chastising his friends, no matter how necessary it had been. He nodded to Abebe and Irmo.

“Come; we resume our rehearsal,” he prompted, and the dance master, choreographer, and dancers scurried to resume their practice as the interrupting contingent made a subdued retreat. Ori caught his eye long enough to offer the briefest of winks at the center of an otherwise impassive face before he, too, exited the studio.

As Thran bent his regard on Abebe and Irmo’s instructions about refinements to the scene, he gave brief consideration to his so-called tantrum. At least he hadn’t spat out his words at the speed of a rifle, or blistered everyone with an outpouring of Russian curses.

He might have gesticulated, though.

* * *

“Welcome home!” Bard called. “Legolas and I are in the solarium!"

Footsteps – one lighter, the other faster – sounded in the mudroom. Tilda and Sigrid; Bain would have thumped more. When Bard and Legolas exchanged looks, the boy seemed to have made the same deductions that Bard had. He grabbed a tissue from his box to blow his nose, sounding very congested, but he got up with Bard to go into the sitting room to see the girls.

“Tilda?” Bard called. “Sigrid? How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” Sigrid said too quickly. She didn’t meet Bard’s eyes as he came into the kitchen. She dug into her backpack twice, once for her lunch bag, then again for a book and several sheets of paper. “I got your assignments for English, French, and government, Legs. Plus your Literature book, because you’ve got a reading assignment. I saw Bain – he’d gotten the rest of your stuff, so he passed it on to me to give you. So everything’s there.”

“Thank you, Sigrid,” Legolas smiled as he took the book and the papers. “That was nice of you to get all my assignments.”

“You’re welcome. I’m heading upstairs to work on my assignments now, Da. I’ve got a lot to do, and I’m not hungry, so I’ll see you at supper, okay?”

Sigrid headed upstairs with her backpack without delay.

“There goes a girl who’s on a mission, and it’s not to get her homework done,” Bard observed thoughtfully, as he considered the hallway.

Legolas had stooped beside Tilda, but now he looked up at Bard. “What’s going on?”

“I think she’s sick.”

“I think Tilda is, too, Bard,” Legolas patted Tilda’s back. “She said she’s so tired that she wants to
Bard stooped beside Tilda. Her complexion was pale, and her eyes looked a little glassy. He laid a palm on her forehead. “You’re warm, little doll. I think you’ve got the same cold that Legs has. How do you feel?”

“Not very good,” she shook her head. In fact, she looked almost sad enough to cry. “My head hurts, and it’s too hot, and my nose is stuffy, and I’m so tired. I just want to go to sleep.”

“I think that’s just the right thing to do,” Bard said, giving her braid a little tug. “We’ll check your temperature, but you do feel warm. A little acetaminophen will help your head feel better and your fever go down, and a nice long nap will help your body fight the germs. So let’s go upstairs.”

“Okay, Da,” Tilda nodded without argument.

“Legs, can you hold the fort while I get Tilda settled and see what’s up with Sigrid?”

“Sure. I can go up with Tilda if you want. I’ll help you tuck in Mr. Bun, Kukla.”

“He’d like that. I don’t think he feels too good, either,” Tilda shook her head.

“Oh, okay, upstairs, everyone,” Bard shepherded the two children down the hall. “Legs, make sure you stay warm.”

“I’m warm,” Legolas confirmed as they went up the stairs.

“I’m the wrong kind of warm,” Tilda groaned as she struggled up the stairs. “I’m hot!”

“Almost there, little doll,” Bard coaxed, as they reached the bedroom landing. “I’ll get the thermometer for you.”

He ducked into the children’s bathroom to retrieve the thermometer, then came into Tilda’s room to find Legolas getting her pajamas from the closet. “Here, Kukla. Pajamas are more comfortable than school clothes. I’ll wait outside for you to change.”

“Okay,” Tilda wavered, drawing Bard’s smile. Yes, Tilda had a cold and slight fever, but it wasn’t serious, despite her plaintive voice.

“I’ll wait outside, too, Til,” Bard said. “Get into your night clothes, then I’ll check your temperature.”

He and Legolas waited outside the door until Tilda said she was ready, then came back inside. Bard helped her crawl into bed and settled Mr. Bun in her arms. While Bard got the thermometer into Tilda’s mouth, Legolas perused her shelf of toys and chose a stuffed elephant.

“She,” Tilda corrected through a mouthful of thermometer. “That’s Nelephant.”

“Oh, sorry – she looks like she’d be good to hold onto for a nap.”

“She is,” Tilda mumbled.

“Let the thermometer do its work before you talk,” Bard urged, and the little girl fell silent. When the thermometer chirped, he took it out to look at it. “Yes, you’re a couple of degrees warmer, so you and Legs get Mr. Bun and Nelephant tucked in beside you while I get the acetaminophen and a cup
of water.”

“Okay, Da,” Tilda nodded, then sneezed violently.

“Tissues,” Legolas said, quickly. “They’d be good, too.”

“They certainly would,” Bard grinned. “Back in a tick.”

In a minute, Tilda had downed the pill and water, a new box of tissues sat beside her on the bed, and she was tucked in with her toys.

“Do you want your light on, or just your night light?” Bard asked, as he moved the wastebasket near to her bed to catch the used tissues.

“The light, please.”

“Okay, light on. Close your eyes and try to rest, little doll. That’s the best thing to kill a cold.”

“I thought it was chicken soup,” Tilda murmured, rubbing her eyes.

“That, too. I made a big pot this morning. You can have some when you wake up.”

“It’s good soup, too. I had some for lunch,” Legolas supplied.

“Mmm,” Tilda hummed. “I love chicken soup. And grilled cheese.”

“Nap first,” Bard said. “Then you can see how hungry you are when you wake up.”

“Okay, Da.”

“Sleep well, little doll.”


“You’re welcome. See you later.”

Bard and Legolas left Tilda to rest. On the landing, Legolas gave Bard a mischievous smile. “Would you rather I go downstairs to rest in the sitting room, or can I rest in my room for the off chance that I can hear what Sigrid says?”

Bard gave him a grin. “That depends on whether you’re more polite than curious.”

“I’m polite most of the time. Is it okay if I’m curious for once?”

“Suit yourself. In either place, stay warm and quiet. You’re not through the woods yet.”

“Okay, Bard,” Legolas gave a pleased grin as he headed for his room. “I’ll be warm and quiet and curious.”

“Good lad.”

Bard waited until he heard Legolas crawl into bed and turn on his light. He went into the children’s bathroom to wash off the thermometer, then stuck it in his shirt pocket. Then he knocked on Sigrid’s door. “Sweetness?”

A slight flurry of sound – maybe she’d been lying on the bed? “Y-yeah, Da?”
“May I come in, please?”

“I’m working on my paper.”

“This won’t take long, Sig. It’s important.”

“Okay, come in, then.”

That was one reluctant assent, without doubt. He smothered a sympathetic grin before he eased the door open.

“What’s up?” Sigrid said, turning around in her chair before her desk. Her computer was open, but the desktop displayed, not the application Sigrid used when she wrote her papers. Her papers and books were still in her backpack, and she hadn’t changed her clothes yet. The bed was rumpled – yes, she’d been lying down when he’d knocked. Bard scanned her face, finding exactly what he’d expected – the same feverish eyes and pale skin that Tilda had shown.

“I want to check your temperature,” Bard said, pulling out the thermometer. “Because I don’t think you feel any better than Tilda or Legolas does.”

“I’m fine!” Sigrid insisted. “No, Da, I mean it! I’m fine! There’s nothing wrong with me!”

“Just humor your old Da, please,” he held out the thermometer. “I don’t like it when my children are sick. Makes me worry.”

“Da, I told you, I’m fine!” Sigrid got up from her chair and flounced down on her bed. She spread her hands in exasperation. “I’m really fine!”

“Sigrid,” Bard asked quietly.

His daughter’s face spasmed with anger, then guilt. She grabbed the thermometer from him and stuck it in her mouth as if it were coated with poison. “There. Happy?”

“Reasonably. Come on, Sig. Seat it properly.”

She shifted it in her mouth and tried to look sulky, but it was a sad attempt. When the little device chirped, she pulled it out. “See? Normal. I told you.”

Bard retrieved the thermometer, but Sigrid had already cleared it. He gave her a look. “We can do this one of two ways. You can tell me what it read, or I can ask you to measure it again and hand it to me without turning it off.”

Sigrid held his gaze for a long second, then her eyes dropped to her lap.

She started to cry.

Bard sat down beside her, and put his arms around her. “Aw, sweetness... getting sick has put a crimp in something.”

“I’m not sick!” she cried, clinging to Bard. “I’m not. I can’t be. Oh, Da, I just can’t be!”

“Why not, sweetness?”

“Because my paper is due and the college fair is tomorrow and Saturday I’m supposed to start my job and I just can’t –”
Sigrid gulped, but she couldn’t hold everything in any longer. Her arms tightened around Bard, her body shook, and Bard’s shirt soaked up a deluge of tears. For long seconds, Bard didn’t try to speak, but merely gave Sigrid someone to cling to as he rubbed her back.

“I’m sorry, sweetness,” he murmured, when the initial rush had passed.

“I just can’t be sick, Da!” she repeated. “My paper’s due, and I have to finish the last little bit, and then there’s the big college fair tomorrow afternoon – three of the colleges I’m interested in will be there, with people I can talk to about their programs, and let them know who I am which might give me a little credibility when I apply, and then on Saturday, I have to show up at the bistro or Miss Dís will think I’m just a screw-up, and I’ll lose the job, and-and – oh, Da!”

“Hang on, Sigrid,” Bard urged, still rubbing Sigrid’s back. “One thing at a time, okay? Come on, sweetness. Try to calm down. Getting so cranked up won’t help your cold any, will it?”

“I guess not,” Sigrid sat up, rubbing the heel of her hand over her cheek in a futile attempt to wipe the tears away.

“Sure. That’s right; take a deep breath. Now, what’d the thermometer read?”

Sigrid’s face was desolate, and she tensed under Bard’s hug. “An even hundred.”

“Okay,” Bard soothed. “How long have you had a fever? Yesterday, too?”

Sigrid’s nod was shamefaced. “It was only ninety-nine yesterday.”

“So you tried to work through it, and today it’s higher. So that’s no good. You need rest to knock it out. I’m sorry, but school’s right out tomorrow.”

Sigrid hiccupped and her face twisted in misery.

“Let’s think about contingencies. Can you finish your paper in bed, then email it to your teacher?”

Sigrid thought about that. “Hmm. That’s a good idea. I think I can do that.”

“Okay, paper solved. There isn’t anything you can do about the college fair, but I’d expected to take you to visit schools this summer, so maybe we can see the ones you’re interested in if they aren’t too far away.”

“Okay,” Sigrid sniffed. “But my job...”

“We’ve got two days. Maybe you can rest enough to get your fever down in time. If it stays down tomorrow, and if you’re not too snuffy, a decongestant can get you through Saturday and Sunday. We didn’t get you a bicycle, but I’ll drive you into town so you don’t have to walk in and wear yourself out before you get there. By next week, you should be fine, so you can get yourself there and back again.”

Sigrid sniffed and laid her head on Bard’s shoulder. “You make so much sense, Da. I should have thought of all those things.”

“You might have, if you hadn’t spent the past two days trying to hide that you were sick,” Bard grinned, giving Sigrid a one-handed hug. “You know you can’t fool me for long.”

“I can’t,” Sigrid sighed, wiping her face again. “I should know better than to try.”

“You just want to keep me on my toes,” Bard chuckled. “So get into bed while I get the
acetaminophen. Try to finish your paper and email it off, then rest. Don’t worry about your homework for now; you’ve got all day tomorrow and the weekend.”

Sigrid took a tremulous breath. “I guess you’ll have to make a big pot of soup with all of us down for the count.”

“Already been done. I made a fresh pot this morning. I’ll dish you a bowl after you’ve had a rest.”

“Okay, Da. Thanks.”

“Welcome, sweetness. Get into your nightclothes, and I’ll be back with the pills.”

Bard fetched the fever reducer and Sigrid’s cup from the bathroom, and yet another box of tissues. Thank goodness he regularly bought both in bulk, so there was no danger that he’d run out before the colds had run their course. For the second time, he settled an ailing child in bed with as many comforts as he could provide – fever reducer, tissues, and warm blankets. Sigrid lay back, propped up on pillows with her laptop on her knees, ready to finish her paper.

“Tea?”

She nodded. “That’d be great, Da.”

“Okay. How much of your paper do you have left?”

“Just the last part of the summary. I hope it’ll be just a paragraph or two.”

“Try to tie it up and send it off soon. The best thing you can do for yourself is rest.”

Sigrid ventured a thin smile. “I know. I’d hoped to finish it last night, but I was just so tired that I couldn’t see the screen anymore. So I’ll finish as soon as I can while still doing a good job.”

“That’s all I ask. I’ll bring your tea when it’s ready.”

“Okay,” Sigrid thanked him as he left her room.

Bard detoured to Legolas’s room before he went downstairs. The boy was asleep, so Bard went down to the kitchen, got Sigrid’s tea, and brought it up to her. His oldest child looked a little easier, so he left her to finish her paper. He looked in on Tilda, and found her sound asleep with Nelephant and Mr. Bun both tucked into her arms.

Bard went downstairs into the kitchen, checking the clock on the oven timer. He still had almost two hours before Bain would be home, and longer than that before Thran would likely appear. He considered the contents of the freezer, and pulled out a frozen beef roast to stash in the fridge to thaw overnight. He’d put it with carrots, onions, and potatoes into the crockpot tomorrow morning, and let it cook slowly into a tasty and tender meal that would be easy on scratchy throats.

He wandered into the solarium, smiling at the painted wall. He hoped he’d get to hang the fountain and get the basin in place tomorrow. The basin needed some patching before he could fill it with water, but just getting it into place would look great. He’d get Bain off to school, then start on the fountain first thing. Then he’d keep working on his commission sketches. He had several ready to send to Hal depicting his maple tree.

He snickered. Plans for tomorrow were well and good. But with three sick children in the house, he’d likely spend most of the day playing nursemaid. Not that he minded. For the first time in a long time, he had the wherewithal to take care of the children properly. Even the prospect of innumerable
games of Dinky Farm and glasses of juice and cups of tea and too many sneezes couldn’t dim Bard’s relief.

He fetched his sketchpad, and sat down in the sitting room to think about a spinning galaxy, a statement tree, and a steampunk orrery. For the first time in a long time, guilt had no part in his thoughts.
Chapter 117

Chapter Summary

While the angel is grateful to dance again, the saint contemplates the end of renovations, the start of sculptures, and the state of Clan Ffyrnig's medicine cabinet.

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to "The Treasure of Sierra Madre." It's a great film :-) 

Hal appears courtesy of johnnysmitten. Thank you, my dear!

The rest of Thran’s morning passed smoothly. He made good progress on the dance, even venturing a complete run through of the *pas de deux* with Charisse when Death confesses His love for her. Half of it was really a *pas de trois*, because Luka’s Soldier flitted in and out to show why the Maid had no eyes for the Lord of the Underworld. Thran was still not happy with his pointe work – it was too studied and careful for his likes, but at least his attention to strength work kept him steady on his feet.

At noon, he sat down with his lunch and everyone who had items for him. Ori, he was glad to see, had helped everyone prioritize and optimize, so they dealt with each item expeditiously. Círdan had already begun constructing the set at the school with the student interns, to the students’ enthusiastic delight. In a week, the company would have the bare bones to rehearse on, so the company would begin their work there in the afternoons and evenings. The lighting and sound crews were in place, again making heavy use of student interns. Rúmil and Lettie were in better moods because Ori had gone over their PR plans, insurance information, and several other bureaucratic considerations to take care of as many as possible. Ori gave Thran succinct summaries of everything, and Thran signed the forms that they needed to complete the rest.

Rada’s report was last. The costumes were complete for the mortal soldiers and civilians; so was the Maid’s mortal dress, as well as the more elaborate one Death gives her in the Underworld. The costumier was in close discussion with Abebe and Irmo about the costumes for the troll market scene – the basics were done, and the company dancers were bringing in personal touches to further customize them appropriate to their characters. Thran took that moment to mention that he had heard rumors of the amazing costumes of tribal fusion belly dancers. Since part of the troll market’s allure was all the different styles of dance that would be on display, a belly dancer might add even more excitement. Ori quickly had pictures on his tablet, which looked as exotic as Bard had claimed.

“I understand Rachel Brice is one of the stars in the genre,” he ventured, keeping his anticipation to himself. But he had no need to worry that anyone would notice his interest, as Ori quickly brought up one of her videos to play. As everyone gathered around to ooh and aah, Thran had the luxury to appreciate the dancer’s supreme control, serene expression, and fantastic costuming. The consensus was immediate – the troll market needed a belly dancer.

“I’ll ask if anyone in the company is a belly dancer,” Abebe quickly volunteered, then he grinned at
Lettie. “If none of them is, why don’t you volunteer to step in, Lettie?”

That brought a chorus of playful encouragement, Thran’s among them. Lettie might not dance professionally any longer, but she was still slender and able.

“You wish!” Lettie joshed, laughing. “Besides, I’m not from India, am I? I’m a Hakka from Jamaica, or at least my parents were. They came over here in the sixties along with a lot of the other ethnic Chinese Jamaicans. I’ve never been anywhere near India!”

“Not all belly dancing is from India. It’s bigger in the Middle East, and it’s got roots all over the world. Look at that dancer,” Círdan pointed at Ori’s tablet, where a trio of dancers undulated across the stage. “She’s Chinese, and she looks fantastic. You’d fit right in.”

“My niece is a big fan of tribal, and I agree with Círdan,” Abebe seconded. “You’d look great in any of those costumes.”

“As if,” she shook her head, still laughing. “I’m not so sinuous as that.”

“Too bad. I’ll ask around, then,” Abebe conceded.

Thran had kept one eye on Ori’s tablet during the teasing, studying the videos the young man had played one after another. Bard was right about how wonderful this form of dance was. Whether the troll market acquired a belly dancer or not, he’d see that the Clan Ffyrnig solarium hosted a variation of one very soon.

The final costume item to discuss was the body stocking that Thran would wear when Death confessed his love to the Maid. It needed a final fitting to make sure that the contoured painting had been placed properly to match Thran’s physique. Rada had brought it with him, so Thran put aside his lunch to ease the body stocking on in the changing room, then the small, closefitting loincloth that went over it. He still had on his pointe shoes, so he came out into the studio for Rada to examine the costume in front of the mirrors.

“Oh, that is amazing.” Lettie circled Thran to check the fit and the markings.

“Here.” Rada pulled a pair of gloves from the bag he carried and handed them to Thran. “Let’s go for the complete look.”

When Thran eased them on, the point of the tight-fitting gloves was obvious – they extended the colors of the body stocking over his hands, and lengthened each finger by three inches into a long, attenuated point. The next item Rada pulled from his bag was Death’s headdress, which was as much wig as crown. Rada had long since removed all the veiling from the piece, because obscuring Thran’s vision was too dangerous to risk. This iteration extended the line of Thran’s skull up and back, and silky white hair blended the piece into Thran’s own hair. A simple diadem provided the only sign of Death’s lordly status. Thran sat on the nearest chair for Rada to seat the headdress properly and blend the strands of hair into his own. He got up to consider himself in the mirror, struck this pose that, then hazarded a sequence of steps. The murmurs around him revealed how well Rada’s costume had been received, so he beckoned to Charisse who watched nearby. As she came forward, he danced around her, angling his head like the velociraptor they’d discussed earlier. When he drew himself up on pointe to step this way and that, emphasizing his attenuated appearance, Irmo was beside himself.

“Yes, yes!” he exclaimed. “Yes, that is brilliant! Both the dancing and the costume! Yes!”

“I have one more suggestion for the costume,” Rada said in his quiet way, smiling at the reception.
Thran’s performance had garnered. “It isn’t necessary, but I wondered if adding light reflective contact lenses would further emphasize Death’s otherworldliness?”

“That’d be amazing,” Lettie nodded. “Imagine Thran looking out over the audience, and his eyes would reflect the light just like a cat’s do.”

“I like it! Yes!” Irmo declared with a single emphatic nod.

“Amazing, as you say,” Thran agreed. “However, I would have to learn how to properly care for my eyes.”

“I agree, it’d be a fantastic look,” Lettie nodded. “But as you said, it’s a concern for your eyes, Thran, and it’s an extra expense.”

“It isn’t essential,” Rada assured the group. “I suggest it more with an eye to future performances, rather than the three at the school.”

“I agree,” Thran said. “Let us keep it in mind for the future. With a mere nine weeks left before our premiere, we must concentrate on the major concerns of staging and story. Rada, this costume is wonderful on its own. It does not need the contacts to make Death alien.” He rose up on his toes again, and extended his arms above his head. “Death is already alien enough.”

Rad offered him a pleased bow, thanks for Thran’s praise as well as acceptance of his decision about the contacts.

“Before you take off the costume, Thran, I’d love to get a few pictures for the PR campaign,” Rúmil asked eagerly, already pulling out his digital camera. This was the happiest he’d looked today, so Thran was glad to stand against a plain part of the studio wall and strike a suitable pose. The PR rep snapped eagerly until he had at least a dozen shots. “Perfect. Just perfect. I can use these to tease the media about Immortal, until we can get a few more formal shots. Next week? More costume shots with you, Charisse, and Luka?”

“Of course. That would be ideal. Ori, would you and Rúmil please choose a day next week with Rada? Rada will need to know what costumes to bring on which day.”

“Will do, Thran,” Ori nodded, so he and Rúmil drew together to coordinate schedules.

“Perhaps we can revisit the scene with Death, the Maid, and the Soldier?” Irmo asked just as eagerly. “To see how the costume fares?”

Thran turned his gaze on Rada. “Is the costume ready for that, Rada?”

The costumier nodded. “It is. I’d love to see how it moves in performance, too.”

“So let us warm up, and dance the scene,” Thran nodded.

Thran, Luka, and Charisse limbered arms and legs, torsos and backs, and soon Vieuxtemps’s Elegy for Viola and Piano, Opus 30 began its sonorous chords. As Thran caught sight of himself in the studio mirrors, he subtly modified the steps to increase the sense of an ancient god who suddenly and unexpectedly finds himself in the throes of desire and worship. It was a little easier to lose some of his studied caution when he was on pointe, because the costume gave him a much clearer sense of being Death, rather than merely dancing a role. At the end of the seven-minute scene, he was met with applause from the entire company. With hand on heart, he offered a gratified bow to his colleagues. Even more gratifying was Lettie’s expression. She looked more confident, less worried. When he caught her eyes, her smile widened, and her chin rose a little.
“We are going to make a hell of a noise with this,” she clenched both fists in affirmation. “We really are.”

Thran offered her a regal bow replete with Death’s gravitas. “So we will.”

“Death will have a little more to offer the audience in that costume,” Rada said, with his usual inward smile. “It’s been out of its bag for long enough now, so if you all would remain still for just a moment…”

Rada went to the light switches on the side of the wall by the door. “Three, two, one.”

The lights went out. Two seconds later, oohs and aahs filled the studio. Thran looked down at himself – yes, his costume glowed with a blue fluorescence.

“Amazing!” he declared. “Back up, everyone – I will dance a few steps.”

People shuffled out of the way. When silence fell, he took a few steps across the floor, then back. The murmur of voices was excited, and he distinctly heard Luka murmur, “That is so cool!” to Charisse, who giggled in response.

“Lights, please, Rada?” Thran called. When the studio was lit again, he searched the faces of his colleagues. “How did it look?”

“I liked it.” Charisse had a big grin on her face, an expression that most of their colleagues shared. “Such a simple thing, but so effective.”

“All of the costumes have some sort of fluorescence,” Rada explained. “We had originally talked of LED lighting, but while it is possible, the cost is too high for so many costumes, so I looked for alternatives. Glow sticks are inexpensive, widely available, and come in several colors. So I sewed a pocket over the heart of each costume to hold the glow sticks. Red is for the living mortals; pale green is for the dead. Blue, of course, is the signature color of the Lord of the Underworld. His costumes also have fluorescent paint so that he remains the brightest in the Underworld.”

“That is brilliant,” Ori declared, tongue firmly in cheek, which drew a laugh. “Fits the budget, simple technology, and reinforces the story.”

“Indeed,” Thran offered Rada brief applause. “Well done, Rada!”

“Thank you,” the costumier offered a humble smile.

“Does anyone have anything else for us to consider?” Thran asked, looking around.

No one spoke.

“Then I will give Rada back his costume, and we will resume our rehearsal. I thank all of you for your understanding and your help with all that we discussed. We have much to do, but we make good progress. Everything goes well.”

It wasn’t the best of motivational speeches, but it was sincere, and Thran was gratified to see smiles and nods greet his words. As he left the studio, Abebe and Irmo called the dancers to the next scene. Thran was glad to retreat to the relative privacy of the changing room, where he took a deep breath. He eased off his pointe shoes, then carefully slipped Rada’s costume off.

Ori stuck his head in. “I don’t want anything,” he said hastily as Thran gave him an inquiring look. “But I thought you’d like to know that everyone’s reasonably happy with how things turned out
today.”

“That is welcome news,” Thran took another deep breath. “Thank you, Ori. Your advice this morning was sound.”

The young man waved a hand. “I’m glad it helped. I’m still learning my way around a ballet company. There’s a lot to learn.”

“For us all,” Thran grinned as he eased on a clean pair of tights and belted them into place.

“Let’s hope that we stay ahead of the curve,” Ori sat on the bench to shake his head wryly.

“Perhaps we should all learn to surf, so that when the curve crashes upon us, we can stay afloat,” Thran joked.

“That’s no lie,” Ori chuckled. “I’ve got Rúmil’s costume shoot set up for next Tuesday. And I’m going to help Lettie this afternoon on the donor list, unless you need me for anything else.”

“I plan to devote myself to Abebe and Irmo all afternoon, so yes, however you can help Lettie will be perfect.”

“Okay, Thran.” Ori looked at him sideways, shyly. “I appreciate your trust in me. It won’t be misplaced.”

“I do not expect it to be,” Thran smiled back. “Thank you.”

Ori nodded, and slipped out as quietly as he’d slipped in.

After Thran finished dressing, he put on his dancing slippers, went back to the studio, and danced.

* * *

After Bard brought Sigrid her tea, he took advantage of the quiet to call Hal Galadhrim to let him know that he had sketches ready for him. The flamboyant financial planner gave him an email address, so Bard scanned in his sketches on Thran’s printer, and sent them off. It seemed that the email could hardly have arrived before Hal had called him back with effusive praise. Even better, he gave enthusiastic approval for Bard to begin on the model for the tree. Bard asked a few more questions, most to confirm that Hal hadn’t changed his mind about the particulars of the piece, then thanked Hal for his speedy response. His next call was to Bilbo to let him know the progress of the project, so that he could send out the appropriate paperwork to Hal. The artist’s rep was delighted at his quick follow up with Hal as well as the other clients. Bard gave Bilbo a quick rundown on the orrery and galaxy projects, but explained that he hadn’t heard from the remaining client.

“That happens sometimes,” Bilbo mused. “I’ll follow up as well, but in the meantime, I’m delighted that you have three confirmed contracts. You’ll be a busy sculptor.”

“I’ve no complaints about that,” Bard assured him. “I can start the model for Hal’s tree right away, but I’m still thinking about the other two.”

“I don’t have to tell you to take the time your pieces need,” Bilbo cautioned. “You’re not doing art fair caricatures with these. You’re a fine artist, and clients understand that that takes time.”
“Absolutely,” Bard assured him. “But I appreciate the affirmation all the same. I’ll keep you posted on how things go, Bilbo.”

“Thank you, my boy. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Bard and Bilbo made their goodbyes, then Bard wandered back into the solarium to look at the drying wall again. It was the last wall he’d paint as a full time renovator. Once the fountain went on the wall and he repaired the basin, the house was more or less finished. Yes, there were closets and the main room to paint, but next week, painters would come to restore the exterior, and strip all the interior doors. Soon the window company would replace all the windows. After that, there would be only the occasional project for him to undertake. He’d be in the barn full time from now on.

Despite the excitement of returning to his art, Bard still felt a pang of regret. He’d loved working on the Clan Ffyrnig homestead, seeing it come back to life. But he didn’t get too nostalgic. Despite all the things he’d replaced and repaired in the house – roof, heating and cooling, plumbing, wiring, windows, appliances, insulation – this was still an old house, and old houses never stayed fixed for long. He’d have no lack of chances to tinker around the house for years to come.

Bain rattled home, full of energy and smelling of green spring air. The other children were still asleep, so Bard explained that both Tilda and Sigrid had joined Legolas in the ranks of the sick. Bain wasn’t surprised about Sigrid; he’d thought she hadn’t looked herself when he’d passed her Legolas’s assignments.

“Guess I’ll be making the homework rounds for all three of them tomorrow,” he shrugged, pulling cheese out of the fridge, then ducking into the pantry for crackers.

“That’d be great,” Bard thanked his son. “You’re not feeling any of the same symptoms, are you?”

“Nope,” Bain assured him, shoveling in a huge chunk of cheese. “Fine so far.”

“Good. If you start to feel off, though, please don’t pull a Sigrid and try to tough it out,” Bard asked. “As she found out, that just makes it worse.”

Bain grimaced as he assembled more cheese and crackers. “Why was she so hot about trying to fake it?”

“The college fair’s tomorrow, she has a paper due, and she was worried about not being able to start her job on Saturday.”

“I forgot about the job,” Bain admitted, chewing. “That’d stink, missing the first day of a new job.”

“It would,” Bard agreed. “We might end up eating supper in shifts tonight. I don’t know what time Thran will get home, and I want the other children to sleep as long as they can. So we’ll plan for you and me to eat at the usual time, so you can get started on your homework after, and I’ll dish up something for the rest as they appear.”

“Let me guess – we’re having chicken soup for supper, right?” Bain grinned as he sampled more cheese.

“Got it in one,” Bard chuckled. “You and I aren’t sick, but a little chicken soup might help us stay that way.”

“With biscuits, maybe?”

“Course. I made brownies and applesauce raisin cake for afters.”
“Sweet,” Bain breathed. “Hey, I can still play video games because I’m not sick, right?”

“Right,” Bard nodded.

“Sweet again,” Bain pumped his fist. “Would you play one with me before supper?”

“I’d prefer to crash cars than shoot zombies, but other than that, sure. Or maybe you’d rather play Dinky Farm.”

“Da!” snorted Bain. “That’s okay with Tilda, but with anybody else? Come on!”

“Hey, don’t diss the one game I can win,” Bard teased.

Bain stuffed more cheese and cracker into his mouth. “What is it you always tell me? You won’t get better at something if you don’t keep doing it?”

“Hoisted by my own petard,” Bard mock groaned.

Bain looked blank. “What does that mean?”

Bard grinned. “It means we’re playing Car Crash Five Thousand.”

“Yes!” Bain cheered. “I’ll start the game.”

Bard put away the remains of cheese and crackers, then followed Bain into the sitting room, where they spent the next hour gleefully running each other off the road. Legolas wandered in to watch for a few minutes, then the three got ready for supper. Legolas was coughing and sniffling too much to help with the food, but he managed to get the flatware and condiments on the table without spreading too many germs while Bard made biscuits and Bain poured milk and dished small cups of fruit. Bard refilled the teakettle, then they sat down to bowls of soup, hot biscuits, and Bain’s fruit cups. Bard kept the conversation light so as not to wear out Legolas too badly, and sent him into the sitting room to prop himself up on pillows to work on his homework. Bain helped Bard clean up supper, then asked if he could bring down his pillows to join Legolas. He’d just gotten settled when the door to the mudroom opened.

“I am home!” Thran called.

“Welcome home!” Bard called back, then gave the boys a smile. “Get started on your homework, lads. I’ll bring your Papa in, Legs.”

He met Thran in the kitchen to give him a welcome home kiss and a pat on the back. “How’d it go today, angel?”

Thran returned Bard’s affectionate kiss, then grinned. “I threw the tantrum you recommended. It was most instructive.”

Bard blinked. “You did? Gods, that must have caused a flurry. Did you get to dance at least?”

“I did,” Thran nodded, his satisfaction evident in his triumphant smile and erect carriage. “Ori thought your idea was excellent, and offered many good suggestions so that I crafted it perfectly. So I danced more today than I have in several days. We make good progress.”

“I want to hear all about it,” Bard nodded. “Why don’t you go in and say hi to Legolas and Bain, and then put on something more comfortable while I get your supper? It’s chicken soup, of course, but the boys did leave you a few of the biscuits.”
“Mmm, biscuits,” Thran hummed. He gave Bard a frown of surprise. “Where are the girls?”

“Both down for the count with the same stuff that got Legolas. I’ll tell you about it over your soup.”

“All right,” Thran agreed, and went into the sitting room to greet the boys. Bard busied himself with Thran’s supper, but didn’t fill the soup bowl until Thran came in clad in his comfortable leggings, socks, and tee.

“It smells wonderful,” Thran said as Bard handed him the filled bowl. He leaned over it to take another deep sniff. “I am very hungry. Is there more? I think I will need two bowls.”

“There’s plenty,” Bard assured him. “You must’ve danced up a storm today, if you’re that hungry.”

Thran gave him a resigned sigh as he sat down. “I did dance a great deal, yes. But I must also confess that I did not get to eat all of my lunch today. The chicken, yes. The vegetables, yes. Even the cookie, yes. But the rice? No. Tomorrow, I will bring things that I can eat with only one hand, that do not need to be heated up. Although perhaps today the circumstances were not normal. Rada had the costume for the scene where Death confesses his love for the Maid…”

Bard listened to Thran’s description of the day’s events. Rada’s costume sounded amazing, and to hear Thran describe how wearing the costume helped him refine his dancing made Bard itch to sketch him in it.

“Rúmil, Rada, and Ori have scheduled a photo shoot for me, Charisse, and Luka next Tuesday,” Thran divulged, helping himself to a biscuit. “You are more than welcome to come and sketch all you want.”

“The painters are coming Monday, so I’ll probably need to be here,” Bard said regretfully. “There might still be a child or two in the ward, too.”

He told Thran about Tilda and Sigrid, and how upset their oldest child was. Thran winced in sympathy. “La pauvre petite. Let us hope she sleeps away much of her cold, so that she can at least make her debut Saturday as the barista.”

“If she wakes up with a fever tomorrow, I’ll insist that she call the owner to explain. I don’t want her to infect any customers, and she needs to allow the owner time to get a replacement.”

“Sadly necessary, but courteous,” Thran called it. He got up to refill his soup bowl and returned to the table. “Legolas said that you painted the solarium wall this morning, so I went to look before I went upstairs. It is amazing – in the lantern light, it looks like a smooth stone wall.”

“Just the fountain left,” Bard said. “It’s my last act as your general contractor. After that, I’m a full-time artist who does home repairs on the weekends.”

Thran paused in his single-minded consumption of soup to offer him a surprised look. “That is true. In December, I asked you for six months to act as general contractor, and so you have done.” He looked around the kitchen, and smiled. “It has gone by so fast. And look at the beautiful home you have made for us, lyubov moya. There is none finer.”

Bard’s grin was pleased. “It turned out well. Guess you got lucky and hired the right man.”

Thran snickered. “I did. I hired another right man this morning – a right hand man. Ori. We have particulars to work out, but he accepted.”

“That’s great, angel. Ori’s a gem, and then some. I had a conversation with a gem today, too. I sent
sketches to Hal of his tree, and he’s already come back with an okay for me to start on the model. Time for me to hit the aquarium store.”

Thran gave him another surprised look. “That is a store that sells fish, yes? Pet fish?”

“Exactly right. They also sell everything you need for aquariums – tanks, pumps, models of sunken ships, and so forth. A lot of people don’t want models of sunken ships; they want rocks. If they have a big tank, they want big rocks. So I’ll see if they have something I can use for the base of Hal’s tree.”

Thran took a warm biscuit to butter. “How big of a rock do you need?”

“A pretty big one. Hal says he wants the whole thing to be eighteen to twenty-four inches high. Not only do I need a big rock to balance the tree, but I need a big rock to anchor the whole thing so it doesn’t topple over.”

“That is a big rock,” Thran murmured dubiously as he nibbled at his biscuit.

“A few pounds worth, yes. Hal was very specific that it had to be white quartz, too. I don’t know how easy that will be to find. I might have to talk to a mineral shop, if I can find one. Or maybe I’ll just have to find someplace where it occurs naturally, and ask the landowner if I can do a little collecting.”

Thran gazed at him in fascination. “What would you do? Go out with a pick or chisel or some such thing? Perhaps with a mule, like Humphrey Bogart in that old film, The Treasure of Sierra Madre?”

Bard laughed. “Was there a mule in that film? I don’t remember. But no; no mule, no pick, no chisel. A chiseled rock wouldn’t look right – the face that got chiseled would show the tool marks, and likely the color would be different from the other faces. So keep your fingers crossed that I find something at the aquarium store that Hal’s okay with, or he agrees to a smaller piece.”

Thran hummed as he munched another bit of biscuit. “Oh, before I forget, I want to tell you that Círdan has begun set construction at the Imladris Academy. The students are most enthusiastic, and Círdan says that enough of the construction will be complete that we can dance safely in a week. So we will begin our rehearsals there in the afternoon and evenings. It will be good to work on the stage where we will perform, but unfortunately it will put me on a different schedule than the rest of our family, at least until the school year ends.”

“That’s only four weeks,” Bard replied, getting up to refill his teacup. “Maybe not too bad, depending on what time you and the company will start your day.”

“We have permission to enter the school at noon, so that the interns will have their last class of the day with us, and then the time where our children are in sport, the interns will be with us as well. The dancers will do our barre at noon, so as to be ready to dance at one-thirty. Then we may run until eleven.”

Bard considered. “That’s a big difference, but we’ll sort it out. The only time you’ll have to eat a substantial meal is in the morning, so I could make you a big breakfast. Then we’ll pack you stuff to nibble in the afternoon and evening. It’s up to you how much you want to eat when you get home, but once you decide, I’ll have it ready.”

Thran took his last bite of his biscuit. “I regret that much of the morning flurry to get the children to school may fall upon you, so I will not have you stay up late to make a meal for me. I know how to make eggs, and if I am hungry, they are good for a late night meal. You are a working artist now,
and you must focus on those now, not eggs for a night owl dancer.”

“We’ll find a rhythm, one way or another,” Bard shrugged. “As long as we remember to have a moment for each other now and again, and see to the children.”

Thran’s nod was firm. “No more out of harmony. We have both learned our lesson.”

“Gods, yes.” Bard got up to refill his teacup again. “Are you ready for afters? Tea and either brownies or applesauce raisin cake.”

“Tea, yes. And the raisin cake.” Thran got up to carry his dishes to the sink.

“Spice tea?”

“Perfect.” Thran washed off his dishes and put them into the dishwasher while Bard made his tea. The cake was on the counter, so Thran sliced a small square and put it on a plate. He couldn’t resist taking a bite of it as he stood at the kitchen island. “Mmm. I do not understand the boys. They think this needs a thick layer of icing to be good. I think it is good all by itself.”

“They’re lads. They need rocket fuel,” Bard snickered, putting Thran’s cup of tea by his hand. “Speaking of which, I wanted to check Legolas’s temperature. If it’s still down, he can go to school tomorrow. If not, he’s in for another day.”

Thran sipped his tea. “I will get the thermometer.”

“No need.” Bard reached into his shirt pocket and pulled it out. “It’s gotten a workout this afternoon. It’s clean and ready for the next examination.”

Thran beckoned for it, examining it as he sipped his tea. “Ah. Once for on, once again for off. Under the tongue and wait for the beep, yes?”

“You’re an expert.”

Thran rolled his eyes. “Hardly. But I improve.”

He put the last small bite of cake in his mouth, put his plate in the dishwasher, then carried the thermometer into the sitting room. “Legolas, it is time for the temperature check. How do you feel?”

“A little dizzy,” he said reluctantly, smothering a cough as he took the thermometer from his father. He put the device under his tongue. In a few seconds, it beeped, and he took it out. The grimace on his face confirmed the result, but Bard peered around Thran’s shoulder to look at it anyway. Legolas still had a just under a degree of fever.

“Then you’re in tomorrow,” Bard exhaled.

“That’s what I expected,” Legolas sank back into the pillows with a disappointed expression, and coughed again. “But I wish I’d been wrong.”

“Since you will be home tomorrow, if you want to put aside your books now, you may,” Thran said. “It is more important that you rest.”

“I’m through most of it, all but the writing assignment in English, and another one in French. I’d like to put those off. It’s hard to think in any language right now.”

“Wish I had an excuse to do that, too,” Bain sighed from the other sofa. “I know, I know – I don’t. So I’ll plug away just like always.”
“Good lad,” Bard offered his son in encouragement. “Looks like you’ll be Clan Ffyrnig’s lone representative at school tomorrow, boyo. So make sure everything’s done.”

“I’m working on it,” Bain promised. “I don’t like it, but I’m doing it.”

“When I finish this set of problems, I’ll get into bed,” Legolas said. “I haven’t been up for very long, but I’m really tired.”

“The effect of the germs,” Thran agreed. “As Bard says, rest is the most important thing. Do not worry about the shower. Stay warm in bed.”

“Yes, Papa,” Legolas agreed. His eyes widened, and he frantically groped for his box of tissues. He managed to grab one before he erupted into a terrific sneeze.

“That’ll be Clan Ffyrnig’s tribal call this weekend. The sloppy sneeze.” Bard shook his head in commiseration and gave Thran a glance. “I think I’ll check on the girls, then get a shower. I want to go to bed early tonight. Unless I miss my guess, we’ll have a few children wake up in the middle of the night because they’ve got clogged sinuses, feverish brows, or chills.”

“And Doctor Da will be there for the rescue,” Thran surmised. “Since every superhero needs a Boy Wonder sidekick, that will be my role. Nurse Ada.”

“I’ll marshal the meds to get us through the night. I hope everyone will be good with bed rest and such tomorrow. If we need more than that, I’ll call Rosie for a recommendation for a pediatrician.”

Thran smiled in triumph. “I did that. Remember when I said I would get our health insurance in order? So I did, and I called Rosie as you planned to. The children are already set up with the doctor she recommended. It is a whole practice, with several doctors, so no matter when we call, someone will be there to help us. I liked that. I set you and me up with a different practice, so we are prepared, too.”

“That’s great, angel,” Bard beamed. “Thanks for seeing to that for us all. I should have seen to it weeks ago. We’ve been lucky not to need one.”

“I hope we still do not. But in case, we are ready.”

“I’m ready for bed,” Legolas moaned, rubbing his nose. “Oh, this is so annoying! My nose itches and it’s clogged and runny at the same time, and I can’t stop coughing, and it’s all going to drive me crazy!”

“Upstairs with you, then,” Thran urged. “I will help you settle while Bard looks through our medicines.”

They left Bain to work on his homework while Thran took Legolas upstairs and Bard sorted through their stock of remedies. After some debate, he and Thran decided on more acetaminophen, a decongestant, and a cough lozenge.

Thran stayed with Legolas while Bard looked in on the girls – both still slept soundly – and then headed for the shower. As soon as Bain finished his homework, Bard would get into bed and rest while he could. The night shift would start before long.
Chapter 118

Chapter Summary

A saint offers comfort to a host of ailing cherubs, and an angel contemplates the nature of his saint's heart.

Chapter Notes

I don't own rights to any part of the Star Trek universe. It's a fun one to visit, though :-) 

I don't own rights to any part of WALL-E, either, especially their cockroach :-) 

The first ailing child woke at one-thirty. Bard had left the bedroom doors ajar so he’d hear anyone get up, so he was instantly awake as soon as Sigrid’s door creaked open. He’d have to oil the hinges in the morning. Thran lay asleep beside him, so he got stealthily out of bed, pulled his tee and sleep pants on as silently as possible, and padded out onto the landing. Sigrid shuffled out of the bathroom.

“How’re you doing, sweetness?” he asked softly.

“Sucky,” she sniffled. “I don’t think I have a fever, but I’m really clogged.”

“Come on,” he beckoned her back into the children’s bathroom. “Let’s see.”

Sigrid followed him in without comment. She was right; the thermometer showed her temperature was normal, but her nose streamed steadily. Bard doled out a dose of decongestant, which she downed, and she agreed to a shot of nasal spray.

“I’ll get you a cup of tea,” Bard offered as he wiped the spray bottle with alcohol, but Sigrid shook her head.

“No, Da; I’m fine without it. I want to go back to bed to knock this stuff out as fast as I can. And you know that Tilda will be up soon. Colds always hit her hard.”

“They do,” Bard agreed. Tilda rarely got sick, but when she did, she took a long time to recover. “All right, sweetness. Hope you get back to sleep quickly.”

He leaned over to brush a kiss on her hair, but Sigrid held him off. “Da, no! I don’t want you to get sick, too! You’re the glue that holds everything together around here, not that Thran doesn’t do stuff, but he’s got to stay healthy for his ballet. So go back to sleep while you can. I’ll be fine.”

Bard tugged a bit of her hair as he grinned. “Thanks for looking out for me, too, sweetness. See you in the morning. Sleep as long as you can.”

“Okay, Da. Night.”

“Night.”
Bard saw Sigrid back to her room, then eased back into bed. Thran didn’t stir, so he breathed a sigh of relief. He shut his eyes, then willed himself back to sleep.

The second ailing child woke up at two-thirty. Bard recognized the familiar liquid coughing that was Tilda’s usual response to a cold. He hadn’t bothered to take off his tee or sleep pants after he’d seen to Sigrid, so he rolled out of bed again, and slipped into Tilda’s room. The little girl was half asleep, but her breathing was raspy, punctuated with congested coughs. Before she woke completely, he retrieved the box of tissues that had fallen on the floor.

“Da....” Tilda wavered between crying and coughing.

Bard sat beside her. “Right here, little doll. You’re very clogged, aren’t you? Come on, sit up a bit, and we’ll take care of things.”

Tilda’s reply was an inarticulate moan as she came into Bard’s arms like a limp puppy. He mopped up her streaming nose, then got her to blow it – that was a messy three-tissue job. Her forehead was hot, so there was no point in trying to take her temperature; she couldn’t breathe well enough for him to get a good reading, anyway. He carried her into the bathroom to manage the essentials, then gave her both a decongestant and acetaminophen to swallow with a cup of water, which she managed without too much trouble. She even managed to let Bard give her a couple of squirts of the nasal spray – something she normally hated, so she must be terribly clogged to endure it willingly.

“My throat burns and my ear hurts,” she whimpered as Bard picked her up. She pressed the side of her head to Bard’s chest. “And I can’t breathe!”

“I know, little doll. I know,” Bard crooned, rubbing her back. He grabbed the tube of mentholated chest rub and a cough lozenge, and carried her back to her room. “I’ve got your favorite medicine, through. You know that’ll help you get unclogged.”

“The rub stuff?” Tilda said, relaxing a bit against Bard’s chest.

“The rub stuff.”

She sighed. “I like the way it smells.”

“I know you do. So let’s rub a little on your chest and throat. I’ve got a cough lozenge for you, too, so you’ll feel better soon.”

“Okay,” Tilda coughed. Bard unwrapped the lozenge for her, then smeared a fingerful of the mentholated cream over the top of her chest and her throat. Then he wrapped her in a blanket and sat in the rocking chair with her in his arms to comfort her until she eased. Gradually, her wheezing and coughing eased as the medicines did their work. The familiar pungent smell of mentholated rub permeated the air, which made Bard smile as he shut his eyes and rocked Tilda. The stuff wasn’t quite eye-watering, but it certainly was a sinus-clearer. May it work as well on Tilda as it did on him! He hummed a bit of an old air his mother had sung when he’d been a small lad with a cold, but softly, so as not to wake anyone else.

“A little better?” he murmured, when Tilda’s breathing sounded easier.

The little girl nodded sleepily. “My cough lozenge is gone.”

“Okay. Let’s get you back into bed, little doll. Sleep’s the best thing for you.”

Tilda’s assent was an inarticulate mumble, so Bard carried her to bed and tucked her in with Mr. Bun and Nelephant on either side. She snuggled in with a sigh, so Bard sat beside her until she fell asleep.
He eased out, ducked into the children’s bathroom to reorder his medicines, wash his hands, and clean the nasal spray bottle. Then he tiptoed back to bed.

“Tilda?” a sleepy voice queried as he crawled between the sheets.

“Yes.”

“What is that smell?”

Bard grinned in the dark. “Mentholated rub. Tilda swears by it.”

A hum. “It is very pungent.”

Bard snickered. “It is. That’s part of its charm.”

A cough – Legolas this time. Bard snuck a look at his clock radio, which read three-thirty. Right on schedule. He lay quietly with his eyes shut, waiting to see if Legolas quieted, or if his cough worsened. As he expected, the boy went into a coughing jag. He sat up again, but Thran’s hand fell on his arm.

“I will see to him, Bard.”

“It’s okay, angel. I don’t mind.”

“You have been up twice already. I can do my part.”

“Of course you can. But I’m already dressed, so it’s okay.”

Thran leaned over the edge of the bed to get his shirt and leggings. “You are a good father, lyubov moya. Let me be one, too.”

“Okay. Everything’s in the children’s bathroom. The nasal spray’s clean.”

“Clean?” Thran looked back at him from the bedroom door.

“Sigrid and Tilda both needed some. I wiped the bottle down with alcohol after each of them used it so it’d be ready for the next victim.”

“Ah. Sensible. I will follow your precedent.”

Thran disappeared. Bard lay still with his eyes shut, but wasn’t surprised when he couldn’t go back to sleep. He was too intent on listening for whatever went on in Legolas’s room. Yes, there were the soft footsteps to the bathroom, and a nasty string of wracking coughs. The turn of the faucet to fill the drinking cup meant medicine – with any luck, decongestant instead of fever reducer. Low voices, the snuffling of Legolas blowing his nose not once, but twice, then the sniffs that meant nasal spray. The faint rustle of the wrapper around a cough lozenge. Gradually, the deep, throaty coughs slowed, calmed, subsided. Footsteps shuffled from the bathroom back to Legolas’s room. Several minutes passed of mostly silence, broken only with the occasional murmur of voices, so low that Bard hazed towards sleep. He roused again when Thran came back to bed.

“How’s the lad?” he mumbled as Thran snuggled into his pillow.

“No fever, but so much congestion,” Thran murmured. “I gave him the decongestant and the spray and the cough drop. His nose is very sore after so many tissues, so I put coconut oil on it.”

“What, no pungent rub?” Bard smiled in the dark.
A soft chuckle. “He put it on by himself. So the whole house will smell of it very soon.”

“Maybe it’ll chase a few germs away,” Bard said.

“Hmm. Go back to sleep while you can, lyubov moya.”

Bard went.

* * *

Thran was vaguely aware of Bard stirring beside him once more during the night, but he fell back asleep before Bard came back to bed. When he roused, he found it was seven o’clock, and the bed was cold beside him. Had Bard never gotten back to bed, then? He shoved back the covers, hurried into the bathroom, then yanked on his clothes to hurry downstairs.

The teakettle was hot, porridge was on the stove, and an empty bread bag lay on the kitchen counter, so Bard had gotten Bain off to school with his usual hot breakfast and bag lunch. It was past the time that Bard would be out to see Bain to the bus stop, so he looked in the sitting room. There sat Bard, leaning against the back of the sofa with his eyes closed. Tilda lay on the rest of the sofa, bundled in a blanket. Her dark hair straggled over the pillow, and her eyes were closed, but her eye sockets were dark and the rest of her face was pale. Still sick, then.

Bard opened his eyes, found Thran’s, and blinked sleepily. He glanced at Tilda, then eased off the sofa to draw Thran into the kitchen.

“How is she?”

“Reacting as she usually does, poor mite. She’s not often sick, but when she is, she goes right to bronchitis or something worse. Her ears hurt because they’re clogged, too. Do you have the name of the pediatrician? As soon as the doctor’s office opens, I’ll call to make an appointment for her. I’ll need an ID card for the medical insurance, too.”

“I have both,” Thran assured him. “I will get them right now.”

He fetched his laptop, printed the card that Bard needed, and wrote down the name and address of the children’s doctor. Bard called the doctor now on the off chance that someone would pick up, but he got the off hours recording.

“I can call back at seven-thirty,” he told Thran as he disconnected the call. “I’ll do that right on the button, because I’ll bet we’re not the only family who wants to bring a child in today.”

Thran hummed. “What time did you get up with her again?”

Bard rubbed the back of his head. “Probably around five. She was miserable with all the coughing and her ears, so I just brought her down here so we wouldn’t wake up everyone else, and I could watch over her while I got Bain ready for school.”

“And how is Bain?”

Bard snorted. “Healthy as a horse. I can count on one hand the number of times he’s been sick in his life. He must have the immune system of a cockroach.”
Thran gave his husband a skeptical look. “A cockroach?”

“Nothing kills a cockroach,” Bard shrugged. “I read once that they’ll rule the planet long after we’re gone. Just like the little guy in WALL-E.”

“Ah, at last a film I have seen! Legolas likes that one,” Thran grinned. “Have you eaten?”

Bard cast a look back at their youngest child, then shook his head. “Do you want to eat now, or are you going to do your barre here?”

“I will do my barre here, because I want to know when you will take Tilda to the doctor. I will see to the other children until you come back.”

Bard didn’t argue, merely nodded. That wasn’t like him, but of course it wouldn’t be – Bard had gotten perhaps two hours of sleep all night, and he was too intent on Tilda to think about much else, including his breakfast.

“You have a few minutes before you can call the doctor, lyubov moya. I will watch our Kukla while you eat. You are tired and hungry, and you cannot see to her as well as you usually do in such a state.”

Bard’s eyes sharpened on his. Ah, that was the best way to get Bard to see to himself – tie it to how well he could look after his children. It was such an obvious ploy – why hadn’t he thought of it before? No matter. He’d thought about it now, and now he had it to use another day.

“Go,” Thran pushed Bard into the kitchen. “Porridge, eggs, whatever you like. I will call you if your little doll needs you.”

He got a reluctant smile, but Bard got out a bowl and spoon. “Thank you, angel.”

Thran sat himself on the sofa opposite Tilda, but the little girl didn’t stir. She probably hadn’t slept much last night, either. Bard padded in with a large mug of tea and a bowl of porridge, which he sat down on the table before Thran.


He returned to the kitchen to fetch another bowl and mug, then came back to sit next to Thran while he ate his porridge. He ate it absent-mindedly, though whether it was weariness or preoccupation with his daughter’s illness that distracted him wasn’t clear. Thran nudged him with his shoulder.

“She will be all right, lyubov moya.”

Bard’s expression was startled. “What? Oh, I know she will.”

“Then what preoccupies you so?”

Bard hand came to rest on Thran’s thigh. “I’m just... appreciating things. I don’t have to scrabble because the children are sick. I don’t have to dump them in a sick children’s clinic until I get off my shift. I won’t lose my job if I stay home with them. It’s... a big relief.”

Thran looped one arm around Bard’s shoulders and brushed a kiss on Bard’s hair. “I do not have to dump Legolas in a boarding school, or worry about him in the infirmary when he is sick. That is a big relief to me, too.”

“We both have a stable family life now, thanks to a certain angelic dancer.”
“And a certain hunky welder.”

“Angel –”

“Hush. I speak no less truth than you do.”

Bard’s cheeks tinged with a faint pink, and his smile was the same sheepish one he’d revealed when he told Thran about the flirty paint department clerk at the homeowners’ mecca. Such a modest man, uncomfortable with compliments! Would there ever be words to convince Bard of how much he brought to his family? Perhaps not. That was the only downside to his modesty. Fortunately, Bard didn’t try to refute Thran’s sentiments, but only offered an appreciative smile as he resumed his breakfast. Thran finished his porridge, and savored the warmth of his tea mug in his hands. Bard spooned up his last bit of porridge, then glanced at his mobile.

“Seven-thirty. I can call the doctor’s office now.”

“Go,” Thran urged. “I will sit here with the small one.”

Bard nodded agreement, then went into the kitchen to find the paper Thran had given him with the doctor’s number on it. Thran heard the small beeps that were Bard typing the number on his mobile; in a few seconds, Bard stuck his head into the sitting room.

“I’m in the queue,” he said.

Thran lifted a hand in acknowledgement, then contented himself with quietly sipping his tea as he watched over Tilda. She still slept without disturbance, though her breathing was congested. Ten minutes later, Bard’s low murmur revealed that he’d reached someone in the doctor’s office. He heard “bronchitis,” and “ear infection,” and “possible strep throat.” Thran winced at that last one; strep throat was painful and contagious. After few more murmurs, Bard returned to the sitting room.

“I can take her in at nine. That’s good. I worried that I wouldn’t get her in to see anyone until late this afternoon.”

“I will call Lettie to tell her that I will be in as soon as you are home from the doctor with Tilda.”

“I hope we won’t have to wait long when we get there. I asked if I needed to fill out paperwork, and could come in early for that if it’d help. Of course, there is always paperwork, so I’ll leave here about eight-fifteen.”

“Then take a brief nap, Bard. You did not sleep most of the night, and even a short nap will help. I will wake you up in time.”

“I need to get Til dressed, and I want to look in on the other children.”

“Why make Tilda get dressed? She is in her pajamas, so she needs only socks and shoes and sweater. I can look in on Sigrid and Legolas while you nap. Please, lyubov moya. You must be tired.”

“It goes with the job,” Bard protested. “I’m fine.”

“You are,” Thran nodded. “And you are tired, too. Now, lie here and shut your eyes. I insist. I will wake you in half an hour.”

“All right, all right,” Bard conceded. “Just look in on Sig and Legs, okay? I’d rather know that neither of them need to see a doctor before I take Tilda.”
“I will. So rest. What the popular adage? Do not make me come down there?”

“That doesn’t apply to you. You’ve already descended from heaven, so you can’t go any lower. Except as Lord of the Underworld, which doesn’t count here.”

“Tcha. You waste valuable time, my saint,” Thran chided, but with a smile. “Go to sleep.”

He got up and urged Bard flat, even unfolding the wool throw over him. Bard mugged an embarrassed roll of the eyes, but didn’t argue. Thran went upstairs to check on Legolas and Sigrid; both were still asleep. He dressed in his dancewear, then called Lettie to explain about Bard’s trip to the doctor. Before he went downstairs, he rummaged through Tilda’s room for socks, shoes, and sweater, so that he could let Bard sleep as long as possible.

Ah, that was a revelation – Tilda’s clothes were few, and worn. Thran detoured into Bain’s room to do a similar search of closet and dresser drawers, which told the same story. Sigrid’s things were likely in no better state. He and Bard must remedy that as soon as everyone was healthy again. It would take delicate handling so that Bard didn’t feel ashamed of his inability to provide many clothes for his children. He had no reason to feel that way – almost daily, Thran found a new reason to marvel at his husband’s resourcefulness to make do as well as he had. All the skills he’d learned – cooking, all the tasks of renovation, and welding, in addition to his artwork and parenting – showed how hard he worked.

Thran considered as he returned to Tilda’s room to collect a pair of socks, her trainers, and her favorite green sweater. He would frame their shopping trip as a celebration for both of them working –

No, no, no – that would only draw attention to exactly what Thran didn’t want to draw attention to, that Bard’s marriage to Thran meant clothes for the children, and his previous single-parenthood didn’t. The most obvious approach was to say that everyone had grown out of their old things, and needed bigger things. They would not shop at the most expensive shops, but better ones than the second hand places that Bard had had to frequent before. To treat this as a regular, normal chore without regard to previous hardships would be the best way to proceed.

He came downstairs to retrieve his mobile from the kitchen. He still had twenty-five minutes before he had to wake Bard. He stuck his head into the sitting room – yes, Bard had dropped off – then padded to the ballroom. He set an alarm on his mobile to alert him as to when he should rouse Bard, then gave himself to the first warming stretches of the morning. He limbered and warmed until the alarm chimed softly, then went to wake Bard.

His husband opened his eyes as soon as Thran touched his leg. “Is it time?”

Thran nodded. “Five after eight. I have Tilda’s things, so you have only to dress yourself.”

“Thanks, angel. I’ll get my jeans and shoes, and be back down.”

“I will sit with her.”

Bard headed upstairs. Tilda still slept, so Thran sat on the end of the sofa, and unwound the bottom of her blanket to find her bare feet. He was awkward, but he managed to get her socks on before she roused.

“Da?” she said in a very congested voice.

“Ada is here, Kukla,” he replied. “I put on your socks, and now I put on your shoes for you. Your Da will be back in a moment. He takes you to the doctor to see about your cold. Can you roll over so
“I can do your shoes?”

“Okay.” she sniffled, and edged over onto her back. She opened her eyes to regard him in confusion. “I’m going to a doctor?”

“You are. You will feel better soon.”

“Not the clinic?”

“No, Kukla. This is a new doctor.”

“No, Ada, we have to use the clinic,” she mumbled. “A doctor is too much money. Sigrid said so.”

A hard, angry lump rose in Thran’s throat, but he forced it down. “We have enough money, Kukla. And medical insurance.”

“What’s insurance?”

“It means we can see a doctor whenever we need to, not the free clinic. Do not worry.”

“Okay,” she breathed, and shut her eyes again.

Thran eased her shoes on and tied the laces, glad that he didn’t have to say anything. Suka blyad, when even a ten-year-old worried about the cost to see a doctor... “Kukla, can I help you to sit up? I have your favorite green sweater to keep you warm while you see the doctor.”

Tilda pushed herself up, grimacing. “I’m dizzy.”

“I know, Kukla.” Thran got her arms into the sweater. “There, you can lie down again, until your Da comes down. Just rest.”

Bard came in, dressed in jeans and tee, a hoodie over his shoulder. “Little doll? How are you doing?”

“I feel dizzy and my throat hurts and my ear hurts and I’m stuffed up. Ada put on my socks and shoes and sweater. He said we’re going to a doctor.”

“That’s right, little doll. I want to make sure you don’t have bronchitis or strep throat or an ear infection.”

“I hope not. They’re all yucky.”

“Very. Okay, let’s get you into the truck.”

Thran moved out of the way so that Bard could pick up his daughter. As Tilda snuggled into his arms, Bard gave Thran a reassuring smile. “Thanks, angel. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Take the time Tilda needs. If you must stop on the way home for medicine, do so. I set up our information at the pharmacy in town, the one next to the bagel shop. I will see to the sleepy ones.”

“Do your barre, at least,” Bard urged as he carried Tilda towards the mudroom door.

“I will,” Thran assured him. “First, I will open the carriage house door for you.”

He slipped on his trainers, and saw Bard and Tilda safely into the truck. Once Bard drove out into the driveway, Thran locked the carriage house door and came to Bard’s window.
“Good luck,” he wished his husband. “I will see you soon.”

“Before too long, I hope. Hold down the fort.”

Thran grinned. “I will.”

Bard offered him a smile, then headed off. Thran walked slowly back to the house, which was uncharacteristically still and silent. He made the most of the quiet, and went into the ballroom to resume his barre.

He had much to think about.

* * *

Bard drove silently, casting an occasional glance at Tilda as he navigated through the early morning traffic to the doctor’s office. The little girl looked straight ahead through bleary eyes for a few seconds, then shut her eyes. Despite her ailment, Bard felt more relief than anything else. He was on his way to a children’s specialist, not an overworked, general clinic physician’s assistant. He wasn’t about to lose his job. He had the wherewithal to pay for medicine if Tilda needed it without worrying if his family would have to do without something else. It was almost surreal, this descent into plenty.

Maybe he was asleep and dreaming. Gods, what if he were, and what if he woke up to find out doctors, insurance, houses, angels, commissions were only the yearnings of a tired brain?

“I’m awake,” he murmured firmly, pinching the skin on his wrist hard when he stopped at a traffic light. “I am awake.”

“What, Da?” Tilda murmured.

“We’re almost at the doctor’s office, that’s all,” he soothed.

“Okay.”

Bard pulled into the hospital parking lot, found the office building next to the main hospital, and parked. He gathered Tilda into his arms, and carried her inside. Up the elevator to the third floor, down the hall, into the reception area. He spoke to the receptionist, settled Tilda in a chair, and settled himself beside her to fill out the expected paperwork. Once that was done, Tilda crawled into his arms to press her aching ear against his chest. They were not the only people in the waiting area; from the sounds of the other children, the doctors would be busy today dealing with the same stuff that Tilda had.

When their turn came, he carried her to the examination room, where a smiling physician’s assistant took stock of Tilda’s symptoms, and left them to wait for the doctor. Tilda immediately climbed down off the examination table to crawl back onto Bard’s lap. In a few minutes, the doctor came in.

“Hi, I’m Doctor Firenze,” the middle-aged woman greeted them. “Hello, Mr. Bowman; hello, Tilda. You’re under the weather, aren’t you?”

Tilda nodded, but didn’t say anything or move.

“I’m sure you’d rather sit with your father, but it’d be a big help if you’d sit on my table here, so I
can take a look at you.”

“Her ear hurts,” he explained. “It feels better when she presses it against my chest.”

“Because it’s warm there,” Dr. Firenze nodded understandingly. “Let’s take a look, Tilda, so we can help you feel better.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and Bard set her back on the examination table. She grimaced as the doctor took a look in her ear. “Oooh, that hurts!”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” the doctor said. “I’ll try to be quick, but I need to take a look in both your ears. Yes, I’m sure this one does hurt. You’ve got a nice collection of bacteria in there. Let’s look down your throat, too.”

The doctor took a look at Tilda’s throat, then her nose and eyes. A careful probing of neck glands followed, and a listen to Tilda’s heart and lungs. A gentle feel of abdomen and ribs. An assistant whisked away a quick swab of the throat to check for strep throat. The doctor stepped out to see other patients for the twenty minutes it took for the culture to complete, then was back.

“The good news is that you don’t have strep throat, Tilda,” Dr. Firenze informed her and Bard. “You do have a nasty touch of the flu, but it’s not bronchitis, which is also good. Your Da knows that the flu and bronchitis are viral infections, not bacterial ones, so you just have to wait those out – antibiotics don’t work on them. You also have an ear infection, which is a bacterial problem, so I’ll write you a prescription to help you get rid of that. Make sure you take all of the medicine the way your father tells you. And I’ll bet you know what to do to keep the flu from turning into bronchitis, right?”

Tilda nodded. “Da’s chicken soup, hot tea, and a lot of tissues. And lots of hand washing. And rest. Books, not video games.”

Dr. Firenze chuckled. “Da’s trained you well, I see. You already know how to be a good patient.”

Tilda nodded. “The soup is the best part.”

“I’ll bet it is.” Dr. Firenze glanced at Tilda’s chart, then at Bard. “Any other children, Mr. Bowman?”

“Three,” Bard said. “My other daughter’s sixteen, my oldest son is fourteen, and my youngest son is thirteen. The two older ones have a milder version of what Tilda has; they’re at home with my husband. The younger boy’s generally got the constitution of an ox, so he’s at school.”

“You know the routine about washing hands four ways ‘til Sunday, and not sharing drinking glasses, then,” Dr. Firenze nodded.

“Absolutely,” Bard nodded.

“Good. What pharmacy do you use? I’ll send off a prescription to address the ear infection, so it’ll be ready for you to pick up when you head home.”

“Is it that weird pink stuff?” Tilda piped up.

Dr. Firenze’s hand hovered over her tablet. “It is.”

“Are there some pills instead, please? I hate that pink stuff.”
“Absolutely, there are pills. Most children don’t like pills, or they can’t swallow them.”

“Tilda’s a champion pill swallower,” Bard supplied. “I don’t blame her. That pink stuff is nasty.”

“It is,” Dr. Firenze gave a theatrical shudder. “All right Tilda, pills it is. All I need is the name of your pharmacy.”

Bard supplied the name of the pharmacy, which Dr. Firenze tapped into her medical tablet. “All right, it’s there now; I’ve gotten an acknowledgement back. It’ll say on the label, Mr. Bowman, but I just want to make sure you understand that you’ll have to cut the pills in half. There’s not much call for pills for children because they have trouble swallowing them, so most come only in adult doses. Tilda needs only half a pill for each dosage. Make sure you do that, all right?”

“I will,” Bard nodded. “I appreciate you pointing that out.”

“It was nice to meet you, Tilda, and you, too, Mr. Bowman. I hope you’ll be on the mend very soon.”

“Me, too,” Tilda replied. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Enjoy your chicken soup.”

Bard shepherded Tilda out of the examination room to the checkout desk, where he got his receipt. He pulled out his wallet, expecting at least a copay to be due, but the administrator explained that the HMO that provided their coverage had a variable copay, depending on services rendered and deductibles and so forth. What that meant was that the doctor’s office staff would resolve things with the insurance company, then send Bard a bill for the remainder.

He carried Tilda back to the truck still bemused. He’d taken a child to a doctor and hadn’t had to pay cash up front. What a strange experience...

When he got to the pharmacy, he was happy to find the he didn’t have to wait long to collect Tilda’s medicine. It was a generic form of a common antibiotic, and the cost was minimal. Bard paid for the medicine, and got Tilda back in the truck for the brief ride home. By the time he carried her inside, she was wilting. He read the instructions for the medicine – half a pill, three times a day, for ten days.

“Okay, little doll, let’s get you some water for your first pill, and then you can go to bed for a nice long nap.” Bard filled a glass of water, and tapped out one of the pills. He got the cutting board and carefully chopped the pill in half, handing her one piece. “Down the hatch.”

“It’s down,” Tilda confirmed. “Though it wasn’t very easy to swallow. My throat is sore.”

“You’ll be uncomfortable for a few days more,” Bard nodded. “That’s good incentive for lots of naps, though. The more naps, the faster you’ll feel better.”

Thran came in from the ballroom. “Hello, Kukla. How did you fare with the doctor?”

“Okay,” Tilda graved.

“No strep, no bronchitis, just a touch of flu and an ear infection,” Bard translated. He held up the plastic bottle of pills to show Thran, then put it in the kitchen cabinet with the glassware. “She has medicine to take. And naps to take, too, right?”

“I’m glad I have to take naps because I really want to take one right now,” Tilda sniffled. “I’m tired again.”
“Do you want anything to eat first?” Bard asked.

Tilda shook her head. “I’m too tired to eat now.”

“Upstairs, then,” Bard urged. “I’ll bet Mr. Bun is already waiting for you.”

“Come with me,” she pulled on his arm.

Bard gave Thran a look. “I’ll be right down, angel, unless you have to leave right this moment.”

“See to Kukla. I will be here.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye, Ada,” Tilda grumbled, which drew a sympathetic smile from Thran.

Bard let Tilda pull him upstairs. She didn’t take long to settle, and was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow. He stuck his head in Legolas’s room, then Sigrid’s; both children were still asleep. It was almost ten o’clock, so likely neither had gotten up yet. Thran confirmed that when Bard came back down to the kitchen.

“That’s good. They’re both sleeping. I hope you had time to do your barre.”

“I did. How was the doctor? A good one, I hope?”

“I liked her, and Tilda did, too. Dr. Firenze. Pleasant, and very thorough. The thing I liked the best is that she talked to Tilda, not just to me. And before I forget, just so you know, those pills are an adult dosage because most children don’t want pills. They want that nasty pink stuff, but Tilda hates that. So we have to cut each pill in half so that she gets the right dosage.”

“How often must she take it?”

“Three times a day, for ten days.”

“I will remember,” Thran nodded.

“So I’m back now, and the children are settled,” Bard said. “Get yourself to the studio, angel. We’re fine here.”

Thran looked torn. “I do not like leaving all this to you, lyubov moya. You are tired, and should rest.”

“I’ll nap down here until one of the children gets up,” Bard said. “It’s okay, angel. I’m an old hand at this, so I’ve got it down to a routine. No worries.”

With a sigh, Thran nodded reluctantly. “I will do my best to be home at a reasonable hour to help with supper and homework.”

“That’d be great. The children will be tired of looking at me by then,” Bard gave Thran a reassuring grin. “You can give Bain a run for his money on the speedway.”

Thran snickered. “You are better at that than I am – more practice.”

“I’m sure Bain will be delighted to give you the chance to practice.”

“I’m sure he will,” Thran exhaled. “I will get my things and go, then. As you say, sooner started is
Thran went to collect his bag, so Bard opened the fridge to collect things for his husband’s lunch. The ubiquitous chicken breast, of course, and the chopped veg. No rice, because yesterday Thran didn’t get to eat it. He made up a few peanut butter cracker sandwiches, and slipped in a piece of the applesauce raisin cake. A water bottle went beside Thran’s bento boxes. Thran stowed the collection gratefully in his bag, and wrapped his arms around Bard in a hug.

“You look after me very well, and the children, too. You are the best husband, and the best father.”

Bard needed no encouragement to twine his arms around Thran’s ribs to better savor the warmth of his husband’s body. Was it any wonder Tilda had pressed so closely against him in the doctor’s office? The comfort of another body was a pleasure that soothed many ills. He found himself humming in enjoyment.

“You’re a damned good hugger,” he murmured, grinning when Thran hummed back. “Which I quite enjoy.”

That coaxed a chuckle out of Thran. “Oh, my saint, you are such a temptation. I must leave now, or I will not leave at all.”

Bard let Thran ease out of his arms. “As much as I’d welcome you to stay, you need to dance.”

“I do. Good luck with the children, and I will see you at supper.”

“Okay, angel. Dance well.”

Bard walked Thran out to the carriage house, and saw him off with a wave. He came back inside the house.

So quiet.

It was the perfect time for a nap on the sitting room sofa...

... but he really should put the roast he’d gotten out of the freezer yesterday into the crockpot first. He made himself a cup of tea, then got the beef into the crockpot with a mound of carrots, potatoes, and onions. A good splash of red wine went into the pot with some pepper, thyme, and garlic. He switched on the crockpot to slow cook, and took his tea into the sitting room...

...and detoured to the solarium. Yes, the wall looked great. Before he could stop himself, he eyeballed the wall to decide on how high to hang the fountain. It’d be easier to tell if he slid the basin in place, so he set his teacup aside and got the half-circle basin centered on the wall. It wasn’t very big, but if he put a few plants around it, it would look bigger, and the plants would also cover up the cracks he needed to repair. He moved the ferns around the bottom, then held up the lion’s head portion to gauge the correct height. When he thought he had the right height, he marked the top, then set it aside. He slid the basin aside, and found the tape measure to find the center of the wall. Three inches to the left for the first fastener, then three to the right for the second one, then level the marks. He drilled pilot holes, ran in the heavy-duty anchors, then the bolts. He sorted out the plastic tube that would recirculate the water from the basin up to the lion’s mouth, and poked it into place. Leaving the end of the tube to dangle, he set the fountain onto its anchors, slid the basin and the plants over, and stepped back to gauge the effect.

It looked fantastic. Just fantastic.

With a grin, Bard moved the ferns out of the way, and got the tube of crack repair he’d set on the
marble topped table, and carefully sealed the couple of cracks in the basin. Once the repair compound cured, he’d line the basin with a piece of heavy-duty black pool membrane to make sure it stayed watertight, and it’d be ready to fill.

He rearranged the ferns around the basin. Another one would look great at the back of the basin to hide the plastic tubing that recirculated the water. With satisfaction, he collected the tools and bits and bobs that littered the floor, and put everything away. A quick sweep of the floor removed the remaining traces of his repairs, and he arranged the fainting couch – the room still needed another chair or two – and arrayed the palms around the room. All that remained was to dress the reclaimed space with more plants.

“Wow, Da,” a gravelly voice spoke from the door. Sigrid stood looking in, with Legolas behind her. The children edged in to admire the room. “You got the fountain up.”


“Tomorrow, I hope,” Bard replied. “The basin was cracked, so I just patched it. But soon, yeah.”

“I love it,” Sigrid smiled. “It’ll be fun to go to Mr. Sam’s garden center and pick out a few things, won’t it, Legolas?”

“I hope they have hibiscus,” the boy said. “Have you seen them, Sigrid? The flowers are the size of your hand, and they come in all sorts of reds and pinks and yellows.”

“Sounds like both of you feel loads better,” Bard gave them both a close look. “No fever, no dizziness?”

“So far,” Sigrid said, holding up her crossed fingers. “I’m still clogged, and but I’m going to do nothing all afternoon, because I want to be good to go to my new job tomorrow.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be good to fence tomorrow,” was Legolas’s reluctant assessment. “But I won’t do anything today, either, except my homework. I’m tired of being sick!”

“You both know the drill, then,” Bard shooed them into the sitting room. “Or Legolas, you don’t, do you? First, we check your temperatures, and dose accordingly. Then tea and something to eat.”

Bard put the broom away in the mudroom, then had both children take their temperatures. Thankfully, neither had any fever. Sigrid was especially jubilant.

“Okay, we’ll see to the sniffles and such,” Bard said. “The kettle’s hot, so make yourself some tea. And both of you put some socks on. It’s important to stay warm to help your body cook the germs. Please tiptoe upstairs, would you? I took Tilda to the doctor this morning, and she’s asleep in her room. The trip wore her out.”

“Oh, poor Kukla,” Legolas murmured.

“This always happens to her,” Sigrid explained to Legolas. “Her colds always seem to turn into the flu, or bronchitis, or strep, or something nasty. Which one was it this time, Da?”

“A touch of flu and an earache, but no bronchitis or strep, which is good. But she’ll be down for a bit. So get your socks, then come down for either breakfast or lunch, whichever suits you. What would you like?”

“Something hot,” Legolas said, looking at Sigrid. “Something hot would be good, right?”
Sigrid nodded. “Eggs or chicken soup?”

“Eggs for me.”

“Eggs are good for me, too. Scrambled?”

“Scrambled it is,” Bard agreed, when Legolas had seconded Sigrid’s suggestions. “Get your socks, and sweaters won’t hurt, either. Eggs are on their way.”

Bard put a bowl of chicken soup into the microwave for himself, then got the children’s eggs started. They soon sat down to a hot meal, punctuated with the last of yesterday’s biscuits. When they were done, Bard got them settled on the sofas in the sitting room with blankets and pillows and their homework. He got the kitchen cleaned up, and was about to jot down an idea he had about the steampunk orrery he was to design when a light step came down the hallway.

“Tilda?” Bard called.

A moment later, a small, unhappy girl came into the kitchen with the faithful Mr. Bun under her arm. “I’m stuffed up, Da. It woke me up.”

“Sounds like you need a few tissues and some hot tea, little doll,” Bard said, coming around the kitchen island to stoop beside her. “Come sit at the table and I’ll make your tea. Sigrid and Legolas are in the sitting room.”

“They are?” Tilda rubbed her eyes. “Where’s Bain?”

“He’s at school. Come on, let’s blow your nose.”

Tilda obligingly did so, an effort that took repeated tries before she was clear. Bard washed his hands before he got Tilda’s tea and brought it to her with the squeeze bottle of honey.

“Do you want anything to eat?”

She shook her head. “All that goop has made my stomach feel funny.”

“I’m sure. Maybe a little toast with some butter would help it. Or a scrambled egg.”

“Maybe egg. Toast would hurt my throat.”

“Bread and butter, then?”

She nodded. “May I take my tea in the sitting room and lie down?”

“We’ll ask the big kids to make room for you.”

“Okay.”

Bard led her into the sitting room, where both Legolas and Sigrid greeted her with sympathetic words. Sigrid curled her legs up on her sofa.

“Here, Til. You’ll fit on the end.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Tilda got comfortable on the end of the sofa, and Bard wrapped the wool throw around her. She snuggled into it with a sigh, and gave Legolas a little wave. “Hi, Legolas.”

“Hi, Tilda,” the boy waved back. “I’m sorry you’re sick, too.”
“I’ll feel better soon. I have pills.”

“Oooh, pills,” Sigrid grinned, winking at Legolas. “They’re almost as good as that rub stuff, right?”

“Almost,” Tilda pulled the throw up over her nose. “I think I need more. I don’t smell like it very much any more.”

“Eat a little something first,” Bard said. “I’ll bring your egg and bread, and you can snack on that. Then you can fumigate yourself with the rub stuff.”

“I like that stuff, too, Kukla,” Legolas told her. “It smells to the heavens, but it clears my nose just like that.”

Tilda looked a little more animated. “It does that to me, too. So it doesn’t just smell good.”

Sigrid made a grimace. “I don’t know whether I’d call that a good smell, Til, but it’s certainly a big smell.”

Chuckling, Bard left the children to get Tilda’s breakfast ready. He refilled the teakettle, too, and was happy to have another cup of lemon ginger tea to warm him. Tilda managed to eat most of her egg and bread, and she drank all of her tea. She immediately fell asleep after, despite the close quarters on the sofa.

“Poor Tilda,” Sigrid shook her head. “She really is sick.”

“She’ll be okay in a day or two,” Bard assured Sigrid. “I’ll take her back upstairs where we won’t bother her. Sleep will do wonders for her, even without the infamous rub stuff.”

“I’m going back upstairs, too,” Sigrid closed her government book. “I don’t know whether it’s my cold, or this boring government book, but I’m ready for a nap, too.”

“I guess I should, too,” Legolas looked torn.

“If you’re comfortable, stay where you are, Legs,” Bard suggested. “I’ll work on my sketches in here, but it won’t bother me if you work on your homework or nap.”

“Okay,” Legolas smiled. “I am comfortable, and it’d be nice to be out of bed for a little while.”

“Sigrid, if you’re going to nap, may I borrow your computer? I need to do some research for one of my commissions.”

“Oh, sure, Da,” Sigrid waved her hand at her laptop on the coffee table. “Which commission is this for?”

“It’s an orrery,” Bard said, and described what that was. “It’ll look like the Victorian steampunk vibe.”

“Oooh, steampunk?” Sigrid sat up. “That sounds neat! Didn’t Mr. Rohan’s urban art exhibit at the April Fool’s Follies have a couple of examples of that?”

“Oh, is that what that bust was?” Legolas also looked interested. “I thought it was some sort of Star Trek thing about the Borg.”

“Ha, I never thought of the Borg that way, but you’re right, Legs. They’re kind of a modern vibe of steampunk,” Sigrid laughed. “There are a lot of comics and stuff about it. A steampunk orrery will look cool, Da.”
“I hope so,” Bard agreed. “I know what Tilda will ask about it, though.”

Sigrid grinned. When Legolas looked blank, she said, “Tilda is a kind soul, Legs, and she was very unhappy about Pluto being demoted to a dwarf planet in the same year she was born. She said she felt sorry for it. So she’ll be the first one to ask Da whether he’ll put Pluto in his orrery.”

“Will you, Bard?”

“Technically, I shouldn’t. Steampunk usually reflects the Victorian world around 1850 or so. Neptune was discovered in 1846, so the first eight planets would be authentic to the period. Tilda’s pet planet Pluto wasn’t discovered until 1930, so the Victorians wouldn’t have included it in their instruments. But I’ll ask the client what he’d prefer. Some Pluto fans are very staunch supporters.”

“Of course we are,” Sigrid said. “It’s not Pluto’s fault that humanity can’t sort itself out about what’s a planet or not. We said it was once, so it still should be. Just because it’s small shouldn’t matter.”

“That’s Tilda’s position,” Bard grinned. “So I want to look at a lot of steampunk art and such to see how I want to do my take on it.”

“I could help you look,” Sigrid offered.

“That’s fine, sweetness, but would you rather to that, or rest so you can get to your new job tomorrow?”

“I want to do both,” Sigrid made a face. “But I want to make a good impression, so I’ll go nap.”

“Good girl. Sleep well.”

“Okay, Da.” She got up and collected her blanket to go upstairs. “No, just worry about Tilda. I’ll get myself upstairs, and you don’t need to get any closer to my germs to kiss me. See you in a while.”

“Bye, Sigrid,” Legolas offered a wave. “I hope you feel better in a little while.”

“Me, too, and you, too!” Sigrid waved as she left the sitting room.

Bard grinned as he collected the sleeping Tilda to take her upstairs. Sigrid was feeling better, if she could joke with Legolas.

“I’ll settle Tilda, and be back down, Legs. Do you need anything? More tea?”

“I left my box of tissues upstairs. Would you bring it down for me?”

“Righto. Back in a tick.”

Bard got Tilda into bed, and stuck his head into Sigrid’s room, where she gave him a sleepy smile and wave as she arranged her pillows. He collected Legolas’s tissues to give to him, then gave a quick stir to the crockpot. He added a little parsley and some paprika for color, then got his sketchpad and pencils to sketch any ideas he found on Sigrid’s computer. Legolas finished some portion of his homework, set his books and computer aside, and lay back to nap. Bard soon found himself fascinated by the wide array of interesting facts, pictures, and ideas. So many good ideas came to him that he quickly filled several pages of his sketchbook with snippets of designs. Hmm... what if he represented the planets as the ancient gods and goddesses who had inspired their names, as interpreted by a Victorian steampunk artist? That led to more research about each of the deities. He got so caught up in his creating that he didn’t notice the time fly by.
The mudroom door opened. Bard looked up, startled. Gods, was it four-thirty already? As he pulled out his mobile, Legolas roused at the noise.

“Is that Bain?” he murmured sleepily. “I must’ve slept all afternoon.”

“It’s only two-forty,” Bard replied, casting a look at the door to the kitchen, then at Legolas. “If that’s Bain, he came home on the early bus.”

Oh, gods – had the indestructible Bain succumbed to the rampant family disease, too? From Legolas’s expression, he’d come to the same conclusion that Bard had.

“Uh-oh,” Legolas said.

Uh-oh, indeed.
“Hello? Bain?” Bard called from the sitting room.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Bain replied, rattling into the kitchen. His backpack thunked into the corner by the table, and he appeared a moment later. “Hi, Da. Hi, Legolas.”

A frown wrinkled Bard’s forehead. “Are you sick, boyo? You’re home on the early bus.”

“I’m fine,” Bain shrugged, “but a lot of the school isn’t, including the teachers. Mr. Boromir was out, and so was Mr. Faramir, so there weren’t enough teachers to cover all of sport today. The lacrosse group is already down by almost half, so the school canceled it for today. They canceled archery, too, Legs, so you didn’t miss it. I got everyone’s homework stuff, and just made the early bus by the skin of my teeth.”

“I’m glad you’ve still dodged the germs,” Bard replied.

“I’m glad I didn’t miss archery,” Legolas exhaled. The deep breath made him cough, but he didn’t launch in to a coughing jag as he’d done early this morning. He smothered it in his blanket – that’d need a good washing in a day or two – and the spasms quieted quickly. “Thanks for getting my homework.”

“Not a problem,” Bain gave his brother a quick smile. “How’s Sigrid? And Tilda? She looked pretty bad this morning.”

“I took her to our doctor –”

“Wait... what?” Bain interrupted. “We have a doctor? I thought we had to use the clinic.”

“Not any more,” Bard assured him. “We’ve got health insurance now, and a pediatrician for all of you. Her name is Dr. Firenze. She checked Tilda over from top to bottom. Tilda’s got a touch of flu and an ear infection, but nothing worse, so she’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Bain’s worried expression eased. Bard kept a straight face; it was one thing for Bain to feel protective about his sister, and quite another for anyone to call him out about it. “She always gets the worst of stuff.”

“She’s upstairs, sleeping, and so is Sigrid. So please keep the clatter to a dull roar when you go upstairs, so they both stay asleep.”
“Course, Da,” Bain nodded. “Where’s Thran? At the studio? And what’s in the crockpot? Can I have a snack?”

“Thran’s at the studio, pot roast is in the crockpot, and I don’t know; can you have a snack?”

“May I have a snack?” Bain amended hastily. “And the pot roast smells really good.”

“Help yourself to the usual,” Bard agreed. “Thran said he wanted to get home at a reasonable hour today, so I expect we’ll have supper about six.”

“Biscuits, I hope? Or muffins?”

“I like those orange cranberry ones,” Legolas suggested helpfully. “Or the corn ones. Or the Nirvana ones...”

Bain snorted. “Geez, Legs. Why not just say that you like any kind of muffins?”

The other boy grinned. “I do. And so do you.”

“Maybe spoonbread instead of muffins or biscuits,” Bard countered. “You both need a whole grain. And a lot of greens. You need the iron and calcium, too. Maybe with a little spice. The hot spices would help unclog you, Legs.”

“Oh, I don’t think anything can do that,” Legolas grimaced. “It’s about to set me crazy!”

“Sounds like it’s time for more tea. Did your Papa give you any meds this morning?”

He nodded. “Decongestant, nasal spray, and a cough drop at nine-thirty.”

“Maybe another round of those, and some hot tea.”

“Anything,” Legolas rubbed his nose. “This is awful!”

“Okay, I’ll get your stuff. Bain, help yourself to snacks. Tea for you, too?”

“Tea’s always good, Da. That chocolate mint oolong is cool.”

“I haven’t tried that one,” Legolas looked interested.

“It’s more mint than chocolate, but I like it,” Bain shrugged. “You want anything to eat, Legs?”

“No, thank you. Just the tea.”

Bain gave his brother a skeptical glance. “Huh. You must be sick if you’re not hungry.”

“I’m sure I’ll have room for whatever this spoonbread is at supper,” Legolas grinned.

“Oh, it’s the best. It’s my Gran’s recipe. She was from Wales...”

Bard left the boys to discuss the origins of his mother’s cornmeal-based spoonbread recipe as he put on the kettle and collected the medicine for Legolas. He dosed Legolas while Bain collected his cheese and crackers and came to join them in the sitting room.

“Do you want the mentholated rub, too?” Bard grinned.

“Oh, Tilda swears by that stuff,” Bain rolled his eyes. “I swear it kills mosquitoes and fleas at fifty paces by the sheer smell alone.”
Legolas chuckled. “I don’t care what it smells like – it helps. So yes, I want some of that, too. Anything to help unclog my nose!”

Bard handed him the tube. “Have at, then. Doesn’t take much.”

As Legolas squeezed out a little of the ointment and then stuck his hand under his tee to rub it over his chest, Bain gave Bard a hopeful look. “It’s Friday, Da, and there’s no school tomorrow, so can – may Legolas and I play a video game?”

“Maybe tomorrow, boyo. Legs is still too under the weather for my likes. I want him to rest so that he gets well faster.”

“Are board games okay?” Legolas asked.

“Those are fine,” Bard agreed.

“Oh, Da, we’ve played all the board games so much that they’re boring,” Bain complained.

“I have a chessboard and the pieces,” Legolas offered. “Papa got them for me in China when he went to dance there. The kings look like dragons, and the queens look like phoenixes.”

“That sounds cool,” Bain conceded. “But I don’t know how to play.”

“I don’t play very well,” Legolas admitted, “but I know enough to show you the moves. They aren’t that hard, but the game is different every time.”

“That sounds neat. Sure, let’s give it a shot.”

“I’ll get it, then,” Legolas smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

Legolas returned shortly with a box under one arm. Tilda was with him, holding his other hand. She held Mr. Bun and she looked a bit more restored, if not completely comfortable.

“She says she’s hungry,” Legolas said, looking at Bard. “That’s good, right?”

“It is. Thanks, Legolas,” Bard nodded. He gave Tilda an encouraging smile. “Some soup, little doll?”

She nodded. “My ear still hurts.”

“It will for a little longer, Til. But it’ll get better now that you’ve got your medicine. In fact, it’s time for your next dose.”

“Okay.”

“Come into the kitchen. You can have some tea while your soup gets warm.”

Bard busied himself in the kitchen. He gave Tilda her half pill and water, put Tilda’s soup in the microwave to warm, made four big mugs of tea, and handed the tea around. He kept Tilda company in the kitchen while she ate, listening to Legolas explain the different chessmen and how each one moved. The boys started a practice game, occasionally laughing at a move one or the other made. Tilda didn’t say much, but her smile as she enjoyed her soup was comment enough. After she was through, she was happy to sit on the sofa in Bard’s lap to watch the boys. Bard got one of his small sketchpads to draw little animals for her, which she liked. Before long, Sigrid came down to join the mix.
“Ooh, is that chess?” her eyes widened.

“Legs is teaching me how to play,” Bain replied.

“Wow!” Sigrid enthused. “Will you teach me, too?”

“Sure,” Legolas nodded. “We just finished sort of a game, so I’ll show you, too. You and Bain can play, and I’ll watch to help where I can.”

“Just let me get something to eat.” Sigrid dipped into the kitchen long enough to get a container of yogurt and a spoon, which drew a lot of interest from Tilda. She sat up in Bard’s arms.

“Is that yogurt?”

“Strawberry. Would you like one, too, Til?” When the little girl nodded, Sigrid fetched another container and spoon for her sister. “There you go.”

“Thank you,” Tilda said, putting Mr. Bun down so she could take the yogurt.

“That’s a good snack,” Bard encouraged his youngest daughter. Sometimes antibiotics upset small stomachs, so yogurt was a good counter to that. “It’ll feel good on your throat.”

“It does,” Tilda nodded. “Really good.”

Her hum of enjoyment was good to hear, and relaxed a little of Bard’s concern for her. He was surprised at her interest in the chess game. She carefully watched the other children as Legolas explained about the pieces again.

“It’s... sort of like checkers?” she asked Legolas at last. “Except all the pieces move in different ways?”

“A lot like checkers, except you want to keep the king from moving at the end,” Legolas nodded.

As the children studied the chessboard, Bard quietly sketched them. He got several good studies of each of them as their game progressed. At one point, when neither Sigrid nor Bain reached forward to move a piece, Tilda sucked the yogurt off her spoon and leaned forward.

“Whose go is it?”

“Mine,” Bain murmured, studying the board.

Tilda reached forward to take one of Bain’s bishops to take one of Sigrid’s knights. “Like that, Legolas?”

“Just like that,” Legolas laughed, as Sigrid made a raspberry.

“Wow, thanks Til!” Bain exulted.

“Yeah, thanks, Til,” Sigrid growled. “That doesn’t count because Tilda did it, Bain.”

“Well, now I’m doing it,” Bain retorted with an impudent grin. “She caught on faster than either of us did, and I’m not too proud to take advantage of it.”

“I hope you’re going to help me, too, Til,” Sigrid gave an exasperated look at her sister. “Any suggestions?”
After deliberate consideration, Tilda slid Sigrid a look. “Um, maybe...”

Sigrid waved at the board, so Tilda picked up Sigrid’s bishop to take Bain’s queen.

“Hey!” Bain protested, as Legolas laughed harder. “Til, what did you do to me?”

“Yeah, thanks, Til,” Sigrid grinned at her sister, “and this time I mean it. I’ll take a queen for a knight any day.”

Laughing at the children’s antics, Bard picked up Bain’s captured queen to study the carving. Maybe it was jade or a close relative, a dark, mossy green stone that was a nice match to the lighter green of Sigrid’s pieces. The board was alternating squares of the same materials, with a carved edge. The small phoenix that Bard held was carved in painstaking detail, with a flourish of ornate tail feathers. Bard made a sketch of it, enjoying the smooth feel of the stone that warmed quickly in his hand. When he had to give it back so the children could start another game, he cobbled together a nice composite of a smiling Legolas holding the phoenix up beside his face. It was only a head shot, but it was a nice composition that Bard liked enough to refine from the quick sketch he’d originally thought to draw. By the time the mudroom door opened again, he had completed a nice portrait of the boy. If Thran liked it, he’d give it to him.

“I am home!” Thran heralded.

“We’re all in the sitting room,” Bard called back.

Bento boxes rattled into the sink, then Thran appeared in the doorway. “Hello, children! Hello, Bard! Ah, you play chess?”

“I wouldn’t call it playing, exactly,” Bain gave Thran a smirk. “Right now, it’s more just moving the pieces around. Legs is still explaining it to us.”

“Tilda caught on pretty fast,” Sigrid said. “I think I’m getting it, though.”

“And look at this wonderful picture!” Thran said, squatting beside Bard to give him a welcome home kiss. “Legolas, did you see this? Bard has drawn you with the queen.”

The boy glanced at the drawing that his father held up, and reddened quickly. “Oh. I didn’t know he was drawing me.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Sigrid advised casually. “Da’s been drawing us for years. He never makes us look bad or stupid, so we just tune it out. It’s not a big deal.”

“I guess I’ll get used to it, too, then,” Legolas ventured, looking at the drawing. “Wow, that is me, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Thran’s nod was emphatic. “I like it very much.”

Bard signed and dated the drawing, and carefully took it out of his book to hand to Thran. “I thought you’d like to have it, cariad.”

“I would, very much. Thank you, lyubov moya.” Thran took the picture with a glad smile. “And how are you, children? Better, I hope?”

After the children gave Thran the details, Bard reached out to give Thran’s braid a playful tug. “You made it home early. Irmo must be beside himself.”
Thran’s lips briefly thinned, so Irmo must have been as annoyed as Bard guessed. “As I told him, our ballet is important. So is my family. Much of it is sick, and its heart is weary from seeing to the rest of it. Those things need my attention, too, whether Irmo understands why or not.”

“We’re okay, Thran,” Bard reassured his husband. “The children slept most of the day, Bain got everyone’s homework from the school, and supper’s in the crockpot.”

“Bard finished the fountain, too,” Legolas added. “The lion part is on the wall, and the bottom part is patched, and it looks amazing.”

Thran’s eyebrows went up with as much concern as surprise. Oh, he was worried about Bard doing too much again. He’d likely say something about it later, but not in front of the children, but Bard would assure him that he’d wanted to do it. How could he leave something undone? More importantly, how could he resist coaxing something beautiful out of disrepair? It would be as if Thran danced half of a scene and then stopped. He bet Thran couldn’t do that, either.

“The patch has to cure before we can put water in it, but it’s in place,” Bard said casually, setting his sketchbook aside. “Took all of about an hour. Not long at all.”

“The fountain’s finished?” Tilda looked towards the solarium and slid off the sofa. “I want to see!”

She led the way into the solarium with Thran close on her heels. Bard left the older children to their chess game to follow his husband and daughter into the garden room. It was less than an hour away from sunset, but the room was dimming rapidly, so Bard flipped the switch to light Thran’s Istanbul lanterns.

“Oh!” Tilda murmured, looking up at the lanterns. “It looks so pretty!”

“It is beautiful,” Thran agreed, smiling. “Now we can add more plants to make it fully tropical.”

“A couple more chairs, too,” Bard agreed. “And some more lamps. And you two want to make your tessellation to put somewhere.”

“Perhaps as a table top,” Thran suggested. “Look, Kukla – the fountain has covered one of the cracked floor tiles, and the other will likely hide under a plant. A table top would be more noticeable.”

“I like that,” Tilda nodded. “We could put it on top of one of the old plant stands in the carriage house.”

“Sure,” Bard said. “I could make a metal frame for your mosaic, and then weld it to the plant stand.”

“Weld it?” Thran turned a sly smile on Bard that raised gooseflesh all over his body. “Hmm. That is a good idea.”

“Yeah, and it’d use something old in a new way,” Tilda said, blithely unaware of the spark that passed between Bard and his husband. “Da says it’s a virtue to make something old pretty again.”

“I agree,” Thran purred, but discreetly, but Bard still rolled his eyes at him when Tilda wasn’t looking. “This room is a perfect example of your Da’s virtue, Kukla. It was once so sad and shabby, but now it is magical. We will all enjoy this room now, all year long.”

“When can we go to Mr. Sam’s garden center and pick out some more plants, Da?”

“Not until everyone’s healthy again,” Bard said. “So maybe next weekend. I’ll have the fountain
working by then, I hope.”

“Can we get some with flowers?”

“We’ll see what Mr. Sam can suggest for us.”

“That’s a good idea. He knows everything about flowers.”

“That he does,” Bard agreed. “Enjoy the view a little longer, angel. I’m making spoonbread for supper, so I’ll go put it in the oven so it’ll be ready when we’re ready to eat.”

“This is a new dish?” Thran offered him an interested look. “A bread to be eaten with a spoon?”

“It’s my Gran’s spoonbread,” Tilda explained. “It’s soft and you put lots of butter on it. I love it.”

“I think I will help your Da make this confection,” Thran told Tilda. “I want to see it come to be myself.”

The trio returned to the sitting room, where Tilda crawled onto the sofa to retrieve Mr. Bun and watch her siblings play chess. Bard headed into the kitchen with Thran trailing behind him. Bard was well aware of his husband’s scrutiny, so he nodded towards the pantry. “Yellow cornmeal. And baking powder. And salt.”

Thran gave him a pale look of exasperation, but his smile took away any sting, and he obediently disappeared into the pantry to retrieve the three things that Bard asked for. Bard got milk and eggs from the fridge, and a casserole dish from the cupboard. He turned on the oven, then set about making his concoction with Thran attending carefully. Bard was particularly fond of this dish because it was easy to make, delicious, and reminded him of happy times with his mother and father. He urged Thran upstairs to change his clothes, and then put him to work setting the table and making a big vegetable salad and small cups of fruit while they talked about Thran’s day at the ballet. Thran was well aware that Bard wanted to keep him busy and focused on the day’s events at the UVB studio, but after a few pointed looks, Thran acceded to Bard’s tacit request without complaint. When the spoonbread was done, he took it out and set it on the kitchen island to cool slightly while Bard plated the pot roast and vegetables.

“This smells wonderful,” Thran offered as he leaned over the smoking spoonbread. “Is it a sort of custard inside, because of the milk and eggs?”

“It’s soft, a little stiffer than oatmeal,” Bard replied as he sliced the beef. “And Tilda’s right – it’s best with lots of butter.”

“Lots and lots of butter!” Bain called from the sitting room. “Is it done?”

“It’s done,” Bard confirmed. “All of you, wash your hands, please. Lots of soap and water! We don’t need any more germs at the table.”

“Okay, Da; yes, Bard,” the children chorused, and were soon ready to fill their plates. Tilda didn’t want a lot, given how recently she’d had her chicken soup, but Bard was happy for her to confine herself just to spoonbread, fruit, and a little salad. Bain more than made up for his sister’s slight appetite, and Sigrid and Legolas had close to their normal amounts. Bard was happy to see Thran put reasonable portions on his plate.

Supper was subdued, well punctuated with sniffles, sneezes, and coughs, but for the most part, the children contained their explosions in their napkins, and everyone remained in good if quiet spirits. Bain helped Thran and Bard clean up the dishes as the other children went into the sitting room to
choose a film to watch. In deference to Tilda, the boys didn’t push for their usual “more stuff blows up” genre, and the foursome settled on *Howl’s Moving Castle*.

“You’ll like this one, angel,” Bard said to Thran as everyone settled on the sofas. “It’s about a wizard with long white hair.”

“He has black hair at the end,” Tilda said.

“And red, too,” Bain added.

Thran snickered as he sat next to his son. “This wizard cannot seem to make up his mind.”

Sigrid plunked next to Bard. “Wait until you see his bathroom. Makes the boys look like clean room techs.”

“Hey!” Bain complained, plunking down on the other side of Legolas. “We’re not that bad!”

“Only because somebody cleans the bathroom once a week,” Sigrid shot back.

“You sound better,” Bard grinned at her as Tilda climbed into his lap. “Looks like you’ll get to Miss Dís’s tomorrow after all. What time do you need to be there?”

“Seven, half an hour before the shop opens,” Sigrid replied.

“I’ll get up at six-thirty to get your breakfast, then take you into the village,” Bard stifled a yawn. Sitting down was definitely not the wisest move for someone who hadn’t gotten much sleep last night.

“Shh,” Tilda fussed from Bard’s lap. “There’s Sophie!”

Conversation lapsed as the story of Sophie, Howl, and Calcifer unfolded. While this was a film that Bard enjoyed, it wasn’t unfamiliar or exciting enough to keep the efforts of the last twenty-four hours at bay. With Tilda in his lap, he couldn’t pick up his sketchbook to distract himself from the heaviness that seemed to pull him deeper into the sofa cushions. About halfway through the movie, Tilda fell asleep, so Bard carried her into the kitchen to give her her last dose of medicine for the day, then took her upstairs to settle her into bed. He took the chance to shower, hoping it would wake him up enough to get through the rest of the evening. Much cleaner and slightly more awake, he rejoined the rest of the family to see the end of the film. Without Tilda on his lap, he was able to sketch a bit to keep himself focused and awake without anyone the wiser.

When Sophie, Howl, and Calcifer reached their happy ending, the three older children went upstairs to cycle through the shower. It was just past nine o’clock when Sigrid came downstairs to bid Thran and Bard goodnight.

“I want to get as much sleep as I can, so I last through the day tomorrow,” she yawned. “I work until three.”

“Good idea,” Bard said, getting up to give her a goodnight hug. “Let’s get you one more decongestant so you sleep well, and you can have another one in the morning. Do you need a lunch?”

“I guess I do. Just a sandwich and some fruit and my water bottle. Thanks, Da. Night, Ada. I’ll see you when I get home tomorrow afternoon.”

Thran gave her his own goodnight hug. “May all go well tomorrow, lioness. Listen well, smile,
be your most gracious self.”

“I will. Night.”

“Sleep well.”

Bard went upstairs again to give Sigrid her medicine, and said goodnight to Legolas, who had been next in the shower. Bain decided to say goodnight as well, despite the early hour; he planned to curl into bed with a book when he finished in the shower. Thran came out of Legolas’s room to wish Bain goodnight before the boy disappeared into the shower.

“Now.”

Bard perked up at his husband’s firm tone. He turned to find Thran regarding him with arms akimbo and a determined look.

“What?” Bard said in his mildest tone.

“What am I to do with you?”

Thran’s tone was not purring arousal, or playful teasing, but from somewhere, Bard summoned the energy to give Thran a thorough look up and down. “Hmm. Anything you want.”

Thran snorted and pointed towards their bedroom door. “You did not sleep all day, did you? Now you are exhausted. Please, Bard; you weigh more than I do, so get yourself into bed before I must carry you there. No, do not try to brass it out any longer, lyubov moya. Go to bed.”

Bard exhaled, and gave Thran a rueful smile. “I meant to nap, but...”

Thran nodded. “The house was quiet, the solarium beckoned, then the kitchen, and then the children woke up, and so you went back to the kitchen, and so it went all day. Yes?”

“Something like that,” Bard admitted. He didn’t improve his standing in Thran’s eyes when a yawn would not be suppressed despite his most determined efforts.

“Tcha! Go, go, go!” Thran made shooing motions with both hands towards the bedroom. “Look, I gesticulate. Do I have to swear very fast, too?”

“No, I’m going.” Bard suited action to words, and preceded Thran into their bedroom. As Thran turned down the bed, he stacked jeans, tee, underwear, and socks on the chair to be at hand in the morning, then stripped off his nightclothes to crawl under the covers. “Don’t expect me to be awake when you get out of the shower.”

“I will be most displeased if you are,” was Thran’s pert reply as he slid their bedroom doors closed.

“Leave the doors open a little, please?” Bard asked. “The older children are probably fine, but Tilda’s still in the woods a bit, so...”

“There.” Thran left the doors open about two feet. “Now, I will shower, and be in bed with you soon.”

“Promises, promises,” Bard grinned as his husband began to shed his clothes. His mistake, however, was to draw up the bedclothes. When the covers settled softly around him, even watching Thran’s long, pale, elegant body appear as he shed one article of clothing after the other could not keep him awake. Sleep wound soft arms around him and consumed him before Thran’s shirt fell to the floor...
“Da...”

Bard pried his eyes open blearily. Gods, every limb felt like lead. He fumbled his tee and sleep pants on, and was padding out of the bedroom before he fully registered it. Tilda sat up in bed, too clogged to cry, but the sentiment was certainly there.

“I’m here, little doll. Where’s your box of tissues?”

“I don’t know...”

“I’ve got it. It’s okay. Come on, blow your nose.”

Four tissues later, Tilda was a little clearer, enough to whimper.

“Ear?”

She nodded.

“Okay, let’s go in the bathroom and get some medicine.”

Bard took advantage of her clearer nose to dose her with nasal spray; she was too miserable to complain or refuse it. Decongestant was next, then a cough lozenge, then more of Tilda’s favorite mentholated rub. Then they were back in her room to rock in the rocking chair until all the remedies had made her a little easier. He was so desperate for sleep that he drifted off in the chair with Tilda in his arms, her aching ear pressed against his chest. He didn’t rouse until the clock read after five. Tilda was sound asleep, and blessedly stayed that way when he put her back in bed. He fumbled his way back to bed, wincing when he realized that he’d have to get up again in an hour to get Sigrid to her job. Thran seemed to rest easily on his side of the bed, so Bard grabbed for sleep with both hands...  

“That was Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue in G Minor* —”

The clock radio. Bard groped to turn it off before Thran roused. Gods, every muscle ached, as if he’d tried to swim the English Channel during the night. He grabbed his clothing from the chair and got into the bathroom to dress. Downstairs he went to make Sigrid a bowl of porridge, and a turkey and cheese sandwich with lettuce and mustard. He got it into Sigrid’s lunch bag with a pear as she came downstairs, looking excited despite the early hour.

“Morning, Da. Gods, you look ragged. Was Tilda up again?”

He nodded. “Her ear. I hope the antibiotics kick in soon.”

“Me, too. It sucks to feel that bad.”

“How’re you?”

“I’m good,” Sigrid nodded vigorously. “I’m still clogged, but I feel a lot better. I’ll take it slow, though. May I have some decongestant, please?”

“Got it right here.”

Sigrid swallowed her medicine, and shoveled in the rest of her porridge. “Okay, I’ll brush my teeth, then I’m ready.”
“I’ll get the truck out, so come on out when you’re done.”

“Okay, Da."

Sigrid bounced upstairs. Bard got his keys and let himself out of the house, rolling his shoulders and stretching his arms, trying to ease the achiness that made every step uncomfortable. He got the truck out of the carriage house and was ready to leave when Sigrid came out of the door with her lunch in hand. Despite how tired he felt, he smiled at his daughter’s excitement for this new venture. She wondered how long it would take her to learn how to make espresso, and if she’d get the hang of the cash register, and how busy the shop would be on a Saturday. Traffic was light, so it took just ten minutes to pull up before the shop. Sigrid pressed a kiss on his cheek before she bolted out of the truck. He rolled down his window to wave goodbye to her, and didn’t pull away until someone came to let her into the shop.

As he turned for home, he didn’t have Sigrid’s excitement to distract him from the pervasive weariness that flooded him. Gods, he was getting old – two days’ lack of sleep had never stopped him in college, but here he was, as achy as an eighty-year-old. And how had a New York day in May turned so hot? Gods, it was so hot that he felt dizzy.

He got home and snugged the truck in the carriage house before he put all the clues together.

Oh, shit.

He got through the mudroom door, and staggered into the kitchen. It was too overwhelming to think about climbing the stairs to bed, but he could make it to the sitting room. If he could get to the sofa and lie down, he’d rally by the time anyone else woke up...

Thran appeared in the doorway to the sitting room, blocking Bard’s straight path to the sofa. “Lyubov moya?”

The room started to spin, then greyed.

Oh, gods, please don’t let Thran freak out...
Chapter 120

Chapter Summary

The angel exercises his right to free speech, and the cherubs help him conspire.

Thran took two swift steps forward to catch Bard before he crumpled to the kitchen floor. Bracing himself, he kept his husband upright long enough to get his arms under Bard’s, then clasped his wrists across Bard’s chest. He labored to haul so much dead weight across the kitchen and into the sitting room – *suka blyad*, Bard’s heavy boots caught on the rug, which didn’t make getting across the room any easier – and deposited him on the sofa. He unlaced the offending boots, tossed them aside, and propped Bard’s feet atop a couple of pillows so they were higher than his head. Then he sat beside his husband, who met his worried gaze with a bemused expression.

“You aren’t going to freak out, are you?” Bard mumbled faintly. “Please, don’t freak out.”

“*Ty che, suka, o’khuel blya, Bard?*” Thran spat, glaring at his husband’s anxious expression. “You are whiter than milk, *ty grebanyy huiesos!* You are hotter than the August sun, *suka blyad!* You pass out in the kitchen, *sukin syn!* Then you ask me if I freak out? *Idi k chertu!*”

Bard’s lips curved up slightly, and his gaze tracked Thran’s hands. “Oh, this must be serious. You didn’t just swear and talk fast. You gesticulated, too.”

*Sosi moy chlen,*” Thran muttered.

“I’m all right, angel.”

“*Oy, idi na khuy!*” Thran threw up his hands again. “Even you cannot believe what you try to tell me! You are most certainly *not* all right! No one who is all right passes out in the kitchen!”

“I didn’t completely pass out,” Bard protested weakly. “It just got grey for a second.”

“You passed out,” Thran said flatly. “You will not argue with me about this. You have not slept in two days, you have nursed all the children, you have seen to me, you have worked too hard on the house, you have sketched without end to keep yourself awake, and now you are sick! You will not try to pass it off as nothing, do you hear me? I won’t let you!”

“Okay, angel, okay,” Bard put a hand on Thran’s thigh. “I’m sorry to worry you. I’ll be okay.”

“You have no idea what it means to be okay,” Thran snapped, hands waving. “You tell me not to let the ballet consume me, and then what is it that you do? You let our family and our house consume you until you are rags! *Sukin syn, ty grebanyy chlenosos!* Now, you will tell me the symptoms, and *I* will decide whether you are okay. First, I get the thermometer. You will not move even an inch until I get back.”

Thran stalked off to the children’s bathroom without looking to see if Bard obeyed him or not. He retrieved the thermometer and went back downstairs, fuming. What a ridiculous man his husband was, to drive himself into such a state of collapse – but Bard was not completely to blame. He, Thran, had not helped. He had barely registered Bard getting up to tend to Tilda in the middle of the night, and hadn’t been able to stay awake long enough to register when Bard had come back to bed.
It had likely been hours after he’d gotten up. Then Bard had gotten up again to take Sigrid to work. Thran had almost fallen back asleep, then Sigrid had slammed the mudroom door with such force that the whole house had shaken. He’d gotten up to check on the children; thankfully, they all had remained asleep. He’d gone downstairs to the kitchen to make tea, then wait for Bard to return.

Thank the gods he had. What if Bard had been alone in the kitchen when he’d fainted? He could have hit his head on the marble top of the kitchen island, or the corner of the table, or even just the floor itself...

Thran was so angry that he trembled. He stopped in the hallway and forced himself to take three deep breaths, because so much fury would not help Bard. Then he went back to the sitting room.

Bard lay on the sofa with his knees drawn up, and his head cradled on one of the pillows that had been under his feet. His eyes were shut, but he opened them when Thran padded back into the room. He didn’t argue when Thran poked the thermometer at his mouth, but put it under his tongue with mute obedience. Thran was silent for the few seconds it took for the device to chirp, and he batted Bard’s hand away to take the thermometer himself.

“One hundred and two,” Thran announced, leveling a stern glare on Bard. “As I suspected, you are not all right. You have a fever, you are dizzy, you are very tired. What else?”

“Achy,” Bard conceded.

“No congestion, no ear ache, no cough?”

Bard shook his head.

“Then I will get Bain, and we will haul you upstairs to bed between the two of us, and you will sleep until you cannot sleep any more.”

“You don’t need to wake up Bain, Thran,” Bard protested. “I can get myself upstairs.”

“Don’t try to shit me,” Thran growled. “You have no idea what you can and cannot do. For all I know, you will pass out again while I have you on the stairs, and then where will we be? At risk of life and limb when we tumble down and crash into Hope the Lope. That is no good for either of us.”

“I don’t want you to wake Bain up.”

“Tcha,” Thran waved a hand. “He will survive, and so will we. A good deal all around.”

“I’ll rest here until he gets up, and then I’ll go upstairs.”

Thran snorted. “If I leave you down here, you will not sleep because you will want to be involved in everything. So I will get Bain, and we will take you upstairs, and we will shut the doors so that you will have nothing to distract you from the rest you need.”

Bard sighed. “Would you just give me an arm, angel, and I’ll take care of the rest? Please?”

Thran sighed, too, but in exasperation. With a smothered curse, he got up from beside Bard, and held out a hand. “All right. My arm is here.”

Bard grasped Thran’s wrist, and let Thran pull him to his feet. Then Thran hustled his husband down the hall, up the stairs, and into their bedroom. Once he’d eased Bard onto the bed, Bard immediately lay on his back with a silent groan.
“Yes, it was a close thing,” Thran growled. He sat next to Bard to undress him, unbuttoning jeans, sliding them and his underwear off, then his socks, and finally his tee. He helped Bard slide between the sheets, and pulled the covers over him. Bard shut his eyes and heaved a sigh.

“I will bring the acetaminophen,” Thran murmured with less vehemence. “Stay awake that long, please, lyubov moya.”

“Okay,” Bard whispered, eyes shut.

Thran wasted no time in collecting the fever reducing pills and a cup of water, then helped Bard sit up enough to take them. When Bard was flat again, Thran brushed the hair out of his husband’s eyes.

“Sleep, my saint, please,” he pleaded. “Restore yourself. You have worn yourself to a thread.”

Bard managed a half smile before his eyes closed. In two breaths, he was asleep.

Finally. Finally.

* * *

Thran sat beside Bard long enough to ensure that his husband was solidly asleep. What was the best thing to do next? It was just barely eight o’clock, so the Legolas and Bain would likely sleep for some hours yet. Tilda might be another story – she might awake in pain because of her ear or stuffy nose, or because she had to use the bathroom. If she awoke in pain, she might call for her Da, and then he would try to see to her, no matter how sick or exhausted he was. So Thran must take steps to intercept her if that happened.

He went down to the kitchen and made himself a light breakfast and a large pot of tea. Then he tiptoed into the bedroom. Bard remained unmoving, so Thran eased a clean set of dancewear out of his drawers, and went into the children’s bathroom to change. Then he took over the children’s study for a temporary dance studio, moving the petite rug out of the way, and using one of the chairs as a stand-in for his barre. He would have preferred merely to settle in the room with a book to wait for the children to rouse, but with Immortal’s premiere little more than eight weeks away, he could not afford to skip the practice, even if the company had not planned to meet today. The rare Saturday off was to give all the dancers a deep breath before rehearsals at the school ramped up next week. Despite that, he did all of the stationary sequences, then risked going into the ballroom for the steps and jumps. He did his strengthening repetitions for his feet and ankles, and went upstairs to complete his yoga. His pot of tea was empty by the time he completed his work. He changed back into his leggings and tee in the children’s bathroom. Then he stationed himself in the children’s study.

What the study needed was a cozy chair or settee, and an accompanying side table. Or perhaps a table that folded away when the children did not need it, and a pair of settees that encouraged lounging with a good book? He tugged the rug back into place, and threw the bedraggled flowers that remained in the vase on the children’s memory shelf out of the window. The three chairs that sat before the bookcase desks did not look particularly conducive for lounging, so he made himself comfortable on the rug with a book he chose at random. He hadn’t read but a page or two before Bain’s door opened and the boy traipsed to the bathroom. When he came out, he spotted Thran and raised a hand in greeting.
“Morning, Thran. What’s up?”

“Your Da has the flu. He is asleep, thank goodness. I wanted to be near if you or Legolas or especially Tilda woke up in need of something, so that I could help you while your Da rests.”

“Da has the flu?” Bain gaped. “Oh, that’s bad. Da never gets sick.”

“He has this time. He has a fever and is too dizzy to stand up.”

Bain gave Thran a worried look. “What are we going to do?”

“You and I will figure that out. We are the healthy ones, yes? So it is up to us.”

Bain considered that. “I guess we are. What do we do first?”

“See to the sick. I will be the dispenser of medicines and so forth. Legolas will not need much, but he should not bounce too much.”

“Did Sigrid get to her job?” At Thran’s nod, Bain considered again. “So she’s out of the picture until this afternoon.”

“Do you know when Sigrid’s job finishes? Three o’clock?”

“I think that’s what she said,” Bain nodded, coming to sit down on the rug facing Thran.

“So I will pick her up then. You and Legolas will be in charge while I am gone. So that leaves Tilda. She was up during the night again, I think because of her ear. So she will not be her usual self. She will need her pills and distraction.”

“I would say lots of games of Dinky Farm, but Da doesn’t like us to play video games when we’re sick.”

“We have plenty of books and drawing things and games,” Thran suggested. “And homework. We will decide once we see how she feels.”

“What next?” Bain asked.

“Food. We all need food. Breakfast and lunch, they are not so hard. Supper... I will need your help with that.”

“Maybe we can do something in the crockpot again? That’d be easy.”

“We will see what the freezer has for us.”

Another door opened, and Legolas appeared. He looked into the children’s study with curiosity. “What’s going on?”

“Take your turn in the bathroom, then come back,” Thran asked. “We plot strategy for the day.”

“Da’s got the flu,” Bain added.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Legolas breathed. “Okay, back in a minute.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, reappearing shortly with a clean face and combed hair. He sat with Thran and Bard on the floor.
“Why are we up here?” he asked.

“Because Kukla is still asleep, and I do not want her to wake Bard if she needs something,” Thran explained. “He has not slept more than an hour or two in the past two days, and he is exhausted. He must rest or he will get sicker. So until Kukla wakes up and we explain that we will see to her until Bard feels better, someone must stay near.”

Legolas nodded. “Makes sense.”

“So Thran’s the medicine man,” Bain explained. “We were just about to figure out the food.”

“Breakfast and lunch we will do as always,” Thran said. “For supper, Bain and I will see what the freezer offers us, then we will figure out how to cook it.”

“I can help, too,” Legolas protested.

“You still recover from your cold,” Thran replied. “So Bain and I will see to the food preparation. Are you hungry? If you would listen here for Tilda, Bain and I could make us something to eat. Eggs, or chicken soup, or something else?”

A third door opened, and there came Tilda, rubbing her eyes. She caught sight of her brothers and Thran in the children’s study, and came over. “Why are you in here?”

“Good morning, Kukla,” Thran wished her. “Here, take your turn in the bathroom, and then we will tell you. Are you hungry?”

A sleepy nod. “And I’m not so stuffed up this morning.”

“That is good. So go, and then you can hear what goes on.”

“Okay, Ada,” Tilda yawned and took her turn in the bathroom. When she came out, her hair was still rumpled.

“Let us go downstairs, children. Bain and I will make breakfast, and Kukla and Legolas will rest quietly in the sitting room.”

“Go get your brush, Kukla,” Legolas asked Tilda. “While Papa and Bain make our breakfast, I’ll brush your hair for you. It’s very tangled.”

Tilda brightened. “Would you make braids for me like yours?”

Legolas nodded. “On both sides and in the back, too, if you like.”

Tilda’s return to her room was faster than she’d moved in several days, which brought a smile to Thran’s face. When she had her brush and comb, the foursome started down the stairs. As they came into the kitchen, Tilda craned her head to look in the sitting room.

“Where’s Da?” she asked. A confused frown wrinkled her brow.

Both of the boys looked at Thran, so he led them all into the sitting room to sit down. “Your Da is upstairs in bed, Tilda. It is his turn to have the flu, so he is asleep.”

Tilda sat stock still for a heartbeat, then gulped. “Oh, no... I made Da sick. He got it from me, didn’t he?”

Her face scrunched up as she started to cry.
“No, Kukla, no,” Thran scrambled to gather her up into his lap. “You did not make your Da sick, no more than anyone else did. Please, do not worry. You did not make him sick.”

“Yes, I did!” she sniffed. “He sat with me all night because my ear hurt, and it’s my fault!”

“Oy, tcha, moya Russkaya Kukla,” Thran hugged her. “He comforted you when you felt so bad, and that did not make him sick, not at all! In fact, I think his love for all of us has kept him well for a very long time. But today he has done too much, to see to us and the house and his art, and the germs found him to be an easy target because he worked so long and so hard at all the things he loved. So he must rest, and then he will be well again. But we must work together to make sure that he does rest.”

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Bain exhaled, patting Tilda’s knee. “Trying to get Da to stop doing stuff is like trying to stop the zombie apocalypse, or that annoying pink rabbit with the drum.”

That got a chuckle from Legolas and Thran, and even Tilda managed a thoughtful look.

“He doesn’t ever stop,” Legolas admitted.

“No, he does not,” Thran agreed. “So, Kukla, this is why your brothers and I were upstairs. We planned ways to see that your Da rests, without worry. So far, we have agreed that I am the one to give out the medicines.”

“Thran and I are the cooks,” Bain chipped in.

“So what do Legolas and I do?” Tilda asked.

“Mostly rest,” Thran answered. “It is important that both of you get well, too. Tomorrow, if both of you feel better, we will think about other things. Perhaps he would like someone to read to him. But today, we will be quiet, and work on the homework. And when your Da wakes, we will all insist that he must stay in bed. We will bring him food on a tray, and lots of tea, and books if he wants to read. But he must spend most of his time at rest.”

“Should we let him draw?” Tilda asked.

“Perhaps a little,” Thran shrugged. “We will all watch carefully to make sure he does not get too tired, yes?”

Three children nodded in reply, drawing Thran’s reassuring smile. “Good, we have our plans. Soon, Bain, you and I will sort out the supper. But first, a light breakfast. What would everyone like?”

Eggs seemed to be the children’s consensus, so Thran made scrambled eggs while Bain scrounged for the last of the muffins, butter, and jelly. As Thran worked, he studied how Bain sliced the muffins, buttered each half, and ran them under the broiler once the eggs were close to done. He also kept an ear tuned to Legolas and Tilda as the former combed the latter’s hair. When he called them to the table, Tilda appeared with a big smile to accompany Legolas’s neat braids. Thran was quick to compliment his son’s handiwork, and to comment how nice Tilda looked with them. He also made sure to give Tilda her antibiotic and some yogurt with her eggs.

After breakfast, Legolas and Tilda went back into the sitting room to rest while Bain and Thran cleaned up. Then Bain considered the freezer.

“What looks good?” Thran asked, as he put away the egg bowl.

Bain shook his head. “Wow. Da’s got more stuff in here than a store. There must be two weeks of
“Then we can have our pick,” Thran looked over Bain’s shoulder. “Of things we know how to cook, at least. We have enough chicken soup for today’s lunch. We can make more if we think we will need it tomorrow. But perhaps something different for supper.”

“Look at this,” Bain dug out a package. “A bag of corn tortillas. We could make enchilada casserole.”

“Do you know how?” Thran cast Bain a look.

“More or less,” Bain hedged, shrugging. “Da mixes up a lot of ground beef with Mexican spices, then layers the tortillas with the meat and cheese in a big pan, then he bakes it.”

“That sounds within our abilities,” Thran agreed. “Perhaps we can find a recipe on the Internet to help us make such a thing?”

“That’d be good,” Bain nodded. “That’d give Legolas and Til a way to help – they can find the recipe.”

“Good idea,” Thran agreed. “Let us pose the challenge to them.”

The children quickly put their heads together around Legolas’s laptop to look up interesting recipes. That was another thing Thran needed to see to – Tilda had no computer, nor did Bard, and Sigrid’s and Bain’s were likely old. Tilda would surely need one by the next school year, as she would enter the middle school grades. Bard needed one to check his art website, and to email clients and Bilbo. Sigrid might be able to coax hers to last through her senior year of high school, but she would need a new one for college. Bain would make good use of one for high school, and would need a new one for college. This summer, then, they would make some computer company very happy.

The children found several recipes that sounded interesting, but given their collective cooking expertise, they discarded the ones with too many ingredients, or too complicated instructions, or ingredients they didn’t have. At last Legolas pointed to the screen.

“What about this one? It’s for taco filling, but that’s mostly what we need, anyway. If we have the filling, we can do whatever we want with it – make tacos, or the layers in the pan.”

“See what it says, then,” Bain agreed.

“Hm, maybe not,” Legolas said. “This one calls for a beef roast that you put in a crockpot.”

“So we use ground beef instead of a roast,” Bain shrugged. “Check the spices.”

“Taco seasoning, cumin, pepper, and cilantro,” Tilda read. “We have all of those, right?”

“Right,” Bain nodded. “How much beef?”

“They say three pounds, and three packages of taco seasoning,” Legolas read.

“We have that much ground beef,” Thran called from the kitchen.

“It’s easy,” Legolas read. “Just put everything in the crockpot and cook for a long time.”

“I vote for that one,” Bain said. “We have all the stuff, we don’t have to do much, and when it’s done, we can make tacos, or burritos, or enchilada casserole.”
“Uh-oh,” Tilda said. “The meat’s supposed to be thawed. Ours is frozen.”

“Aha, I know the answer to that one,” Thran said with a grin. “We will thaw the meat in the microwave, and then put it in the crockpot.”

“Perfect,” Bain nodded. “Okay, we’ve got supper planned.”

“Can we make that gelatin fruit thing I like?” Tilda asked. “It’d feel good on a sore throat.”

“I’m sorry, Kukla. I don’t know how to make that,” Thran said regretfully.

“I do,” Tilda smiled. “Bain knows, too. It takes only five minutes and then it goes in the fridge to set.”

“Then we will do that,” Thran agreed. “So, Bain, let us see whether we can make more supper than mess!”

Bain snickered. “Is that a challenge?”

“Remember that we must clean up after ourselves.”

“Oh, that’s no good, then,” Bain sighed. “I guess we’ll have to go for the supper.”

Thran put the ground beef in the microwave to thaw while Bain perused the pantry for gelatin and fruit. While the boy assembled the gelatin concoction, Thran got the meat and spices in the crockpot and turned it on. The only things to clean up were the bowl and utensils Bain had used, so they were soon back in the sitting room to savor a sense of accomplishment. Thran went upstairs to check on Bard; blessedly, he was still sound asleep. He looked comfortable, so Thran left him undisturbed. The children worked quietly on their homework in the sitting room until lunchtime, when Thran warmed up Bard’s chicken soup. After lunch, while Tilda and Legolas napped, Bain cajoled Thran to play a video game with him, so Thran allowed himself to get sucked into the zombie apocalypse. Bain, sensing an easy time of it, chortled to himself with unseemly glee, but after a few games, Thran improved, and even had Bain on the run a time or two.

“Aha, I have you!” Thran grinned, as he sent his zombie racing after Bain’s hunter. “Die, zombie hunter!”

“No, you die, zombie!” Bain exhorted, as he sent his avatar milling after Thran’s with a huge machete. “Off with your head!”

“No, off with yours!” Thran shot back, as his zombie ducked Bain’s attack and circled around. “Then I eat your brain for lunch!”

Thran’s mobile chimed. He was so intent on the game that he didn’t recall why it had a reason to ring. Ah, Sigrid! He had to pick up Sigrid at the bistro. He charged his zombie in a furious attack against Bain’s zombie hunter, until it had grabbed Bain’s machete to hack at him. A few bloody seconds later, he was rewarded with a garish scene of his zombie stuffing its decaying face with the bloody remnants of zombie hunter brains.

“That sucks,” Bain exhaled in exasperation.

“Yes, that is what my zombie does – it sucks down your brains, ha, ha!” Thran set the controller aside. “So, I must leave to pick up Sigrid. You have the helm, Lieutenant Bain.”

“Aye, Captain Thran,” Bain grinned. “You’re getting too good at this game.”
“There is hope for me yet,” Thran offered Bain a slight bow. “I will be only a few minutes.”

“Don’t worry,” Bain waved a nonchalant hand. “If Da tries to get up, I’ll rally the security forces and we’ll hold him down.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Back soon.”

Thran got the SUV out of the carriage house, and was soon on his way to the village. He didn’t find a parking space in front of the Blue Mountain Bistro, so he parked down the street and walked back to the shop. The aroma by the door was alluring enough, but inside, it was a far better incentive to indulge in a decadent coffee than any advertisement. Thran took a deep, appreciative sniff as he studied the open bags of coffee beans for sale; then the racks of syrups and flavorings; then the menu of pastries, sandwiches, soups, and beverages. He spotted Sigrid behind the counter, and waved a greeting.

“Hi, Ada!” Sigrid waved back. “Miss Dís, this is my Ada, Thran Oropherson.”

“It is nice to meet you,” Thran offered his hand. The hand that met his was firm and assured. “You have a most deliciously aromatic shop.”

Dís was a short, stout, vigorous woman, with curly, dark brown hair just touched at the temples with grey. She wore it in two long braids wound around her head and fastened with carved silver clasps. A handsome headband threaded with sparkling sapphire beads circled her head in front of the wrapped braids, looking more like a tiara than utilitarian head wrap. She heaved a new bag of coffee beans effortlessly up to the counter for display, brushed off her hands, and offered Thran an appreciative laugh. “Aye, it’s that. That’s the best sales pitch I can make. In warmer weather, I just leave the door open, and business doubles, even in August.”

“I well imagine,” Thran grinned. “I apologize to interrupt, but I wanted to tell Sigrid that I am parked up the street when she is ready to go. I will run some errands, so at your convenience.”

“Goodness, it’s three already,” Dís checked the wall clock. “That’s it for you today, lass. You pulled your weight, and I thank you for it. Eight-thirty tomorrow, remember.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sigrid nodded. “I’ll be here. Thanks for showing me everything.”

“More thanks to you for catching on so fast. It’ll be as busy tomorrow, but the Sunday crowd likes a bit slower pace, so you’ll have more time to catch your breath. I'll see you then, Sigrid.”

“All right,” Sigrid untied her apron and hung it up on the row of hooks behind the counter. “Bye! Bye, Dana!”

“Bye, lass!” Dís smiled, and the other girl behind the counter smiled and waved farewell. Thran held the door for Sigrid to exit the shop, then followed her out.

“All right,” Sigrid’s sharp eyes skewered Thran. “What’s wrong with Da?”

Thran snickered, then explained how sick Bard was, even revealing how he’d barely made it into the house before fainting. The girl’s eyes grew round and her mouth shaped a silent O.

“Oh, gods,” she breathed as Thran opened the SUV door for her.

“And how did you fare today?” Thran asked, when he’d gotten behind the wheel.

“My cold wasn’t too bad. In fact, Dana’s was worse, I think. But I washed my hands a lot, and Miss
Dís made up most of the sandwiches, so all we had to do was to put the pastries on a plate and make
the beverages. We had gloves to wear. I haven’t learned the cash register yet, but I’ve got the
espresso machine down, and I can do the coffee scale, so it was a good day. I saw Da’s rep, Mr.
Baggins, and his nephew. They came in for lunch, and said to tell Da they said hello.”

“So a good day,” Thran concluded. “So I will tell you what the other children and I have done
today...”

He detailed their efforts at food, which seemed to impress Sigrid. “I’m surprised Da wasn’t in there
with you, no matter how sick he is.”

“I put him to bed, and he has slept all day since eight this morning. He is exhausted.”

Sigrid’s expression turned hard. “He’s been exhausted for ten years. And that Steffen Masters... he’s
nothing but a maggot. He took such advantage.”

“He is in deep shit, as they say, so waste no anger on him,” Thran assured the girl. “Instead, you
must plot with the rest of us to make sure your Da stays in bed asleep as long as possible, and then he
stays in bed until he is over his flu.”

Sigrid’s expression turned impish. “We should take turns doing what Da does to us when we have to
stay in bed. He tells the most amazing stories, all of them made up. They weren’t in a book where we
could read them for ourselves; we had to stay in bed if we wanted to hear the end. Worked like a
charm.”

Thran filed that away. It might be the perfect solution to many of the things he’d thought about in the
past several days.

They reached home without mishap or delay, and came into the house to find Bain hadn't moved
from in front of the TV, happily blasting at zombies. Legolas and Tilda were still asleep, and Bain
had heard nothing from Bard. Thran saw for himself that Bard remained asleep when he peeked into
the bedroom.

Good. Bard was resting, supper was in the crockpot, and the children were at peace.

Thran allowed himself a small smile. It seemed that the gods were just as interested in Bard’s
recovery as he was. As he came back down to sit with the children, he sent them a silent thank you.
Chapter 121

Chapter Summary

While a saint drifts, an angel is just the anchor Clan Ffyrnig needs.

Chapter Notes

I don't hold any rights to Hellboy, Abe Sapien, or Liz, but I think they'd be fun to have as friends :-)

Bard floated in darkness, far away from all physical sensation except ease without effort. Was he floating? Was he even in his body? He certainly wasn’t on earth. In the dark, a veil seemed to hang before him, a veil that was normally invisible and impenetrable, but today, it was the simplest thing to pass through it like so much colorless vapor. And what lay on the other side was magical – a world full of trees and glades, a forest that stretched as far as he could see, but what a forest it was! It was aglow with so much more of every sensation, be it color, life, freshness, tactile depth, or smell. He seemed to see each leaf individually as it grew, each blade of grass as it lengthened. Each creature among the trees and glades – coral red birds, mossy yellow butterflies, and sooty black squirrels – seemed effused with an aura whose color fluctuated as the creature moved. The temperature was slightly cool, but comfortably so, and the sun was out in a deep blue sky full of puffy clouds that cast dancing shadows over the land.

Above it all, he floated, drawn this way and that, towards whatever caught his eye...

What was that flash of white?

Without effort, he was beside the flash of white.

An angel stood straight and tall on a small, treeless hillock, his head thrown back and his arms stretched wide to embrace the sun.

Long, white hair blew and drifted on an unfelt breeze around his head like a corona.

Even longer white wings at full extension flared high over the angel’s head.

Pale, translucent skin pulsed with life, so delicate that arteries and veins traced impossibly thin paths over arms and legs and chest. Despite his dark eyebrows, only a delicate fuzz of white clothed the rest of his body. A cloud of white pubic hair enrobéd a cock as long and as elegant as the rest of the angel, an earthy touch that did nothing to dissipate the ethereal aura that surrounded him.

The angel opened his eyes. They were silver grey, luminous, and warm, and met Bard’s eyes with a smile. He furled his wings, and dropped to one knee in a graceful bow.

“You came.”

Bard felt mild surprise as if from a lifetime away. “Did I?”
“I had only just thought about you, and here you are.”

“Where is here?”

“A fair, green land.”

Bard hummed as he looked around. The angel rose to stand beside him, watching him with a tender smile as Bard took in the surrounding forest. Each leaf, each creature, even those unseen, were known to him, and pulsed with life and breath.

Bard cast the angel a bemused look. “Am I supposed to be here?”

“I asked for you to be here.”

“Why?”

The angel enfolded him in his arms, and his wings unfurled to surround him, too. “Is that so hard to divine, my saint?”

“Um, because I’m dead?”

The angel laughed softly. “No, because you have worked much too hard, and you need a rest. This is a beautiful place to rest, yes?”

Bard looked around again. “It is. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Likely you won’t again for a long time.”

“It’s so alive here. And beautiful.”

“So it is.”

“I don’t understand.”

The angel brushed a soft kiss on Bard’s hair. “You don’t have to. Just be.”

Bard inched his arms around the angel’s torso, shut his eyes, and soaked up everything the angel had to give him – warmth, softness, calm. When he opened his eyes, the forest around him had faded. When the angel’s feathers encircled him, the light turned pale alabaster, filtered as it was through the angel’s pearly wings of pink, cream, white, and pale ecru. The feathers buffered the sun’s warmth into a delicious cocoon that lulled him back to sleep. He floated away again on a cushion of air. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so relaxed and peaceful.

When he opened his eyes again, the forest and the angel were gone. This was his bedroom. He felt impossibly thin and light, without an ounce of strength in his body. It was an indescribable blessing to lie in bed, so swathed in sheets and blankets, without having to move. But he had to move – his bladder was full almost to the point of pain. He managed to untangle himself from the bedding, though it almost made him cry to force such a spent body to move. The bathroom seemed miles away, years away. But he managed to stagger there, get the job done, and stagger back to bed without collapsing. Exhaustion grabbed him with both hands and pulled him down into sleep.

He had the most vivid dreams...

He walked in an endless bazaar, pausing before a shop where beautiful lanterns festooned the rafters like molten fruit.
A little farther on, a spice shop stretched to infinity with sacks and bins full of spices he’d never heard of, but which smelled heavenly.

Two people in suits and stern eyeglasses fit for the high court dispassionately discussed the merits of replacing a belly dancer’s arms with snakes.

To one side, a dark passage radiated down into the depths of the earth, lit down its length with a string of overhead light bulbs, and shadowy tables gleamed underneath with more displays of wares. People seemed to come back and forth from that passage without emotion, but as Bard passed it a dark sense of all-consuming, primal terror radiated forth, and he scampered through the throng to pass it by as quickly as possible.

Ahead, a rainbow of draperies whirled in a pinwheel as a shop clerk stood before it, working the crowd with a spiel fit for any used car lot – or strip joint.

Baskets of jewelry beckoned next, children’s strings of pop beads and native fetish charms intermingled with bangles from Cartier and Tiffany.

Was that a wand shop?

Two fur trappers in head-to-toe frontier costumes squatted near a flickering campfire as they smoked clay pipes and dickered over the price of beaver pelts.

In a used book shop, a familiar ten-year-old girl with warm brown eyes and curly dark brown hair caught in an untidy braid looked up from a book of fairytales, but she was gone too quickly for Bard to speak to her.

A hulking red demon with a flame over his head and wide-arching horns stomped by with a cigar clenched in his teeth. Beside him, a slight, blue-skinned biped with huge eyes and some sort of breathing apparatus kept pace. Bard lifted a hand in greeting.

“Hey, Hellboy, Abe. Give Liz my regards.”

“Why, thank you,” Abe replied politely. “I’ll be sure to do so.”

“Man, that one’s flying far afield today,” Hellboy grunted to Abe, who gave Bard a sympathetic smile as they passed.

A teahouse loomed ahead, so Bard drifted inside. Or was this an opium den? Or a bathhouse? Everything seemed to shift and drift and change each time Bard looked around. A small girl in a cleaner’s robe and sandals led him to a room with a bathing tub in it, so he thought away his clothes and sank into the nearly boiling water with a sense of relief. Gods, such fiery heat would burn away all the impurities inside him. It would be bliss to lie there forever until the water cooled, but it turned icy at once and he was too chilled to climb out. A bedraggled stuffed rabbit took his hand to pull him out of the tub – not a drop of water clung to him – and into a warm bed. He didn’t have the strength to wrap the covers around him, but they snugged close of their own accord, and he dove back into the beckoning arms of sleep.

After an eon, he slowly, slowly roused. He was back in the bedroom. The room had darkened as if the sun had just fallen below the horizon, and a tall figure moved silently around the room. He managed to shift his index finger, hoping to get the attention of the figure, but it was such a small gesture that he didn’t expect to succeed. To his surprise, though, the figure turned towards him.

“It is time to get up,” the figure said into the dark.
“Is it?” Bard said faintly. “I feel so tired.”

“You have to get up. The circus is here.”

“The circus?”

The tall figure raised a hand, and the wall of the room behind the bed vanished. To the north in an open field, a big white pavilion topped with a long crimson pennant rose above the grass. No sooner had Bard registered the pavilion than he and the tall figure stood just outside it. Yes, the tall figure was the same angel he’d seen before.

“I thought you said I wouldn’t see this again.”

The angel turned towards him with a fond smile. “This is not the forest. This is the circus. You have not seen this before, and you likely won’t see it again, either, so look closely at all you see. It is a rare sight.”

They went inside the tent. A throng was already there, most staring at the stage where the angel stood, whirling around and around on pointe like a top while juggling at least seven small red balls. His hair streamed around him in that same corona, but a close-fitting Harlequin suit of black and green and white clothed him from head to wrist and toe, and his wings were tightly furled close to his body. Frowning, Bard looked at the angel beside him, who smiled in appreciation of the juggling dancer’s skill. He was now clothed in the same livery as his dancing counterpart.

“You have a twin?” Bard asked.

The angel beside him shook his head. “Even twins are not identical. See?”

The angel pointed to the juggling dancer on stage as a second figure in matching livery joined him. Was that he? His counterpart smoothly received the juggling balls that the angel tossed to him, spinning them around a time or two before he sent them back to the angel. A small glowing circlet hovered a few inches above his head.

“Right. I’ve turned into a nightlight,” Bard observed as his counterpart circled the spinning dancer, tossing the balls back and forth. The angel beside him laughed softly.

“It is not such a bad thing to be a light in the dark,” the angel teased gently.

“It might be helpful during a power failure,” Bard allowed. “Saves a hand to hold the torch.”

The two performers completed their dance, offered the crowd a bow and a wave to their counterparts, then disappeared in a blink. The audience vanished with them, and the tent was empty and lifeless, but for one small illuminated point on the stage. When Bard found himself beside it, the tent disappeared, leaving him in the field. The small circle still glowed, so Bard stooped and reached a hand out to it – it was the saint’s halo. But no matter how he tried to pick it up, it ignored his touch, and continued to lie gleaming in the grass.

“Why do you want to touch it?” the angel beside him asked curiously.

Bard tried again to pick up the halo, but he felt only a sense of warmth, without substance that he could grasp. “I just want to see what it feels like.”

“That is another thing you already know,” the angel shrugged.

“I don’t think it is,” Bard looked up at the angel. “All I feel is a faint warmth.”
"That is all it is."

"Why does it glow?"

"Because it is a halo, yes?" the angel explained. "The metaphysical manifestation of sainthood is a halo."

Bard blinked. "I have no idea what that means, or if it's even right."

The angel turned mischievous eyes on him. "That is a good answer. Such a trinket cannot fool you, then."

"That makes no sense."

"Ah, my poor saint, always trying to make sense, to make order. Think of what is behind the symbol, then."

Bard stared down at the halo, and thought about Old Masters paintings and long-suffering nurses. It wasn't until he thought about fighting dragons and phoenixes in Chinese scroll paintings that the halo faded into the grass, and corresponding warmth grew in his body.

"Yes, it is time to go back," the angel said, drawing him up. "Too much of anything generates heat."

He was back in bed, lying flat, but he plummeted towards sleep again as if from an immense height. He fell without hesitation.

Eons passed. Stars turned, seasons changed, snow fell and melted and fell again. The heat within him melted the snow and warmed the earth, and he woke again, feeling as wrung dry as bones in a desert. The bed, yes, the dark room, yes, the tall figure moving silently, yes. He moved his whole hand this time, and the figure turned towards him to sit on the bed beside him. A long, slender hand pressed against his forehead.

"Are you awake, lyubov moya?"

"That depends," Bard mumbled. Gods, the effort to form words had grown exponentially harder.

"That depends?" the figure repeated. "Depends on what?"

"On whether you want to talk metaphysics again. If you do, I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Awake."

The figure paused. "This sounds suspiciously like metaphysics to me. But you still run a fever, so perhaps you merely talk nonsense."

"Look who's talking. You just told me that the metaphysical manifestation of sainthood was a halo."

A soft chuckle. "Did I?"

Bard nodded. "It was just outside the circus tent."

"Of course."

Bard pried his eyes open to look at the figure suspiciously. "Where are your wings?"
“I thought they might frighten you, so I made them invisible. Are you hungry?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Is your stomach upset? Do you feel nauseated?”

Bard thought about that. His head was light, his body felt boneless, and he was alternately hot and cold, but his stomach was quiet, so he shook his head.

“Perhaps you would humor me to sip a few mouthfuls of broth, then.”

“Is it chicken?”

“Yes.”

“What, no carrots or onions?”

“There is essence of both in your broth, yes. Perhaps a little celery, too. Come, let me prop up your pillows for you.”

The tall figure leaned down to switch on the light beside the bed, which made Bard blink at the sudden illumination. Before his eyes adjusted, two hands took hold of the pillow under his head and eased it up to slip another one behind it. Bard fell back against the pillows, his strength too thready to shift one way or the other. Thran sat down on the side of the bed and took up a mug and a spoon.

“Now, just a spoonful or two. You need a little something to sustain you until your fever breaks.”

Thran dipped a spoon half full of broth, and brought it to Bard’s lips. It smelled good, so he opened his mouth and let the broth trickle in.

“Good,” he whispered.

“Thank our Sigrid,” Thran murmured with a smile. “We made tacos for supper, and of course that would be too hard for you to eat, so when she said so, Bain and I made soup for you. For now, you must confine yourself to the broth, but it is full of good things, so it will help you.”

Thran fed Bard several spoonfuls of broth. With each one, the surreal floating sensation faded, and Bard felt more rooted. He glanced at Thran sitting beside him so patiently.

“I dreamed you were an angel, and we went to the circus.”

“I gathered as much,” Thran admitted. “And you and your angel discussed metaphysics, I think?”

“He wanted to, but I was too tired. So we just watched the jugglers. And before that, we were in a forest. It was so amazing, Thran. I thought it was heaven.”

“Tcha,” Thran gave him a tender smile with his next spoonful of broth. “We are in heaven here, are we not? We are in our house, and our children are here, and all is well.”

“Are the children all right?”

“They are well, lyubov moya. Do not worry. Legolas and Sigrid are on the mend, and Tilda is not far behind. Her ear is much improved. So all is well.”

“Okay.” Just swallowing a few mouthfuls of soup and asking a few questions had exhausted him, and his eyes fell closed no matter how much he wanted to keep them open. He managed to swallow
his last sip of broth before he fell into the void again.

* * *

Thran set the mug of broth aside. His poor saint, so drained that a few words and even fewer sips of broth were all he could manage before he fell back into sleep. He could hardly call it dreamless sleep, given the hints of what Bard had seen – magical forests, circuses, and angels who discussed arcane minutiae were surely not all of the wonders he’d experienced. If Bard remembered his visions once his fever broke, perhaps he would tell Thran more about them. They sounded fascinating.

He made sure Bard was well swaddled in his sheets and blankets, and left the light on to orient Bard if he woke again. Then he took the broth downstairs, dumped what little remained down the sink, washed the spoon, and put the mug in the dishwasher. Supper was done – the tacos had met with approval – the kitchen was clean, and the children were reading together in the sitting room. Sigrid was all but asleep, and Tilda and Legolas were quiet, so Bain had handled the majority of the reading chores. When Thran came in, Bain paused in his reading, and all of the children looked up at him.

“How’s Da?” Bain asked.

“He took a little of the broth. He still has the fever, but he sleeps now. He told me he has had several vivid dreams.”

“Dreams?” Tilda looked thoughtful. “I had dreams last night, too, when my ear didn’t wake me up. I thought Mr. Bun and I went to the cheese shop, but when we got there, he said he didn’t like cheese, so he bought a box of clover blossoms instead. I didn’t know you could buy those in a shop.”

“I don’t think you can, Kukla,” Legolas considered.

“It seemed so real,” Tilda said.

“The dreams I have when I have a fever seem so real, too,” Legolas replied. “And I think they stay with you better than regular dreams do.”

“Why is that?” Sigrid murmured, though her eyes were still closed.

“The doctors of the West might tell you that the heat of the fever does it.” Thran sat down between Tilda and Sigrid. “But other people say that when you have a fever, the boundaries between this world and others become very thin, and it is easy to slip through to other places.”

“Other places?” Sigrid’s eyes opened, alive with interest. “What other places?”

“No one can say for sure.”

“Maybe they’re other dimensions in the multiverse,” Bain grinned.

“Perhaps so,” Thran grinned back. “Some cultures say that clowns and fools were originally the gatekeepers between here and there, which I think gives clowns a more magical glamor than a humorous one.”

“So they’re shamans,” Sigrid summarized. “Intercessors to the gods.”

“They’re creepy,” Bain snorted. “I don’t like them.”
“That one in the zombie apocalypse game is worse than creepy,” Legolas made a face. “He’s the best advertisement for why you should never trust a clown.”

“That’s the truth,” Bain shook his head. “I go for him first. Get him out of the way.”

“I like my clown doll,” Tilda observed. “She’s cute.”

“She’s not a real clown,” Bain protested. “She’s a pixie pretending to be a clown. That’s not scary.”

“Not all clowns are scary, Bain,” Sigrid sniffed. “You think that the only real clowns are the scary ones, but they aren’t. Tilda could tell you that your zombie clown isn’t a real one, it’s a zombie pretending to be a clown, and she’d be just as right as you are. But we’ve gone off point, as my English teacher would say. So Da’s still got a fever, and he’s had dreams. Did he say what he dreamed about?”

“The circus,” Thran teased, which got a laugh from the children. “But no clowns. Jugglers, he said, and a magical forest. He may have wonderful things to tell us when he wakes up.”

“Maybe so.” Sigrid stood up with a groan. “Ugh. I’m tired.”

“A long day,” Thran observed. “A new job with so many things to learn, and recently recovered from the flu.”

Sigrid nodded. “I’m off to the shower, and then I’ll go to bed, because when I wake up, I have to go to the bistro again.”

“Eight-thirty, yes?” Thran prompted. At Sigrid’s nod, he said, “Then I will get up at quarter to eight to make your breakfast and get you to the bistro on time.”

Sigrid leaned over to kiss Thran’s cheek. “Thanks, Ada. I’ll see you in the morning. Night, everyone.”

“Night, Sigrid,” the children and Thran chorused, and Sigrid took herself upstairs with a smile and a wave. Bain resumed his reading, and continued while the shower ran. In a few more minutes, Bain reached the end of the chapter of their Harry Potter tome, and Legolas went upstairs to bathe. Bain went with him to get ready for his turn, leaving Tilda with Thran.

“Will Da be all right tomorrow, do you think?” she asked as she climbed into Thran’s lap.

“We must wait and see, but I know we both hope so, Kukla,” Thran replied, gathering Tilda into his arms. As the little girl pressed her ear to Thran’s chest, he stroked her back. “Does your ear hurt?”

She snuggled against Thran’s chest. “Not any more. I guess the medicine has worked.”

“It has begun to work. You must take all of it to make sure that it continues to work.”

“Okay.”

“Tonight, if your ear hurts, you will call me, and I will come to help you, yes? We must let your Da rest.”

“I’ll remember,” Tilda nodded. “I hope it doesn’t hurt. I just want to sleep.”

“I will ask Mr. Bun to whisper a lullaby into your ear so that it does not hurt.”

“Can you do that?” Tilda sat up to look at Thran. “He doesn’t listen very well.”
“He will listen this time. He loves you very much and would not want you to feel bad. So I will tell him that, and he will agree that it will be a good thing to do.”

Tilda accepted that with a hum of agreement. His saint was so good at using humor and whimsy with the children, so how gratifying was it for Tilda to affirm that Thran had learned to employ them, too? He was content to sit with this small gem in his lap, chatting of this and that, until the shower stopped running. He urged Tilda upstairs to take her turn, and saw to the boys while he waited for Tilda to wash. Legolas was ready to sleep, so Thran got him comfortably tucked in. Bain didn’t need to go to bed so early, as he didn’t suffer from any of the ills that plagued his siblings.

“Is it okay if I play video games for a while?” he asked Thran.

“I will get Tilda into bed, and then I will wash. You must take the helm to listen for trouble up here until I am done. Then I will watch over the sick. If you want to play your games until eleven, that is fine. After that, you can read in your room.”

“Okay, Captain,” Bain grinned. “It was fun being in charge today. Getting to cook and stuff.”

“I am glad you liked it,” Thran returned Bain’s grin, “because we will do so again tomorrow. We have enough of the meat to make the casserole for supper, perhaps? We have soup for your Da.”

“So we’ll need lunch, that’s all.”

Thran nodded. “We will have fun to figure out something. But for now, I will see to Tilda.”

“Aye, Captain Thran.” Bain threw a crisp salute.

Thran returned the gesture with a chuckle. “You are a good lieutenant, Bain. With you to help me, we will get through tomorrow very well.”

“Okay, Thran. See you in a bit.”

Thran raised a hand in acknowledgement, then went into Tilda’s room. He helped her comb her hair, and made a big show of whispering into Mr. Bun’s ear about the lullaby to soothe her ear. She rewarded him with a big smile and a hug, and settled quickly into bed.

Thran eased into his bedroom, but Bard was solidly asleep. Thran wrapped his braid around his head, washed his face in the sink, and then got into the shower to wash off the day’s efforts. When he was clean and dry, he let Bain know that he was back on duty, so Bain scampered downstairs to indulge in his video game.

Thran came back to the bedroom to consider his husband. Bard remained quiet, so Thran shed his shirt and leggings and laid them by his side of the bed, close to hand if any of the children needed him during the night. He laid a light hand on Bard’s forehead; yes, still warm. It was hard to tell whether he dreamed or not, but Thran eased as delicately as possible under the sheets so as not to disturb him. Should he curl around him, to help him stay warm? Should he stay away, to reduce his chances of catching Bard’s flu?

Thran smirked. The entire house was bathed in so many cold and flu germs that holding his husband would make no difference. Let him do what he could to comfort lyubov yego, then.

Just as he slid closer, Bard began to shiver. That seemed to affirm Thran’s decision, so he eased closer until Bard fit snugly against his chest. In a few seconds, Bard’s shivers calmed, but just as quickly, his temperature spiked again. Thran didn’t find the excess heat unpleasant, so stayed close at Bard’s back. The sudden increase calmed after a few minutes, and Bard lay quiet. Thran closed his
eyes, and let himself drift towards sleep...

“Thran?”

Blinking, Thran stroked Bard’s shoulder. “I am here, Bard.”

“I have to get up.”

“Do you?”

“Toilet.”

“I will help you, lyubov moya. All is well.”

Thran supported his husband as they made their way into the bathroom, where Bard managed to do what was needed without making too much of a mess. Thran got him back to bed, and quickly brought him some acetaminophen and some water.

“For your fever, Bard,” he coaxed. Bard was glassy eyed and seemed halfway to somewhere else, but he got the pills and water down before he fell back into his pillow. Thran got him under the covers again, and by the time he returned the glass to the bathroom and came back to bed, Bard had fallen fast asleep again.

Steps on the stairs announced the end to Bain’s video game foray, so all of the children were in bed. Thran turned off the light, and lay back with a sigh.

This might be a very long night.

* * *

Bard wandered so long and so far that he forgot about ever having a home, a family, a life as an artist. Maybe he’d become a travel writer or photographer, but he wrote nothing and took no pictures. Maybe he was an itinerant monk, but he spoke no verses or mantras, and no one asked for his blessings. He saw the winged angel again many times, but never close enough to speak to again, and he had no conversation with any of the people who crowded the paths of his travels. Was he merely an observer, then? It was too much to think about – the least moment of consideration exhausted him, and the air around him grew alternatively hot and cold. He was content to drift without regard to what he saw. What kind of place was this? There was no sensation but heat and cold, sight, and an exhaustion that dogged every breath, every step, every moment. No memory of touch, smell, taste, sense of effort, pain...

Almost unnoticed, the visions grew calmer, less vivid, and finally faded. He caught a fractured glance of the bazaar again, and that primal tunnel down to something too terrifying for words, but he steered away from it with great effort. So hard did he fight to move away from that place that his next vision revealed a vaguely familiar bedroom.

His bedroom.

He had a bedroom?

Like snowflakes falling silently to the ground, pieces of memory filtered back into conscious thought.
Yes, he had a bedroom. He had a house. He had a family, three children... no, four children, and a husband. How many eons ago had he married, had children, been widowed, married again, and come to live in a long-neglected house? A thousand? Maybe half the lifetime of the universe. Several more lifetimes passed before he recalled enough of that life to understand that yes, he was back in that life, that world. An arm around his ribs was warm and comforting. That was his husband’s arm... Thran’s arm. Thran was the angel he’d seen so often over his eons of wandering. He eased off his side and onto his back, and stroked the arm that lay so protectively over his ribs.

“Bard?”

“I’m here,” Bard whispered. He felt heavy, and too comfortable to move.

“Your fever has broken, my saint. That is welcome news. Lie still now, and rest.”

Bard didn’t have the strength to turn his head to look at Thran, but when his husband sat up beside him to feel his cheeks and forehead, Bard searched for his silvery eyes.

“Where are your wings?” Bard mumbled softly.

“They are hard to see with your eyes open, my saint,” Thran’s soft voice replied. “Close your eyes, and I am sure you will see them again.”

“Okay,” Bard breathed, and was asleep before he’d completed the syllable.

This time, he had no dreams as he slept.

* * *

Thran’s alarm went off at seven forty-five. He shut it off quickly, but Bard remained soundly asleep beside him. His forehead was cool, and he didn’t shift when Thran climbed out of bed. He slipped into the bathroom, then the closet to change into his clothes, and then downstairs to see to Sigrid’s porridge. She appeared close after him, and made quick work of the cereal while he assembled her lunch of sandwich, fruit, and a cookie. The run to the bistro in the village was uneventful, and she wished him an easy day as he let her out of the SUV. He replied with similar wishes, a smile, and a wave, and returned home. The house was still quiet, but Thran made a quick round of all the children’s rooms – no one had yet stirred, but that would soon change – before going back into the bedroom. Yes, Bard was still asleep, so Thran headed back downstairs to think about the day’s food. He’d just decided on eggs for his breakfast when Bain and Legolas came down, and Tilda soon joined them. Except for a lingering cough, Legolas said he felt almost himself again.

“And Kukla, you slept all night!” Thran smiled at her. “Your ear is better, then?”

She nodded with a relieved smile. “It is! It feels almost normal now.”

“I think Mr. Bun must have sung the lullaby I told him about last night. But let us not rely only on his lullaby to help your ear. Here is your medicine for the morning. And please eat some yogurt after you take it to protect your stomach.”

Tilda took her pill with water, and then perused the refrigerator for the yogurt. “Ooh, vanilla! I’ll have that.”
“Kukla, your ear is not the only good news. Your Da’s fever broke last night at just after four this morning. He must still stay in bed and remain quiet, but he is on the mend.”

“Good for Da!” Tilda grinned.

“Yeah, that’s great,” Bain exchanged a relieved smile with his sister and brother. “But now the hard part starts.”

Legolas hummed agreement. “To keep him in bed, you mean.”

“You got that right,” Bain shook his head.

“We will be ready,” Thran avowed. “But first, what should I make for our breakfast, children? Eggs, perhaps? They would feel good on scratchy throats.”

The consensus affirmed that eggs were the right dish, so Thran scrambled a bowlful while Bain saw to the tea, toast, and butter. As they ate at the table, they considered what to make for lunch, and decided that the soup that Bain and Thran had concocted last night was a good start.

“Maybe with grilled cheese?” Tilda asked with a hopeful glance at Thran.

“We can make grilled cheese, yes,” Thran nodded. “I have Lieutenant Bain to help me with that. But lots of soup, too. I want all of you to be well and rested, so you can go back to school tomorrow. After breakfast, then, the homework.”

That met with groans, but not terrible ones. Thran had the children carry their empty dishes to the sink to rinse and put in the dishwasher, then settled them at the table with a pot of hot tea and their homework while he washed the flatware, skillet, and cooking tools. When the kitchen reflected Bard’s usual pristine order, Thran came to the table.

“I go to see to Bard, children.” He held up both hands with his fingers crossed. “Wish me luck that he sees the wisdom of rest.”

“Good luck, Ada; good luck, Papa; good luck, Thran,” the children chorused.

Thran poured a mug of tea from the pot, and carried it upstairs and into the bedroom. Bard was curled into a knot under the covers, but he rested quietly and his expression was peaceful. As Thran tiptoed closer, though, his eyes opened. They gazed blankly before gradually tracking on Thran as he put down his cup of hot tea on Bard’s nightside table.

“Good morning, my saint,” Thran murmured, stroking a dark curl off Bard’s forehead. “No, you do not have to move.”

“I’ve been gone a long time,” Bard said softly.

“Are you back to stay now?”

Bard blinked several times. Each time, his eyes grew clearer, until he regarded Thran with thoughtful awareness. “I think so. It feels like my fever broke.”

“It did. It did so just after four this morning.”

Bard considered that until his expression waxed with regret. “I kept you awake, then.”

“No, lyubov moya. You were quiet most of the night, just as you were all of yesterday, I think because you were exhausted. I woke in the night and realized that your fever had cooled, and you
were peacefully asleep. So all is well.”

Bard shut his eyes, and managed a single nod.

“I brought you some hot tea, if you would like it. Or if you would rather rest, that is fine.”

Bard hummed. “I feel so comfortable. But I’m parched.”

“I will arrange your pillows for you again. Then you can sip a little of the tea.”

At Bard’s nod, Thran propped three pillows behind Bard’s head so that he was upright enough to sip the tea that Thran held for him.

“Mmm. Good.”

Thran helped his husband to several sips of the hot tea until he’d drunk almost half of it. At that point, Bard rallied enough to want to tend to necessities, so Thran helped him into the bathroom for that. Once he was back in bed, he didn’t immediately fall asleep again, which Thran took as a good sign.

“Are you hungry?” Thran asked. “I have more soup broth for you, or perhaps a scrambled egg with some toast, or a bowl of porridge?”

“Mmm, an egg sounds good,” Bard nodded. “But you’ll have to help me down the stairs, I’m afraid.”

“I will bring you a tray, because of course you will want to sleep again afterwards, which, as a certain Welshman has been wont to tell me, is the best thing for you to do to get well.”

Bard smiled sheepishly. “So I have. The only reason I won’t argue with me is because it feels so good not to move right now.”

“Good. I will make your breakfast, then. Please, lyubov moya, do not get out of bed while I work in the kitchen. Promise me.”

“I’ll be good,” Bard agreed with a sleepy sigh.

Thran nodded acceptance before he returned to the kitchen. All of the children looked up at his entrance.

“Is he awake? Is he better?” Bain asked quickly.

“He is awake, and he is better,” Thran confirmed. “He is very weak, though. I will make him breakfast and then he will be a little stronger.”

“Can I go see him?” Tilda asked

“Perhaps you can help me bring his breakfast up to him,” Thran suggested. “You can take the toast, Kukla, and I will take the egg. Bain can take the butter, and Legolas can take the salt and pepper. We must not stay long, however. He will need to sleep again once he has eaten. That will help him get better faster.”


“So on to the breakfast. Perhaps two eggs, and a slice of toast...”
Thran busied himself with the pan and eggs. As second in command, Bain got out the bread, butter, and condiments, and readied the lap tray with utensils and a napkin. Soon Bard’s breakfast was ready, and Thran and the children trooped upstairs to deliver it to their patient.

“We announce the arrival of breakfast,” Thran said as the children followed him into the bedroom with hellos and waves. Bard was alert to greet the entourage with a smile. “We bring you eggs with salt and pepper, and toast with butter.”

“I hope you feel better, Da,” Tilda chimed in.

“Me, too, Da; I do, too, Bard,” Bain and Legolas added.

“That’s good of you, children. I do feel much better. And the breakfast is spot on. Thank you,” Bard said, struggling to sit up a little more.

“No, stay where you are,” Thran urged. “You are not strong enough to sit up any more, so we will see to things. Bain, would you please find a clean tee for your Da? Legolas, if you and Tilda would help me to arrange the tray breakfast…”

Bain helped his father slip the tee over his head, then lie back on the pillows, while Thran and the other children put Bard’s breakfast on the tray.

“There, you are ready to have your breakfast,” Thran prompted as he placed the tray over Bard’s legs. “Thank you, children. I will see that our Bard eats everything, while you continue your homework. Lieutenant Bain, you have the lower deck.”

“Aye, Captain,” Bain made his best salute. Then he gave his father a stern look. “Thran says you have to stay in bed to get better, which is what you always tell us, so you’d better do it. Don’t make us come up here.”

“Yeah, Da; that’s right, Bard,” Tilda and Legolas agreed.

“I guess I’d better, then,” Bard gave them an amused smile. “I appreciate you all looking out for me.”

“Feel better soon, Da,” Tilda waved on the way out. “And eat all of your breakfast!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bard nodded as the children trooped back downstairs and Thran sat beside him on the bed.

“Come, while your breakfast is still hot.” Thran speared a bit of egg and held it out to Bard.

“I can feed myself, angel.”

“You can. But you have had a long, wearying time with your fever, so let me help you save your strength.”

It was a mark of Bard’s lassitude that he protested with only a self-conscious look. While he chewed his eggs, Thran buttered his toast and cut it into four small triangles. When he held out one of the triangles, Bard took it with an affectionate smile.

“It tastes good.”

“I am glad. You need to eat after going so long without. It will help you get stronger.”

Bard ate quietly as Thran doled out the bites of egg and toast, and handed him his mug of tea when the food was gone.
“Can I bring you more?”

Bard shook his head as he sipped his tea. “I’m good. Just very sleepy again.”

“You see the wisdom that the children and I quote to you, then, that you need more sleep to recover your strength.”

“That won’t be hard,” Bard sighed. “My eyes are already closing.”

“Let them.” Thran set the empty tray aside, and helped Bard to slide flat. “Sleep, and you will soon be better.”

Bard nodded as his eyes shut, and he was asleep before Thran could take the tray out of the room.

He had done well to get Bard to eat something and to convince him to stay in bed. He had also reassured the children that Bard was on the mend. The next time Bard woke up, however, he would not be so compliant.

Thran grinned in anticipation. He had a plan to deal with that.
Chapter 122

Chapter Summary

When a saint emerges from his dreams, an angel is determined to ensure his recovery by whatever means necessary.

Bard drifted away after his breakfast without effort. His dreams slipped from one scene to another without pause, as if he paged through one of his college art history books without ever looking closely at any of the pictures. No sooner would one detail come to the forefront than it slipped away again, and the scenery changed. Maybe here was a Monet café in Arles, and maybe there was a bright Rousseau jungle. Maybe an H R Giger biomechanical alien stalked through them both... or maybe not. Was that a Robert Arneson pillar? No, perhaps it warped into Calder’s Red Stag? As soon as Bard tried to identify the wonders he saw, they disappeared, so after a while, he stopped trying, and let them stream by. It didn’t matter that the time of day and season shifted from brightest summer noon to deep pearlescent winter afternoon to rainy spring night, or that some of the beings he passed were not human. He let everything drift past – hmmm, that reminded him of The Wizard of Oz when cows, rocking chairs, and witches on bicycles and brooms streamed by in the throes of a tornado. Mostly he felt regret that he wasn’t able to fully appreciate the visions he’d been given, but even that emotion was muted.

After a while, the visions slowed, then turned much spottier – was his connection to the source of these images dissolving? Complete, boneless relaxation swept away the last of the surreal visions, and he fell solidly into deep sleep. Time might have passed or not; he had no way to know, but at some point even oblivion waned, leaving him without any sensation beyond a velvety greyness.

A bright shaft of light appeared. He opened his eyes, and made out a bright patch of sunlight splashed over his blanket. Ah. The skylight above the bed had let in that rectangle of light, and now it warmed his legs through blanket and sheet. He lay unmoving, still savoring the deep relaxation that made lying in bed so irresistible. Muted voices drifted by at sporadic intervals, lilting and smiling, the voices of children. Turning over onto his back, he let the pervasive warmth lull him into thinking of nothing else. But a full bladder goaded him tottering and shivering into the bathroom; when he’d dealt with that, he made a beeline right back into bed, and let himself wallow in the welcome warmth again. He shut his eyes, and thought of crocodiles basking on the banks of the Nile, old dogs curled on sunny porches, housecats luxuriating on bright windowsills.

“Bard? Did you get up?”

Bard cracked open one eye. Oh, he was still in dreamland, because the angel wafted gently into the bedroom and sat down beside him, one long, slender hand brushing Bard’s curls aside to feel his forehead.

“Still don’t understand manifestical metasomething of physical halohood.”

A soft chuckle. “I claim no knowledge of that, either, lyubov moya. You will have to go back to sleep to find any answers to that.”

“I’ve tried, but no go.”
“Ah. Then perhaps you have met your quota of sleep and you must return to this world until the next bout of flu.”

Bard pried open both eyes. Yes, the bedroom was still here, and the angel still sat on his bed. “Where are your wings?”

“In your dreams, with your halo and the rest of your wonders, my saint. Do you want to look for them again?”

Bard shut his eyes, wanting nothing less than the respite the angel offered him. But that door had closed, and he was solidly in the world again. His sigh was regretful, so he turned over on his back. When he opened his eyes, there sat Thran, gazing down at him with a welcoming smile.

“Welcome back, my saint. You have had many adventures in the past two days.”

“Two days?” Bard blinked in surprise. “What day is it? Is it Monday? Oh, shit, the painters –”

“Calm yourself,” Thran patted his arm. “It is one o’clock on Sunday afternoon, so you have been in bed just a few hours more than twenty-four. You had a fever. Do you remember that you took Sigrid to her job yesterday, and then passed out when you came home?”

“I remember,” Bard murmured, as it all came back. “Gods, did Sigrid have to walk home? And what about the other children –”

“I retrieved our Sigrid, and the other children are fine, too,” Thran soothed him. “All is well. I have been the captain, and Bain is my lieutenant, and we have made meals, we have done the homework, we have gotten Sigrid to and from her job. So calm yourself so that you do not undo the good of your sleep. There is nothing you must do right now, except recover.”

Bard eased the sudden tightness in his limbs. If he were honest, to lie back was the most wonderful thing in the world, and the only thing he wanted to do, so he let himself do so, albeit with a little guilt.

“Chert, perhaps I lie a little,” Thran shrugged with a mischievous look on his face. “There is something you must do in addition to take your ease in bed. You must eat lunch. I will bring you a nice bowl of chicken soup and perhaps a roll, and of course tea. Can you manage that?”

Bard’s stomach growled softly as he thought about hot chicken soup. Thran nodded as if in reply to the noise.

“I thought so. I will bring you some, and keep you company while you eat. Please, lyubov moya, stay in bed until I come back.”

“I will,” Bard promised, and lay back as Thran rose and went downstairs. He was content to keep his promise for the few minutes Thran was gone, because he still felt lightweight and thready, as if all that kept him grounded were the bedcovers atop him. After a deep breath, he was seduced deeper into the pillows and covers, and he lay with his eyes closed again.

Sloth had never felt so divine.

A step on the stairs alerted him to open his eyes again. There was Thran with a bowl of soup cradled in his hands, and a trio of children behind, all carrying something. Legolas had the lap tray with a soup saucer, mug, utensils, and napkin set atop it, so Bard pushed himself up against the pillows to that the boy could set the tray over his legs. Bain had the teapot, which he set on the nightside table while Thran put a steaming bowl of soup on the tray. Tilda was last with a small bowl of leftover
spoonbread and the butter crock, which she set on the tray by Bard’s soup.

“Hi, Da!” Tilda smiled. “You look better now.”

“Yeah, not so pasty,” Bain said with his typical tact. Legolas snickered behind him, but he raised a hand in greeting to Bard.

“You do look better,” the boy admitted.

“I feel better,” Bard replied. “And look at this – bedside service.”

“An exclusive offer available only to our most valued clientele,” Thran said as smoothly as any hotel concierge.

“Eat it while it’s still hot,” Tilda suggested. “Bain and Thran made it yesterday. It’s got lots and lots of noodles.”

“So I see,” Bard said, dipping his spoon into the bowl to pick out a ribbon of egg noodle. He took a bite. “Mmm. Pretty good. Needs parsley, though.”

Thran snickered; maybe he thought about the day after they’d met, when Bard had first taught him how to make chicken soup. “Of course it does. Shall I bring you some to sprinkle over your noodles?”

“It’s good just the way it is,” Bard grinned. It felt strange to smile so widely. He was used to drifting along in a crowded bazaar, merely observing rather than interacting with anyone he passed. “And spoonbread is perfect.”

“All right, children,” Thran said. “I will see that Bard eats all of his lunch. If you could decide on something we can make for supper, it would be helpful. We have lots of chicken.”

“Okay, Thran, Ada, Papa,” the children replied, and gave Bard reassuring smiles before going downstairs. Bain was already lobbying for Tandoori chicken, while Legolas and Tilda seemed to think something plainer would be better for Bard’s recovery.

“But the spicy Tandoori would fight the germs better because of the turmeric,” Bain said as they retreated.

Bard chuckled, but applied himself to the soup. It wasn’t highly spiced, which his stomach appreciated, and the warm broth soothed his hunger pangs without overstressing it. The spoonbread was nicely crusty on the top, yet soft and buttery underneath, and that eased his stomach, too. With each bite, a little more of his strength came back. When his dishes were empty, Thran leaned forward for the teapot so that he could pour Bard’s mug full.

“Better, yes?”

“I am,” Bard nodded, and was surprised that he meant it. “Much better by far.”

“Perhaps more soup? That was the last of the spoonbread, so I am sorry that I cannot bring you more of that. Or we have the rolls I mentioned before. Tilda thought you would like the spoonbread.”

“She was right,” Bard nodded. “I’m fine just with the tea. If you can get me some clothes, I can come downstairs to join the family.”

“You are not yet rested enough to come downstairs,” Thran objected quietly. “Please, Bard, stay in
bed for a while longer. You have been sick, and you need to restore yourself.”

“I can restore myself in the sitting room, can’t I? That way you won’t have to run up and down the
stairs to keep an eye on me.”

“I knew you would suggest such a thing as soon as you stayed awake for two minutes,” Thran gave
him a stern look. “It is not good for you. You will want to be in the middle of everything, because
that is what you do, and then you will forget to rest, and then you will relapse. Better you stay in bed,
so that you sleep and sleep and sleep until you are well.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “I’ve done nothing but sleep for the past twenty-four hours. More than
that.”

“Tcha, you have not slept. You have told me tales of jugglers and circuses and magical forests and
angels who speak of metaphysics. You have traveled a long way to get here, and only now can you
sleep properly. You must stay in bed so that you may do so.”

Bard sighed. “I am not the least bit sleepy, angel.”

Rather than continue the argument as Bard expected, Thran sat back with a wide grin on his face.
Suspicious, Bard narrowed his gaze on him.

“You look like the Cheshire Cat, Thran. What are you up to?”

“I am prepared for this moment, that is all. I will make a deal with you.”

“What sort of... deal?”

“If you will eat a little more soup, and drink very much more tea, I will offer you a distraction from
the horrible fate to stay in bed. What do you think of that?”

“What sort of... distraction?”

If anything, Thran’s grin grew wider. He didn’t answer for a moment, as if he savored the moment.


“You promise to stay in bed, drink the tea, eat the soup?”

“I promise.”

“Ha!” Thran clapped his hands in triumph. “I will get the soup, then. Do not get out of bed. You
promised!”

“You still haven’t told me what this distraction is.”

“I will tell you, then. I will do what all good parents do when their children are fussy and do not
want to stay in bed. I will tell you a story.”

The anticipatory look on Thran’s face was enough to make Bard’s lips tremble into a smile.

“It must be one hell of a story. You’re all but gloating.”

“We shall see. But first, I bring the soup, and more tea. It is a thirsty tale.”

Thran scampered downstairs with the teapot and Bard’s tray, leaving Bard to wonder just what tale
he was about to hear. One of Thran’s Russian fairytales? Something about a ballet he danced once? Or something entirely unexpected? In anticipation, Bard ducked into the bathroom to deal with his protesting bladder, then padded back to bed. He plumped his pillows, and straightened the sheets and blankets before he crawled back into bed. He settled comfortably against the pillows and crossed his legs, ready to give Thran his full attention when his husband returned from the kitchen with a full tray.

“Don’t fuss,” Bard said quickly, as soon as Thran’s mouth opened to protest. “Getting out of bed to pee doesn’t count. It’s not like you can do that for me.”

Thran gave him a quelling stare as he set the tray across Bard’s legs. “Of course not. So here is your soup, and tea for the both of us.”

Thran fetched more pillows from the closet to pile against the headboard on his side of the bed, then settled himself in the middle of them. He mimicked Bard’s cross-legged posture and pulled the sheet and blankets up over his knees, but loosely. He took the teapot to pour his mug full, then set the pot on his nightside table.

“So, the soup,” he waved his hand at Bard’s bowl.

“Where’s my story?”

“Soup first,” Thran waved his hand again. “Then you can be comfortable for the story.”

Bard gave Thran a mock look of affront. “Is this a bait and switch?”

“Tcha, you are not a fish, and I am not a fisherman. I merely want you to eat your soup.”

Bard didn’t try to explain the idiom to Thran; he had a sneaking suspicion that Thran already knew exactly what it meant. So he spooned up the shreds of chicken, the small bits of carrots and celery, the thick ribbons of egg noodles. There was a distinct flavor of ginger and star anise, and a sprinkle of spring onion that brought a fresh green taste to the well-simmered meat and vegetables. He didn’t rush through it, but ate slowly not to overload his stomach, as well as to appreciate the taste. When he was done, Thran poured his mug full of tea, and then set the tray aside.

“Now, you are comfortable?” Thran asked.

“Comfortable,” Bard nodded.

“Then it is time for my story.”

“Does it have a name?”

“You may choose one when I have told it. So, I begin in the time-honored fashion, yes? With once upon a time.”

“I’m ready.”

Thran nodded acceptance. “Once upon a time, in a city called Daugavpils –”

“Dog of Pills?” Bard repeated incredulously. “What kind of city name is that?”

“DAU-ga-pils,” Thran pronounced in an exasperated tone. “It is the name of the second largest city in Latvia. It means Castle on the Banks of the River Daugava. Now hush, or I will not tell you any more than that.”
Latvia? That was where Thran had been born. So was Thran about to tell him something about his childhood?

“I’m sorry, angel. I’m just an ignorant Welshman. Carry on.”

“Thank you. So, I begin again. Once upon a time in Daugavpils, there lived a small boy. One day, when he was just four years old, he saw an amazing sight on the old television in his parent’s front room – a group of dancers who were to perform at a celebration of local folk dance. Such colorful costumes, such spritely music, the dancers who look like little dolls, but most importantly, such beautiful steps of the dance... the small boy was transfixed. So transfixed was he that for the next several days, he drove his poor mother mad with his constant attempts to imitate what he saw. His poor father was angry to have such a dervish whirling to and fro every second until bedtime, for his poor father worked hard, long hours in the local factory and wanted only stillness and silence when he came home. So to keep the family peace, his mother took the small boy to the folk dance festival, thinking that that would sate the small boy’s fascination.

“But did it? Of course not. The small boy found himself consumed even more completely when he saw so many dancers in person. The music, the colors, the performances... he became twice as much the whirling dervish. In desperation, his mother found a dance studio with a teacher willing to tend to the small boy for an hour once a week. This will not last long, the mother pleaded to the father, who was not thrilled at the cost of such a thing given an already tight budget. But he went along, especially when the small boy quickly became less of a dervish and more of a serious student. Even though the small boy was only four, he attended the preschool classes to learn his letters and numbers and other simple things. He could not go to the dance lessons unless his classwork was impeccable, and so it became.

“Two years passed. The small boy achieved a little more in height, but very much more in his abilities at the dance. Folk dance at first, for that was the local tradition. The ballet came next, because the dance instructor thought the discipline would deter the small boy, only to find that the small boy did not just love that discipline, but craved it, adored it, excelled at it.

“When the small boy was six, the dance instructor confided to the mother that a scout for the state – Latvia was still a Soviet state then, you understand – the state’s program to identify potential dancers for the Russian ballet had come to the school. This scout had been very interested in the small boy, no matter his youth, and had invited him to audition for a spot at one of the youth ballet schools. Thus began a great argument between the small boy’s parents. His mother wanted to accept the tickets for her and her son to attend the audition, which was a very long distance away in St. Petersburg, because she thought it would mean a better life for her son. The father wanted to reject them, because he did not think much of the ballet, and he was too tired from his labor in the factory to think of very many things beyond his supper and the ice hockey games on the television. He relented only when his wife told him that if the small boy earned a spot in the ballet school, his parents would receive a stipend for their contribution to the glory of the state.”

“That must have been hard for the small boy to listen to,” Bard murmured, then sipped his tea.

An airy hand waved. “Tcha, the small boy knew nothing of this until his father spoke of it many years later. All he was told at the time was that he would have the great treat of a train ride all the way to St. Petersburg, and a chance to show people how well he danced. Even better, if he danced well, he would be able to go to a school where he could dance many hours every day, rather than just the single hour each week that he danced now. He was deliriously happy. So happy, that his mother dipped into the family’s meager coffers so that the small boy could spend three days a week with the dance instructor to learn just how best to impress those he would dance for in the great Russian city.
“Some weeks passed, until the time came for the audition. Mama packed a bag with our things, and I said goodbye to my Papa the night before, because he would be away at the factory when Mama and I would leave for the train station the next morning. He did not have much to say, but I was too excited to notice. I hardly slept that night. The next day, after a good breakfast, Mama and I went to the train station, and when the train from Vilnius stopped in Daugavpils, we got on, and away we went to St. Petersburg. I cannot tell you how many times I had seen the trains come and go, for the city is a great rail hub for the region. Estonia is to the north, Lithuania is to the south, Russia is to the east, and Riga, the famed port on the Baltic Sea, is to the northwest. Trains, as many industrial as passenger, come and go all day. So at long last, after all the trains I had heard and seen, here I was to travel on one myself! The trip takes ten hours, and there are several stops along the way, but I thought everything was wonderful. How could I not? I had never been outside of Daugavpils before, nor had Mama.

“Someone from the ballet program met us at the train station, and took us to a hotel for the night. It was a very modest place, but I thought it was quite grand, and to have a man in the dining room bring me a bowl of lamb stew with a warm roll was the height of luxury. Then came the room that was bigger than my parents’ front room, with a bed big enough for both Mama and me to sleep in it! Such opulence was not to be believed. Fortunately, I was very tired by then, and so I slept very well that night.

“The next day? First, a bowl of porridge and another warm roll. Then it was on to the audition. There were so many other children there! Many older, but almost none younger. My dance instructor had told me to expect this, so I was not surprised. It would not have mattered to me if I had been surprised. I had been told that if I danced my best, then I would earn the right to dance more. So I thought of that, and not all the other children.

“The audition was not what I expected – so much of the tape measure, and repeated stretches of the limbs, and so many questions! I was impatient, and wanted to ask over and over, you asked me here to dance, so when may I? But I did not want to jeopardize my chance for any reason, so I held my tongue.

“Finally, finally, came the dance! But even that was not straightforward. First the dance in a big room with so many other children – not so many as had been with me this morning, but still many. The instructors walked back and forth, so I did each thing they asked as best I could. There were many children trained only in the folk dances, and many fewer in the ballet, and only one or two as young as I. So I did many of the things you have seen me do at the barre for the first time. Eventually I was allowed to do my small dance that my instructor had taught me, which embodied a little folk dance, a little ballet, nothing sophisticated, but it was not the dance of a six-year old, either. All day this took, without a break but for the toilet, but not lunch. I was very hungry, but again I held my tongue. And at the end of the day, I was told that yes, I had earned my place at a ballet school. So I told Mama goodbye, and when she went home on the train, I did not go with her. I went to the ballet school.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “Wait... just like that, you were accepted on the spot and went right to the school? You didn’t even go home again?”

Thran’s face waxed in the smile of a man wiser than a six-year-old boy. “Ah, you ask for more than a fairytale, then. You ask about the adult reality behind the child’s naïveté.”

“I guess I do. It just seems... kind of heartless.”

Thran looked thoughtful. “I did not see it that way then. Only later did I understand. I will tell you all that I came to understand when I have gotten a little further along in my tale. But for now, I will tell
you that yes, the usual practice was to send all of the children home while the judges considered and bargained to make their choices. But it was very clear on that day that I had great potential to bring all glory and honor to the state, so there was no need for the judges to debate about me. They were unanimous. Of course, now I know what a great sacrifice this was for Mama. She loved me so much that she gave me up to the program because I was so enamored with the dance, and would have been unhappy to work in a factory as my Papa did. She had a premonition that Papa would need the stipend I provided soon enough, too, which was the case. And it was easier for her to give me up all at once, rather than take me home only to make this same trip again in just a few days.”

“Of course, I was not told that if I won my place, that I would go to school in St. Petersburg, far away from Mama and Papa. I knew only that I had won the prize I wanted, the chance to dance more. So Mama and I went with a strange lady to see the school. I was shown a dormitory like the one I would share with several other children, and there in the farthest corner, by a window, sat one of the beds with a small cabinet beside it. Mama helped me put my clothes and other few things in the cabinet to see how everything fit. I thought it was pretend, you see? Then we were given supper in the dining hall. It was another very thick lamb stew, very hot and full of carrots, and good.

“And after that, Mama told me goodbye. Ah, perhaps I was to stay here tonight to see what the dormitory is like? Very well; I told her I would see her in the morning. But no, she said, she would return to our hotel, and in the morning she would take the train home. Only then did I realize that I would not go back to Latvia with her. I would not go to a school in Daugavpils like this one – this very school was where I would live now. But who would look after me, I thought, though I did not ask aloud. As if she heard me, Mama pointed to the lady who had been with us during supper. She was what you call the dormitory housemother, yes? She would look after me now, Mama said. I foolishly thought that if I said anything, I would lose my place at the school, so I merely nodded, and hugged Mama. At least I told her that I loved her before I said goodbye. Then away she went, and I was now a beginning student in a dance academy.”

Bard let out a long breath. “That sounds awful.”

Thran shrugged. “Again, I did not see what I lost in that moment until some years later. Though later that first night, when I was told to go to sleep in the bed they had given me, it was so strange that I cried into my pillow, because I did not want anyone to hear, in case it would make them send me away from the dance. I was the only student there that night, and there was no sound of the hockey games that my Papa listened to, or the sound of Mama as she went into my parents’ room to sleep. The light that shone under the door of the lavatory was too bright, and the sheets smelled different, and the pillow was too flat. It was the first time I missed things that I had never noticed before. But the long day and the excitement and the strangeness of everything had worn me out, so eventually I fell asleep.”

Bard had a hard time swallowing his next sip of tea. “That sounds even worse.”

The next morning, the sun came though the dormitory windows so brightly, and it did not look so bad. My dormitory housemother – the grand Mistress Galina Vladimirovna Petrova – came to wake me up, but I was already awake. She took me to have breakfast, and then to the classroom, but there were no other children as young as I, so I was given a book to read about the greatest Russian ballet dancers. It was too old for me, but I picked my way through it well enough, and the pictures entranced me. Then it was on to lunch with Mistress Petrova, and then finally to the dance mistress, who with Mistress Petrova found dance clothes for me, and I was able to dance for the rest of the afternoon in a class of older children. It was too advanced for me, but I did not care, and thought that all the corrections that the mistress did were only extra attention.

“So it went for several days, until eventually the dormitory filled, and the classes for my level began.
In a few days, I met Vileria when she came from Moscow to attend the school – she was as young as I, so we shared much of the same instruction, but we became instant best friends, and the world seemed perfect, to have a good friend, and the dance.

“That continued for four years, until the auditions came for the Vaganova School, the most prestigious ballet school in all of Russia. This school accepts no students younger than ten, but Vileria and I had worked hard to be ready for this as soon as we both turned ten. We passed easily, even doing a pas de deux together. So I moved from one dormitory to another, and Mistress Galina Vladimirovna Petrova became Master Pyotr Ivanovich Bermanov, who was not nearly so nice as Mistress Petrova, but at this point, I was quite well able to look after myself in the dormitory, the classroom, the dance studio. Vileria and I became regular partners, and we went on to great success. Our wedding was quite showy, and the cake was beautiful and tasted of cherries and chocolate, and we had an entire two days off for a honeymoon.”

“Two whole days?” Bard gave Thran a sober look. “Nice of them.”

“You know, of course, how close we were as friends, Vileria and I, how we kept each other such close company through the endless hours of practice, the pressure of our sexuality. We played matchmaker for each other – I found Lily for her, and she found Sergei for me, and we covered for each other to maintain a discreet privacy. Legolas was unexpected, but we were delighted to have our small son to be a new joy in our lives. I loved Vileria more when I watched her play with him, and the same was true of her feelings for me. If she had not died, we might well have been happy after a fashion for many years. Or perhaps if we had emigrated here together, we would have separated our union, but still remained close friends. But that was not to be – she died, Legolas and I came here without her, and a new tale began.”

“That is a sadder tale than I expected,” Bard admitted.

“You must bear a little more sorrow, lyubov moya,” Thran gave him a smile. The warmth in it was unexpected given the nature of his comment, which made Bard raise his eyebrows. “I have told you the fairytale of a small boy, and I promised you the reality behind the fairytale, so now I will do so. Perhaps this is the Brothers Grimm version? At any rate, do not distress yourself at this tale. It has a happy ending, and soon you will see why I tell you this version of it. Are you ready?”

Bard held out his mug. “I’d like a fresh cup of tea before I hear this one.”

“Excellent idea,” Thran said, taking up the teapot to pour both their mugs full. He took a long draught of his, smiling at Bard when he swallowed. “Storytelling is thirsty work.”

“It is,” Bard said, toasting Thran with his mug. “So carry on when you’re ready.”

“So. Now comes the adult understanding of the small boy’s tale. Daugavpils is a heavily industrial city. It has been so since the end of the world war, thanks to the Soviets. My father was the locomotive mechanic; my mother was the domohozyayka, the housewife. We lived in a very small flat in an apartment building built for the factory workers – just a kitchen, a front room, a small bath, and two small bedrooms. It was not so hard a life for my parents before I was born, because then the Soviet system made possible so much of the subsidies for the Latvian industry. Perhaps eighty percent of the goods went to the military. But as glasnost and perestroika approached, the Soviets no longer supported the Latvian industries, so life became harder for a time. So when I was born, there was much depression in Papa, and much worry in Mama. I was lucky to be no younger, because shortly after I was sent to school, those programs to scout for dancers stopped. But regardless of the timing, I went to ballet school when I was six.

“St. Petersburg was brighter and bigger than anything in Latvia, and of course the city is full of...
beautiful monuments and architecture. It is very cosmopolitan. The ballet schools, however, are very old school, and very hard on their children. There is so much to learn, to do, so many rules, and because so many children clamor to be dancers, if a ballet student fails to be less than perfection, he or she is farmed out to a regular school and is no longer in the dance school. The discipline is very strict, and often very cruel. Teachers are obeyed instantly. Weariness, frustration, mistakes, and any transgression often draw physical punishment – slaps, blows with the hand, beatings, things this country no longer allows. Each student carries a full load of schoolwork, and of course there is the ballet, but there is also the history of ballet to learn, and the piano.”

“You play the piano?” Bard blinked in surprise.

Thran grinned. “I do. I am very much away from it, because I did not like the practice required, and my knuckles suffered often. You understand why I associated the piano with unpleasantness for many years. But if one day we get a piano for the ballroom, I would enjoy to play a few things. I like Chopin, of course.”

“Of course,” Bard shook his head in amazement. “Who else?”

“Oh, Scott Joplin is very much a master,” Thran nodded, his eyes brightening in recognition. “I played the Maple Leaf Rag so many times that the instructor banned it from the practice hall. But that just meant that I occasionally snuck out into the city to a café that had a piano, and I played it there in the early evenings. One day, I would love to make a dance to match his music.”

“I’ll bet you make a good one,” Bard nodded.

Thran smiled in appreciation. “But to continue... the school load is very arduous. There is very little free time. There is never enough time to do all that must be done. Those who are not a quick study, whether in dance or the languages or the maths, do not last, because there is no time to let them catch up. There are three languages to learn – Russian, which of course I spoke at home as well as Latvian, French for the ballet, and English because performers must learn to speak to the media when they travel. There are endless lessons about deportment and manners, which are even more arduous than the ballet at times! As the students get closer to their final years, the maths and sciences are less frequent topics of study, and ballet instruction intensifies. I reveled in that, because academics had never held the fascination for me that the dance did. But ballet of course is very demanding physically. The girls cannot gain too much weight, or they are dismissed. The boys must develop the strength to carry their partners and to endure through four acts of Swan Lake, or they are dismissed. Food is rigorously administered with the precision of medicine. One learns to live with hunger many times, even the boys. And the constant repetitions, over and over and over again... make no mistake, my saint, the smallest swan is physically tougher than the brawniest footballer. The pain and the devotion required to defy gravity, to seem the lightest feather floating meters above the stage, would drop a team of oxen.”

“I don’t know how anyone survives,” Bard said simply. “I can’t conceive of how much work it must have been.”

“There is still more to the burden,” Thran replied. He took a deep swallow of his tea before he went on. “This sounds like torture, like slavery, like bondage, like forced labor, yes? But there is no dancer in these schools who does not want to be there, who does not know and accept the suffering involved. We all know that if we cannot find it within ourselves to give everything, we will be replaced. So competition is fierce. The dancers have rivalries, of course – how could we not in such an arena? But I saw little sabotage. We all had too much to do to maintain ourselves to waste effort in such things. But we all knew that as friendly as we were, as much as we commiserated together over a difficult routine, a bastard teacher, an impossible standard, if any of us fell, few would shed tears.
The lion pulls down the slowest gazelle, and the other gazelles feel relief that they are not the ones consumed. That is the nature of such places.”

Bard swallowed. “It’s as if you all were gladiators. Beautiful ones, but in just as competitive a setting. Merciless.”

Thran nodded. “Very much so, though again, I did not think of it in that way for a long time. It just was.”

“Did you ever get to go home to your parents at all? Get some semblance of family life?”

Thran’s smile was ironic. “I was home only a handful of times, and most were after Latvia ceased to be my home. Mama came to see me a few times when I was too small to travel alone. She died when I was ten. Her lungs had never been strong, and an industrial city does not have the cleanest air, and in the winter the bronchitis is frequent, and so she succumbed. Papa had also suffered from the industry – an improperly secured tram motor came loose and broke his arm and leg past his ability to work again. He received a small pension from the state, and the stipend for my school, so he made do, if not in any great luxury.

“Papa was no fan of the arts or travel, so he never visited me at either of my schools. So when I was eleven, I was deemed suitably old enough to take the train to Latvia myself. Usually one of the train attendants looked after me to make sure I knew when to get off the train. I liked to ride the train, but once I got off in Daugavpils, not so much. An industrial city in the midst of a recession is no comparison to St. Petersburg, and Papa and I had nothing in common. He was a tradesman; I was an artist. He was a peasant; I was cosmopolitan. He spoke Latvian and bad Russian, I spoke four languages fluently. When I came out as gay, he had even less to say to me. So I went back to Latvia as little as possible, because it was so uncomfortable for both of us. Once Vileria and I went to Mariinsky to dance, we lived in St. Petersburg, but Papa was often ill, and did not visit. He did enjoy to meet Valeria when we went to see him, and he doted on Legolas, so that was a welcome reconciliation for us both. But he died of a lung illness similar to what had claimed Mama when Legolas was five. I dispensed with his things, and that was the end of my ties to Latvia. I returned to St. Petersburg with no expectation that I would ever see my birth country again. I was a Russian now.”

Bard winced. Thran’s recitation was matter-of-fact, apparently long past any regret, but to hear the story for the first time was to make Bard appreciate his very different childhood anew. He’d thought his own tale had been rootless, but it was no comparison to the isolation that had been Thran’s lot.

“Do not despair, my saint. The sad tale is almost done. I have only to speak of how I came to realize that I was no more a citizen of Russia than I was of Latvia. You know, perhaps, the tale of Mikhail Baryshnikov, the great dancer? He, too, was from Latvia, from Riga, and he, too, went to Russia to dance. But he was shorter than the average male dancer, and despite his great skill he was faced with the prospect of only secondary roles because of it. He also yearned to dance with choreographers from the West, not just Russian ones. His discontent became so great that he defected in the late seventies. I speak of that because even just seven years ago, Russian ballet was still slow to allow outside influences into their ballet. I, too, wanted to dance new things, try new things. I was in constant disagreement with the ballet lords because of it. The knife dance commissioned for me was offered as a compensation, but as much as I like it, it is still a thing very much of the empire, rooted in folk traditions. Vileria was no happier than I with this, but she loved St. Petersburg, and was reluctant to leave it. So when she died, and Legolas suffered so because of it, there was no reason to remain. The Soviet empire was no more, and when my contract with Mariinsky was up at the end of the year, I emigrated with Legolas and came to this country. Perhaps a man and his son who had no home would find one here. And of course, you know the end of that tale, for you and I found each
other, and we fell in love just as happens in the best fairytales, and here we live happily ever after.”

Bard grinned, giving Thran a sideways glance as he sipped his tea. To his surprise, however, Thran didn’t offer a similar grin, but instead looked soberly at Bard. Bard’s smile faltered. What had cast a pall on the end of Thran’s tale?

“So why did I tell you such a long tale of a small dervish of a boy?” Thran asked, his voice as soft as if he asked himself rather than Bard. “To keep my dervish of a husband in bed so that he could heal, yes. But is that the only reason? No. It is one thing to tell the story as the child saw it, and another to tell it as the cynical young man understood it. But I want to be honest and tell it from a new perspective, one I have only recently come to understand.”

Bard nodded. “Okay.”

“Last November, in the middle of snow and cold and aggrieved ligaments, I met you. Last November, in the middle of despair and poverty and worry, you met me. We fell in love, and we are very happy. We have both become so much more together than we are apart, and we have healed much in each other. But you think that is all my doing, because I had the money we used to restore this house to more than its former beauty, and to send our children to a good school far more humane than those I attended, and to eat well. Yet you have brought something much more important to my life, my son’s life, your children’s lives. You are the one who has made you and me and my child and your children into a family, and your house into our home. It is the greatest gift I have ever received, and so much more important than money. I wish you to understand this, so that you come to value your gift as much as I do.”

Bard reddened, and he looked into the depths of his teacup. “I just wanted to make up for everything you’ve done for us, Thran –”

“No, no, no!” Thran barked. His cheeks flushed pink, but it was the color of frustration, not embarrassment, and his angry glare skewered Bard. He set his mug on the nightside table with a bang, briefly balled his hands into fists, then let his open hands fly wide around him. “There is nothing to make up for, do you understand? No, I will not let you continue to say this! Have you not heard anything I have said to you in my tale? Have you not understood it? The small boy infatuated with the dance was blind, and the young cosmopolitan artiste was blind, even the world-renowned dancer was blind, but you, you have no excuse to be so blind! You, the one who has supplied what the story has lacked from the first moment of it, regardless of who tells it! Suka blyad, how can you be so blind?”

“Wha – me?” Bard gaped, hunching down into the pillows.

“No, no, no!” Thran barked. “Yes, you! You, you, you! You see the child who has only the dance, who loses his Mama, who is looked after by a dormitory matron who has seven or more other children to mind, or a dance master who slaps and yells, or a piano teacher who whacks the knuckles with a stick! You see the young man who discovers he is gay and must marry a woman who is also gay! You see a father who must have a babushka to see to his tiny son because he must dance to glorify the state! You see a father who must put his son in boarding school because he must dance to make a living for the son! What is missing in all of that? What?”

“Thran –”

“Do not be evasive! Just say it – say what you know is no part of all I have told you!”

Bard swallowed, and shut his eyes. “Love. Not love of the dance, certainly that was there. But there was nothing else.”
“No! Try again! Think of what I have said to you, Bard. Please. This is very important to me.”

“No, angel. If it’s not love you want me to say, then it’s any sense of belonging to very much.”

“No, no, no!” Thran snorted. “Chert, you are just as blind as I say you are, or you think to cushion me from some blow. What is the saying? ‘I have been in there with the pros?’ Tell me what I want you see.”

“Family,” Bard finally ventured. He didn’t know whether to be happy or distressed when Thran’s face cleared and he nodded. “No family.”

“Finally, finally,” Thran exhaled. “At last you say it. Yes, there is no family in my tale – a dear friend in Vileria, yes, but no real family. Then I meet you because of stupid radiators, and in only a few days, you give me more of what it is to be in a family than I have ever had. We watch the parade, make the soup, share a meal, laugh with the children, even fight a common enemy. I have never had these things, Bard! Never! Only now, after I become part of a family, do I see how soulless my life has been. Vileria was an orphan, and she knew no better than I did, but we did the best we could, though we had no idea what we lacked. Thank the gods I know what is a family now and not then, because the emptiness of my life might have crushed me. But you! You have known these things for so long that you have forgotten every one of them. You do them, but you do not know that you do them, and so you have no idea how much of a gift they are. Then you are a modest man, and so of course you demur and say, oh, no, no, what I do is of no consequence, it is nothing to value, but of course it is, and you are such an idiot that you dare not see it through my eyes! So each time you say that all that matters is that I bring the money, I wince.

“So now at last I am angry, because I will no longer let you dismiss as trivial something that I value so much. You make the best of all of us – me, you, the children – and if you love me – and of course I know you do, lyubov moya – if you love me, then you will never dismiss the family you have made for us ever again! It is worth more than money, more than material things, more than anything! Do you hear me? Do you?”

Thran’s hands fell into his sides, and after such an outpouring of words his chest rose and fell rapidly, as if he’d run a marathon. Maybe he had, to speak so long and so completely about a world that was as alien to Bard as a normal family life was to him.

Bard choked down an uncomfortable knot. In all the months that he and Thran had been together, Bard had not made much of what he did to care for his family. Before he’d met Thran, financial resources had been as ephemeral as a rainbow’s treasure trove, and Thran’s generosity with them had been as much a gift to Bard as the sense of family had been to Thran. Yes, he wasn’t comfortable taking plaudits for doing what he’d always done to see to his family. And maybe taking any credit for their situation was presumptuous and dismissed Thran’s contribution. But listening to Thran’s impassioned words... when he’d devalued his part, he’d also devalued the sense of family that Thran had never had.

What would Bard have without his children or his husband who looked out for one another? Suppose he lived in a house full of people who were just roommates without connection, without affection? How soulless was that?

Just as soulless as the dormitories Thran had lived in for most of his childhood – if he could even call Thran’s youth a childhood.

Bard set his teacup aside, and linked his arm in Thran’s to urge him closer. “I’m sorry I’m such a doofus, angel. I didn’t realize the things you’ve never had, or why they’re important to you. I’m glad that I’ve given you the family that you haven’t had before. But I didn’t create Clan Fyrrnig all on my
own, you know. I may have started it, but you and the children have responded in kind, and that’s what keeps us going.”

Thran leaned back in the pillows, and rested his head on Bard’s shoulder. He exhaled deeply. “You are right. Legolas, Sigrid, Bain, Tilda, and I have taken all that you have given us and returned it, and we have grown strong together. But please, my saint, I want to hear you say just once that you understand how important your part is. I want you to believe in your heart that you are an equal partner in our marriage, our family, our lives. You are the heart of Clan Ffyrnig, and you always will be. We would not be without you.”

Bard caressed Thran’s long, white hair that pooled in his lap. “I can do that, angel. I am your equal partner, and proudly so.”

The corners of Thran’s lips curved up, and he raised his head to brush a kiss on Bard’s cheek. “Thank you, my saint. You make me very happy.”

“You make me very happy, too. Just promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Because I am such a doofus, you have to promise me that you won’t stop gesticulating. That’s how I know you’re serious, and I need to pay attention. I don’t like to distress my angel.”

Thran chuckled. “I love you,” he said and waved his hands for a second or two. “There. Now you know I am serious.”

“I do,” Bard said.

It was the perfect ending to an angel’s fairytale.
Chapter 123

Chapter Summary

The angel and his troupe of cherubs mount a campaign to keep their saint on the path to recovery, and a new week begins.

The knot eased from Thran’s throat. *Suka blyad*, to tell the tale of his childhood had been harder than he expected, even given Bard’s sympathetic hearing. He so desperately wanted his husband to understand why he treasured their family so much, because it loved and nurtured unconditionally, and its affections were not so tenuous that they dissolved when misfortune fell. This family met misfortune as a unified front to rout it, drive it away, reject it utterly. No matter that this family snarked and teased and complained – it also helped with homework, read stories together, tackled chores en masse, and loved fiercely. All of this was thanks to Bard, the heart of the clan –

Thran’s mobile chimed.

Bard had his arm around Thran’s shoulders, and his hand squeezed Thran’s upper arm at the sound. “Uh-oh. What’s up, *cariad*?”

“There is no uh-oh, as you call it. It is merely time for me to get Sigrid from the bistro. At the perfect moment, yes? It offers you the chance to recover from my long tale, and nap for a while.”

Bard winced, just as Thran expected him to. “I’m sorry, angel. I should be the one to get her.”

“And why is that?” Thran gave him a smile. “It is a ten-minute drive, and the bistro smells deliciously of coffee and pastry, and Miss Dís is a pleasant acquaintance. Perhaps I will buy us some scones to enjoy after supper, or buns.”

“Did you have time to do your barre today?”

“Of course I did. The ballet approaches, and I will not miss a day of practice until it is over.”

“At least I can go downstairs and help the children with supper.”

“No, you cannot. This is Sunday, and we are all at home to help with the meal. You must do your part, which is to rest so that tomorrow you can answer the door for the painters, and work on the sketches for your commissions, and so forth. I cannot, because I must be at the studio. The children cannot, because they must be at school. So do not shirk your duty, or you will throw us all into disarray.”

Bard shot him a thwarted look. “That’s low – using my own guilt against me.”

Thran favored his husband with a smug grin. “I am ruthless beyond redemption. So rest, my saint, and I will be back soon with our lioness. Perhaps she will have an enthralling tale for you when you wake up.”

Bard held up his hands in surrender. “Safe journey, then, angel.”

“You, too. Tell the angel in your dreams that I salute him.”
Thran kissed Bard’s temple, then collected the lunch tray, the mugs, and the teapot. He headed down to the kitchen to put the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and rinse the teapot to be ready for the next round of the genial beverage. The children were in the sitting room – Tilda drew, and Legolas and Bain had the chessboard between them.

“I go to collect Sigrid, children,” Thran informed them. “Bard has had his soup, and will nap for a little longer before supper. Have you chosen something for us to make?”

“I wanted Tandoori chicken, because of the spices, but Tilda and Legolas convinced me that maybe the spices wouldn’t be so good for Da’s stomach,” Bain explained. “So what about pot roast with chicken instead of beef? We’ve got a bag of chicken breasts, and a bunch of veg.”

“Yeah,” Tilda looked up from her drawing pad. “We can put it in a casserole, and it’ll get nice and mushy.”

“Mushy?” Thran looked at her askance. “That does not sound good, mushy food.”

“She means the carrots and potatoes will get soft, and the meat will be tender,” Legolas translated with a smile. “I made the same comment about mushy, too.”

“Hmm, that sounds more appetizing, and good for a patient in recovery. It makes broth, yes?”

Bain nodded. “It does. Nice and juicy.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. It seems that you, Ensign Legolas, and Ensign Tilda have picked a suitable dish. If you can start on the vegetables, I will get Sigrid, and be back in about twenty minutes to help. Perhaps it would be nice to have a few scones from the bistro for dessert?”

“That’ll keep Bard from having to bake tomorrow,” Legolas agreed. “We all know he’ll want to, unless we have treats already.”

“Excellent point, Ensign Legolas. So off I go, and will return soon. Bard is supposed to nap now, and he knows he is not allowed downstairs until supper.”

Bain and Tilda exchanged gleeful smiles. “Take your time, Captain,” Bain grinned. “The crew will make sure that the prisoner stays in the brig.”

Tilda couldn’t resist clapping her hands, or grinning in anticipation. Thran headed upstairs to get his jeans, wallet and keys, eager to tease Bard about his jailors’ excitement, but Bard had fallen asleep. Thran’s smile faded. How exhausted Bard must have been to fall asleep so quickly... but he looked peaceful, and breathed easily. Had the hard-working saint finally learned to follow his own advice?

The drive to the bistro was uneventful, though the roads and sidewalks were more crowded than Thran expected. Tourist season had begun, for all of the shops Thran passed seemed busy with visitors out to enjoy the mild, pleasant afternoon. He didn’t find a parking space on the street, so had to resort to the big lot where he’d thwarted Lance’s bid for escape. Was the boy still in police custody? He’d make a call to Dwalin Fundin tomorrow to find out. But for now, he parked the SUV and headed to the main street.

The cheese shop was on the way and open, so he stopped in to buy a little of the Double Gloucester that Tilda liked so much. Then he went into the Blue Mountain Bistro to peruse the display of pastries. He was pleased to see that the shop was busy, with several patrons sitting at the half dozen small tables with plates of sandwiches and pastries, and cups of various coffee beverages. Sigrid bustled over from behind the counter to greet him with a smile.
“Hi, Ada! Are you just waiting for me, or may I bring you a treat?”

“Hello, lioness. I await you at your convenience, yes, but I also want to consider the pastries. Some scones, perhaps, or buns, for after supper? It would keep your Da from his bake pans tomorrow, so that he rests a bit longer. What do you recommend?”

“Ooh, that’s a great idea,” Sigrid nodded. “Everything’s good, but I especially like the cinnamon raisin buns, and the orange current scones. The lattes are good, too, if you’d like to indulge.”

“Mmm, the coffee smells wonderful, but I have had much too much tea this afternoon while I sat with your Da to make sure he stayed in bed. I will try the latte another time. So... perhaps half a dozen cinnamon buns, and a dozen scones?”

“Coming right up,” Sigrid nodded, and got two paperboard boxes to hold Thran’s treats. While she selected the buns, Dís came over to say hello. They chatted cordially for the few moments it took Sigrid to fill Thran’s boxes. Dís rang up his purchase for Sigrid, and passed him his receipt.

“It’s after three, Sigrid, so hang up your apron, and I’ll see you next Saturday. You were a good help today, and I thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Dís,” Sigrid replied, her cheeks turning a bit pink at the praise. What that any surprise? She was her father’s child in many ways, and her reaction to honest appreciation was just one of them. She hastened to tidy up the last crumbs from packing Thran’s treats, then took off her apron.

“See you next Saturday, Miss Dís. Thanks for showing me everything, and you, too, Kane. Have a great rest of the day.”

“Thanks, kid!” The lanky young black man with a full head of dreadlocks clasped at the nape of his neck looked up from the coffee machine to wave. “You’re a champion sandwich slinger!”

Laughing, Sigrid raised a hand in farewell and preceded Thran out the door.

“So a successful day, then?” Thran asked as they proceeded down the sidewalk.

Sigrid grinned. “It was incredibly busy. I had a lot of sandwiches to make, but I did what Da does, and made an assembly line, and we managed okay for having a newbie – me – on the crew. Kane’s one of the college students that Miss Dís has back each summer, except this summer, which is why I got the job. He’s studying archeology, and this summer he’ll be on a dig in Greece. Thank goodness he’s really patient with the newbie, or this would be uncomfortable. There’s not a lot of room behind the counter for us to stay out of each other’s way.”

“Very little,” Thran smiled. “The SUV is in the back lot. The tourists have begun to come out, I see.”


“I did,” Thran said proudly. “And he sleeps now, thank goodness. So I think we may safely let him venture downstairs for supper. The other children have chosen a chicken pot roast to make.”

“Mmm,” Sigrid hummed as they neared the corner to head down to the lot. “Ooh, I ducked inside the Imladris Gallery on my lunch break. All of Da’s sketches are gone, and the owner told me to tell Da that someone’s interested in buying Alexander’s Downfall, and for him to call her to discuss if he wants to sell it.”

“That is wonderful,” Thran murmured, smiling. “I am so happy for him, whether he sells the piece or
not. I cannot wait to see him back fulltime at his art. Yes, he has enjoyed the renovation, but he will enjoy his art more, I think.”

“I barely remember him working on it,” Sigrid said thoughtfully. “I was only seven when he had to stop. So I’m just as excited to see what he does as you are. Gods, I’m glad you and he ran into each other. Everything’s been so amazing since then.”

She linked arms with Thran as they walked to the SUV, and Thran basked in the regard of his teenaged daughter. From what Bard had told him of the sometimes-mercurial temperaments of such creatures, and his own experiences with youthful ballerinas, he appreciated the moment for its rarity as well as its sweetness.

They were soon home, and Sigrid ran upstairs to say hello to her father. She was quickly down again to inform the rest of the family that Bard was still asleep, so everyone helped to put the chicken and vegetables together into a casserole dish, and it went in the oven to roast slowly. Sigrid got out her books to work on her remaining homework, and Tilda went upstairs to crawl in bed for a nap. The house was serene, slowly filling with the inviting scent of supper, so Thran took the chance to venture into the ballroom to practice his pointe work.

Despite the short time that remained before Immortal’s premiere, Thran warmed up slowly and methodically. He could not risk an injury to his feet. They were more battered than they ever had been before, thanks to the stress of bearing all of his weight on such slender toes, and featured callouses, rough skin, even a blister on his smallest left toe. But many ballerinas bore far worse, so he took what care he could to coax his longsuffering feet into the needed steps while keeping the wear and tear on them as minimal as possible. He smirked – how ridiculous was it to do something that ravaged his feet at all? All for an illusion.

Still... it was a spectacular illusion. So on he danced.

The ballroom lacked the fixtures that were so ubiquitous in most ballet studios, the banks of floor-to-ceiling mirrors that kept every dancer ruthlessly aware of the smallest movement. It was a rare luxury to dance without that constant visual feedback, one that usually came only during performance. It allowed Thran the chance to sense each step almost entirely from within, rather than from a chorus of external images. If anything, it sharpened his sense of balance, which was essential for him to dance on pointe without injury. As his body warmed, he segued from practice to rehearsal, carefully tracing the steps that revealed the unexpected passion that the Maid had lit in the lord of the Underworld. He had grown more confident in moving in and out of the pointe work, but he still didn’t venture into the unrestrained passion that would need to suffuse his execution when he performed for an audience. He didn’t trust himself yet to know just how close to the edge of injury he could push his feet, but he didn’t dwell on his reticence; in nine weeks, he’d find his limits.

He went through the entire scene three times with the utmost concentration to ingrain the steps into muscle memory. Yes, he had become more confident of this new skill, thanks to Mme. Morgelle’s guidance, and his feet continued to get stronger. Carefully, carefully he pushed his body to the point of instability, but not past it. He finished the scene for the third time with the dramatic rise to his greatest height, then the precipitous collapse to the floor as the Maid brushed him aside to pursue the ephemeral memory of her Soldier. He held the desolate pose for a pair of heartbeats, the rolled to his back to remove his pointe shoes. It felt good to flex his feet this way and that, and he gave both a thorough massage. Then he rose to complete his cooling stretches. By the time he felt relaxed and centered, the angle of the sunlight coming through the big windows opposite the fireplace revealed that supper was not long off.

As he came through the main room – he hoped that his sofa would appear there before long – the
sound of laughter whispered from the sitting room. Bain and Legolas were amused about something, so he headed for them rather than the kitchen to check on the pot roast as he’d planned. As he came through the door, a small object flew across the room and through the open door to the half bath to bounce on the tiled floor.

“Almost, but not good enough, doofus,” Legolas chortled.

“Like you can do better, smart ass,” Bain snarked back.

“Like I can, and you’re the smart ass,” Legolas shot back, snickering. “Come on, it’s my turn – oh! Um, hello, Papa.”

Thran eyed the boys crouching on the floor under the windows, and put his hands on his hips. “What do you do, and what is this doofus and smart ass?”

Bain tried to slide something behind him, but Thran caught the movement, and beckoned with his hand for Bain to produce the mysterious item. The boy produced a small catapult made of wooden popsicle sticks, a plastic spoon, a spring clothespin, various small nails and tacks, and a rubber band. Legolas unsuccessfully tried to put his hand over a small pile of dried beans, but moved away when Thran waved him away. Shamefacedly, Bain put the catapult in Thran’s outstretched hand, and Legolas bit his lip as the two boys exchanged looks.

Thran gave an experimental flick to the little device, enough to make the spoon fly up. Ah, the boys had made some sort of game out of flinging dried legumes into the half bath. He gave the tiled floor a look – yes, a handful of beans scattered far and wide over the floor. Thran squatted beside the boys, selected a bean to load into the spoon, and sighted carefully before releasing the clothespin that would fling the spoon forward. His bean rose in a graceful arc to bounce across the half bath floor.

“Very inventive. I assume this game awards points for how the beans land.”

The boys exchanged relieved looks, and launched into an explanation of how bounces on the floor were worth more than those on the walls, and how knocking an opponent’s bean off a tile added points, but getting theirs knocked off subtracted them. He made a few more exploratory shots before he looked at the boys.

“This would be a better game with castles to shoot at – perhaps made of cards or blocks,” he decided.

“We’ve got some cards somewhere,” Bain grinned with excitement, happy that he wasn’t about to get into trouble for flinging his father’s dried legumes all over.

“Fling the beans, but no doofus and smart ass,” Thran gave both boys a look. “And do not put the beans back in the pantry bin. Put them in a bag so you can use them for another game later. I do not want to eat them, and neither does anyone else.”

“Yes, Papa; yes, Thran,” the boys murmured in subdued tones. Thran smothered a grin.

“‘Yes, Papa; yes, Thran,’” he echoed. “So you reveal that you knew you should not call each other these things, nor should you try to sneak used beans back into the pantry, but you intended to do so. I am not as ignorant as you think.”

Legolas started to say something, but Bain shook his head quickly and sawed his hand back and forth over his throat. Thran didn’t resist a laugh at that, and launched one more bean into the half bath.
“Bain teaches the truth of an old adage, synok. ‘It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.’ Consider it as the two of you clean up the beans before supper.”

“Yes, Thran; yes, Papa.”

The boys crawled over the bathroom floor to collect their missiles, so Thran went into the kitchen to check on the pot roast. Yes, it was ready to serve. He took the pot roast out of the oven to rest as Bard had taught him, and turned off the oven. Now he would go upstairs to change out of his dancewear, and rouse Bard for their meal –

“Ada, you’ve got to see this,” Sigrid appeared in the kitchen. At the sound of the boys’ voices, she stuck her head into the sitting room, then looked back in curiosity at Thran. “What’re they doing?”

“They clean up from a game,” Thran waved a hand.

“Oh. Um, anyway, you’ve got to see Da upstairs. It’s so sweet.”

“I was about to wake him for supper. All we must do is to assemble salads.”

“What, no biscuits?” Sigrid gave him a surprised look, and turned the oven back on. “I can do those. Go upstairs and wake up Da, but make sure you appreciate the cuteness factor before you do, okay?”

“I will consider this cuteness factor,” Thran agreed. “Will I know it when I see it?”

“Oh, you’ll know it right off,” Sigrid grinned. “It’s cute enough to take a picture of, which is what I did. I’ll start the biscuits, so you’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“Okay,” Thran agreed. He stuck his head in the sitting room. “Bain? Legolas? Come wash your hands, and help with the supper. We need fruit and a green salad before we sit down at the table.”

“Okay,” the boys chorused, so Thran headed upstairs on quiet feet, hoping to catch Bard in whatever this cute thing was. He needn’t have worried; the bedroom doors were open, and there was Bard with Tilda beside him, both of them sound asleep. As Sigrid said, it was an adorable tableau, and Thran pulled out his mobile to take a picture of the pair as they slumbered. He went into the closet to change from his dancewear to comfortable leggings and tee and socks, then into the bathroom to rinse his face and comb his hair. When he emerged, Bard was blinking sleepily at his daughter nestled at his side.

“I seem to have acquired a fellow hibernator,” he quipped, which drew Thran’s chuckle.

“Kukla takes very seriously her part to help keep her Da in bed to rest,” Thran observed with a smile, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorjamb.

“I didn’t hear her come in,” Bard admitted. “Sound asleep, I was.”

“More dreams?”

Bard thought about it, but shook his head. “Not that I remember this time. I feel much better.”

“That is good,” Thran agreed. “The crew has decided to allow the patient out of the brig – I mean the medical bay – to come downstairs for supper. Or if the patient prefers, I will bring a tray supper to him.”

“Oh, I’m ready to get out of bed,” Bard avowed. “Um, all I’ve got on is this tee, so in deference to the young one, would you please bring me some underwear and pants?”
“Of course,” Thran agreed, and rummaged through Bard’s dresser for socks and underwear, which he handed over with Bard’s sleep pants. His husband eased into them before he rubbed Tilda’s back gently to wake her.

“Little doll? Time to get up for supper,” he urged.

Tilda stretched. “Supper? It’s not time for supper, Da. It’s time for breakfast.”

“Usually it is when you get out of bed. But this was just a nap, little doll, and it really is time for supper.”

“But that’s silly...” Tilda yawned, sitting up, but when she saw Thran and Bard, she looked out the window, and blinked with more alertness. “Oh, I guess it is time for supper. It’s still Sunday.”

“It is,” Bard agreed. “Go wash your hands, and I’ll do the same, and then we’ll go down for supper.”

“Okay, Da. Hi, Ada,” Tilda murmured, as she clambered out of bed and went yawning and stretching into the children’s bathroom.

Bard rolled out, passing Thran with a smile as he ducked into the bathroom. “Everything go all right while I was asleep?” he asked, when he came out again.

“I fetched Sigrid, buns, scones, and cheese, I did my pointe work, Sigrid did her homework, and the boys invented a game that involves a catapult.”

“Eh, Bain’s catapult,” Bard’s smile was full of remembrance. “I showed Bain how to build that when he was in fourth grade. It was for a school project about the Medieval era. It caused a bit of an arms race, because in the next week the things appeared all over school flinging one thing or another. I don’t think the school staff appreciated the children’s enthusiasm quite as much as they could have.”

Thran snorted in laughter. “I appreciate their chagrin. Be careful when you use the half bath. The floor was the target practice.”

“Typical,” Bard rubbed the back of his head before giving Thran a sideways look. “What was the ammunition?”

“Dried beans. Do not worry, svyatoy moy. I told them not to put the beans back in the pantry.”

“Killjoy,” Bard grinned. “You’ve caught on, so that means you’re no more fun than I am anymore.”

Thran put a limp wrist to his forehead and pretended to sigh in despair. “I struggle to survive such desolation. Now, come, Sigrid has made hot biscuits for us, and we have chicken pot roast, and salad, and fruit, as well as scones and buns.”

“A feast, then,” Bard rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “It’ll be nice to taste someone else’s cooking for a change.”

Sigrid’s biscuits had just come out of the oven when Bard and Thran came downstairs. They quickly sat down to supper, and Bard was most complimentary to the day’s cooks. He ate well, and didn’t seem to tire too quickly after the meal, so he was allowed to sit quietly on the sofa in the sitting room with his tea and scone while Thran and the children took care of the kitchen. Afterwards, as everyone gathered in the sitting room, he and Thran urged the children to make sure their backpacks were ready for the new school week that started tomorrow, and that their lunch bags were clean and ready.
“I will get up with the children tomorrow,” Thran told Bard. “You sleep in a little, because the painters come tomorrow to work on the outside of the house, and you will want to be well for that.”

“Don’t argue, Da,” Sigrid cut Bard off before he’d only just opened his mouth. “There are five of us who can help with the lunches and porridge and such, so there’s no reason why you can’t have a day off. You’ve got to hurry up and get well, so the rest of us can slack off again!”

That brought a round of laughter, not the least of which was Bard’s. “I see what I’m good for,” he teased, but without malice.

“Everything, of course,” Sigrid shot back. “So, no bus run tomorrow, no baking because we already have buns and scones, and no house stuff. We took a vote – you can deal with the painters, as long as you don’t actually paint anything, and you can do your art stuff. That’s it.”

“Yeah, Da, and if you don’t behave, you’ll be restricted to the same again on Tuesday,” Bain shot.

“Yeah, Da; yeah, Bard,” Tilda and Legolas affirmed.

“Okay, okay,” Bard held up his hands. “I appreciate you all looking out for me. I feel much better, and I’ll be quiet tomorrow to make sure I stay that way. But that doesn’t mean I can’t tell you all to start cycling through the bathroom for your showers. It’ll be a busy day tomorrow for all of you but Bain, because you’ve missed a day or two.”

The children scattered to see to their backpacks, and Tilda went to take the first turn in the shower. Bard wasn’t inclined to get back into bed yet, so Thran brought him his drawing pad and pencils, and when Tilda reappeared after her shower, she settled beside her father to practice her sketching.

When the children’s bedtimes drew near, Thran ran upstairs to see if Legolas had corralled all of his homework in his backpack.

“Yes, Papa, it’s all ready,” the boy pointed to his backpack leaning against the wall by the door.

“Good, synok,” Thran nodded. “You should catch up easily from your cold. You understand all that you were assigned, yes?”

He nodded. “Sigrid explained one bit of the math, so that helped. I knew all the rest. Um... Papa?”

Thran sat down on the bed beside Legolas and gave him his full attention, for the boy’s expression was a frown of concern. “What is it, Legolas?”

“Is Bard all right now? His flu is gone? He’s not just saying so, is he?”

Thran shook his head. “No, I think it is mostly done with him. He is strong, so he recovers quickly.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“You were concerned?”

Legolas nodded. “Because of what Bain said when he heard that Bard took Kukla to the doctor. He said they had to go to the clinic, not a doctor. What clinic? One in the city? Is their doctor there? It would have been a long way to go for Kukla.”

Thran sighed. “When Bard and the other children lived in the city, they could not afford to go to anything but the free clinic, Legolas. They were like many poor families, without medical insurance. But now that we are a family, we all have medical insurance, which means that we all can go to the doctor when we are sick.”
“Bard, too? Not just the children?”

Thran nodded. “Bard, too. So if he were still sick, I would take him to my doctor. But he recovers, and if we can convince him to take the next day or so slowly, he will be fine.”

Legolas considered that, and nodded. “So... they were poor.”

Thran smiled. “They had little money, yes. But they were rich in everything else, yes? They were a family before we joined them, and now they teach us well how to be one. That is worth much more than money.”

“I think so,” Legolas agreed. “I... just didn’t understand, exactly.”

“It is why they are frugal, and so competent at so many things, because they have had to rely only on themselves and very little else to do things. That is why most of their things are not new. It was much less expensive for them to buy used things, things they could fix or make new again.”

“Like the fountain in the solarium, or the CD player, or the TV.”

“Exactly.”

“But... those things don’t seem so bad.”

“They are not bad, not at all. In fact, if Bard had not bought these things, they might well have been thrown away, which would be wasteful. Not everything needs to be new.”

Legolas chuckled. “Bain says shoes, underwear, and food need to be new, and not much else. He’s right.”

“He is. So settle yourself for tomorrow, and I will see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Papa. I love you.”

“I love you, too, synok. Sleep well.”

“You, too.”

After Thran bid the rest of the children goodnight, he went downstairs to make the rounds around the house to make sure all was secure. Bard was still in the sitting room, but he had laid aside his drawing things, and was about to head upstairs.

“Do you want the shower first, cariad?” Bard asked, pausing as Thran came into the room.

“We can shower together, or if you would rather go first, that is fine,” Thran shrugged. “I have made the rounds, and the security system is set.”

“I don’t think I’m still contagious, but I understand if you’d rather avoid what’s left of whatever I’m carrying.”

Thran snorted. “I intend to sleep beside you tonight as I did last night, so the shower is no closer than that.”

“True. Together is fine, then.”

“I will start. The children are all in bed, so say your goodnights, and then join me.”
Bard suited actions to words, so before long they were both clean, dry, and in bed. Bard’s temperature was normal again, which in the light of Legolas’s worry, reassured Thran that Bard truly was over the worst of his flu.

“I am glad you feel so much better,” Thran murmured, nuzzling Bard’s hair.

“I do. Thanks for seeing to everything so well. The children, picking up Sigrid, and the food. Supper was delicious.”

“It is not true, then, what the old adage says,” Thran snickered. “The one about too many cooks spoil the broth. We had five, and the broth did not suffer.”

“Oh, that’s because you all proved a different adage, angel. I bet that each of you worked on a different part – the old divide and conquer.”

“We did. So we are set for tomorrow. Once the children go to school, I will go to the studio, and you will see to the painters. How long do you think it will take them?”

“I hope no more than a week for the exterior. I don’t know if they’ll want to dip the doors here or take them into their shop, but there are a lot of doors. We’ll get to them when we get to them.”

“I am excited to see the exterior painting done. Then Sam can restore our gardens, and we will be complete.”

“More or less, we will. We’ll be out of renovation mode and into weekend do it yourself, like half of the regular world.”

“They will paint the barn and the carriage house, too?”

“They will. The whole place will look like rich people live here.”

Thran grinned. “Rich people do live here, Bard, and I do not talk of money. We are a rich family, and we are very happy.”

Bard’s hand strayed down to rub that special spot at Thran’s hip that never failed to drench him in blissful relaxation. “We are, angel. Thanks to both of us.”

Thran smiled in the dark.

Finally. Bard had finally gotten it.

* * *

The alarm went off – Monday morning, six a.m., the start of a new week. This morning, it was Thran who padded into the bathroom first, while Bard luxuriated in bed. Once Thran headed downstairs to get the children’s breakfast and lunches ready, Bard shut his eyes, and willed himself back to sleep. But sleep was the farthest thing from his mind – he’d been in bed for two days, and he was too alert to stay there any longer. He went into the bathroom, pulled on his clothes, and went downstairs to join Thran in the kitchen.

“Tcha, Bard. You were supposed to sleep this morning,” Thran chastised.
Shrugging, Bard snared the loaf of sandwich bread and laid out slices atop the waxed paper that Thran had lined up on the kitchen island. “I did try, angel, I promise. But I’m ready to be out of bed, so there’s no reason why I can’t help you with the lunches today. Or would you rather I start the porridge?”

“The porridge is on,” Thran nodded at the stove. “And the tea. So let us make the sandwiches.”

They settled into their comfortable morning routine to pack the children’s lunches, and Bard made a quick omelet for two to give them a hearty start to the day. As the children came down, each one delivered one admonition or another about Bard taking it easy for the day. He took the comments in good humor as he wrote a steady stream of absence excuses as well as permission slips to miss the day’s sport if they felt it was necessary. He reminded them to meet at their usual spot by the buses to make sure they knew who would go home early and who would stay for sport. Once that was all sorted, Bard let everyone persuade him to let Thran see them off at the bus stop, so after hugs and the old saw about being off and leaving, too, he waved goodbye to them from the mudroom door. He returned to the uncharacteristically silent kitchen to see what he could assemble for Thran’s lunch.

He had a lot to do today, even if little of it was physical labor. First, of course, he’d await the arrival of the painters. How exciting would it be to see their old house sparkle on the outside? In a week or so, that would come to pass, and maybe then he’d believe that their renovation was almost done.

Next on the list – call Bilbo. At supper last night, Sigrid had relayed the message from Celebrían at the Ilithien Gallery that someone wanted to buy Alexander’s Downfall, and he was seriously considering it. He’d held on to it because it was the last piece he’d made. He and the children had moved to the city by then, but he’d stubbornly kept working on weekends as best a widower with three children younger than seven could. He hadn’t had a client, and his material was scrap rebar scavenged from a construction site. It had been an act of will to turn refuse into art, and when he hadn’t had the money to market it, he’d put it in the barn with the other pieces he’d managed to hold onto, as if he could bank them towards a better future. Against all odds, he was back at work now. He had Rahmiel waiting to be cast, and sketches, and commissions, so it wouldn’t be so hard to let the last sculpture from his previous life go. He’d see what Bilbo had to say about it, and then decide.

After he called Bilbo, he had sketches to do. He could even start on the clay model for Hal’s tree. Wouldn’t that be great to do so in the newly finished solarium? Bard’s fingers itched to tease a beautiful tree out of Hal’s tale of lightning strikes and an emerging spring.

First, though, a dancer’s lunch.

The larder was depleted, but Bard managed to cobble enough together to make Thran a solid lunch – chicken from the leftover pot roast, a selection of mixed vegetables, the last pear, and some cheese with the last of the wheat crackers. Tomorrow, he’d have to get to the market to stock up. He got out another package of chicken to roast for Thran, and a couple of steaks to thaw for tonight’s supper. They had sweet potatoes, so he could roast those, and he had enough vegetables for a stir-fry, so no one would go hungry tonight. As he set enough potatoes out on the counter from the pantry, Thran reappeared through the mudroom door.

“I’ve got your lunch done, and supper planned,” he said. “I’ll need to restock tomorrow at the market, but I’ve got today covered.”

Thran took the mug of tea that Bard handed him and took a sip. “Thank you, lyubov moya. I was not happy for you to be sick, by any means, but I still enjoyed the chance to cook with my stalwart Lieutenant Bain. We got on well.”

“I enjoyed my time with Legolas, too. Neither of us has had a lot of one-on-one time with them
before. We need to make a point to have more of it, for us as well as them.”

“I agree, very much. But now, I must dress and be off to the ballet. The next weeks before the premiere will require very long hours and careful plans so that I do not burn myself out before the premiere. Please, you must speak up if I become too obsessed, so that we do not have another meltdown. Promise me, lyubov moya.”

“I learned my lesson, Thran. We have to stay in sync.”

“We do. And you must not work yourself so badly again, either. I want us both to survive Immortal’s premiere to enjoy your success, and the children. And I want us finally to have time to prowl the shops from high to low to find treasures for our house.”

“I look forward to that, too,” Bard stroked Thran’s glute. “So go tackle the ballet world, and I’ll wrangle the painters and my sketchbook and such.”

“Have you decided what to do about Alexander’s Downfall?”

“I’ll call Bilbo this morning as soon as he gets in to see what he thinks. If he likes the idea and the price is right, I’ll sell it. I’ve still got a lot of rebar in the barn if I want to make another one, and it’d be nice to make a sale after so long.”

Thran enfolded him in a hug. “That is wonderful, Bard. So I will dress, and be back in a few minutes.”

By the time Bard washed the few dishes remaining on the counter, and put the chicken breasts for Thran’s lunches in a pot to simmer, his husband was dressed and ready to leave. He stowed his lunch in his dance bag, and bid Bard farewell.

“Remember, do not bake, and do not renovate, and do not clean out the barn today,” he admonished Bard. “Give yourself one more day to recuperate, Bard, please? And take a nap this afternoon.”

“Mmm, naps,” Bard wiggled his eyebrows at Thran. I can’t wait for some nice, warm spring day when we can nap together – assuming we don’t have other things to do.”

“We will christen our solarium very soon,” Thran purred, his lips twitching with anticipation. “That will be most divine. I will make sure we both need a nap after that.”

“So will I.” Bard leaned in to brush a kiss on Thran’s jaw. “So off with you, angel. Go soar above the dance floor.”

Thran returned Bard’s kiss with one of his own, then he made his way out. Bard enjoyed a few seconds of anticipation about their upcoming adventure in the solarium, smiling as he checked the chicken. Satisfied that it was simmering nicely, he headed upstairs to brush his teeth. Then he made the rounds to haul all the dirty laundry that lurked in hampers and baskets down to the mudroom.

Maybe he wasn’t supposed to bake, renovate, or shop for groceries, but there was no reason why he couldn’t push a few buttons on the washer and dryer. Given how big the pile of dirty clothes on the floor was, he wondered if anyone in the family had anything clean left to wear.

He had everything sorted, the first load washed and in the dryer, and the second load in the washer when a knock on the front door echoed through the house. The painters were here! He greeted Darla and her crew, and soon they began to drape big tarps on the ground around the house to catch all of the chipped paint they were about to strip from the house. They wouldn’t start on rounding up the interior doors today, as the weather was forecast to be nice for several days, and Darla wanted to get as much done outside while they had the cooperation of Mother Nature. Bard made his call to Bilbo
to tell him about the interest in his rebar knot sculpture – yes, his agent thought that was wonderful, and promised to look into a suitable price and call him back. After that, he tended to the laundry and his sketches to the tune of rasps, scrapers, and sanders, and scaffolding rose on the side of the house. He ate a hearty lunch, and made a point of resting afterwards on the sofa, even dropping off for a few minutes until the dryer beeped, signaling the completion of the next load of laundry. Once he got that folded and distributed, he carried Rahmiel into the ballroom and carefully set him on the garden table there so he could use the swivel base to set up the board for Hal’s tree. That was another thing he had to put on his list of chores – he had to visit the aquarium store to look for a rock to make the base, and failing that, he had to locate a mineral dealer. In between more loads of laundry, Bard got another board and wire for the armature from the barn, and happily worked to set everything in place. It was exciting to start a new piece, and soothing to feel the wire and clay under his fingers again. Before he knew it, Tilda and Sigrid were coming through the door.

“Wow, Da!” Sigrid called as she and her sister came into the solarium. “There’s scaffolding all over the side of the house, and paint chips on these big tarp…”

“And that scritch-scritch-scritch sounds like squirrels fussing,” Tilda joined in.

“That won’t last long,” Bard explained. “They have to chip off all the loose paint so that the new paint doesn’t flake off. So the house will look a little worse for a bit before it looks better. I take it Legs and Bain are at sport?”

Tilda nodded. “Legs doesn’t have to run around for archery so much, so he wanted to stay. I didn’t feel like jumping so much today. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Yes, I didn’t feel like running today, either,” Sigrid agreed. “But so many people are still sick that there wasn’t a stink about not being there. I heard Lewis say that the meet this Wednesday was canceled because it’s with two other schools in the county, and they’re pretty badly hit with the flu, too. Oh, there was some good news, though. The college thing on Friday? So many people were sick that they’re doing another one in two weeks. So I didn’t miss much after all.”

“That’s great, sweetness. And your teacher got your paper all right?”

“She did. So I didn’t lose any points for not turning it in on time.”

“What about you, little doll? How was your day?”

“I have new French words, of course. And a new drawing assignment. I have to draw something mechanical.”

“Mechanical?” Sigrid looked at her sister. “You mean like a television or a mobile phone?”

“Those are technological. I mean mechanical, like a pair of pliers, or an eggbeater, or something like that.”

“We have lots of things like that to choose from,” Bard grinned. “The barn’s full of stuff, and so is the kitchen.”

“I thought maybe an egg whisk? Or that funny shaped bottle opener with the twisty thing on the bottom.”

“Oh the wine bottle opener,” Bard guessed. He led them into the kitchen and pulled out said object from the drawer next to Thran’s wine fridge. “This? It’d be a good one.”

“Yes, that thing.” Tilda took the bottle opener and pulled the two lever arms up as far as they would
go, which exposed the corkscrew. “It looks like a space ship or something.”

“Have at,” Bard agreed. “Just make sure you tell Ada you have it, in case he wants to use it.”

“Okay, Da,” Tilda nodded.

The girls cleaned out their backpacks as Bard pulled another load of laundry out of the dryer, then settled in the sitting room to get as much of their homework done before supper as they could. Bard joined them on the sofa to doodle ideas about the steampunk orrery, as if each planet was the head of the god or goddess. He had to remember to talk to the client about how many moons to include, and if Pluto was to be included or not, so he scribbled a note to that effect on the side of his current sketch. They passed a pleasant hour or so, interrupted only when Darla knocked on the door to say she and her crew were done for the day and would be back again tomorrow early. Bain and Legolas returned home shortly thereafter, and before the children had gotten the cheese and crackers out and settled around the kitchen table, the mudroom door opened again.

“Thran?” Bard called.

“Yes, I am here.” Thran bustled into the kitchen, his face alive with excitement. “Hello, children! Hello, Bard! Ah, I have so much news today! Wait until you hear it all!”

“Is it good news, Papa?” Legolas asked. “It must be, because you look very happy.”

“I am, Legolas,” Thran said, giving his son a big hug. “In three days, we reach a big milestone in the drive to stage Immortal. We move our rehearsal to the Imladris Academy auditorium. This is a big step! But that is not the only news I have.”

As the family gathered around the table, Bard was not the only one eager to hear more.
Chapter 124

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig takes a big step.

Thran’s eyes sparkled as he let his dance bag slide off his shoulder and drop beside the children’s backpacks. His excitement brought a smile to Bard’s face as he took his usual seat at the sitting room end of the table.

“Pass the cheese and crackers down to Thran,” Bard encouraged. “He looks like he wants to celebrate.”

“I do, but only a bit of cheese, thank you,” Thran said, taking a small slice of the Double Gloucester when the board had made it down to him. “Ah, some of the grapes, yes, please. So I will tell you my news. Círdan, the set designer for Immortal, told us today that the stage is well under way at your school, children. The base is very simple – a very large circle. Two thirds will be for the troll market, and the rest will be bare, so that we can project films on its wall for the other scenes. While the troll market part will take time to finish, the partition between it and the other third is done, and we may practice on it in just a few days. On Thursday, UVB will be at the school for a special assembly for the students, to explain what we do. It will introduce all of us who will soon be among you after your classes are done, and we will dance a little, to show what all the excitement will be about. I am most excited.”

“Ooh, nice!” Sigrid exclaimed. “Will you dance something from Immortal?”

“We plan to showcase the troll market, which includes many dance forms, not just ballet. Some modern, tap, hip hop, belly dance, others. The dancers will perform just a few minutes of each kind of dance. At the end, when all of the dancers will be onstage in our different costumes, we will do the zombie dance from Thriller. It is an old dance, but everyone knows of it, and likes it. I look forward to it.”

“Zombies!” Bain and Legolas crowed, grinning widely. “That’ll be great!”

“That ought to create a buzz,” Bard grinned. “The whole village will talk about nothing else the next day.”

“Exactly as we hope,” Thran nodded. “It ought to generate a lot of interest in all of the village festival, not only Immortal, so that both will be successful.”

“So we’ll get to see all of your company dance at the assembly?” Tilda asked. “Miss Charisse and Mr. Luka and all the others, too?”

“You will see us all,” Thran confirmed. “With our most spangly costumes.”

“Goodie!” Tilda clapped her hands. “That’ll be a much better assembly than the last one.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes, and Bain grimaced. It was left to Legolas to explain to Bard and Thran. “It won’t take much to be better than the last one. It was about the schedule for next month’s final exams. No one wants to think about final exams!”
“UVB won’t have to try very hard to do better than that,” Bard agreed. “But I know they’ll will put on a good show regardless.”

“We will,” Thran nodded firmly. “We want the students to be excited – about Immortal, of course, but also proud that their school will host it, and of course about the whole festival. Perhaps they will tell their families about what they have seen, and encourage them to visit.”

“I hope so,” Sigrid leaned over her elbows on the table. “Miss Dís told me on Sunday that most of the village shops count on the tourist traffic during the festival for a big part of their yearly income. One year, it rained all week, and a lot of the shops, especially the food ones, lost a lot of money because no one came. The artists and the trinket shops could eventually sell the extra stock they bought, but the bistros and food vendors couldn’t because food doesn’t keep.”

Thran held up crossed fingers. “Then we must hope for good weather, children. For the bistros, the artists, and the trinket shops, as well as Immortal.”

“That was all exciting news,” Legolas said, reaching across the table for another slice of cheese and a cracker. “We have exciting news, too. Or did Sigrid and Kukla already tell you?”

“I forgot,” Tilda admitted. “I guess you did, too, Sigrid?”

“I was so focused on getting through my homework, Til,” Sigrid said. “So no, Legs, we didn’t say anything. Go ahead.”

“Okay. We got our summer camp schedules today,” Legolas informed Bard and Thran. “They’re not final, as no one’s paid anything yet, but it shows whether we got into the ones we wanted. I got into the Gondors’ fencing intensive, and the school’s archery one, too, so I’m happy.”

“I got into the soccer one,” Bain seconded.

“I got into both the afternoon driver’s ed one and writing, but I’ll have to pick one, because driver’s ed is at the same time as writing. There may be a second writing one after the first one, because there is a lot of interest, but I don’t know that yet,” Sigrid explained. “Did you get your drawing one, Til?”

“I didn’t apply to the drawing one,” Tilda said. “Mr. Rohan said that I’m already learning everything in the drawing one in his class, so I should do one of the other art ones instead. So I chose pottery, and I got into that one.”

“Sounds like you all hit the jackpot,” was Bard’s comment. “Let Thran and me look at your schedules, to make sure we can cover everything. Thran’s going to be very busy until the festival, and after that we don’t know yet. We’d hoped maybe later in the summer that we could do some day trips, like maybe a rafting trip, or a railroad excursion, or maybe some museum trips into the city.”

“Rafting? You mean, whitewater, and all that?” Bain looked gleeful. “That’d be awesome!”

“Nothing too battering,” Bard cautioned. “Thran’s got to take care of himself so he can dance, and you and Legolas have to so you can take advantage of your sports.”

“I don’t want to be thrown out of a raft into a river,” Tilda looked dubious. “So nothing too scary for me, either.”

“I’m good with any of it,” Sigrid shrugged. “The train sounds neat, too.”

They talked a little longer about their summer plans, then started supper. Bard tossed sweet potato wedges with olive oil and herbs and put them into the oven to roast, while Thran cut up veg for the
wok. The steaks went on the grill, the fruit went into a bowl, and soon Clan Ffyrnig sat down to a hearty supper. To Bard’s relief, all of the children looked to have recovered from the worst of their colds and flu, though Legolas still nursed a deep cough that would likely take another week or two to pass. Given how much the boy ate, though, his cough clearly hadn’t interfered with his appetite. They finished off the last of Miss Dís’s cinnamon buns for dessert. After cleanup, Thran and Bard retreated to the sitting room while the children claimed the kitchen table for their homework.

“You should be a lawyer,” Thran exhaled as he sat beside Bard.

“Oh, gods, don’t wish that on me,” Bard mimicked a shudder. “I have no head for all those whereases and wherefores. What makes you think I should do something so ludicrous?”

Thran snickered and sampled his bun before answering. “Because I see the empty laundry hampers upstairs, and all the clean clothes in drawers and closets. You were supposed to rest today, at least a little. Instead, you ran the Clan Ffyrnig laundry single-handed. Of course you did – I did not exhort you not to do so. You exploited the loophole, like any good lawyer.”

Bard’s grin held no remorse. “Laundry isn’t nearly so hard as renovation, or barn cleaning, or even baking. I did everything else I was supposed to do – I called Bilbo, who’s working on a price for Alexander’s Downfall. I greeted the painters, and admired their expertise to put up a scaffold and scrape paint. I set up my stuff to work on Hal’s tree in the solarium – by the way, Rahmiel’s in the ballroom. I needed the base for Hal’s tree, and I figured Rahmiel would be okay in the ballroom rather than the main room. Eventually your new sofa will arrive, so I didn’t want to have to move him out of the way when it came. So laundry wasn’t such a big deal. It’s not as if we didn’t need clean stuff. That reminds me – your dance things are still in the washer. I have to hang them on the line.”

“I will get them,” Thran insisted. “I will do them now, then I will tell you what other news I received today.”

“Oh?” Bard looked at his husband with curiosity. “Good news, or bad?”

“Both good. I will hang up my things, then I will tell you. No, sit. Work on your sketches. This will take me only a minute or two.”

When Thran pointed firmly at Bard’s sketchbook on the fruit crate coffee table, Bard took it up with uncharacteristic meekness, but he ruined the effect when he stuck his tongue out at his husband. Laughing, Thran returned the gesture, then got up to see to his laundry. Bard doodled a quick sketch of an orb that suggested Mercury’s head, complete with winged hat and caduceus. Another of Neptune included a beard of seaweed and a trident. Jupiter had storm clouds for hair and beard, and a crown of lightning bolts. By that time, Thran was back to rejoin him on the sofa.

“Ah, for the orrery,” Thran sat close, looping his left arm in Bard’s right to sit close enough to view the sketches. “You will make the planets as faces?”

“That’s one design,” Bard nodded. “I don’t know if the client will like that whimsy, but I’ve got another idea that will show the planet surfaces more realistically, as they appear in the Hubble space telescope, but the metal bits that hold the orbs will have the mythological signs of each planet and some feature, such as Neptune’s trident, Venus’s mirror and the clamshell, and so on, all done in steampunk style. Both will be fun to do, so I’m not particular as to which he chooses.”

“Whichever one he does not choose, you can use the design for another piece,” Thran suggested.
“Absolutely. I kind of hope he decides he wants the planet surface one. The faces would make a great totem pole.”

“Ooh, my saint, they would!” Thran agreed, his arm tightening on Bard’s in his excitement. “So we will wish that he wants scientific endeavor rather than mythological whimsy.”

“We will,” Bard chuckled. “So what other news came your way today?”

Thran dropped his voice to a low murmur. “Kell called about our adoption questions.”

Bard locked eyes with his husband. “And?”

Thran smiled. “It will not be hard for us. New York recognizes our marriage, of course, so it also recognizes our right to adopt. In our case, because we are already legally married, we want to adopt our stepchildren – I Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda, and you Legolas. Normally, the main concern would be to obtain a release of parental rights on the parts of the children’s mothers, but as they are both beyond this world, we do not have to do that. So we complete some forms that Kell will provide to us. Bain, Legolas, and Sigrid are over twelve, so they must each complete a form that states their agreement to the adoption. Tilda does not have to complete a form, but I would want her to agree to it just as the other children do. We file the forms at the same county office where we were married, and then we wait for the legal wheels to slowly grind to a conclusion.”

A grin spread across Bard’s face. “That’s all we have to do? That’s great!”

“I am just as excited,” Thran agreed, squeezing Bard’s arm. “Kell has sent me the forms we need. So we must talk with the children separately – you with yours, and I with Legolas, and see how they feel about it. We will tell them that we want to do this because we love them, and because we want them to be protected in the eyes of the law in all circumstances.”

“Exactly,” Bard murmured. “If something happens, we want to keep everyone together, not scattered in foster homes. I think Sigrid and Tilda will be okay with it, hands down. I hope both of the lads will.”

“When do you want to talk to the children?”

“Sooner rather than later. What do you think?”

“I agree. Perhaps after they finish their homework? When Legolas goes upstairs to shower, I will go with him, and then you can talk to Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda down here.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Bard nodded. “Oh, wait – you said you found out something else?”

“Tcha, I nearly forgot,” Thran tsked. “I did not want to say it in front of the children –”

“Hmm, then it must be about Lance,” Bard breathed with a grimace.

“It is,” Thran’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I talked to Mr. D today. Lance has not been out of police custody. The seriousness of what he did was enough that he narrowly escaped being charged as an adult. But because of his age – he is only fifteen – he will be placed in one of the wilderness programs that Mr. D told me about. It is in the Catskill Mountains, some two hundred miles away, secure, quite remote, and well staffed with counselors and so forth to encourage the children to take a different tack. He has been told that his behavior in this program is all that stands between him and the adult criminal justice system. He will be placed in this program in a few days. So he will be well away from us for some time to come.”
Bard let a long breath go. “That’s good news. I hope he can turn himself around, but more than that, I’m just glad he won’t be anywhere near us, particularly Sigrid. Why he fixated on her when Bain, Legs, you and I – even Tilda – also fought against him bothers me.”

Thran’s jaw tightened. “Because she is what he calls an ‘uppity bitch,’ Bard. She not only stood up to him, but she physically fought him, and she defeated him. He cannot countenance it.”

“If he’d left Legolas alone, if he hadn’t attacked her, she wouldn’t have laid a hand on him,” Bard protested.

“I agree. But he thinks his way is the only way, and no female should cross him, or so Mr. D told me,” Thran replied. When Bard tensed, his husband rubbed his thigh in consolation. “No, I agree with you, Bard. But Lance does not. Let us hope that this wilderness program can change his mind.”

“Agreed.” Bard tried to relax the tension out of his body, but was only partially successful. “There’s nothing we can do about that, so I’ll try not to worry about it. Instead, let’s think about the adoption, and hope the children are as for it as we are.”

Thran leaned his head on Bard’s shoulder. “Now it is I who agrees. Let us see how the homework progresses, and perhaps we can broach the subject with our children. I am excited with the chance to make your children and my child our children in all of the world, not just within our home.”

Bard hummed agreement. Thran fell silent, happy to sit beside him to watch him sketch. He doodled a few ideas for steampunk fittings for the orrery globes, regardless of whether they featured faces or landscapes, and a fanciful base. Before long, Tilda came in with her list of French vocabulary words for Thran. Their conversation was almost entirely in French, evidence that the concentrated attention from his husband and Legolas continued to improve her fluency. She went through the words perfectly the first time, which brought a proud smile to his face as well as Tilda’s.

“Monsieur Cornett said that I’ve gotten so much better that next year he’d recommend me for the conversational French class,” Tilda said proudly. “Then I could talk like you and Legs, Ada.”

“That will be wonderful, Kukla,” Thran beamed. “Now we must encourage your Da to take a class, so that he will know what we all say.”

“Maybe that should be my summer camp,” Bard teased. “We’ll have to see if the barn and the carriage house leave me time for that.”

“The barn and the carriage house?” Tilda looked up, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“The barn because I’ll have metal to work, and the carriage house because I’ll have chauffeur duties to get all of you to your camps and so forth. Maybe later in the summer, after most of your camps are done, and Ada’s ballet is on.”

“What happens after you do your ballet at the festival, Ada? Will you make another one?”

“Without doubt,” Thran nodded. “But perhaps not for a while. If people like Immortal very much, perhaps we will go on tour, across the country.”

“Really?” Tilda asked, looking interested. “So you’d go to a lot of different cities and show them Immortal?”

“We will have to see how it is received at the festival. And tours take time to arrange, so we will have to see how that develops, too. It is a lot to coordinate.”
“Will you have to do all that arranging, Thran?” Bard asked.

“Thankfully, no,” his husband shook his head. “That will be the task of our public relations people, and Lettie, and others. I hope I can concentrate on refinements to Immortal, and the dance, and work with Irmo on new ballets.”

“So... you’re the artistic director?” Bard asked.

“That is what I hope my place evolves to be,” Thran nodded. “Until we have the company on a solid foundation, I am everything, Lettie is everything, we are all everything. We cannot afford to specialize right now.”

“What does that mean, Ada?” Tilda struggled to understand. “The studio building is broken? That happened once to our house, because Da had to brick up part of the cellar wall that cracked. Maybe he can fix it for you?”

“The studio building is in fine shape, Kukla,” Thran reassured her. “I mean only that our ballet company is very new, very young, very inexperienced, very unknown. That is good because we come up with new things. But it is also bad because people who would come to see our new things do not know about us. So that is why we work very hard to make Immortal so special – so people will discover we are here, and will want to see more of our work.”

“Oh,” Tilda’s face cleared. “Like our school put up signs in the halls and around the village about the April Fool’s Follies, to let everyone know when and where to come.”

“Exactly,” Thran nodded. “You have it, Kukla.”

Legolas stuck his head in the sitting room. “I’m done all my homework, Papa. I’m very tired from archery today, so I’d like to take my shower and read my book for a while.”

Bard and Thran exchanged glances. At Bard’s miniscule nod, Thran turned back to Legolas. “That is fine, synok. Restore yourself for tomorrow.”

“Okay, Papa.” Legolas gave them a grateful smile and went upstairs.

Thran squeezed Bard’s leg, offered him a smile of hopeful anticipation, and got up to follow his son. Bard let a few moments pass before he beckoned to Tilda, and they both went into the kitchen.

“How’s the state of the homework?” Bard asked casually to Bain and Sigrid.

“I’ve got one more math problem, but that’s all,” Bain looked up.

Sigrid’s fingers never stopped moving over her computer keyboard. “Just another sentence or two, Da. What’s up?”

“Finish your sentences and your math problem, then I want to talk to you all.”

Sigrid shot him a frown, but tore her eyes away to focus resolutely on her computer screen. “Okay, just a couple of minutes...”

Bard busied himself getting another cup of tea while his children finished their studies. Tilda asked for another cookie, so he put several on a plate and brought it to the table.

“When you’re finished,” he told Bain, whose hand automatically strayed for the plate.

“Aw, Da,” Bain grumped, but his grin was sheepish; he knew the routine. In a few minutes, he put
down his pencil with satisfaction. “Okay, done.”

“Put everything away,” Bard directed. “Just like always, boyo.”

“I know,” Bain exhaled, digging through his backpack for his green math homework folder. “That doesn’t mean I don’t hope otherwise.”

“If you didn’t, I’d think you were sick,” Bard agreed. “Okay, have at. One.”

“Da!” Bain protested again, but took the single cookie without delay.

“Okay, I’m done, too,” Sigrid announced as she clicked a few more keys. “Done, saved, and backed up. So what’s up?”

Bard waited until everyone had a cookie. “I want to talk to you about something Thran and I have been considering. It’s something to make sure we can take care of all of you and Legolas in case anything bad happens.”


“Lance isn’t coming back, little doll. And nothing else bad is going to happen that we know about. But you know bad things can happen, like someone gets sick or hurt. If it ever does, Thran and I want to make sure that we all stay together as a family, that’s all. So let me explain what we’ve talked about, okay?”

“Okay,” the children said.

“Thran and I are married, so that means he’s your stepfather, right? Just like I’m Legolas’s stepfather. We wondered how you’d feel if Thran adopted you, so he’d be your legal father, not your stepfather. I’d adopt Legolas so I’d be his legal father, not his stepfather, and all of you would be brothers and sisters, not stepbrothers and stepsisters.”

The children looked around at each other. Sigrid was calm, even smiling slightly, so she was likely already agreeable. Tilda looked confused, and Bain was thinking about it.

“This won’t really change anything,” Sigrid observed. “This is for legal protection, am I right?”

“That’s right,” Bard nodded. “It won’t change anything for us, likely for the rest of our lives. But because of what happened to your Mam and Legolas’s Mam, we all know bad things can happen. We want to make sure that if anything happens to Thran, then Legolas would stay with us, here in our home, and not have to go to a foster family. We want to make sure that if anything happens to me, then you would stay with Legolas and Thran, here in our home, and not have to go to a foster family. No one could break us up, ever. Does that make sense?”

Sigrid nodded. “I’m for it.”

Bain, however, looked a little dubious. “So... Thran would be my Da, just like you are.”

Bard nodded. “I’m your biological father as well as your legal father. Thran would be your legal father, too.”

“What about Mam?” Bain asked.

“She will always be your mother, and Vileria will always be Legolas’s mother. This won’t change that.”
“Will I have to stop calling Thran Ada, and call him Da?” Tilda wanted to know.

“You can call him Ada for as long as you want. I think he really likes that name, anyway. And Bain, you can call him Thran just as you do now. This really doesn’t change anything for any of us, other than to protect you against bad stuff.”

“And Legolas would be our real brother, not our stepbrother,” Tilda pursued.

“Exactly right,” Bard nodded. “Have I explained everything so you understand?”

“Can I say no?” Bain said quietly, looking scared. He winced when Sigrid snorted in disagreement.

“You can,” Bard nodded calmly. “I won’t make you do anything about this that you don’t want. If it makes you feel better, you and Sigrid are over twelve, which means that you have to sign a form that says you agree to let Thran adopt you. So if you don’t want him to, he can’t. Legs is over twelve, too, so he’d have to sign the same kind of form to let me adopt him.”

“What about me? Don’t I get to sign a form?” Tilda asked.

“You’re too young to have to sign a form, little doll, but if you don’t want Thran to adopt you, then he won’t. You get to say yes or no, just like the other children.”

“What do we have to do to get adopted?” Sigrid asked.

“We all fill out a bunch of forms –”

“Of course,” Sigrid smirked.

“Of course,” Bard grinned. “We fill out the forms, we take them to the same place where we got married, and then we wait for however long it takes for the people in the county office to approve it.”

“Can they say no?” Bain asked.

Bard shook his head. “Whatever we say goes.”

The children looked at each other. Sigrid was still calm, though her smile was a bit wider. Bain still seemed torn, but Tilda’s expression revealed her usual thoughtful consideration.

“Would you like to take a few days to think about it?” Bard said. “It’s okay if you do.”

“What if Legolas doesn’t want to?” Tilda asked.

“Then it’s okay, same as it is now,” Bard replied. “Thran’s upstairs talking to him just as I’m down here talking to you, so after they’re done, maybe the four of you might want to talk about it together.”

“But you want us to do this, right, Da?” Bain pressed.

“I would like to know that you’re protected in case something happens to me,” Bard nodded. “But I want you to be comfortable with this, and with Thran. No one will think differently if you don’t want to do this.”

The children exchanged looks again. Tilda ventured, “I’d like Legolas to be my brother, not just my stepbrother.”

Bain nodded slowly, but with increasing confidence. “Yeah. Me, too, Til. And Thran... he’s a good
guy. I like him. He’d look after us right if anything happened to you, Da. So... yeah. I’m okay with it.”

Sigrid grinned. “Oh, I was in from the start. I just hope the prospect of having the three of us as his full brother and sisters doesn’t scare Legolas to death.”

“Hey, it’s not me he’s scared of, Sig, or Tilda. It’s you.”

Sigrid’s smirk was smug. “Hey, he knows I’ve got his back.”

“You’re all sure?” Bard pressed. “You don’t have to decide right this second, all right? You can think about it.”

“No, I’m good,” Tilda said with a definite shake of her head.

“Let’s hope Legolas wants to take us on, then,” Sigrid looked past her father towards the hall. “Sounds like they’re coming downstairs.”

Tilda bit her lip. “Oh, I hope he said yes, too.”

Bard joined his children in looking towards the hall. Despite himself, he tensed as the tall, blond youth and his father appeared. Had Legolas had said yes, or no?

He was about to find out.

* * *

Thran stuck his head in Legolas’s room. “May I come in?”

Legolas had picked up his sleep pants and a tee. “Of course, Papa. What is it?”

“I have something to ask you. Come, let us sit.”

He explained about the adoption. Legolas grew very still, and for the first time in a long time, he seemed as reserved as he had been when he’d first come home from boarding school. Thran folded his hands in his lap and gave his son a thoughtful look.

“What do you consider, Legolas? This is not something either Bard or I intend to force upon you or the other children. If you are uncomfortable in the least, then it will not be done.”

“What do the other children think of it?”

“I do not know, synok. Bard speaks of it downstairs with them now.”

“So... what exactly does it mean, adoption?”

“To us, in our lives, it means very little. We will be Clan Ffyrnig as we already are. Bard will not treat you any differently than he does now, nor will I treat Sigrid, Bain, or Kukla any differently than I do now. It will matter only if something happens to Bard or me. If something happens to me, then you would stay with Bard and the other children as you do now. If something happens to Bard, then Sigrid, Bain, and Kukla would stay with us. There would be no chance for the courts to put any of you in a foster family. That is the reason Bard and I consider this. It is like the medical insurance – it
is there if we need it.”

Legolas bowed his head. “Does this mean that Maman won’t be my mother any more?”

Thran looped his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Of course not, Legolas. She will always be your mother, and she will always love you as her son. It means that you are very lucky to have had three parents who love you, that is all. And you will also be the full brother to Sigrid, Bain, and Kukla.”

“What if something happens to both you and Bard?”

“You know I have set up provisions so that you would be cared for in our home. That will extend to the other children, too. None of you will have to go into a foster home, or be separated.”

Legolas nodded, and looked down at his hands again. Thran’s arm tightened around his shoulders, offering comfort.

“What are your thoughts, synok? Did I not explain everything completely?”

“Bard would adopt me, and you would adopt Sigrid, Bain, and Kukla. Bard would be my father, and the children will be my full brother and sisters.”

Thran nodded. “You have it.”

Legolas looked up at him with a troubled expression. “You won’t think that if I say yes, that I don’t want you as my father anymore, will you?”

“Of course not! This is not to take me from you, or Bard from Sigrid, Bain, and Kukla. It is to give all of you more, you see?”

Legolas nodded. “Bard has done so much for me – he fixed up my room, and our home here, and all the cooking... he looks out for me; he even plays zombie apocalypse. I like being with him. I just wanted to make sure that you know I still love you, and that I want you as my Papa always.”

“And I want you to know that you will always be my son, whom I love very much, too. Sigrid and Bain and Kukla are more children, not replacement children.”

Legolas nodded, finally smiling. “They are a lot of fun, especially our Kukla.”

“I enjoy them very much, too.”

“Then I would like to, Papa. I want Clan Ffyrnig to be together for a long time, no matter what happens. But... do you think the other children will feel the same way?”

“I hope they will. Shall we go down and find out?”

Legolas nodded, so they got up from his son’s bed and went downstairs. As they came into the kitchen, Legolas ahead of him, four heads turned towards them. He caught Bard’s wink – thank the gods, all was well. A wide grin spread across his face as Tilda turned around in her chair to peer excitedly at Legolas.

“Did you say yes? Please say that you said yes.”

Legolas gulped, but he managed a crooked smile. “I did. I hope you did, too.”

“We all did,” Tilda nodded vigorously.
Sigrid pulled a plate of cookies within reach and held it out to Legolas. “There’s two left, if you and Ada want to help us celebrate.”

Legolas took his with a big smile. As Thran took the last cookie, he met Bard’s elated eyes, and held up his cookie in silent salute. The treat was a sweet one, but not nearly as sweet as their children’s unanimous decision. That was without equal.
Chapter 125

Chapter Summary

A teenaged rite of spring translates into plans for a Clan Ffyrnig shopping expedition. A saint's efforts continue on house and art, and an angel works his magic on a captive audience.

Chapter Notes

I own no rights to Wagner's Thus Spake Zarathustra, the Thriller music, nor the Thriller dance choreography.

Despite Tilda’s happy applause, Bain and Legolas exchanged bashful, awkward looks. Thran locked eyes with his husband, sharing silent congratulations at their children’s unanimous agreement to their adoption plan, so it was left to Sigrid to break the ungainly silence. She did so with her usual forthrightness, rolling her eyes and snorting.

“Oh, ye gods and little fishhooks,” she sniffed. “It’s not as if anything’s changing. We’re still going to rumble and roll the same way.”


“Me!” Tilda hopped out of her chair, put one hand on her hip, and stuck the other one up to point at the far wall, striking a silly superhero pose. “It came from me! Your real sister. If you want to help me celebrate, you can play Dinky Farm with me.”

Legolas laughed outright. “I have a better idea.”

“Oh? What?”

“What if I show you how to play the car race game?”

“Oooh, really?” Tilda’s eyes lit up. “You’d show me how to play that? Da, can I?”

“Knock yourself out, little doll,” Bard grinned. “Make sure Legs shows you how to drift, yeah? That’s the most fun.”

“Ooh, drifting!” Tilda echoed. She looked up at Legolas. “What’s drifting?”

Bain put a hand over his eyes in mock suffering. “Oh, Tilda...”

“Maybe Bain can help us, Kukla,” Legolas smiled. “He’s really good at that.”
“All right!” Bain dropped his seeming indifference. “Sure, Til, I’ll help. Come on.”

The three children dashed off to the sitting room, leaving Sigrid to shut her computer, then crack her knuckles in such a resounding ripple of snaps and pops that Thran cringed. “Ah, my evil plan proceeds apace. The shower is mine, all mine!”

Bard laughed at Sigrid’s fiendish laughter. “Go revel in your ill-gotten gains, then, you nefarious villain. Before Legolas remembers that he’s tired.”

“I will.” Sigrid bounced up to press a sound smack of a kiss on Bard’s cheek, then bestowed the same to Thran. “You two are the limit, and I thank you both kindly. Especially you, Ada. It’s one thing for Da to adopt Legolas – he’s so well behaved. But you’re getting the three crazy Bowmans. You must be as crazy as we are.”

Thran snickered. “What is the adage? Who needs to watch TV? The comedy is already in the house.”

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Sigrid laughed. “All right, I’m off to the shower. Then I’m going to call Finn and tell him the good news.”

“Okay, sweetness,” Bard waved her towards the hall. “Enjoy the warm water.”

As Sigrid skipped upstairs, Thran sat down beside Bard and drew him close to kiss his temple. “I am very happy, lyubov moya. No, that is not quite right. Happy, yes... but also very honored that your children trust me enough to do this.”

“I feel the same way about Legolas. I hope it wasn’t a tough sell.”

“Not at all. His concern was mostly that he did not want me to feel as if he no longer wanted me as his Papa. I told him this was not to take anything from any of us, but to give us all more. And he was very taken to be Kukla’s full brother.”

“She felt the same way. Sig was in from the first word, which was no surprise. The big thing for Bain was to know that no one would end up in foster care. We saw a lot of the worst of that in the city, and the children want Clan Ffyrnig to stay together.”

“I will print out all of the paperwork tonight, then,” Thran murmured, his hand straying over Bard’s back. “We can fill it in tomorrow or the next day, and then we must file it. I do not think all of us must be present to file it, but I will ask. If the children do not need to be present, then one or both of us can go into the office one morning. Once UVB starts work at the school in the afternoons, I could do it easily.”

Bard stroked the hair away from Thran’s face with the lightest touch, prickling Thran’s skin into gooseflesh. “Before you get too deeply into those afternoon rehearsals, I have an idea about how I want us spend one of those mornings.”

A sly smile teased the corners of Thran’s lips. “Do you?”

“I do.”

“Does it have anything to do with a certain solarium?”

“It does.”

Thran hummed deep in his throat, and his smile grew wider. “Oh, my saint, let us not wait to indulge
in such a beautiful way. Sooner rather than later, please.”

“I would have said this week, but the painters will be here.”

“The solarium is most beautiful at night, but we have already discovered the rarity of uninterrupted
time when the children are here, so we will indulge as soon as the painters are gone and we are here
alone.”

“That’s a date, then,” Bard breathed, running his lips down Thran’s throat. The touch was so soft, so
arousing... “The first day the painters are gone.”

“I cannot wait for the dancer to meet the rare artist who has made such a beautiful garden,” Thran
breathed.

“Maybe the mysterious dancer will favor the artist with one of the dances that have earned him such
renown.”

“He will savor the chance to share his new sanctuary with an appreciative audience, and who is more
appreciative than the one who created it?”

“I can’t wait to see how appreciative the dancer is,” Bard bit Thran’s earlobe.

“Ooh, my saint...”

“Da! Come look! I’m doing it!” Tilda yelled.

Grinning, Bard gave a last nip to Thran’s earlobe before he looked towards the sitting room. “Doing
what, Til?”

“Drifting!” she crowed. “Come see!”

Bard winked at Thran before he climbed out of his chair and ambled into the sitting room. There was
Tilda, eagerly working her game controller. On the TV, a bright yellow Mustang with two wide
black stripes rocketed down the straightaway of a banked racetrack.

“Watch!” Tilda ordered she bounced up and down on the sofa. “Here I go!”

The yellow Mustang – Angry Bumble, the screen read at the top – whipped into full drift to get
through the corner, showering rubber in every direction. It snapped back once it hit the next
straightaway and roared towards the next corner.

“See! My car drifted! I did it!”

“You certainly did,” Bard nodded, as Thran offered applause. “You catch on fast.”

“Yeah – too fast,” Bain snarked. When Tilda stuck her tongue out at him, Legolas chuckled and
chose that moment to drive his car past Tilda’s. With an outraged yelp, Tilda worked her controller
madly to get her car to chase after Legolas’s.

Thran left them to it, and drifted into the solarium. As Bard followed him, he switched on his
Istanbul lamps, setting them aglow in the darkness. It was the first time they’d turned the lamps on at
dusk, and he was delighted at how exotic it looked. Gods, with a few more plants for background
and the fountain softly splashing, it would be a vision right out of the Arabian Nights. How easy it
would be to tease Bard into all manner of sensual delights...

Maybe their first dalliance in this room wouldn’t be at night, but it’d be their private oasis regardless
of when they met here. But if ever all four of the children managed to be out on the same night, he
knew exactly how he’d spend the evening. Bard would put up no resistance, either.

He’d only just snuck a hand over Bard’s glute, only just enjoyed Bard’s hum of pleasure, when
Sigrid’s urgent call echoed from upstairs.

“Da! Da!”

Bard exhaled and gave Thran a chagrined look. “Gods, it’s like they know,” he murmured.

“Da-Ada radar,” Thran offered with a snicker.

“Or something,” Barr agreed. He looked back towards the sitting room. “In here, Sig.”

“Da!” Sigrid burst into the solarium with breathless speed. “Da – ooh, wow, it’s gorgeous in here!
Just gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” Bard’s tone was mild. “Where’s the fire?”

“Fire – what? Oh, that! Da, I just talked to Finn, and he asked me to the Imladris junior prom!”

“He did? Well, of course he did. You’re the prettiest girl in the school, aren’t you?”

“Oh, Da – I wouldn’t be one of those girls who primp all the time for anything.”

“Of course not,” Bard agreed.

“Did you tell him yes?” Thran smiled.

“Wellllll...” Sigrid hedged. “I want to, but...”

“But what?” Bard turned his whole regard on his daughter.

“I need a dress.” Sigrid’s expression was more wince than anything else, and she clasped her hands
together in unconscious dismay. “Maybe we could go to the second-hand store this weekend?”

“Absolutely not.” Thran put his arms akimbo. “This is an important thing, this prom, yes?”

“Well.... not as much as the senior prom, but for juniors.... yes.”

“Then you should have a nice dress, don’t you think so, Bard?”

“I think we can manage that,” Bard nodded with a smile.

“In fact, that will tie in nicely to my plan for this weekend,” Thran said smoothly. “Legolas has
outgrown his jeans again, and I suspect the rest of the children have grown almost as much. We need
to get them all new clothes.”

“Gods, you’re right,” Bard winced. “I should have thought of that before now. It’s getting warmer,
and there’s likely nothing from last year that’ll fit any of them. So yes, we need to make a pilgrimage.
We can look for a dress for Sig at the same time.”

“Really?” Sigrid’s face was wreathed with a huge smile. “Oh, that’ll be so amazing! Can I call Finn
back now and tell him?”

“Absolutely. We’ll go this weekend after you finish at the bistro, and see what we can find.”
Sigrid threw her arms around Bard, then Thran. “Oh, thank you, thank you so much! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” Bard and Thran offered, but Sigrid had already sprinted upstairs to relay her acceptance to Finn. They exchanged glances and rueful chuckles.

“I should have thought about their clothes long before now,” Bard grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. “I wash all their laundry, so I can’t claim that I don’t know the state of their clothes. My three are used to shabby things, but Legolas isn’t. I wouldn’t have minded if he’d said something.”

“I think he liked letting his things become not so pristine,” Thran observed, coming to stand beside Bard again. His hand strayed over Bard’s glute again, coaxing another hum from Bard. “The Imladris Academy is not the style-conscious place that his boarding school was, and is more relaxed. He likes that.”

“Oh, the children are more style-conscious at Imladris than you think, but it’s a different vibe. More boho, more artsy. Makes sense, given that the village is more of an artist colony than most places. Not a lot of the preppy stuff. I figured it out the first few days I volunteered. By the way, you said that you and UVB will be at the school on Thursday for the assembly?”

Thran nodded. “We have just time to teach the Thriller dance to the company, so that will be tomorrow’s fun.”

“I think I’ll do my volunteer day then. I can sneak into the assembly to see you dance.”

Thran’s fingers traced teasing circles over Bard’s back. “I will make sure that your dancer offers you something delicious in the solarium very soon.”

“Mmm,” Bard growled, offering Thran a furtive kiss on his collarbone. “I look forward to that. In the meantime, I’ll get a kick out of you on Thursday, and then on Saturday or Sunday, we can take the children to shop. Or if you have to work on *Immortal*, I can take them.”

“I want to attend this ritual,” Thran mused. “It will fun to watch the children enjoy themselves, and who would not want to see our lioness in a beautiful gown?”

“Will the children need something nice for your ballet premiere?”

“That is the tradition,” Thran nodded. “I generally rent something for Legolas, because he grows too fast to buy something so formal each time. But Kukla would like a pretty dress, perhaps?”

“Probably so,” Bard nodded. “I guess I need a suit, too. I can follow the lads’ example and rent something, too.”

“I will enjoy that,” Thran purred. “We will do that on another day, when we have time to focus on formal things. This weekend, we will see to comfortable, practical things for school and home. And Sigrid’s dress.”

“Oh, we have a plan,” Bard nodded. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll break down and buy a couple of tees and some shorts for myself.”

How delightful would that be? Very. But not as delicious as it would be to tease and entice a humble garden designer. Thran had his sari ready...

Something pricked at the edge of his thoughts.

Tcha – nothing could interrupt his anticipation for the next game that he and Bard would share.
Nothing.

Something important could.

*Think, Thran, think... what had Bard just said?*

Oh, gods – it was so obvious.

Just a day after Thran’s fairytale and the ensuing heartfelt discussion, as clear as diamonds, the thing he had so hoped to see –

Actually, the most important thing was what he hadn’t seen.

This weekend’s shopping expedition was sure to be an expensive proposition, given four children who needed so many things, including at least one frothy party dress. Yet Bard had not blinked, flinched, or worried at the prospect of it. Oh, gods – had he finally accepted that he and Thran were partners, and that together they could care for their children as they both wanted to? He must have – he’d even thought about buying a new shirt for himself. And he hadn’t said a single word about the cost of any of it.

Thran’s smile was elated, then tender. Finally, his saint was easing.

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Tuesday and Wednesday raced by. Thran left early and came home late as UVB worked on their presentation to the Imladris Academy students, and prepared to move their rehearsals to the school auditorium. He filmed a trio of promotional spots with Mavis Davis about the upcoming festival where *Immortal* would make its premiere. Even when he was home in the evenings, he was frequently on his mobile with Lettie and Ori to discuss items. Despite that, he had taken the completed adoption papers to the county building to file them in the midst of all his goings and comings, so they had done all they could to begin the process.

Bard made sure that Thran ate and slept well when he was at home. When his husband was away during the day, though, Bard’s focus was on his own endeavors. Once the painters arrived on Tuesday, he worked on the clay model of the tree for Hal’s commission, and by the early afternoon had it well along. He took a break to get the fountain running in the solarium, and made a quick run to Sam’s garden center to splurge on more ferns, the bright yellow hibiscus that Legolas liked so much, and some twining vines to accompany the fountain. Sam would deliver a couple of large palms as soon as they came in. It would have been wonderful to prowl through the junkshops for another chair or two for the solarium, but Bard had too many other things going on to indulge in that. The coming weekend was filling up, so there likely wouldn’t be time then, either. But that was okay – he was happy to be so busy with his commissions.

While he had the trunk for Hal’s tree mostly done, he couldn’t do the final arrangement of the roots without the chunk of white quartz that would make the base of the piece. To remedy that, he stopped on the way to the market Wednesday morning to peruse the aquarium center’s rock offerings, but nothing suitable appeared. Sam hadn’t had anything in the landscaping section of his garden center, either. As Bard continued on to the market, he considered other options as he bought the family’s provisions and made his way home. There was a construction crew blocking the road on his way home, so he had to detour down a residential street that he normally didn’t traverse. The traffic was
much thicker than the small road was used to handling, so he made slow progress. He was patient, though; there wasn’t anything in the groceries that would suffer another ten minutes in the back of the truck, so he checked out the gardens on either side of the street to see how they were laid out. He wanted to have some ideas to bounce off of Sam for the front yard, once the painters were done next week –

The house on the right, in the middle of the block, had two white rocks in the front yard, one on either side of the driveway, right at the curb. They looked to be about ten or fifteen pounds apiece, maybe a bit more, and beautifully angular. And quartz.

Without thinking, Bard clicked on his blinker and pulled out of the traffic to the curb in front of the house. He got out of the truck, trotted up to the front door, and rang the doorbell. After some seconds, the door inched open, then a little more, then a little more, then went all the way wide. A rotund man in his late sixties peered up at him from a wheelchair though thick glasses. He had on a tidy red flannel shirt with two breast pockets, sturdy dark blue moleskin pants, and comfortable oxford shoes. The wheelchair was sleek and fit the man’s body well – maybe that meant a long-term injury or illness.

“‘Yes?’

“Hello, my name is Bard Bowman, and I’m an artist. Those two rocks at the end of your driveway... would you consider selling them to me?’

The man gave him a suspicious look. “Is this a joke?”

Bard chuckled. “No sir, it’s not. I really am an artist, and I really am interested in buying your rocks.”

He dug for his wallet, pulled out one of his new business cards, and held it up to the storm door. When the man beckoned to him, he opened the door and handed the card over. “I have this commission...”

Bard described the tree Hal had asked him to make, and how he needed a sizeable chunk of white quartz to form the base for the metal tree.

“I hadn’t seen the right rock so far, but I think yours would fit the bill perfectly. Would you consider it?”

The man’s expression had eased from its suspicion to one of more consideration. He looked once more at the card, then studied Bard closely.

“Bard Bowman, you say? You wouldn’t be the artist who had an exhibit at the Ilithien Gallery a week or so ago, are you?”

“On April thirtieth? Yes, sir, that was me. I had a lot of my sketches on display, plus a couple of pieces of sculpture.”

The man nodded. “One of my neighbors told me about it. She actually bought one of your sketches. It was of a little girl.”

Bard nodded again. “I had one of my daughter Tilda playing hopscotch, and another one of her and her brother reading together.”

The man nodded once more. “The hopscotch one it was. I saw it. Nicely done.”

“Thank you,” Bard smiled. “So about the rocks...”
The man’s grin was sudden, and surprisingly mischievous. “I’ve always hated both of them, if you want to know the truth of it. They were my wife’s idea. She thought they’d make it harder for our son to miss the driveway and drive over the grass, but all it accomplished was to make me have to take that damned car in for a realignment twice as often as I would have if he’d just run over the curb.”

Bard’s chuckle was rueful. “My older daughter’s just about to start driving. I expect I’ll be right there with you before too long.”

“Oh, lordy, they’re a handful – teen drivers,” the man held up both hands in resignation as he shook his head. “How old is your girl?”

“Sixteen going on thirty-five,” Bard rubbed the back of his head. “Right now, she’s closer to sixteen, because her boyfriend asked her to the prom, and she’s pretty excited about it. How old is your son?”

“He’s thirty-two, but he still drives over the damned rocks like a sixteen-year old. So if you want ‘em, they’re yours. It’d be nice if they’d turn into something other than a source of steady business for my mechanic.”

Bard pulled out his wallet again. “How much do you want for them?”

“Twenty and they’re yours.”

Bard pulled out a couple of tens and opened the storm door to hand them to the man. “Done, and I thank you kindly.”

The man leaned forward in his wheelchair to take the bills. “My wife won’t, but what she doesn’t know now won’t hurt her later. I hope they do your tree proud.”

“I think they’ll be perfect. Thanks again.”

The man waved, and watched as Bard loaded both chunks into the back of his truck. Bard waved his thanks again, and got a wave and a satisfied smile in return before the man closed the door. Bard got back into his truck and inched his way back into the line of traffic with a glad feeling of accomplishment.

He got home, stowed all the groceries, plotted supper, checked with the painters – Darla’s crew was making great progress – and hauled both of the rocks he’d bought around to the back terrace. He gave them a thorough wash with a scrub brush and a bucket of water, and left them to dry in the sun. He was considering which one would make the better base when Darla came around to talk about the broken balustrade on the front porch. They went around to the front of the house to consider; he got it free from the railing and took it into the barn to glue and clamp. It’d be ready to put back in place tomorrow. The missing one... after discussion with Darla, he freed the one from the back of the side railing to fill the missing space. At some point, he’d see about a replacement to fill the empty space, and if he couldn’t get an exact match, at least a replacement wouldn’t be so obvious. He had several rotten boards on one side of the porch to replace, too, so he’d have to see about that as soon as possible so that the painters could paint them. Maybe Friday? Tomorrow, Thursday, he’d do his volunteer stint at the school, and see Thran dance at the assembly. Maybe he could buy the lumber first thing tomorrow morning...

Welcome to working on an old house. Something always needed to be done.

Darla also wanted to talk about the front door. It was original to the house, and beautifully carved, but the finish was well weathered, and some of the wood was badly stained. They talked about
restoring it, but neither Darla nor Bard thought that it would ever look more than shabby, despite the beautiful carving. Tilda had asked for a red door, and when he ventured that with Darla, he was relieved when she agreed that a painted finish would rejuvenate it nicely. As the stained glass sidelights and transom both featured green leaves and amber and red flowers, a red door would match it very well. The brass work – lock, knocker, and knobs – was still in good shape despite the dull finish, but a little polish and elbow grease would bring that back to life.

Something else to do, he smiled to himself. There was always something else to do.

By the time the children came home – everyone was well enough to stay for sport today – Bard had decided which of his two rocks would be the base for Hal’s sculpture, and he’d had figured how much lumber he needed to replace the rotten porch boards. He got supper on the table for himself and the children, then started them on their homework.

When Thran got home around eight, the children made room at the end of the table for him to eat his supper. All four plied him with questions about tomorrow’s assembly, but he would only smile mysteriously and tell them that they would have to wait and see with the rest of their classmates. That provoked loud complaints, which he met with a mischievous grin.

“Now that I have outraged you beyond contemplation, are you sorry that you filled out the adoption papers?”

“Filling out the forms means that we have license to yell even louder,” Sigrid riposted.

“I shudder at the prospect,” Thran teased. “I will tell you a little, then. We will have a belly dancer, a step dancer, and a swing dance couple. You must be content with that.”

“That’s not much,” Legolas snorted. “Won’t you tell us if you’ll dance, too?”

“Of course I will dance,” Thran shrugged. “What will everyone say if I do not dance?”

“But what are you going to dance?” Tilda persisted. "Will you still dance the zombie thing?"

Thran chewed his bite of trout with great deliberation, swallowed, and had a sip of water before he answered. “It will be a surprise.”

“Augh!” Tilda complained, but Thran would not be moved. When the clamor got too insistent, Bard gave all of the children a look.

“Let Thran eat his supper, children, or he’ll be too hungry to dance anything. Just wait until tomorrow, and you’ll see what he has up his sleeve.”

“Okay, Da,” Bain snorted in exasperation as he went back to his pre-algebra homework. “Bummer, though.”

“Maybe so. You’ll find out tomorrow.”

The complaints eventually subsided, and homework continued. Still amused, Thran gave Bard a wink as he finished his rice, green beans, and salad. They soon retired to the sitting room to share tea and small dishes of ice cream.

“I should bake tomorrow, but I’ve got lumber to buy in the morning, then my stint at the school. So we’ll have to make do with ice cream for a day or two,” Bard said, as he brought in the teapot.

“Lumber?” Thran’s eyebrows went up. “What is the lumber for?”
“The rotten section of the porch.” Bard explained about that, the door, and his adventure to buy the big chunks of quartz for Hal’s tree. They carried their ice cream into the solarium for Thran to see the rock that Bard had chosen.

“I’ll have to do this properly in the barn, because the rock’s a bit weighty,” Bard grinned as he unclamped the clay model of the tree off of its board, then stooped beside the rock to arrange the still-bare wire roots over the craggy face of the rock. “But that’s more or less what it’ll look like.”

“I like it,” Thran stooped beside Bard to view the tree from several angles. “Is that how the roots will be?”

“Oh, no, that’s just the bare armature,” Bard hastened to explain. “I haven’t done the roots yet because I needed the rock first. Now that I do, I’ll make the roots look like they’re growing right into it. The rock’s got a nice, wide base to it, too, so I don’t think I’ll need anything underneath to balance it, or to keep the piece from being top heavy. I can put it on one if Hal wants it, but I think that will make it look less spontaneous. I’ll see what he thinks.”

“I like it as it is now,” Thran cocked his head as he considered it. “So you will finish the clay, and then make a mold of the clay, and then cast metal in the mold?”

“I will make molds and cast from them, yes,” Bard nodded. But because the roots and the branches are spread out, I’ll likely cast in pieces and then weld them together. That’ll make for a better piece.”

Thran hummed appreciatively, drawing Bard’s grin as he clamped the tree back to its board.

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist, angel. This won’t be that kind of welding.”

Thran waved his spoon over his dish of ice cream. “You tell me that none of your welding is that kind of welding. So I take what I can get.”

Bard chuckled. “You’ll be so disappointed when you finally see me weld.”

“Never.” Thran led the way back into the sitting room. “It will be artistic endeavour, and well worth the sight.”

“Hardly scintillating.”

“Tcha,” Thran cast him a look as they sat down. “You like to watch me at the barre from time to time. I want to see you work at your art, too.”

“You’re welcome in the barn anytime, except in the middle of casting.”

“I understand. That is a delicate time.”

“It can be...” Bard described a little about the complexities that could arise on some piece. Thran listened intently, nodding from time to time. Before long, the children joined them as they finished their homework, the Harry Potter book came out for another chapter, and the children cycled through their showers. Sigrid and Tilda seemed none the worse for wear from their colds and flu, though Legolas’s cough was still substantial. Apparently many children at school were still fighting the illnesses as well. Bard made the boy a cup of lemon ginger tea with honey to help ease it before bed, and the evening wore down. He and Thran made their usual rounds, then showered and crawled into bed.

He had intended to tease Thran about what he intended to dance tomorrow at the school assembly, but he fell sound asleep in his husband’s arms before he could manage a single sentence.
Clearly, he still had some recovering to do from the flu, too. At least he could do so in an angel’s arms.

* * *

Bard saw the children and Thran off Thursday morning with their usual breakfasts and lunches. The painters arrived as he returned from the bus stop, so he set off for to look for boards for the porch. This time, he didn’t bother with the homeowners’ mecca, but went straight to the lumberyard, which tended to have a better grade of stock and a wider selection of boards. Because he expected that to find a few more that needed replacing once he started ripping up the old ones, he got six more than he needed. He hurried back, stacked the boards in the barn, took a long few seconds to admire how well the front of the house looked with its first coat of fresh white paint, then exchanged his jeans for nicer clothes before heading to the school. He’d work with Theodred in his last class before lunch, then his first class after lunch. The period after that was the special assembly where Thran and his company would appear.

Today’s classes were one intermediate and one senior class. The senior one was more challenging, as one of the students was in a mood and wanted nothing more than to splatter paint over her canvas, almost throwing it. Theodred was well used to this, so he grabbed a sheet of frisket and a craft knife and quickly cut a shape out of the middle.

“May I, Rachel?” When the girl paused, Theodred smoothed the frisket over her canvas. The masking material was sticky on one side, and stuck to Rachel’s canvas. “Now, have at.”

The girl smacked her brush against the canvas for several strokes until Theodred nipped in and ripped the frisket away, leaving the silhouette of a giraffe in the middle of the mess. That distracted the other children enough to comment.

“Hey, how’d you do that, Rach?” another girl demanded. “That’s wild!”

By the time Theodred and Bard showed how to make frisket masks, Rachel was calmer. She made a mask shaped like a flower, and painted that in over the giraffe’s ear with more control.

“You can use the same kind of mask when you’re airbrushing, or using spray paint,” Theodred inserted smoothly. “And when the paint dries, you can come back with other masks on top to add details, like stripes, or other colors. It’s a great way to add a crisp edge to your figures.”

Relieved, Bard let Theodred do his magic as he collected the discarded brushes to wash them out in the sink. Four children at once were enough for Bard to manage.

He joined Theodred in the cafeteria for a quick sandwich, then they worked through a sophomore class working with pastel chalk. That class was less fraught with teenaged angst, and passed quickly. Bard helped Theodred return the pastels to their boxes and mop the tables down before he waved goodbye.

“See you next week, Bard,” Theodred wished him.

“That was quick thinking with Rachel.”

The young teacher’s smile was rueful. “She’s still figuring out how to handle her moods, so distracting her was the best thing. Distracting her to learn something positive was even better.”
“I have a lot to learn,” Bard said. “My oldest daughter is so level-headed for the most part. We’ll see in a year or two when Tilda gets a little older.”

“Tilda’s very deliberate and considered most of the time,” the art teacher agreed. “So keep your fingers crossed. Are you staying to see the assembly?”

“I am,” Bard smiled. “Thran’s company’s going to dance, so I’m excited to see that.”

“Are they?” Theodred’s face sharpened with interest. “Oh, that’s right, this will alert the students about the production that’s going on in the auditorium for the village’s summer festival. So it won’t be just a boring blah blah blah about what’s going on, then?”

“I don’t think so, no. Thran said last night that several of the company’s dancers will be on hand to do a little show and tell, but he kept mum about what exactly they’d do, just that it would be more than ballet.”

“Interesting!” Theodred replied. “I think I want to see this assembly, too. Come on; everything’s about as clean as we can get it, so let’s see if we can snare a couple of seats.”

They headed down to the auditorium, which was already nearly full of students and teachers. Bard and Theodred had to make do with standing along the sides.

“Good afternoon.” Headmaster L’Eärendil walked to the middle of the empty stage. Behind him were the blank, matte black walls of the Immortal stage; he stood on the two-thirds of the circle that would soon become Death’s ornate Underworld. “As you know, this summer, our school has the great privilege to host the premiere of a new ballet that will be the highlight of Greenwood Dale on the Lake’s summer arts festival. This is the first time that the festival will host a ballet, much less the premiere of one that has never been seen before.

“Many of you are already aware of the effort that has begun here to stage this new work. The UltraViolet Ballet Company has generously provided a wonderful opportunity for many of you to learn that’s involved to stage such a work though several kinds of internships. We have students already busy on the construction crew to build the sets and scenes for the ballet. We also have others who will manage lights, sound, and music. This is a rare chance for those of you who want to continue your studies in the performing arts to work on a real production. So to officially kick off the effort to bring this exciting ballet to our school, our stage, our village, and our world, I’d like to introduce Thran Oropherson, executive director and principal dancer for UltraViolet Ballet.”

A good round of applause went up from the students as Thran appeared from the wings of the stage to take the microphone from the headmaster. He was clad in his usual cream tights and dancing slippers – thank the gods, no pointe shoes today – with a thin, cap-sleeved top of pale grey tucked into his tights. His hair was smoothly braided into an elegant fishtail braid. His eye sockets were painted in smoky blacks and greys, and his cheekbones were highlighted to make them more prominent. He offered a graceful bow to the retreating headmaster, then to the students.

“Good afternoon, students, teachers, visitors, and everyone else!” Thran waved, smiling when he received many waves and murmured greetings in return. “Thank you for this chance to make a new dance in this beautiful school, and to meet so many of you. UltraViolet Ballet is delighted to be here!”

That got some nice applause.

“I might know what many of you think at this moment – here is this strange person, he will talk us to death, we will all be bored, but at least it is better than to stay in one classroom or another, yes? Am I
“YES!” came back so resoundingly that Thran’s laugh was hearty.

“Oh, then it is too bad that I will disappoint so many of you, because I will not talk very much. I will tell you that our new ballet is called Immortal, and it is about the great Lord of the Underworld.” Thran pointed to himself. “Yes, that is me, I dance the role of this great lord. Do you know what his name is? Can you guess?”

A lot of names echoed, making Thran laugh again. “No, his name is not Bob. But I think you might know his name. It is Death. Sort of scary, yes?”

The murmur indicated that yes, it was sort of scary.

“Perhaps it will be sort of scary. But it will be scary for Death, too, because something happens to him that has never happened before. He falls in love with a mortal Maid.”

Charisse appeared from the wings, came to stand beside Thran, and offered a winsome smile and graceful bow.

“This is Charisse, our Maid. But does the Maid love the Lord of the Underworld?”

Charisse shook her head most emphatically to show that no, she certainly did not love Death. Thran put a hand to his heart and looked sad.

“No, the Maid does not love the Lord of the Underworld. She loves the Soldier.”

Out came Luka to offer his enthusiastic bow and a wave.

“This is Luka, our Soldier. He and the Maid are very much in love.” Charisse and Luka embraced tenderly, to which Thran shook his head in mock annoyance, which made the audience laugh.

“There is no reason to love, I suppose. So our ballet is what happens to the Lord of the Underworld, the Maid, and the Soldier. If you want to know what happens, you will have to come to see us dance Immortal at the festival.”

That got a lot of protest, which brought smiles to all three of the dancers.

“Ah, that is good, you want to know the end of the story!” Thran nodded at the students. “But we cannot give away what happens, can we? Instead, Charisse, Luka, and a few of our friends will give you a sample of what you will see in Death’s great kingdom called the Underworld.”

Headmaster L’Eärendil reappeared to take the microphone from Thran, and a dozen dancers appeared from both sides of the stage, all dressed differently in brightly colored practice wear. In addition to the motley collection of earrings, head wraps, bandannas, and scarves, one woman wore a belly dancer’s belt stitched with rows of silver coins around her hips, and one man wore heavy Irish clogging shoes. Two wore what looked like saddle shoes, and another wore exotic sandals that laced almost up to her knees. Music began, and the dancers took turns showcasing different forms of dance. Luka and Charisse, both in ballet shoes, did a quick waltzing pas de deux; the pair with the saddle shoes did a wild Lindy hop. Blazing fast Irish step dancing followed acrobatic hip-hop, and sinuous belly dancing followed that. Thran did a flashy turn with Luka and Charisse of at least two dozen perfectly synchronized pirouettes followed by an equally flashy grand jeté. That earned cheers and loud applause, Bard’s among it.

As the music ended, the dancers came forward to take a bow to even louder applause. Headmaster L’Eärendil reappeared to thank the dancers, then held the microphone out to Thran.
“We have one more treat to show you, in thanks for such a warm welcome,” Thran teased. “Would you like to see it?”

Applause was answer enough. The headmaster held out a hand, inviting Thran to take the stage again, so Thran did so. The other dancers disappeared into the wings, leaving Thran alone in the middle of the empty space. Bard watched with avid curiosity – hadn’t his husband mentioned the dance from Thriller? This solo posture didn’t look like that, so maybe Thran had changed his mind...?

A low buzz signaled the beginning of something, and the lights lowered until a single spotlight centered on Thran. He stood completely straight in first position, with toes turned out and arms crossed over his chest. As the first strains of Richard Strauss’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* began, Thran raised his left leg until it formed a vertical split with his right leg. No other part of his body moved. The control and the extreme stretch raised a gasp from the audience. As the music rose, Thran raised his arms slowly over his head, still keeping that absolutely straight vertical line, then gracefully lowered his arms and torso to his lower leg. At the next rise of music, he stretched his lower leg straight up, putting him into a handstand. Over his head one leg went forward, the other back, again to make a split parallel to the floor. That straight split never trembled as first one foot touched the floor, then the other. When the foot over his head was firmly on the floor, Thran rolled from his hands and upright, still keeping his legs in a split while he lifted his torso back into his vertical split. In time to the last rushing chord, he clasped his hands above his upraised foot. As the music ended, Thran returned his upraised foot to the floor and his arms to their original position.

It was the most stunning example of flexibility and control that Bard had ever seen, and without thinking he broke into cheering applause. He wasn’t alone – it seemed as if everyone in the auditorium reacted in kind. Thran didn’t move, though, and with all the noise it took some seconds before the pulse of new music registered. The rest of the dancers appeared from the wings as Thran raised his head to look out into the audience. A sly smile appeared as the company formed around him, and he raised his arms like a not entirely benign magician. The company did likewise, then the lot of them swung into Thriller.

Now the beautiful ascetic dancer of masterful control turned into a creepy zombie – not the Lord of the Underworld, but one of its denizens. The dancers hammed up their performance with twitches and drunken rolls of the head and nerveless flops of their hands, even as they executed the steps with exquisite perfection. At once, the students were on their feet to jump and sway in time to the music. At the last chord, the dancers froze, and the lights went out. When they came up again, the dancers had lined up across the stage with Thran in the middle, holding hands to take their bows. The cheers and applause were thunderous, especially when the dancers took a step back to let Thran take a solo bow. Headmaster L’Eärendil reappeared, applauding with as much vigor as his students to encourage the dancers to take another bow.

“That was wonderful! Just wonderful!” he enthused. “Students, please give one more well-deserved round of applause for UltraViolet Ballet!”

The headmaster held the microphone out to Thran, but the dancer had his arms around two of his colleagues, so he contented himself by leaning close enough to speak into the microphone.

“Thank you for such a warm welcome! We look forward to our time with you very much! Immortal thanks you!”

The applause didn’t lessen even after Thran and the company left the stage, but when the stage remained empty, the students reluctantly filed out.

To Bard’s delight, the students’ chatter was excited and enthusiastic. With any luck, the parents of
every Imladris Academy student would get an earful about the excitement that took shape in the school auditorium. Would a little more luck see that excitement turn into record ticket sales for *Immortal’s* premiere?

They’d find out in just eight short weeks.
Chapter 126

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig plans a weekend foray, and the saint has reason to appreciate the rain.

Bard and Theodred waited until the auditorium was mostly empty before they made their way out. The art teacher turned to Bard as they came into the auditorium lobby.

“That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen in a school assembly,” he shook his head.

Bard ran his hand through his hair. “I’ll second that. Thran’s the only person I know who can do something so over the top and make it look easy. And then he goes off and plays a zombie for an encore.”

Theodred shook his head. “If you’d drawn your husband in any of those split poses, I would have said you were making it up, because no one can move like that.”

“He does stuff like that on a daily basis, but not often enough for me to think he’s anything other than the best dancer in the world.”

“No,” Theodred pursed his lips as he shook his head. “Tell him how much I enjoyed his performance, would you? And I’ll see you next week.”

“Okay, Theodred,” Bard offered a wave. “Next week it is.”

Theodred smiled as he offered his own wave of farewell, leaving Bard to head for the hall beside the auditorium. He wanted to see what the rest of the day held for Thran before he said goodbye. He found the company coming towards him, surrounded by excited students who clamored to talk to the dancers. Bard retraced his steps back to the lobby to wait for the rush to pass. It took at least twenty minutes, but Bard enjoyed watching the company interact with the children. Luka was not that much older than many of them, so he was right in the midst of a group of boys and girls, talking about what it was like to dance and what he ate and how often he went to rehearsal, excitedly talking and expansively gesturing with his hands. Charisse was her usual poised and confident self as several girls gathered around her – in fact, all of the dancers had an eager band of children asking questions, including Thran. It gave Bard a warm feeling to see his husband banter with the children, teasing and laughing as he fielded their barrage of questions.

Legolas appeared out of the throng to greet his father, who returned the greeting warmly. Was that calculation on the boy’s part, or oversight? Hmm, likely oversight, given the way Legolas’s eyes widened in apprehension when a lot of the girls turned their attentions on him. He was a handsome youth with his long blond hair and tall, slender frame, attributes that weren’t lost on those around him. He quickly excused himself and made a beeline to Bard, trailing girls behind him.

“Hi, Bard,” he said quickly.

“Hi, Legolas. Quite the crowd.”

The boy grimaced. “Too much of one. Could you look... teacherly or something, just until they go away?”
“Absolutely,” Bard grinned. “So, what do you think about your latest assignment in history class?”

Legolas launched into a monologue that apparently was to clarify something about some paper or another, and the few girls who had followed him drifted away. Bard kept one eye on them until the last one was out of earshot.

“You’re clear.”

“Oh, good,” Legolas breathed. He snuck a look behind him, and finally joined Bard to lean against the wall. “I didn’t think when I said hello to Papa. They’ll follow me all over school now.”

Bard’s hum was sympathetic. “Kind of a pain.”

“A real pain. Are you going home now?”

“I’ll see what your Papa’s schedule is first, once he’s clear of the crowd, but then yeah, I’ll head home. Are you going to fencing, or do you want a lift home?”

“I’m just waiting for Kíillian and Tara, then we’ll go to fencing.”

“Okay. So I’ll see you at the regular time, then.”

“Yes, the regular time. Oh, there’s Kíl. Thanks for bailing me out.”

“Anytime. Enjoy your fencing, and say hi to the Gondors for me.”

“I will. Bye, Bard.”

Legolas scrambled off to join Kíllian, who waved to Bard before grabbing Legolas’s arm and dashing off. Tara came down the hall, looking for her cohorts, so Bard waved to her and pointed after the boys. She flashed a bright smile and waved as she ran after them. Tilda was the next to appear, skipping down the hall as she saw Bard.

“Hi, Da!” she exclaimed with a bright smile. “Did you see Ada? That was something!”

“I did, little doll,” he smiled. “Are you off to sport now?”

She shook her head. “They canceled sport for the lower grades because so many children are sick, and so are the teachers. So can I go home with you?”

“You sure can,” Bard grinned. “I want to talk to Ada before I head home, so do you already have your things to take home?”

“No, I have to go to my locker to get everything.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you here, all right?”

“Okay, Da. Be back in a minute.”

Tilda scampered off. By this time, most of the students had said their farewells to the dancers, and Bard made his way to Thran’s side.

“A bit over the top with the Strauss, don’t you think?” he teased, when Thran turned a welcoming smile on him.

Thran’s smile turned gleeful. “Entirely. But I know my audience, yes? I have to be bombastic and
over the top to distract them from their mobiles, iPods, and so forth. It is a good thing I am tall. Only a tall person can carry off Zarathustra.”

“It had nothing to do with the impossible splits, no,” Bard teased back. “Theodred passes along his compliments. He was quite impressed.”

Thran smiled in appreciation. “That was kind of him.”

“Hi, Charisse, Luka,” Bard waved to the two dancers who had waved to him. “You were both wonderful. And good zombies, too.”

“Thank you!” Charisse called. When Luka imitated a lumbering, looming zombie, Charisse offered him a fond shake of the head and a playful nudge. Laughing, the young dancer dropped his play-acting, and linked arms with his companion as they turned to speak to others of their company.

“Does something blossom between those two?” Bard murmured.

Chuckling, Thran shrugged. “Who knows? Luka is quite the puppy, yes. Charisse is more seasoned, but he is quite endearing, so perhaps. As long as they are happy and do not disrupt the company, yes?”

“Absolutely. I won’t hold you, angel. I just wanted to hear what your schedule is for the rest of the day so I can time supper.”

“I understand. We will be here to see how possible it is to work on the stage today, so I hope I will be home in time for supper at the regular time. We hope we can begin our work here starting tomorrow, but it now may be Monday before that is the case. If so, then tomorrow we will be at the UVB studio. And Saturday, we may be in the ballroom, if that is not an issue.”

Bard shook his head. “It won’t be as far as I’m concerned. I’ll get the porch boards replaced tomorrow, then Saturday I’ll work on my commissions to make up for taking the time out to do the porch. I hope to get Hal’s piece to the point that he can come out to see it in a day or two.”

“That is exciting!” Thran’s eyes brightened. “So the children are all at sport now?”

“I saw Legs, and he’s off to fence with Killian and Tara. Tilda’s sport was canceled because of all the flu, so she’ll come home with me. I haven’t seen Sigrid or Bain, so I’ll assume they’re at lacrosse and track. I’ll walk around back to make sure before Tilda and I head home.”

“All right, lyubov moya,” Thran replied. “I am off to the stage. I will text you when I am ready to leave so you have a little warning.”

“Perfect,” Bard nodded. “Dance well, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Hi, Ada!” Tilda hailed, trotting up to her fathers. “I liked your zombie dance. It wasn’t too scary!”

“I am glad, Kukla,” Thran replied. “No sport for you today?”

She shook her head. “I saw Bain and Sigrid, though. They’re both in sport, and Legolas went to fencing, so it’s just me who doesn’t have it this afternoon.”

“Let’s head home, then,” Bard said. “Say goodbye to Ada – he’s off to dance in the auditorium for the afternoon.”

“Bye, Ada! Break a leg!” Tilda grinned, and a laughing Thran waved goodbye as she and Bard left
the school and went out to the parking lot. The two chatted as they drove home; Tilda didn’t have a lot of homework today, and when Bard mentioned that he’d work on the porch tomorrow, she wanted to help. So once they got home, Bard gave Tilda her next dose of her medicine with some yogurt, and then she hurried into her grubbiest clothes to help Bard pull out the nails from the rotten boards in the porch. Once Bard identified a rotten one, Tilda drew a big X on it with a heavy black marker. As Bard pried each nail up, it was Tilda’s job to put it into a metal can. Most of the rotten pieces were on the leftmost end of the porch, under the circular section at the corner of the house and down the left side. That was the western side of the house, which got little morning sun and so took longer to dry each day. He left the boards in place, because it would save him time tomorrow if he could use each board to measure its replacement. The right, easternmost end had avoided the rot, but one board had badly warped and needed replacing. When Bard removed the last nail, he carted two of the garden benches from the gazebo and put them on the left side of the porch to block anyone from stumbling over the loosened boards. Then he and Tilda swept the porch and stairs.

“Da, I think this one is rotten, too.” Tilda called as she wielded her broom down the western side of the porch.

“You’re right, Til,” Bard agreed. “Good catch. Time for the pry bar again.” He freed the nails from the offending board and Tilda dumped them in the can. “I’m going to cut a new board for that one warped one outside of the main room. It’s the only one I have to replace over there, so let’s measure it and I’ll cut its replacement now.”

“Oh, Da. I’ve got the tape thing.” Tilda held the end of the tape measure so that Bard could see how long the board was, then she followed him into the barn. He set up a pair of sawhorses, put a board on top, and then Tilda helped him measure the board to the right length. A quick cut with the circular saw, and then the two carried the board to the porch. Bard grinned to see how proud Tilda was to be able to carry her end of the board, help slide it into space, and then stand on the board to hold it in place while Bard drilled the screw holes and fastened it down.

“Let’s check for any other ones over here before I put the saw away,” Bard said. Tilda’s reply to that was to jump up and down on the boards to see which ones made suspicious crackling sounds. “No, Til, that’s not a good idea!” he hastened to say. “What if the board breaks? You’ll go right through the porch!”

“Oh... I didn’t think of that,” Tilda admitted. She bounced with less force. “No, I think the rest are okay.”

“Good,” Bard exhaled as he looked over the Xed boards at the opposite end of the porch. “It’s a good thing I got extra boards. There are more rotten than I thought. It’ll take all of tomorrow morning to replace them.”

“I wish it wasn’t a school day tomorrow,” Tilda said, coming to stand beside Bard to survey the Xed boards. “I could help.”

Bard ruffled her hair. “You’d be a good helper, too. You could hand me the screws and stand on the boards.”

“If you did it on Saturday, I could help,” Tilda looked up with a hopeful expression.

“The painters need me to finish before Saturday, little doll,” Bard explained. “They might be able to start on the porch, but they won’t get far with all these rotten boards in it. They wouldn’t be safe putting their ladders and stuff on them to paint the porch ceiling, would they?”

“No, they could get hurt,” Tilda agreed, if reluctantly.
“We’re going to be very busy on Saturday anyway, little doll. Thran will be here with his ballet company, and Legs will go to fencing, and Sigrid will go to the bistro.”

“Everybody will have some place to go except me,” Tilda sighed.

“Bain probably won’t, but even if he doesn’t, maybe you’d like to ask Elanor to come over to play?”

Tilda nodded vigorously. “That would be good.”

“I’ll give Miss Rosie a call tonight about it. Then remember on Sunday, we’re going to look for some new clothes for everyone.”

“A party dress for Sigrid, too?”

“We’ll need to get you one, too, before long. When Ada’s ballet opens, you’ll need something nice for that.”

“Really?” Tilda brightened again. “That’ll be cool.”

“I hope it is. His premiere will be in July, when it’s hot as fire. So it’d be good to get something light and cool, so you won’t hate to have it on.”

“Ugh, that’d be no good at all,” Tilda agreed.

“Wow, you’ve got a great helper, Mr. Bowman!” Darla exclaimed as she came up the porch stairs.

“I do,” Bard gave Tilda a wink. “She’s the best.”

Darla chuckled. “Lucky guy, then. I just wanted to let you know that we’re ending a little earlier today, just so we don’t start the next section and get it half done. The forecast is for rain tomorrow, so if it starts, we won’t be out, and I don’t want the paint to look streaky.”

“Makes sense to me,” Bard nodded. “So I may not see you until Monday?”

“If it rains tomorrow, but clears up on Saturday, we’ll be back out on Saturday,” Darla replied. “I like to get a full week in when I have the chance, so my crew doesn’t have to short their paychecks.”

“I know exactly,” Bard said. How many times had he had to scramble when a paycheck was less than he’d wanted, through no fault of his own? “We’ll have someone here all day.”

“Great, Mr. Bowman. I appreciate you being flexible.”

“Not a problem. The house looks better already, even with just the single coat. I appreciate the careful job.”

“You’re welcome,” Darla thanked him. “So I hope I’ll be back out tomorrow, but if not, we’ll try for Saturday.”

“Great. See you one day or the other, then.”

“Have a good evening, Mr. Bowman. You, too, Miss Helper!”

“I will! Thank you!” Tilda waved, as Darla and her two helpers carried their brushes and pans into the barn to wash them out in the big tub sink there. Bard and Tilda knocked around the yard, talking about what kinds of plants and such that they might like, until the painters reappeared with their cleaned tools and headed home for the day. Then they went inside, Tilda to start on her homework
and Bard to consider what to make for supper.

As usual, the old reliable chicken breasts were in abundant supply. Because they tended to dry out unless they were in some kind of sauce, Bard put them into the oven to roast. When they were done, he’d shred them and put them into a casserole that the children particularly liked called Mexican Mix-up. It had black beans, corn kernels, tortilla strips, tomatoes, and lots of enchilada sauce, with cheese on top. With fruit and veg, it’d make a hearty supper. He put a couple of extra chicken breasts in the oven for Thran’s lunches, and some big sweet potatoes in case the casserole wasn’t enough to fill up the bottomless pits named Bain and Legolas.

While the chicken and potatoes cooked, Bard worked on his sketches for the elusive Andromeda galaxy commission. He wanted to order a few aluminum spheres to try out some ideas, but he’d have to wait until someone with a computer came home, as the suppliers were all online etailers. By the time he’d sketched a few more ideas and made some notes, the children were home from school, and they chattered about the day’s events while they had their usual snack and helped Bard assemble the big chicken casserole and a green salad. Thran appeared just as the casserole came out of the oven, so he ran upstairs to change out of his dancewear and into comfortable clothes.

The casserole disappeared in record time. The amount all of the children ate was prodigious, given all the exercise they got in their afterschool activities. Thank the gods he was finally in a position where he could watch them fill themselves up without worrying about every mouthful, and without applying for public assistance. Thank every one of the gods.

Everyone had lots to talk about around the supper table, from Tilda’s sojourn as Bard’s construction helper to Thran’s description of progress on the Immortal set in the children’s school auditorium.

“The floor is done,” he reported. “It is a big wheel on a central spindle, with wheels around the edge. We will have students in black costumes who will rotate the set as we need. The walls are done, as well. That is fine for the one third of the stage where we will conduct the battle, the travels between the mortal world and the Underworld, because that will be only bare floor, bare walls. But the rest must become the troll market. There will be a great throne for Death that comes apart to make other pieces of the Underworld, and lots of set dressing. That remains to be done. But it comes along.”

“Will you be able to dance there tomorrow, Papa?” Legolas asked.

Thran shook his head. “There are a few more safety things to be done. So Monday will be the day. We will work tomorrow at the studio, then Saturday here in the ballroom. Sunday we will have off, then Monday we will begin our noon-to-whenever efforts at the school.”

The discussion veered away from the ballet to whether the children had turned in their checks to pay for their summer programs – they had – and their plans for their shopping trip on Sunday. Bard got paper and pencil and made a list of the minimums that everyone needed, and they decided where they would shop. Even though they didn’t have to confine themselves just to the secondhand shops, Sigrid made a pitch to visit them anyway, especially a vintage shop in the village that she’d wanted to visit.

“Why don’t you take a look on your lunch break on Saturday?” Bard suggested. “See if there’s anything you want, and we can pick it up when I get you at three.”

“That’s a great idea, Da,” Sigrid smiled. “They’ve got some neat old stuff in the window.”

“We can hit the department store for basic stuff – socks, underwear, tees,” Bard continued. “Then the mall for other stuff.”
“And my dress?” Sigrid asked.

“And maybe mine?” Tilda piped up.

Thran nodded. “We have several places to go, it seems. This will call for efficiency if we are to get done in a reasonable time.”

“Spoken like a guy,” Sigrid shook her head. “Shopping for clothes is not an act of efficiency.”

“Some girls think it’s a roving party,” Legolas smirked. “Some of the girls in my boarding school spent every weekend shopping at the mall. They bought stuff, but mostly they spent time talking to their friends, or eating in the food courts, or trying out stuff at the makeup counters.”

“A lot of them do that,” Sigrid nodded. “I don’t have the patience for that, but I’m not like Bain, either. He goes in one store, buys one thing, and then comes out and goes home.”

“I don’t need anything else!” Bain shrugged, as everyone laughed.

“We’ll aim for a happy medium,” Bard suggested. “Who’s ready for dessert?”

While the children cleaned up from supper, Bard arranged with Rosie and Sam for Elanor to come over to play with Tilda Saturday afternoon, so the little girl dug into her homework in good spirits. Thran helped him look for the aluminum spheres on his computer, and he ordered a few in three different sizes and colors. It would save him a lot of time and effort if he didn’t have to color the spheres himself, but he got some plain ones to experiment with, in case the colored spheres weren’t what he wanted. He also ordered three kinds of epoxy to test what would best make the spheres stick together.

After homework and showers and bedtime, Thran and Bard gratefully settled into bed. Tonight they didn’t need all of their blankets, mute testimony to the gradual warming of the season.

“The house already looks better with the paint,” Thran murmured with a soft sigh.

“It does. It’s supposed to rain tomorrow, so Darla and her two compatriots may not be in residence tomorrow.”

“Oh? They cannot work on the porch, since it is out of the rain?”

“All the moisture in the air messes with how the paint goes on. That’s okay; I can still work on the porch boards whether it rains or not, so it’ll give me a chance to stay ahead of them.”

Thran murmured understanding and stoked Bard’s chest softly. “It will be so beautiful. It already is.”

“It is. Everyone’s happy and healthy, coughs notwithstanding, you’re dancing, and I’m working. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Nor I, lyubov moya. Nor I.”

Bard half expected Thran’s soft whisper to turn amorous, but the rigors of the day had been enough that his husband was content to rest in his arms. Despite the stir in his loins, Bard respected his angel’s weariness, and shut his eyes. It was a peaceful way to fall asleep, and Bard embraced it without complaint.
The next morning started quickly, much to Bard’s satisfaction. He and Thran saw the children off to school, then Thran headed for the UVB studio. He’d barely turned into the lane before Bard was trotting into the barn. Clouds in the overcast sky loomed low, threatening to drop their rain at any moment, so before it started, Bard hauled the sawhorses, circular saw, and all the lumber onto the porch so he could work there without dashing out into the rain.

The first drops fell before he got the last of the boards from the barn. There was no wind, so he left the bay open in case he needed something while he worked. The rain intensified, but he made it to the porch with the last three boards before the rain really opened up. As it sheeted to the ground, Bard stood at the top of the stairs to watch it until it slowed into a steady soft rain. This was just the kind of rain the burgeoning grass and shrubs needed to shoot into full growth; likely in a few days he’d have to get the lawnmower out...

Imagine Thran in a pair of ratty jeans, an equally ratty tee, and his hiking boots, mowing the lawn like any other family man, his braid swinging behind him. Maybe with a pair of sunglasses, and a trucker’s cap –

What a ludicrous image. Especially the hat.

Laughing, Bard set up his sawhorses. He measured, cut, drilled, and screwed down two boards before he stopped chuckling.

He worked steadily, enjoying the soft sound of the steady rain as he replaced one board after another. He’d gotten maybe a fourth of the boards replaced when the roar of a large truck caught his attention. It turned into the driveway, but not before Bard read the name on the side of it. Thran’s sofa was here! He stepped away from the sawhorses and lumber as the truck turned around by the carriage house to back up to the porch.

The driver rolled down his window. “Oropherson?”

Bard raised a hand in confirmation. “This is the place. Big sofa?”

“That’s the one, mac. Where’s it going?”

“Inside the front door, and turn right.”

“Got it. It’s covered in plastic, so the rain won’t bother it.”

“Righto. I’ll get the door.”

The driver was a tall, broad-shouldered, muscular man, with a head of thick brown hair and deep-set, dark brown eyes. Two equally doughty comrades were crammed into the front seat beside him. “Okay, Grimbold, Erkenbrand – let’s get the big bast – I mean sofa – out of the truck.”

Bard smothered a snicker. He hadn’t seen the sofa, but the measurements he’d laid out on the main room floor had been large enough that he wasn’t surprised to hear the deliverymen curse it. Thank the gods he’d already finished the floor in that room, so he wouldn’t have to try to move the thing himself once it was in place. He propped the front door open, then stood by as the men got the back of the truck open. He winced at the expanse of plastic-wrapped upholstery – it was a behemoth, and no mistake. They maneuvered it carefully to the edge of the truck, but even with three of them, it was an awkward, bulky thing to move. Bard came down the stairs to help lift the middle section.

“Thanks, mac,” Grimbold panted. “This thing’s a killer.”
“We need to do a one-eighty when we get it off the truck,” Bard said. “Then straight up the stairs and bear right. Watch out for the statue in the front hall.”

“Okay, you heard the man,” the first man said. “Come on, Erkenbrand, move your butt so we can get this sucker up the steps!”

“Hold your horses, Elfhelm,” Erkenbrand grunted. “All right, I’ve got my end now. On three... one, two, three!”

The quartet hauled the massive sofa off the truck, swung it around, then heaved it up the porch steps and through the front door. They maneuvered around Hope the Lope and got it into the main room.

“Centered to the fireplace, please,” Bard requested.

“Bring it this way another foot,” Grimbold directed. “Yeah, another six inches, and down on three – one, two, three. That the right place, mac?”

“Spot on,” Bard agreed. “That’s a load and a half.”

“Solid as a brick,” Elfhelm shook his head. “Great piece, without a doubt, but it’s hell and a half to move. Ought to come with a crane, y’know? Thanks for the hand.”

“Welcome,” Bard nodded.

“We’ll get the plastic off, then you can check it over. And I hope like hell that it’s fine, because I don’t want to put it back on the truck!”

Bard chuckled as the three men methodically unwrapped the plastic from around the massive curving sofa. Mmm, the grey velvet was beautiful, drawing Bard to run his hands over it, but they were too dirty for that, so he had to admire it from a distance. He carefully checked it over from front to back and side to side, and found it without scuff or tear or break. The three toss pillows were there, too. So he signed the delivery receipt without complaint, and saw the deliverymen back to their truck. They threw the discarded plastic wrappings in the back, slammed the back door down, and climbed back into the front.

“I hope that’s the hardest delivery you have today, and the rest of the stuff goes easier.”

“Thanks, mac,” Elfhelm grinned. “We hope the same thing. Enjoy.”

Bard waved, and the truck trundled away. When it was out of sight, Bard headed to the kitchen to wash the sawdust and rust marks from his hands, then returned to the main room to admire the sofa. It was amazing how instantly a single piece of furniture turned an echoingly empty warehouse of a room into something almost inhabited. The grey linen velvet felt as delicious as it looked, and the three amethyst toss pillows looked like frosted grapes. And the shape! It curved around the fireplace beautifully, and Bard imagined a white marble mantel to match the sensuous curve of the sofa with equally sensuous carving. But maybe Thran would prefer something more modern? It didn’t matter. Whatever mantel he chose, it’d certainly be a beautiful one.

How beautiful his pale, pristine angel would look draped over this sofa, too. Bard’s cock twitched in such anticipation that he had to rearrange his jeans. Gods, gods... he needed to take the edge off soon. There was no possible way he’d wait until the room was painted before he seduced Thran into something as decadent as this sofa deserved.

With that promise in mind, he tore himself away from the sofa, and went back to his porch boards.
He worked steadily, careful to measure the boards so they aligned properly over the supporting joists, making clean cuts, and then drilling the holes for the deck screws. He liked the fresh, organic smell of the cut wood on the rainy air. It was the smell of reclamation, of restoration, of making something strong and secure again. Think how great it would look when the whole porch was painted, with wicker chairs like his Mam liked so much. Or maybe some of those big overstuffed things that Daphne had loved, the huge wicker frames with big, round, plump cushions covered in wild tropical prints? If the main room was Thran modern, and the solarium was Morocco, then maybe the porch was either Victorian summer, or Tahitian ease.

That modern main room... his cock twitched again. It was hard to think about what color of paint or what style of mantel to put there when all he really wanted to think about was seducing Thran on that sofa. Life had gotten busy again, then children and he had gotten sick, so he and Thran hadn’t veered into anything more erotic than comfortable cuddling for a week. If anything spoke to his recovery from the flu, it was a rise in his desire for more than cuddling. Gods, as soon as the painters were gone, he’d tempt Thran away from his morning barre and into something...

He dragged his thoughts back to the porch. Circular saws weren’t hard to use, but a whirling cutting blade was in play, which demanded attention –

His mobile rang.

Sighing, he set the saw aside, pulled his mobile out of his jeans pocket, and checked the number. It was Bilbo, so he picked up at once.

“Good morning, Bard!” his agent’s warm and cheery voice said. “Or it is if you like rain, I suppose, which I do. How are you?”

“I’m very well, thank you, and you?”

“Quite well, thank you for asking. I have a couple of things to tell you. Do you have time?”

“Absolutely. What’s up?”

“Ah, good, good. First, I have a price for your Alexander’s Downfall.” He named a figure that made Bard’s eyebrows go up. “I did a survey of your other pieces currently in collections – several are quite well regarded, my boy. And I looked at the market in general, and I think this is a fair price. I’ve underpriced it just a hair, you understand, just because we want more of your things in the market. So if you’re amenable to that price, I’ll handle the transaction for you.”

“It’s wonderful. It’s more than I expected, so yes, whatever you think is perfect.”

“Excellent! I’ll get on it right away. How are you coming with your commissions?”

“I’ve got Hal Galadhrim’s tree in clay now. I hope to call him in another day or two to come see the model and approve it. I can set up the casting as soon as he does.”

“Wonderful!”

Bard described where he was about the orrery and the galaxy, which Bilbo met with interest. When Bard said he still hadn’t gotten in touch with the third client, Bilbo was philosophical.

“I’m not surprised. I do have some word – the principal is on an extended trip, so may not be back for another few weeks. I’ll stay in touch with the client’s rep, who has assured me that his client is very interested. But I’d use your time to work on the three pieces you have, and leave the calling to me.”
“That’s good to know, Bilbo,” Bard said. “I hope to see the orrery client soon with sketches, as I have two directions I can go. I hope he goes one way, to be honest, because the other direction would lend itself to another piece that I’d really like to do.”

“That would be terrific,” Bilbo enthused. “Celebrían tells me that all of your sketches have sold from her gallery, and she’d love to have more. So I think we can keep you busy for some time to come.”

“I’ll get right on it, Bilbo. I can’t tell you how pleased I am. Thank you for all your attention.”

“You’re very welcome, my boy. Thank you for creating such wonderful art! So I hope you stay out of the rain, and I’ll talk to you again soon, especially if your Alexander’s Downfall sells.”

“All right, Bilbo. Enjoy the day.”

“I will! I hope you will, too. Goodbye.”

Bard disconnected the call and stuck his mobile back in his pocket. Maybe he’d just sold a piece of sculpture for twice the amount he’d set as his base limit. And Celebrían wanted more sketches. And he had three commissions with a fourth in the offing. And he had Rahmiel to cast.

First, he had a porch to finish.

He turned back to his saw and drill with purpose.

Noon came and went while Bard worked to replace the rotten porch boards. With all the interruptions, he was anxious to finish them so he could move on to the bounty of paying work he had on his plate. First, Hal’s tree, then the orrery, then the galaxy... maybe he should cast Rahmiel first? It’d been years since he’d cast anything, and if he made a mess of it, he could always recast it without anyone complaining about the cost of materials. He’d slip off the wings, and remove the hair plumes, and...

Ugh. Despite the prospect of seeing Rahmiel in the bronze he deserved to be, it would feel like sacrilege to remove the clay model’s feathered wings and hair, as if he did that to Thran. Better to think about better ways to enjoy his husband –

Oh, gods; he just couldn’t seem to get his mind off hauling Thran to bed, to the solarium, to the sofa, to anything. Hell, he’d tease him onto the half bath’s marble tile floor, if that’s what his angel wanted to do. He wasn’t particular.

The sound of another vehicle turning into the drive brought him up with a muttered curse. What now? He’d never get this rotten lumber replaced with so many interruptions, no matter how nice the interruptions were. He straightened to see who had appeared in the driveway this time.

It was Thran’s SUV.

Before he could worry, the driver’s side window went down and Thran waved.

“The power is off in the studio! So I hope you have not had lunch yet?”

No, but I’m about to have dessert, thank you very much.

Bard put down his drill, and went to the top of the stairs. He looked up at the falling rain, then at Thran, and when he was sure his husband’s eyes were fixed on him, he ambled down the stairs. At the bottom, he casually peeled off his tee and tossed it back onto the porch. He held his hands out, arched an eyebrow, and let a sly smile drift over his lips.
Thran bit his bottom lip, and the window went up. The SUV engine turned off, and Thran erupted through the door to engulf Bard in a hellacious kiss.

“You fucking bastard,” Thran hissed as he clutched Bard’s shoulders, drawing Bard’s laughter. “You are such a filthy, fucking bastard –”

Bard found himself hauled towards the barn by his belt buckle. He went without complaint, a teasing smile on his lips. As soon as they were out of the rain, Thran pressed him against the side of the crates he used to climb up to the chin up bar, and roundly engulfed his smile in another inspired kiss. He wound bare, wet arms around his dancer, who pressed close despite the sawdust, sweat, and rain that spattered Bard’s torso.

“Oh gods, gods, what you do to me!” Thran growled. “You tease me, you make me want you without mercy, so I will have you without mercy. Right here!”

“But right here is so filthy, pretty angel,” Bard teased.

“So are you, you fucker. You know what that does to me. Oh, you bastard –”

Bard picked Thran up in his arms and carried him farther into the barn, back to his workshop. No sooner had he put Thran down than the dancer’s hands stroked over Bard’s chest, and fingers dragged red marks down his flanks. Thran muscled him back against the anvil, pressing close as he rubbed thumbs over Bard’s nipples.

“Yes, yes! That is what I want to hear!” Thran stuttered when Bard gasped. “I want you as frantic as you have made me. More. So much more!”

As wound up as Bard had been all morning – hell, even last night – arousal flashed through him, as hot as any fire he’d generated at the forge. The least touch would have been enough to make him melt; under Thran’s barrage, he all but dripped into a heap at Thran’s feet, craving anything Thran offered him. But Thran held him upright against the anvil, kissing, licking, nuzzling, massaging, and then fumbling for his belt buckle. Bard groped for Thran’s in return, but his husband was still in his dancewear, and he couldn’t loosen the belt that kept Thran’s tights up. It didn’t matter. As soon as Thran breached Bard’s jeans, a hand engulfed his cock. He leaned back, supporting his weight on his hands on the ends of the anvil, his head back and his eyes closed, and let Thran fondle him. A soft moan forced its way past his teeth, then was smothered in Thran’s greedy kiss. Gods, every touch was electric. His lips were bitten, then his tongue, then a long tongue filled his mouth as that hand possessed his cock. He barely had the presence of mind to point to the shelf above the worktable.

“Up there,” he rasped, when Thran came up for air.

His husband backed away just long enough to find the tube of lubricant Bard had stowed there the last time Thran had talked about possessing him in the barn. With a snarl, Thran shoved him around and over the anvil, yanked his jeans off his hips, and slid a well-slicked cock deeply inside him. Feet kicked his ankles wide, and he adjusted his stance to accommodate without thought. As soon as Thran was fully within, he fell over Bard’s back with a whimper, wrapping both arms around Bard’s torso. Long, white, disarrayed hair fell over Bard’s shoulders, and teeth clamped over his spine at the base of his neck. Long, elegant fingers scrabbled for his nipples, pinching and rolling.

“Oh, gods, gods, you filthy bastard, you are too much, too much,” Thran moaned as he worked his cock slowly in and out. His hips jerked erratically as the urge for release got to be too strong to resist. “You have me, you have me –”
“Then fuck me, bastard. Go on. You want to. You know you want to.”

Thran exploded in release, so overwhelmed that he couldn’t spit a single curse with any coherence. He went limp over Bard’s back, but his hands still clutched at Bard spasmodically, and his teeth still nipped up and down Bard’s spine. Bard kept himself steady to support Thran’s weight until his husband regained control of his body. The clutching fingers eased into gentler stroking, and the nips turned into soft kisses.

“You have no shame,” Thran finally whispered. “No scruples, either. How could you do that to me?”

“Because you’re easy,” Bard murmured, grinning. Thran slipped from inside him, but he still lay against Bard’s back, rubbing and stroking. “You’re sooooooo easy. All I have to do is look at you.”

Thran’s chuckle was chagrined. “You are right. You have me well trained. All you have to do is look at me with those bad boy eyes and I come.”

“Bad boy eyes?” Bard repeated, laughing. “Is that what you call them?”

Thran snorted. “Tcha, you stand in the rain, wet and filthy and bare-chested, and you look at me like a devil who invites me to sin in the most decadent of ways, and then you pretend innocence about what I call your eyes? What else should I call them? Cherr, I think of them and want to come all over again. But first I want to reward the devil who leads me into such divine temptation. Tell me that you want to despoil an angel the way the angel despoiled you.”

“I have a better place to despoil an angel than in a barn,” Bard teased. “Or haven’t you exorcised your grunge kink enough yet?”

A sexy giggle revealed that Thran was torn between more play in the barn, and curiosity about what else Bard had in mind. “Oh, how will I ever exorcise such a delightful kink when you insist to tease me in the rain? You will never be safe from my grunge kink.”

“What if I tempt you with something else?”

“What?”

“Pull up your knickers, and I’ll show you. Or is your cock still too hard to get it in your fancy jockstrap?”

“If you can get your cock back in your jeans without injury, I will let you show me. Otherwise, I will let the grunge kink roam free.”

“Mmm, that’s tempting,” Bard admitted, grinning. He half turned around to let Thran see his expression. “But you’re on top right now. Either fuck me again, or let me up.”

Thran muttered a curse, but with a smile, and eased away to pull up his tights. Bard managed to get his jeans over his cock without too much of a grimace; burying it in his underwear did not make it happy. But he wasn’t about to forgo the chance to christen another room of the house if he didn’t have to.

“I am here and ready, my sweet devil,” Thran purred, stroking Bard’s chest, then cupping his hand over Bard’s cock. “Why do you wait?”

Bard grabbed Thran’s hand, held it wide, wrapped his other hand around Thran’s waist, and pulled him hard into his embrace. “Be careful, angel. Or you might be sorry about what you missed.”
“Show me,” Thran kissed him softly. “Show me now.”

Bard pulled Thran with him out of the barn, pausing only to yank down the bay before they ran through the rain to the porch. Bard pushed open the front door, got them both into the hall, and wordlessly pointed into the main room.

Thran’s mouth fell open as he gaped at the sofa. Bard took advantage of his husband’s surprise to gather him into his arms and give him a deep kiss.

“Upstairs. Shower. Then I’m going to make love to you on that sofa.”

“Yes, you are,” Thran breathed, and took Bard’s hand to hurry him upstairs.
Chapter 127

Chapter Summary

The saint balances the angel's devilry in the barn with a little romance, and Clan Ffyrnig whirls into a busy weekend. A couple of friends come to visit, too.

Chapter Notes

Hal and Ari appear courtesy of the very kind johnnysmitten. Thank you, my dear! ❤
❤

Thran had gotten to the UVB studio late because of snarled traffic, an accident that made the normally twenty-minute commute twice as long. The village lanes and streets were adequate to carry the local flow of cars and trucks each morning, but when the wider road that led to the highway ended up the site of an accident at the most heavily-traveled intersection, everything stopped.

After a long slow crawl forward through the rain, Thran finally reached the site of the accident. It was still a mess. The traffic signal was out, and two police officers had to divert traffic around a large delivery truck smashed into a utility pole. All that could be said for the chaos was that no one seemed to be hurt. As Thran guided his SUV around a police car, a fire truck, and a massive tow truck, he pieced together what must have happened – the small blue car askew by one corner had skidded on the wet pavement, and the truck had swerved to avoid it. The truck had clipped the car's fender, crumpling it badly enough that it could no longer be driven, and then veered into the utility pole hard enough to snap it. Removing the truck, then, would be a delicate operation. Yes, on the other side of the intersection were three utility trucks, ready to help sort out the tangle of wires. No wonder the roads were so clogged.

Once Thran was through the intersection, he traveled the two short blocks farther on to the UVB studio. Several people stood outside huddled under umbrellas – Lettie, Ori, Luka, and several dancers – so he pulled the hood of his rain jacket over his hair, got out of the SUV, and joined them. The power was off – probably because of the accident he'd passed – but as the rain increased, Lettie opened the door and they huddled in the lobby by the windows to see if the power would return quickly. One or two additional dancers arrived as they escaped the traffic, and after perhaps fifteen minutes, the lights came on. Everyone hurried to change, and took their places on the studio floor. Neither Irmo nor Abebe had arrived yet, so Lettie led the barre. Though the power flickered a few times, they managed to complete their morning routines. Finally, Abebe bustled in, and Irmo a few minutes later, so they took over from Lettie.

The company set to work on the scene where Death leads the Soldier through the Underworld. This scene was lavishly choreographed with the dances of so many other traditions – belly dance, Lindy, modern, jazz, hip-hop, Middle Eastern, even a dervish – and through it all Death would take a hand of a dancer here, or the Soldier would be embroiled in a madcap ensemble there. The goal was to make the interactions look spontaneous and fresh, but that took a great deal of careful choreography.
They’d worked through the sequence once when Lettie called to them from the studio door.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but a rep from the power company just stopped by. Because of the accident so many of you passed this morning, they need to put in a new utility pole to replace a snapped one, and then reattach all of the lines. Of course they can’t do that safely without turning off the power, so they’re letting all of the businesses in the area know that they expect the power to be off most of the afternoon.”

The dancers looked among themselves. Thran wasn’t concerned for himself, because he expected to have his pointe lesson with Mme. Morgelle this afternoon.

“What do you want to do, Thran?” Lettie asked.

“We will work here until the power is no more, and then we will reconvene tomorrow at the ballroom,” he said. “The school will not be ready for us until Monday, and to reach the ballroom would take us through the same accident zone that delayed us so much this morning. We will not die if we lose the afternoon. Tomorrow, though, we will work hard to make up for today. Everyone, please be in place to dance at nine.”

That met with everyone’s approval, so they went back to work. They got through the scene several more times, and Thran was pleased at how well the various groups of dancers had begun to mesh their performances. The Lindy hop and hip-hop groups had even put together a little Montagues-and-Capulets spat between them, which Death quelled with a wave of His hand. It delighted Thran to see such initiative, and even Irmo didn’t get upset about the added fillip. It also gave Thran the chance to practice with the gloves Rada had provided for Death’s costume that featured such elongated fingers. The belly dancer was kind enough to show him some of the exaggerated finger movements she employed in her dancing, which helped him make his movements more exotic and realistic.

When the power finally went out, the dancers made their way out of the studio with the help of the dim, yellow emergency light. Thran wished everyone a safe journey home, then embarked on his own.

He didn’t want to sit through the traffic snarl again, so he looped wide around the center of town to avoid it. It still took him a very long time to get home, but at least he was moving, and despite the steady rain he enjoyed sights of the village and surrounding area that he hadn’t seen before. He was, however, glad to finally reach the lane that ran by the house, and then the turnoff up the driveway.

Bard was on the porch, and looked up from his saw and boards with a worried expression. Thran turned his SUV so that he could lean out of the window to wave and call a reassurance.

“The power is off in the studio! So I hope you have not had lunch yet?”

Bard came to the top of the stair to look up at the rain clouds, then looked back at Thran. What was he up to?

Oh, gods, look at him slink down the stairs – oh, now look at him strip off his tee to stand bare-chested in the rain – did he flex his abs on purpose, hinting at what was below?

Chert, his husband was such a fucking bastard – look at him spread his hands wide in the most blatant invitation! Just wait until Thran spread Bard’s legs and then his cheeks and paid him back for that come-hither smile and those bedroom, bad boy eyes –

What happened next was delirious, explosive, carnal, fierce, maddening. Through it all, Bard smiled that same, intoxicating smile, and those eyes...
Taking him once was not enough. Not at all.

“What if I tempt you with something else?” Bard teased, rubbing his hips back against Thran’s thighs.

Nothing could do that. “What?” Thran managed, as those tight glutes against his thighs urged his cock to rally again.

“Pull up your knickers, and I’ll show you. Or is your cock still too hard to get it in your fancy jockstrap?”

Thran snarled something equally provocative in return, which only drew Bard’s laughter. Gods, gods, the way Bard hitched up his filthy jeans like the dodgy artist who had so completely snared a sexual vampire snared him with no less surety. That rain and sweat-slicked skin, those unruly curls messily spilling from behind a bandana... it was as if Thran had never touched his husband, so aroused was he. Why did he let Bard pull him through the rain and up on the porch? Why did he let Bard pull him through the door? It was more than he could stand. As soon as Bard shut the door, he would drag him to the floor and have him again in front of Hope the Lope as if he were a ritual sacrifice –

All thoughts of ritual sacrifice vanished when he saw his new sofa. When his mouth fell open, Bard drowned him in a long, slow kiss.

“Upstairs. Shower. Then I’m going to make love to you on that sofa.”

Oh, that would be so much better than rutting in front of a golden idol.

“Yes, you are,” Thran breathed. He grabbed Bard’s wrist, and they fled upstairs and into their shower, shedding clothes all over the bedroom. Thran fumbled to wind his braid around his head to keep it dry, but they weren’t in the shower long enough for it to get too damp. Then they stormed downstairs, Thran in the lead and hauling a laughing Bard behind him, to dive into the main room. Bard managed to get a dry towel over the sofa before Thran fell across it and dragged Bard down on top of him to smother him with uncounted kisses.

“What’s your hurry, angel? There’s no need to rush.”


Bard’s chuckle was quickly swallowed in Thran’s kisses. “Gods, angel. It’s you who went, not me, but no one would ever know it to look at you. You’re all but panting.”

“See what you have done to me? You and your grunge kink and your rain and your discarded shirts, and those come-fuck-me eyes.”

“It’s your grunge kink, not mine. Here, slow down.” He pressed a soft, languorous kiss on Thran’s lips. “Listen to the rain on the roof, and the beat of your heart.” He pressed another kiss on Thran’s temple. “Savor the smell of the spring rain, and the soft velvet under your hands.”

Thran growled as he kneaded Bard’s glutes. “I already savor the sweet ass under my hands, you bastard. I want to desecrate it.”

Bard snickered as he gentled a third kiss on his throat, as soft as the rain sounded outside. “Revel because we have a rare moment to ourselves on a moody day.” A fourth kiss returned to his lips to caress them. “And think about how good it’ll feel when I make love to you slowly and completely.”
Thran’s breath hitched, and he caught the distinctive scent of Bard’s hair and skin. How soft was the touch of Bard’s velveted chest on his? Almost as soft as the look in Bard’s warm brown eyes as he regarded Thran. Such a look of love and appreciation... Thran’s urgency retreated, and he met Bard’s slow kisses with his own.

“That’s better. Not that I don’t like a frantic angel, not at all. But what’s better to follow a frenzy in the barn than a slow seduction in the parlor?”

“Mmm,” Thran breathed. “You tell the best stories, my sweet saint. But you have left yourself with nothing to seduce. I am already yours.”

“Let’s see if I can find a way to thank you for that,” Bard breathed, and set about a most thorough exploration of how one could physically worship another. Such sweet kisses, such soft caresses, such a talented tongue and lips and teeth... Bard drew Thran to sit up against the back of the sofa, pulling him forward enough that Bard could kneel before him to slip a well lubricated cock inside him. Despite having just released, desire and pleasure coursed through him in equal part. How delicious it was to have Bard’s loving eyes on him as his urgency returned, to know that his husband took such pleasure in Thran’s pleasure? But he couldn’t return such attentions with only passive enjoyment – no, he wanted to see the same urgency in Bard’s eyes. He reached up to stroke Bard’s nipples, which were already nearly as hard as the sweet pearls they resembled. A surge of arousal swept through him when Bard’s head went back, his eyes closed, and his breath caught, so consumed was he by Thran’s touches.

“Such a beautiful sight,” Thran whispered, dragging his fingers over Bard’s nipples, down his abs and groins, and up his flanks. “So beautiful, lyubov moya, svyatoy moy, zoloto moyo. Ty velikoye zoloto moyo.”

“My angel,” Bard whispered. “I love you more than I can tell you. So much; so, so much...”

“Come for me,” Thran urged. “Give me all of you, my beautiful saint. I want all of you.”

“You-you always have all of me,” Bard stuttered. “Oh, g-gods, angel, gods, this feels so good, it’s so sweet...”

Thran rubbed his thumbs over Bard’s nipples hard, drawing a gasp from his husband. The cock so deeply within him throbbed in response, so he spread himself wide, and put his hands on Bards’ glutes. He pulled Bard forward, again and again and again, teasing him into a faster rhythm that would soon exceed Bard’s ability to resist it. Yes, yes, the flexing muscles under his hands spasmed without conscious thought to match Thran’s encouragement. He wound his legs around Bard’s torso and positioned his feet on Bard’s back to drive him forward at an even faster pace. The body above his grew more and more taut, until in a fractured second, it convulsed. Such ecstasy flooded Bard’s face as he drove over and over into Thran, urging Thran to rise to a second orgasm. He wrapped himself around Bard with a whimper, and Bard kept up his rocking thrusts until he was sure Thran had completely released. Bard held himself up on his hands as he calmed, but Thran drew him close until they reclined side by side along the curve of the sofa.

“You are perfect, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered in his ear, as Bard shut his eyes and nestled his nose into the angle between Thran’s neck and jaw. “You are sublime devil and delirious romantic. How am I to resist you?”

“Do you want to?” Bard murmured, smiling as he snuggled into Thran’s embrace.

“No. A thousand times no.”
A chuckle was half smothered in a kiss against his throat. “That’s a lot of nos.”

“Do you complain?”

Another chuckle. “No. Another thousand times no.”

“Tcha, we drown in nos.”

“The best kind of nos.”

Thran hummed in agreement as he savored the scent of his release, of Bard’s skin and hair, of the oil he’d used in the shower. The rain still came down at a steady clip, rumbling softly on the roof. In the dim light, his lover’s face was nothing but a smiling shadow, dark lashes, dark curls against a smooth brow. The warmth of Bard’s body next to his was soothing, and the caress of linen velvet against his cheek was luscious –

He looked up. Oh, not to worry – Bard’s forethought had put a thick towel under the worst of their indulgence. He sat up carefully, taking pains to stay on the towel.

“Thank the gods one of us is practical,” he shook his head. “Or we would have had to explain to our children why we have a sofa with suspicious stains on it.”

Bard snickered as he sat up, too. “We’ve still got evidence to destroy. Your SUV is out across the driveway, and my shirt is somewhere on the porch. And both of us have to wash again.”

“We are a reckless pair.” Thran stood up and offered a hand to his husband. “Hedonists, both.”

“No complaints here.” Bard grabbed the towel and the tube of lubricant before they headed upstairs to clean up. “So what should we do for an encore? Lunch? Or are you off to your pointe class?”

“I had intended to go, yes. But at this point, no pun intended, I know Madame’s routine, and the steps I must do for the scene, so I will call her to tell her I will not be there, and then I will do them here. But first, how much more on the porch do you have to do?”

“Another couple of hours, that’s all. Why?”

“Because I want to help.”

“That’s sweet of you, angel, but you don’t have to –”

“I know I don’t have to,” Thran interrupted gently as Bard tossed him the tube of lubricant to stash in his nightside table. Bard ducked into the closet to put the towel in the laundry hamper, then they went together into the bathroom to wash off. “But I want to, if I can. You have done everything, and I have done very little. So if there is something I can do to help, I want to.”

“Let’s have lunch and talk about it,” Bard suggested as he dried off.

“All right. I will put the SUV in the carriage house, and then we will eat.”

Once they were clean, dry, and dressed, Thran dashed out with an umbrella to house the SUV. He brought in Bard’s wet shirt, and hung it on the mudroom line next to Bard’s wet jeans. They rummaged in the refrigerator, and ended up with the last of the Mexican Mix-up for Bard, and chicken and vegetables for Thran.

“You’re sure you don’t want any of this?” Bard questioned. “You eat chicken every day, so if you want something different –”
“That is chicken,” Thran pointed to the casserole remnants. “We both have chicken.”

“Yes, you’re right, I just thought you might be tired of your chicken and want some of this chicken.”

“My chicken is fine, lyubov moya. It has bacon and chive spices on it.” Thran held up the spice shaker and sprinkled his chicken liberally before putting it in the microwave. “Quite delicious.”

“Just checking,” Bard shrugged.

“I appreciate your attention to see that I have good food,” Thran nodded. “Will you want tea after?”

“Always.” Bard scraped the casserole remains out of its bin and onto a plate.

Thran put on the teakettle. “So tell me about the porch boards.”

“It’s not hard. Tilda and I pried up all the nails yesterday, so all I have to do is cut new boards to replace all the old boards, drill pilot holes for the screws, and then screw them in place. Nothing hard.”

“Ah. So I can help.”

“If you really want to, I’d love the company. It’d be faster with help, too. I’m anxious to get them done, because work’s piling up. I heard from Bilbo today...”

While Bard told him the latest about Alexander’s Downfall and his commissions, Thran got out his bento boxes to arrange the rest of his lunch on a plate. Bard warmed his casserole, and they sat down to eat. Thran was thrilled to see Bard so animated about his commissions, so full of ideas about how to build his orrery and his galaxy.

“That is why you need me to help you this afternoon,” Thran declared. “We must clear the decks so that you can go full steam ahead into the barn.”

Bard snickered. “I think that’s a mixed metaphor, but who’s counting? You’re just as busy, angel. Your ballet’s only eight weeks from opening night.”

Thran heaved a sigh. “That is one reason why I want to help today. This weekend is likely the last free moment I will have until the premiere. So I want to work on the porch and shop with the children while I still can.”

Bard’s hand slid across the table to caress Thran’s. “I guess it will. It’ll get crazy and you’ll work too much, and tempers will flare with Irmo, if not the rest of the company. But Immortal will be wonderful, Thran. It will, and we’ll be fine.”

“You will see that I eat, and I will see that you make the time for your art.”

“Deal.”

“Deal.”

“So finish your lunch, and we’ll tackle the porch. Then you’ll go in the ballroom and do your pointe stuff. You can’t skip that.”

Thran held up a hand as if he took an oath. “I will do every step.”

“We have a plan,” Bard smiled. “Let’s get to it.”
Bard enjoyed the rare private lunch with his beautiful husband. He had to remind himself not to fall into the trap he’d been ensnared in before, the one where he worshipped an ethereal dancer whose every gesture was elegant, an angel whose wings were all but physical fact. He had to remember that he and Thran were both human, not beings to be worshipped, but loved and supported. If their play in the barn wasn’t proof of their deep humanity, then Bard just wasn’t paying attention.

Still, he made no apology of putting a little worship into the act of love they’d shared in the main room. They’d had the gasoline-fueled conflagration in the barn, so it was fitting that the main room was the site of something softer and tenderer.

On to the porch. With Thran’s help, the second half of the boards went quickly. It was so much easier to have four strong hands to lift the boards to the sawhorses, brace them for the saw, and hold them to be fixed in place. In a couple of hours, the last one went down.

“Done,” Thran said with satisfaction, brushing his hands together. He looked over the stack of rotten boards stacked on the porch. “What do we do with these?”

“There isn’t much we can do with them, given how rotten they are,” Bard said with regret. “I hate to dump stuff in the landfill, but we can’t burn them in the fireplace because they’re treated with chemicals, and we can’t use them in the yard because they’re too rotten, and we can’t compost them. So I’ll cut them in pieces to fit in the truck, and then tomorrow, after I drop off Sigrid, I’ll take them over to the landfill.”

“Show me how to use the saw?” Thran asked. “If the boards are nothing we can use, then I cannot ruin them, no?”

“Sure. It’s not hard.” Once Bard explained how to cut the boards, Thran was the one who neatly sliced them into halves. Bard got out the truck for them to toss all the pieces into the back so that he didn’t have to load them in the morning, then he put the truck and tools away. The porch was ready for the painters.

They spent the rest of their time before the children came home in the ballroom, Thran working through his pointe lesson, and Bard sketching. He could have worked on the last details of Hal’s tree, but he wanted to spend time with Thran, even if they worked on their individual pursuits. Most of his sketches were for the fittings for his orrery. He’d found several good sources on the Internet that defined all the gear ratios he needed, and several other companies that would produce laser-cut brass gears to his specifications. Given his client’s preference for bright finishes rather than dull ones, he planned to do the piece in bright brass. He had sketches for both sets of orb designs, and he was coming to a plan for the base. That was what he sketched now, trying to refine the shape of the three legs that would support it...

Thran stood in the middle of the ballroom, on pointe, in arabesque, with the most serene expression on his face.

Bard turned to a clean page and sketched quickly. Thran moved calmly and slowly, and when he arched back into another arabesque, Bard raced to add more detail to his sketch. He didn’t think about what he saw, only accepted it, and let it flow from eyes to fingers to pencil and onto paper however it chose to. He flipped to a clean page to draw a lunge, then to another to draw Thran with...
one leg on pointe at a forty-five degree angle to the floor, the other one stretched behind in a split, his arms outstretched parallel to his legs, and braid arcing around him. As long as Thran danced, Bard drew, pose after pose after pose. When Thran paused, Bard still drew, just his husband’s head tilted at an angle, eyes closed and downcast, as if he were dreaming. Those beautiful cheekbones and deep eye sockets, the braid of hair falling to one side... it was no whimsey to sketch the merest suggestion of wings arcing behind either side of Thran’s face.

“Oh, lyubov moya,” Thran murmured, kneeling beside him to stroke his hair. “I think you are dazzled again.”

Bard’s smile was crooked. “How can that be, cariad? I have to see to draw, you know.”

“You see a mirage.”

“Call yourself whatever you like. I’ll still draw you this way.”

Thran snorted, but the sound was soft and affectionate. “If only I danced as lightly as you draw me. Then my feet would not hurt so much.”

Bard shot him a look, but Thran was unperturbed.

“It is the nature of the art, Bard. Dancers’ feet hurt. Mine do, even when I do not dance on pointe. A lot of me feels the aches and pains. That is why you see no old dancers in regular performance. It is an ephemeral art.”

Bard swallowed as he looked back to his sketchpad. “That sucks, Thran.”

Thran shrugged. “Dance is no different from most things. One day, you will not want to replace porch boards or renovate a house, and you will let Bain or Legolas or someone else do it, yes? So one day, I will either not be able to dance, or not want to, and I will let someone else do it while I do something else. But today, I am able, and willing, and both are gifts.”

“The Russian philosopher speaks,” Bard rubbed Thran’s shoulder.

“The Russian philosopher must stretch properly after his pointe work, so that he does not hurt himself and bring that day when he does not dance closer. I hope that you were able to draw things for your commissions, as well as a Russian dancer.”

“I did. I’ll tell you about it when you’re done.”

“I can cool properly and listen at the same time. You worked on the orrery? How does one build such a complicated thing, to make all the planets go around in the proper time? Mercury is faster than Venus, yes, and Earth is slower, and the outer planets slower yet, and I cannot fathom how you are to make that happen.”

“It’s all a lot of gears,” Bard explained, and Thran listened closely as he stretched about how the gears regulated how fast the globes turned, and how they had to mesh to orbit to match the real planets.

“I cannot fathom how you do all of this with just paper and pencil,” Thran said at last. "It is all very mathematical and precise. Would a computer help you? With some sort of application that lets you draw the pieces and how they would go together?”

Bard looked up at him in surprise. “Don’t laugh, but I never thought of that. Shows how back in the Dark Ages I am.”
“We should look into this. Perhaps one would help. I realize that this piece is likely more of a mechanical device than some of your art, but you do other mechanical things, so would it help? Or are you a purist who thinks a computer is a cheat?”

Thran’s expression was teasing, so Bard stuck his tongue out at him. “Hell, no, I don’t think anything is a cheat, really. A computer is just a tool. I still have to come up with the ideas, and the designs to make the ideas live.”

“Then we should see about one. We likely need several. Tilda will need one for school next year, and Bain and Sigrid likely need new ones.”

“I thought about that the other day, too,” Bard admitted. “Sigrid will need a new one when she goes to college, too, so there’s that to figure into the mix.”

“We have time for the children’s,” Thran said comfortably. “We could get them in the summer, so they have time to learn to use them easily by the fall term. But you need something now. We will look at them online and see what suits you. We can visit a store, too, not to buy one, for the online deals from the makers are likely better. But to talk to a person about the software would help. There, I am done. We have a few minutes before the children come home, yes?”

“We do.”

“Then let us put aside everything else, and survey our domain.”

Bard chuckled as Thran pulled him to his feet. He put his drawing things in the sitting room while Thran went upstairs to change out of his dance wear, then they slowly walked through the house, talking of nothing in particular as they savored the momentary pause. They talked about what color to paint the main room, and what kind of mantel to look for. Surprisingly, Thran was less inclined to look for a modern mantel as he was an antique one in the marble Bard had considered. They went into the solarium and turned on the fountain to hear the soft murmur of the water. They looked out over the yard and debated whether to screen in the gazebo against mosquitoes or to leave it open. They ended up in the kitchen to decide on what to make for supper, where the children shortly joined them when they arrived home from school. As the clatter of eight feet breached the mudroom door, Bard turned a soft eye on his husband.

“I love you, too,” Thran murmured, and snuck a hand behind Bard to squeeze his backside.

Trust Thran to find a fit end to their private afternoon, one both sacred and profane.

* * *

Saturday started early, and didn’t seem to slow down for a second. Bard got Sigrid to the bistro – they needed to get to the bicycle store sooner rather than later – and then dropped off his load of rotten porch boards at the landfill. Then he was back home to make breakfast for Thran and Legolas, and two batches of muffins for the UVB company. The sky had cleared, so Darla and her two helpers arrived around eight-fifteen, so he checked with them to see if they needed anything before he took Legolas to fencing. By the time he returned, dancers had began to filter in; it was good to see Ori, Charisse, Luka, and the other dancers again after so many days. As the dancers got to work in the ballroom, Bard took the chance to head out to the barn to see what headway he could make to clean and organize his workshop. He worked an hour or so before the children got up, so he headed
back inside to oversee their breakfasts and to get their homework started. In case they needed something, he worked on Hal’s tree in the solarium to be nearby. It was pleasant to work in the light-filled room with the sound of the fountain gently bubbling among the ferns, and soon he was satisfied with the way it looked. Now for the leaf. A quick sketch, a few colored pencils, and an artist’s knife, and he soon had a realistic maple leaf anchored at the end of one of the branches. He took the quartz base for the tree out onto a sunny spot on the terrace, positioned the clay model of the tree on top of it, and flattened himself on the flagstones to snap a few pictures with his mobile level with the piece. He wasn’t a prize photographer, but when he viewed the pictures on Thran’s computer, they looked good enough to send to Hal with a note that he was welcome to stop by to see the model in person anytime except tomorrow afternoon.

Bard wasn’t surprised when his mobile chimed only a few seconds later.

“Hi, Hal.”

“Oh, my god, Bard! It looks incredible. I can’t believe how incredible it looks. Do you know how incredible it looks?”

“Something tells me it looks incredible,” Bard grinned. “But that’s just a guess.”

“Oh, you,” Hal snorted. “Look, I’m in the city, but I can be there anytime today. Is that doable?”

“As long as you don’t mind a little chaos, Hal. We’ve got house painters working on the exterior, Thran’s got his company dancing in the ballroom, and children in all shapes and sizes are running around. But you’re more than welcome to come take a look. You might even be able to snare a muffin or two from the hungry dancers, and we’ve always got a cup of tea in the house.”

“You know me – I love a party,” Hal laughed. “Um, I’m with a friend, so do you mind if I bring him with me?”

“The more, the merrier.”

“Excellent! Thank you. Hang on, just a second, Bard...” Hal muffled his mobile, but it sounded like he talked to someone else, likely his friend, for some seconds. “Bard? I’m back. We’ll be along in an hour, maybe two?”

“I’ll be here all afternoon until about two-thirty, and again from about three-thirty on.”

“We’ll be there long before then. See you soon, Bard. Ciao!”

“Bye, Hal,” Bard laughed, and clicked off his mobile. He carried the sculpture back into the solarium, and set it carefully in the middle of the marble-topped table, out of the way until Hal could see it. Then he had to dash back into the village to get Legolas from fencing. By the time they returned, it was lunchtime, so he dug out sandwich things for him and the children, and chicken and vegetables for Thran. The fridge had run low again, so he decided he’d head to the market tomorrow after he dropped Sigrid off at the bistro when it would not be so crowded. Lunch came and went in a blur, the dancers headed back into the ballroom, Sam appeared to deliver Elanor to play with Tilda, then Hal was at the door. A tall, dark-haired man stood behind him.

“Afternoon, Hal!” Bard greeted the blond man with a firm handshake. Both he and his friend were dressed casually in jeans. Hal wore a fuchsia Hawaiian shirt covered in bright green parrots. His friend wore a much more subdued teal tee shirt, but he didn’t need bright parrots to draw attention – he had a mane of dark waves that fell to his shoulder, a beautiful olive complexion, and soft green eyes in a handsome face. Chiseled chin covered in dark stubble, very broad shoulders to balance
very narrow hips and swelling thighs – the man must be a model or bodybuilder, or maybe he was about to try out for a film role as a Greek god. He had the presence as well as the body to carry it off.

“Hello, I’m Bard Bowman.”

“Bard, this is my friend Ari,” Hal gave Ari a caressing smile. “Ari, Bard’s the brilliant artist working on the tree I told you about. I can’t wait to see it. The pictures were amazing.”

“Welcome, Ari. Come in.” Bard shut the front door and led the way down the hall to the sitting room, and then into the solarium. Through the windows, they could see Legolas and Bain kicking a soccer ball back and forth, shouting and laughing. Behind them, thumps on the stairs and chirping giggles signaled Tilda and Elanor’s descent to the kitchen for a snack. The strains of music came faintly from the ballroom, and occasional thumps from outside reminded everyone that painters were at work.

“You said you were busy today, and you meant it,” Hal grinned.

Bard chuckled. “I did. We’ve got painters, we’ve got ballet dancers, we’ve got children... quite the zoo.”

“And you’re the artist at the center of it all,” Hal said. “I like it. It’s happy. That’s not true everywhere. So enjoy it to the hilt, I say.”

“I do, I admit,” Bard confessed. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, either. So... this is the solarium. Your tree is by the window, Hal. Can I get you and Ari a cup of tea while you look at it?”

“I’d love one,” Hal agreed, and Ari nodded. He wasn’t the talkative type, then. That was good – Hal likely made up for them both.

“Herbal, black, green?”

“Earl Grey?” Ari finally spoke, with a glance at Hal. His voice was deep but soft, and yes, the accent was faintly Greek.

“I’ve got that,” Bard nodded.

“It’s perfect,” Hal said. “Don’t change a thing. Just like this.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “You’re sure? Once I cast, I can’t change it.”


"Perfect," Hal agreed, then turned to look at his tree. “Oh, my god, look at it, look at it, look at it!”

Hal put one hand over his heart and the other one over his mouth. He approached the table with reverent steps, crouching down to look at it this way and that. “Oh, my god, Bard, it’s perfect!”

“I’ll let you take a good look while I get our tea,” Bard said. “This is just the clay model, not the finished metal piece, of course. So please don’t touch it or try to pick it up, as the clay is soft, and the tree’s not anchored on the rock the way the finished one will be.”

“Of course, of course,” Hal hastened to assure Bard. His eyes never left the piece, so Bard left him and Ari to consider while he made a pot of tea. There were a few muffins left from the dancers’ basket of treats, so he set them on the tray beside the tea things and carried it into the solarium. Hal was still studying the tree, but Ari stood by quietly, looking around the solarium.

“Quite a beautiful room,” the tall man nodded.

“Thanks.” Bard set the tray down beside the tree on the marble-topped table. “Please help yourself.”

“It’s perfect,” Hal said. “Don’t change a thing. Just like this.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. “You’re sure? Once I cast, I can’t change it.”
“Good. I don’t want you to. I want it to look just like this.” Hal turned an uncharacteristically solemn look on him. “It’s beautiful, it’s sad, it’s hopeful, it’s not of this world, it’s completely of this world... it’s exactly everything I wanted it to be.”

“You’re still happy with the grey-green finish we talked about, not tan like the clay?”

“I’m still good with that, yes.” Hal swallowed, and his usual happy smile returned. “You’re amazing, Bard. Just amazing.”

“I appreciate the kind words. I’ll keep you posted on how the casting and so forth goes. I do need you to sign a release, that you’ve approved the model and give your permission for me to start casting.”

“Of course, of course,” Hal nodded. “I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

“I’ll get the form for you to sign, then.”

“Um, Bard, I wonder...”

Here it comes. I knew this was too easy.

“What do you wonder, Hal?”

“I was disappointed to miss your gallery show, I really was. So... I wonder if you’d let me sneak a peak at some of your sketches? The ones I saw on your website are beautiful, and I’d love to see some firsthand.”

“Sure, if you’d like to,” Bard agreed, surprised but gratified that Hal hadn’t come up with the change to the tree that he’d expected. “I’ll bring a couple of my sketchbooks back with me when I get the form.”

“Great,” Hal grinned widely, clearly delighted. “That’d be a treat.”

Bard ran up to the bedroom to get the release form – he really needed to turn one of the upstairs rooms into an office, and get the untidy box of papers and such into some semblance of organization – then snared a couple of his sketchbooks from the sitting room. Hal and Ari had helped themselves to tea, and Hal was waxing rhapsodic about the cranberry orange muffins.

“Didn’t I tell you the muffins would be divine?” Hal insisted.

Ari’s laugh was indulgent and soft. “You did, and they are. Now do you see why I want you to expand from just cupcakes to include these delights, too? You’d be a natural in the catering business.”

“Oh, you,” Hal murmured. “You just want to suck me into your catering business, you dear man.”

“Among other things,” Ari murmured back. Bard grinned at the implications of that, so he made a little noise before he came back into the solarium. He still caught a clear view of the tender expression on Ari’s face as he looked at Hal, and the pink tinge that suffused Hal’s cheeks. Gods, had he and Thran looked that star struck when they’d first met? No wonder Sigrid had called them mooning lovers. Hal and Ari didn’t look any different.

“Here’s the release form, Hal,” Bard said, blithely ignoring the covert glances his guests exchanged. “We can go into the sitting room where there’s more room to sit down.”
“I suppose I can tear myself away from your beautiful tree,” Hal exhaled with his typical theatrical flair, but he gave Bard a smile that proved he knew exactly the impression he made.

“I’ll make it easier and bring the tea tray with us,” Bard grinned back.

“Let’s do the boring part first,” Hal said, pulling out a beautiful blue and copper fountain pen to sign Bard’s form. “There you are, Bard. Now for the fun part – your sketches!”

Bard handed over one of his sketchbooks, and let Hal and Ari page through it as they pleased. He offered any explanations as Hal asked for them, but mostly Hal was content to ooh and aah over Bard’s sketches of the children, Thran’s ballet classes, and his figure studies.

“I have a few sketches I did of you, if you want to see them,” Bard offered tentatively.

“Do you?” Hal turned a wide-eyed look on him, then looked gleefully at Ari. “Ooh, of course I want to see them! Every one!”

Bard proffered the sketchbook with the sketches he’d done of Hal back in January. Ari leaned close to his friend to look at them closely, smiling in fond appreciation. Bard took advantage of their distraction to pull out his pencil and flip the remaining sketchbook on his lap to a blank page. Ari was too distinctive a person not to want to draw him, so he did two or three small renderings before turning to another sheet to do something a bit more dramatic.

“I love it, love it, love it!” Han enthused. “Bard, these are so amazing! They’re me! Every one of them.”

“Especially this one,” Ari pointed to a portrait that showed Hal with his zest for life at full blaze, eyes dancing, head back as he laughed. “That one is you in a nutshell, Hal.”

“Oh, stop it,” Hal blushed bright red. “That’s not me at all.”

“You stop it,” Ari teased, but quietly. A private man, then. What would he be like if he ever got angry? “That is exactly you. That’s just the way you laugh, and the way your eyes smile. Exactly.”

Hal looked at Bard with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. “Is that me, Bard? I ask you, is that the real me?”

“I’d say it’s part of the real you,” Bard allowed as he leaned forward. “There’s one a couple pages on that I’d say is another part of the real you.”

Hal sniffed, but he didn’t hesitate to turn the pages.

“That one,” Bard pointed. “I like that one very much, too.”

This portrait showed Hal with a thoughtful expression, unsmiling, but not unhappy or grim. Bard liked it because it was Hal fully aware and without façade, gazing out to meet the eyes of the viewer without pretense or apology. Hal gazed at it without moving for a long few seconds, then he swallowed and looked up at Bard.

“Oh, you are such a bastard,” he said.

Bard grinned. “Thran calls me that all the time. What’s your reason?”

“Well, he’s right. I can’t let you sell this one, because you’ll give away all my secrets. I’ll have to buy it for self preservation.”
Bard’s chuckle was self-conscious. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this, but I can’t sell it unless you sign a model’s release, anyway.”

“That’s a relief. But I still want to buy this one. And the one Ari likes. They’re both incredible. I know how much you charged for your sketches at your show, so how is four hundred for the pair?”

That was exactly what Bilbo had charged for Bard’s unframed sketches at his show, so Hal was well informed.

“Wellllll,” Bard ran his hand through his hair. “I’m having a special today. Buy two, get one free. So... with my compliments.”

He carefully took the portrait he’d done of Ari out of his sketchbook, wrote an inscription on the bottom, then signed and dated it before he held it out to the pair.

“Ares, God of War, in Repose,” Hal read. His jaw dropped, and Ari turned red. The sketch was just of Ari’s head, but his expression was the soft one he’d turned on Hal, with just the barest smile touching his lips. Hal looked up at Bard, but he was smiling. “Thran’s right. You really are the worst bastard.”

Ten minutes later, Bard waved farewell as Hal and Ari drove off in Hal’s blingy Audi. In Bard's hand was a check for four hundred dollars, and the signed form that meant he could move from model to finished piece for Hal’s tree. He also had a signed model’s release form that would let him sell the other sketches he’d done of Hal.

He couldn’t wait to tell Thran.
Chapter 128

Chapter Summary

A saint and his eldest cherub have an adventure, and an angel dances.

Once Hal and Ari left the house, it was time for Bard to collect Sigrid. He alerted Bain and Legolas to watch over Tilda and Elanor, then he set out in the truck.

Bard was half a block away when he spotted Sigrid outside the bistro beside the sidewalk tables, waving at him. He put on his flashers long enough for her to dash across the sidewalk and into the truck without holding traffic up too much.

“Hi, sweetness,” Bard greeted, as Sigrid pulled the door shut and scrambled to get her seatbelt buckled. “Good day, I hope?”

“Really good,” Sigrid nodded. “Yes, I went into the vintage shop, and yes, I want to go back because there’s some cool stuff in there. So can we now, or is the ancestral home of Clan Ffyrnig in an uproar that demands our attention?”

Bard grinned. “We’re good for a bit. I wanted to stop at the secondhand place on the way home, anyway, to see if we can find you a bicycle.”

“That’d be good, too,” Sigrid agreed.

Bard turned into the parking lot, and let Sigrid drag him up to the main street and across to the vintage clothing store. Vintage was a word that got bandied around a lot, but he imagined it meant clothing from anytime in the past fifty years; anything before that had likely fallen into dry-rotted shreds long before now. He let Sigrid move ahead of him as he took in the quaint ambiance of the place, complete with an old red plush covered Victorian sofa and a heavily carved sideboard topped with stands full of old hats – cloches, plumed wonders, and a floppy thing that reminded him of one Daphne had worn back in art school. Several customers perused the cases near the register that held a lavish display of vintage rhinestone jewelry, as well as a few Bakelite bracelets. Several others leafed through the racks of clothes – all women. There were few things for men in house, though a military jacket of black wool and a chest full of silver braid caught his eye. That would look stunning on Thran, so he took it off the hanger to see if it fit him.

“Ooh, Da!” Sigrid appeared as his side. “That looks sharp!”

“I thought Thran might like it,” he replied. “If it fits me, it might have a chance to fit him.”

“It looks like him, yeah,” Sigrid agreed. “Sleeves are too short, though.”

“Tight across the shoulders, too,” Bard agreed. He glanced at the price tag. “And it’s pricey for something that would need to be altered.”

“It’s a cool jacket, though,” she said regretfully. She held up a very short purple dress, heavily embroidered with small mirrors and sequins at the edges of neck, sleeves, and hem. “What do you think of this?”
Bard rubbed his chin. “It’s... really short.”

Sigrid rolled her eyes. “I’d wear it with leggings or jeans, Da. Not as a dress. I don’t wear dresses, remember?”

“Just checking. Does it fit? Have any holes or stains or missing buttons?”

“Two or three of the mirrors are gone, but everything else is fine. It’s not very much, either. But I haven’t tried it on yet.”

“Okay, it’s a possibility. Go try it on.”

“That’s not how you do it, Da. You wait until you have a bunch of stuff, and try it on all at once, remember?”

“I’m out of practice,” Bard winked as he took off the braided jacket to hang it up again. “Carry on, Number One.”

“Aye, Captain.” Sigrid turned back to the racks to continue her perusal, so Bard returned the jacket to the rack and kept looking. He noticed that Sigrid circled behind him to take the braided jacket off the rack, but he held his tongue. Maybe it’d fit her better than it fit him. He hoped it didn’t — even if it didn’t need to be altered, it was expensive. But there was no point in debating until she tried it on. If it didn’t fit, then that solved the problem.

When Sigrid had an armload of things, she pointed to the dressing room door, drawing Bard’s nod. She threaded through the other customers to ensconce herself in the endmost dressing room, beside a rack of long, frilly, party dresses. An edge of blue green tulle with small rhinestones caught his eye, so he wrangled the hanger out to reveal a very pretty dress with a simple bodice, thin spaghetti straps, and a long skirt of several layers of varying blues and greens. The tiny rhinestones were sprinkled down the front.

He tapped on the dressing room door. “Sigrid? What size are you?”

“I don’t know, Da. Most likely anything from eight to twelve. Stupid girl sizes.”

Bard checked the tag. “I think you might like this, sweetness.”

The door opened. Sigrid had on the purple top, but her eyes widened when she saw what Bard held up. “Oh, gods, Da, that’s beautiful! What size is it?”

“Ten.” He cast her a look. “I know you said you didn’t wear dresses, but I thought you might make an exception in this case. If girls still wear such things to a prom any more, that is.”

“I think it’s perfect.” Sigrid took the dress with eager hands. “Keep your fingers crossed.”

“Will do,” Bard smiled, as the dressing room door shut in a rush. He lingered close by, ignoring the glances the female customers gave him. He’d had ten years to get used to people looking askance at him when he took his daughters shopping. It was tougher when the girls had been small, and he’d had to go into the dressing rooms with them. A few customers in the men’s dressing rooms of various stories had been surprised to see him with small girls, but as he couldn’t go into the women’s dressing rooms with them, how else did they expect him to make sure their clothes fit? It had gotten easier once Sigrid was old enough to help Tilda.

“What do you think?” Sigrid asked breathlessly, coming out of the dressing room.
“Um... wow, sweetness. You look spectacular.”

Sigrid rushed over to the full-length mirror beside the dressing rooms to regard herself. The very simple and plain design of the dress suited her as ruffles and poufs wouldn’t have, but the beautiful fabrics left no doubt as to the richness of the dress. The underskirt was a shiny blue green satin, and the overskirts of three different shades of blue green tulle cast lovely shadows. The bodice was of the same satin, with more of the tiny rhinestones. It fit very well, and the color was beautiful against Sigrid’s dark hair and eyes.

“I couldn’t get the zipper all the way up, Da,” she came close to whisper. “Can you get it?”

Bard bent to see what he could do. “I see the problem. There’s a small tear near the top, and the zipper’s jammed in the edges. But there’s a hook...” He got it fastened, which snugged the bodice a little better. “It’s not too bad. I could get it undone without much trouble, and then a little mending would fix the hole so no one would notice. If you like it, of course.”

Sigrid went back to the mirror to turn this way and that, letting the skirt unfurl around her. One of the other customers, an older woman, leaned close with a reminiscing look in her hazel eyes.

“One minute they’re roughhousing on the playground, and the next minute, they’re grown up and going to the ball.”

“Oh, you’ve got that right,” Bard rubbed the back of his neck and offered a rueful smile. “Quite takes my breath away.”

“It always does,” she whispered back. “I have two daughters of my own. Grown, now, each with children of her own. But I remember the same moment with each of them. You have to get her that, you know. You’ll never find another that fits so well, that looks so perfect. She’s absolutely stunning.”

“Thank you, she is,” Bard agreed. “So we’ll see what the verdict is.”

As Sigrid turned back to Bard, the woman moved away to observe from the sidelines, smiling when Sigrid’s face lit up with a big grin.

“I love it, Da. I really do.”

“So do I. Let’s go over by the window, and make sure there aren’t any stains or anything that would keep it from looking nice.”

“Oh, Da.”

They did just that, and Bard stooped down to carefully check all the layers of fabric for tears or stains. By this time, they’d attracted the attention of the owner, who bustled over to help them go over the gown. The small tear was all that detracted from the dress, but if Bard was careful, he could repair that.

“I think it’s okay, sweetness,” he pronounced it.

“How much is it?”

Bard had already seen the price tag. “Doable. Go try on your other stuff.”

The smile that Sigrid bestowed upon him was pure Daphne – laughing, almost tearful, excited, and oh, so affectionate. His daughter hadn’t been oblivious to the trials of the last ten years, so
appreciation of where they’d been and where they were now was also in her smile. Bard made shooing motions to chase her back into the dressing room, so she went, and just in time, thank the gods – it was all he could do not to get teary-eyed himself. He swallowed hard, and hoped everyone in the shop didn’t know just how much of a sentimental fool Sigrid’s Da was.

He snuck a look around. Eh... the grandmother who’d spoken to him earlier gave him a thumbs up and a sweet smile, but maybe none of the other customers had caught on.

Maybe.

Sigrid came out to show him the other pair of tops she liked – both as bohemian as anything her mother had worn back in the day – plus the braided jacket, which swallowed her. That went back on the rack, but the dress and the three tops went with Sigrid up to the register. Bard handed over his credit card without a blink. The dress was less than half the cost of anything new, and the tops were equally thrifty purchases. Sigrid had suffered alongside Bard through their lean years, and she deserved everything they’d bought.

When the dress had been carefully folded and bagged, then the tops, Bard and Sigrid headed back to the truck. Bard opened the door for her to hop in, but first she carefully laid her dress on the back seat. Then she turned to peck Bard’s cheek with a shy kiss.

“Thanks, Da. That was really sweet of you.”

“I’m glad I can finally do some of the things I’ve wanted to for a long time.”

“You’ve always gone over the top for us, Da. Really – I know exactly why you won’t ever eat ramen again. And even though things are better now, that was still really sweet of you.”

“You’re welcome,” Bard gave her a crooked smile. “So let’s see if our luck holds at the secondhand shop.”

They maneuvered out of the parking lot and drove to the same secondhand shop where Bard had found their kitchen flatware. The place was lively and full of browsing tourists, so Bard and Sigrid took their time to drift through the rooms as traffic allowed. He picked up another dozen teaspoons, as they always seemed to be in short supply – except in the dishwasher. Sigrid pointed out a pair of small wire plant stands that would look nice on the porch, so she took the spoons from Bard and he carried the plant stands. They eventually got to the back of the building, where an attendant watched over a yard full of garden sculptures, lawn furniture, and planting pots. They found a few bicycles stacked nearby on the covered porch. All of them had been wiped free of dust and grime, but most had been nicked and dinged, and a big placard nearby read AS IS. Bard put down the two plant stands to help Sigrid sort through them.

“This one’s pretty good,” Sigrid offered. “Wait, that one looks sturdy. That one, next to the end.”

Bard leaned the other bicycles this way and that to free the one Sigrid had spotted. It wasn’t a true mountain bike, but it looked reasonably decent, though the paint was badly scraped and battered.

“We could sand it down and paint it,” Bard suggested. “A little of that Majorelle blue that I got for the benches, maybe?”

“That’d look cool, yeah,” Sigrid agreed. “Let’s see how it rides.”

Under the watchful eye of the attendant, she got the bicycle off the porch and rode it down the path between all the garden ornaments, but walked it back.
“No back brakes,” she called.

“Let’s see,” Bard beckoned. A quick look told him all he needed to know. “It’s nothing I can’t fix, sweetness, but the whole back brake assembly has to be replaced.”

“That’s probably why the paint’s so wrecked,” Sigrid surmised. “I’ll try that first one I saw.”

“Good idea,” Bard agreed. This one had two functioning brakes, and the paint, while battered, was in better shape than the first one. Even the tires looked reasonably new, without any dry rot, scuffs, or punctures. They went over this one an inch at a time before Sigrid gave it a test ride. Sigrid could still repaint it if she chose to, but it was ready to ride now, without need of repair. “This one looks good, then.”

“It’s not very much, either,” Sigrid checked the tag, then the tags of several of the other bicycles. “A little more than some, a little less than others.”

“What’s the high end look like, just for comparison?”

“That green one. It’s a fancy brand name.”

“You’re good with this one, then?”

“I’m good.”

“Okay, let’s tell the minder.”

The attendant gave them the bottom of the tag to take to the register for payment, then they went around the back with the truck to pick up the bicycle. They made a quick stop at a gas station to fully inflate the bicycle tires, then they were on their way home.

As they came up the driveway, they spotted the boys with Tilda and Elanor in the back, playing kickball. Darla and her crew waved from up on the scaffolding, then turned back to their painting. Bard and Sigrid got her bicycle and the plant stands out of the back, and set them in the empty bay of the carriage house before they put the truck away. Sigrid got her clothes, Bard got the teaspoons, and they headed towards the porch.

The house looks so great,” Sigrid said, looking up at the painters. “What color will they paint the porch?”

“The ceiling’s pale blue. A lot of the floor is stained, so I figured black would look good to even it all out. We can get some old-fashioned wicker furniture, maybe. Or those big rattan things your Mam liked. I haven’t decided yet.”

“I like the wicker,” Sigrid mused, as she paused at the top of the porch stairs, then paced slowly to the round section where Bard and Thran had replaced so many boards. “Didn’t Gran have that?”

Bard nodded. “She did. I remember she had some in Wales, and when we got to Canada, no matter how cold it was, she still wanted her wicker chairs. They were on the back terrace, remember?”

“I do remember. Hers were dark brown. Ours should be white. With bright green cushions. They’d match the house.”

“With lots of flowers all around.”

“We’ve got all those pots in the carriage house.”
“As soon as the painters are done, we’ll fill them up.”

“Mr. Sam will help us with the front garden, too, right?”

“All over,” Bard assured her.

“This place will look like a dream,” Sigrid sighed. “It already does. Imagine what it’ll be like this summer with all the flowers.”

“Pretty amazing,” Bard does. “Hungry?”

Sigrid shook her head as she and Bard headed back to the front door and went inside. “Miss Dís is the nicest boss anyone can have, Da. She lets her staff make our lunches out of the ends of things, stuff that she’d have to throw out. And she donates free coffee and lunch to the two police officers who patrol the village during the day. It makes you want to work hard for someone that generous. And we do. She tells me the summer weekend traffic gets really frantic, but that I’ll be up to speed by then. Kane’s a good teacher, and Dana’s really fast on the register, and Miss Dís says she’s got another barista coming back who’s still in college right now, so we’ll be okay.”

“Does she do all of the baking?” Bard asked, laying his package of teaspoons on the kitchen counter by the sink.

“She contracts with a bakery for the sandwich breads, but she makes the scones and the cinnamon buns herself. She’s very particular that things be just so, just the way she wants them. That’s why she doesn’t do chicken or tuna or potato salad – because she doesn’t have time to make them herself, and she thinks the commercial ones have too much mayonnaise. She contracts with our grocery store for the meats, cheeses, and salad things, and we don’t make up anything until it’s ordered. Everything’s really good. I had turkey and Swiss on an onion bun today.”

“Mmm, onion buns,” Bard savored as he unwrapped the teaspoons to wash them. “I haven’t had one of those in a long time. I love those.”

“This one was good. The bakery’s called Elven Mills. Maybe our grocery store carries them.”

“I’ll put it on the list. I’ll have to refuel Clan Ffyrnig before long.”

Sigrid giggled as she put her bags of clothing on the kitchen table and got a clean dishcloth to dry the spoons as Bard washed them. “The way we go through food is alarming, Da.”

“That’s why I buy food at an alarming rate,” Bard exhaled. “Four hungry children, a ballet dancer, and a welder. Every one of them hungry.”

“An artist welder,” Sigrid amended, opening the silverware drawer to add the clean teaspoon to it. “You have to get the barn cleaned out, Da. You’re going to need it soon, with all the work you have coming in.”

“That’s tomorrow morning’s job,” Bard agreed. “I’d planned to go to the market when I dropped you off tomorrow, but since you can get yourself to work, maybe I’ll get an early start in the barn and leave the market until Monday. I think we’ve got enough stuff to hold us until then.”

“Course we do,” Sigrid said firmly. “It’s time you put your stuff first, Da. No one will die if we have peanut butter sandwiches for lunch on Monday.”

Bard grinned. “Thran will be delighted. If he’s not in the ballroom tomorrow, he’ll be right there, wanting to help in the barn.”
“He’s so funny,” Sigrid snickered. “The simplest things fascinate him. The thermostat, making breakfast, figuring out how to make supper. It’s kind of sad, really. I guess he didn’t get to do any of that when he was little.”

“No.” Bard squeezed out the sponge and rinsed it. Sigrid tossed him the dishtowel so he could dry his hands as she put the last teaspoon in the drawer and closed it. “He told me when I was sick what it was like. He’s danced and done almost nothing else.”

Bard gave Sigrid an abbreviated version of what Thran had told him, which drew Sigrid to shake her head and murmur sympathetically.

“That sounds awful. I hope Legolas doesn’t go through that for his fencing, or Bain for his soccer. Or any of us about anything. I mean, sacrifice is one thing, but to give up everything but that one thing is too much.”

“Sometimes it happens before you realize it, or circumstances don’t give you a choice,” Bard shrugged. “That’s what happened to us when your Mam died. But we forged Clan Ffyrnig on last Christmas day out of a bad circumstance, and look where we are now. Thran and Legs have the family they never had; you, Bain, Tilda, and I are in better circumstances; I’m an artist again, and we’re all here in a real home. So you never know. You just have to keep on, that’s all.”

“Hello, the house!” Sam’s cheerful call echoed from the mudroom. “Anybody home?”

“Come on in, Sam!” Bard called with a grin. “Welcome to Bedlam!”

“Oh, now, now!” Sam came into the kitchen proper with little Merry in tow. “It’s not Bedlam – it’s a happy home! Hi, Sigrid! Can you say hello, Merry-Merry?”

“Hi,” the little boy waved. “Daddy pulled me in the wagon! I held the tree!”

“The tree?” Sigrid bent down beside Merry. “What tree is that, Merry?”

“Your palms came in, so I brought them home with me,” Sam explained. “Merry decided he wanted to help, so out came the wagon. I figured that Elanor would be tired after running around all afternoon, so the wagon won’t go home empty.”

“That was great of you, Sam. Can I help you get the palms inside?”

“Sure, they’re just outside the solarium, so we don’t have far to go.”

“Come on, Merry,” Sigrid offered. “I bet I can find you a cookie, if your Da says it’s okay.”

“Sure, Merry-Merry,” Sam agreed. “But just one. Your mother will have my hide if you won’t eat your dinner tonight!”

“We’ll find a small one, won’t we, Merry-Merry?” Sigrid smiled. “Come on, let’s look in the pantry while our Das move the trees.”

“Okay!” the little boy grinned, and happily followed Sigrid into the pantry. Bard and Sam headed into the solarium, then out to the terrace to bring in the two big palms that Sam had hauled over in the children’s wagon. As they put them in place, Sam explained that they were Areca palms; they didn’t like direct sunlight, which made them perfect for the north-facing solarium. They grew not much more than eight feet high, which meant they wouldn’t take over the room, too. As they set the palms on either side of the marble-top table, Sam noticed Hal’s tree model, so Bard explained that he’d cast the final piece once he got the garage cleaned out.
That’s so exciting, Bard, it really is,” Sam enthused. “And the place looks wonderful. You and Thran have made a real home out of it, which is just what it and the two of you deserve.”

“I hardly believe it myself, Sam. It’s been a long time coming. Every day is more amazing than the next. I keep worrying I’ll wake up and find out it’s all a mad dream, and I’m still a night super for a grotty city landlord.”

Sam thumped Bard’s shoulder. “No, none of that, now. You’re right were you belong, and you’re not going anywhere. This is as real as houses.”

“This house, anyway,” Bard grinned. “Thanks for bringing over the palms, Sam. In another week or so, once the painters are done, I hope we can get started on the gardens.”

“I’ve got the plants for the back terrace in the greenhouse now, hardening off,” Sam replied. “We need to talk about what bushes you want for the front.”

“Something evergreen, maybe, that’ll look good in the snow?” Bard asked. “And some flowers, too. Lots of flowers.”

Sam and Bard walked out to the front to talk about appropriate shrubs, and soon Sam had a list of things that Bard liked. “I’ll work up a plan for you to look at,” he promised, as they looped around the house to collect Elanor from the soccer game.

“That’s great, Sam. I can’t wait to see it. Thank you.”

Sam called to Elanor, and Sigrid came out with Merry, who still munched his piece of shortbread as he and his sister got into the wagon for the short ride home. The trio disappeared across the yard with waves and calls of goodbye.

“Merry is so cute,” Sigrid said as she followed Bard back inside. “He told me thank you very much for the shortbread, but he really would prefer a cookie, please. I had to explain that shortbread is a cookie. He was dubious, but one taste did the trick.”

“It always does,” Bard grinned. “Thran’s acquired quite a taste for it.”

“Good,” Sigrid snorted. “He’s still too skinny.”

“Wait until after he’s done with the pointe dancing to nag him about that, sweetness. It’s hard enough even when he’s thin.”

“Stupid pointe dancing,” she muttered under her breath, but held up a hand when Bard eyed her. “I know, I know, it’s his business, not mine. I won’t say a word, but I can’t promise that I won’t think it. So what’s for supper?”

As Bard and his daughter rummaged in the fridge, he smothered a grin. His daughter was smart, kind, generous, and strong-willed. Not only that, this afternoon had proved that she was quite the stunner in a party dress. He hoped Finn had a strong spine, or he’d soon find himself wound helplessly around Sigrid’s little finger.

Her Da, of course, would never find himself in such a position.
Thran’s day went by in a blur as Immortal wove a net worthy to ensnare him. This was so much better than wrestling with paperwork, logistics, priorities, the press, donors, and on and on and on. No more of that. The UVB dancers were slowly, slowly becoming their characters, no longer merely a collection of dancers who traced steps over a floor. He saw it happen around him, and felt the same transformation inside – Death, Lord of the Underworld, was seeping into his thoughts, his steps, his gestures. With every turn and step, Thran welcomed Death and drew Him closer. To hasten the transformation, he wore Rada’s practice crown and gloves to remind him how alien the Lord was. He had begun to make odd reptilian head movements even in conversation with his colleagues. He flexed his hands wide and rippled his fingers until they danced like spider legs.

He vaguely registered Bard putting lunch in front of him. He ate sparingly, given how soon he would fling himself into the role again, but it was good food, just what he needed to sustain such concentrated effort for the rest of the afternoon.

Back to the ballroom and the dance... Irmo had them make their first run-through of the entire ballet, from start to finish, with the music. This would give them a rough idea of the actual length, and would also allow them to gauge the endurance the three principals must muster. Thran, especially, would be onstage for almost every scene. Even though every little fillip was not yet blocked out, it was still a relief just to dance the role without Irmo’s constant interruptions to adjust a step or gesture. The sense of the Lord of the Underworld snapped into strong focus, something that happened only with a complex and meaty role – it certainly never happened when he danced the Poet in Les Sylphides, no matter how pretty a role that was. To feel that hyperawareness so early in rehearsal... how high it would build in eight weeks, and he would not need wires to fly across the stage.

He sailed onto the first battlefield, a dark and imposing figure as He collected the souls of the dead, saw the Maid, longed for her, and retreated with the souls of the newly dead to the Underworld. After the second battle raged, He descended again, but this time, the Soldier was forced to join Death’s entourage, no matter how the Maid raged, no matter how the Soldier pleaded. Down, down, Death led the souls, until they reached the gates of His kingdom, barred from mortal eyes by huge gates that opened only for the Lord. He led the souls in, then gestured the gates closed, leaving the distraught Maid prostrate before them.

Act II saw Death lead the souls of the newly dead through His kingdom. Here for all to see was the vast array of cultures that populated the Underworld, represented with various forms of dance. Thran had this act to recover his strength from the rigors of the battlefield scenes, and to marshal it for the upcoming scenes with the Soldier, then the Maid. He still danced, but it was in partnership with Death’s subjects, and for the most part in the background; Charisse and Luka, in contrast, bore much more of the emotional content with the longing and despair between Soldier and Maid.

When the Maid marshaled her grief and traveled to the Underworld, she was shown into the presence of the great Lord to beg Him to let her trade places with her Soldier. They danced a beautiful pas de trois where Death oversaw the argument between Maid and Soldier, for the Soldier did not want Death to accept the Maid’s offer. Death had His own argument to endure, His internal struggle to resist His obsession with the Maid. Ultimately, He could not resist, and so He accepted the Maid in place of the Soldier. Once again, the gates of the Underworld closed and a mortal despaired outside of it, this time the Soldier.

Act III began with Thran’s biggest ordeal – the seven-minute pointe scene between Death and the Maid. He bestowed wonderful gifts upon her – a beautiful gown, a glittering bower, all manner of finery – but though she wore the gown, she paid no attention to it or any of the things Death had given her. All she saw was the spectre of her Soldier, even when Death came to her stripped of His
field armor and fine court robes. On pointe, He towered over the diminutive Maid, who cowered before Him and could not bear to look at Him, no matter how He entreated her. When she at last fled, He fell to His knees, devastated at her rejection – no, not a rejection, for she hadn’t so much as noticed anything but His looming presence. His mere presence, so alien, so foreign, had been so daunting that she had never heard a single one of His entreaties.

Meanwhile, the grieving Soldier dreamed of the Maid as she had of him, and he resolved to travel to the Underworld to take his rightful place there rather than the living Maid. Here came the Soldier’s petition, his death, and the Maid’s ejection from the Underworld. Here came the Maid’s death, and her joyful reunion with her Soldier. Death made His final pleas, but once again His words were not so much as noticed. Forced to concede defeat, He collapsed while the Maid and Soldier danced their passionate pas de deux de reunion, ecstatic that nothing would part them for the rest of eternity. Recognizing the power of the love between them, Death escorted them outside the gates of His kingdom, turned them into stars, and transported them into the heavens where they would serve as a beacon of love and devotion to all mortals forever. As they rose, the denizens of the Underworld filtered back behind the gates, leaving Death alone to gaze up at the lovers. Death made His last dance alone, full of despair, loss, and sorrow. He cast one last longing look to the lovers, offered His concession with a bow, then retreated to His kingdom. He gestured, and the gates closed for the final time.

When the music stilled, Thran fell back into the real world with a wrench. Death’s despair still filled his heart and his thoughts, and he mourned for the loneliness of the ancient Lord. It must have shown on his face, because even Irmo left him alone for a few moments to compose himself. When he could breathe again, he looked around and nodded, thanking those who had respected his silence.

“Not bad,” he shrugged.

If the understanding smiles were any indication, it was a lot more than not bad. He appreciated the sentiment, but the company still had so much to do if they were to deliver the stunning performance they needed to make Immortal truly immortal. But it was an auspicious beginning, without doubt.

Irmo returned the company to the important scene that began Act II, where Death’s kingdom was first revealed. The timing and sequencing needed so that a small stage and a large cast didn’t result in collisions and confusion was crucial. Even though the company could not completely refine that timing to the exacting standard they needed here in the ballroom, the practice was still useful, because all of the company dancers but Charisse would be onstage. Most of the dancers had joined Thran in wearing bits and pieces of their costumes to remind everyone that Anna was belly dance, and her look-alike friend Cecily was modern, while Linus was Latin, and Shun was hip-hop, and so on. Thran did have a turn or two to make with some of the dancers, but for the two hours they worked on the scene, he was able to wind down from the exertion of dancing the entire ballet. By the time they ended their work for the day, the timing had improved. Irmo proved his versatility and skill as he added a few more fillips between the different types of dance, which most of the dancers seemed to enjoy. As the high lord, Thran had to remain above the souls’ squabbles, but he enjoyed adding a fluid exchange with the modern dancers, and then a balletic interpretation of a tango partnering with the Latin dancers. The dancers settled to their cooling stretches in good spirits, not yet so depleted that they couldn’t exchange conversation.

That moment would come in just a few weeks.

When the last dancer had headed home, Thran padded into the kitchen to find the rest of his family. They were all at the table, halfway through supper. He looked at the clock on the oven – seven o’clock, late for his family’s usual suppertime. They had hoped to hold it for him, then, which was generous on their part.
“Hello, everyone,” he smiled. “Remember me?”

Bain and Legolas both snorted. His son was becoming more open, thanks to Bain’s irrepressible exuberance. Sigrid rolled her eyes, but Tilda’s grin was welcoming.

“You’re Ada, silly!” she scolded. “How could you think we’d forget?”

“I am glad to know you have not forgotten me, Kukla. If I go upstairs and put on comfortable clothes, do you think I can still have supper with you?”

“We saved some for you,” Tilda nodded.

“We did,” Bard agreed, giving him a warm smile, then nodding to the boys. “But it won’t last long around the twin megalodons, so you’d better hurry.”

“I fly,” Thran promised, and hurried upstairs to exchange dancewear for leggings and tee. As he sank into his chair at the kitchen table, Bard handed him a plate filled with a nice slice of pork roast and berry sauce, a big pile of steamed vegetables, and a small pile of quinoa with fruit and nuts. The children handed down a basket of biscuits and the butter crock, and he set to. All of the children had tales to tell of their day – Legolas’s fencing, Bain’s new personal record for bouncing a soccer ball on his knees without dropping it to the ground (four hundred and eighty-two bounces, to be exact), Tilda’s excitement over having Elanor over to play, and Sigrid’s adventure at the bistro, then at the vintage store and second-hand shop with Bard.

“What is this? You found a beautiful dress for the ball?” Thran smiled. “You are so excited, it must be wonderful.”

“It is, Ada. Da found it, believe it or not. Can I put it on to show Ada, Da?”

“Be careful with the zipper,” Bard reminded her. “But sure, I’m sure he’d love to see it.”

“I would indeed,” Thran affirmed.

“I’ll be right back.” Sigrid jumped out of her chair and ran upstairs. “Don’t tell Ada what it looks like, Da!”

“Never,” Bard grinned, winking at Thran. “Maybe I boosted my karma a little bit, finding her dress.”

“We shall soon see.” Thran surveyed the children, grinning at how the boys still shoveled in mass quantities of food, while Tilda had kneeled in her chair so that she faced the hallway. “I take it the children have not seen this spectacle yet?”

“It’s a dress,” Bain shrugged, giving Thran an incredulous look. “It’s just a dress.”

“I’ve seen party dresses at boarding school,” Legolas shrugged with equal disinterest. “They make the girls look weird, and act funny.”

“Sigrid doesn’t look weird,” Tilda observed, looking back at her brothers with a frown. “I think she looks pretty.”

Sigrid swept in in a beautiful confection of sparkling blue and green, drawing Thran to greet her with a delighted smile.

“Look at you!” he exclaimed, holding his hands wide. “Prekrasnaya doch’ moya! Ma jolie fille! Tu es adorable!”
“Gee, sweetness, I think Ada’s disappointed,” Bard teased.

“Oh, I am not!” Thran snorted, waving his hands at Bard in dismissal. “Your Da is so ridiculous – how can anyone think you are not the most beautiful daughter? More elegant and beautiful than Cinderella!”

“Uh-oh, he must be serious – he’s gesticulating,” Bard continued to tease. “You’re a winner, Sig – you got Ada to gesticulate.”

Thran waved his hands at Bard again as he got out of his chair to offer Sigrid a bow. “You are lovely, milady Sigrid, and will be the most beautiful on the dance floor, yes?”

He waltzed a laughing Sigrid into the sitting room for a quick turn before returning her to the kitchen. “There. We have proved that the beautiful dress is well able to navigate a good waltz. Not that your dance will offer such a thing, but now you know you can do one so attired, yes?”

“Yes,” Sigrid laughed. “Honestly, you and Da are too much.”

“Perhaps so, but you are just right,” Thran bowed over her hand to kiss it. “Enchanté, mademoiselle.”

“Merci, Ada,” Sigrid dropped a curtsey, but she couldn’t disguise her flushed cheeks. “Um, I’d better go take it off before I spill something on it.”

She dashed upstairs, leaving Thran to resume his place at the table. He eyed the boys both studiously intent on their plates, then shared a silent chuckle with Bard.

As if he felt the silent exchange, Legolas looked up. “She did look nice.”

Bain’s head shot up and he favored his brother with another of his incredulous looks.

“Well, she did,” Legolas shrugged.

Bain rolled his eyes, but wisely remained silent.

The rest of supper proceeded without further revelations from the children. Thran talked a little of how his ballet rehearsal went, and how he was pleased with the progress so far. Then he reiterated that starting Monday, he would be working from noon to late in the evening because the company would be on site at the Imladris Academy during the week, so to please help Bard see that all went smoothly.

“Will you be here during the day on the weekends?” Legolas asked.

“Definitely Sundays,” Thran nodded. “I hope on most of each Saturday, too. We must see how the ballet progresses.”

“The weekends would be good, Papa,” Legolas nodded with a hopeful look in his eyes. “I hope it will be both days on the weekend.”

“I hope so, too,” Thran admitted. “But as we get close to the premiere, it may not be so. But I hope at the minimum that Sundays will be ours.”

Once everyone was through, the children got up to begin the cleanup. Bard and Thran went into the sitting room with their tea and a plate of cookies. He was excited to hear Bard’s tale of Hal’s visit, his approval of the tree model, and his friend.
“He bought two of my sketches, too,” Bard concluded. “At two hundred apiece. How amazing is that?”

“Not at all,” Thran shook his head, slipping his arm around Bard to give him a welcome hug. “Your sketches are well worth the price, lyubov moya.”

“Eh, I gave him a third one,” Bard admitted. “Just spur of the moment, of his friend. He had a great face to sketch.”

“You are a generous man.”

Bard shrugged. “It was five minutes’ work, and it made both of them happy.”

“What was Hal’s friend like?”

Bard described the dreamy Ari in thoughtful words, but the faint smile on his husband’s lips told him all that Bard didn’t say.

“Ah, so perhaps this is romance, yes?”

“I’d say so.” Bard grimaced a bit as he turned a rueful smile on Thran. “They reminded me of us back in November, and look what came of that. Gods, we probably looked just as sappy then as they did this afternoon.”

“Tcha,” Thran sipped his tea and settled at Bard’s side comfortably. “If they looked like we did in November, then they did not look sappy, my saint. They looked... luminous.”

Bard’s snort was affectionate. “As luminous as the full harvest moon in October.”

“You would prefer they look like the small, demure little violets in the spring grass? Should we look that way, as well?”

“Demure little violet in the grass is not what you were in the barn yesterday, angel. In fact, neither of us were demure little violets. We never have been. And I thank the gods for that every day.”

Thran stroked Bard’s hair. “So do I, my saint. So do I.”
Chapter 129

Chapter Summary

When an angel plays hooky on Sunday, he makes quite a day of it :-)

Chapter Notes

As requested, this chapter includes the epic shopping expedition to the mall for the children's clothes. It's dedicated to all you good parents out there ❤️.

As usual, I don't own any rights to the wonderful Star Trek universe. But my clan's been known to say, "Make it so, Number One," and "Beam me up, Scotty!" innumerable times.

What a rare luxury it was to sleep in Sunday morning! After uncounted days of getting up at six to get children off to school, or a bit later last weekend to get Sigrid to the bistro, it was so much of a delight not to get up that Bard slept right through it. When Bard finally roused, it was after eight. He padded into the bathroom to deal with necessities, then, because he wouldn’t rest without checking, he stuck a head into Sigrid’s room to make sure it was empty. Yes, she’d gotten up, so he headed back to bed with an easy mind.

A long, pale arm snaked out to ease him close. “Our lioness is off?”

“And she’s left, too,” Bard murmured with a sleepy grin. “It doesn’t feel like the octopus in my bed has left, though.”

“Shh,” Thran hummed in his ear. “You ruin the ambience of the morning.”

“Oh, pardon me,” Bard snickered, as Thran curled at his back and insinuated arms around him. “How exactly do I ruin the ambience of an octopus?”

“An octopus does not like prey who talks so much.” A hand stroked down Bard’s ribs so lightly that it teased his skin into gooseflesh. Across his abdomen it traced, then stroked through his pubic hair to tickle his cock. “Although moans are a delicious garnish.”

“Oh, that’s what you want,” Bard grinned. He shut his eyes to better appreciate his husband’s attentions.

“Tcha, you are the worst prey ever. Here we have at last the lazy Sunday morning, and you want to waste it on talk.”

“Mmm,” Bard hummed. “I guess you’ll just have to give me something better to do.”

“You are something better to do. So let me.”

“If you insist,” Bard teased.
“Chert!” Thran bit Bard’s ear hard enough to make him gasp. “Ah, yes, so much better. Do not say I did not warn you.”

“Of course not,” Bard egged on his husband with another impudent snicker. That wasn’t easy to do while Thran’s insistent hand worked its magic, making it hard for him to think. It was worth the effort, though – with a hiss of another Russian curse, Thran wound his leg around Bard, pulling his top leg back, slithered one hand underneath him to cradle his balls, and engulfed his cock with the other hand to stroke and squeeze. Teeth seized his shoulder just at the base of his neck, so he was well trapped, not that he wanted to escape. He shut his eyes, and managed to get one hand free to squeeze Thran’s thigh. Words were forgotten as Thran played his body like an instrument, bringing him to climax in seconds. As his body writhed, Thran held him tightly to ride his spasms with him.

“Oh, my saint, you are so sweet, so delicious,” whispered Thran into his ear. “Such a delight on a lazy Sunday morning... mmm.”

“Gods, the things I do to humor a voracious husband.” Bard rumbled deep in his chest. “I lead a hard life.”

Chortling, Thran tightened his hand around Bard’s cock. “If you were not just as voracious as I, then you would not get hard so often.”

“Guilty as charged,” Bard grinned. He eased Thran’s leg from atop him, and shifted until he lay face to face beside him. “Let’s see if the hardened criminal can get a rise out of the octopus.”

“Tcha, that is one of your mixed metaphors – oh, gods, Bard!” Thran tensed as Bard slid down to suckle his nipples. Before Thran could flinch again, Bard had rolled his husband onto his back, then half rolled on top of him to further attend to his nipples. Bard had very little work to do farther down; when he slid his hand down to find Thran’s cock, it was already hard and erect, filling Bard’s hand.

“Gods, angel, you’re so easy,” Bard teased, twining his free hand in Thran’s mussed braid to keep him on his back. “Not even a challenge.”

“Oh, you bastard, you fucking bastard!” Thran gasped. His head went back and his hands clawed at the sheets as Bard set about driving him to ecstasy as ruthlessly as he’d driven Bard.

“That’s right, pretty angel,” Bard goaded him. “Show me how much you hate this.”

Thran was beyond speech, but his moans grew increasingly frantic until his body had no choice but to release. How much of a rush was it to see that beautiful, angelic face consumed with the most primal carnal lust? Bard smothered his husband’s helpless cries in a deep kiss, which deepened Thran’s orgasm until he was completely spent.

“You are such a fucker,” Thran spat, when he had caught his breath.

“You should have thought about that before you started on me,” Bard replied without remorse.

Thran’s face waxed in an impudent grin. “I did. I was well rewarded.”

“You’re a bastard, too.”

“I very much am.” Thran gave a luxurious stretch from head to toe, reveling in it so much that Bard felt his loins stir again. Thran opened his eyes, took in Bard’s reaction, and offered him a soft look under his lashes that drew Bard’s laughter. “So very much.”

“Now you’re a royal bastard. You and your eye fucking.”
“Does it make you want me again?” Thran played up his posing.

“I always want you, cariad. But only if you want me, too.”

“Always the gentleman,” Thran dropped his posing and drew Bard into his embrace. “I am the happiest and most fortunate of men.”

“I am, too.” Bard stroked Thran’s hair, his cheek, his throat, then pressed a kiss on Thran’s shoulder.

They lay in each other’s arms for a few more moments to savor their closeness. Eventually, they got up to wash and don clothes, then went downstairs for a leisurely breakfast. The Egg Puff was Thran’s creation this morning, while Bard made a batch of pumpkin muffins. As they ate, they talked about what to do today before they took the children shopping in the afternoon. When Bard mentioned that he’d hoped to clean out the barn in anticipation of shortly casting Hal’s tree, Thran quickly agreed.

“Of course we must do that,” Thran insisted. “Nothing must stand in the way of your return to your art, Bard. You have labored long and hard for us here in the house, and now that it is mostly done, you must have the time to see to your workshop. I will help.”

“No dancing today?”

Thran exhaled. “Yes, I should do my barre. But chert, lyubov moya, I will be sick and tired of so many barres, so many rehearsals, very soon. Today, I want to play hooky to be with you and our family.”

The look on Thran’s face was so wistful that Bard couldn’t resist it. He reached out to stroke Thran’s hand with a single finger.

“They come play hooky with me in the barn, then with the children at the mall. We’ll have a day of fun before Immortal gets serious.”

Thran’s snort couldn’t disguise his appreciation, or his glee. “Yes, yes! Come, finish your breakfast, my saint. The barn awaits!”

Bard didn’t protest. He shoveled the last bit of his muffin in his mouth – this was a new recipe, rich with molasses and raisins, well worth making again – and hastened after his husband to clean up the kitchen. They dressed in sturdy work jeans, shirts, and boots, left a note on the kitchen island for the children about where they were, and headed out to the barn.

“Were there ever animals in this barn, Bard?” Thran asked as he helped Bard to put the two remaining porch floorboards up into the rafters with the rest of the spare lumber. “It seems very small for that. And there are no stalls.”

“I don’t think so, angel,” Bard agreed. “It’s a great size for a workshop and then some, but you’re right, it’s too small for horses or cows. It doesn’t smell like it’s ever had animals in it, either. Plus it’s got a concrete floor underneath the floorboards, and the construction’s a bit more modern than what was used for the house. Somebody might’ve built it as a folly, I suppose, but I think it was a workshop right from the start. Maybe carpentry – I’ve found a few old nails and such, and when we moved in there were some scraps of nice wood – cherry, walnut, and so forth. I made the walnut countertop in the butler’s pantry from one of the pieces.”

“That is a beautiful piece of wood,” Thran nodded. “Such a beautiful, satiny finish.”

“A lot of paste wax and elbow grease,” Bard grinned. “But worth it. It looks like it’s always been
“It does.” The last board went up, and Bard climbed down from the crates under the chin-up bar. “So what is your plan for this?”

“Mostly just clean out the dirt,” Bard exhaled. “There’s not much mess to speak of – even at the end, I kept things more or less in place. But I don’t want to crank up the forge or the metal furnace with so much dust in here. That stuff’s flammable.”

Thran hummed, looking around the workshop. “We need a lot of cloths, then. Everything is well coated.”

“Oh, I can go one better than that,” Bard grinned, pulling out a wheeled vacuum from under one of the workbenches. “Dust cloths move the dust around, but don’t actually get it out of here. The faithful industrial shop vacuum will be just the trick.”

“So do we vacuum first and then arrange, or the reverse?” Thran asked pulling his bottom lip as he studied the vacuum.

“Both,” Bard conceded. “Arranging stuff will stir up a lot of dust, so we should try to get the worst up first, then six times along the way, then once again with feeling at the end.”

Thran chuckled. “I know how to vacuum, so perhaps I should start with that?”

“Sounds good. We’d better clean off the overhead lights first, before they get too hot to touch, then we can see what we’re doing. And I’ll wash the windows – more light is good.”

“Then I will vacuum the walls and the floor. Floor first, I think. It is very dusty.”

Bard fetched the stepladder to reach the light fixtures, wiped them clean, and then set on the big window at the end of the barn, both inside and out. While he washed, Thran vacuumed the walls and floor thoroughly. Despite their care, they still stirred up a lot of dust, so Bard switched on the exhaust fan and opened the windows, which soon cleared the air.

Once the worst of the loose dust was gone, Bard moved the boxes and bins of things from under workbenches and out of corners so Thran could vacuum the spaces. A quick wipe of the bins, and back they went in place. After an hour or so, Tilda roused, so they got the boys up to join her for breakfast. They engulfed most of the rest of the muffins and a lot of eggs. Then the children wanted to see what their fathers were up to. Legolas in particular seemed drawn to poke around the workshop, asking what this or that was for. Tilda was her usual generous soul, and collected the loose remnants of rebar that had rolled here and there and stacked them upright in a corner. They puttered through the various bins and containers, Bard offering commentary about what was what when asked.

“Don’t you get cold out here in the winter, Bard?” Legolas asked.

“Not when I’m casting,” Bard replied. “The furnace that heats the metal keeps things quite warm, and so does the forge. If I’m not doing either of those, I have a space heater.”

“How will you make the metal tree from your clay model?”

“There are a couple ways to go,” Bard said. “There’s the lost wax method, which is very time consuming. Well, all of it takes time, but the lost wax takes a very long time because you have to coat the mold you want to cast from with lots and lots and lots of coats of wax. There’s forging, of course, which is what blacksmiths do. But for the tree, I’ll make a mold from a special kind of sand
called green sand. It’s good for small pieces. I’ll do the tree in sections, then weld them together. It’s been a while since I last cast anything. It may take me a try or two to get it right.”

“I hope it goes right from the start,” Legolas wished, drawing Bard’s appreciative smile.

“So do I,” he said. “But it’ll be fun, either way. That’s the important thing.”

They puttered in the barn until lunchtime, at which point Thran gave the barn floor one more thorough vacuuming. No longer did the workshop look abandoned – it was ready to host an artist again. Bard’s fingers itched to get started on Hal’s tree.

Thran switched off the vacuum and looked around with a satisfied smile. “I hope you did not have to sell much of your equipment?”

Bard shook his head. “I didn’t sell any of it. For the small pieces I cast myself, I don’t need anything too bulky. I’d cobbled together some of it myself, so it wasn’t anything I could sell. When I needed to cast a larger piece, I contracted it out, or worked in trade.”

“So you are officially back to work now, because we have cleaned,” Thran said, but then his expression turned into something inspired. “We must properly toast the reopening of the Clan Ffyrnig forge, yes? Wait here!”

He ran into the house, leaving Bard and the children to look after him with mystified expressions.

“Don’t look at me,” Legolas shook his head. “I have no idea what Papa intends to do.”

The mystery was soon solved when Thran reappeared balancing a small tray of shot glasses. As he walked briskly back to the barn, Bard saw that two of the glasses contained something clear, and the other three contained juice.

“The juice is for you, children.” Thran held out his tray to Legolas, Bain, and Tilda. “Come, each of you take one, so we can toast the rejuvenation of the barn. Now, you, Bard, and me.”

Bard took one of the small glasses to sniff – vodka, icy cold. Thran took the last glass, set down the tray, and held his free hand up in an imitation of a conjuring wizard. “Hold up your glass, everyone. I will make the blessing, and then we will drink. Ready? Okay! Blagoslovi etot saray i khudozhnika v nem! Now drink!”

Thran tossed back his shot of vodka, and the children imitated him to gulp down their juice. Bard held his glass up to Thran in amused salute, and tossed his vodka down. The icy mouthful silked a cool trail down his throat and coiled in his stomach where it quickly warmed. It was too high in quality to make him wheeze or cough, but he’d better follow it with some lunch soon if he didn’t want to feel more of its power.

“What did we just drink to?” he asked. Gods, the warmth rising in his belly would raise a dead man frozen in the Arctic.

Thran smirked, all too aware of what Bard felt. “We Russians do not have a lot of formal toasts, so I made my own. I asked to bless this barn and the artist in it. Short, and apt.”

“Then I guess I’m open for business,” Bard agreed. “What do you say, children? We give it three cheers?”

“Yeah, Da!” Tilda agreed, jumping up and down. “Three cheers!”
“Hip, hip!” Bard said to begin.

“Hooray!” Bain and Tilda chorused with Bard.

“Hip, hip!”

“Hooray!” Legolas and Thran joined the rest.

“Hip, hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Now Clan Ffyrnig Forge rises like the phoenix!” Thran said grandly, drawing Bard’s laughter.

“I think it’s time to have some lunch to offset the effects of the toasting lubricant.” Bard unplugged the shop vacuum, coiled its cord, and stowed it back under the workbench. “What about you, children?”

“Yes, lunch,” Tilda agreed.

“Thank you, everyone, for helping;” Bard said, as everyone filtered out of the barn. He shut and locked the windows, then pulled down the bay door to follow them to the mudroom. “Come tomorrow, I can work in there for the first time in a long time. That’ll feel great.”

He already felt pretty good, and not just thanks to a shot of high-test vodka on an empty stomach. His silly husband and three cheering children had much to do with it, too.

* * *

Lunch was hearty – thick sandwiches for the children and Bard, and a thinner one for Thran. Despite all the labor he’d exerted in the barn, Thran still didn’t indulge in too much bread. He had a very nice chicken sandwich on thin wafers of bread, seasoned with a little cheese and a lot of lettuce and tomato and seasoning. The boys, on the other hand, made massive pumpernickel bagel sandwiches piled high with everything Bard put on the kitchen island. Tilda preferred to eat just the chicken and fillings, but she didn’t stint herself on the cheese and crackers. A big bowl of raw vegetables was soon emptied, and so was another of fruit. Bard had finally stopped waiting for everyone else to eat before he did, thank the gods, so he had a full plate with the rest of them. After lunch, everyone did a quick cleanup of the house, and collected laundry. Bard made the grocery list for tomorrow’s shopping, and Thran and Bain started the first load of laundry while Tilda and Legolas scrubbed the children’s bathroom. Bard did the half bath, so by the time Sigrid came through the mudroom door the house was in decent trim and the laundry was well underway.

“Hooray, Sigrid’s home!” Tilda ran through the house announcing her sister’s arrival. "Now we can go shopping!"

Off they went.

As Thran drove, he listened with a smile as Bard laid out the afternoon’s itinerary. First to the local department store for socks, underwear, basic shorts, and tees. After that, the mall for whatever they hadn’t found at the department store, and if they had time to look, a dress for Tilda.
“So lads, you’re with Thran, and lasses, you’re with me,” Bard finished. “Everybody got it?”

“Aye, Captain,” Thran gave Bard a crooked grin. “The crew is ready to beam down to the department store.”

Bard pointed through the windshield at the parking lot ahead. “Then make it so, Number One.”

They forged into the department store. Ah, good – the boys’ and girls’ sections were beside one another, so Thran could observe how Bard shopped with the girls. Each child had a list of things to get, and Bard held the basket and the list to tick off each item they chose. That kept the children from having to carry everything, and gave Bard the chance to oversee their selections. Bain and his sisters were well used to the routine, sorting through the boring part quickly. Legolas was no more interested in socks and underpants than Bain was, but they lingered over the selection of printed tee shirts and shorts. Bard was already outside the dressing room, waiting for Tilda and Sigrid, when the boys ran in to try on shorts.

“You’re about to get a lesson in the hard part,” Bard murmured as he set down his basket full of the girls’ clothing.

“Am I? How so?”


“Oh, gods,” Thran winced. “Our Sigrid?”

“Brace for impact, Number One.”

Tilda and the boys appeared first, but none of their selections raised much of a stir, other than the rude tee that the boys tried to sneak past their fathers. Thran unleashed enough of his patented Prince of Ice stare that the boys meekly returned the shirts to the rack. Tilda’s shorts and tops were sturdy and comfortable, and Thran was glad to see that none of the shirts had princesses on them. Cute animals, however, were frequent adornments. The one-piece swimsuit was bright aqua with white polka dots, and a distinct lack of ruffles. At least one of the Clan Ffyrnig girls was of practical mien in the pool; whether Sigrid would be remained to be seen.

“All good, little doll,” Bard nodded. “How’s your sister doing?”

Tilda rolled her eyes, looking remarkably like both her older sister and Bain at the same time. “Sigrid takes a long time.”

“I do not,” the girl in question retorted. “I helped you with your things, didn’t I?”

Sigrid had on a pair of blue twill shorts and a pale yellow camp shirt. Bard nodded at her outfit.

“Those are good, sweetness.”

“I’ve got another three pairs of shorts to sort through, and six tops.”

“And how many swimsuits?”

“Six. And don’t say it. I know the drill about the swimsuits.”


“The drill?” Thran leaned close to murmur to Bard when Sigrid went back into the dressing room.
“What is this drill, lyubov moya?”

“She has to be able to actually swim in the swimsuit,” Bard leaned close to murmur in reply. “That tends to keep the flimsy ones at bay.”

Thran smothered a chuckle. “And what about the boys?”

“They’re usually easy. They either get wild flowers or bright things that Piet Mondrian would love.”

“What, no Speedos?”

“Gods,” Bard grimaced in laughter. “This isn’t Europe.”

Thran eyed him. “Pity. You would look delicious in one.”

“Look who’s talking,” Bard snarked back. “I’ll stick to my usual cut off jeans.”

“You will look delicious in anything, or nothing.” Thran teased.

“What are you two sniggering about?” Sigrid reappeared to put her hands on her hips.

“Speedo swimsuits,” Bard shot back. “For guys.”

“Ew, Da.” Sigrid made a disgusted face. “They make great suits for females, but there aren’t many guys who can wear one with any authority, present company excepted, and that’s only because neither of you eat enough, and you’re too skinny.”

Thran cast Bard a commiserating look. “The lioness flexes her claws.”

“We’ll have our chance to flex ours, just as soon as she tries on her choice of swimsuit.” Bard made shooing motions. “Hop to it, sweetness.”

Sigrid stuck her tongue out at her father, drawing both his and Thran’s laughter, so Sigrid gave a snort and flounced back into the dressing room. By the time she came out again in another pair of shorts and top, she ignored them both to look at herself in the mirror.

“That are good,” Bard called.

“I have two more just like these shorts in different colors. Do you need to see those, too?”

“That’s the rule.”

She rolled her eyes again and flounced back in the dressing room, but she dutifully appeared in both pairs. In between appearances, the boys appeared in swimsuits and shorts and tees, all run of the mill. It was interesting to see Legolas watch Bain, then Bain watch Legolas, who tended to like things with more tailored lines. They both ended up with a pile of things right from the start; after the rude tee, neither ventured into that again.

Sigrid finally appeared in the swimsuits, all one piece, all attractive, all swimworthy one-pieces, until she got to the last one. It was a small bikini, but not outrageously so. The look of pale defiance on Sigrid’s face was matched by an equally mild look on Bard’s – how would the contest turn out?

“That one’s nice,” Barn nodded, without cracking a smile.

“Really?” Sigrid blurted, too surprised to stifle her outburst.
“Yes, really,” Bard nodded, giving his daughter an amused look. “What? You don’t like it? Oh, I get it – you put on one you really don’t like, trying to crank your old Da.”

“No, no, I like this one,” Sigrid hastened to assure Bard. “I just... didn’t think you’d...”

“It looks very nice,” Thran offered. “No, that is not the right thing to tell you, lioness. I will tell you what I told your Da about how to shop. Buy only clothes that you wear. Not clothes that wear you. You want people to look at you, not your clothes, you see? So you wear that very nicely, as you do all the things you have chosen, except perhaps the pink blouse. I did not think the color suited you as well as the other things you chose.”

Sigrid’s face waxed thoughtful, then she smiled. “You’re right, Ada. That’s a smart way to look at it. So... I want to try the pink one again, now that you’ve told me that.”

She disappeared into the dressing room yet again. Legolas and Bain rolled their eyes and muttered about being here forever, so Thran turned to them.

“Have both of you gotten everything on your lists? If no, then find the rest. If yes, then you may go look at the games, but only look. We are here for clothing, not games.”

The boys took the armload of clothes from Thran to sort them out and make sure their list was complete. Tilda did the same thing with her stack, but by the time they were through, Sigrid came out with her armload of things.

“All right, I’ve decided. You were right about the pink blouse, Ada, so I got a green one instead. Um, Da...”

Bard went off to the side with her to bend an ear down to her whispered words. He nodded, agreeing to something, which earned him a grateful smile from his oldest child. Everyone gathered up their things, and they headed for the registers.

Their next stop was the mall, where they aimed for the specialty shoe store; all of the children needed good athletic shoes. As the children moved ahead of them, Thran gave Bard a close look.

“What did Sigrid ask you in the department store?”

Bard smiled. “She asked if she could get two swimsuits. Since one of them was practical, I let the bikini go. It looked fine, and it earned me a little karma.”

Thran chuckled. “You need no more karma, lyubov moya. But you do need shorts, and you got none.”

“You didn’t get any, either.”

Thran waved a hand at the children ahead of them. “It was more important to sort through their things. I can go another time.”

“Spoken like a parent. I thought the same thing. You and I can go some morning if we want.”

“Perfect, my saint. Today, then, is the children’s day.”

They sped up after their children, invaded the shoe store, engaged in a flurry of shoe fitting, and soon emerged with four new pairs of athletic trainers. They descended upon an outdoor outfitters’ store for sturdy sandals.
“Can we look for my dress now?” Tilda asked plaintively, looking up at her father as they came out of the outfitters’ store and back into the mall.

Bard pulled out his mobile to check the time. “We’ve got time, little doll. So let’s go see what we can find.”

“Do we have to go, too?” Bain protested. “Legs and I don’t care about a lot of frilly dresses!”

“May we go down to the media store and look at the new games?” Legs asked on the heels of his brother’s protest.

Thran gave Bard an inquiring look. At Bard’s miniscule nod, he said, “You have both been very patient, yes. So perhaps half an hour at the game store would be a good reward.”

“Yes, that’d be awesome,” Bain replied with his usual enthusiasm. “Yeah, Legs?”

“Yes, thank you, Papa.”

“Then we will meet you...” Thran looked around, and pointed. “There. By the fountain in thirty minutes.”

“Okay!” Legs managed, but Bain was already pulling him towards the game shop.

“That’ll reduce the noise level,” Bard shook his head, chuckling. “All right, little doll, off to the dresses.”

Thran took the lead now, choosing a store that he knew carried well-made clothing for adults. It stood to reason, then, that their children’s department would be equally well stocked. So it proved, and Tilda had several racks of dresses to choose from. Bard let Tilda look through the selections herself, which she did by touching all the fabrics. This one was too scratchy, that one felt sticky, and this one was a weird color.

“Look at this one, Til,” Sigrid offered. She held out a pale yellow sleeveless dress with a beribboned Empire waistline. It came to just past the knee and had a small bumblebee in the center of the ribbons.

“Ooh, it’s a bee dress,” Tilda smiled. “And it has the same kind of fluffy stuff on top as your blue dress does.”

“It comes in green, too,” Sigrid pointed.

“I like the yellow one. It’s like my room,” Tilda decided.

“Turn around, then,” Bard wiggled his finger at her. “Let’s see which one might fit you.”

He held the dress up to Tilda’s back, checking if it fit her shoulders. “I think this one might be too small, Til. Sigrid, would you find the next bigger one?”

Sigrid looked through the rack, but shook her head regretfully. “There’s one two sizes bigger. Try that one.”

She exchanged the smaller one for the bigger one, and Bard held that one up. “I think it’ll be okay, Sig. Tilda, why don’t you try this one on?”

“I’ll help you, Til,” Sig said. “It’s got a zipper in the back.”
“Okay, Sigrid. Thank you.” Tilda headed towards the dressing room, so Bard put the dress in Sigrid’s hands, and off they went. In a few moments, Tilda appeared, looking very pleased with herself.

“It looks great with your trainers,” Bard teased.

“Oh, Da,” Tilda put her arms akimbo to frown at him. “You always say that.”

“You’d miss it if I didn’t,” Bard replied. “But it looks nice even with your trainers.”

“It does, indeed,” Thran supplied, for the little girl did look sweet so dressed up. “I think you have grown a great deal since Christmas, yes? Two whole sizes!”

“I think I have,” Tilda agreed. She looked at herself in the mirror. “I like it. It’s not scratchy on the inside, and it’s nice and airy so I won’t get too hot, and it has a bumblebee on it.”

“Perfect all around,” Bard agreed. “Let’s just check the price –”

“The price is fine,” Thran inserted smoothly. “It suits our Tilda exactly, and it is comfortable and pretty and cute, and that means that it is perfect, and whatever it costs is the cost of perfection.”

Bard’s eyes met Thran’s, but Thran kept his gaze serene and smiling, so Bard nodded. “All good points. So you’re sure that’s the one? Don’t you want to try on any of the others?”

“No, I like this one,” Tilda nodded definitely enough that Sigrid rolled her eyes.

“Gods, another one afflicted with the Bowman shopping curse,” she sighed. At Thran’s inquisitive look, she chuckled. “We go in, we see what we want, we try it on, we buy it, and then we leave. It’s not just Bain who does it – it’s all of us.”

“Very efficient, indeed,” Thran agreed. “So we need only one more thing. You and Kukla need shoes to wear with your dresses.”

“I’d forgotten about that,” Bard exhaled. “Okay, on to the shoe department.”

“Better to go to the discount store for those,” Sigrid suggested. “We won’t wear them very often, right? Tilda might even grow out of them by the time we have another fancy thing. So don’t waste money on expensive shoes if we’ll only wear them once or twice.”

“An excellent point,” Bard agreed, so they paid for Tilda’s dress, and found the discount shoe store. Sigrid found some strappy silver sandals, and Tilda opted for black ballet flats to match her bumblebee dress. At last, laden with bags, they returned to the fountain in the center of the mall court to wait for Bain and Legolas.

“Bet you have to go in a haul them out,” Sigrid warned.

“Maybe we will,” Bard agreed. “But that’s okay. They’ve behaved themselves all day.”

“It’s good to sit down for a minute, anyway,” Sigrid sighed.

“Yeah,” Tilda agreed, leaning back to look over her head at the splashing fountain. “I’m hungry. What’s for supper?”

They considered the possibilities while they waited for the boys. At about ten minutes after their meeting time, just as Thran was about to go into the game store after them, the boys straggled out. Spotting the rest of the clan, the boys trotted over.
“Did you see the next generation of zombie apocalypses?” Bard teased.

The boys looked at each other. “Actually, we did,” Legolas admitted. “It looks awesome.”

“Yeah,” Bain agreed. “There was this really nasty ogre zombie that spurted –”

“La, la, la!” Tilda babbled, sticking her fingers in her ears, and crossing her eyes. “I don’t want to know, la, la, la!”

“All right, everyone,” Bard got up from his chair. “Time to beam up, Scotty!”

That got a laugh from the rest of the clan, so they handed around the bags of shoes and clothes and returned to Thran’s SUV. It took little time to return home, where laundry resumed – supplemented by various bits of newly acquired clothing – and supper got underway.

“A successful foray,” Thran observed, as he and Bard lay in bed later that evening. The children were all in bed, restoring themselves for the new week of school that would begin in just a few hours.

“A successful day,” Bard amended, drawing Thran close. “A decadent one for you, cariad. You played hooky from the dance, you messed about in the barn, you climbed on ladders and wrested order from chaos with a shop vacuum, and we kept the mall and then some financially afloat for the next month.”

Thran chuckled. “I feel like quite the superhero who adventures in the comic books, yes?”

“They call them graphic novels now.”

“Oh. Graphic novels, then. Excuse me. But no matter the fancy names, I have lived the fantasy life today, yes? Ventured where no mortal dares go, into a dusty barn armed only with my trusty vacuum and broom. Dared the ire of annoyed teenagers who want rude tee shirts and skimpy swimsuits and upgraded zombie apocalypses. And narrowly avoided a life of slavery at the feet of a small Kukla in an adorable bumblebee dress.”

“You have had a busy day,” Bard chuckled as he stroked Thran’s hair. “Don’t yell at me for saying thank you for making the financial aspect of the day possible. I provided the family bit, which was just as important. And you don’t know the peace of mind you gave me today. To see the children have a few new things, especially Tilda’s dress, and not worry about whether we can afford them... the best present of all.”

“I did not have to buy Legolas things and know that I would not see him wear them, enjoy them, outgrow them, because we would be apart. That is another good present.”

“Then we both got presents that money can’t buy,” Bard murmured, pressing a kiss on Thran’s hair. “Better than gold. So much better than gold.”

As Thran stroked Bard’s chest, he heartily agreed.
Chapter 130

Chapter Summary

Both the angel and the saint have reason to invoke the gods on a Monday.

Chapter Notes

To all of you:

This has been a painful and shocking day for me, as I'm sure it has been for so many of you. For the first time in years, I wasn't able to write. So while this is a short chapter, consider it my act of quiet defiance that I would not let setbacks keep me from something I loved, or from offering my love to all of you.

Stay strong, stay safe, and know that I love you.

EldritchMage

Monday could have been the start of Thran’s new routine for the next eight weeks. Starting today, he would go to the children’s school at noon, and work there with his fellow company members until late each night. He would be late going to bed, and would correspondingly be late to rise if he wanted to stay properly rested for these last few weeks of effort before Immortal’s premiere. That meant, of course, that all the morning preparation to feed the children, make their lunches, and see them to the bus stop would fall to Bard. All the evening supper preparation, homework duty, and bathing would also fall to Bard. In between times, Bard would labor to support a fledgling artistic career. His husband would bear a heavy load, then.

Thran would bear a heavy load, too. Of course the concentrated effort to bring Immortal to life would take its physical toll. But to see his family so rarely – perhaps only on the weekends – was a heavy mental load, too.

So many heavy loads were what kept Thran from beginning his new routine today. Today, at least, he would be beside Bard to help with the morning tasks, and to see his children.

When Bard’s clock radio alarm went off, Thran let his husband take his turn in the bathroom first, then he dressed and prepared himself for the morning routine. With Bard, he made porridge and sandwiches and tea, packed lunch bags, and saw the children onto the bus. With Bard, he checked the pantry and refrigerator for missing items, added to the shopping list, and went to the market to replenish the family’s stores. That was no chore, really; the market was a constant source of wonder – Bard called it the place of infinite possibilities – that never failed to entice him to taste an unfamiliar kind of cheese, admire an unexpected flurry of beautiful flowers, or smell hot bread and rolls coming out of the vast ovens. Neither was it a chore to help Bard unload their purchases, stock their pantry, decide what to have for supper today and tomorrow, and load the refrigerator and freezer accordingly. They dashed out again to the department store to buy themselves a few pairs of shorts, plain tees and shirts, and a couple of swimsuits. Then they shared an early lunch so that Thran would
have a couple of hours for his meal to digest before he danced. Despite Thran’s excitement about *Immortal*, he savored this time with his husband to share the everyday duties that kept Clan Ffynig running in top form.

“Bard? I am off, and I leave, too,” Thran called, as he came downstairs in his dancewear with his bag over his shoulder.

“In the kitchen, angel. I’ve got your supper packed.” Thran came down the hall to find Bard stacking his bento boxes and strapping them together. “If you text me when you leave to come home, I’ll put on something warm for you.”

“Thank you, *lyubov moya.*” Thran took his bag off his shoulder to put the stacked boxes inside. “I have little idea of what to expect today, so we may end early, or we may stay late. I will text you as soon as know something.”

“I’ll be here,” Bard said easily. He gave Thran a grin. “Do your best, just like always.”

“So I shall. And you do your best, too.”

“Always.” Bard walked out with Thran to the carriage house. “Call if you need anything, and I’ll see you when you get home.”

Thran offered Bard a humble kiss. “You are the best husband. Here I go to work the evening shift, and you are gracious throughout.”

“It’s not forever, *cariad.* Besides, the barn will have my time now just as the ballet stage will have yours. We both have muses to serve, and we have to serve them away from each other. That’s what life is now.”

“True,” Thran nodded. “I accept that without complaint. But as soon as the painters are gone, *lyubov moya,* let us have our game in the solarium. That is the last room of the house that we want to christen, and let us do so in glorious fashion sooner rather than later.”

“Oh, I think we’ll manage that,” Bard gave him a caressing look up and down before pressing a kiss at the edge of Thran’s jaw. “Without doubt, we’ll manage that the first chance we have.”

“Then I go to school reconciled. Speak to your muse, then, while I speak to mine.”

“Until later, angel. Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Thran got into his SUV, gave Bard a smile and a wave as he went by, and headed out into the lane. Behind him, Bard stood watching him until he was out of sight.

The Imladris Academy was barely a few miles away, but Thran sighed. This was the beginning of much more than a fifteen-minute journey, and he tensed as he thought of the hazards that hid among the glories he knew so well. To bring a ballet to life, especially a brand new one, was exhausting, frustrating, nerve-wracking, and desolate. At the same time, it was intoxicating, glorious, transcendent, and transformative.

It was also as addictive as light to a moth.

Thran had already flung himself into that light with such abandon that he’d forgotten all else, and driven his longsuffering husband so far past rage that it had taken his breath away. He couldn’t do
that again. He just couldn’t.

All the gods, help me.

* * *

Bard headed back inside once Thran’s SUV disappeared. He waved to Darla and her two apprentices, already up on their scaffolding to continue their work on the outside of the house. The first coat was almost complete, and in a day or so, the painters would start on the second one. That one would go faster, and once it was done the porch would be next, and the interior doors. Bard worked in the kitchen to make cookies for the children’s lunches and a simple sheet cake for supper’s dessert, then started a basic chicken soup for Thran’s late evening supper.

Finally, at last, it was time to head to the barn. Today, for the first time in years, he would go into his workshop and work on his art.

First, he replenished his supply of green sand, the molding medium into which he poured liquid metal during casting. Green sand was a mixture of fine play box sand – what Sigrid had once dubbed as sugar sand, so fine was it – plus bentonite clay and water. It was easy to make from raw materials he already had on hand. Bentonite clay was nothing more than clumping cat litter ground as fine as flour, something he did in a homemade grinder. He still had a bucket of that, tightly sealed against moisture, so he got his mixing bucket, measured out one part clay to nine parts sand, mixed it thoroughly, then spent the next several hours painstakingly adding water and thoroughly mixing the combination until a handful of it held a tight shape. Tomorrow, it would be ready to make the molds for Hal’s tree.

Next, Bard set up the frames to hold the green sand molds during casting. He had a supply of those, but none were long enough to accommodate the base of the tree, so he sorted through his scrap lumber for boards the right size. A few brackets, and he was set. While he worked, he thought about how best to do the delicate branches of the tree – in pieces, of course, but he had to decide how to divide the branches up for casting. He’d have to weld all the pieces together after casting, and he wanted the resulting assembly to look seamless.

He grinned. It was so good to have a technical challenge again.

Thank you, gods.

* * *

Thran passed through the lobby of the Imladris Academy on his way to the administrative offices. He, like everyone in UltraViolet Ballet who would work at the school, had to register with the office staff, and sit for the photograph that would appear on his access badge. In one of their many conversations, Lettie had told him that the administrative staff had wanted all of the dancers to wear these badges at all times when they were in the building, but had finally conceded that that was impractical given the nature of the their work, so they could set them aside in the auditorium and its close environs. Badge acquired, Thran carried his bag down to the auditorium and slipped inside. Ori, Lettie, and Abebe were already there, conferring with Círdan as several students scurried to and
fro to work on the *Immortal* set, so Thran joined them.

“Hi, Thran,” Lettie greeted. “Círdan’s telling us where he and his crews are on the stage design.”

“I am in good time, then,” Thran replied, smiling a greeting at everyone. “Please excuse my interruption, Círdan.”

The set designer nodded in appreciation of Thran’s courtesy, and resumed his explanation. He pointed to the large circular platform as he spoke.

“The metal frame underneath looks almost like a spider’s web,” Círdan explained. “There are ribs from the center to the edge, and concentric circles that brace the ribs. At each intersection of circle and rib is a wheel made of a composite that turns quietly. Tracks underneath the wheels hold the platform steady. A plywood floor is laid over top of the frame, and a membrane dancing surface is on top of the plywood. The membrane is expensive, but it provides an important level of safety for the dancers.”

“The vertical walls that separate the troll market from the blank part are on top,” Ori said. “That’s a lot of weight. Will the students be able to turn it as you planned?”

“They will,” Círdan affirmed. “The composite wheels make the platform easy to turn. We’ve finished the edge of the platform to include small handholds, so the team of students who will turn the platform – they’d dubbed themselves the Theatre Ninjas – will space themselves along the back edge, and push and pull out of sight of the audience to turn the platform as we need.”

“The Theatre Ninjas?” Ori grinned.

“Yeah! Go, Theatre Ninjas!” A short, muscular boy loping past exhorted Ori with a muscle man flex of his arms and a big grin.

“Thank you, Marvin,” Círdan waved a hand at the boy. He cast an amused smile on those around him. “The wrestling team volunteered en masse to do the turning.”

An appreciative chuckle rippled through Círdan’s audience.

“How quiet is the platform when it turns?” Thran asked.

“Very,” Círdan answered. He looked towards the retreating boy. “Marvin! Would you collect enough of the Ninjas to turn the stage for me, please?”

“Absolutely!” Marvin gave a goofy bow in reply before turning to several of the students scattered about the stage. “Ninjas! Time to rock and roll!”

Five other boys sorted themselves out, all of them wearing black tees that bore the same logo printed in white on the front. As they drew closer, the logo revealed itself to be a high-soaring ninja warrior at full kick; their name, Theatre Ninjas, appeared above and below the ninja.

“Great shirts!” Abebe applauded.

One of the boys gave the ballet master a wave. “Thanks! My mom’s a silkscreen artist, and she made these for us. For a little esprit de corps, she said.”

“Yeah, as if we needed any,” a third boy laughed. “But Takashi’s Mom is great like that.”

“She is,” Ori agreed. “Very cool!”
“A full turn around, gentlemen, if you please,” Círdan asked.

“Coming up, Mr. C.,” Marvin replied, as the boys positioned themselves. “Hop on for the ride.”

“Yes, do,” Círdan waved the group onto the platform. “Thran, you especially will want to find out what the platform feels like in motion.”

“Of course,” Thran nodded, stepping up onto the platform. Once everyone was aboard, the Ninjas turned the platform. As it rotated easily, Thran walked forward to keep his position to the boys so he could watch how they worked. The motion of the platform was smooth and even, without jerks or bumps, which would help. When the platform had completed its revolution, the boys stopped it. The boys on each end slipped wedges against two of the wheels to hold it steady.

“Nothing to it!” one of the boys gave his observers a cocky grin. “Smooth ride, too, right?”

“Very,” Lettie agreed. “Well done!”

The boys offered pleased smiles.

Many of the dancers as well as Irmo had come into the auditorium while the Theatre Ninjas had demonstrated how the platform rotated, and stepped forward now for a closer look. The Ninjas set the platform in motion again for the new arrivals, so Thran stepped off to confer with Lettie, Irmo, Abebe, and Ori about the plan for the day. A girl came in, asking about where to put portable ballet barres, so Ori scurried off to point her to the gymnasium. The barres would fit into an equipment room out of the way of the students during the day, then unfolded when the dancers arrived to do their warmups. He returned a few minutes later to say that the barres were in place, and ready for the dancers to begin their warmup. Thran and the rest of the dancers followed Ori to the gymnasium, and the dancers began their limbering stretches. Ori found a dry mop and unabashedly ran it up and down the floor, drawing appreciative smiles from the dancers. He drew applause when he pushed an upright piano into the gymnasium a few minutes later.

The dancers took their places at the barre, and began the day’s work. Lettie played the piano for them, and Thran set aside all but the familiar routine and discipline of the dance. By the end, he was thoroughly warmed and centered, and ready to begin the day’s rehearsal.

They trooped en masse back to the auditorium. For the rest of the afternoon, they got used to the confines of the stage, and walked through each scene one by one, first to adjust their positioning relative to the physical set, and then to actually dance it. The rotating central platform was set a little to the back of the space, so they had the front of the stage as well as both sides of it to fill. Abebe and Irmo wanted to make sure that all of the dancers became comfortable with the step up from the stage to the platform and avoided injury.

As Thran expected, this first rehearsal on stage was disjointed and distracting. For the first time, the lighting crew was seeing dancers onstage, and made frequent adjustments to the lights. Círdan and his students and assistants prowled the set to consider side scenery as well as the structure of the troll market. Sound came and went as the crews considered how to cue the music. But this was typical, and Thran and the other dancers were used to such turmoil early in rehearsal. They kept their focus on the scenes on the mortal world and ignored the hammering and banging and calls back and forth as so many people labored on the other side of the platform walls to bring the troll market to life.

A brief break allowed Thran to snatch a few bites of the meal Bard had packed for him. While he munched, he kept his body moving gently, staying warm so that when he resumed dancing he didn’t have to warm up again. Irmo came to stand beside him.
“These are not easy conditions for rehearsal,” the choreographer grumbled, rubbing his chin with an exasperated hand. “The lights are not right, the sound is off, the stage is not yet built.”

“That will settle in a few days,” Thran offered. “We have practiced a great deal in the studio, in the ballroom. We need this time onstage so that our placement is perfect, our timing is perfect – we are perfect.”

Irmo’s shrug was reluctant, but conceded the validity of Thran’s points. “I hope so. I want to bring in the rigging crew for the flying. The Maid and the Soldier... it will be relatively easy to have them fly to heaven, because it will merely be from the floor of the stage straight up. To fly Death onto the battlefield will be more difficult.”

“Because you want me to fly over the audience,” Thran pointed up to the auditorium ceiling. “We do not know if that is possible yet.”

Irmo shrugged again, and with as much reluctance. “So we need to bring in the rigging crew as soon as possible to find out.”

“Ori works to arrange it,” Thran replied. Poor Ori – the young man already had so much to do, but Thran would have a word with him once Irmo turned his attention elsewhere. “He will let us know what is possible as soon as he knows.”

“Soon... please,” Irmo remembered to say.

“Of course,” Thran replied blandly, not smiling at Irmo’s hard won courtesy. Even if the choreographer sounded more truculent than not, at least he’d made the effort. Irmo nodded, and drifted away to talk to Abebe. Thran took the chance to find Ori and relay Irmo’s latest request.

“I knew he’d want to get on that sooner rather than later,” Ori said, scrolling over his tablet. “I’ve got a list of three firms to call. I’ll do that tomorrow, and let you know what I find out when I see you.”

“Thank you, Ori. I do not have to tell you to find one exquisitely concerned with safety, since it is I whom Irmo wants to hurl atop the heads of the audience. At least Charisse and Luka have only a shorter trip up, and a much gentler trip down.”

Ori grimaced in commiseration. “Oh, I know it. Maybe they’ll all say that across the top of the audience isn’t a good idea, and you’ll have just the shorter ride down, too.”

“We will soon see,” Thran agreed. “Ah, I am wanted onstage again. Please let me know what you find out tomorrow.”

“Okay, Thran,” Ori waved, and went back to his tablet.

Thran went back to his dancing quickly enough, but he couldn’t resist a look up at the ceiling of the auditorium. It seemed a long way up. From up there, it probably looked like an even longer way down.

He grimaced.

* * *

Gods help me.
Bard still tooled in the barn when the children came home from school. He’d made his molds, finished his green sand, and had decided how to divide the model for Hal’s tree for casting. He’d scrounged up his small bronze ingots left over from casting Sea Spot Run and his pine tree – he had more than enough left for the small tree. He’d cleaned out his melting cauldron and checked over his furnace. On top of all that, he got a sign that more good things were on the way – he’d signed the delivery driver’s recoder for the package of test aluminum spheres for his galaxy sculpture. As the children came breathlessly into the barn, he gave them a big smile, and not just because he was happy to see them. He’d put in a good day’s work, too.

“Hi, children! How was school today?”

“I saw Ada at school today, Da,” Tilda said. “I waved to him. He was doing ballet things in the gym when I went out for sport.”

“Today’s a big day for him,” Bard agreed. “First day on the job, in a way. Have any of you seen the set yet?”

Both Bain and Legolas had, so they described the scene as they went inside to divest themselves of backpacks. The lot of them thundered upstairs to change into their afterschool clothes, then bustled about the kitchen making snacks. There was a flurry of discussion about homework and what to make for supper and whether Thran would make it home in time to eat with them or not. Bard reminded Tilda that Thran might not be here tonight to help her with her French vocabulary words, but Legolas offered to do that duty if she wanted, which pleased Tilda no end. After a few cheese and crackers, Bard sorted out the assignments for the sous chefs and cleanup crew, and got supper underway. Tonight’s menu was poached salmon in broth with dill and onion, onion gratin, green beans, and macaroni and cheese. While everything was in the oven or simmering on the stove, he made a quick vanilla icing to slather over his sheet cake. The children dug in enthusiastically, and even though Bard missed Thran’s smiling presence at the other end of the table, he enjoyed the children’s playful conversation. Once they’d stuffed themselves with as much of the main course as they could, Bard brought out his sheet cake, laughing when the boys’ eyes lit up.

“Whoa, icing!” Bain breathed, nudging Legolas. “Look, Legs! Icing!”

“Yessss,” Legolas licked his lips. His eyes darted to Bard’s. “Spice cake, I hope?”

“Spice cake indeed,” Bard nodded. “Cinnamon, cardamom, allspice, nutmeg, and mace.”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes,” Legolas edged to the front of his chair in anticipation. “Sigrid, if you don’t want yours, I’ll be glad to eat it.”

“Not a chance,” Sigrid grinned in friendly challenge. “I’m not missing Da’s spice cake for anything, icing or not.”

“I like the icing,” Tilda offered, as Bard handed her a slice to pass down to Sigrid.

“I loooooove the icing,” Bain sighed, grinning. “Love, love, love!”

“Pass it down,” Bard said, handing another plateful to Bain to hand to Legolas. He loved to see his family enjoy a meal with such obvious delight.

Thank you, gods.
Chapter 131

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint engage in a little domestic bliss. The saint reaches a milestone, and the angel anticipates flying lessons.

Is a new game in the offing?

Chapter Notes

Hi, all. Thank you so much for all the encouraging messages you've sent me during the last week. You have no idea how much comfort they provided. It's a scary time, but I hope this chapter eases a few jitters. Hang in there, take care of each other, and keep your fingers crossed.

Take a deep breath, everybody. We'll be okay.

❤ ❤ ❤

Bard was in the sitting room when the mudroom door opened. The boys sat in front of the TV, playing the car race game, and Tilda and Bard were on the sofa, sketching together. Sigrid was upstairs, working on a paper. It was just past nine o’clock.

“There’s your Papa, Legs,” Bard called, for the blonde youth was entirely focused on running Bain off the road before Bain did the same to him.

“Papa?” Legolas tore his eyes away from the TV, but jerked his gaze back to the TV before Bain could capitalize on his inattention. “Oh, no you don’t, Bain! I saw that!”

“No, you didn’t,” Bain chortled, speeding up his car to surge ahead of Legolas’s. “It’s clear sailing to the finish line now!”

Legolas madly worked his controller to send his car racing after Bain’s, resulting in a dead heat at the finish line. Bain snorted in disappointment, Legolas grinned because he’d pulled a tie out of the game, and Tilda shook her head.

“I like it better when you drift over the finish line,” she sighed, looking up from her art class workbook.

“I couldn’t let Bain skunk me, Kukla,” Legolas explained earnestly. “No time for flashy moves – I had to get to the finish line as fast as possible.” He set aside the controller and bounced off the sofa to dash into the kitchen. “Papa?”

“I am here,” Thran’s voice came from the mudroom. “Hello, synok!”

“Well, come on,” Bain exhaled as he beckoned to Tilda with mock reluctance. “Show me what you
got in your drift, girl.”

“Really?” Tilda’s eyes widened in delight. She put down her workbook and scrambled to take up Legolas’s controller. “Okay!”

“Make it a quick round, you two,” Bard asked as he got up. “It’s after nine, and Bain, you still have to get through the shower.”

“Okay, Da,” Bain said, letting a big grin vanquish his pretended disdain as he and Tilda started a new game. “Here, Til, I’ll call up your Angry Bumble car…”

He left the children’s voices behind as he came into the kitchen. Thran had his arm around Legolas’s shoulders as they bantered in Russian. Both of them were smiling, so Bard took that as a good sign for how Thran’s day went.

“Welcome home, căriad,” he lifted a hand. “I’ll turn up the soup a tad for you. Can I get you anything, Legs? Some mac and cheese?”

“Mmm, mac and cheese,” Legolas smiled in hungry anticipation. “That does sound good. I’ll get it, Bard. Thank you.”

Bard nudged the heat under the pot of chicken soup a hair, then got utensils and plates and bowls out for two and arranged them on the table. Thran disappeared for a few minutes to change into comfortable clothes, and Legolas popped a big bowl of macaroni and cheese into the microwave. As Thran came into the kitchen, Bard put his soup and rolls on the table, then offered him a kiss.

“You two enjoy your snacks, angel. I’ve got water on for tea and afters.”

Thran gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you, lyubov moya. I will say hello to the children, then I will have my soup with Legolas.”

“No hurry. I’ll be in the sitting room. Sing out if I can get you anything.”

Thran stuck his head into the sitting room long enough to greet Tilda and Bain, then retreated to the kitchen table to have his soup. Bard lingered only long enough to make sure Thran had all he needed for his late supper, then left him and Legolas to enjoy their time together. With the sound of soft Russian conversation in his ears, he returned to the sitting room to chuckle over Bain and Tilda’s game. Tilda worked her car gamely; even if the little girl was still learning how to finesse her performance, Bain was no less glad to have someone to indulge in a little video mayhem with him. Bard took up his sketchpad to record the moments – first Bain’s grin and Tilda’s frowning concentration, then a pause as Bain leaned over to show Tilda which button to push and her nod of appreciation, then Bain’s startled chagrin when Tilda gleefully slid under her brother’s car as they careened around a curve. At the end of the game – Tilda accounted for herself respectably – Bard sent Bain upstairs to bathe. Tilda returned to her art workbook, crawling up beside Bard to carefully work through the lesson on perspective.

“You’re going to finish your whole workbook ahead of your class and before the end of school, little doll,” Bard teased her gently. “And then where will you be?”

“I have my other drawing book, the one I got at the used book store,” she reminded Bard, unperturbed. “And after that, I’ll get another one.”

“That’s the best thing for you,” Bard said. “Just keep drawing, over and over and over, anything that strikes you.”
“That’s what you do, and you’ve gotten pretty good at it,” Tilda said with a straight face, though she dimpled when Bard slid her an amused smile.

“That’s thanks,” he returned, just as deadpan. “Maybe if I keep practicing, I’ll be a great artist someday.”

“Oh, Da,” Tilda exhaled gustily. “You already are.”

“Maybe so, little doll. But I still have to practice every day. Just like a musician, or Thran.”

“It takes a lot of work to be a dancer,” Tilda observed.

“It takes a lot of work to be anything,” Bard amended. “Everything worth doing takes practice.”

“That must be why I have to work so many math problems,” Tilda sighed again. “That’s what my math teacher thinks, anyway.”

“They all think that,” Legolas mumbled through a big bite of spice cake. The remains of his chunk were in his hand. “Every single one.”

“Maybe that’s how you know what you should do when you grow up,” Tilda looked up at Legolas. “It’s the subject with homework that you don’t mind doing.”

“Then I’ll never work in anything related to government,” Sigrid said as she came in from the hall. “I’ve never seen anything more boring in my life! Though maybe it’s not the subject, but the teacher. Mr. Saur gets weirder and weirder every day. I can’t concentrate on the subject because he’s just... odd.”

Thran appeared with two big mugs of tea. “Hello, Sigrid! The adventures of the weird Mr. Saur continue, then?”

“Ada! I didn’t know you’d gotten home yet!” Sigrid gave him a welcoming smile. “Oh, who cares about the weirdness of Mr. Saur? How was the ballet today?”

“It comes along.” Thran set one of the cups down in front of Bard and the other beside it so that he could return Sigrid’s hug. “The students are fun to be with, and the school has been very kind to let us practice in the gymnasium until the stage is ready for us. I hope that will be soon, because in a few days the gymnasium will turn into a fantasy for the junior dance.”

Sigrid blushed, and her smile was sweet. Bard sketched quickly; as his daughter appeared on the page, he thought this one would make a great study for a more detailed piece. Sigrid’s expression would make all parents celebrate the blossoming young woman it heralded even as they mourned the child that was no more.

“I don’t think the Imladris Academy stays still for a second,” Bard commented. “Ballets, dances, summer programs, and who knows what else as well as a full schedule for all the students.”

“It’s a busy place,” Legolas agreed. “Maybe your public school in the city was like that, Sigrid, but my boarding school wasn’t. It had lots going on, but it was... quieter, somehow.”

“My city school was busy, but it all seemed like drudgery,” Sigrid replied. “All concrete block, linoleum floors, battered lockers, just... very utilitarian. The Imladris Academy looks like Hogwarts Castle or something. It’s more exciting just to look at.”

“That’s true,” Legolas nodded. “My boarding school was very modern. It was sort of like going to school in an airport terminal. This school is much more beautiful.”
“My old school was grotty,” Tilda declared, wrinkling her nose. “It’s a lot easier to pretend that I go to Hogwarts here, even if I don’t get to learn Potions or Defense against the Dark Arts.”

“No, but you do have Herbology,” Bard pointed out.

“Yes! I love that,” Tilda nodded vigorously. “We planted marigolds and zinnias for the front garden. We’ll plant them outside in another week or so, I hope. Mine are already six inches tall.”

“I hope soon we will be ready to plant flowers in all our pots,” Thran offered as he sat beside Bard. “Once the painters are done, we will have Mr. Sam to help us.”

The conversation considered what sort of flowers to get until Bain returned from the shower, then he and Legolas drifted upstairs to play zombie apocalypse. Sigrid went after them to give her paper a final edit. When Tilda made no move to get up from the sofa, Bard patted her head.

“You, too, little doll,” Bard prompted. “It’s nine-thirty, so time for bed.”

“Oh, Da,” Tilda grumped. “I have to go to bed before all the other children!”

“Yes, you do,” Bard agreed, smiling. “You have more growing to do, and a lot of that happens when you’re asleep. You don’t want to stay the smallest forever, do you?”

“Maybe,” Tilda pouted. “I bet I’d still grow if I stayed up a little longer.”

“We won’t take that chance, at least not tonight,” Bard demurred. “It’s only Monday night.”

“Ada?” Tilda gave him a pleading look.

“Ah, ma petite, you must rest in order to grow. And perhaps to let the last of the ear medicine work? You should be through it soon, yes?”

“The last dose,” Bard confirmed, getting up from the sofa. “I’ll get it and a cup of water for you, Til. Then it’s up to bed.”

“Alllllll right,” Tilda groaned, pouting a little, but she obediently swallowed down the last half pill that Bard brought her. “I’m not very sleepy, though.”

“You will be, as soon as you see Mr. Bun,” Thran assured her. “Come, I will go with you and your Da, and help to tuck you in.”

They took the little girl upstairs, and soon had her ensconced in bed. Thran had been right; Tilda’s eyelids started to flutter as soon as she crawled into bed. Once Mr. Bun and his favorite cohort, Nelephant, had stationed themselves on either side of their charge, Thran and Bard bid Tilda goodnight. Their next stop was Legolas’s room, to call an end to the zombie apocalypse so that the boys ended the day with something quieter. Once the boys were settled in their beds with books, Bard and his husband decided to shower before it got any later.

The warm water felt good after a productive day, and Bard savored a good scrub. Thran chuckled to see him apply his washcloth with such vigor.

“Are you so dirty that you need to scrub so hard, lyubov moya?” Thran teased as he stood under the water to wet his hair.

“Not quite, but it’s good to be clean. I spent almost all day in the barn after you left this morning. I made green sand, and casting molds, and I got the samples of the aluminum spheres I ordered for the
“And you made soup and cake and supper,” Thran added, soaping his scalp with gentle fingers. “A busy man.”

“I managed to fill my time,” Bard grinned. “I didn’t do a single thing on the house today. That’s the first time since we moved here.”

Thran was covered in shampoo suds, so he merely gave Bard a thumbs up sign before he resumed his rinsing. Bard followed suit, slathering suds through his hair. It had gotten long again; he ought to visit Rowan again for her to do her magic before the weather warmed much more. He didn’t have enough hair to make a good tail, so it’d hang heavy and wet on his neck out in the un-air-conditioned barn. Better to shear a bit off, if only for comfort.

As soon as he rinsed his hair, Bard blinked the water out of his eyes to find Thran smiling at him. He grinned back, unabashed about his happiness.

“So how did the ballet go today? How does the stage look? Did Irmo behave himself around the students?”

Thran chuckled. “You are very happy, my saint. I am very happy for you. And before I tell you of the ballet, thank you for the time with Legolas. I enjoyed it very much, and so did he.”

“It’s something we should probably have thought about before this,” Bard mused. “Legolas is so used to being on his own, or having you to himself. There must be times that he gets tired of all of us rattling around.”

“He is very happy here, and with you and the other children. He has told me so many times. But yes, the occasional quiet moment is something he enjoys, such as Kukla does so often.”

“She likes being the baby sometimes, yes,” Bard agreed. “Sigrid’s happy on her own more than the others now, and Bain loves having another brother. I hope he’s not being too much of a nuisance to Legs.”

“No at all,” Thran assured him. “Legolas has spent too much time alone, and he and Bain seem to have come to a comfortable togetherness. I have often caught them together as they read – separate books, but in the same room. They seem to like that.”

“Tilda adores Legs, if you hadn’t noticed,” Bard grinned.

“She does. She has quite captured him, as she has me. Our Russkaya Kukla. We are very fortunate, Bard. Our children have come together far quicker than we had any right to expect.”

“We’re fortunate about a lot of things.” Bard traced a finger down Thran’s water-slicked chest. “Did you get enough to eat when you came home?”

“I did. I ate all of the soup, and the buns, and even sampled the cake. Legolas highly recommended it.”

Chuckling, Bard squeezed out his washcloth and hung it on the rack. “Did he leave any of it for tomorrow?”

“A small amount, for appearance’s sake,” Thran shook his head. “I think children do that not because they cannot finish whatever is in the pan. I think they do that because they do not want to wash the pan if they empty it.”
“You’ve caught on,” Bard nodded. “I’ll mix up something else in the morning.”

“You are good to us,” Thran tugged a lock of Bard’s hair. “I am ready to get out now, if you are.”

“I am,” Bard agreed, and they dried off and settled in bed. Without prompting, Thran described the scene at the Imladris Academy – the emerging stage, the Theatre Ninjas, and the eager faces of the other students. Yes, Irmo had behaved despite his uncomfortableness with the unfinished stage, and the unfamiliar goings and comings of so many people. But they had made good progress once most of the students had gone home for the day, when it was only the ballet company and a few light and sound people to help them. While Luka and Charisse had worked on their pas de deux, Thran had gently done his pointe exercises to strengthen his ankles and feet, so all had gone well. The tall dancer seemed content and not overly tired as he lay against the pillows beside Bard, so Bard was encouraged to give him an update on the painting.

“Darla thinks she and her two helpers will be done the outside of the house later this week,” he told Thran. “The porch will be next, then the carriage house. I hope I’ll be through casting Hal’s tree by that time, so they’ll do the barn last. Then they’ll be done until the new windows arrive. Once the windows are in, they’ll be back out here to paint the window trim.”

“What about all of the doors?”

“I’m okay with them getting all the exterior painting done first, then they can do the doors. It’s kind of six of one and a half dozen of the other – either they have to haul a dipping vat out here to do it on site, or they haul all the doors to their place and do it there, then haul them back. They haul either doors or paint stripper.”

“I would think that the nature of so many chemicals would mean that they would rather confine that to their shop, and just haul the doors,” Thran said after consideration.

“That’d be my guess, but because we’ve got the barn and the carriage house, they might prefer to set up something in one of those, because the stripper is contained, out of the weather, and can be locked up at night. I could work around that, especially if they can set up in the carriage house. We’ve got a right lot of doors, and it won’t hurt us to park the SUV and the truck outside for a few days.”

“Yes, Lance is not likely to bother us,” Thran agreed.

“Have you heard anything more about him?”

Thran shook his head. “I have not. Just that Sergeant Fundin said he would go to the wilderness program. Perhaps tomorrow morning, I should call him and ask.”

“It’d be good for peace of mind,” Bard agreed. “But back to the ballet...”

“I have revealed all, my saint.” Thran leaned over to turn off his nightside table lamp, and slid down flat. “I am quite ready to rest.”

Bard turned out his lamp and snuggled beside his husband. “If you can stay awake for another minute or two, I have one more thing you might want to think about.”

The slight increase in tension in the long, elegant body beside him revealed Thran’s curiosity. “Oh? What is this one more thing, lyubov moya?”

Bard’s grin was anticipatory. “It has to do with the week’s weather forecast.”

Light fingers traced over Bard’s chest. “Does it? And what is this forecast?”
“It’s supposed to rain Wednesday morning.”

“It is? What does that have to do – ah, I see, my saint. When it rains, the painters cannot paint.”

“That’s right.”

“So we will be here alone Wednesday morning.”

“That’s also right.”

A light, breathy laugh. “If it rains hard enough, the sky will be dark, and the lamps in the solarium will look beautiful when they are lit.”

“They will.”

“So at last we can have our game.”

“If you’re amenable, so am I. If the ballet needs more of your attention, we can put it off.”

“Even if it does, it will have to wait until a mysterious dancer thanks the one who has made such a beautiful refuge.”

Bard hummed in anticipation. “The artist will be greatly honored.”

“So will the dancer.”

“Do you need anything before the moment?”

“I am prepared. I have music, I have my costume, I have what comes next.”

Bard nuzzled his nose into Thran’s hair. “You’re cruel, cariad. How am I supposed to wait until Wednesday after hearing a line like that?”

“Do you have a costume?”

“I planned to borrow your haori, if that fits with your costume.”

“Tcha, that will leave the rest of you in jeans. Take my kimono. Not the crane one – the blue one suits you better.”

“You have a blue one?”

“It is very soft cotton. You have seen it.”

“I don’t remember it. It’s in the closet?”

Thran tsked. “Tcha, I forgot that you have not seen it. How could you, when it is folded in a drawer in my dresser? I will get it for you now.”

“That’s all right, angel, you don’t have to get up.”

“I want to. It is perfect for you, and I want you to see it. Cover your eyes while I turn on the lamp.”

Bard did so. By the time his eyes had adjusted enough for him to blink, Thran was out of bed and stooping by his dresser. He pulled out a compactly folded packet of fabric and brought it to bed. He slipped under the sheets and handed Bard the packet, who sat up to look at it. Thran was right – the fabric was soft, and intricately dyed into beautiful geometric patterns of indigo blue.
“You’re right, this is perfect.” Bard sat up to shake out the folds. The bottom edge of the kimono was carefully dyed to reveal a stunning pattern of small tessellations that contrasted nicely with the softer curves dyed across the body and shoulders of the garment. “Too fine for a artist and gardener.”

“He is a well known and revered artist and gardener, and merits a beautiful kimono,” Thran shrugged with a smile, as Bard got up to give the kimono a shake, then ducked into the closet to hang it up. “I am pleased that you like it.”

“What’s the chance that the lowly artist will get a preview of the dancer’s costume?”

“No chance at all,” Thran gave Bard a smug grin. “How can I remain mysterious if I reveal myself too early?”

“Bastard.”

“Entirely.”

“Unrepentant, too,” Bard teased, as Thran turned off the light and they resumed their tangle of arms and legs.

“Also entirely,” Thran sighed without apology. “It is your fault. You reward me so well that I cannot stop.”

“Then hope for rain on Wednesday, pretty dancer, and I’ll reward you again.”

Thran’s chuckle was silent, but Bard felt it through his chest. “Anticipation abounds.”

A fair amount of anticipation coiled in Bard’s chest, too.

* * *

Tuesday morning saw all the children off to school. Thran had gotten a full night’s sleep, so he’d gotten up with Bard to help with the children’s morning routine. He and his husband were halfway back home when Bard’s mobile chimed. It was Sam, already at his garden center despite the early hour. Bard put the call on speaker so that Thran could hear it, too.

“I’m sorry for the early call, Bard, but I forgot to call you and Thran last night. I got a new shipment of tropicals in yesterday, and there are some nice hibiscus in the lot that would go with the one you already have, as well as a gardenia that smells like a dream when it blooms. Would you like me to set anything aside for you to look at?”

“We could go look now,” Thran said quietly.

Bard gave a quick nod of assent. “Are you open yet? Than and I just got the children off to school, so we could take a run by if you are.”

“Course I’m open!” Sam laughed. “It’s prime time spring, so come on over.”

“We’ll be there shortly, Sam. Thanks for thinking about us.”

“A morning adventure,” Thran grinned at Bard as his husband stuck his mobile back in his pocket. “I have seen the garden center only once, and that was in the winter. It was a wonderful place then, and
will be even more so now that it is full of spring flowers.”

“Wait until you see how right you are. We’ll want two of everything,” Bard warned.

They changed into jeans and tees and climbed into Bard’s truck for the ride to the garden center. Thran had guessed right that it would be full of spring flowers. A beautiful cascade of blooming hyacinths and daffodils in planters to either side of the entrance welcomed visitors in style. Inside, a lush display of flowers surrounded a small fountain near the checkout registers. Beyond the registers were shelves full of colorful bags of gardening supplies, from specialty plant fertilizers to soil amendments and the usual tools to deter pests, whether animals, insects, or weeds. Bins full of tiny onion bulbs for spring planting beckoned. Hoses, tools, pots of all descriptions, lawn decorations, wind chimes, pennants, birdhouses, animal feeders – Thran didn’t know where to look first.

Thran followed Bard to the back to the greenhouse. So many flats of bright flowering annuals in every color! So many rows of perennial plants and ornamental grasses! It was a mouthwatering display. He and Bard walked up and down the rows to admire the full-color pictures above each group of plants that showed what they would look like in full bloom. They gradually made their way back to the tropical section, where Sam was busily transferring potted shrubs off a wooden pallet to fill in the empty spots of the display. He greeted them with a happy smile and a wave. Here was a man in his element – just as Bard had smiled last night when he’d talked about his work in the barn, so Sam looked equally delighted to be schlepping large plants around the floor of his greenhouse.

“I know you got a yellow hibiscus last time you were here, Bard,” Sam said, pointing to a group of plants still waiting on their pallet. “I thought one of those bright fuchsia ones would look wonderful with the yellow one, and really pop against the green walls of your solarium.”

They picked out a bushy fuchsia hibiscus.

Sam led them back to a display of the gardenias he’d told them about. “Normally, I wouldn’t recommend these, because they’re particular about light and humidity. Have you got a humidifier on your furnace?”

Thran had no idea what such a thing was, but Bard nodded.

“Good. You’ve got your fountain basin, too, which should do the trick. And your solarium gets a lot of indirect bright light, which a gardenia wants – it doesn’t like direct sun. It likes a good misting more than not, too. If you can give it all of that, you’ll be well rewarded. It smells like paradise.”

“Paradise is what we have in plenty,” Thran winked at Bard. “So a plant that smells like the same will be welcome, yes?”

“No argument here,” Bard agreed. “I’d like one more fern, too, Sam, to sit on the back of the fountain basin and hide the tubing. Something that likes a splash of water.”

“Got lots of those,” Sam led them off to the fern table. “These foxtail ferns aren’t strictly ferns, but they look like them, and they’re a fun plant to look at, and not picky at all if you’ve got the humidity for them. If you want to stick to real ferns, there’s maidenhair, asparagus – be careful of the thorns on those – Boston, all sorts.”

They mulled the choices, but eventually settled on a foxtail fern. Once Sam helped them carry their purchases to the truck and bade them a warm farewell, they headed home.

“What is a humidifier, Bard?” Thran asked as they got underway.

“That’s a thing that attaches to the furnace to make sure enough moisture goes into the air inside the
“Most houses are way too dry in the winter, and it messes with more than the plants in the house. It dries out your furniture, for one. But worse, it plays havoc with your skin, your nose, your lungs, your hair, everything. We’re all healthier and happier with a little more moisture in the air.”

“You are an amazement,” Thran shook his head. “So many ways you look out for us.”

Bard flushed slightly pink, but he gave Thran an appreciative smile. “That’s my job, angel. That’s all.”

“Tcha – it is not merely a job. It is a saint’s act of love.”

Bard chuckled. “You’re funny. You get so excited about things like thermostats and humidifiers and garage door openers.”

“And welding,” Thran said with enthusiasm. “All the mechanical things I knew nothing about until I met you. No, do not say I am funny by myself. I am just as funny as you when you profess amazement at the dance, or the technical things that go into the effort to make Immortal. We are both properly appreciative of things we have never considered before. It is good to have an open mind that can marvel at new things.”

Grinning, Bard conceded with a shrug. “You’re right, angel. Every artist needs an open mind to see new things.”

“You see, I am right,” Thran nodded. “We serve our muses well when we marvel at new things.”

They turned into the driveway, waving to Darla and her assistants as they carted their new plants into the solarium. Bard put the gardenia to one side of the fountain to take advantage of the nearby humidity, then arranged the foxtail fern on the board he’d laid across the back of the fountain basin. He fluffed it to disguise the clear plastic tubing that stretched from the basin up to the lion’s head spout.

“We need another couple of chairs in here,” Bard said, looking around. “Not enough places to sit down yet.”

Thran gave him a sly look as he arranged the hibiscus in front of the tall palms. “We will look for some on the weekend, perhaps. But do not worry, lyubov moya. Our fainting couch will be all we need tomorrow morning.”

Bard swallowed, exhaled, and eyed Thran up and down. When he ran his tongue slowly over his lips, Thran sly look widened into a smile, drawing Bard’s chuckle. “You are such a bastard.”

“You reward me deliciously when I am. I hope you do so tomorrow.”

Bard’s chuckle was half growl. “Now you’re a royal bastard.”

Thran put a hand to his heart and offered a bow to go with his self-possessed smile. “Mmm. That bodes well for tomorrow.”

Bard’s growl deepened. “I think I’d better disappear into the kitchen. Otherwise, the painters are going to get an eyeful of your pretty ass and a lesson on what to do with it.”

Thran laughed hard enough that Bard stuck his tongue out at him and headed for the kitchen. Thran followed him into the pantry, eased Bard’s back against his chest, and breathed softly against Bard’s neck until Bard’s skin flexed into gooseflesh.
“Stop it, you fucker.” Bard’s voice trembled, and his body leaned into Thran’s without resistance. “Or you won’t have a thing to tease tomorrow morning.”

“I am tempted,” Thran nosed Bard’s ear, then pressed a soft, nipping kiss at the edge of Bard’s jaw where it joined his neck. “Does the pantry count as a room that we can christen?”

Bard grinned. “Do you remember what happened to the last sous chef I interviewed in my kitchen?”


“Then decide. Do you want a demanding chef to trash his sous chef in the pantry now, or can you control yourself long enough to let an artist worship a beautiful dancer in the solarium tomorrow?”

“Both sound delectable,” Thran whispered, letting one more kiss trail off Bard’s hair. He stroked his fingers from Bard’s shoulders down his arms, then backed away. “But... I admit that to christen the solarium is a delight I have anticipated for a very long time.”

Bard gave him a look over his shoulder, then pulled the flour bin of the shelf and handed it to Thran. “So have I. So don’t make me take the edge off. I want tomorrow to be worth all the anticipation.”

All the anticipation... Thran’s anticipation preoccupied him the rest of the morning as he helped Bard bake. After a good lunch, he left for the Imladris Academy with the mouthwatering aroma of Bard’s orange cookies to follow him out to the carriage house, and his husband’s kiss and final wave to send him on his way. He headed into the school, making sure he had his identity badge around his neck, not that he needed it for everyone to know he had reason to be in the halls. Many of the children and teachers greeted him with a smile and a cheerful, “Hi, Mr. Thran!” as he passed by. He didn’t mind; Mr. Oropherson was hard for a lot of the youngest children to say, so he was content with his new moniker. He went into the gymnasium where Mr. Faramir had several children already setting up the portable barres for the dancers who would soon arrive. He chatted briefly with the children, then with Mr. Faramir about Legolas’s archery, then set to his barre early. He would have to repeat the first part when the other dancers appeared, but that would be no burden. For the moment, he could retreat into the familiar sequence that his body knew so well. That was a perfect cover to let his thoughts savor tomorrow’s game all over again.

Very quickly, he had to let his anticipation fade once more into the back of his thoughts, as the rest of the company arrived and set to business. A young boy sat at the piano today, learning how to tailor his music to what the ballet master wanted. Around the edge of the gymnasium, several students, mostly girls, lingered to watch the dancers work. Many murmured amongst themselves, pointing to one or another of the dancers, or trying an experimental step themselves. Did the Imladris Academy offer dance classes? He would ask his children; perhaps the students were here to study technique. With that in mind, Thran gave a critical eye over his fellow dancers. Yes, most of the ballet dancers were much sharper now than they had been when he’d first joined UVB. Even the dancers who specialized in other traditions had taken the barre warmup to heart, and were carefully preparing for the upcoming rehearsal. Good; his example of hard work had rubbed off. It must, if UVB expected to hold its own with more established companies once Immortal debuted.

Warmup completed, Thran and the other dancers got the portable barres stowed in the equipment room so that the gymnasium was ready for the children’s afternoon sport. Faramir appreciated the gesture, and smiled his thanks while Ori did his stint with the dry mop. Yes, the company could have left their cleanup to the children, but it was better for the dancers to offer a helpful and friendly gesture where they could, so the school didn’t regret its decision to host them.

On to the stage. The troll market had begun to take shape; in the back at the juncture of the two walls were the beginning components of Death’s throne. To either side of the revolving platform were the
two halves of the gate that blocked mortal entry to the Underworld. Right now, they didn’t look like much, merely utilitarian frames of the same white PVC tubing Thran had seen at the homeowners’ meccas in the plumbing sections. Thran smothered a grin when he thought about what Bard would say about the lowly material being put to such unorthodox use, and that brought a resurgence of his eagerness for tomorrow’s game.

He had to take himself strongly to task before his cock soon made itself visibly embarrassing. What did Bard tell him to think about? Baseball? Thran snorted. He had no more idea about baseball than he did about plumbing. He would just have to think about the thermostat, or humidifiers – how exactly did one attach to the furnace? He would have to get Bard to show him, after which he would reward his knowledgeable husband in the most outrageous of ways –

*Sukin syn!* Now he had to start all over again to find a distraction...

Thankfully, Ori appeared to talk to him about the three companies he’d called about rigging the dancers for flying across the stage. Thran’s preoccupation with Bard faded as the young man explained what he’d learned about each of the three, and why he thought one was a better choice than the other two. The firm Ori preferred was used to theatrical performances, as well as working with dancers, and they had a solid reputation for safety. Once again, Thran was gratified at how much work Ori had put into his consideration, and told him so. Ori smiled in relief and confessed that he’d taken the liberty to set up an appointment with the firm on Friday morning for Thran, Luka, and Charisse to have their first flying lesson, if that was enough notice for the three dancers.

Thran agreed for himself at once. When Ori trotted off to talk to Luka and Charisse, Irmo and Abebe pulled Thran into rehearsal.

With all the bustle and stir, it took a few minutes before Thran realized that on Friday, he would have his first experience to soar above the stage powered by more than his muscles.

He looked up at the high ceiling of the auditorium again. It still looked very far away, but despite that, he smiled.

An artist served the muse when he kept an open mind. So he would not worry – yet. After all, it wasn’t as if he were Icarus.
Chapter 132

Chapter Summary

An angel deals with the rising demands of his ballet, and a saint balances sculpture, children, and a house. Soon, art will claim both above all else.

First, however, one more room in a rejuvenated house awaits its welcome back to beauty.

Chapter Notes

Nice reader IMK took pity on my terrible attempts at Russian and offered me more accurate translations, so I have updated the story accordingly (yes, all 132 chapters, ugh!). Thank you, my dear ❤️!

As Tuesday progressed, Thran played two roles. The first one was obvious – he was UVB’s premier principal dancer who would dance the lead role in *Immortal*. That was an important and weighty position, so he did his barre, he worked the hours of rehearsal, he did his pointe practice, he worked more rehearsal, he did another barre to cool down, all with the same intensity as he had always embodied since his earliest days in ballet school. The intense, laser focus on position, technique, stage presence, keeping the body warm and pliable no matter how tired he was... nothing new intruded on this part of his day.

But now he had another role to play – he was the artistic head of the effort to stage *Immortal*. He could not pay attention only to his form, his role, his body – he had to assess and weigh the worth of every dancer around him. Though he was aware of the cold-blooded and ruthless nature of that role, this was the first time he had fully felt the truth of it for himself. All of a sudden, things that had nagged at the edge of his perception since the company had taken the stage pushed to the forefront of his awareness, where they sharpened into lethal focus. The company had seemed so much sharper when they’d done their barre in the gymnasium. What had happened? Had the dancers worked so well there because they’d had so many onlookers, which was not the case now? Was it merely their need to get used to the stage? Whatever the reason, now the company looked ragged and lackluster. How many times did that ballerina’s not-quite-one-hundred-and-eighty-degree split beg for him to correct it? How many times did that male dancer’s pirouette go just past one complete rotation without a word from him?

Chagrin flooded through him.

UVB’s future reputation depended on more than how Thran, Charisse, and Luka performed. He did not want to read “brilliant performers, but weak chorus” in the reviews the day after *Immortal’s* premiere. At the first break, then, he headed right for Abebe.

“Yes, Thran?” the ballet master looked a question at him.

“A moment, please,” Thran murmured lowly, and they stepped off the stage to confer in the audience
seats out of earshot.

“I see too much inattention.” Thran’s voice was soft, but implacable. “A lack of precision, of crispness, in the movements. We will face sharp scrutiny with this ballet, with this company, and we cannot afford such casual execution.”

Abebe swallowed. “They’re a little ragged yesterday and today, Thran, I agree with you. It’s just the coming and the going to get the stage done—”

“If we cannot be precise in the middle of this, then we will not be precise in the chaos that always comes with a premiere. The construction must be of no consequence. Nothing must be of any consequence. I want everyone to perform each move as if it is the very last one they will ever do, as if they expect to be judged before the thrones of all the gods on that last move. Otherwise, we have no chance to make the impression we want. Look and tell me I am wrong—should we settle for what I see?”

For a moment, they stood watching the stage.

“There,” Thran murmured, when the less than straight split appeared. When the over-rotated pirouette appeared, he murmured again. “And there. I have seen other instances. It is not acceptable, even in rehearsal.”

Abebe visibly straightened. “No, it’s not. It stops now.”

Thran returned to the stage without further comment, but Abebe pulled Irmo aside for a quick consultation. Ori edged beside him as he stood at the side of the stage.

“What’s going on, Thran?” the young man whispered.

“Perhaps the change in venue to a school has made some of our company think they go back to school themselves,” Thran whispered back. “They do not dance like professionals. That will not continue.”

Ori pulled his ear thoughtfully. “Ah. Anything I can do?”

Thran shook his head. “If Abebe does his job, no.”

Ori nodded in understanding. “If it helps to set your mind at ease about something, Círdan has done his job and then some. He says the set construction will be done in the next two days. He’ll work on the set dressing right after, but you’ll have the stage itself, so we can work on the film projections, set rotations, and so forth.”

“Please pass him my sincere thanks, Ori. He has done a masterful job with so many students. All goes well with Lettie?”

Ori nodded. “She’s plugging away hard at the donor’s list to see if we can scrape up a bit more cash.”

Thran flicked Ori a look, but kept the concern from his face. “How goes the funds, then?”

“We’re struggling, no doubt,” Ori exhaled. “But we’re hanging together so far.”

Thran closed his eyes. A third role, that of creative financier, wasn’t one he wanted. “We can pay all the urgent bills?”
Ori nodded. “All but the one to the company who’ll rig you and your two cohorts for flying.”

“How much?”

Ori whispered an amount, enough to make Thran wince inside. “I will transfer money to our account today. That is not one I want overdue.”

“Understandable,” Ori offered him a pained smile. “Oh, looks like Abebe and Irmo are back to business, so I’ll talk to you later.”

“Thank you, Ori,” Thran wished the young man. At the center of the stage, Irmo called for a repeat of the scene the company had just rehearsed, straight through, so Thran took his place with the rest. However, the company got only part of the way through it before Abebe waved everyone to a stop to bestow some frank language on the dancers about precision and follow-through and standards. He heard his own words about dancing as if each move was the last one a dancer would perform, but did not smile. He might have prompted the rebukes, but when he danced, he was subject to them as every other dancer was.

Only eight weeks remained before the cost of rigging and imprecise dancers would be immaterial. So much work remained to be done!

Too much.

Perhaps he should tell the dancers to do their warmup barres at home before they came to the school, so that they could begin rehearsals that much sooner. They could start this tomorrow morning –

He winced. Tomorrow morning, he was to meet his husband in the solarium.

He should ask Bard if they could defer their liaison –

No. He could not, would not, disappoint Bard so badly.

Círdan said that the stage construction, if not stage dressing, would be done in two days. When that happened, the dancers could arrive earlier than noon to do their warmups, which meant that they could resume rehearsal earlier. So on Thursday or Friday, he would see that they did.

Not Wednesday.

On Wednesday, he would savor the solarium with Bard.

He sighed. Despite all the practical reasons to forgo them, he wanted those two hours with Bard. After all the care and love Bard had lavished on the solarium, not to mention the rest of the house, were two hours so much to give his husband?

A cynical voice in the back of Thran’s head whispered that he’d be better off to spend those two hours with Bard now rather than later, before he was too tired to do anything but dance, and his feet were so battered that Bard noticed.

He winced again. More hiding, more sins of omission.

This was why so few dancers sustained a life with those who were not also dancers. Outsiders didn’t understand the toll, the sacrifices, the single-mindedness...

Bard had labored in a grotty city apartment, enduring misery and want to care for his children. Then he’d labored to make a family and a home for Clan Ffyrnig before he’d returned to his art. Bard
wasn’t a dancer, but he’d paid tolls, made sacrifices, and focused single-mindedly, just as deeply as any dancer.

Tomorrow morning, Thran would be the mysterious dancer that Bard had asked for, because they both deserved the indulgence.

This would be his last indulgence before *Immortal* premiered. After he and Bard had savored their game to its fullest, he would talk to his husband, preparing him for what was to come.

He let none of this show on his face when he took his place at the center of the stage.

* * *

As soon as Thran left for the school, Bard took his clay model of Hal’s tree out to the barn. It was time to make his green sand molds, commonly called flasks, because they held the molten metal.

On went the barn lights, and out came the bucket of green sand. Yes, it was nicely ready, neither too damp nor too wet. Yes, his wooden frames were clean and ready to hold the sand for molding, but he couldn’t mold yet. First, he had to carefully dissect the clay mold into the pieces he’d decided to cast, which required precision, delicacy, and patience. There was a reason why he didn’t have a clock in the barn – the passage of time didn’t matter, but the care he took did. So he had no idea how long it took to divide the model. When he was satisfied with that, he made sure he had the right-sized frames for each piece. Only then could he begin to make the flasks for each piece.

Making a flask wasn’t hard in theory; all he had to do was pack sand into the frames, sprinkle talc over the model of the piece to be cast into the sand, press half of it into the sand, sprinkle more talc, then pack in the other half of the sand, remove the model, and add gates, which were holes into which he’d pour the molten metal. In practice, this took just as much precision, delicacy, and patience as dissecting the model did, as well as a steady hand. He took his time so he’d have as little mending and patching to do when the castings came out of the molds.

Gods, how amazing was this? It didn’t seem like it had been years since he’d done this, so surely did his hands move. He had six pieces to cast – roots, trunk, and four sections of the tree canopy. The delicacy of the branches had driven his decision to cast it in four sections, just to make sure the molten bronze flowed completely into so many small channels.

Now for the casting. He set his furnace outside where it would have plenty of ventilation, set his crucible in place, and lit it –

“Hi, Da! Hi, Bard! Ooh, you’re lighting the furnace! Are you going to cast the little tree now?”

Gods, how had it gotten to be so late? He could have sworn he had at least a couple more hours before the children came home. Were they home early? No, there was no reason all four of them would be home early, not when they weren’t sick, so it really must be four-thirty...

He turned off the gas to his furnace before anything got very hot. He’d have to leave casting until tomorrow.

“Just making sure the furnace is ready to go, that’s all,” he replied, as the children all gathered a respectable distance away. “If it doesn’t rain tomorrow, I’ll cast then.”
“When will you do Rahmiel, Da?” Tilda asked breathlessly.

“Not for a bit, little doll,” Bard shook his head. “I’ve got paying work now, so that comes first. But it won’t be long before I get to him.”

“How does it work?” Legolas asked. “You heat the metal, and then what happens?”

“A lot happens before I pour the metal,” he explained, and showed Legolas his six flasks lined up on the workbench. He described how he’d made them, and how he’d pour the molten metal into them, assemble them, and finish them. He was gratified at how interested Legolas was in the whole process.

“So tomorrow you’ll cast all the tree parts?” Legolas asked.

“If the rain holds off, yes.” Bard looked up at the overcast sky. “It’s supposed to rain tonight and tomorrow morning, so it may be the afternoon before I can do it.”

“What difference does the rain make?”

“I like to heat the metal outside, where it’s well ventilated,” Bard explained. “The furnace burns propane, and gets the crucible – that’s the vessel that the metal goes in to melt – very hot, so when I can do it outside, I’d rather.”

“How hot?” Tilda asked.

“That depends on the metal, but upwards of a couple thousand degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Wow!” Legolas blinked in surprise. “And then you weld all the pieces together, and put the finish on it, and you’re done.”

“The metal part, yes,” Bard grinned as he and the children trooped inside. “This one’s a little different in that I have to fasten the metal to a rock, and then put the paper leaf on the branch. But right now, I’ve got something else to ponder - what to make for supper. I didn’t prep anything.”

“I’ve got something to ponder, too,” Sigrid said, flushing slightly pink. “I found out today at school that I’m supposed to get Finn a flower for the dance.”

“A flower?” Bain and Legolas chorused, both of them giggling. “What for?”

“Stop it,” Sigrid snapped, brushing the loose hair from around her face with a flustered sweep. “And I don’t know what for, just that I’m supposed to, and I don’t know what to do.”

“A boutonniere?” Bard guessed. “It’s a small flower that you pin on the lapel of his jacket. He brings you a corsage, too.”

“Oh, is that what it is?” Sigrid’s face cleared. “It makes sense now. I just didn’t understand the word. I thought it was some French thing, and I’d misheard.”

“The word is from French, yes,” Legolas said, still trying to smother his grin.

“So where do I get a boutonniere?” Sigrid asked Bard, pointedly not looking at her brothers.

“The florist shop in town, I’d guess,” Bard replied. “Did you tell Finn what color your dress is? And do you know what color suit he’s wearing?”

Sigrid nodded. “He knows it’s blue and green. He said his suit is dark blue.”
“Maybe a white boutonniere, then. The dance is next Friday, right?”

Sigrid snorted. “Saturday, Da. Really – you can’t expect most of the girls to go to school all day and then get ready for a dance in a mere two hours, do you? They need all day!”

“Good point.”

“They have to do hair, nails, make up…”

“Oh, so should we mark the bathroom off limits to everyone but you next Saturday, sweetness?”

She snorted again. “You know better, Da. I’ll be one of the few ready in two hours.”

Bard laughed. “No matter what day it is, you could call the florist before it closes today and order Finn’s boutonniere.”

“Oh, so should we mark the bathroom off limits to everyone but you next Saturday, sweetness?”

She snorted again. “You know better, Da. I’ll be one of the few ready in two hours.”

Bard laughed. “No matter what day it is, you could call the florist before it closes today and order Finn’s boutonniere.”

“Okay, I’ll do that right now.” Sigrid grabbed her backpack and pulled out her laptop. “First I’ll find the florist shop…”

Sigrid dashed into the sitting room to sort out Finn’s boutonniere. Tilda gazed after her thoughtfully for a long moment, drawing Bard to fluff her hair.

“What’re you thinking about, little doll?”

“Why does Sigrid get all fumbly and silly when anyone brings up Finn?”

Bain and Legolas dissolved into gales of laughter at Tilda’s innocent question. They laughed harder when Sigrid’s indignant denial echoed from the sitting room.

“Because she likes him in a special way,” Bard explained. “Kind of like Bain how turns red when anyone mentions Angelica Crofton.”

Bain’s laughter came to an abrupt end, and he blushed furiously when Legolas laughed. “Da! I do not! Stop it, Legs, or I’ll bring up a certain brown-haired girl on your archery team –”

“You’d better not!” Legolas snorted, becoming the third indignant, red-faced child. “Just because I said Tara’s best girlfriend was a good archer –”

“I knew it! You’re sweet on Gloriana!” Bain teased. “I knew it! I am not!” Legolas blustered in the face of Bain’s laughter, and they both ran off upstairs to continue their teasing.

Tilda watched all of this with dubious eyes. “Oh,” she ventured, then glanced at Bard. “I get it now. It’s all that liking and loving stuff.”

“That’s what it is,” Bard agreed, giving her a comfortable pat on the back. “No big deal.”

Tilda exhaled. “It’s kind of dumb.”

“Sometimes it is,” Bard smiled. “But it’s not to the people who feel that way. You’ll see one day.”

Tilda turned a solemn expression on Bard. “Promise you won’t laugh at me then, please?”

Bard held up a hand. “Scout’s honor.”
“Thank you,” she smiled “Oh, I know - we can have spaghetti for supper.”

“We can,” Bard nodded, smothering a smile at the unintended humor of children and their love lives. In eight years, when Tilda went away to college, he’d miss such mayhem, so today he savored it for the sweetness it was. “Do you want to choose what shape, little doll?”

* * *

Thran didn’t leave for home until nearly ten. A slow, steady drizzle was falling when he came out of the school to go home, so he walked swiftly to his SUV. Once he pulled out of the school parking lot, he was cautious on the glistening roads; at least the late hour meant no traffic, and he got home without incident in fifteen minutes. He put his SUV into the carriage house, dashed to the mudroom door, and went inside, shaking raindrops off his hoodie before he hung it up. What reception awaited him? He grimaced, imagining worry or irritation. How relieved he was when Bard came in from the sitting room to kiss him in welcome! There was no tension or resentment on Bard’s face or in his bearing as he rubbed Thran’s back, stroked his braid, only pleasure in seeing him again. At least that was one worry he could relax. All was well at home.

“You got caught in the rain, I see,” Bard wiped a trickle of rain off his cheek.

“It does not fall very hard, but it is steady, as if it might be happy to rain all night.”

“Tilda’s already asleep, but Sigrid and the boys are still awake.” Bard gave him a subtle nudge towards the stairs. “Go say hello while I get your supper. I’ve got leftover spaghetti and salad from supper, or chicken, or chicken soup, if any of those suit you, or the house short order cook can wrangle almost anything else you’d like instead.”

“The soup would be wonderful, lyubov moya,” Thran gave him a gratified smile. “And tea? Something soothing?”

“We have chamomile, perfect for before bed.”

“That sounds good. I will see the children, and then change. Would you mind if I shower first?”

“Course not. I washed after the children earlier, so have at.”

“Thank you, my saint. I will be down shortly.”

“Righto,” Bard agreed.

Thran went upstairs, spoke to Sigrid and Bain who greeted him with welcoming smiles, then spent a few minutes with Legolas. After assuring himself that his son was well and happy, he bid Legolas good night, stripped his dancewear, and ducked into the shower cabinet for a warm, soothing shower. It felt good to let weariness and worry flow away with the soapsuds. He dried his hair, and dressed in comfortable leggings and tee. When he padded downstairs, Bard had soup and tea ready for him. Thran filled his bowl and sat down; Bard followed behind with his own cup of tea to keep him company.

“Go on and eat,” Bard urged Thran when he looked longingly at his soup bowl. “I’ll provide silent moral support.”
Thran’s lips curved into a grateful smile as he picked up his spoon. “Would you tell me about your day while I eat? That would be good company.”

“It’s not that exciting except to another metal sculptor, but it was a good day. I have everything set to cast Hal’s tree, rain depending. The furnace gets very hot, so I do that outside when I have the chance...”

Bard talked softly about his progress, but despite his low voice, his excitement and happiness was clear. It calmed Thran to hear about his husband’s work, which didn’t seem like work to Bard at all. When his husband described Sigrid’s dilemma about a boutonniere and the resulting conversation with the boys and Tilda, Thran chuckled.

“That is funny. Our lioness is so self-assured most of the time. To hear of her so flustered... she is not always as old as she seems.”

“I’ll see how old she seems next Saturday. Finn, too, for that matter. I have a feeling that he’ll look even more fumbly and flustered than she will.”

“I would like to see that,” Thran admitted with a wistful smile. He met Bard’s eyes. “But... I cannot promise to be there. So pay attention very hard, so that you can tell me everything afterwards.”

Bard’s hand snaked across the table to stroke Thran’s. “You know, it’s okay if we want to postpone our game in the solarium tomorrow. It really is.”

The lump in Thran’s throat made it nearly impossible for him to swallow his mouthful of soup. How did Bard know what he’d wrestled with all day? “I don’t want to.”

“I know you don’t. But if you have to, I understand. You’re in the final push to get Immortal off the ground. I know the next eight weeks will be a grind. If you need to sleep tomorrow, or go to the studio or the school, go.”

Thran sighed. “I think you are a mind reader, lyubov moya.”

“How’s that?”

“Because I thought about just this thing this afternoon. About how much of a grind, as you call it, it will be. You cannot imagine.”

“Maybe not, but I have a little better idea today than I did yesterday.”

Thran gave Bard his full attention. “Do you? How did this happen?”

“Are you done your soup, or would you like some more?”

“I am finished.”

“Then let’s go into the sitting room where we can relax.”

Thran and Bard cleaned up the remains of Thran’s late supper, then settled side by side on one of the sitting room sofas. Bard’s arm went around Thran’s shoulders, drawing him close, and his fingers stroked through Thran’s hair.

“I borrowed Sigrid’s laptop tonight while she was in the shower,” Bard began without preamble. “I found this video about what a dancer’s day is like during rehearsal for a show. It was about a ballerina, but I figured the same thing would be true for you. She started at ten in the morning with
barre, then went to rehearsals – two, in fact, for different ballets – then physiotherapy, then more classes, then a three-hour performance. She got home at midnight, and then talked about how hungry she was, but she couldn’t afford to eat too much because she’d gain weight. I saw several, even one about your Vaganova School and Mariinsky Company, and they all said more or less the same thing. So yes, I know a little more about what you have to do over the next eight weeks. It won’t be easy. So... the solarium will be here for the next fifty years, and so will we. It’ll be ready whenever we both are. Tomorrow morning, do what you need to do.”

The lump was back in Thran’s throat. “The only downside to a marriage between a dancer and a nondancer is that now I worry about the time the dance takes. I cannot expect you to understand the unending string of days where I work fourteen and more hours. I do not want us to come to another crisis as we did not so long ago. I should have explained this before we became so entwined.”

Bard snickered. “What, three minutes after we met? Because we both fell hard about four minutes after we met.”

Thran grinned. “True. We did not have a lot of time before we were a fait accompli.”

“School ends in about three weeks. There’s a week off before the children’s camps start. The camps start at nine, not seven-thirty, so everyone’s schedule will shift later, and that’ll help. So we’ll be okay. You focus on Immortal, and I’ve got the rest.”

Thran let out a long, slow breath. “You are a saint. I know this. So I will not worry about you and the children... tcha, what do I say? I will try not to worry about you and the children. In return, you must not worry about me. Perhaps I will have only part of Sundays off, or perhaps not even that. I will be tired, hungry, and good for very little. But I will always answer your texts when I get them, and I will always come home to you, and I will not be so oblivious as I was before.”

Bard nodded. “I won’t jump to any more contusions.”

Thran couldn’t resist an impish grin. “I might, though.”

Bard angled his body to give him a surprised look. “You what?”

“Jump to the contusion – literally, not figuratively. Friday, I have my first flying lesson. So that Death will swoop onto the stage from on high.”

“Really? I have to say that that looks like fun.”

“I hope it is. Luka, Charisse, and I will all go. I look forward to it.”

“Wait until the lads find out. They’ll be envious. Hell, I am.”

Thran chuckled. “I will tell you all about it when I come home Friday. But first, we must get through Wednesday and Thursday.”

“We’ll make it,” Bard asserted in a firm voice. “We’ll get through the next eight weeks, too.”

“We will. But before the grind begins...”

Bard slid a look at Thran, who met it with a small smile.

“If it rains tomorrow morning, the solarium beckons our attendance. As soon as the children are off to school.”
Bard rubbed Thran’s shoulder slowly. “The gardener will be there.”

“The dancer will be, too. So let us go to bed, my saint. It is late, and I want us both to be well rested for whatever happens after the children go to school.”

“Rounds first.”

They made their usual pass around the house before heading upstairs to climb into bed. As Thran settled into his husband’s arms, much of his worry and apprehension faded. Everything would be all right. It would.

“What is it you always tell me, angel?” Bard whispered, stroking the sensitive spot on Thran’s hip that felt so good.

“What, my saint?”

“All is well. And it is.”

Thran chuckled silently. His husband was a mind reader extraordinaire.

* * *

The school bus sloshed away from the bus stop. Bard huddled under his umbrella and turned towards home just as eagerly as the other parents did, though they probably weren’t nearly as excited about what awaited them there as he was. So much anticipation coiled in his belly! As the rain fell steadily, not a painter was in residence, so Thran was back at the house transforming himself into... someone mysterious. Bard’s blue kimono was ready for him in the children’s bathroom, and when he got home, he’d shed the metal sculptor, father, and home renovator to become a simple gardener who had built a beautiful secret garden for an enigmatic dancer.

Would Thran wear his crane kimono? No, he’d worn that for their ballroom rendezvous. He’d said he’d venture into the delights found on the Indian subcontinent. Could that mean he’d wear a sari? That would certainly play to the feminine aspects that had piqued Bard so much more than he’d expected. Would he show up in drag? Maybe, maybe not... Thran had left Bard with the impression that he’d combine masculine as well as feminine aspects. That sounded... well, Bard didn’t know what it sounded like, but it reminded him strongly of Buddhist tantric thangkas – tapestries and paintings – that represented complementary spiritual concepts as sexually linked deities. The images were not merely sexual; rather, for an illiterate population, the highly symbolic representations were meditation tools that extended esoteric and subtle ideas from the physical to the metaphysical. Everyone understood how two lovers joined; so, the implication was, could the concepts that the lovers represented. This was no different than the purpose so much medieval European church art served for their illiterate population – cross, dove, nails, thorns, and so on, were just as symbolic, and just as beautiful.

Wasn’t that what all art was? Physical manifestations of beautiful mysteries?

Bard’s angel was beautiful and mysterious, and being with him was a grace Bard cherished. How would Thran embody that mystery as his dancer?

Whatever Thran did, he wouldn’t merely show up in a costume. He’d become the beautiful dancer who had commissioned a garden. Gods, if that dancer favored the gardener with a private
performance, he’d have the gardener at his feet in an instant, ready for whatever enlightenment he cared to bestow.

He ran back into the house through the rain, left his dripping umbrella in the mudroom sink, and kicked off his muddy boots. He ran upstairs – yes, the doors to their bedroom were closed, though he made out the vague outline of a figure moving within.

“I’m back!” he called. “Five minutes, and the gardener will be in the solarium!”

“Five minutes more, and the dancer will follow!” Thran called back in reply.

Bard ducked into the children’s bathroom, shedding clothes as he went. He stripped down to nothing, and wound the traditional Indian langot around his hips. The langot was more comfortable than the traditional Japanese fundoshi would have been, which was little different from the dancer’s belt that Thran wore every time he danced, if not so elastic. The langot wasn’t quite so... invasive, which gave him something to grin about as he slipped on his kimono. Gods, Thran was right about how soft the fabric was. It felt wonderful against his skin. He shook out his hair – it was at the unruly stage, and really needed a trim, so it suited a humble gardener who cared more about his plants than his appearance. He knotted the sash around the kimono, and came out to the bedroom landing.

“Gardener’s in the house,” he called, and headed downstairs without waiting for an answer. He ducked into the kitchen, set out on the kitchen island the teapot and cups that Thran had asked for, and the small basket of muffins. He made sure the teakettle simmered on the stove. Then he headed for the solarium, dim and shadowy against the backdrop of overcast skies and falling rain. He switched on the lamps, and turned on the fountain.

He waited.

* * *

The gardener gave his creation one more critical look. Was it finished at last? It had been no easy battle to wrestle this oasis out of a dark and decaying courtyard, where iron grilles and heavy wooden shutters had condemned any plant placed here to a dark and stifling death. It had been no easy battle to get him to even consider the effort, either, much less agree to do it – it had been such an obvious disaster that he’d rejected the plea to do the work four times. How could he nurture a beautiful and thriving garden here when anything, plant or animal, put in such a sunless, airless hole would die in days? The impossible location was not the only worry – the client was mysterious and unseen, and the impassive faces of the client’s shadowy representatives did not inspire comfort. Who knew what to make of that? Perhaps the client was a rich crime boss who sought to enhance his questionable status with a courtyard garden for his harem of concubines. He snorted. Designing a pretty prison was nothing he would do.

But the client’s representatives had come back again and again and again, always courteous, always respectful, always solicitous. The gardener had enough work for reputable clients who wanted a small, happy garden for their children, or to turn a battered piece of soil outside a family home into a beautiful oasis for all who passed by to enjoy. He’d even done a large park for the town government house for many to enjoy. He had enough work to stay busy until the monsoon without venturing into something that smelled so questionable.

But again the client’s representatives had come back, murmuring pleasant compliments and offering
more money. The client, he had finally been told, was a famous and enigmatic dancer who wanted a refuge, who appreciated the gardener’s care and patience, and who was willing to pay well for his skill. Even though the gardener was not free of the need of money, it had held no allure for him this time. The black hole he had been shown was nothing he could transform.

Finally, the representatives had come back one more time, murmuring the same pleas, making the same offers. No one else could make anything out of this ruin but him.

“I can’t make anything of it, either!” the gardener had argued in exasperation. “It’s nothing but a dark pit! There’s no air, no light, no anything! It’s a prison! No one can make anything grow there as long as all of those things remain true!”

“My client offers you free rein to do whatever you deem necessary to build your garden,” the representative had said calmly.

The gardener had turned a jaundiced eye on the speaker. “That’s what you say. But does your client really want to tear down walls and grates and barriers? A garden needs light, air, space. Without that, nothing is possible.”

“My client understands. You would be free to change all you see fit.”

“Such things are expensive.”

“You will be paid well.”

“It won’t be me you need to pay well. It’ll be the masons, the builders who must create the light and air and space first before I do anything.”

“My client agrees. You will have free rein to do all that it requires.”

Despite his better judgment, the gardener had agreed.

So the builders and the masons and the glazers had come to dismantle the prison. Grilles were banished; shutters were burned. Light now streamed through wide windows and expansive skylights. In such a light-filled space, he had rebuilt pale stone floors and walls, and then he had built a small fountain so that the hard stone would reflect the soft, soothing sounds of splashing water. He had taken carved panels from a junk heap to give climbing vines a place to curl and flourish. He had hung brightly colored lamps to extend the day’s sunlight into night with a soft, friendly glow. He had brought in tall palms and feathery ferns to soften the stone walls and floor. He had brought a small lamp shaped like a glowing flower to cast a little magic among the pots of low-growing shrubs. His final touch was a comfortable lounging bench, soft with velvet cushions, so that the mysterious dancer could rest easily in the heart of this garden.

All was done, all was complete. The gardener had already been paid for his work, so he had nothing more to do with the small oasis he had built. And yet...

How many times had he felt eyes on him as he worked? How many times had he heard a soft step on the stone tile, only to turn and see nothing but the merest corner of richly embroidered cloth that vanished out of sight? How many times had he smelled the faintest exotic scent, or heard the faintest chime of bracelets as they rubbed against each other?

Had the mysterious dancer watched him as he worked?

He had made inquiries. His client was no mere street dancer who shimmied for coins cast in the dirt. His client was widely acclaimed as the most beautiful, most skilled, most accomplished dancer,
without par. Those who had seen his client’s performances had fallen silent, unable to answer his questions, though whether awe or some other emotion silenced them, he could not say. Nothing more had he learned.

This morning, the last morning he would ever set foot in this small oasis, he resolved to come here hoping to finally see the most beautiful, most skilled, most accomplished dancer for himself.

The morning was silent and quiet, but for the soothing sound of the fountain. He gave the ferns that surrounded the fountain one more critical look, and stooped to pinch off a broken frond that would soon brown –

That same soft step whispered across the stone floor behind him, followed by faint music, dreamy yet sensual, soothing yet exotic. He looked up at once, sure that all he would see was the same scrap of enigmatic fabric that he had seen before.

He was wrong.

The fabric became a hem of deep purple, more blue than red, and richly embroidered with purple and silver threads, even small mirrors. The hem brushed the stone floor like a caress, and then swept aside to reveal two long, gracefully arched feet. As the gardener looked higher, the richly embroidered hem became the border of a sumptuous sari.

This dancer was a maiden, then?

He was wrong again.

The sari draped at the waist in the expected deep pleats, topped with an intricately beaded belt sewn with dangling coins and flashing jewels. The free end did not sweep around a delicate feminine waist, but taut abdominal muscles, and the chest above the belt and sari pleats was bare, broad, and masculine. The end of the sari did not modestly drape a demure maid’s head, but swept over a broad, powerful shoulder. Long, pristine, white hair gloriously crowned an otherwise bare head, and flowed over sculptured shoulders as sensuously as any woman’s mane. Pale, pearly skin was the perfect partner to the pale hair. And such jewelry – a cuff of delicate silver tracery adorned each wrist, and a wide collar of the same tracery edged in silver teardrops gilded the broad chest as handsomely as any Egyptian pharaoh’s sacred jewelry. A matching tracery of silver formed a diadem that held the pale hair out of the dancer’s face.

The gardener’s mouth fell open, but as splendid as sumptuous fabric, beautiful jewelry, and spectacular body were, what held him spellbound were pale silver-grey eyes, limned in the thinnest of black lines, shadowed in smoky grey and silver, and fringed with the longest black lashes he’d ever seen. Perfect black brows arching over the eyes only intensified their power.

Before he could move, those eyes widened in surprise, and the ethereal creature turned to retreat in a swirl of regal purple.

“Please, don’t go,” the gardener pleaded. When the purple fabric hesitated, the gardener salaamed over his knees, his eyes on the floor. “I... I just... wanted to make sure the garden was everything I could make of it before I relinquished it to the one who commissioned it.”

“You are the renowned artist who has made this place?” The dancer’s voice was soft, exotic, melodious.

“Am I... um, I don’t know how renowned I am, but yes, I made this garden. And... are you the dancer who commissioned it?”
“I am.”

“I’m honored.”

With a swish of fabric, the dancer stooped before the gardener. He took the gardener’s hands, and drew him to his feet. Before the gardener could protest, the dancer made a deep bow to him.

“I am grateful for this beautiful sanctuary you have made for me. It is beautiful, and green, and peaceful, and I will enjoy it very much.”

The gardener offered an awkward bow in return. “You’re welcome. I... think I owe you an abject apology.”

One exquisite eyebrow went up, and two perfect lips spread in a faint smile of surprise. Were those lips faintly rouged to complement the high cheekbones? “Do you?”

The garden nodded. “I do. I didn’t agree to make your garden for the longest time. Your representative was so inscrutable that I was sure you must be a gangster.”

The dancer laughed. “You must tell me more of this. Please, let me offer you tea in exchange for your story.”

The gardener’s first thought was to refuse. Gardeners were in a different guild than dancers, a slightly less distinguished one, but didn’t so many villagers claim that guilds no longer were the sole determination of a man’s merit, that one’s own hard work and good deeds also generated merit? Oh, hell; that was merely a polite excuse. If everyone in the village had loudly proclaimed guilds to be the sole determination of anything, the gardener would have still nodded acceptance.

“You’re most kind.”

“Wait here.”

The dancer swept away. Gods, what an elegant creature! The gardener had always admired the graceful sway of a maiden’s sari, but he had no idea how much more compelling a male dancer could make it, combining strength as well as grace – if male was the correct designation for this dancer. The body was so deliciously male, but the trappings so seductively female that the gardener was dazzled by both aspects. Before he could think about that, the dancer was quickly back, bearing a tray of tea things, a basket of small muffins, and a crock of butter. He set the tray down on the marble-topped table under the windows.

“Please, sit,” the dancer asked, so the gardener tucked his kimono around him and squatted on his heels. The dancer gave him another amused smile, drew him up again, and held a hand out towards the lounging bench. “You are a very modest gardener. Please, sit here.”

He sat on the end of the lounging bench, whereupon the dancer poured a cup of tea, sipped it to show it held no harm, and offered it to the gardener with a humble bow. The gardener managed to bow back without spilling his tea, and appreciated the dancer’s precise movements as he selected a muffin, buttered it, and took the traditional nibble to show no harm before placing it on the small plate and offering it to the gardener. Once the gardener had tea and muffin in hand, the dancer poured tea for himself, and made his own muffin. It was as if the dancer presented a time-honored and carefully choreographed ritual. Surely it took years of study and practice to render the simple movements with such subtle beauty.

“So you thought I was a great and powerful gangster, did you?” the dancer grinned, seating himself beside the gardener.
“One with a harem of unhappy maids imprisoned in the dark,” the gardener admitted with a sheepish nod.

The dancer sipped his tea delicately. “Tell me how you came to think so poorly of me.”

The gardener reddened. “Did you see this space before you sent your representative to me?”

The dancer shrugged. “Only briefly. I have not been long in this house, and it has needed much work. Was it cursed, or the scene of a terrible murder?”

The gardener allowed himself a quiet snort. “I can’t say about the rest of the house, but this benighted room was a walled-in, airless, boarded-up pit. That was all the curse it needed to murder any life that tried to survive here.”

“Ah,” the dancer nodded, nibbling a corner of a muffin. “So you thought that the gangster imprisoned his enemies here, or his harem of wives, who are often the same thing. Am I right?”

The gardener nodded. “So every time your representative appeared, I said no, because I didn’t want anything to do with a prison. Then finally he told me you were a dancer who longed for a retreat, which made me more sympathetic. But whether you would commit to the expense to tear out the iron grates and shutters over the outside, and open the space to the light and air that all living things need to grow, was not assured. Only when your representative told me that yes, you understood the structural work that was needed before I planted a single fern or palm, did I agree. Once that was done, any fool could turn it into a garden.”

“You are no fool.” The dancer looked around the transformed space with appreciation. “A fool would not have chosen warm, light stone to make the most of the lack of direct sunlight, or a fountain to soothe the ears. A fool would not have taken the discarded screens from a harem, which is the prison you say it is, and made them into artwork for a beautiful oasis. All this you did, before you added your welcome greenery and exotic flowers. You have a gift.”

The gardener offered a gratified smile. “I’m happy you like it. I hope you’ll spend many peaceful hours here, away from the weariness of the world.”

“I will. You have made a ceremony here, much as I do when I serve tea, or when I dance. There is more than just to drink the tea, yes? There is the grace of the teapot, and of the cup, and then of the one who pours and presents it. There is the smell of the tea when it is just brewed, and the first, fresh taste of the tea, then the deeper taste as it brews over good conversation. There is the first surprising flavor of the muffin, and of the fresh butter before it melts, and how the combination complements the tea. Then there is the lingering flavor of the tea on the tongue when it is gone. There are so many layers of enjoyment and appreciation, yes?”

The gardener nodded.

“Your garden does the same thing. First come the layers of materials – stone, wood, water, earth, plants. Next are the layers of sound and scent of the plants and water. Then the beautiful vision of the stone fountain that contrasts with the wooden screens and the soft plants. Yet unlike my tea ceremony, your garden offers its ceremony each time I enter it, just through its mere presence. That is a magical thing.”

The gardener breathed in, but more than the scent of water and greenery came to him. A subtle hint of exotic perfume – yes, that was the elusive scent he’d smelled so often as he worked – wound its allure with that of the garden and urged him to linger. He invariably found it difficult to leave any garden he made when he had finished it, but this one would be particularly hard, especially now that
the owner had cast his glamour over it.

Over him, too.

“Please, more tea?” the dancer urged, holding the pot in ready hands. Oh gods, those beautiful silver grey eyes, so artfully painted, so beckoning, so alluring, calling to both halves of him, and those long, elegant, graceful fingers cupping the teapot like a lover...

He held out his cup with both hands, both asking and receiving in a single act. His fingers warmed as the hot beverage filled his cup, and he sipped, grateful for a reason to drop his eyes. If he gazed too long on his exotic host, he would...

Never mind what he would or wouldn’t think, want, need... or do.

He murmured his thanks softly, trying not to look too hard at the dancer. But the dancer fell silent to sip his tea and admire the garden, which emboldened the gardener to speak.

“Once I began my work here, and I understood that you were not the evil gangster I imagined, I asked in the village about you. You are known as a wonderful dancer, full of fire as well as subtlety, technique as well as passion. So... such an artist would not be happy with a few wisps of kitchen herbs and perhaps a tree unhappily plunked in a pot. I imagined the rigors of your art would make you long to escape to a peaceful and tranquil place, and so I added all the things that I thought you would enjoy. You have noticed the fountain, the carved screens, the warm stone. You have added your own music to my sound of the fountain. But you will find other things in time. That plant will soon bloom with very fragrant flowers. And the one in the corner has the most ridiculously huge pink flowers, as silly as a clown. I thought it would make you laugh, which is never a bad thing.”

The dancer chuckled. “You are right. Happy laughter is always welcome. I will savor your clown flowers all the more because you chose them for me. They are a gift.”

The dancer finished his muffin as neatly as a cat accepting a treat, and sipped his tea. The gardener thought his respite was at an end, and steeled himself to take his leave. But the dancer set his teacup and small plate aside and gave him a smiling look through lowered lashes. Gods, gods, the jolt of adrenaline that flashed through him...

“I would like to offer you a gift, in return for all that you have done to make this sanctuary.”

“You don’t have to,” the gardener scrabbled, too overwhelmed by his racing heart to be graceful. “I mean, you paid for my work, and you paid me well. I am already well rewarded.”

“I paid for a garden, and you could have filled it with your kitchen herbs and a sad tree in a pot, but you were generous to offer much more than that. So I would like to repay your artistry with my own. Will you let me dance for you?”

The gardener swallowed down his eager anticipation, and put his palms together to bow over them. “I would be most honored if you would.”

When the dancer rose, the music rose with him. The confines of the garden were small, but that meant that the gardener could not miss any of the subtlety and grace that went into the dancer’s offering to him. The slow beginning, merely a flex of fingers, a curve of the arms, an exquisite roll of the shoulders, then a fascinating pulse of muscles that started in one wrist, darted up through the arm and across the shoulders, down the other arm, to the wrist, and finally to the very ends of the fingers... the tilt of the head left, then right, following the dancer’s shifting gaze... oh, gods, the undulation of chest, then stomach, then abdomen, and the slow twist and sway of hips in circles,
figure eights, ripples up and down... impossible back arches that let fingers brush the floor only inches behind arched feet, and then rise like dancing cobras before falling back to the floor again... the flex of powerful thighs to lower the arched back to the floor, where more undulations from collarbone to pubic bone made a pale torso writhe with passion... the equally impossible rise up to vertical again, when the free end of the sari traced a feather’s light, teasing path over the gardener’s arm, shoulder, cheek...

The music changed from slow and sensuous to a faster, more passionate throb. The dancer’s undulations turned sharper, more intense, and the silver coins decorating the beaded belt at the dancer’s hips flashed and beckoned. If only he had the daring to touch them, to take the end of the sari and pull until all the pleats were undone...

His longing must have shown in his face, because the dancer flicked the end of the sari into the gardener’s hands, and backed away, hips still swaying, abdominals still undulating, shoulders still shimmying. Gods, gods, the fabric ran through his nerveless fingers like water before he could suit action to thought. At the last second, he caught the end of the purple sari before it escaped him. It was impossible not to pull it towards him and gather the unspooling fabric in his arms, unveiling the dancer like a divine gift. In seconds, the dancer was bare but for his beaded and jeweled belt and his silver jewelry. The belt hid the most human part of what otherwise was a celestial deity, but the gardener’s imagination was more than enough to tell him what remained concealed.

“Oh, gods,” he managed to breathe, but it was enough to draw the dancer down beside him.

The dancer kissed him deeply, until every nerve of him tingled with desire. Damn all thoughts of guild rankings – he kissed back with all the passion the dancer had kindled in him, until the dancer’s soft laughter graced his ears. Did he dream that the dancer urged him flat on the lounging couch, still smiling at him? Did he imagine long, nimble fingers insinuating themselves in the knot of his kimono, or did his kimono fall open of its own accord?

He didn’t imagine the jeweled dancer perched atop him. But the mere sight of the beguiling dancer wasn’t enough – he filled his hands with muscled glutes, and his eyes with the dazzle of silver-bound hair and glimmering grey eyes, then his mouth with the sweetness of the dancer’s beckoning lips.

He was not the only one to savor. The dancer sat up on his heels to run his hands over the gardener’s bare chest, humming in delight when his touches garnered the gardener’s sudden intake of breath. The gardener made no protest when deft fingers slipped under him to ease the end of his langot free, but he couldn’t suppress a moan when those same fingers teased loose the knot that held the langot in place. The dancer eased the cloth away to leave the gardener’s cock fully exposed, already hard and aching.

“Such a gift,” the dancer breathed, as he bent over the gardener. He enfolded the gardener’s cock in a warm, moist caress, sucking and stroking until the gardener couldn’t keep himself from thrusting into the dancer’s mouth. In seconds, he wouldn’t be able to keep himself from climaxing deep down the dancer’s throat –

“So eager, so strong,” the dancer whispered, leaving the gardener to groan at the loss of his soft, sucking mouth. “So much pleasure in such a beautiful body, more than I can hold that way. How badly you make me ache for you, I cannot resist...”

Something slick and slippery soothed over the gardener’s cock, and before he could bless his good fortune, the dancer had impaled himself with a gasp and a shudder of pleasure.

“Oh, gods, you are huge,” the dancer hummed, shutting his eyes to savor. “You are in so deep... I am well filled, sweet gardener.”
Impossibly flexible hip joints allowed the dancer to hold all of the gardener’s cock inside him as he leaned forward for a kiss. The gardener kissed back eagerly, pushing his tongue past the dancer’s teeth, and his cock further inside the dancer. The dancer moaned, and pushed away from the kiss, though he still held the gardener’s cock.

“You will have me in seconds, before I can give you one more gift,” the dancer panted.

“You’ve given me so much already,” the gardener whispered, pushing himself up onto his elbows. “Let me return some of the pleasure you’ve given me, so we share it together.”

Greatly daring, the gardener sat up on the end of the lounging couch, and wrapped the dancer’s long legs around his waist. He crossed his legs underneath the dancer’s hips to give him a stable seat, then reached around to find the fastening to the dancer’s belt. He unclasped it, and eased it free. There, freed from its tight confinement, was the dancer’s long, elegant cock. The dancer sighed in relief.

“You are more overwhelming than I imagined,” the dancer murmured, wrapping his arms around the gardener’s shoulders. “How many days have I watched you toil here, such a patient soul within such a beckoning body? How many days did I almost interrupt your work, no matter how I told myself that I must wait for the right moment, when you would see how much I understood your passion for your work, your drive to create such beauty?”

“I knew you were with me, just out of sight,” the gardener replied, stroking the broad shoulders and back under his hands until the dancer rewarded him with a groan of pleasure. “I felt your eyes on me, heard you sigh and the soft step of your foot. That’s when I asked who you were, but those who had seen you dance were struck speechless, and I thought I’d never know the truth about the one who had asked me to transform a black pit into an oasis.”

“I waited until your work was done, so that it received a proper ceremony,” the dancer fluttered long lashes as he stroked the gardener’s kimono off his arms, then cradled his head in long hands to kiss him thoroughly. “One rife with mysteries.”

“Tantric ones?” the gardener grinned. Who couldn’t help but feel confident when a creature both god and goddess held him so intimately?

“Ah, a devotee,” the dancer smiled. “Let us see if we can reveal one such mystery.”

“Which one? There are so many good ones,” the gardener begged.

His answer came not in words, but in a powerful flex of muscles deep within the dancer, a flex that tightened around and teased his cock most deliciously. His breath catching, his head went back as the pulses teased him thoroughly.

“Yes, you know this one,” the dancer cooed, kissing his lips, chin, jaw.

“I’ve never had the pleasure.” The gardener’s breath hitched again when another flex massaged the whole length of his cock. “Oh, gods... that’s intense.”

“For both of us,” the dancer whispered, pulling the gardener close. “Let us see if I can take us both to nirvana...”

The gardener buried his nose in the notch at the base of the dancer’s throat. He held him close as the dancer alternatively flexed and released the muscles that held the gardener’s cock so tightly. As the flexing sped up, so did the gardener’s urgency, and he spread his hands over the dancer’s ribs, searching for his nipples. At the first touch, the dancer shuddered, his entire body spasming as his pleasure rose. Just the sight of the dancer’s delicious body so wracked by his rising made the
gardener’s cock all the more sensitive. He had the worst urge to plunge even deeper into the bounty before him, but he had only curled the slightest bit before the dancer was consumed. The steady pulse of contractions around the gardener’s cock exploded into irresistible spasms. All he needed to release was to look at the dancer’s contorted face as his orgasm enveloped him. How could he not follow headlong?

He pulled the dancer hard over his cock and let himself go with a stuttering gasp. Still riding out his release, the dancer curled around him, softly moaning as each spasm shook them. Did he cry out? Was his cry act of worship or carnal release?

It was both.

* * *

They stayed in each other’s arms for some seconds, letting delirium fade, heartbeats slow, breathing steady. Bard twined one hand in Thran’s silky hair and stroked his nape lightly, drawing a hum of contentment from his husband.

“You reduce me to a puddle, lyubov moya,” Thran whispered.

“Welcome to my world.” Bard kissed a soft kiss on Thran’s collarbone before he gave into an irreverent grin. “That was so stunning. Everything. The way you looked, the way you moved, and such a dance I’ve never seen. And after... gods. You have the most amazing ass in the world.”

Snickering, Thran gave him one more internal squeeze. “The Buddha position gives me so much of you to work with, my saint.”

“But that you needed it. You had me at the sari. It was all I could do not to drool.”

“I noticed,” Thran replied with a smug smile, but his kiss took the sting out of his teasing. “For a moment, I worried that I had done too good a job to entice you, and you were overwhelmed.”

“Your dancer was everything a humble gardener asked for.” Bard reached up to draw Thran into a long, thorough kiss. “More. Beautiful, graceful, refined, and so, so talented. I love you, angel. Gods, I love you.”

“You are zoloto moyo, my saint.” Thran’s hand on Bard’s cheek was a tender caress. “My treasure. The way you looked in the langot, with your hair in your eyes... you nearly had me in a second. I have never been so worshipped. Oh, my saint... there are not enough words to tell you how much I love you.”

Bard put his arms around Thran’s legs to keep him close as he stood up. He was soft enough to slip out of Thran, and his husband eased his feet to the floor. They stood embracing for a long moment. The rain still fell, the fountain still chimed, and the plants still lent their green scent to the air. But his husband’s elegant body was warm, and his hair and skin and lips were soft, and the scent of their indulgence lingered.

The moment didn’t need words, so they went upstairs in silence, to become themselves again.
Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint speak of this and that before the former flies back to the ballet, and the latter makes his first casting. Painting progresses, and cherubs enthuse.

Hope you all had a Happy Thanksgiving Day, no matter where you are.

Chapter Notes

As a technical note, I freely admit that casting and welding are very complicated and technical businesses, and in no fashion could I begin to get all the details right for Bard's artistic endeavours. So I have done what all good writers do in such situations - I have waved my hands and made it so. We'll just trust that Bard knows his business, and he gets everything done the way he's supposed to.

As Thran paced slowly up the stairs, smiling at the pleasure he and Bard had shared in the solarium, a soft hum of appreciation whispered behind him.

“You,” Bard rumbled, “are one hellaciously beautiful angel.”

Snickering, Thran cast a look over his shoulder as he reached the bedroom landing. His husband had thrown his kimono back on, but it hung loose and open on his shoulders because he hadn’t bothered to wrap it around him, leaving Thran with a full view of all of Bard’s assets from head to toe. He had his langot in his hand, his carriage was loose and relaxed, and the smile on his face was sly as he pointedly stared at Thran’s backside.

“I do not think I am the angel you think you see,” Thran countered with just as sly a smile. “When I see you look at me as you do now, I think very unangelic things.”

“Mmm. Maybe I can help that along.” Bard’s grin grew a little wider as he sauntered up the last stair and came face to face with Thran. He bent Thran back over one arm into his favorite swashbuckling kiss, caressing thoroughly until Thran was putty in his husband’s arms. Once Bard bought them back to vertical, he closed in for another kiss, nipping at Thran’s lips rather than caressing them gently. Thran hummed in arousal, but Bard eased away to give a pert squeeze to Thran’s glute, then backed towards the bedroom with a mischievous smile.

“Bastard,” Thran growled, prowling after Bard.

“Oh, really? To quote a certain unangelic angel, ‘ Entirely,’” Bard said without apology. “To quote myself, ‘You like me that way.’”

“Gods, I do,” Thran murmured with just as much unabashed enthusiasm. “I must wash, if I am to appear before the company without revealing how I spent the morning. Join me?”
“I won’t turn that down,” Bard agreed. “Though I’m sorry to see my beautiful dancer in his sari and jewels depart for dreamland again. He was perfect.”

“He will come back one day, if you want him to,” Thran replied, stroking Bard’s hair with a loving hand. “I enjoyed his visit as much as you did.”

Thran dropped his sari and belt on the bed and followed Bard into the bathroom, where his theatrical makeup kit still lay open on the sink counter. He removed his diadem, braided his hair loosely, and pinned it back before he tackled his makeup. As Thran took a cleansing wipe from its container and began to gently wipe away the silver, grey, and black makeup from his eyes, Bard watched in the mirror. When most of the paint was gone, Thran soothed on oil to remove the rest, then washed his face with gentle fingers.

“You’re so careful,” Bard commented thoughtfully.

Thran nodded in agreement. “A dancer does not speak during a performance, so his or her face must speak instead. So it is not unusual for us to use makeup to make our faces mirror the role. To rush it on, then scrape it off, can take a toll, especially when we add or change makeup between acts, so we learn to be gentle, or pay the price.”

“You do your own makeup for your performances?”

“I do,” Thran nodded, blotting his face with a towel. “Every dancer does. All dancers are taught this at an early age, and most come to find their own style after a year or two. It is rare for any ballet to have a makeup team – only if the makeup is elaborate or extreme. I have never danced a ballet with such a team, but then the men’s roles do not usually call for that, even if the women’s roles do. There were rare occasions that the female corps had hairdressers to help with wigs or hairpieces, but for the most part we do our hair ourselves, too.”

“What do you do with yours for a performance? Do you have to pin it up?”

Thran grinned. “It depends on the choreographer, the director, the people in charge. At school, my teachers did not approve, so I wore it in the infamous man bun, little different from the girls. It was a pain, but it was my small act of rebellion that was let go because I was very good. There was less issue when I danced at Mariinsky, because once I was known, people wanted to see my long hair, even if I usually braided it. In this country, it has always been up to me. I have never danced with it loose before Immortal, though; usually I have at least some of it pinned out of the way.”

“I badly need a haircut,” Bard observed, shaking his hair until it fell into his eyes. “I thought I’d call for an appointment today. I hope Rowan doesn’t spank me for letting it go so long when I finally get in to see her.”

“I must make an appointment as well,” Thran said, wrapping his hair around his head and stepping into the shower cabinet to turn on the water.

“Do you want me to make an appointment for us both?” Bard asked. “Or would it be quicker if I made you a separate one so you don’t have to wait for Rowan to do us both?”

“I would like us to go together,” Thran admitted. “We could at least talk on the way to and from, and it would not take that much longer for her to do us both. And I like to watch you enjoy yourself.”

Bard grinned. “I’ll call her today, then. I assume you’d rather go in the morning?”

“As early as she can take us, yes,” Thran agreed. “It may take a while to get such an appointment, but as long as it is before the premiere, I am not particular as to the day.”
“I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya.” He turned a questioning look on his husband. “To be spanked... is that a kink of yours?”

“Is it a – ?” Bard shot a look at Thran before his face spasmed with laughter. “Oh! No, it’s not for me, sorry to disappoint you. I know what aficionados say about it, but I’m not one of them. It reminds me of when I was a misbehaving little brat far more often than I should have been, and my Gran took after me with a wooden spoon when she’d had enough of my idiocy. Distinctly not sexy.”

Snickering, Thran took off his cuff bracelets, and finally his collar necklace. “It is not for me, either, and for similar reasons – too many ballet masters and their ways to encourage attention in class, or to mete out punishment for misdeeds in the dormitory. One in particular was infamous for his beatings, even of very young children. He did not like my long hair, and sought to... encourage me to cut it, so it became a test of wills. Given the enthusiasm he put into his side of the test, and similar tests he forced upon other children, he was finally reprimanded, which did no good, and eventually he was dismissed. That is unheard of in a system that is so matter-of-fact about harsh discipline. I did not like to be made to feel like shit because of my hair, or punished because I was a very tired ballet dancer pushed beyond what my body could do.”

“I’m glad. I couldn’t hit you, even if you claimed it felt good. It...” Bard’s voice trailed away as he soaped and washed, then he grimaced. “It would be cruel, like your story.”

“And you are not a cruel man.” Thran stroked a hand over Bard’s chest. “Even when you were the king to my seer, you were gentle. Ruthless, but gentle.”

“The dodgy artist who provided the fucking a certain sexual vampire deserved wasn’t particularly gentle,” Bard gave Thran a wink. “And seems to me that neither of us was particularly gentle when we christened your SUV. We both ended up with rug burns after that one.”

“Badges of honor,” Thran proclaimed, laughing when his pretentious words got a guffaw out of his husband. “Though not ones I intend to display for public admiration.”

“Hell, no,” Bard agreed, still laughing. “So what were you saying about either of us being gentle?”

“Perhaps we have not been physically gentle in every one of our games,” Thran conceded with a shrug as he lathered his abdomen. “But we have never struck each other, either.”

Sobering, Bard considered that, then grimaced. “No matter what the kink world says, I think of blows as anger, not foreplay, and I just... it’s just not in me, to give or receive, I still feel guilty about how I grabbed your arm and hustled you into the ballroom when we had our fight. That wasn’t a blow, but it was angry, and I don’t ever want to do it again.”

Bard’s tone was mostly matter-of-fact, with only a tinge of regret, so Thran kept his demeanor philosophical. “We both learned a great deal then. Now that we know how to stay in harmony, how to watch out for each other, we can leave the spank kink to others.”

“Good,” Bard hummed in emphatic agreement before smiling perversely. “It could never compete with our fantasies, anyway. Those are a delight.”

Thran’s growl was a low rumble in his throat as he gathered Bard into his arms to kiss him. “Entirely and spectacularly.”

With a chuckle, Bard kissed back. “All right, I’m done. It’s time we make a good lunch and send you to the ballet, and me to the barn.”
“Indeed,” Thran grinned, turning off the water. “Something with protein.”

“Always.” Bard grabbed Thran’s towel and tossed it to him before grabbing his own. As he stood drying himself off, his eyes fell on Thran’s silver jewelry. “Those are nice pieces. Not merely costume pieces, I think?”

Thran nodded, smiling. “They are very nice silver, yes. Would it bother you to know that they belonged to Vileria?”

Bard shot him a mixed expression, but Thran shrugged without concern. “This was not the first time I have worn them, so put your mind at ease.”

Bard’s expression grew speculative. “Oh? That sounds like a story.”

“A very small one. We bought the pieces for her to attend a party, and because they suited her very well. But for another party, a somewhat... dubious costume party, I wore them.”

“With the sari?”

“Oh, no, I wore harem pants and the funny shoes with turned up toes, yes? Vileria went in the sari as Scheherazade, and I went as the paranoid prince who threatened to kill her every night. You know the story, yes? The Arabian Nights?”

“I do,” Bard nodded. “So what was so dubious about this party?”

“We would have been more in character with the general mood if I had been on a leash, and not a prince but a slave.”

Bard snorted in laughter. “Oh, spanking isn’t your kink, but a little B and D is?”

Thran snickered in kind. “Have you forgotten how we spent our official wedding night, lyubov moya? I enjoyed it immensely. If you would like to make such a pet of me, I would let you.”

“I did that the night you wanted bandits and bonds,” Bard stuck his tongue out at Thran.

“Tcha, my saint,” Thran grinned. “That was sensory arousal, not B and D.”

“So speaks the connoisseur,” Bard parried. “Maybe the king should lead his seer around on a leash. Oh, Vileria already did that. The woman had balls, that’s for sure.”

“She never led me around on a leash, but she did have balls, as you say. That night, we made our appearance and enjoyed the party for the short length of time before matters... deteriorated, and then went home to baby Legolas.” Thran’s grin was wry. “We loved Legolas very much, but we were also often relieved to have him as an excuse to leave such parties early. We were the old, sedate, married couple.”

“At what? Twenty? Twenty-one?” Bard tutted, but gently. “Those are generally the hell-raising years.”

“Neither of us was foolish enough to engage in liaisons with anyone at a party, straight or gay,” Thran explained. “Even if we had faked an interest in someone of the opposite sex, there was still the danger of having official people know of one’s choices. So we made our jeweled appearances, and then we went home.”

Bard shook his head. “Art school was a lot easier. No official government agency gave a rat’s ass
about what any of us did, as long as we didn’t burn down the campus.”

“A better situation by far,” Thran nodded. “I am quite ready for lunch.”

“Let’s see what we can scrounge,” Bard agreed, as they came into the bedroom to pull on clothes.

In less than an hour, Thran was well fortified with a chicken sandwich on a wheat bun with lettuce and tomato, his usual chopped vegetables, and a handful of grapes. He shouldered his dance bag, bolstered with Bard’s snacks for him to nibble until he came home, and aimed his SUV out of the driveway.

As he waved farewell to his husband, he savored thoughts of the delightful game he and Bard had played in the solarium. How dazzled Bard had been when he first saw Thran in his finery, his makeup, his beautiful sari. How dazzled he had been to admire his husband’s delicious body in his kimono and langot. He was such a tease, pairing that hard warrior’s body with a gardener’s soft and humble demeanor. How much fun they had had, resisting so much physical bounty to pique each other with their tea ceremony and genteel conversation. Then Bard’s inspired Buddha position – how compelling that had been! It’d hardly taken anything from either of them to rise in such a deep, intimate position. Thran had found it as irresistible as when Bard took him off the ground. To be so supported, yet so deeply impaled, was divine. When Bard had massaged his nipples, Thran had not been able to keep himself from exploding, never mind that neither of them had so much as looked at Thran’s cock. Sublime.

How delicious would that position be if he teased Bard into a more... alpha role? He’d give that some thought –

Thran winced. It was good their solarium game had been so spectacular. Any variations might have to wait until after Immortal’s premiere, eight weeks from now.

Sighing, he drove to the school, and headed for the gymnasium. As usual, he was early, but one or two other dancers were there, already setting up the portable barres. Thran put down his bag and hastened to help them so that they could get started on their work as soon as possible. One by one, more of the dancers joined them. As Ori was with Lettie today, Thran was the one to mop the floor, while Abebe found the piano in the nearby music room. A young girl took her place at the piano, Abebe called the dancers to take their places, and the day’s work began.

As Abebe called the first figures, a dancer at the barre opposite Thran smothered a cough. Thran said nothing, but after spending time with so many sick children in the past week or two, he knew the difference between a cough to clear the throat, and a cough that signaled a cold. This was the latter.

Thran winced again. The Imladris Academy had been inundated with colds and flu for weeks. Late spring it might be, but was it any surprise that germs still lingered, looking for new hosts?

So it began.

* * *

The rain continued steadily after Thran’s departure for the school, so Bard didn’t progress any on Hal’s tree. He had no lack of work, though – he spent the afternoon working on more sketches of the steampunk orrery, and fiddled with the sample aluminum spheres to see how he could get them to stick together. He spent time on his mobile, first with a call from Bilbo asking for more sketches for
Celebrían’s gallery, then with Rowan, setting up appointments for him and Thran in three weeks’ time. He also talked to the orrery client about the two directions he had come up with, and emailed sketches for him to consider. Bard’s sense was that the client liked both ideas, but wasn’t too familiar with Greek or Roman mythology, so the gods didn’t resonate with him as much as they did with Bard. That didn’t upset Bard; he still liked the idea of making totems with the heads of the gods, or perhaps a mobile.

He also called Mr. D, to ask about Lance.

“Aye, Bard, he’s at the wilderness camp I told ye about,” the old rugger confirmed. “I half expected him to come of his cage fighting and spitting like any young wildcat, and he did at first. But he seems to have settled a wee bit. I’m nae sure sure how much I trust that, ye ken, but as long as he behaves himself, I’ll take it.”

“How long might he be out there?” Bard asked cautiously.

“Open ended,” the sergeant replied. “It’s up to him more than anything else. He knows that he came a hair’s breadth from getting his sorry ass thrown into the adult justice system rather than the juvenile one. Attempted arson, almost up-in-flames arson... it’s hard to call that a juvenile misdemeanor, isn’t it?”

“I guess it is.”

“Damned straight, it is. The least little dust-up, and he’ll find himself back into that adult justice system, I tell ye. So keep your fingers crossed that he settles down, and finds something to think about rather than how fucking stupid he’s been for the past year.”

Despite himself, Bard smiled at the sergeant’s vehemence. “I’ll keep them crossed, Mr. D.”

“Good lad. Ye take care of your bairns and your husband, and with bit of the grace of Mahal, ye won’t see the likes of yon fool again.”

“You take care of yourself, too, Mr. D. Tilda especially sends her regards.”

“She’s a bonny lass,” Mr. D said gruffly. “I miss seeing her, and her brother and sister, too. Offer them my regards, would ye, lad?”

“I will. Thanks for the update, Mr. D. Take care.”

“I thank ye, Bard, and ye do the same.”

Mr. D rang off without further comment. Bard stuffed his mobile back in his pocket, and went back out to the barn to contemplate three kinds of epoxy and several sizes of small aluminum spheres.

Thursday dawned bright and blustery, so Darla and her two assistants were back painting – today they’d begin on the porch. Thran lingered long enough to watch them set up ladders and set to work before he left to be at the school by ten. The Immortal stage was finished enough for dancing, so rehearsal was now in full swing. Bard’s sculpture was also in full swing at long last – he was excited to head out to the barn for his first casting. While he set up his furnace the barn, the last part of the house received its final coat; the porch ceiling, its first coat of pale blue; and the door, its first coat of red. The porch trim also got its first coat of white, which made a huge difference in the appearance of the entire house. The once-peeling balusters and support beams looked like new, even with just a single coat of paint. If the weather held, the second coat would go on the door, ceiling, and trim tomorrow, and the first coat would go on the floor. After that, Darla would set on the carriage house and the barn, so the place would look stellar by the end of next week. All that remained were the
replacement windows –

Bard’s mobile chimed. Could he be there next Wednesday to oversee the start of the window replacement?

Hmm. Had he started to develop ESP?

His furnace was set up, hot, and ready to melt bronze. Bard set his crucible in place, and melted enough small bronze ingots to fill the six flasks for Hal’s tree. He had the flasks lined up and waiting in front of the barn, and the pour went off without a hitch. He wouldn’t know whether the flasks had filled successfully until they cooled, but he’d taken all the care he could, and everything looked promising. He’d leave the flasks to cool outside for the rest of the afternoon before he put them inside the barn overnight. The children would be home soon, and it’d be time to see to them. Despite his excitement, tomorrow morning was soon enough.

Friday came in a rush, and everyone had something to be excited about. All of the children were excited to reach the end of the week; Sigrid, however, was particularly excited. Today was the college open house to supplement the one two weeks ago that had been poorly attended because so many children had been sick. Thran was excited because today he would meet Luka and Charisse for their first flying lesson. Bard was excited to see the results of yesterday’s bronze casting. As soon as the painters arrived, Bard trotted out to the barn, threw open the bay, and switched on the overhead lights. The six flasks waited on his workbench, and he opened the first one with eager fingers. Had it properly modeled the trunk? Had the bronze filled it properly? He unbolted the two halves of the mold and gently brushed the green sand from the metal.

It looked perfect.

He unmolded the other pieces of the tree, and they all looked to be properly filled and cast, without dimples or excess bits.

Thank you, gods.

He returned the green sand to its bucket to await his next casting, and carefully cleaned the pieces. Now to weld them together. He thought of Thran, smiling at his husband’s fantasy of a hunky, bare-chested Frank Frazetta-esque warrior as the archetype for a welder. As he’d warned Thran, he wasn’t such a vision when he fired up his torch – this might be a small piece of sculpture, but he still put on heavy welding jacket, tough jeans, steel-toed boots, heavy gloves, and his welding mask. Not only that, he put on sunscreen, too – the light reflected off many metals, particularly shiny ones, could cause a nasty sunburn anywhere his protective gear didn’t completely cover. This piece might be small and not shiny, but he put on sunscreen, anyway, as a matter of course. Out came his torch, on went all his gear, and on went the torch –

No, not yet. Before he turned on the torch, he warned the painters to stay out of the barn until he was done; an arc-welding torch burned brightly, and could damage eyesight if one looked at it too long.

Painters warned, he headed back to the barn, clamped the tree trunk in his vice, put the roots to hand, and turned on the torch. After so many years of commercial welding, he could consider Hal’s tree as trivial, but that would be a mistake. It called for a delicate hand to join the pieces together without leaving residue that he’d have to polish away later, or damaging the two pieces so that the join would be visible no matter how much polishing he did. He took his time, ensuring each join was solid and stable before moving to the next one.

About halfway through, he remembered to surface for lunch, and made himself a hefty ham sandwich before heading back out to the barn. This time, he remembered to put his warning sign –
Metal In Progress – Go Away – outside the bay so that no one would venture inside in the middle of his welding. This time, however, he completed all his welds to his satisfaction without interruption. He propped the tree up on rebar braced with heavy boards to keep it steady while it cooled, and came out into the open air for a much-needed stretch. He wandered over to the porch to see how it progressed, and was gratified to find that the second coat on the ceiling and trim was done, and the floorboards gleamed with their first smooth coat of black. Darla put down her brush to ask if he’d be around tomorrow for her crew to get another day’s work in, and he’d just agreed when the children came walking up the driveway from the bus stop.

“Da!” Bain heralded, waving excitedly. “You’ve got your welding jacket on! Did you already do it?”

“I did,” Bard confirmed with a satisfied grin. “Mr. Hal’s tree is all put together now.”

“I want to see!” Tilda shouted, skipping up beside him. “It’s really all in one piece now?”

“It is, little doll. It’s in the barn, cooling.”

“I’d like to see, too,” Legolas came up behind Tilda.

“Sure,” Bard led the way to the barn. “Welcome home, sweetness. How was your college thing today?”

“It was amazing,” Sigrid enthused as she followed the other children into the barn. “I’m so glad they had another one. I talked to six different schools about a whole bunch of things.”

“Oh, look, Kukla!” Legolas pointed at the tree propped up on the workbench. “It really is all in one piece now! It’s almost done!”

“It’s got a ways to go,” Bard amended. “Polishing, working to smooth the welds, then the patina. Then I fasten it to its rock base, and put on the leaf. After all that, then it’ll be done.”

“How long will all that take?” Legolas asked.

“Best of all possible worlds, another week or so. No more than two, I hope.”

“It looks like a real tree already,” Tilda nodded. “I like it.”

“Thank you, little doll.” Bard shrugged off his welding jacket before he ruffled his youngest daughter’s hair. He hung it up on its hanger, and led the way out of the barn. “Everyone’s ready for a snack?”

“I am!” Bain and Legolas chorused, drawing Sigrid’s laughter. Bard pulled down the barn bay door and everyone headed for the house. As Bain and Legolas ran ahead, Bard warned them about the wet paint on the porch, so of course everyone had to detour to inspect the day’s progress.

“Wow, Da, it looks amazing,” Sigrid breathed. “I never realized just how beautiful this old place could look.”

“I love the red door,” Tilda nodded emphatically as she pointed to the red in the side lights and transom glass. “Look, it matches the red in the stained glass.”

“It does,” Sigrid agreed, linking arms with Bard. “Oh, Da, it all is just the most amazing thing. All of it.”
Bard patted Sigrid’s arm. “The old girl’s a young beauty again. A fit home for the lot of us.”

“The ancestral home of Clan Ffyrnig,” Legolas smiled, coming to stand next to Bard. “It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever lived.”

“Even better than Saint Petersburg?” Sigrid looked around Bard to gaze inquiringly at Legolas.

The boy nodded as firmly as Tilda had. “Even better. I don’t remember it very well, but it was a flat, not an entire house. This is a lot nicer, and we have a yard, and a solarium, and a ballroom.”

“A ballroom that looks like a cake,” Bain grinned. “Oh, I shouldn’t have said cake. It reminds me how hungry I am. Head for the kitchen!”

The boys raced off, Tilda between them, leaving Bard and Sigrid to follow them more sedately. She squeezed Bard’s arm and gave him an affectionate smile. “Now, aren’t you glad I made you call the guy in 5B back in November to come out here with you?”

Bard chuckled. “Oh, you’re taking credit for all this, then?”

“Maybe,” Sigrid snarked back in kind.

“No maybe about it, sweetness. You did us proud. Now look what’s happened – we’re happy and healthy, I’m an artist again, we have Ada and Legolas, and we live here.”

Sigrid gave him a surprised look. “Oh, come on, Da! It wasn’t just me – you had a little something to do with it, too.”

Bard gave her a fond smile. “We all did, sweetness. All six of us.”

Sigrid held onto Bard’s arm a little tighter, and her smile grew to match his.

“So,” he said as they strolled to the mudroom door. “Tell me about your college fair.”

As Sigrid launched into a nonstop monologue, Bard was content to listen. So much excitement, enthusiasm, and hope were in Sigrid’s voice, and all were worth savoring.

Who said Thanksgiving came only in November?
Chapter 134

Chapter Summary

The Maid, the Soldier, and Death learn to fly.

Chapter Notes

Rigging a performer to fly is very exacting and demanding. The research I did for this chapter gave me a healthy respect for the people who design and implement flying elements for theatrical productions, which is why I emphasized the precautions they take to make sure performers fly safely. They literally have the lives of their charges in their hands, and I salute them one and all.

For the sake of this story, I have simplified the procedures and processes expert riggers employ, so please, don't take this story as the end all and be all of the profession, and Don't Try This At Home. It is a mark of the importance of this element of theatre that it has its own safety certification process, the Entertainment Technician Certification Program (ETCP), to make sure that its members scrupulously safeguard rigging crews, performers, and audience members. ETCP certification is the professional standard for any theatrical rigger, which is why Fly By Nighthawks included notice of their certification on their signage. They are among the best of the best.

The next time you see a production with flying performers, take a moment to salute the folks behind the flying that make the magic happen :-)

As usual, I don't hold any rights to The Incredibles, or to the incredible Edna Mode. But boy, wouldn't it be fun to be Edna??? I could so do that!

The 1,000 Pound Club is a real thing. Hugh Jackman lifted the amounts I listed for Half Ton to earn his entry into the elite club, so our rigger is in good company :-)

Luka Caragiale's name is taken from the Romanian poet of the same name, just because. Charisse LaFleur recognizes what a sprightly flower our petite dancer is, again, just because.

Thran was thankful to have a day away from the Imladris Academy and the rest of the UVB company, but not only to have a respite from the increasing number of coughs and wheezes that had punctuated yesterday’s rehearsal. He had weathered Clan Ffyrnig’s bout with colds and flu, so he hoped that would provide him some immunity from the germs that flew around the dancers who rehearsed on the school’s stage. But today, he, Charisse, and Luka would have their first lesson in how to fly with more than the power they generated through their bodies. Today, they would fly on wires.

As he drove to his first flying lesson, he had no idea what to expect. A flying harness of some sort, yes. Perhaps large burly men would heave him aloft and let him gently down? Or would some sort of
mechanical pulley provide the impetus? Thran was excited to find out.

He found the business easily enough – on the front of the building housing the firm was a huge image of a bird with wings spread wide, clear indication of the firm’s name – Fly By Nighthawks. The smaller print below the name read *Riggers Extraordinaire*, and below that read *ETCP Certified*.

Certification boded well. Ori had told him this company had an excellent safety record, as well, so he expected to be in good hands as he learned the particulars of how to effectively bring Death from on high down to the battlefield. It would ruin the whole effect of Death soaring so spectacularly above the stage if he stumbled upon landing, or fell flat on his face.

Luka was already in the lobby, peering with great interest at the many framed still shots from various productions the company had rigged. Several Peter Pans, of course, and almost as many Mary Poppinses. Pictures of Tarzans – who knew that was a musical? – and Easter pageants and Christmas angels mixed with pictures of several Broadway productions – Thran recognized one or two Billy Elliotts among them. That further reassured Thran that he and his fellow dancers would be in good hands.

“Good morning, Thran!” Luka waved. Thran’s lips curved up at the excited, gleeful expression on the young dancer’s face. “I told them we’re here, so our instructor will be along in a minute. I’m so excited about this! Aren’t you? The chance to fly around on stage – how cool is that?”

“Very cool,” Thran admitted with a grin that was likely as gleeful as Luka’s own. Both of them could easily be Bain and Legolas presented with a new zombie apocalypse game. “I have looked forward to this very much. My children are quite envious.”

“My girlfriend thinks I’m crazy,” Luka admitted, looking disappointed. “But... she says that about dancing in general, so... maybe she won’t be my girlfriend for much longer. It’s hard to explain the long hours to her, and the things I can and can’t eat, and working on Saturday, and doing barre even on Sunday, and now flying...”

His shrug was not as disconsolate as it could have been, and to see his face light up when Charisse came through the door explained why. Thran recalled his own pangs of worry about whether Bard could understand all the rigors Luka had just listed. As long as Luka’s infatuation with the lovely Charisse didn’t interfere with his work, Thran was content to let matters proceed as they would.

“*Bonjour, mes chers!*” Charisse heralded with a sunny smile and a wave. “*Ça roule?*”

“*Comme d’hab,*” Thran grinned in reply.

“*Bonjour,* Charisse,” Luka murmured softly, which Charisse rewarded with a wider smile.

“So, today we learn to fly *comme des oiseaux,*” Charisse laughed. “Like the great bird on the sign outside.”

“I just told Thran how excited I am about it,” Luka replied. “Though you and I get to fly up and that’s all. Thran gets to fly down.”

“Mr. Oropherson?” A very strange man came towards them. He was big and burly, with bright red hair in dreadlocks topped with a knitted beanie, and a lush bushy beard. His clothes were even more eccentric – a silver grey kilt, thick knitted socks, and heavy black construction boots, topped with a black and baggy Fly By Nighthawks tee. He was almost as heavily tattooed as Mr. D.

“I am Thran Oropherson,” Thran took the brawny hand that extended out to him. “May I introduce my colleagues, Luka Caragiale, and Charisse LaFleur?”
“Good to know you. I’m Robbie MacPhearson, senior head rigger for Fly By Nighthawks. I’ll be your flight attendant today, ha, ha. Just call me Robbie, or Rob, or dammital Robbie when you get to know me better,” the man gave them a mischievous grin.

“Thran, Charisse, and Luka, and we hope we do not give you reason to call us those damned foolish dancers once you get to know us,” Charisse replied without batting an eye, but with plenty of humor.

“All right! I think we’ll get on just fine,” Robbie’s grin was appreciative. He nodded towards the far door. “Come on. Let’s go flying.”

“I can’t wait!” Luka bubbled, as the three dancers followed their instructor. He led them into a large empty space, three sides of which featured bright green walls. The high ceiling was festooned with an incomprehensible collection of rigging, from wires, bars, tracks, and ropes, as well as lights and other components of theatrical stage equipment. As Thran and his compatriots took in the sights, Robbie held his arms wide.

“Welcome inside the world’s biggest lime,” Robbie said with another wide grin. He very much reminded Thran of Bain when he teased his siblings.

“It’s... very green,” Charisse admitted, taken aback at the intense color. “A very bright green.”

“It is, that,” Robbie agreed. “We do a lot of green screen work for films, hence the nerve-wracking color. You get used to it after a while.”

“I imagine it’s... very invigorating,” was Luka’s comment.

“It’s obnoxious, but that’s okay,” Robbie grinned. “Come on, let’s get you into harness.”

Two other riggers in black company tees were to one side of the big room, crouched on the floor beside three flying harnesses. They stood at Robbie’s approach. One was a burly black man who wore a close-fitting crocheted cap on his bald head, and had well-muscled arms and shoulders. The other was a tiny Vietnamese woman with thick black hair in a queue almost as long as Thran’s.

“Hey, guys,” Robbie waved to his colleagues. “Charisse, Thran, and Luka, that’s Fong Shiv, and that’s Mustafa Garland.”

“Tink,” the woman waved.

“Half Ton,” the man grinned.

“Interesting names,” Thran laughed.

“Tink’s trained so many Peter Pans that she’s become the patron saint of Pans,” Robbie explained. “Half Ton became a member of the elite powerlifting Thousand Pound Club when he deadlifted four hundred and ten pounds, squatted three hundred and fifty-five pounds, and benched four hundred and ten pounds a couple of years ago.”

“Ah, so we are in good hands, then,” Thran nodded approvingly. “A man who can bench press four hundred and ten pounds will have no problem to heave me into the air.”

“What are you, about one-eighty?” Robbie looked Thran up and down.

“Five pounds less,” Thran corrected.

Robbie nodded, then eyed Charisse and Luka. “A hundred, and one-twenty, about?”
Both dancers nodded.

“Okay. So let’s get you fitted in the harnesses, and we’ll talk about what you need to do in your show. Thran and Luka, if you don’t already have on your dancer’s belts, put ‘em on. I want to rig both of you in what you expect to wear in the show, as much as I can.”

“Luka is probably all right in his tights,” Thran explained, “but my costume is more involved. And it has a cape.”

“No capes,” Tink muttered to Half Ton with a rueful smile.

“A cape does complicate things,” Robbie conceded. “But Tink just likes to channel Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*."

“One of my children’s favorite movies,” Thran nodded. “And I understand the problem. But my choreographer insists that the cape is an essential part of the scene, a very dramatic entrance. I dance Death, Lord of the Underworld, who descends upon the carnage of a battlefield to collect the souls of the dead. The cape is very light and billowy, and is to stream behind me as I descend to, shall we say, make the grand entrance.”

“I talked to your choreographer about it a little. He’s a bit of an excitable dude, isn’t he?”

All three dancers laughed. “To say the least,” Thran confirmed.

“We’ll make it happen. It shouldn’t be too hard, given the harness we’ve got for you. But first, you need to learn to fly.”

The fitting took longer than Thran expected, but as Robbie explained, the company took its safety certification very seriously, and making sure the correct harness was snug and properly seated was important for both safety and comfort of the performer. It was a simple enough contraption, a vest-like thing made of tough, form-fitting fabric pieces and mesh strapping that went tightly over both shoulders and around both thighs. The wire attached at the back, between the shoulder blades.

“This is a single point harness,” Robbie explained as he worked on Thran’s harness. Beside him, Tink adjusted Charisse’s harness, and Half Ton, Luka’s. “From the discussion I’ve had with your folks, none of you will have much to do other than go up or down one time – no flipping, no sailing back and forth – so a single-point harness is all you need. It calls for only a single cable to do the lifting from the back. If you were turning flips in the air, we’d put you in a different harness that would support you at the waist with two cables, so you could somersault.”

“Thran goes down, and Luka and I go up,” Charisse shrugged. “Simple, I hope?”

“It’s never simple,” Robbie shook his head. “Every job’s got its bits and bobs. We take as much pains with your up and down as we do with Peter Pan where we’ve got as many as four people in the air at the same time. Safer that way.”

“Good,” Charisse gave an emphatic nod. “We dancers work so hard for many years to do what we do. I don’t want to undo so much work with a single flight.”

“We’ve worked with a lot of dancers,” Robbie assured her. “You’ve got a lot more going for you than most amateurs, exactly because of all that work. You know your bodies well, you know balance well, you know control well. Those will help us keep you safe, too.”

The trio of instructors made a few more adjustments, then Half Ton attached a wire to Charisse’s harness. “Ladies first, as they say,” he winked at Charisse.
“I’m ready!” she clapped her hands in excitement.

“Okay, this is just to check the adjustment of your harness, that everything’s as comfortable as it can be,” Robbie explained. “We’ll take you up a bit, and we’ll check the fit again. Thran and Luka, you watch how this goes, because your turns are next. Ready?”

At Charisse’s excited nod, Half Ton hauled on her rope, and up she went about three feet. She lifted both arms out as if they were wings streaming behind her, and arranged her legs in a fish dive. “Oh! It is much harder to hold the pose when the lift is so high up to the shoulders!”

Half Ton lowered Charisse slowly to the ground, making sure she got her feet solidly under her before he released the tension. All three of the dancers had their harnesses adjusted to make the lifting point slightly farther down their backs.

“This will make your position easier to hold, but also to tip over, so take it slowly,” Robbie cautioned, as Half Ton lifted Charisse up again.

“Oh! So I see!” Charisse agreed. “The balance is a bit harder, but it is much easier to hold the position.”

Luka was next, and with the adjustment, he, too was soon a few feet off the ground in the same fish dive position. When Thran followed him aloft, it was momentarily disconcerting, then exhilarating. He tried the same fish dive as his colleagues had, with the same success.

“You’re ready to fly,” Robbie grinned. “So here’s the deal. You stand over there, and we hoist you up over here. That’ll get you flying from there to here. Ready to give it a go?”

“Absolutely,” Luka said with bated breath, making Charisse and Thran laugh. Tink went with them to show them where to stand, then attached the wire to Charisse’s harness. At Tink’s signal, Robbie counted three, and up Charisse went, then across the huge space. An ecstatic cry of glee punctuated her brief flight.

“So amazing!” she called to Luka and Thran, when she was safely back on the ground.

“Oh, my gods, it is!” Luka yelled as he went aloft.

“All right, Thran,” Tink warned him. “You’re going to get a bit higher, because both Robbie and Half Ton will boost you. Keep your core strong, that’s the trick.”

“I hear and obey,” Thran grinned back, as he stooped down to let her attach the wire to his back. Tink waved their readiness, Robbie counted three, and up Thran sailed across the room. “Oy, suka blyad, Death flies through the air!”

The riggers gave them several more flights until all three felt comfortable with the basic take off, flight, and landing. Their next instruction was tailored to the specifics of their roles, where Luka and Charisse would fly up together, and Thran would fly down. A tall tower was the takeoff point for Thran, and the landing point for Luka and Charisse. His colleagues seemed to have no fear of the height to which they were boosted, though Thran was very much more aware of it. It was far easier to stand on the ground and look up than it was to stand at the height and look down, much less be hoisted off that height and then lowered down.

After several practice runs, the riggers worked with Luka and Charisse to fly up to the platform hand in hand. Thran had an easier time of it, and even managed to think about just how Death would swoop from on high. He thought of Rahmiel with wings fully extended, and experimented with that a little to see what worked best.
As he took a break to watch Luka and Charisse work in tandem, he asked Robbie, “Do you know the Imladris Academy auditorium, where our ballet will appear?”

The rigger nodded. “I’ve done two shows out there. Nice facility. The building’s not that old, unlike the rest of the place. An old church or something, if I remember.”

“Monastery, yes,” Thran amended. “But the auditorium is a new addition, you say?”

“Yeah, and a good thing,” Robbie grunted. “The old stuff’s cool to look at, but hell to put an up-to-date presentation space in it. The new addition’s got nice features for a secondary school space. More thought went into allowing for lighting, rigging, all that stuff, so while it’s not anything as elaborate as a Vegas show spot, it’s got a solid structure to support fliers. You’ll be safe – of course you will. We wouldn’t have agreed to the job if the space couldn’t support it.”

“The school’s attention to such things does not surprise me,” Thran said. “It was begun for children of many artists, and it would not neglect the performing arts.”

“Imladris supported us big time when we moved out here from the city into a bigger facility,” Robbie nodded. “So we support Imladris in kind. When your man told us about expanding the arts festival to include more performing arts, we were all over it, because it means more business for us. We cut the cost of our services for your ballet in half, so you get a cost break, but we get more than you do out of the deal. We get a tax deduction, we help the school, we help the arts festival, and more companies see the school as a good facility and us as a good production partner. Winners all around.”

“Indeed,” Thran agreed. “Our ballet company has many hopes pinned to this production, too. More work, more patronage, and the chance to bring a new ballet to the world.”

“Even better.”

“You said that you talked to our choreographer. Did he tell you about his wish that I fly not just over the stage, but over the audience, too?”

Robbie stopped to look at him in surprise. He waved to Half Ton and Tink to hold off on the next flight for Luka and Charisse to give Thran his full attention. “No, he didn’t mention that little detail.”

“I thought he might have overlooked that. From your expression, this wish is not a good one, no?”

“No.” Robbie’s shake of the head was emphatic. “It’s not. Like I said, Imladris’s auditorium’s got a lot of nice features. We’ll have no problem flying you and your two friends onstage, none at all. But over the audience – no. That’d call for a whole other set of supports and rigging, and the building’s not set up for that. Sure, you can throw a hellacious lot of money at it, but for a thirty-second flight? It’s not worth it. Even if you decided to throw money at it, you won’t get the construction and certification done in time for your premiere, much less the rigging design. Stick to stage flying at Imladris. Save the buzz over the audience when you take the show to Vegas.”

“That is sensible,” Thran agreed, not at all perturbed. At his easy acceptance, Robbie gave him a penetrating look.

“Ah. You weren’t too eager to be the one who buzzed the audience, were you?”

Thran chuckled. “It would have been a wonderful spectacle. It will be, one day. But for now, I am content if my first flight is not so precipitous. I will deal with the disappointment of the choreographer.”
“Good luck with that,” Robbie snorted frankly. “That Irmo... he’s famous, you know? And not just for his brilliant choreography.”

“I am well aware,” Thran offered a considered shrug. “But despite his... animation, he has made a brilliant ballet out of my story, and so I deal with the rest. He has learned that he cannot always get exactly what he wants from me, so he will adjust accordingly.”

“Good enough.” Robbie waved at Tink and Half Ton that they were back to attention on the three dancers, and their practice resumed.

At the end of two hours, all three dancers had made good progress on their flying. They would have four more lessons here at the Fly By Nighthawks studio, and then in another three weeks, with less than a month to go before *Immortal*’s premiere, Robbie and his crew would be onsite for several run-throughs of the dancer’s flights. They would also be present for all the full rehearsals to practice the rigging and unrigging. This was of little concern for Charisse and Luka, whose flights were in the last scene of the ballet. Thran’s, however, presented a bit more of a challenge, because he had to dance full scenes immediately after his descents onto the battlefield. They would have to figure out how to unhook Thran from his line onstage without the audience seeing it.

“We’ll pick that up onsite,” Robbie assured Thran as the lesson came to an end. “Maybe we dress one of our riggers as one of your dead bodies, and when you land he stands behind you to unhook the line. We’ll see what we have to work with before too long.”

“I thank you for your consideration,” Thran nodded, as Half Ton helped him out of his harness. “And for your expertise, too, Half Ton, and Tink. You have all been good teachers.”

“This was amazing,” Luka grinned. Despite two hours strapped in a tight and sometimes uncomfortable harness, as well as a lot of sailing around a big space, the young dancer’s enthusiasm was undimmed. “This was so much fun, and I learned a lot.”

“I liked it, too,” Charisse added with a wide smile. “It was hard work, but very enjoyable hard work.”

“We’ll see you back here soon,” Robbie led them out of the studio and back towards the lobby. “You lot were pretty easy. There’s a lot to be said for disciplined fliers, and you all were.”

“Oh, heck, yeah,” Tink made an exaggerated sigh. “So much easier than that last bunch of Tarzan fliers. Remember that one boy, Half Ton?”

“The one who tried to fly around the other fliers and tangle the lines? Oh, lordy, that kid nearly did me in.” The rigger made tsking noises and rubbed a hand over his face in exasperation. “I was ready to hogtie that kid in the rafters until he settled down. Robbie finally set him straight.”

“Easy,” Robbie shrugged when the three dancers gave him inquiring looks. His grin took on an evil cast as he pointed to an imaginary miscreant. “You do that again, and you’re grounded. Literally. Worked better than it does with my own kids. He didn’t cause any trouble after that.”

“Thank gods,” Tink muttered, looking up at the heavens for patience. “And no one got hurt.”

“Even better,” Thran agreed. “So we will see you again soon. You took very good care of us, and we appreciate it.”

“Our pleasure,” Robbie held up a hand in farewell as the dancers shouldered their bags. “Take care, and good luck with Irmo.”
The dancers waved, and headed for their cars.

“That was brilliant. So cool,” Luka continued to murmur, as they crossed the parking lot. “So very, very cool.”

“It was a lot of fun,” Charisse agreed. “I am afraid that today’s barre will seem anticlimactic after our lesson.”

“I will do what I can to enliven it,” Thran grinned. “I will explain to Irmo how he cannot have me fly over the audience.”

“Oh, that’ll throw gasoline on his fire,” Luka winced.

“It will, but it will not change the outcome. The auditorium cannot support it, so I will not support it, and we will just have to distract Irmo from his disappointment in some fashion.”

“Tell him we take the show to Vegas as Robbie suggested, and he will not be disappointed for long,” Charisse giggled.

“That might distract him from our premiere entirely,” Thran laughed. “We will sort it out, however it needs. So a bientôt, mes amis. We will meet again shortly at the school.”

With smiles and waves, the three dancers separated, and Thran climbed into his SUV well pleased with the day’s progress.

He couldn’t wait to tell Bard and their children what it was like to fly.
Chapter 135

Chapter Summary

The angel has an exciting tale to tell, and the saint shows his youngest cherub how a certain tree grows close to maturity.

It was just after eleven o’clock in the evening at the ancestral home of Clan Ffyrnig. Bard was in the sitting room, idly watching Bain and Legolas play their car racing game. His sketchpad was on his lap and his pencil was in his hand, but he hadn’t sketched anything for a good half hour. The day’s rigors in the barn had worn him out, but it was a good kind of worn out, so he enjoyed the boys’ snarky banter back and forth without guilt. He’d cast his first metal in years today, and it had come out fine. He’d sketched ideas for the next ones, ideas he loved. He’d fooled with so many tiny aluminum spheres that he expected to dream of being inundated with them tonight. Sigrid was upstairs, he hoped not still talking to Finn, given the late hour; Tilda had gone to bed an hour ago. The only reason the boys were still downstairs was that Legolas had pleaded to be allowed to stay up until his father came home, and Bain wanted to keep him company. It was the end of the school week, and while Legolas still expected to go to his fencing lesson tomorrow at nine, he was young enough to make up for the lack of sleep later in the weekend. So Bard had said yes. Who would be mean enough to deny a child the chance to see his hard-working father?

Bard would be happy to see his angel, too. He missed not having Thran’s smiling presence to anchor the supper table, to share tea with him in the sitting room, and to tease Tilda as they went through her French vocabulary.

When the mudroom door finally opened, Legolas almost hurled his game controller into Bain’s lap and bounded off the sofa with a whoop.

“Papa’s home!” Legolas crowed, drawing Bain’s laughter.

“That’s one way to win a race,” Bain snickered to Bard, as he maneuvered his car across the finish line. “He was ahead, too, so thank you, Thran.”

Bard grinned. “I think it’s safe to turn the whole thing off now.”

“Yeah, likely,” Bain agreed. “Can I have something to eat?”

“The usual stuff,” Bard replied, as he got up to head into the kitchen. “Nuts, cereal, peanut butter, fruit, yogurt…”

“Stuff that’s good for me, yeah, I know,” Bain exhaled as if he carried a huge burden. “Really, Da – would a bowl of ice cream kill me?”

“Can’t be too careful,” Bard teased back.

“Oh, Da,” Bain pouted, but followed Bard into the kitchen nevertheless.

“Welcome home,” Bard greeted Thran with a wave. His husband looked tired, but not exhausted, and his smile was unforced. “Good day, I hope?”
“Such a morning I have had,” Thran grinned, hugging Legolas, then fist-bumping Bain. “I had my first flying lesson today, and it was wonderful!”

Footsteps skittered down the central steps, and Sigrid trotted into the kitchen. “Ada! You’re home at last! Did you do the flying lesson today?”

“I did, I did!” Thran confirmed. He gave Bard a quick hug, then Sigrid. “I know it is late, but I want to tell you all about it, rather than wait until tomorrow morning.”

“I want to hear, too,” Bard agreed, grinning at how four faces turned towards him, as if he were the keeper of bedtime... well, he was for most of the family, but it was funny to see Thran’s expression turn just as inquiring as the children’s. “Are you hungry? Bain was about to have a snack, so what can I get you, angel?”

“I want soup, if there is any,” was Thran’s request. “And I want to be out of my dance belt. I will dash into the half bath with my leggings and so forth, and be right back.”

“All right, lads and lass, let’s get some food on the table for the hungry ones.” Bard opened the fridge door. “Sweetness, do you want anything?”

“Is there any popcorn left?” the girl asked quickly.

“Ooh, popcorn!” Legolas echoed. “That’s for me, too.”

“That does sound good,” Bain brightened. “I’ll get it out of the pantry.”

While Bard warmed a pan of soup for Thran, the children busied themselves with making the popcorn, and assembling the different spices they liked to sprinkle on it. Legolas had never tried cinnamon on popcorn before, but despite Bain’s grimace of distaste, he thought it sounded good.

“Ugh, Legs!” Bain protested. “What you want is cheese and bacon sprinkles!”

“Bacon sprinkles?” Legolas looked skeptical. “Do we even have bacon sprinkles?”

“No, but I keep asking Da to get some,” Bain gave Bard a pointed look. “I had them on popcorn at a birthday party once. Totally awesome!”

“I like Parmesan cheese,” Sigrid said. “And oregano. It’s like pizza popcorn.”

“I am back!” Thran dashed back from the half bath, now clad in tee, leggings, and socks. “Gods, I am starving!”

“You’re in a very good mood,” Bard observed, smiling as he stirred a pan of Thran’s soup. “It must have been something special, this flying lesson.”

“It was!” Thran grinned, taking the plate of seeded wheat rolls and butter that Sigrid handed him to put on the table. “As soon as we all sit down, I will tell you –”

“What’s going on?” a sleepy voice came from the door to the hallway. There stood Tilda with Mr. Bun under her arm, rubbing her eyes. “Is it a party? I smelled popcorn.”

“Three bags full!” Bain chortled, cycling the next bag through the microwave. “Come on, Til! There’s lots!”

“Why is there popcorn?” Tilda looked around in blurry confusion. “It’s not a holiday, or did I forget one?”
Sigrid came to pick her up, though with difficulty. “Ada had his flying lesson today, Til. He’s hungry, so we’re making soup for him, and popcorn for us. I’ll bring you a bowl if you’d like some, too.”

“I’d rather have cheese,” Tilda said sleepily, leaning her head on Sigrid’s shoulder as her sister carried her to the table. As Sigrid deposited her in her chair, the little girl’s eyes sharpened. “Flying lesson? Ooh! Ada flew today?”

“I did,” Thran stooped by her chair and tapped a long index finger playfully on her nose. “I am sorry we woke you up, Kukla, but I am very excited, and everyone is very excited with me.”

Tilda blinked until she was more awake. “Then I’m glad I woke up. I want hear about it, too.”

Sigrid brought a stack of small snack bowls to the table, as well as a small board bearing a chunk of Tilda’s favorite Double Gloucester cheese and a cheese knife. Bain dumped the last bag of popped corn into an enormous serving bowl, and handed it to Legolas to bring to the table. Bard handed Thran a serving bowl from the cabinet, then followed him to the table with the pan to fill the bowl with warm soup. As soon as Bard sat down, Tilda crawled into his lap to sleepily munch her cheese curled against his chest. He cuddled her close to listen, though she perked up as Thran launched into a description of his lesson with Charisse and Luka. Despite the late hour, Thran was all smiles as he told them about how green the studio walls were, what his outlandish instructor looked like, how small Tink was and how she got her name, why Half Ton had earned his nickname, and what it was like to stand atop a metal platform some twenty feet in the air and leap off it.

“You jumped off?” Bain gaped. “You really jumped off a twenty-foot platform?”

“I did,” Thran grinned proudly. “Many times!”

“Was it scary?” Tilda sat up on Bard’s lap to peer down the table at Thran.

“At first, very scary,” Thran nodded emphatically. “Twenty feet does not sound like much until you stand atop something that high and look down, because then it seems twice as high. That is almost three times as high as I am, yes? Perhaps at the school, I will have to be higher. I do not know. But the riggers who worked with us are very careful and very exact, and I felt as safe as one can feel to stand so high up. I was always on the wire when I climbed up, and at least one of the riggers always had my line in hand in case I fell, and of course Half Ton or Robbie held my line when I flew. It was very exciting.”

Bard grinned. “I can tell. You’re gesticulating.”

Thran made a raspberry and let his hands flap high above his head. “If you think I am excited, you should have seen Luka. He could not contain himself. He flew very well, and so did Charisse. She looked like the most elegant of birds, soaring up to heaven. Me, I did not fly up. I flew down to alight upon a battlefield. I pretended to be Rahmiel, but not quite so tenderly did I fly. I am Death, after all.”

“Of course,” Bard nodded sagely. “You ought to make quite the impression soaring over the audience.”

“Ah, that I will not do.” Thran explained that the Imladris Academy’s auditorium didn’t have the rigging platforms to allow him to fly above the audience. “So of course, I had to explain this to Irmo in the afternoon.”

“Uh-oh,” Sigrid paused in her munching of popcorn. “That must’ve provoked fireworks.”
“He was not happy at first,” Thran conceded. “But before he launched into a full tantrum, I distracted him to suggest that if there were a place onstage for Death to stand to watch the battles, he would look like a vulture on high that contemplates the carnage, and that this would add a most dramatic design element. Ori picked up on that right away and helped me made a most convincing confection of it, and before long Irmo almost believed that he had come up with this most dramatic addition himself, which of course bothered me not in the least. He busily conferred with Círdan about how to do this most of the afternoon, and so Abebe could lead us through our exercises and then our rehearsals without upset. It was a most productive day, if very long.”

The children had many other questions to ask about Thran’s adventure, and the dancer was so animated that he hardly touched his soup. Eventually, however, the questions and the excitement calmed, and Tilda was curled nearly asleep in Bard’s arms.

“Let’s get you back to bed, little doll,” Bard murmured, when the conversation lulled.

Tilda struggled to open her eyes. “Not yet. I want to hear more about the flying.”

“I have revealed, all, ma petite Kukla,” Thran replied from the other end of the table. “Perhaps I will think of more things to tell you when I am not so excited, but they will wait until tomorrow.”

“Someone needs to get some sleep before he has to fence tomorrow morning, too,” Bard added with a glimpse at Legolas. “And a couple of other children look pretty sleepy, too.”

“But there’s still popcorn,” Bain protested.

“Not much, boyo,” Bard countered gently. “Come on, lads and lasses. It’s time all of you went to bed.”

“I’ve got to get up early to go to work,” Sigrid remembered, getting up. She gave Thran a kiss on the cheek. “So I’m for bed. Night, Ada.”

“Sleep well, lioness,” Thran smiled, patting her arm. “Come, Legolas. It is time we were all in bed.”

None of the children protested too much on the way upstairs. The hardest part was to coax Tilda to brush her teeth. Once she managed that, she was happy to curl around Mr. Bun again and shut her eyes with a murmured goodnight. The rest of the children were almost as quick to settle, so after rounds of goodnights, Bard padded back to the kitchen. He put Tilda’s cheese back in its waxed paper wrappings and then in its plastic bag to tuck into the fridge. Despite Bain’s protestations, little popcorn remained, so he collected what remained into one of the children’s small bowls. Thran appeared behind him, smiling pensively.

“Your soup’s probably cold by now,” Bard pointed out. “Want me to nuke it a bit? Because you are going to eat all of it, yes?”

“Yes,” Thran gave him a mischievous grin as he picked up the half-full bowl. “I will nuke it. Perhaps thirty seconds, yes?”

“That’ll do it,” Bard nodded, carrying the empty popcorn bowls to the sink to wash. “I’ll clean up this lot, then come sit with you.”

He suited action to words, and sat beside Thran to munch on the remaining popcorn while Thran finished his soup.

“Exciting stuff today,” Bard observed with a smile.
“I left out the part about how uncomfortable the harness can be at times, but for the most part, yes, it was fun,” Thran shrugged. His grin widened as he buttered the second half of his roll. “Luka is very funny. He reminded me of Bain a little. It was most fun to watch him enjoy himself, though he acquitted himself well to work so hard.”

“Charisse was okay?”

Thran nodded as he swallowed his mouthful of roll. “She was her usual beautiful and spritely self. She looked like a small bird.”

“I’m glad it all went so well.”

“So am I. And I am glad that Ori helped me to divert Irmo. I had anticipated much more of a fuss.”

“Maybe he’s figured out that he can’t bully you, after all.”

“He has figured that out, yes. That does not always stop him from the attempt.”

Bard snickered as he got up to put his popcorn bowl in the sink.

Thran followed him with his bowl and bread plate. “So tell me about your day. Did you get to cast?”

“I did!” Now it was Bard’s turn to describe how he had assembled Hal’s tree.

“You welded!” Thran exhaled in mock annoyance, flicking the dishtowel at Bard’s thigh. “Suka blyad, I missed it again. Will I ever see what I have waited so long to see?”

“What, all of six months?” Bard teased gently, handing Thran the rinsed popcorn bowl to put in the dishwasher. “Don’t worry, angel. You’ll have plenty of chances to see the barn troll in fifteen layers of clothing crank up the torch.”

“I will know what is under the fifteen layers of clothing,” Thran tsked gently, giving Bard a crooked grin as he leaned over the dishwasher rack.

“Maybe not. With that many layers, it might just be a troll and not me under there, and you’d never know.”

“I will know. I know how you move, how you study whatever you work on.”

“I’d better tell the troll to make sure he copies my moves, then,” Bard chuckled, handing Thran the rinsed bowl and plate to load. He went on to describe how the painting had progressed, and all the other news that concerned Clan Ffyrnig. “I assume you’ll be with the ballet tomorrow?”

Thran nodded as he dried the sterling spoon and knife to put in the drawer. He tossed the dishtowel to Bard to dry his hands. “We will not have the stage to work on next Saturday, because that is the evening of Sigrid’s dance, and the school rightly wants to ensure that they know who goes and comes in the building that night. So if you are amenable, we will work here, because Saturday is the day that UVB holds classes all day in the studio.”

“Of course.” Bard mopped up a splash of water from the granite countertop. “With any luck, Darla and her two will be done everything but the interior doors and the window trim, and maybe all of the windows will be in by then –”

“The windows will be in?” Thran repeated in surprise.

“The company called yesterday. The windows start to go in next Wednesday. The renovation’s in
the home stretch.”

“Then we will enjoy a beautiful house restored as it was meant to be,” Thran mused, smiling.

“An empty house, for the most part.”

“Not empty of our family – only of things, and that will change as we search for things we like. If you see something, Bard, do not wait for me. Buy what strikes you that we can use. A mantel to go with the new sofa, for instance.”

“I want us to choose things together, angel,” Bard protested.

“As thoughtful as you are, I hardly think you can fill a house before I can hunt with you, lyubov moya. So if you see something you like for us, get it. Such as that blue inlaid table that has ended up in the sitting room. That is a nice piece, and the blue contrasts nicely with the pecan wood and the red rug.”

“I’ll see,” Bard conceded. “Maybe you’ll have a few hours free on Sunday now and again, and we can look together.”

“I hope so,” Thran agreed. He stretched up until his joints cracked, and sighed. “The soup was very good. And I like those rolls. Thank you.”

“That was the last of the soup. I thought tomorrow I’d make Chinese hot and sour, if you like that? Or bean?”

“I like both,” Thran nodded. “I also like the Asian chicken soup with the ginger and the star anise. Tcha, I am not helpful. I have liked all your soups so far. As long as you do not put eggplant in soup, I am likely to be happy. Or lentils. I do not like lentils at all.”

“You know eggplants have no place in our house,” Bard teased. “Nobody likes them. And we can skip the lentils, too.”

“Eggplants look like something I should like. Such a nice color, a nice shape, but the taste?” He grimaced. “It bears no contemplation.”

“Agreed,” Bard winced in commiseration. “Rounds and then upstairs?”

“Yes,” Thran agreed, and so they made their usual circle through the house, set the security system, and then walked upstairs together. It felt good to have a thorough scrub, then to settle in bed with his husband’s long body beside him. They relaxed in their usual tangle of limbs, and within minutes Thran breathed deeply in sleep. His flying lesson, combined with the rest of the day’s physical exertions, had worn him out. The endurance required of a dancer was considerable.

As if in sympathy, Bard’s eyelids grew impossibly heavy. Welders needed just as much sleep as dancers, it seemed. That gave him something to smile about as he drifted off.

* * *

Saturday flew into a whirl early. Sigrid hurried through porridge and set off on her bicycle for the Blue Mountain Bistro. Legolas wolfed down the next batch of porridge, then a sleepy Thran took
him to fencing. The painters appeared to finish the porch and start on the carriage house. Thran returned to share omelet and tea with Bard before he headed off to the school. Bain and Tilda slept in, so Bard left them a note in the kitchen telling them he was in the barn, then strode out to begin the day’s work.

He opened the bay door wide to enjoy the warming sun and light breeze. Then came the pull-ups that had become his habit. With each repetition, he thought of the strength that returned to his body, strength he used to shelter his children, and cradle his husband. As if that were not incentive enough, he thought of Thran’s hungry eyes on him as he heaved himself up and down, up and down, up and down. When he caught his breath after the last one, he grinned. There was nothing wrong with teasing himself before he settled to the rigors of his art.

Today’s plan was to clean Hal’s tree after its casting and welding, and give it its patina. The branches of the tree were long and attenuated, so he needed a fine detail drill and a delicate hand to refine and polish each limb and branch until the welding joints were no longer visible and all extraneous bits of metal were removed. He began patiently, and let the sounds of the world outside the barn drift in – the occasional call of Darla and her fellows, liquid notes from a couple of birds, the chatter of cars passing down the lane. Before long, Tilda appeared, so he came inside to make her breakfast. When she was done, it was almost time to get Legolas from his fencing. Bain was still asleep, so Bard stuck his head in the boy’s room to get him up. The youth decided to stay home and make his breakfast, so Bard and Tilda ran a few errands before they picked up Legolas. Once they retrieved Legolas, they came home to sort out lunch. The boys made plans to walk into the village to meet Killian and Derry for a film, so they headed out after lunch. Bard was eager to get into the barn again, so Tilda kept him company as he continued his polishing.

“Ooh, it looks like a real tree,” Tilda commented, when Bard wiped the last of the residue from the tree trunk. “Are you going to sand blast it the way you explained to Ada?”

“I don’t think so, little doll,” Bard shook his head. “Tree bark isn’t a smooth surface, so I don’t want this to look too slick. I’ve cleaned up the rough bits that I didn’t like, so I’ll degrease it, and it’ll be ready for the patina.”

“What’s a patina?” Tilda cocked her head curiously.

“That’s a fancy name for finish,” Bard smiled. “It means I heat the metal, then spray lot of chemicals on it, then heat it and polish it some more, and then spray more chemicals, and more heat, and on and on until it’s done.”

Tilda giggled. “How do you know when you’re done?”

Bard’s shoulders lifted in a shrug. “When it looks right. It’ll take a little while, so do you need anything before I start? Once I start, I have to finish.”

“Can I watch?” she looked at Bard with a hopeful look.

“I’ll move my stand outside so there’s lots of ventilation, but you have to stay where I can see you, and far enough away not to get burned or breathe any of the chemicals. It’s very important that you stay safe.”

She nodded. “I will, Da.”

“Okay,” Bard agreed. “I’ll get everything set up, so if you want a snack, go get one, and I’ll be ready to start in a few minutes.”
Tilda jumped up quickly. “Okay, Da!”

The little girl ran towards the kitchen, waving to Darla and her helpers as they worked on the carriage house. While she was gone, Bard checked the sky; the sun was steady, and there was no wind. He dragged out his metal stand – it looked like nothing more than an old gas grille grate on a post that let Bard turn it this way and that – and set it outside the barn. The acetylene torch and tank came next, and then some firebricks. He degreased and rinsed the tree, putting on medical gloves to carry it outside to the stand, where he propped it up on the firebricks so that it was supported upright while he worked on the patina. Finally, he fetched the chemical solutions he’d chosen to get the greenish grey finish he wanted for the trunk, and a big bucket of water.

“I brought you some cheese, Da,” Tilda called, skipping away from the house with a small plastic storage bin in her hands. “And those funny crackers you like.”

“Thanks, Tilda,” Bard smiled at his youngest child. “Let me wash off my hands first. That’s just the perfect thing I need before I light the torch.”

“I’m excited to see what you’re going to do,” Tilda said, following Bard into the barn to the wash sink. “I’ve never seen anybody make anything but a drawing before – except those clay pinch pots. I hope I get to do something better than that this summer in my pottery camp.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Bard agreed, taking some of the cheese and a cracker. “Maybe tiles, or animal figures. That’s what the course description said.”

“Do you think they’ll do the wheel thing?”


Tilda nodded. “I know. I want to try it, but the animal figures sounded neat, too.”

They chatted for a few moments until their snacks were done, then Tilda ran inside to return the plastic bin to the kitchen while Bard made one last check. He got a box where he arrayed all the bottles, brushes, and bronze wool he’d need, then tied his heavy apron on. He tugged a fireproof glove onto his right hand that held the torch, and a surgical glove on his left hand that wielded the spray bottles and brushes to add the chemicals to the surface of the tree. When Tilda returned, she stopped some feet away.

“Where should I stand, Da?”

“Back up another three feet, right in front of me. Yes, that’s good. Are you ready?”

She nodded.

“Okay. This might take a while, so if you get tired of watching, that’s okay. You can go play in the house, or in the yard, but not the barn.”

“Okay, Da.”

“Okay, here I go.”

Bard started the torch, and methodically began to heat the metal tree. The metal was in no danger of melting; he just had to get it hot enough for the various chemicals to do their work. As thin as the tree was, this didn’t take long, so he was quickly ready to start his layers of patina. He’d decided to add a base layer that would produce a greenish cast, then follow that with a layer that would darken the crevices of the piece for depth. Additional layers would add browns and greys. The lightning-scarred
section of the trunk would have a much lighter color than the rest.

He began slowly, building up the darker colors in the angles and cracks in the bark, then burnishing it off on the highlights to allow more of the green to come through. He used a small brush on the trunk so that he kept the darker colors away from the lightning scar, and small spray bottles on the limbs and roots for more even coverage. If Bard had to describe how he decided which colors to add, or how much of each, he wouldn’t have been able to say beforehand. But as the bronze changed with each spray of chemical, each swipe of the bronze wool, he got closer to the colors he’d envisioned when he first conceived the piece.

As small as the tree was, it didn’t take long for Bard to complete his patina. He left the smallest twigs a bit paler, a bit greener, than the trunk, which showed the green mostly in the trunk highlights. The lightning scar was lighter, as if a piece of the trunk had fallen away. When he was pleased with the color, he neutralized the chemicals so they didn’t change the color further, then brushed a fine wax over the hot metal to finish it.

When he looked up, Tilda still stood in front of him. He turned off the torch, and beckoned her forward.

“It’s still hot, so don’t touch it, but you can come closer now.”

She came closer to inspect the little tree. “It’s not just sort of brown any more. It’s got green in it, and black, and grey, and even a little yellow. And the scarred part looks like it was bad, but now it’s started to grow over.”

“Just what I want it to look like,” Bard nodded. “I hope it’s what Mr. Hal wanted it to look like, too.”

“Oh, I hope so, too,” Tilda agreed, frowning at the tree critically. “It looks like a real one, so I hope he didn’t want a fake tree.”

Bard chuckled. “I don’t think he did, no. We’ll find out in a few days, when I’ve got it on the rock and the leaf on.”

“It’s almost done, then,” Tilda smiled up at him. “Will you take a picture of it?”

“I sure will,” Bard agreed. “Just like all artists do when they finish a piece. You want a nice picture for your portfolio, to show people what kinds of things you do, so they ask you to do something for them.”

“Do you have a portfolio of all your things?”

“I still have mine, yes. Now I’ve got more things to put in it. And Mr. Frodo has made me a nice website, so I’ll have to tell his uncle about the tree so Mr. Frodo can add pictures of the tree to it.”

“So when I become an artist, I’ll need a portfolio and a web site, too.”

“A good agent, too. Mr. Bilbo and Mr. Frodo are good, so you’re set there.”

“Well, that’s one thing done,” Tilda said with utter seriousness. She was regarding the tree thoughtfully and didn’t see Bard’s surprised look, or hear his silent laughter.

Tilda might be the youngest child in the family, but she was growing up just as fast as the rest of them were. Before long, she wouldn’t be content to stand and watch Bard work on his pieces – she’d be making her own.
He couldn’t wait to see the art his daughter would create to carry on this part of the family business.
Chapter 136

Chapter Summary

Time passes, the angel labors, the saint soars... and a cherub leaves for the dance.

Chapter Notes

Hal and Ari appear courtesy of johnysmitten. Thank you, my dear! ❤️

I don't own any rights to "The Little Mermaid" film, or the forks used therein.

"Grasshopper" is a reference back to the "Kung Fu" television series of long ago, and I don't own any rights to that, either.

As Thran drove home from the Imladris Academy, his thoughts were aswirl. So tangled, so loud, so tense, so confused, so...

Suka blyad, such a mess. Such a fucking mess.

After the week he’d had, was it any wonder his thoughts were in such turmoil? Why had he ever agreed to take a position with such an underfunded, understaffed, undermanned company? There were no understudies for the three major roles because the company was so small, and no money to pay for them, anyway, even if they could find someone to dance Thran’s role. There was no studio space to work on the choreography, and so the company labored on a high school stage with so many student volunteers who were children and not professional, and the people who were professional had restrictions on this and that because of labor unions and time spans and work rules...

Then there were the rampant colds racing through the company, because while the school had finally recovered from the pervasive childhood illnesses, the dancers had little immunity from the remaining germs, and they had begun to sneeze and cough and run fevers and chug gallons of cold remedies, so tempers were short and people ached and wheezed so much that they fell out of position...

... which led to pulled muscles and sore knees, and the UVB’s physiotherapist had moved into the school auditorium to work on dancer’s aching bodies...

... which led to Irmo’s temper fraying and venting at dancers not quite at their best, and Thran having to speak at increasingly frequent intervals about maintaining professional demeanors...

... which led to Irmo railing at him in private...

... which cut into the time Lettie or Ori needed him to deal with company matters...

... which fought for attention with media duties, costume tweaks, pointe practice, flying lessons, and so many other things...

... all of which meant he was not with his family until very late each night, which added guilt to the
mix. He hadn’t seen Tilda since last weekend.

Thran sighed. At least tomorrow, the company would be in the ballroom. The shape of the ballroom wasn’t always what they needed to refine pieces of the choreography, but focus was much easier to maintain. He would make a point to send everyone home at four, not six, and there would be no work on Sunday, despite Irmo’s protestations. Everyone needed a break, a day to see to whatever gentle barre they deemed fit, and then enjoy rare free time for the rest of the day. Thran needed this as much as anyone in the company. If all he managed were to sleep late, walk gently around the yard with Bard, enjoy regular meals rather than bolted bites here and there, and remember his children, those would provide desperately needed relief. For those twenty-four hours, he would not have anything to do with the fucking insanity called *Immortal*.

Thank all of the gods that Bard had everything so well in hand. The children were happy and well cared for, the construction work on the house was all but complete, and Bard was thoroughly happy at work on his commissions, finally the artist he should always have been. Though Thran was criminally distracted with ballet matters, he had forced himself to tell Bard that he noticed when the house painting was done, even on the porch, carriage house, and barn, and the replacement windows had descended upon the house in a flurry of industry over three days, today being the last day. He had managed to notice the missing doors throughout the house as the painters stripped their battered paint, refinished most in something that left the beautiful wood gleaming, painted the few that were too battered to remain so naked, and then put them back into place. He remembered Bard telling him that the painters would take another day or so to touch up all the window trim before they took their leave, but what mostly registered with a distracted ballet dancer was that hammer blows and sanders no longer echoed through the house, and the smell of new paint was mostly gone. Now the house echoed only with the laughter of children, and filled only with the aromas of good food.

Bard worked hard to make sure that Thran didn’t feel guilty about his long hours away – supportive words, endless delicious meals tailored to fit his schedule and tastes, encouraging smiles, and so, so many back rubs. He still felt guilty, but he intended to remain that way; as long as he felt guilty, he had not descended into the single-minded oblivion that had claimed him once before. He forced himself to put aside his worries to listen to Bard tell him about what the children had done, and who’d done well on tests, and who needed to do a little more study. No matter UVB’s pressing urgencies, these small things about term papers and art projects and English tests were important, and he would pay them the attention they deserved.

If he forced himself to be objective, despite all the logistical tangles, *Immortal* itself progressed well. Irmo no longer railed about not having the wherewithal to fly Death over the audience and onto the battlefield; once Círdan and his crew built the appropriate platform at Stage Right where Death would stand, the lighting team had designed a wonderfully evocative bit of backlighting that turned Death’s perch into a looming aerie. In a nice bit of symmetry, another platform went up at Stage Left, where the Maid and her Soldier would stand when they became stars in the sky. Thran quite liked opening the ballet with a descent from one side, and closing it with an ascent to the other.

The lights and sound and visuals had progressed, as well. The blank walls that framed the empty third of the set were painted a matte black, and a barrage of images projected on those black walls combined with stark flashes of light to turn the bare stage into a chaotic battlefield on which the dancers seethed and surged. The glow sticks in the costumes worked well, and the dancers had learned how to exchange the red ones that identified mortal life with the eerie green ones that identified the dead. When the battle staggered to a shuddering halt, Death descended in otherworldly streaks of blue and silver to begin his grim collection. Thran couldn’t wait to practice that not just in his flying lessons but onstage, but a few weeks remained before Robbie and his riggers would arrive at the school. At least Fly By Nighthawks had confirmed that everything needed for safe flight was in place.
The troll market was built, but its set dressing continued to evolve. The students on the construction, light, and sound crews had taken a real interest in the set, and items continued to appear to further enhance the appearance of the uncounted different cultures that occupied the Underworld, like flotsam washing up on the beach after a shipwreck. Someone had snuck an ancient surfboard onto the set, which wasn’t in line with the overall impression Irmo wanted to make, so the school had rung with laughter when repeated pleas for the removal of the surfboard had echoed over the PA system.

Had that been Killian of the dark, curly hair and bouncy step who’d escorted the surfboard offstage? Finances didn’t look quite so dire now, though they were still not flush enough for him to completely relax. While Irmo had howled when Lettie had brought in a film crew to tape a short segment about the ballet, the result was well worth the cost and the lost rehearsal time of *Immortal*’s three principals. As soon as the segment began to air, donations picked up, and so did inquiries for tickets. Thran was confident that all three shows during the arts festival would sell out, which gave him hope that perhaps their next step would be to stage the show in the city. Thran had too much to think about to consider that yet, trusting Ori and Lettie to do that for now. All this work would be for naught if he couldn’t dance Death as well as everyone expected.

As if to reinforce the physical demands, Thran’s lower back twinged. An old injury from long ago had resurfaced – a touchy right erector spinae. Not only was that painful, it also meant he had another demand on his time and thoughts, to take proper care so that he did no further damage to the muscle. He stubbornly refused to wonder how much longer he could push a thirty-four-year-old body as hard as he had a twenty-year-old one. Maybe Sigrid still snarked at him now and again for being too thin, but at least his leanness was easier on his feet and ankles, not to mention the rest of him.

There were a few other bright spots in this whirlwind of worries – Luka had finally embraced the proper work ethic to imbue his Soldier’s first act with all the lightness and naïve enthusiasm Irmo could ask for. When the ballet grew darker in the last two acts, Luka had soaked up everything anyone had told him about how to convey a desperation that he’d never personally experienced. When he and Charisse danced their despairing pas de deux, the raw emotion generated between them was all but visible. The young man would have a world of opportunities before him, if they could just get to *Immortal*’s premiere. Eventually, that would register with Luka, but for now, what made him work harder than future hopes was the occasional emphatic nod that Charisse directed his way. That gesture appeared only when someone met her high standards.

Charisse continued to be the brightest of bright spots. She and Thran worked so well together, and she only cemented her place in Thran’s affections as one of his favorite partners. Vileria might always remain his favorite, because she had matched Thran’s temperament, style, and body type so well. But dancing with the effervescent Charisse never failed to make Thran feel lighter and quicker. She was such a joyful, brilliant dancer! Thank the gods for that – the amount he’d had to pay to buy Charisse’s contract for the duration of *Immortal*’s development, rehearsal, and performance was scandalous. So much of what he’d paid for everything was scandalous, if not ruinous – yet.

Now that his thoughts had circled back to money, Thran fought back with the same tired refrain, that cost and stress and worry and tension would all pay off when the curtain finally rose to reveal this ballet in all its splendor. *Immortal* would be worth every sacrifice.

His touchy erector spinae twinged as he shifted in his seat. Ice, as soon as he got home. Bard’s bag of frozen peas... no, one of the children’s lunch ice packs, that would work better... he hoped.

Gods, was there nothing that could distract him from the mess in his head?
Ah, yes – tomorrow was the Imladris Academy’s junior prom, and he would be in the house to see Sigrid depart with her prince to the ball. No matter how Irmo yelled, Thran would step away from his dance to rejoice when Sigrid left for hers. This was not something he would miss, no matter how Irmo protested.

That finally gave him something to smile about as he turned off the lane and into the driveway. He put his SUV in the carriage house, eased from his seat gingerly to keep his back from twinging, and headed into the house.

Bard was in the kitchen as Thran came in from the mudroom. He looked up to meet Thran’s eyes, the teakettle poised over his mug.

“Angel!” Bard smiled in welcome, putting the teakettle down to offer Thran a kiss. “You’re home early.”

Thran’s lips turned up in a rueful smile. “Oh, so it is before midnight, then.”

“Only nine-thirty. What can I get you to eat?”

“Ice first, please. One of the lunch ice packs –”

“Uh-oh,” Bard’s smile fell into concern before he pulled open the freezer drawer. “What happened?”

“An old injury. Little to speak of. The physiologist worked on it, so now is the time to ice it.”

“Papa!” Legolas bounded into the kitchen. “You’re home!”

“Be careful of your Papa, Legs,” Bard said quickly, handing the boy the ice pack. “He’s pulled something somewhere.”

Legolas’s gaze raked Thran from top to bottom, and his lips turned down. “The erector spinae again.”

Thran nodded. “You know me too well, synok. It is not terrible. I have caught it in time, I think.”

Legolas took the long elastic wrap that Bard passed him and slipped the ice pack into the pocket. Thran pulled up his sweater and knitted top to let his son wrap the pack around his waist. Bard watched with interest.

“So, lower back, just by the spine?”

Thran nodded. “The ice will help it. Thank you, Legolas.”

“So... maybe you want to give the ice a few minutes to work? I’ll put something on for you for supper. Lasagna, turkey vegetable soup, sandwich things, salad, ice cream...”

Thran tsked at the mention of ice cream. “Tcha, no brownies? I thought a brownie sundae would be the perfect supper.”

“Did someone say brownie sundaes?” Bain was instantly in the room.

“Someone did, but I don’t think he meant it,” Bard gave Thran a smile.

“I’ll eat it, if no one else wants it,” Bain pleaded.

“Maybe tomorrow, boyo. Right now, this close to bedtime, you know the routine.”
“Drat,” Bain muttered. “Do we have any of those almonds left?”

“Mmm, almonds,” Legolas murmured, and followed Bain into the pantry. Thran shared a commiserating look with Bard.

“Really, what would you like?”

“What I want is lasagna,” Thran sighed. “What I will eat is turkey soup.”

Bard nodded without hesitation. “Coming right up.”

Thran let Bard pull out the plastic bin of soup before he could no longer suppress another sigh. Bard’s eyebrows went up in inquiry.

“Only a small piece of lasagna,” he conceded. “It has been a long day.”

Bard put the bin of soup away and pulled out the pan of lasagna. “It’s got lots of veg in it, and turkey rather than beef, so it’s not terrible for you.”

“And it has cheese,” Thran gave Bard an apologetic look. “How can I resist cheese?”

“Cheese? Who’s got cheese?” Tilda bounced into the kitchen. “Can I have some?”

“I don’t know,” Bard teased. “Can you?”

“May I please have some cheese?” Tilda rephrased with a pleading look.

“Have at. You know where it is. I’m warming Ada’s supper.”

“Hi, Ada!” Tilda beamed, then frowned when she spotted the end of the elastic wrap that dangled by his side. “Ooh, did you hurt yourself?”

“Just a small twinge, Kukla,” Thran said to reassure himself as much as Tilda. “The ice is a precaution to make sure it does not do more than twinge.”

“Yuck,” Tilda said in sympathy. “You can have some of my cheese to help it feel better.”

“You must have learned that from your Da,” Thran smiled. “He warms a very nice piece of cheesy lasagna for my supper.”

“It’s very cheesy,” she nodded, smiling. “I had a piece almost as big as Bain did.”

“No, you didn’t,” Bain came out of the pantry, his mouth full of almonds. Legolas came after him, his mouth just as full.

“I did, too,” Tilda riposted stubbornly.

“Doesn’t matter, anyway. I ate two pieces to your one.”

“How do you know?” Tilda demanded. “You don’t taste your food – you inhale it, so how do you even know what you’ve eaten?”

“You don’t need to answer that, Bain,” Bard gave his son a look. “And it’s not polite to talk about how much someone eats, Tilda.”

“But Da, s/he –” both children protested.
“Enough,” Bard gave both children another pointed look. “Thran’s tired, and he needs his supper, not so much snarking. Tilda, you can start the shower cycle now, before it gets too late.”

“Yes, Da,” Tilda replied, but she sent an affronted look at her brother before she disappeared upstairs. The boys glanced at each other, decided that it was time for an expedient exit, and disappeared into the sitting room to see what was on TV.

“This is just about done,” Bard told Thran, as he eyed the covered plate in the microwave. “Sit down, and I’ll bring it to you. Do you want a salad to go with it?”

“I ate all the vegetables I took with me today, so I have had plenty of those. Perhaps some fruit.”

“Raspberries and blueberries are in the fridge. Pears are in the bowl. And of course we have bananas.”

“I have had two bananas already today, so raspberries, I think. I will get them.”

Thran perused the contents of the refrigerator, bending carefully to extract the box of raspberries from the fruit bin. He poured a serving into the small bowl that had magically appeared beside him on the kitchen island, returned the rest to the fruit drawer, and carried the bowl to the table. He sat gingerly, careful not to slump into the back of his chair. A plate of steaming lasagna appeared in front of him with a fork, then a bottle of ibuprofen and a glass of water. Bard returned to the kitchen counter to refill the teakettle, so Thran fished out a large dose of the pills and washed them down before Bard came to sit beside him with his mug of tea.

“I’ve got more water on for tea.”

“Thank you.” Thran eyed the lasagna, which was more than the small portion he’d asked for. He gave Bard a look, who gazed back without apology. He would eat only part of it, then, only as much as he thought would keep him from losing any more weight, and if Bard protested, he’d get the boys to help him finish it. He put a small forkful in his mouth...

“Oh, gods,” Thran sighed, when he’d swallowed. “You are the devil incarnate, and so is this.”

Bard’s smile was quiet, but triumphant. “I had to find some way to get you to eat it all, didn’t I?”

Thran hummed through another bite. “You succeeded. If anyone tries to take even the smallest bite of this, I will kill them with my fork.”

Bard snickered. “Good.”

“It has vegetables and turkey, not cheese and beef?”

“Oh, it’s got cheese – three kinds. But yes, ground turkey instead of ground beef, and carrots, tomatoes, zucchini, onions, and spinach, then the tomato sauce.”

“Soooood good,” Thran mumbled, chewing another mouthful. He gave Bard a look. “No parsley?”

Another snicker. “It’s got parsley. And oregano, chives, and basil, too.”

“You are a delight, lyubov moya. And so is this.”

“I’m glad you like it, but the lads won’t be. You don’t want to know how much they ate. Tilda’s not far wrong that both of them inhaled mass quantities.”

“We did not!” came a chorus from the sitting room.
“No?” Bard drawled. “Then I suppose the first pan disappeared all on its own?”

“It was Martians!” Legolas chortled.

“Oh, it was? I guess I’d better not make so much next time, if you didn’t like it well enough to defend it from Martians.”

“Da!” Bain protested. “No!”

“No, Bard!” Legolas agreed. “Papa, tell Bard he can’t make just one pan next time!”

“I agree with the boys,” Thran speared another forkful of noodles, vegetables, and cheese. “You cannot make only one pan of this ever again.”

“Yeah!” the boys laughed.

“What’s going on down here?” Sigrid came into the kitchen with her wet hair coiled up in a towel. “Oh, hi, Ada! You’re home early!”

“For once,” Thran nodded. “The boys try to tell me that they did not like this lasagna, that Martians ate it.”

“What!” Sigrid snorted. “They both all but waded into the pan to devour it. Even Tilda ate a massive amount.”

“And of course you showed more decorum?” Thran teased.

“Oh, gods, no,” Sigrid grinned. “I was right there with them. The stuff’s divine.”

“It is,” Thran nodded. “You are ready for tomorrow’s dance?”

“I’m ready for tomorrow’s turn as a barista,” Sigrid waved her hands. “I’ll worry about the dance when I get off at three.”

“I will be here to see you,” Thran announced with pride. “The company will work here tomorrow morning, and I will dismiss them all early because they have worked so hard and deserve a break. Then I will be here to see you off to the Cinderella ball with your Prince Charming.”

“Prince Doofus!” the boys chorused.

Sigrid sent a calculating look towards the sitting room door. “Gloriana Ecthelion and Angelica Crofton,” she said in a warning tone.

“Ugh. She fights dirty,” came Bain’s plaintive mutter.

“She does. How did you manage it, being the only boy in the house?” Legolas returned.

“It wasn’t easy,” Bain muttered back.

Thran couldn’t suppress a laugh, and hastily pressed a napkin over his mouth before he spewed bits of lasagna over his plate. Gods, maybe to others this was nothing but snarky children’s nonsense, but he felt privileged to be in the house to hear it.

Sigrid crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a superior smile. “Game, set, and match.”

“Without question,” Thran nodded. “And I will still be here to see you off to the ball.”
Sigrid’s smug smile faded into a happy one. “I can’t wait. I came down to say thanks for mending the hole in the back of my dress, Da. I thought we’d forgotten about it.”

“I remembered,” Bard nodded. “Even though your hair might cover it, I thought better safe than sorry.”

“I might wear my hair up. I haven’t decided yet,” Sigrid said thoughtfully, then gave Bard a sweet smile and a peck on the cheek. “So thank you for giving me the chance.”

“Welcome,” Bard reddened, and gazed after his daughter as she headed back upstairs. Belatedly, he looked back at Thran, then at his plate. “Wow. I think Martians ate your lasagna, too.”

“Oh, I ate every bit of it myself,” Thran declared, grinning. “No Martians dared defy my fork.”

Bard laughed. “Good. Can I tempt you with a little more?”

“You can, but I must resist,” Thran held up his hands.

“That’s why I filled your plate from the start,” Bard sat back with the same smug look that his children had mimicked earlier.

Thran hummed in concession as he started on his raspberries. “So how was Clan Ffyrnig today?”

Bard’s smile warmed Thran as he savored his fruit. The children had had a successful day at school, and Legolas was excited about his fencing lesson tomorrow. Tilda had been invited to the Gamgees to go to a film with Elanor in the morning, then lunch afterwards. Bain and Derry planned to play a little soccer and video games while they waited for Kíllian and Legolas to finish their fencing lesson, then the foursome would go to see a film.

“No Finn or Tara, but Kíllian,” Thran mused. “Finn will prepare for the dance, yes? But if there is no Tara, but there is Kíllian, have they broken up?”

Bard grinned. “They’re not old enough for the dance, technically. Even so, I don’t think Kíllian’s quite of the mindset yet to ask Tara to the dance. Neither do I think Tara would be all that enthused about going to the kind of film that thirteen- and fourteen-year old boys tend to like.”

“That is true,” Thran grinned. “She is likely too refined to want to chortle over fart jokes, or more stuff blows up.”

“Gods, I’d hope so,” Bard leaned over his elbows and chuckled.

“And how did a certain hunky welder fare today?”

Bard’s face waxed with a broad grin, both for the compliment as well as in anticipation of what he had to say. “Frodo was over this morning. I gave him another set of sketches for Celebrían’s gallery, but that’s not the main reason he stopped by. He wanted to take a few pictures of Hal’s tree for my website and portfolio before Hal comes by tomorrow to take delivery.”

“It is finished?” Thran sat up straight – ouch, his back twinged at the sudden movement.

“It’s finished,” Bard nodded.

“Where is it? I want to see it!”

“It’s in the dining room,” Bard nodded towards the doorway. “I thought the green walls would make a good backdrop for Frodo’s pictures, so it’s sitting in the middle of the table. And it’ll look good
there when Hal comes to get it.”

Thran got up carefully, so as not to pull his back, and hurried into the dining room to see the small tree. Bard had put a small cloth underneath the rock that formed the statue’s base to keep it from scratching the table, but it still looked elegant against the wood tabletop and grey-green walls.

“So much movement, yet stillness; so much quiet, yet promise,” Thran murmured, slipping his arm around Bard’s waist. “The lightning scar tells of a traumatic past, but the leaf tells of a hopeful future. You have made a wonderful piece, my sweet saint.”

“Thank you,” Bard leaned into Thran’s body and pressed a kiss on his shoulder. “I’m more than pleased with it.”

“You should be,” Thran nodded as he gazed at the small tree atop its quartz perch. “Your first piece in so many years, but so masterful that no one would believe you have been away.”

“I didn’t feel like I’d been away when I worked on it, either,” Bard admitted. “It felt right from start to finish. I half hope Hal doesn’t like it.”

“What? Why would you want that?” Thran turned to look at him with a shocked expression. “This is wonderful! How could you hope Hal would reject it?”

“Because it’s got a rhythm that just draws me,” Bard admitted. “But that’s a good sign, I hope. Pieces I like a lot tend to be ones that find good homes.”

“I am sure this one will,” Thran said firmly. “I hope that Hal’s friend loves it as much as you do. But if he does not, I will buy it from Hal myself.”

“No need,” Bard smiled without concern. “If Hal doesn’t like it, it’ll sell quickly anyway. I’m on a roll. Frodo said that Bilbo sold Alexander’s Downfall yesterday, and wanted to know if I had anything else lurking in the barn I wanted to put up for sale.”

“I am happy for you, lyubov moya,” Thran said simply. “You are yourself again.”

“No.” Bard found Thran’s hand and drew it up to kiss his wedding ring. “I’m better. You and Legolas are here, and life is beyond wonderful.”

Thran smiled, and refused to think about sore backs, aching feet, and ballets that required blood sacrifice before they came to life.

* * *

Saturday was no day of rest for Clan Ffyrnig. Bard was up early with Sigrid to make sure she had a good breakfast before she headed off to work. Perhaps her eyes sparkled a little more than usual in anticipation of tonight’s dance, and her farewell wave to Bard was excited as he saw her onto her bicycle and down the lane. Legolas was up next, wolfing down pancakes before Bard took him to his fencing lesson. Once Legolas bounded out of the truck with his bag over his shoulder, Bard headed to the market to restock the fridge and pantry, then stopped at the florist’s shop as soon as it opened to claim Sigrid’s boutonniere for Finn.

When he got home, Tilda and Thran were up, sharing porridge as Bard came in with the first couple
of grocery bags and Finn’s boutonniere. Tilda oohed over the small white rosebud with its frill of fern before he stashed it in a corner of the fridge, then headed out for more bags. His husband and daughter unpacked the bags as Bard ferried them in from the truck, then he joined them to distribute his purchases to pantry, fridge, and cupboards. Tilda hurried to finish her porridge, then scampered upstairs to get ready for her visit with the Gamgees. Bard walked her over, and chatted a few minutes with Rosie before heading home.

When he returned, Thran had cleaned up the kitchen, and disappeared to put on his dancewear. Bard got out the ingredients for the muffins he’d bake for the dancers, and set to with a will. Given his successful week as an artist, he planned to do house things today – scrape and paint more garden benches, tidy up the scattered mess in the house that installing new windows had left, and clean up the yard. Sam would be by with his crew in a few days to plant new bushes and lay out the Japanese garden he and Thran had chosen for the back terrace.

Muffins were in the oven and dancers had started to arrive when Bain surfaced. He inhaled two huge fried egg sandwiches on toast and two containers of yogurt before grabbing his soccer ball and dashing outside to meet Derry. Bard returned the kitchen to order, and carted the vacuum from room to room to suck up the crumbs of debris around the windows. Down to take out the muffins and deliver a basketful to the ballroom with butter and jelly – he stashed a few for Hal when he arrived – then back upstairs to finish the vacuuming. Gods, tomorrow everyone needed to do a more thorough cleanup, and they needed to do laundry. But for now, Bard was free to putter with his house stuff until Hal appeared.

He saw to the plants in the solarium – they needed a good watering and a quick grooming here and there – then ambled out to the gazebo where two flaking garden benches and a table perched. The day was warm and sunny, so he laid down a tarp and plunked the garden pieces atop it to give them a good scraping. Once the old iron furniture was clean, on went the magical Majorelle blue he liked so much, imbuing the elaborately curlicued pieces with a bit of modern edge. He went around the yard and into the carriage house to collect the remaining pieces that needed refinishing, and set them out to scrape and paint. By the time he was done, it was time to prep Thran’s lunch, so he left the collection of chairs and tables out on the lawn by the gazebo to dry.

Inside he went to put a sweet potato in the microwave to cook, then assemble Thran’s salad from fresh greens, thin slices of carrot and red pepper, shreds of chicken, and blueberries, topped with a sprinkle of sunflower seeds. He put it in the fridge to await Thran’s convenience, then checked the sweet potato. It was done, so he chopped it up in a bowl with a little cinnamon and butter. The potato smelled so good that he put cooked another one for himself, and sat at the table to eat it. He was about halfway through when Thran passed through the kitchen on his way to the half bath.

“That smells delicious, lyubov moyya,” he said, slowing to take an appreciative sniff.

“Yours is in the microwave,” Bard said through a mouthful. “Heat it for one minute and it’ll be ready. Your salad’s in the fridge.”

“Thank you, my saint.” Thran replied, as he continued on. Bard finished his potato, got up to scrounge through the fridge, munching on a carrot as he chose a few grapes and took out the jar of peanut butter. A side trip to the pantry found the crackers, and he grazed through his selections as he contemplated what to make for supper. Maybe a nice slab of salmon with farro and roasted veg...

He tidied up the remains of his lunch, enjoyed a mug of tea, and cleared out of the kitchen before the dancers broke for lunch. He headed back outside to putter with a rake, stuffing his gleanings into the compost heap. He had the front cleaned up quickly, and stood by the carriage house to admire the freshly painted house. The white paint shone in the sunshine, and the newly repaired and painted
shutters for the two round windows were like the bow tie that enhanced a formal tuxedo. The red door glowed with welcome, and the carved balusters looked like lace on a dress. All in all, the old girl looked like a young ingénue again...

A car pulled into the driveway – Hal’s blingy R8. The path was already crowded with several of the dancers’ cars, so Bard motioned Hall to pull forward in front of the carriage house. He left his rake inside the open bay door before he greeted the flamboyant financial planner. Hal’s boyfriend, Ari, got out of the passenger side of the car to hold up a hand in welcome and offer a friendly smile.

“Bard!” Hal heralded, bounding forward with an excited grin to throw both arms around Bard. “How are you? Oh, my god, the house looks fab! Absolutely beautiful!”

“Hello, Hal,” Bard greeted warmly as he returned Hal’s hug, then nodded at Ari. “Ari, it’s nice to see you again, too.”

“Hi, Bard,” Ari smiled affectionately at his excitable boyfriend. “Hal really didn’t want to drive out here, as I’m sure you can tell.”

“Oh, hush,” Hal rolled his eyes at Ari. “I absolutely refuse to apologize about getting excited to see my tree, Ari. Really, Bard, do you blame me? Why shouldn’t I be excited? I just know it’s going to be amazing.”

“No criticism here,” Bard shook his head, laughing. “It’s my work you’re excited about, and that’s a gift. Do you want to see it first, or can I tempt you with a muffin and some tea first?”

“Oh, you are a cruel one,” Hal pretended to look torn. “Your muffins, your sculpture... I’m just a big old pig about everything, so I’ll ask for both at the same time.”

“How about if I give you a muffin on the way to see the tree, then you can have something to nibble while I make a fresh pot of tea?”

“Perfect,” Hal nodded. “Well, come on! I can’t contain this much excitement for so long, can I?”

“You never can, Hal,” Ari said with an indulgent smile.

“Of course I can’t,” Hal sniffed, as Bard led them to the mudroom door and into the kitchen. A few dancers sat around the table with Thran as they ate, and Hal hailed Thran like a long lost brother. Bard left them to chat a bit while he retrieved his stashed muffins from the fridge, and ran them through the oven while he made tea. By the time Ari and Hal had finished their chat with Thran, Bard had the muffins warm and the tea brewing.

“Help yourself,” Bard invited. Once Hal and Ari had their treats, he led them into the dining room. Despite his satisfaction with the tree, he tensed as Hal had his first look at it, and tried to look at it as if he hadn’t been the one who’d created it. The angular white quartz base, so solid and substantial, contrasted sharply with the grey-green roots that wound around it, then rose into a scarred and bent trunk that supported a full canopy of bare branches. The pale, stark scar was softened as new growth filled in its edges, and the branches thrust up in defiance of that damage. But what spoke loudest of the tree’s return to life was the solitary small leaf of the brightest spring green that dared to sprout from one of the topmost branches. Bard had labored long to reproduce that exact shade of green, variegated just enough to look real rather than the watercolor on thin paper it was. Yes, it was a piece that Bard was proud of. But would Hal feel the same way?

“Oh...” Hal hemmed. His hand fluttered to his chest, then his mouth, then back to his chest again, and he swallowed once, then again. “Oh, Bard...”
Bard didn’t dare twitch, but waited out Hal’s flustered reaction. Both hands flew up to Hal’s lips, then clutched each other, then fluttered in the air until they finally landed at Hal’s sides.


The financial planner put his arms around Bard and hugged him hard. “Thank you. You don’t know. But thank you. Thank you so much.”

“You’re more than welcome, Hal. I’m glad I made something that speaks to you so well.”

“Well, that’s putting it mildly,” Hal huffed, releasing Bard as he finally regained his composure. “Honestly, Bard, you just reduce me to a big old puddle. I’m awestruck. Just... beyond words.”

“I’m honored,” Bard smiled. “I don’t imagine that too many people can say they’ve struck Hal Galadhrim dumb.”

“Oh, no,” Ari shook his head emphatically, grinning at Hal. “In fact, until today, I would have said that no one has ever struck Hal dumb.”

“Oh, both of you,” Hal waved a hand, but his smile was just the slightest bit sheepish. “Honestly, what did you expect? You’d have to have a heart of stone not to be struck dumb, so there.”


“It does!” Hal agreed. “And the scar... it’s there, but healing. It’s perfect. It’s exactly everything I wanted it to be. Bard, I’m absolutely delighted.”

“I appreciate that, Hal,” Bard nodded his thanks. “I hope you’ll enjoy it very much.”

“I will,” Hal gave Ari a knowing look. “I’ve got plans for this little beauty. I hope it’ll do much more good than you imagine, but that’s a story for another day. Ari, love, would you carry it out to the car? And hold it on your lap on the way home?”

“You’ll have to drive home at less that your usual breakneck pace, for once,” Ari replied.

“I suppose I will.” Hal tapped his upper lip with a finger, then struck a pose. “I wonder if I can?”

“You’d better, Hal,” Ari urged with a smile. “Or you’ll impale me on your delicate tree.”

“Oh, pfft,” Hal waved a hand. “That would be a waste of a perfect sculpture, and a perfect body.”

Bard smothered a smile. “I’ve got some bubble paper and a box to help you avoid impaling anything.”

“I appreciate that,” Ari grinned.

The tree was soon carefully swathed and ensconced in Ari’s lap in Hal’s blingy Audi, and after another exuberant hug and a profusion of praise, Hal waved goodbye, leaving Bard to enjoy an appreciative chuckle. Hal was a good soul, and a delight.

It the tree ended up as a gift to Hal’s troubled friend, Bard hoped its message of hope resonated as deeply as Hal’s generous friendship.

“Da! Hi, Da!” Tilda came skipping around from the back yard, with Rosie in tow, as well as her four children. Bard was delighted to see all of them race around the yard in a game of tag while Rosie and
Bard had a chat. Of course, they had to grab the curious Merry-Merry before he poked his fingers all over the newly painted garden benches, but the paint was dry enough to the touch that his fingers and clothes stayed clean. The small boy ended up over Bard’s shoulder, giggling and trying to tickle Bard while he caught up with Rosie about the plans for the summer arts festival. He tended to forget that the entire village was preparing for the festival, not just UVB. Perhaps he should kick his own backside in gear and prepare a few pieces of sculpture as well as his sketches for Celebrían’s gallery?

Bard gave himself a mental poke. He still wasn’t the world’s best marketer, but at least this time something important sank in early enough for him to do something about it.

The Gamgee children and Tilda still raced around the yard when Sigrid pedaled up the drive. She offered a breathless greeting before she disappeared inside to start her preparation for the dance. After a few minutes of reminiscing about dances in their pasts, Rosie headed for home, a parade of small children following more or less behind her. Bard had to recapture Merry-Merry before he headed back to poke the painted benches, but quickly diverted him by pretending to be a bear who loved to find little boys to tickle. He let the laughing toddler run just out of his reach after his mother, who snared his hand firmly to lead him home.

Bard went back to his groundskeeper duties, raking up the last of the winter’s detritus from the yard’s nooks and crannies. Tilda helped him load his gleanings into the compost heap. After she went inside to read, Bard pulled out the old mower to trim the new spring growth, and in an hour the lawn was in as good a shape as he could make it. It’d be fun to see Sam and his team come in with new plants to complement the house’s transformation. As he pushed the mower towards the carriage house, dancers began to stream out of the ballroom, waving a farewell to him as they sorted out the tangle of cars parked in the driveway and down the lane. Bard put away the mower and the trimmer, closed the carriage house, and ducked inside the mudroom.

“Bard? Is that you?” Thran called from the kitchen.

“It’s me, angel,” Bard called back, bending down to unlace his boots.

“Do we have a plastic bucket?”

“Sure.” Bard relaced his boot and came into the kitchen with a quizzical look for his husband. “How big of one?”

“Big enough for me to put my feet in it.”

Bard’s eyes immediately went down to Thran’s feet, but he still had on his dancing slippers. Nothing seemed untoward, but Thran’s expression was guarded.

“It’s in the carriage house. I’ll get it.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”

Bard retraced his steps outside, fetched the bucket, and washed it out thoroughly to remove the bits of dirt that had settled in it. When it was clean, he carried it inside the house. Thran sat in his chair at the table in the kitchen, looking uncomfortable. An ice pack was already wrapped around his ribs, and the bottle of ibuprofen was on the table next to an empty water glass.

“Bucket,” he said, holding up said article. “Now what?”

“May I ask you to put as much ice as you can in it, then water? Leave room for me to get my feet in it.”
Uh-oh. That sounded dire. But Bard merely found an old towel he used for washing the truck, and put it on the floor at Thran’s feet. He carried the bucket to the fridge, where he hauled out a ten-pound bag of ice and dumped a good quarter of it into the bucket before plunking the bucket atop the towel. The watering can from the solarium ferried water from the sink to the bucket.

“A little more water, please,” Thran asked, so Bard obliged. When Bard made no move to tend to anything else, Thran gave him a resigned look.

“This is nothing unusual, Bard. Many dancers ice their feet after a long day.”

Bard nodded. “Good to know.”

Thran eyed him again, and Bard did his best not to give in to a smile. “Do we eat early today to give Sigrid more time to prepare for her dance?”

“No especially,” Bard shrugged. “Finn doesn’t pick her up until seven-thirty, so if we eat at five-thirty, she’ll have lots of time.”

“What do we have tonight?”

“Salmon, veg, farro, some sort of fruit.”

“Ah. You have already decided.”

“I thought about it while I raked the lawn. Go on and stick your feet in the bucket, Thran.”

Thran’s look was disgruntled.

Taking pity on him, Bard squatted by his feet, and reached out to take one in his hands. When Thran tsked and tried to pull his foot away, Bard held on gently until Thran stopped pulling.

“No secrets, angel. That’s what we promised each other. I know what dancers’ feet look like, so it won’t kill me to see yours. Let me help.”

Thran tsked again, but didn’t resist when Bard eased off his canvas dancing slipper. As he expected, he found scrapes, small blisters, bruises, and a lot of red skin. He eased it into the bucket, then repeated the same actions with Thran’s other foot, which was in no better condition. When he looked up, Thran grimaced as the icy water hit his feet.

“The first minute is the worst,” Thran confessed. “Painful until the cold numbs my feet.”

Bard stuck his hand in the bucket, wincing. “Intense, no doubt about it. How long do you need to soak?”

“At least fifteen minutes,” Thran sucked in his breath. “The longest fifteen minutes of the day.”

“You’ve got ice on your back, too. How bad is that?”

“An annoyance, to be sure. But not severe enough to keep me from the dance.”

“I’m glad you have tomorrow off,” Bard said, giving Thran a frank gaze. “Because you do have tomorrow off, don’t you?”

“I do,” Thran confirmed. “And I am even gladder about that than you are. This has been a long, hard week.”
It was hard to watch his husband struggle not to show how uncomfortable he was, so much so that Bard’s throat clenched. He patted Thran’s thigh in sympathy.

“You don’t have to be such a stoic, cariad. Look, I’ll go make you a cup of tea over there so you can grimace all you want to over here.”

“Go, go,” Thran gave him a sheepish, if pained, smile. “I have only so much stoicism in me.”

Bard went, but kept a surreptitious eye on Thran as he filled the kettle and gathered cups. Thran bent over his legs, his braid drooping nearly to the floor; he laced his fingers behind his neck, and stayed hunched over his legs. Bard poured hot water into the teapot, then collected a pair of mugs to bring to the table. At the sound of his footsteps, Thran straightened. His face was twisted in pain, and his breathing was measured as he struggled to master his discomfort.


“I will be all right,” Thran tried to reassure him. “You know I do not like to be cold, and I find this excruciating. A cure far worse than what it treats, by far.”

“What does it treat?”

Thran took another measured breath. “A dancer’s feet swell. The ice reduces the inflammation. It does work. But I hate it, no matter how well it works.”

“I’ll get you a towel to dry off with. Socks?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, angel. Just ten more minutes to go.”

“Ten more lifetimes,” Thran winced. “Suka blyad!”

Bard ran upstairs for a clean towel from the linen closet, and a cushy pair of socks from Thran’s dresser, then ran back down to the kitchen. Thran looked so unhappy that Bard sat with him to count down the minutes, trying to distract him with a synopsis of his conversation with Hal, then the details of the art festival he’d gleaned from Rosie. He talked about all the benches and tables he’d scraped and painted, and his plans to repair and repaint the gazebo. At last the ten minutes passed, and Thran pulled his feet out of the bucket with a gasp of relief. Where they’d been red and swollen before, now they were white, almost as pale as the marble atop the kitchen island. Bard blotted gently, not rubbing or squeezing too hard, until they were dry.

“Will you need the ice again today?”

Thran shook his head. “I am thankful to say no.”

“Then I’ll dump it out in the laundry sink. Sit tight.”

Bard upended the bucket and left it to drain in the mudroom, then came back to give Thran a critical look. Yes, his expression had eased, and he flexed his toes and rolled his ankles to speed their warming. He slipped on his socks with a sigh of relief, then met Bard’s eyes.

“So much better,” he exhaled. His body visibly loosened, and his smile was chagrined. “No pain tolerance.”

“Bullshit,” Bard snorted. “How much pain did you endure to get yourself to the point that you
needed to ice your feet and your back? Different kinds of pain affect people in different ways.”

Thran hummed a concession.

“Where do you want to settle? I can carry you into the sitting room.”

Thran looked up at him in reproach. “Tcha, I can still walk for myself, silly saint.”

“Of course you can. But Merry-Merry Gamgee thought it was great fun for me to give him a ride around the back yard, so I’m in good form if you’d like to try it yourself.”

Thran’s lips slid into a reluctant grin. “You are shameless, lyubov moya, and I still have enough self respect to totter from here to there under my own power. You may bring the tea.”

Thran got up gingerly, more because of his back than his feet, and padded into the sitting room with Bard on his heels. He took his time to settle on the sofa, eventually ending up with his head in Bard’s lap and his legs stretched over the length of the sofa. They enjoyed a companionable silence, exchanging a word here and there, content to take their ease together. Before long, Bard got up to start supper, leaving Thran to nap.

Bain and Legolas came bouncing in shortly thereafter. They and their mates had made a day of it, replete with video games, soccer, a silly movie, a few more rounds of video games, then home. Both smelled of the outdoors and sweat, and their tees were quite aromatic. Bard sent them upstairs to change before they returned to help Bard with supper.

“Muster the troops, lads,” Bard directed, when everything was ready. Legolas dashed upstairs to get the girls, and Bain stuck his head in the sitting room to call Thran. Sigrid came down in her sleep tee and pants, but her hair was piled on her head in an artfully messy knot, with a pair of black lacquer hair sticks to hold the confection in place.

“Ada loaned me these,” she said with a smile at Thran when Bard complimented her hair. “I think they look cool.”

"You look like you have chopsticks stuck in your hair, Sig," Bain snickered.

"Very funny," Sigrid snarked. "Not."

"Remember in The Little Mermaid, Sigrid?" Tilda asked, smiling. "When Ariel put the fork in her hair? I liked that part. I think Ada's stick things look much nicer than a fork."

"Why, thank you, Til," Sigrid gave her sister's pigtail a playful tug. "Now I know who my real friends are in this family."

That got laughs out of everyone but Bain, who made a loud raspberry instead.

"Of course our Sigrid looks much nicer than a mermaid with a fork in her hair, Kukla," Thran grinned when the laughter had calmed. "Much more elegant, I think. And our lioness will be well prepared tonight if she gets hungry at a restaurant that has run out of utensils."

“Oh, Ada,” Sigrid grinned. “That’s something Da would say. He’s definitely rubbing off on you.”

“The corny Dad jokes,” Thran nodded sagely, winking at Bard. “Yes, your Da is a master of those. I can only hope to reach his level of corniness.”

“Practice, Grasshopper,” Bard intoned with a grin. “You must study long and hard if you hope to
attain the heights of Dad joke-ness.”

“I will, I will,” Thran pretended to salaam over his plate.

Bard waved a hand at Thran, and looked around the table at the smiling children. “See that you do. Now, who wants dessert? Just ice cream tonight.”

“Vanilla with sprinkles!” Tilda called.

“Ew, Til, that’s boring!” Bain groaned. “Any of that chocolate whatever left?”

Sigrid excused herself to go upstairs, but the rest of the children scurried to array bowls, toppings, and ice cream on the table. Bard was glad to see Thran indulge in a small dish of the vanilla topped with his favorite raspberries and a dash of chocolate sauce. He was more concerned when Thran got up to help with the supper cleanup. Wasn’t that bad for his feet? But a single quiet but quelling look from Thran convinced Bard to smother his protest. He presided at the sink, rinsing the dishes for Thran to load in the dishwasher while the children ferried everything from table to kitchen island. Legolas wiped the table, put away the condiments, and scraped the few leftovers into bins; Tilda dried the silverware and put it away; and Bain dried the knives, pots, and pans. Once Thran switched on the dishwasher, everyone settled in the sitting room with tea. Legolas got Harry Potter from its shelf and offered to read, so the book made its rounds so each person could read a few pages.

At seven-fifteen, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Bain jumped up.

“No, you won’t,” Bard got up, and pointed Bain back to the sofa. “This is Sigrid’s night, and we’ll all play nice for it. No pranks, and no teasing.”

“Yes, Da,” Bain subsided at his father’s level gaze. Legolas made a sympathetic face, so Bard suspected one or both of them had hoped to inflict some sort of brotherly hazing on the hapless Finn.

“Can I get the flower, Da?” Tilda asked eagerly.

“That’d be nice, little doll.”

As Tilda scampered into the kitchen, Bard padded down the hall to the front door. When he opened it, there stood Finn, looking very handsome in a dark blue suit with a pale blue shirt and blue and green clan plaid tie. His long blond hair was neatly brushed, and he had a corsage of white orchids in a plastic box. He held up a hand in greeting.

“Hi, Mr. Bowman. I’m here to take Sigrid to the dance.”

“Come on in, Finn. You look great. Of course, you know she’s not ready.”

“Oh, Mom warned me about that,” Finn made a face. “She won’t be hours, will she?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Bard grinned, as Thran appeared in the hall. “I’ll tell her you’re here.”

“Okay,” Finn nodded. “Hi, Mr. Oropherson. How’re you?”

“I am well,” Thran replied, freeing Bard to head upstairs. He knocked on Sigrid’s door.

“Da? Come on in.”

Bard stuck his head inside the room. “Finn’s here.”
“Almost done.” Sigrid sat her desk, putting the last touches on her makeup. She turned a hopeful face on Bard. “Not too much?”

“Perfect, sweetness.”

Sigrid snorted, but softly. “You’d say that if I wore a bag and smeared that football stuff around my eyes.”

“You’re not wearing a bag, or that football stuff, and you look beautiful,” Bard said with a fond smile.

“Hook the back, please?”

“Course.” Bard stooped to see the tiny hook and loop at the top of the back of Sigrid’s dress, and got them properly fastened. Sigrid put on a pair of plain silver hoop earrings and an old-fashioned blue rhinestone necklace, then gave herself one more critical look in the mirror, nodding when she was satisfied with what she saw. She stood up to fluff out her dress, draped a shawl over her arm, and collected a small clutch bag – both Daphne’s, as was the retro necklace.

“It’s nice that you have a chance to wear your Mam’s things at last,” Bard observed. “She’d approve.”

Sigrid swallowed. “Mam would approve of a lot of things around here. She’d be really proud of you.”

“Of you, too.”

“I want to look at her picture before I go downstairs.”

“She’d like that. So I’ll go down and prepare the troops for your grand entrance. Finn looks nice.”

“He’d better,” Sigrid rolled her eyes. “Sometimes he’s such a doofus.”

“Not tonight. He’s done you proud. See you downstairs.”

“Okay.”

“Prepare for the flashing of photograph bulbs, or whatever’s inside mobile cameras these days.”

With a snicker, Sigrid waved Bard downstairs. He came down to find Thran chatting with Finn, but the boys lurked nearby, and Tilda was on the other side of the stair, holding the boutonniere in its box and looking up at the stairs expectantly.

“The belle of the ball will make her entrance momentarily, I have been directed to say,” Bard intoned. “All cameras at the ready.”

He fished his mobile out of his jeans, and had just started the camera when Sigrid’s step fell on the top stair. She looked very happy, calm, and self possessed as she came down to the landing, and saw her family and boyfriend waiting below. Everyone but Finn, even Bain and Legolas, had a mobile out to snap her picture as she came downstairs. It was just as well that Finn didn’t have to concern himself with a camera, because he was too busy gaping at Sigrid. He wasn’t the only one – Legolas and Bain looked almost as surprised, and several seconds passed before either remembered to snap any pictures.

“Wow,” Finn finally stammered. “You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen, Sigrid.”
“Thank you,” Sigrid accepted with great dignity, then she smiled. “I don’t expect to see anyone tonight who looks nearly as handsome as you do, either.”

“Thanks. Um, I’ve got your corsage here.”

“I’ve got your button thing,” Tilda piped up, holding up the box as everyone laughed.

“Boutonniere,” Bard corrected with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that,” Tilda said, handing the box to Sigrid.

“Thanks, Tilda,” Finn replied with a grin, and there was the usual fanfare of picture-taking as the corsage was pinned to Sigrid’s dress and the boutonniere affixed to Finn’s lapel. They posed smiling for several more pictures, including some at the base of Hope the Lope, before going outside.

“Would you do a big favor for my mom and dad?” Finn asked as everyone filed onto the porch. “Would you send me some of your pictures tomorrow? Sigrid knows my email address, and I’d like my mom and dad to see them.”

“We’ll be sure to,” Bard agreed, and Thran nodded agreement. “I know they’ll enjoy them.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bowman,” Finn said as Sigrid draped her shawl over her shoulders. “The dance is over at midnight, so I’ll have Sigrid home about twelve-thirty.”

“That’s fine, Finn. Thanks. Sigrid, I’ll wait up for you. I hope you both have a great time.”

“Thanks, Da.” Sigrid kissed his cheek, which Thran was quick to photograph. When she bestowed a similar kiss on Thran’s cheek as well, Bard snapped that. “And you, too, Ada.”

“Have a wonderful night, lioness,” Thran smiled as he bowed over her hand and brushed the back of it with a kiss.

“The best night,” Bard agreed, kissing her hair.

“Have a good time, Sigrid,” Tilda waved. “You look so pretty!”

“Thanks, Tilda!” Sigrid waved back, as she took the arm Finn offered her. “I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay! Bye!”

“Bye!” The rest of the family waved as they came out onto the porch to watch Finn help Sigrid into his car, then get behind the wheel. With a few more smiles and waves, the couple disappeared down the lane.

Bain, Legolas, and Tilda were quick to return inside, but Bard stood looking down the lane thoughtfully. Thran edged close enough to thread his arm around Bard’s waist, and he pressed a kiss on Bard’s hair.

“So the world changes,” Thran said softly.

“So it does,” Bard nodded. “But it’s a good change.”

“It is.”

They stood in quiet companionship for a little longer before they followed Tilda, Legolas, and Bain
back inside.
Chapter 137

Chapter Summary

A weary angel does his best to stay awake until a cherub returns from the ball, then Clan Ffyrnig takes a deep breath before a new week begins.

Chapter Notes

Bain's history teacher, Mr. DeFilippo, is named in honor of my son's teacher who nurtured a love of history in so many of his students through his own love and enthusiasm for his subject. Would that all teachers were so in love with their subjects, and delighted to share that love with everyone they meet. Thank you, sir!

The fantastic gingerbread version of St. Basil's Cathedral that Thran refers to was a real one. In 2009, Pastry Chef Troman Felizmenio, who worked at the Ritz Carlton hotel near the Kremlin and Red Square, made one that was 6.5 feet (2 meters) tall. He put it in the hotel lobby to greet guests as they arrived. It was an exact exterior replica of the 16th century cathedral, with a big tower in the center, and eight smaller, onion-domed towers around it, all covered in lots and lots of royal icing decorations. If you Google "gingerbread St. Basil's," you can see a picture of it. It was amazing! I loved being able to link the Russian half of Clan Ffyrnig to a real moment and place in our world, just to make them even more real.

Thran settled gingerly on the sitting room sofa, glad to prop his achy feet on the coffee table, and shut his eyes. He suppressed a shiver – the room was slightly too cold, as if it were late March. How could it be almost June? It was, however, and he was the one out of sync, not the temperature – such a chill spoke more of how tired he was, rather than how unseasonable the weather was.

Bless all of the gods, tomorrow he did not have to dance. He was tempted not to do his barre or his yoga, either.

Automatically, he rejected such an absurdity – of course he would do his barre and his yoga. It would not help him to stage Immortal if he neglected the basics so close to the ballet’s premiere.

But he was so tired...

He would see how he felt in the morning, after he had slept as late as he possibly could. Or in the afternoon, if he slept the clock around.

_I will not feel guilty. I will not feel one single iota of guilt, even if I sleep until six in the evening._

If he slept that late, he would miss the day with lyubov yego and the children, and he did not want to do that. He was already with them so little.

“‘The children are through their showers and in bed, angel. You can go soak in the tub if you want,”
Bard’s soft voice insinuated itself into Thran’s reverie.

“I might melt into the water, and when you came to find me, there would be nothing left but a few
strands of white hair,” Thran admitted, keeping his eyes closed. “I would not like to be reduced to
nothing but a drain clog.”

“A warm shower, then. Then you can collapse in bed with a clear conscience and a noble cause.”

“I want to stay with you and wait for Sigrid, unless you would rather I did not,” Thran protested. “I
have so little time with you, and I do not want to waste this evening.”

“Of course I don’t mind if you do, but you need to rest. You look exhausted.”

“I am exhausted,” Thran admitted. “So forgive me if I drowse on the sofa while I wait with you.”

“Get your shower, then. I’ll have a drop of nalivka waiting for you.”

“Come with me, so that I do not dissolve down the drain. Then we will both have a drop of nalivka.”

“Deal.”

They helped each other upstairs and through the shower, said a last goodnight to the children, then
came back downstairs in tees and sleep pants for their treat. Thran took the bottle of liqueur out of the
wine refrigerator, and fetched two small glasses from the butler’s pantry. When he came out with the
glasses, Bard was at the counter, arranging a few shortbread cookies on a plate.

“Cookies, my saint? What is your term? You live large tonight?”

Bard grinned. “There’s no reason why we can’t have a party while we’re waiting for a third party to
come home from her party.”

Thran snorted in laughter. “Tcha, you put so many parties in a single sentence!”

“The children will tell you that there is never too much party in anything.”

“Without doubt.”

He took the two small glasses to follow Bard bearing the cookie plate into the sitting room. His
husband propped a pillow against the arm of the sofa so that he could comfortably lean against it, and
Thran settled between Bard’s legs. He handed Bard his small glass, and Bard plopped the cookie
plate on Thran’s lap. They munched and sipped in silence for some minutes.

“Feeling more human again?” Bard murmured.

“I felt all too human earlier. I am glad to feel less human now,” Thran sighed.

“Good point,” Bard allowed. “I can turn on the TV or some music if you want.”

“You would have to move to do either, and then I would have to move. It is much sweeter not to
move at all.”

Bard waved the universal remote in front of Thran’s nose. “No one has to move.”

“Something quiet, then.”

Bard clicked on the television, and eventually found a travel documentary about the Trans-Siberian
Railway. They watched in companionable silence as the narrator imparted that the longest railway in the world crossed eight time zones.

“That would be a fun adventure to take one day,” Bard murmured. “Cross the Atlantic, get on a train in France, ride all the way to Moscow, go up to Ulan Bator and then down again, then go on to Beijing. Fly to Vancouver, take the Trans Canadian Railway east to Toronto, then some other train home to New York. Or the reverse.”

“It sounds quite romantic,” Thran smiled sleepily. “The reality would likely not be but so comfortable, because you and I are so tall. Train berths are not meant for giants.”

“You’re right,” Bard conceded, rubbing Thran’s arm. “But I’ve never been anywhere but Wales and Canada, and it’d be fun to sketch the steppes of Central Asia, or the Forbidden City. Maybe when Tilda goes to college we can journey somewhere on a train. I can wait to fulfill a certain fantasy that long.”

Thran opened one eye. “What is this certain fantasy, lyubov moya?”

“I want to make love on a train. But if the berths are as short as you say, maybe it’d be an exercise in contortion rather than passion.”

Thran laughed softly. “Perhaps we would find passion in the contortion. Ah, I know – the Buddha pose that you enticed us with in the solarium! That is not contortion, and the motion of the train would do most of the work for us, yes?”

It was Bard’s turn to laugh. “It’s never work to make love with you, angel. But I grant you, the train would give a healthy carnal context to the term ‘rock and roll.’”

“We have started a bucket list, then. To make love on a train,” teased Thran sleepily.

“Why not? We’ve christened most of the house, unless you count the mudroom, the center hall, and the half bath.”

“We will do those before long, I am sure,” Thran waved a hand. “If only to say that we have. The cellar does not count. Do we have an attic?”

“We have an attic. It’ll need a good cleaning before long. There’s still some stuff up there we can use around the house, then it’ll get a good sweeping so it’s fit to store all the Christmas decorations we don’t have.”

“We will buy tinsel and garlands and bells and nutcrackers and decorations galore,” Thran waved his hands. A yawn threatened to consume him, so he put both hands over his mouth to smother it. “And perhaps a small train to run around the tree we put in the ballroom.”

Barn wrapped his arms around Thran’s shoulders. “Candle lights for all of the windows.”

“Holly on the mantel.”


Thran hummed in anticipation, but another yawn swallowed the sound.

“It’s almost midnight, cariad. Sigrid will be home soon. You can go to bed if you want to; I won’t be insulted.”
“It is hard to stay awake, yes, but I will manage if only to sleep all the better very soon. So help me to stay awake, *lyubov moya* – tell me what you remember about past Christmases, and I will tell you what I remember.”

“My mother loved Christmas, so she went all out, or as best she could. A tree with tinsel and ornaments, most handmade... a pudding on Christmas Eve... carols at the church at midnight... a orange in the toe of my stocking, if not much else... turkey or ham and all the trimmings.”

Bard fell silent, but his pause was not a melancholy one, so perhaps he remembered happy times. Thran shut his eyes as he thought of years past.

“Surprisingly, Christmas in Russia is mostly a religious holiday, and it is on a different day than Christmas here. Russian Christmas Eve is January sixth, and there is a big meal, of course. There are lots of decorated trees, though they are called New Year trees there. Russia does not have Saint Nicholas, but Grandfather Frost, to bring our gifts. But there are many similarities – the lights, the decorations. Of course there are many nutcrackers, both the actual object and many ballets, because the great Tchaikovsky is Russian, yes? Of course, holiday music is everywhere, and candlelight, and usually snow. Even in dancing school, we were allowed to go out and play in the snow from time to time, and I took Legolas sledding when I could. He loved it.”

“Do Russians make gingerbread houses?” Bard asked. “They originated in Germany, I know, but we had them in Wales, and of course they’re common here, too.”

“There are gingerbread houses – a welcome tradition from Germany, as they are in Wales and this country. One was very special to me. Just before I came here, while Legolas still recovered from Vileria’s death, I took him to Moscow to see a very large gingerbread fantasy that a famous chef made for his hotel lobby to delight tourists. He created a six-foot high model of Saint Basil’s cathedral, entirely out of gingerbread and icing. One of the onion domes had red and white frosting, like a peppermint. It even had gold foil on some of the smaller domes. Legolas was enchanted when he saw it, and he began to talk more after that, so that is a happy memory. So perhaps we can have a small gingerbread house here next Christmas in honor of that.”

“Tilda would love to make one,” Bard stroked Thran’s arm. “Though when should we celebrate Christmas? You’ll have a riot on your hands if you expect Tilda and Bain to wait until January sixth.”

“Legolas, too,” Thran grinned. “He was most delighted when we arrived here to find out that Christmas comes almost two weeks earlier than it does in Russia.”

“December twenty-fifth it is,” Bard made a gusty exhale. “Whew, crisis averted.”

“I hope we will avert a crisis tonight,” Thran groaned as he struggled to keep his eyes open. “If Sigrid does not come home soon, you and she will have to carry me upstairs.”

“Only ten more minutes to wait, angel.”

“I hope they do not delay to kiss and kiss and kiss on the porch.”

“I don’t think they will. I turned on the porch light when it got dark.”

“Then she will go to the mudroom door.”

“I turned on that light, too. In fact, I turned on all the lights. If that doesn’t deter them, I’ll open one door or another and stand there.”
Thran snickered. “She will think you are a bad dad.”

“All good dads are bad dads.”

“Ugh,” Thran groaned, smiling. “I am much too sleepy to make sense of that.”

“You won’t have to make sense much longer. I think I hear steps on the porch.”

Sure enough, a key clicked in the front door lock, and the door came open. Thran rubbed his eyes hastily before Sigrid came into the sitting room, smiling.

“Welcome home, sweetness,” Bard smiled up at her. “How was the dance?”

“It was nice. The gymnasium was amazing. It looked almost like the dining hall in Harry Potter.” Her smile broadened as she took in her parents ensconced on the sofa. “Ada, your eyes are open, but you’re asleep, aren’t you?”

“I am,” he yawned. “But you did not expect me to leave your Da here alone to wait for you, did you? I wanted to know that Cinderella returned from the ball and that she had a good time.”

“I had a great time. Lots of dancing – Finn actually likes to dance, unlike most guys on the planet, present company excepted, so I don’t think we sat down all night. There were lots of snacks and different things to drink, and the deejay played requests, so it was great. Finn had some good news, too.”

“Oh?” Bard’s tone was mild, drawing Thran to smother a smile. Would father as well as daughter deem a teenaged boy’s news good?

“Yeah,” Sigrid’s smile broadened again. “His father finally gave in, and said Finn could try to get into the Imladris Academy. So he’s going to make his case starting tomorrow. I hope he can do it.”

“It’d be a great opportunity for him,” Bard allowed. “I’m happy for him. I’m happy you had such a good time, too.”

“I did. I had the best dress there, just so you know. So thanks for finding it.”

“All in a Da’s work,” Bard quipped, drawing Sigrid’s groan. “And now I’d better take my sleepy husband upstairs and put him to bed. It’s past his bedtime.”

“Yours, too,” Sigrid riposted. “Don’t get up to make my breakfast in the morning, Da. I can get it just fine before I go to work. Night, Da. Night, Ada.”

“Good night, lioness,” Thran waved.

Sigrid headed upstairs, so Bard got up to key the security system, then offered a hand to help Thran to his feet. He paced slowly upstairs, no longer bothering to smother his cavernous yawns. He blundered through the necessities in the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and braided his hair loosely. How wonderful it was to fumble out of his clothes and into bed! His silent moan was nothing but utter relief. He barely registered when Bard came out of the bathroom and slipped between the sheets to join him.

“If you try to get up before noon, I’ll tie you to the bed,” Bard teased, settling Thran against his chest.

Grinning, Thran let his breath out in a long exhale. “Not even such a delicious temptation will rouse
me before noon, *lyubov moya.*”

“Good. Please, angel, promise me you’ll sleep in as long as you can. You need it.”

Thran found Bard’s right hand and drew it close to kiss its wedding ring. “I promise,” he whispered, and was asleep two breaths later.

* * *

Bard vaguely registered the time on the clock radio by the bed – seven-thirty. Time to get up to make Sigrid’s breakfast... no, wait... didn’t she say something last night about her getting breakfast herself? Didn’t she? It wasn’t just wishful thinking, was it?

_Don’t get up to make my breakfast in the morning, Da. I can get it just fine before I go to work._

Sigrid had definitely said that, thank the gods.

Bard got up to duck into the bathroom, then snared Thran’s mobile to set the security system to daytime operation. The last thing the morning needed was for Sigrid to set off the alarm when she went out any of the doors. That done, he put the mobile on his nightside table, and snuck back into bed as stealthily as possible. Thran lay solidly asleep beside him, and Bard wanted to make sure he stayed that way.

As if to reinforce Bard’s intent, Thran snuggled closer in his sleep. Bard draped an arm around Thran’s ribs to snug him against his chest, and shut his eyes to drift away.

The mudroom door slammed hard enough to rattle the entire house. Thran jerked awake, drawing Bard’s silent curse. “It’s okay, Thran. It was just Sig making a grand exit. I’ll talk to her about that.”

“Do, but do not complain. She woke me the day you had flu. If she had not, I would not have been there to catch you when you passed out.”

“I would’ve made it to the sofa.”

“Nyet.” The tall dancer stirred slowly, and made to rise, but Bard kept him snuggled against his chest.

“You promised me you’d sleep in.”

“I intend to. But I must tend to necessities first.”

Bard let go, Thran was soon back beside him, and they rearranged themselves in a comfortable tangle. Bard drifted off, glad to enjoy the rare chance to sleep in. Thran was no more energetic, and uncounted minutes flowed by without notice. When Bard had slept enough that he couldn’t sleep any more, he still enjoyed the chance to lie beside Thran, stroking lightly and slowly until his husband all but purred. He didn’t venture into more erotic touches, because Thran needed the endorphins to ease his achy body more than he needed to indulge his libido. The truth of that was clear in the way that Thran sighed in relief rather than arousal.

“Oh, *lyubov moya,*” Thran murmured. “You take good care of me.”

“This is such tough duty,” Bard grinned, still stroking. “If you’re tired of it, I can offer a massage, or
breakfast. Other things, too, of course, but you seem to want to tend aches and pains this morning."

“I do,” Thran sighed, leaning into Bard’s fingers. “Forgive me, my saint.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, angel. You’ve pounded yourself this past week. You don’t have to do anything today that you don’t want to do.”

“I am ashamed at how wonderful that sounds,” Thran admitted.

“Don’t be. Just think about what you do want to do today, and if you want to spend it in bed all day, that’s perfect. I’ll make sure you’re left in peace.”

“I am well rested, and well soothed. Now I would like breakfast with my husband in the sun, and then a gentle walk around the yard. When the children get up, I want to help make them breakfast, and while they do their homework, I will help you plan what to make for supper. I will do a gentle barre to make sure that I am properly flexible and ready for tomorrow, and then we will have lunch. By then, I am sure I will think of ways to spend the afternoon.”

“We need to do laundry and tidy up a bit, too,” Bard advised.

“We do. I have little left to dance in tomorrow.”

“We have a plan, then,” Bard rumbled. “All you have left to do is to decide what you want for breakfast.”

“Eggs, please. The protein helps my body to heal.”

They got up to dress. Bard kept an eye on Thran, but other than how slowly and carefully he moved, there was no other sign of his husband’s aches and pains. As they made their eggs – soft boiled for Bard, a little harder boiled for Thran – Thran put the kettle on and Bard got out the last couple of muffins from yesterday. He’d gotten into the habit of baking them in the small, bite-sized pans rather than the full sized ones, because tiny ones were more convenient for the dancers, and the children liked to sample however many flavors Bard had made rather than limiting themselves to just one. As he split four into halves and ran them under the broiler for the butter to melt, Thran set out bowls and plates, utensils, and salt and pepper. He looked up as the oven timer beeped.

“That’s for my eggs,” Bard said. “Yours need to stay in another six minutes.”

Thran reset the oven timer accordingly. “Start on your eggs, then. I will watch the muffins.”

Bard fished out his two eggs from the saucepan, peeled them into the bowl Thran had set out for him, and carried them to the table. Tea and cups awaited him, and he was quick to pour himself a cupful after he sat down. Thran brought the pan of muffins to the table, then returned with his eggs. Bard poured his teacup full.

“Thank you, my saint. It is a relief to have a civilized breakfast for once,” Thran sighed, choosing a muffin half. “Warm eggs, nicely done, and delicious homemade muffins with butter, and hot tea. Perfection.”

“Mmm,” Bard agreed, his mouth full of eggs. As they ate, they talked of inconsequentials, planned supper, and decided to contact Mrs. Mathom to see if she could tell them where to look for a mantel for the main room. When they were done, they cleaned up the kitchen, loaded the crockpot with four kinds of beans and seasonings to cook all afternoon, and went upstairs to fetch the laundry to sort. As Bard followed Thran upstairs, he noticed how carefully Thran stepped on each step up the stairs.
“Um, angel?”

Thran looked back at him when they reached the bedroom. “My saint?”

“I was just thinking... you’re always barefooted in the house now that the weather’s warmer. That’s likely hard on your feet given that you dance more or less barefooted, so... maybe your feet would feel better if you wore some comfortable shoes that had good arch support and padding in the sole.”

Thran considered that thoughtfully, then stooped to take a pair of clean socks out of his dresser drawer. “That is a good point, Bard. It is true that as we age, we lose the natural padding on the soles of our feet, so you make a reasonable suggestion. My trainers are comfortable. I will put them on when I take the hamper from our closet downstairs.”

They collected the laundry, got it sorted and the first load into the washer, then had their walk around the house, talking of the landscaping that would begin in a few days.

“That is something we could do today,” Thran stopped to give Bard a bright look. “We can go to the garden center to buy dirt and plants, fill all the pots in the carriage house, and put them around the porch and the terrace.”

“We certainly could,” Bard agreed at once. “Once the children are up and have had breakfast, we’ll take a trip out there. We just have to make sure the children have time to get their homework done.”

“Agreed. I know Tilda and Legolas will be excited to go to the garden center. Will Bain?”

Bard offered a perverse grin. “Maybe, maybe not. If I ask him to jockey the washer and dryer while we’re gone, he’ll be very excited to go to the garden center.”

Thran’s chuckle mirrored the sentiment of Bard’s grin. “Ah. He is a hard one to figure, I admit. He was a good lieutenant when everyone was so sick with the flu, and generous to help me as I needed. And I enjoyed the chance to play his zombie apocalypse with him. But it is hard to know what else interests him.”

“That makes two of us,” Bard admitted. “He’s a good lad, with a good heart, but other than soccer and zombie apocalypse, he hasn’t found a burning passion yet. He’s good in most of his classes, but none of them seem to draw him the way art does Tilda, or writing and math draw Sigrid. In the city, I tried to expose him to as many different things as I could find, but I had to opt for free stuff at the museums and such for the most part. Since we’ve been out here, I focused so much on getting the house livable that I haven’t done a lot of looking for things. During the summer, I hope we can do some day trips with the children. Maybe he’ll suggest something he’s interested in.”

“We will make sure all the children help us decide what trips to take,” Thran agreed.

They came inside to find Tilda and Legolas looking through the fridge together, contemplating the choices for breakfast.

“... but no more muffins, Kukla.”

“Any biscuits?”

“No, none of those, either.”

A heavy sigh. “Toast, then.”

“Morning, children,” Bard greeted.
“Hi, Bard. Hi, Papa,” Legolas smiled at them both.

“Ada! Da!” Tilda's expression was hopeful. “Are you going to make muffins this morning?”

“That depends,” Bard replied. “I can make muffins, or I can make you eggs and toast so we can go to the garden center to get plants for the porch and terrace.”

“Ooh! The garden center!” Tilda beamed. “Legs, don’t you want to go to the garden center?”

“I would like that, yes,” the boy nodded, “so eggs and toast are fine. We still have blackberry jam, too.”

“Eggs and toast it is, then. Any sign from Bain?”

“Not yet,” Legolas shook his head. “Should I go get him?”

“Please,” Bard agreed. “Fried or scrambled?”

“Fried for me, please,” Legolas said. “Back in a sec!”

“I want scrambled, please,” Tilda asked, so Bard made those for her while Thran saw to toast and tea. When Legolas tumbled back downstairs, Bard fried eggs while the boy collected the ingredients for fried egg sandwiches, which incorporated toasted bagels, sliced ham, mustard, and cheese. Tilda watched this in silence, finally asking Legolas for a slice of cheese that she ate once her eggs were done. In addition to his sandwiches, Legolas toasted more bread for his blackberry jam, and sat down with a loaded plate.

Bain shuffled in. “Morning, he murmured, rubbing his eyes. His hair stuck out in all directions.

“Hmm, the furry yeti has descended,” Thran grinned, drawing Bain’s broad grin.

“Maybe time for a haircut, boyo,” Bard commented.

“No, Da,” Bain grimaced. “I’ve got the shortest hair in the house, and I’m feeling kind of naked.”

“Ew,” Tilda made a face.

“Stop it, Til,” Bain snarked back, but his expression changed when he took in Legolas’s breakfast plate. “Legs, what are those? They look amazing.”

“They are amazing. Fried egg, ham, Swiss cheese, and spicy mustard on a rye bagel. I’m thinking of calling it the Legolas Special.”

That brought a round of snickers and chuckles.

“I’m making one, too,” Bain moved with purpose to the stove. “I wonder if it’d be good with onions?”

“Don’t take long, boyo,” Bard asked. “We’re going to the garden center. Tilda and Legs are in; what about you?”

“Can I stay here?”

“If you jockey the washer and dryer and work on your homework.”

“Ugh. I’ll just go to the garden center, then.”
“Homework this afternoon, though, for all of you.”

“Still ugh,” Bain moped as dropped his bagel halves into the toaster. “I can’t wait to be an adult so I won’t have any homework.”

“I have homework,” Thran pointed out. “I will still do my barre and yoga today even though it is Sunday.”

“And I have accounting to do,” Bard added. “So you won’t be alone, Bain.”

“Oh, well,” Bain grumped.

“At least we have just two more weeks of school,” Legolas consoled. “One more week of review, then exams, then done!”

“I hope the next two weeks don’t kill me,” Bain groaned.

“That’s no good,” Legolas countered. “Then you’ll miss summer vacation and soccer camp and so many other things. If school’s going to kill you, at least put it off until the end of the summer!”

That got a laugh from everyone, even Bain. He collected his bagel halves and cheese and ham for his sandwiches, humming in anticipation when Bard slid his two fried eggs onto the bagel halves, ran them through the broiler to melt the cheese until it bubbled, then sat beside Legolas to wolf down his creations. He’d downed them both before Tilda was through her toast.

“Those were excellent,” Bain sighed, patting his belly as he trooped upstairs with the other children to brush his teeth.

“I bet they’d be good with gouda cheese,” Legolas suggested, making Bard laugh at his enthusiasm.

In a few minutes, they were in Bard’s truck and on the way to the garden center. Sam greeted them with a big smile as the children fanned out down the aisles of blooming flowers. Thran wandered after them while Bard put in his order for bags of potting soil. He got those loaded into the back of the truck before he followed his family to see what appealed to him. It took very little time before flats of marigolds, impatiens, begonias, geraniums, and a host of other varieties topped the bags of potting soil. They set up production outside the carriage house.

“It’s an hour, hour and a half before lunch,” Bard said. “It’ll take longer than that to get everything potted, so let’s go inside and tackle the homework, have lunch, then we can play with the plants afterwards?”

“No, Da!” Tilda moaned. “Plants now!”

“Yeah, Da – that’s a bait and switch, getting us all excited about the garden center and then making us do homework!” Bain groused.

“I would rather play with the plants, too,” Thran ventured, which drew a big cheer, until he held up his hands. “But I will do my homework first, so that I do not have to dread it any longer. Let us be done with it, all of us.”

Even Legolas grumbled, but not very much, so they headed inside to dispense with their chores. Thran took himself to the ballroom, the children settled at the kitchen table, and Bard wrangled laundry and tended to his crockpot of beans. As the first load came out of the dryer, he made a detour with the laundry basket into the ballroom to make sure Thran wasn’t working too hard. He was gratified to see that his husband was stretching carefully and slowly, and he still had on his trainers to
ease his feet. He remembered to record his two sculpture sales in his accounting book, then tidied the lower floor of the house as the laundry cycled.

By the time lunch came, Thran was done his yoga, Tilda was through her geography map and arithmetic, and Legolas had composed his French essay. He delayed lunch a bit for Legolas and Bain to sort through their pre-algebra, then ferried all the eclectic bits and bites of leftovers out of the fridge and onto the kitchen island for a Trash Lunch. Typically, some of the combinations of things that ended up on their plates were unusual, but no one went hungry. He pulled a package of pork chops out of the freezer for supper, sorted out one more load of laundry, then everyone was glad to begin on the flowers.

The boys brought a garden bench around for Thran, so he had a place to sit by the bin of potting soil to fill the pots that someone handed him. Bard had the children carry the pots from the shelves in the carriage house out into the driveway, until they had a massive array fit for a pottery works. He showed the children and Thran how to put a potshard over the hole in the bottom of each pot to keep the dirt from falling out, then how deeply to set each plant in its pot, then the potting fest began. By the time Sigrid pedaled home, the family had dozens of pots filled and ready to find a perch on the back terrace or on the porch.

“Wow, look at you all!” Sigrid exclaimed. “Da, all of the big ones look amazing!”

“Thran and I did these two,” Bard grinned, pointing to two old-fashioned black iron urns filed with tall plumes of grass, trailing vines, red geraniums, white petunias, and yellow and orange marigolds. “We thought they’d look great on either side of the porch steps.”

“And I do this one for the back terrace,” Thran announced proudly, waving at another one of the urns half full of more plumes, bright green sweet potato vines, purple petunias, and purple heliotrope. “I will do three more like this, and Kukla has bright yellow marigolds to go around each one.”

“Tilda, you must have two dozen pots ready to go!” Sigrid stopped by her sister to touch one of the yellow flowers.

“I’m doing the ones to go with Thran’s pots, and Legs and Bain are doing the porch ones.”

“Lots of wild combinations,” Legolas grinned. “Every color we can put out there.”

“Except black,” Bain laughed. “But they had black violas, so this fall, I say we go back for black violas and orange pansies for Halloween.”

“That’d be perfect,” Sigrid agreed with a cheerful nod. “I’ll go change, then I can do a few pots, too.”

“As long as you get your homework done, sweetness,” Bard cautioned. “Between work and your dance, you haven’t had much time to get that done.”

“A few of the teachers were kind and didn’t give us any, or very much. So I don’t have too much left from Friday to do. But it’ll get done, I promise.”

She ran into the house and was soon back to help pot the last few plants. They had a good time arranging the pots around the porch and terrace, though it took both the boys or Thran and Bard to cart the large urns and set them in place. Tilda ran here and there to tuck her smaller pots of marigolds, purple pansies, and white impatiens around the urns. She also helped arrange the boys’ collection of brightly colored flowers over the porch.

“We have begun our bright gardens,” Thran smiled as they cleaned up the last of the spilled potting
soil, and brushed off the tools before they put them away. The boys dumped the last two bags of potting soil in the big plastic trash can they kept in the carriage house for it, and Bain jumped into the back of Bard’s truck to sweep out the last bit of dirt. Bard backed his truck into the carriage house, Tilda and Sigrid put the few empty pots away, and they were done.

“When does Mr. Sam come to work on the bushes?” Sigrid asked, as they went back inside the house together.

“This coming week,” Bard answered. “Then the ancestral home of Clan Ffyrnig is officially no longer a renovation site.”

“The main room’s not done,” Bain pointed out as he washed his hands in the mudroom sink. Apt, that; his hands were so dirty that when the water hit them, mud resulted.

“Not yet, but it’s far enough along that I can work on the weekends to finish it. Just paint and a mantel.”

“Then it’s on to the junk shops!” Tilda clapped her hands. “I love looking in those.”

“I do, too, Kukla,” Legolas agreed. “It’s sort of like going through a museum, except you get to touch everything, and if you like something and you have the money for it, you can take it home.”

Bain gave his brother a startled look. “I never thought of it that way, Legs, but you’re right. All that old stuff is small history, where the stuff in the museums is big history. I never thought of it that way before. It’s cool.”

“It is an interesting way to look at it,” Thran agreed, taking his turn at the sink. “Someone keeps something for a long time, and then takes it to the junk shop when he gets tired of it. Then someone else comes along and takes it home, and it gains even more history.”

Bain continued to mull this new idea with uncharacteristic seriousness, finally nodding. “Yeah. Small history.”

He went into the kitchen, preoccupied with Legolas’s characterization. Bard and Thran exchanged glances. Had Legolas’s observation given Bain a new view on the world?

Later that night, once supper was done, the children had showered, and everyone prepared for bed, Bard came into Bain’s bedroom to find his son on the floor, looking over his prized collection of soccer cards. He looked like a fortuneteller, dealing out the cards in different piles and arrays.

“It’s been a while since you’ve had those out,” Bard observed, sitting on the bed.

Bain’s nod was thoughtful. “You remember what Legs said about the junk shops this afternoon?”

“That they were like museums?”

“Yeah. Then I said that the stuff in them was small history, and the stuff in museums was big history.”

“Sounds like something resonated for you in that.”

“It did.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“You won’t laugh?”
“Course not. Besides, I don’t think anything you come up with about history will be laughable. You’ve always enjoyed it in school.”

Bain nodded again. “I do like it. Not that a lot of the teachers make it easy to like, though – they just want you to vomit a lot of names, dates, and places, which is some kind of boring. But my history teacher this semester, Mr. DeFilippo, isn’t like that at all. He’s funny, and he makes it exciting. He shows you how it’s a story, and I really like that.”

“It shows. You’ve had As in his class all semester. Despite all those essays you say you don’t like.”

“Well, some essays are easy not to like, but his are mostly interesting. So anyway, the things in the junk shops go along with bits of history, just like my soccer cards go along with what the teams do. I like to know all the whats and whys and hows about the players, and that’s what makes the cards fun. So the stuff in the junk shops is no different.”

“That’s nothing to laugh at, not at all. That’s a very astute thing to figure out.”

Bain grinned. “Thanks. So the next time you go to the junk shops, I want to go, too. I want to think about big history and small history some more.”

“The architectural remnant warehouse would be good for that, too.”

“Hey, yeah! I didn’t think about that,” Bain sat up straighter. “Yeah, that’s brilliant. The stuff in there is the small history of houses. Architecture.”

Bain looked much too animated for a boy about to go to bed, but Bard didn’t have the heart to tell him to calm down. “I guess I’d better plan a trip there soon. I want to look for a mantel for the main room, anyway.”

“Cool. Maybe next Saturday, when Legolas goes to fencing?”

“We have a plan. So hop into bed, boyo. You have a week of school to get through first.”

“It’ll go fast,” Bain said confidently as he picked up his cards. “No new equations, thank the gods. Just review.”

“Then hang tough. Two more weeks and you can take a breather.”

Bain put his cards on his nightside table and got under the covers. “Night, Da. Sleep well.”


“Love you, too.”

Bard let himself out of Bain’s room with a hopeful smile. Maybe his son had found something that intrigued him beyond zombie apocalypse and soccer.
Chapter 138

Chapter Summary

As the days count down to Immortal's premiere, an angel's burden increases sevenfold.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter depicts drug use. I don't condone it, and my characters don't, either, and I don't want anyone who might find the depiction disturbing to stumble upon that part unknowingly. Be safe, all.

Thran’s world narrowed to the ballet stage and little else. He got up each morning, too late to see the children off to school. He wrung every scrap of affection out of Bard’s good morning kiss, and infused his response with all of his love before he ate whatever Bard put in front of him. He packed his dance bag and drove to the Imladris Academy. He dealt with whatever Ori or Lettie or Irmo or Abebe brought to him. Then he rehearsed. He ate scraps of chicken, vegetables, and fruit whenever a spare moment revealed itself. He went down to the Imladris physical training rooms to soak his feet, then returned to the auditorium to put on his shoes and dance again. He danced Death until his dreams at night were nothing but the same thing, if without so much physical exertion. When he was nearly past seeing, he got in his SUV, drove home, ate whatever Bard put in front of him again, let his husband guide him into the shower, and then fell into bed.

Eight hours later, the cycle repeated.

He was dimly aware of some of what happened at home. Sam and his crew of landscapers came to transform the bare dirt in front of the porch into lush banks of shrubs fronted with bright flowers. The back terrace was next, and Bard’s pine tree became the center of beautiful Japanese-influenced plantings. Every Sunday, Bard coaxed him away from Immortal for a handful of hours, hours where he drank in the smiles on the faces of his children, the sound of their voices, and the savor of their stories. He listened to Bard’s tale of how he cast the steampunk orrery, and how the glassblower who had created the glass orbs threaded on their main stair balusters provided the orrery planets. He registered, but didn’t understand, how Bard assembled all the gears so that the orrery planets orbited in the proper proportions. He hugged Bard when he returned from delivering the orrery to his client, but carefully, because his sore erector spinae was still painful, despite the efforts of the UVB physiologist.

Just when he thought that the nasty cold that had decimated the UVB dancers had passed him by, his sinuses filled, his head ached, and his throat hurt. He coughed until he thought his lungs were about to erupt from his chest. But he had no fever, so he drank hot tea and ate uncounted bowls of Bard’s chicken soup to stay on his feet. In a week, the worst of the symptoms were gone, but he was left feeling drained.

He was dimly aware of the children studying hard for their exams, even little Kukla. He registered that everyone passed everything, though he could not have named a single subject any of them had
taken. He roused enough to enjoy Bain’s birthday lunch at Kasim’s, the day after school ended. The
first few days after the end of school were a blur; Sigrid left early in the morning for her job at the
bistro before he got up, and he left for rehearsal usually before the other children got up.

The hours of rehearsal were grueling, but slowly, slowly, the UVB dancers grew from a reasonably
talented if unremarkable company into a dynamic force. Irmo’s choreography turned the eccentric
collection of dance forms that inhabited the Underworld into a tapestry of disintegrating and merging
cultures. The price for this improvement was unconscionable, for Thran, Irmo, and Abebe drove the
company as hard as Thran drove himself.

Not all of the company, however, possessed Thran’s sheer stubbornness and devotion to pay
Immortal’s high physical and mental toll.

On the first Thursday after the school term had ended, the UVB dancers, their technical crews, and
student interns had the school to themselves. Work progressed as it had all week, at a higher intensity
now that the distraction of students coming and going was no more. So intense was the company’s
focus that when they finally paused for a break, it was direly needed. Thran was no exception, and
he was quick to rush off to the restroom with the others. But Kiefer, one of the Lindy hop dancers,
didn’t dash ahead of Thran to dart into the closest one – instead, he sprinted down the hall towards
the gymnasium facility. One of the student interns from the set crew came out just as Kiefer reached
the door; exclaiming in annoyance when the dancer nearly knocked him down in his urgency to go
inside. Thran eased into the restroom after Kiefer, who was in such a hurry that he didn’t bother to
fasten the stall door behind him.

It wasn’t the urgent need to piss that so consumed Kiefer. Before Thran could do more than gape, the
man pulled a tiny plastic bag of white powder and a rolled-up dollar bill from his dance bag on the
floor. Thran let him snort the first line off the back of the toilet tank before he came up behind him.

“What do you do?!” Thran snarled, blocking Kiefer from getting out of the stall. “This is a fucking
school!”

“I just need it for the energy! That’s all! Just to stay sharp!” Kiefer stammered, his eyes wide and
unblinking in the face of Thran’s fury.

“Your contract is severed,” Thran spat. “I intend to call the police. Do not ever set foot in this school
or in the UVB studio again. Your run with us is over!”

Kiefer went to sweep the remains of the powder off the back of the toilet tank before he came up behind him.

“GO!” Thran shouted, hurling the dancer towards the exit – right into Ori. The dancer tried to shove
his way free of Thran’s assistant, but Ori held tight, his normally open and friendly face twisted into
a fierce scowl of determination.

“Get the security guard, Thran!” Ori shouted. “We’re lost if Kiefer sets one foot outside the building! Do it!”

Thran fought to get the restroom door open and erupted into the hall, scanning the hall for anyone. There – a custodian!

“Help! Get the security guard! Hurry!” he shouted as he waved his hands frantically, and the
custodian dropped his mop to run down the hall. Thran pushed his way back into the restroom,
where Ori still hugged both arms around Kiefer with dogged determination.
“The security guard is on the way,” Thran panted, which tore a gasp from Kiefer and a renewed effort to fight free of Ori’s grasp around his waist.

“I won’t come back! Please! Just let me go, and I promise I won’t come back!”

Kiefer was about to break free of Ori’s tenacious grasp, so Thran added his bulk to the effort, plunking himself solidly down atop Kiefer’s shoulders.

“You fucking bastard, you try to ruin everything with your stupidity!” Thran snarled. “How could you put all of us at such a fucking risk so that you feel energetic?”

He lit out with such a stream of irate Russian profanity that he barely registered the security guard banging on the door because their bulk kept her from pushing the door open. He and Ori dragged Kiefer aside enough for the security woman to get inside. Ori was the collected one, describing in terse words what had happened. The woman responded instantly, putting Kiefer into handcuffs so that Ori and Thran could get up from the floor. Neither of them was allowed to leave the restroom while the officer called for police backup, then blocked off the restroom from the growing crowd. Once a police car was on the way, the custodian hurried to the front entrance so he could direct the officers to the scene when they arrived.

More and more of the company, both dancers and crew, gathered outside the area. Two more officers arrived to take charge, and a forensic technician soon followed to assess the powder on the back of the toilet tank and in Kiefer’s bag. Ori stayed glued to Thran’s side, his mobile at his ear as he called Lettie, and who knew whom else – likely the company’s lawyer, Thran’s lawyer, and Mr. Nori. Thank the gods he did, for so much fury and rage blinded Thran that he was all but incoherent. It was Ori who explained how he’d followed Thran who had followed Kiefer, and who the student intern was whom Kiefer nearly bowled over in his haste. It was Ori who had the forensic technician confirm that neither he nor Thran had any of the white powder on his person, that all of it was in Kiefer’s bag or on the toilet tank. It was Ori who made sure that the police checked and confirmed that none of their fingerprints were on anything in Kiefer’s bag. It was Ori who explained to the white-faced Headmaster L’Éärendil that an incident had required the help of police, but the police didn’t allow him to say more yet.

The worst of the chaos finally calmed when officers escorted the handcuffed Kiefer out of the school for his trip to the police station. Another officer escorted the student intern to the station to make his statement. Before they left, the officers asked Ori and Thran to follow them so that they could make their formal statements as well.

They promised to do so as soon as Lettie arrived to take charge.

The crowd of dancers and crew that had watched Kiefer taken out of the building in handcuffs finally registered, and Thran’s rage surged anew.

“Hang on to yourself, Thran, please,” Ori coached softly. “Wait until Lettie gets here, then we can get through our part at the police station. Don’t say anything that leaves you or the company open to defamation charges if Kiefer decides to claim innocence.”

“I cannot say nothing,” Thran growled, but Ori’s pleading expression forced him to take a deep breath. “But... I will wait until Lettie arrives. It will be a hard job she faces to calm Headmaster L’Éärendil, and I must not make that job any worse for her.”

“Absolutely right,” Ori consoled, patting Thran’s arm. “Oh, thank the gods – there she is.”

Both Thran and Ori rushed to Lettie’s side, and they drew her off to the side to apprise her of the
“Oh, gods,” she blanched, darting a look down the hall at the clustered dancers who still lingered. “I’ll do damage control with Elrond, but I think it’s best if we dismiss the company for the afternoon. We’ll meet tomorrow at the studio to regroup. Keep your fingers crossed that we won’t be summarily dismissed from the school entirely. With just four weeks before premiere, our chances of finding another venue are slim and none.”

Thran’s mouth went desert dry. His heart skipped a beat, then thumped hard as it tried to regain its rhythm. “I want to say something to the company.”

“You can’t,” Ori protested. When Thran glared at him in frustration, the slight man held up his hands in placation. “I understand you want to put the fear of all the gods in anyone else who might be just as stupid as Kiefer. But you absolutely cannot say anything specific about what we saw or what you think about it, Thran. If Kiefer decides to plead not guilty, he can come back and sue you and the company for defamation, no matter how factual you are. Please, venting isn’t worth that risk.”

Thran muttered another string of profanity under his breath, but it was only to vent his frustration, and wasn’t directed at the sensible Ori.

“You are right,” he agreed. “Can I at least remind them that the terms of their contract are quite specific about what is required of them, and that if they cannot follow them, then it is best that they leave now?”

Lettie and Ori exchanged glances, but the director deferred to Ori, who heaved a marshaling breath.

“It’d be better if you just say there has been an incident, and that we can’t say more than that until the police have reviewed it. That’ll give us time until tomorrow.”

Thran held up his hands in concession. “I will do as you say. Though I would prefer to tell them that I will personally strangle anyone who puts us at such risk again.”

“So would I,” Lettie said with blunt frankness. “But that amounts to a threat, which we can’t make. Let’s dismiss the company, then I’ll deal with Elrond, and you two can make your statements to the police.”

Thus resolved, the trio returned to the clustered dancers, who gathered around them. All were distracted, upset, and full of speculation.

“What’s going on? What happened? What did Kiefer do?”

Thran held up his hands. “I can say little other than has been an incident. Ori and I go to the police station to make statements, and I am sure that you are as upset as we are. So we are dismissed for today, so that we may sort out what has happened and what we are to do. Tomorrow, we will meet at the studio at ten-thirty. If we know more tomorrow, we will say so, and we will plan what to do. So please, bear with us until we understand what has happened.”

The effort to couch his words in the mealy-mouthed language that he had to use for his own safety as well as that of the company had Thran trembling from head to toe. He managed to keep his voice even and calm rather than the snarl that he wanted it to be, and he tried not to glare at the rest of the company. Still, their tight postures and furtive glances revealed how upset they all were. Nadine, Kiefer’s partner, had her hands pressed tightly against her mouth and met the eyes of no one.

Thran got into his SUV to drive to the police station and tried not to think about anything. He and Ori reached the station at the same time as UVB’s lawyer, as well as Celeborn Lothlori, his personal
lawyer. They had just time to let Adam and Kell know what had happened before the police swept them away to make their statements. After what seemed like hours, the questions and clarifications and restated questions and reclarifications dribbled to a halt, and he was allowed to leave.

“What happens now?” he asked Kell as they came out to the station lobby.

“A lot of waiting,” Kell admitted frankly.

“Maybe not,” Adam amended. “Kiefer Standaal pretty much admitted to what you said happened, so this might go quicker than usual.”

Thran’s eyebrows went up. “He admitted everything? Was counsel present? They reminded him of his Miranda rights and so forth?”

“Counsel was present, but the officers played their hand well,” Adam gave him a cynical smile. “Anytime anyone gets caught with coke on his person and in his system – both of which were true, as you know – the officers rightly remind him that intent to distribute to minors on school property isn’t viewed kindly. He was all too ready to plead guilty to the lesser charge.”

Thran and Ori exchanged skeptical looks, which both lawyers mirrored, but Thran tried to take what solace he could in Adam’s words, however little.

“Now we must hope that Kiefer’s idiocy does not get us kicked out of the school completely,” he said lowly, voicing what everyone was thinking.

“We’ll do our best to prevent that,” Adam tried to reassure him. “If Kiefer goes through with his guilty plea, that’ll give us a better chance.”

Little else remained to be said.

As Thran and Ori separated from the lawyers and walked together out to the parking lot, they consoled each other as best he could before they got in their vehicles for the ride home.

Thran sat in his SUV, watching both lawyers and Ori drive away. When they were gone, Thran leaned his forehead against the steering wheel and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

It was just four weeks before *Immortal’s* premiere.

What would he do if the Imladris Academy refused to let UVB stage *Immortal*? They would be within their rights to do so.

*Gods, please no.*

He swallowed down helpless fury, impotent rage, useless anger.

He drove home.

* * *

Bard cocked an ear when the mudroom door opened. It was just past five, and far too early for Thran to be home yet. But that was his husband’s tread on the floor... if not his usual step. It sounded slow and painful, not his usual pace at all. Oh, gods, had he hurt himself? Thran didn’t need to add
another injury to his burden – he already suffered from the dregs of a cold, a painful back muscle, aching feet, and mental and physical exhaustion. He rushed around the kitchen counter to confront Thran as soon as he came in from the mudroom.

One look at Thran’s grey face brought his heart into his throat. “What happened?”

The look that Thran turned on him was unadulterated misery. “Oh, gods, Bard, the worst. Just the worst.”

Bard grabbed the dance bag that still hung on Thran’s shoulder, slipped it off, and let it fall to the side by the table. “Are you physically all right? Did you hurt yourself?”

Thran shook his head. “Where are the children?”

“Tilda’s at the Gamgees, Sigrid’s upstairs, and the boys are up the lane playing soccer with Derry. Why?”

Thran buried his face in his hands. “Because I cannot be brave any longer, Bard. Please forgive me.” Was his husband crying?

Bard didn’t wait to confirm his suspicion. He stepped forward to wrap his arms around Thran. “It’s okay, Thran. I’m here. Whatever it is, I’m here.”

“It is not okay.” Thran snaked his arms around Bard’s waist and burrowed his nose into the crook of Bard’s neck. “But you are here. I am grateful for that.”

“Come into the sitting room. Tell me what happened.”

Bard drew Thran into the sitting room and sat them down on the sofa. Thran fell back against the cushions with a grimace as his back muscle pulled, and he looked limp. After a marshaling breath, he told Bard how he’d caught one of the dancers snorting coke at the school, and the ensuing upheaval as the police were called, Lettie appeared to do damage control, and the company was dismissed. He described the scene at the police station as officers and lawyers had Thran and Ori go through their story over and over and over again. Even if the guilty dancer continued to accept responsibility for his actions, the risk that the company might be banished from the school remained real. Despite the days where Thran had looked exhausted, in pain, frustrated, or merely sick with a cold, never before had he looked so defeated.

Bard gathered Thran into his arms. “I don’t know what will happen, angel. I don’t. But you know that Lettie will fight for UVB. So will Kell and UVB’s lawyer. I’m sure Ori called his brother in the midst of all this, too, and if anyone can pull strings in your favor, it’s Nori. Don’t despair.”

“I try not to. I try very hard not to.” Thran’s voice was thin. “Was this my fault, because I have driven the company too hard? That is what Kiefer said – he did what he did because he needed to boost his energy.”

“Hell, no, angel – you didn’t force him to snort anything up his nose!” Bard said forcefully. “Don’t try to second guess yourself. Right now, you hurt, you’ve been in a fight, you’re suffering from the aftereffects of a fight, and you’ve been grilled for hours. All that has worn you to a thread, and the best thing you can do is rest and take care of yourself. Otherwise you’ll add collapse to everything else. Just let it go until the morning.”

“How could he fuck us over like this?” Thran’s voice went up in his fury. “He ruins himself, and he ruins me and UVB and Immortal along with him!”
“Let’s hope he’s the only one who suffers from being an idiot,” Bard consoled, swallowing.

“So much work! What if it all comes to naught?”

“It won’t come to naught, angel. It won’t. Even if the worst happens, you can’t stage *Immortal* at the school, you’ll stage it somewhere, sooner or later. You will.”

“I hope so. If I cannot, I will not be able to bear it.”

His husband’s voice was so bereft of hope, of comfort, of strength. Bard rubbed Thran’s back slowly, trying to put all the solace he could in his touches. “The school will think long and hard before they kick UVB out, Thran. They’re getting a cut of the performances, and they want to bring in more such productions into the festival. So this is a big chance for them as well as UVB, too. They’ll see reason.”

“I hope so. Gods, Bard. I very much hope they do. But what if Kiefer was not the only one so foolish? What if he was only the one I caught?”

“Then he’ll be an example to the others of what will happen if they try something so stupid again.”

Thran stayed huddled in Bard’s arms. Bard’s answer had reassured him no more than it had Bard.
Chapter 139

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig rallies around a beleaguered angel.

The arms around Thran tightened when footsteps ventured towards the sitting room. He opened his eyes, found Sigrid hovering at the door, and shut his eyes again.

“Oh, gods, what happened?” the teenager breathed. “Did Ada get hurt?”

“Nothing so simple,” Bard exhaled, rubbing his husband’s back. “He caught one of the UVB dancers snorting coke in the school bathroom.”

At Sigrid’s sudden inhalation of breath, Thran opened his eyes again. His daughter’s eyes widened, and she started to say something that was likely profane, because she clapped a hand over her mouth before any of the words escaped. “Oh, holy hell, Da! The Imladris Academy’s got a really strict policy about that. Just about zero tolerance.”

“That’s why Thran’s upset, and rightly so. The fool risked a lot more than himself.”

Sigrid sat on the other side of Thran and wrapped her arms around him, too. “Ada, I’m so sorry.”

Thran gave Sigrid a wan smile. “I thank you, lioness. We acted so quickly that perhaps the headmaster will see that we are just as intolerant of such idiocy as the school is, and will not throw the rest of us out after the fool.”

“What did you do?”

“I almost threw the bastard out on his ear,” Thran admitted. “Fortunately, Ori was there to save us from my rash stupidity, and we held the bastard long enough for help to arrive. The police handcuffed him and took him away, and then they examined all of the evidence.”

“So it was pretty obvious, then,” was Sigrid’s surmise.

“Fucking blatant,” Thran spat, which drew Bard’s wince and Sigrid’s smothered grin. “Oy, I am rude. I apologize, Sigrid, and to you, too, Bard. But... tcha, I watched him spoon out the powder, chop it fine, cut a line, and snort it. He was so oblivious to all but his need that he never heard me behind him until I confronted him. So we have my account, we have the drug itself, we have Ori and a student intern to confirm that no one was in the toilet but him, and we have Ori to confirm that he saw the fool with the coke on his face when he crashed into Ori. We also have the fool’s admission that he did all that we said he did. And I severed his contract on the spot. So perhaps we will survive.”

The practical Sigrid hummed. “I hope so. But if Da hasn’t already asked you this, I will – do you think he was the only one?”

Bard grimaced at their daughter’s bluntness, but Thran nodded agreement as he sat up. “I have asked myself that, yes. Ori and I considered it before we left the police station. I want to say something to the company, that the fool is no longer associated with us, and that we will pay even more attention
to ensure that we all remain in compliance with our contracts. If someone does not comply, then he or she is gone. But I will take Ori’s advice about what to say, or even if I can say anything at all. He tells me that I must be very careful not to imply anything or the fool can sue UVB for defamation.”

Sigrid’s snort was no less affronted than Bard’s was. “That takes gall.”

“Welcome to the land of lawyers. If you do something rotten, we will get you off, and then we will sue those who complained about what you did,” Thran shook his head.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen,” Bard urged. “Listen to Ori, and the fool won’t have anything to complain about. Put your efforts into making the best case you can for UVB.”

Thran appreciated his husband’s efforts to remain positive and hopeful, but he had a hard time feeling so upbeat. When he thought about it, betrayal was what swirled foremost in the stew of his emotions. So much effort – creative, emotional, and physical – might come to nothing because of the foolish, selfish, idiotic actions of a single person.

*Gods, may this be just a single person.*

If this involved more one – say, three or four or five – the entire production might be ruined because the company didn’t have the resources to replace so many dancers on such short notice. What would UVB do if that were the case?

He couldn’t bring himself to think about that. Nor could he reveal to the younger children just how upset he was. He took himself upstairs to shower and dress before supper, and managed to maintain a reasonably calm demeanor during supper. Afterwards, however, he couldn’t stand the suspense, and called Lettie to see if she had anything to tell him about her damage control efforts with Elrond L’Eärendil.

* * *

Bard was in the sitting room to play Dinky Farm with Tilda when Thran took himself off to the ballroom to call Lettie. His husband might as well be a doomed prisoner who awaited execution, so upset was he. He’d managed to keep what had happened from the children at supper, though Legolas knew something was up, and Bain suspected just because he’d come to know Legolas’s reactions so well. But everyone pretended that the dregs of Thran’s cold were what made him look so miserable. The older children disappeared upstairs after supper, and while Bard didn’t say anything to Sigrid about holding silent about what she knew, he hoped she’d say little or nothing.

He should have realized that holding silence was not Sigrid’s approach to anything.

“Da?” Sigrid’s voice was tentative as she stuck her head into the sitting room. She gave Tilda a quick glance, but the little girl busily tended her beehives with only a quick smile for her sister.

“What’s up, sweetness?”

“There’s something up with my computer. Can you come take a look?”

Bard’s eyebrows went up. He was master of many mechanical things, and tinkerer around many others, but his computer repair skills were nonexistent. Sigrid knew that, so something else gave her reason to couch her question in such terms.
“Sure, Sig. Til, can you hold down Dinky Farm for a few minutes so I can take a look? You can take my turns if you want, just don’t pick the apples too early or chase off my sheep.”

“Da, I wouldn’t do that,” Tilda protested. Her sniff was nothing but injured tones. “Maybe I’ll get you more sheep.”

“That’s fine. Back in a few minutes.”

Tilda gleefully took over both controllers as Bard followed Sigrid upstairs to her room. His eyebrows went up again when she shut the door behind them and flopped down on her bed.

“Am I about to get a top secret security briefing?” he asked mildly as he pulled Sigrid’s desk chair out and sat down.

Sigrid snorted, but her expression was more worried than anything else. “Did Ada tell you why I was so upset about him and the pointe dancing?”

Up went Bard’s eyebrows again. “That came out of left field.”

“It wasn’t really about the pointe dancing, though I still don’t like it, but I accept that he’s doing it, and that he’s not killing himself so far. But that’s not what this is about. When we had that whole dust up, I told him about all the stuff I’d read about him on the Internet, and how nasty some of it was. He told me that of course it was, because nasty sells, because no one wants to read about a dancer with a happy family who does amazing ballets. They want scandal.”

“Yes, he’s told me the same thing,” Bard admitted.

“He told me it would only make me unhappy to read it, that I should just watch our family and see for myself how happy we are, and let the rest go unnoticed.”

Bard leaned his elbows on his knees and gave his daughter a considering look. “I take it you didn’t listen to that sage advice.”

Another snort. “Of course I didn’t. Someone in this family has to keep an eye out for the social media fallout, and since I’m the pragmatic one, I’m the one to keep tabs on it. Most of it’s laughable, and some of it’s nothing but envy, because Clan Ffyrnig is happy and none of us are nutcases. But the past week I’ve had more time to keep tabs on it, and I don’t like one particular line. Someone’s leaking stuff about Immortal, and guess what just popped up on the gossip lines after supper?”

“Something about what happened today?”

“Got it in one. It’s coy enough not to mention names, but it says someone was arrested for drug possession. Worse, it insinuated that this was only the latest scandal in the,” she held up her hands to make air quotes, “‘troubled effort to stage Immortal,’ as they called it. That to me said there were other stories, so I went looking for them, and there are a few previous ones over several months. They read like they’re done by one person, and they’re all insinuation, like how nutso Irmo is, or how much of a demanding divo Ada is, or how there are cost overruns, and on and on and on. None of them come out and state many facts, but there are a few details that make me wonder if someone in the company is behind them. For example, the few griny pictures of the set and of Ada’s costumes were taken inside the school. Mostly, I worried about it affecting people who might otherwise donate to UVB.”

Bard regarded Sigrid with a smile. “Thran didn’t know what he started when he first called you our most excellent co-conspirator. We should introduce you to Ori.”
Despite her concern, Sigrid’s smile was elated. “I already know Ori. He’s the cutest and sweetest guy ever, with his little sweater vests and all. Do you want me to email him? I bet he can figure out who’s behind this.”

“Let’s bring this up to Thran first, okay? If he’s done talking with Lettie, I’ll get him up here. Can you have some of the stuff you mentioned on the computer for him to see?”

“Sure, Da,” Sigrid bounced up to grab her laptop. “Thanks for believing me.”

“You’ve never given me reason not to, sweetness.”

“Weeellll, there was that time when I was six when I claimed that Joey Friedman made me eat a whole bag of salted peanuts.”

“True. But you didn’t try that again, so you get a bye.”

Sigrid made a face. “Hardly. I was so sick, it took three years before I wanted to look at a peanut. So no, I won’t try that again.”

“Good girl. Let me round up Thran.”

Sigrid was tapping away on her computer before Bard was out of her room. He tiptoed into the ballroom, but Thran ended his call just as he entered.

“What did she say, cariad?”

“Lettie said that Headmaster L’Eärendil was reassured at our instant response, as well as guarantees Lettie made that I fully support. There will be drug tests, there will be baggage searches, there will be no tolerance of violations. Thankfully, the UVB contracts with its dancers are quite explicit about the repercussions of drug abuse, so we do not have to rewrite them. We are also quite fortunate that the school is out of session, so very few students were in residence, and no students saw anything, or seem to be involved. So I hope we have dodged a bullet.”

“That’s a relief,” Bard exhaled. “But don’t let down just yet. Our excellent co-conspirator sniffed out something you need to see.”

“Oh, gods,” Thran flinched visibly. “What is it?”

“UVB may have another rat lurking around the fringes. I think it’s important enough that she should show you what she found.”

Thran swallowed, and the mutter under his breath wasn’t Russian that Bard recognized, but its vehemence was unmistakable. He followed Bard upstairs into Sigrid’s room, where she recounted what she’d told Bard. He and Thran sat on either side of Sigrid on her bed to scan the items she’d found. When she displayed the blurry picture of the *Immortal* set, Thran bit off a curse.

“Suka blyad, you are right,” Thran growled. “If this shit comes from anyone associated with the production, I will end that association.”

“Sigrid thought Ori might be able sort out who’s behind this stuff.”

“Without a doubt.”

Sigrid clicked on her email app and pressed Send. At the surprised looks from her fathers, she shrugged. “I made a list of the links and put them in an email to Ori while I waited for you to come
“upstairs.”

“Such initiative,” Bard gave her a wry smile. “Too bad you don’t anticipate your homework so well.”


Bard didn’t rise to Sigrid’s bait. “Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, let Ori take it from here.”

“But Da, I can help —”

“Sigrid...” Bard glanced at Thran, but his husband was still glowering at Sigrid’s computer screen. “Ori is a decent guy. I think highly of him, I like him, and I’m grateful to him for everything he’s done for Thran. But... some of the data mining he does for his brother isn’t... anything I want you involved in. I’m very serious about this. Do not get yourself embroiled in exactly the thing that’s causing Thran so many headaches.”

“Do not,” Thran growled, and turned a hard, quelling stare on the girl. Ah, he hadn’t been as oblivious to Bard’s words as Bard had thought. “Do not. I am grateful that you showed me what you found, but you must let that be the end of it.”

Sigrid’s expression fell into subdued agreement, and her posture was placation itself. “I won’t. But I’ll still watch the net for stuff for Ori to look at.”

“That’s fair. Just tell us when you find something you think is a concern, and that’s all.”

“Yes, Da. Just... um, one more thing?”

“Yes?” Bard and Thran drawled, drawing Sigrid’s snicker.

“Gods, Ada, you sound just like Da. But... you’ve probably already thought of this, but in case you haven’t, there’s this legal thing called a nondisclosure clause? It means you can’t reveal stuff to people outside your workplace – your competitors, the media, that stuff. It’s common in high tech firms, but that’s not the only field by any means. If you don’t already have one in your dancers’ employment contracts, you could add one to keep them from spilling anything about *Immortal.*”

Thran’s angry glare faded into consideration. “I do not know if the UVB contracts include such a thing or not. That is a very useful suggestion, lioness. I will call Lettie back to ask her.”

Thran got up, offering Sigrid a small smile of thanks, but his expression was intent as he left the room. When Sigrid gave Bard a questioning look, he sighed.

“He’s got a lot on his plate, sweetness. I appreciate you looking out for him about stuff I didn’t consider.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate, too, Da. Everything’s gone so well for us since we met Thran, and I want it to stay that way. I figured that as the most tech-savvy one of the clan, I could look out for us there.”

“Bain and Legolas might dispute your claim of being the most tech savvy.”

“Proficiency during zombie apocalypses isn’t the only claim to tech-savviness.”

“Granted. I’ll see to the Russian, and let you know how it turns out.”

“Okay, Da.”
Bard leaned forward to give Sigrid’s braid a tug. “Everything going well at the bistro?”

Sigrid nodded. “I like it there. Some mornings are incredibly busy, but Miss Dís stays calm and smiling through all of it, and she’s very motherly to all of us. Oh, she fusses when we mess up, but it never lasts long, and she helps us sort out whatever we did so we don’t do it again.”

“Have you done anything yet to earn her fussing?”

“Not so far, thank goodness. I had trouble with the cash register until she and Dana told me how to sweet-talk it, so I’m good.”

“Was she okay with you having to cut out early for the two weeks of your driving class?”

“She was when I offered to be there on the weekends for longer to make up for it. She seemed to appreciate the initiative, so I’m ready to go in another week. I hope they teach me to shift gears – I have to pass the driving test in your truck.”

“Thran might let you borrow the SUV.”

Shaking her head, Sigrid demurred. “No, I want to learn how to shift. If I learn that, I can drive anything.”

“Very true. If you don’t learn in your class, I think my old truck can stand a few lessons on Sundays in the school parking lot.”

“Along with my classmates in their parents’ cars,” Sigrid chuckled.

“Likely,” Bard agreed, smiling. He got up from his chair. “Keep your fingers crossed for your Ada, sweetness.”

“I will,” Sigrid’s nod was firm before she flashed a gleeful grin. “I hope Tilda’s made you the ovine czar of Dinky Farm.”

Laughing, Bard held up his hands. “I’ll try not to feel sheepish about that.”

Sigrid’s groan followed him halfway down the stairs, drawing his grin. His reputation as King of Bad Dad Jokes was intact.

* * *

Bard acquired another title – King of Sheep – by the time Thran returned from the ballroom. Tilda had done as she’d promised, doubling Bard’s herd until his Dinky Farm hardly had space to hold them all. At the same time, she had become the Bee Queen, so the game became a race to see whether honey or wool would produce the bigger return on investment. It was a virtual dead heat, and father and daughter still laughed about it when the tall dancer joined them. Did he look more reconciled, or was he resigned?

“Lettie is in agreement about the nondisclosure clause. We have something in place now, but it could be more strongly worded, and Adam considers how to update it. And I spoke to Ori, though it was merely for my own comfort, not to urge him on. He took Sigrid’s email very seriously, and is already at work to see what he can learn.”
Bard winced. “I’m sorry we put him to work afterhours.”

“He did not consider it as overtime; merely an interesting, if somewhat trivial, challenge, as you or I might find a children’s crossword puzzle. He seemed to think it was the work of an amateur, in which case he or she has no chance against Ori. He may well have something for us soon.”

“Is something wrong, Ada?” Tilda ventured, looking somber.

Bard winced. They’d forgotten that Tilda hadn’t heard this morning’s tale. But Thran managed a smile for her.

“It is a computer thing, Kukla, which I do not understand very well, but Ori works on it for us. He does not think it is a concern, so I trust that it is so.”

“I like Ori,” Tilda agreed. “And I like Mr. Rada, too. I miss seeing him and Sebastian.”

“I will tell him you asked after him and his small pet,” Thran replied. “That will make him very happy.”

“Good,” Tilda smiled. “I like him a lot. He eats an awful lot of cookies, though. I hope he gets enough vegetables.”

Bard grinned. “Maybe he eats nothing but veg at home, and keeps all the cookies in his coat for work.”

“Maybe so,” Tilda considered, but her expression was dubious. “I’d rather even it out and have both all day long.”

“Cookies all day long?” Bard pretended to look appalled. “Not around here, I’m afraid. I’d be baking and doing nothing else to keep Clan Ffyrnig in cookies. But enough about cookies, little doll – it’s time for you to get a shower. You know Thran and I are going into the city tomorrow to get haircuts, so you and Legolas and Bain will hold down the homestead for us. I’ll talk to the lads while you’re in the shower, then when you’re done we’ll sort the rest out.”

“Okay, Da.” Tilda shut down Dinky Farm, put the controllers away, and headed upstairs. Thran sat perched on the end of the sofa looking distracted.

“Everything all right, angel?”

Thran heaved a sigh. “I forgot about our appointment with Rowan.”

“You want me to reschedule it again?”

Thran waved a hand. “We did that last week, and we were lucky to get another slot so soon. I have my last flying lesson tomorrow before we try it on the school stage next week, so I already will not have a regular day to dance, so it is just as well for us to go. I think I will go to bed now, because tomorrow we must get up early to reach the city in time. As if I will be able to sleep well after today.”

“We’ll settle the boys about what happened today, set the duties for tomorrow, then you can crawl into bed while I get in the shower,” Bard agreed. “So rounds and upstairs.”

They made their usual check of the house, set the security system, and followed Tilda upstairs. Bain was waiting for them. “Uh, Da? Can I talk to you?”
Bard gave Thran a look, so Thran went into bedroom.

“Sure, boyo. What’s up?”

Bain led him into his room, where he found Legolas perched on the bed. For the second time tonight, he faced concerned faces.

“What’s going on with Papa?” Legolas asked lowly, as Bain sat down next to him and turned an expectant face on his father. “What happened today?”

Despite the boys’ serious expressions, Bard grinned. “What, you couldn’t get anything out of Sigrid?”

That struck a chord, for the boys exchanged annoyed grimaces. “We tried, but she wouldn’t tell us. So you have to.”

“We were on our way up here to tell you. Hang on.”

Bard retreated to beckon Thran to join him in Bain’s room. In a calm, serious voice, Bard told the boys bare bones of Kiefer’s idiocy, gratified when both looked disgusted. Thran summarized what the incident might mean for the future of Immortal’s premiere, and what he thought would happen. Both boys took in the information with solemn concern.

“What a dickwad,” Legolas muttered, nearly drawing Bard’s laughter. A little of Bain’s bluntness had rubbed off on the quiet boy. “Didn’t he think that he might ruin Papa’s ballet?”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” Bard agreed. “If he’d thought at all, he might’ve realized that his job was on the line, because that’s what happened – your Papa fired him from the company, and he’s in jail accused of drug possession.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, Papa, since you told Sigrid?” Legolas asked plaintively.

“Only Sigrid was here when I came home, Legolas, and she saw how upset I was. Tilda came home before you, and we did not want to upset our small Kukla to tell you in front of her. So please, do not alarm her.”

Both boys looked appeased, if their exchange of glances were any criteria.

“Okay, thank you for telling us, Papa,” Legolas nodded. “We had hoped that it was only because of Kukla that you didn’t tell us before.”

“Yeah, thanks, Da,” Bain seconded.

“You’re welcome,” Bard nodded. “But realize that your discretion pays a big part in what we tell both of you, yeah? This isn’t something to brag about to your friends. It’s Thran’s business, and he wants us to know so that we understand some of the pressure he’s under, not so we can blabber it around. So keep the family business in the family.”

“Yes, Bard, Okay, Da.”

“One more thing to talk about,” Bard went on. “Thran and I have to go into the city early tomorrow. Sig’s going to work as usual, so you two and Tilda will be here. You know the drill – you can make scrambled eggs, toast, bagels, grilled cheese, porridge, yogurt, or fruit for breakfast in whatever combination. Please stay on the property until we come back, which shouldn’t be long, given when you usually wake up. Make sure Tilda gets breakfast. I’d appreciate it if you don’t launch into
zombie apocalypse and leave Tilda with nothing to do, so if you play video games, make it something she can play, too, if she wants. All clear?"

The boys nodded, so Bard looked to Thran. “Did I forget anything?”

Thran managed a smile. “Clean up the kitchen, put away the food, and if the dishwasher is full, please put soap in it and run it.”

Bain snapped a crisp salute. “Aye, Cap’n! Aye, Commander!”

“Carry on, then, Lieutenants,” Bard saluted back, and Thran followed suit. “All right, Ensign Tilda’s through her shower, so once we make sure you all know the drill, you lads wash, too.”

“Okay, Da,” Bain agreed.

Bard and Thran sorted out the children about tomorrow’s routine, and bade goodnight to all of the children. Bard came out of the shower to find Thran tossing and turning as he tried to find a comfortable position in bed.

“Still unsettled,” Bard murmured, as he tossed his dirty clothes in the hamper and laid his sleep pants and tee by his side of the bed.

“I think UVB took no lasting harm today, but yes, I am still so, so angry,” Thran confessed. He fell back against his pillow to stare up at the ceiling.

“You have reason to be,” Bard agreed. He turned out both lights by the bed, and eased in beside Thran. “But you reacted instantly, which Lettie parleyed into a reprieve from the school, the fool is in the clink, Sigrid looked out for us, and Ori looks out for us on top of that.”

Thran hummed. “I should take solace in how many good people look out for us.”

“You do, but it’s hard for you to calm down after a day like today. You need a distraction.”

Shutting his eyes, Bard slid closer to Thran. Even in the dark, his husband’s long, lithe frame was graceful and elegant, and it was a pleasure to stroke and caress it. He kept his touches light and feathery, the better to coax Thran’s body to produce the endorphins that would soothe the grating edges of his upset. But before that happened, Thran took his hands to still them.

“You give too much, lyubov moya,” he whispered. “I am already ashamed that I do not pay you the attention that you deserve. I should be the one to reassure you that today is only a small concern.”

Bard’s chuckle was soft and breathy against Thran’s neck. “I know a onetime welder who used to feel guilty about all the money a certain ballet dancer bestowed on the renovation of an old house. The dancer said not to worry, because he had lots of money to spend on making a home for his family. So let a metal sculptor tell you not to worry because he’s got lots of love and affection to bestow on the love of his life. No guilt or shame need apply.”

After a short silence, some of the tension in Thran’s limbs eased. “You fight dirty, to use my words against me.”

Bard slid his hands from Thran’s grasp. “What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.”

“What is this sauce for poultry, and what does it have to do with anything?”

“It means that if it’s okay for a dancer to be generous, it’s okay for a metal sculptor to be generous,
too. So be quiet and enjoy your rub.”

Chuckling, Thran relaxed a little more into Bard’s embrace. “I hear and obey, my saint.”

“If only,” Bard teased, nuzzling Thran’s ear. “Just let everything go, angel. Don’t make me pull rank and remind a pale seer that his king is here.”

Thran sighed, but it was heavy with desire for solace rather than arousal. “I should tell you no. I should be strong and tell you that all will be well, that I will kick the ass of anyone who stands between me and the premiere of this stupid fucking Immortal.”

“Tomorrow.” Bard kissed Thran’s nape softly. “Tell me that tomorrow. Tonight, the king wants to cherish his seer, to show him what a treasure he is. Let go. Give in. You can’t deny me or yourself.”

“No.” Thran’s whisper was barely audible, and his breath caught as Bard pressed another kiss against his nape. “I cannot. Make me yours again, my king.”

Bard needed no more encouragement to put all his love and affection into gentle strokes, soft kisses, and whispered endearments, gradually coaxing Thran to relax. Under Bard’s care, Thran’s tension dribbled away until he hummed in silent pleasure. Thran had rarely been so passive before, mute testimony to how exhausted he was and how eagerly he soaked up Bard’s ministrations, so Bard lavished caress after caress over Thran’s beautiful body. Only when Thran’s back arched, when his hands grabbed at the sheets in desire, when his breath turned rapid and erratic, did Bard venture into more erotic touches, but at the same unhurried pace. Just to feel his husband lean into Bard’s caresses, to hear him moan softly, then to feel his cock rise without ever being touched, was so arousing that when Bard slipped inside Thran, they both shuddered in long-neglected pleasure. So intense was it that Bard rolled on top to thrust in deeper; in response, Thran pulled his legs up, arched his back, and crowded hard against Bard’s thighs with a groan of urgency. Such want banished all thought of slow, leisurely teasing, and Bard pulled his husband back to meet his thrusts forward, faster and faster. Gods, such a needy, mindless partner turned him just as needy and mindless, and he crouched over Thran to grope for his cock. He stroked Thran’s cock in rhythm with his thrusts, driving Thran to widen his knees until he’d fully opened. In seconds, Thran’s head arched back as his arousal reached its peak. Gasping, he clenched hard around Bard’s cock. It was too intense a pleasure to resist, and Bard gave in just as eagerly to wave after wave of ecstasy. They both collapsed flat on the bed in a tangle of limbs.

“Gods, I needed that,” Thran whispered, his voice muffled in his pillow.

Bard smiled as he rolled off Thran to lie on his back beside him. “I don’t want you to feel guilty, so I’ll let you in on a secret.”

Thran snuggled beside Bard to put an arm over his chest. “What is this secret, lyubov moya?”

“You weren’t the only one who needed that, so you don’t have to worry that this was just me being altruistic.”

Thran snickered. “I am glad you told me. Otherwise, I might have thought that the king had suffered mightily to care for his poor seer.”

“The things I do to care for my realm,” Bard teased as he pressed a kiss against Thran’s hair.

Thran got up with him to clean off the remains of their delight, and they soon returned to bed. They cuddled briefly, but it wasn’t long before Thran eased into sleep. Bard eased his fingers from Thran’s hair, and breathed a sigh of relief.
Now, if only Thran stayed asleep...

** * * *

Bard reached out a hand to turn off the clock radio alarm when it went off at seven. Thran was still asleep, so Bard took his turn in the bathroom before he woke his husband with a soft touch.

“Porridge or eggs?” he asked when Thran blinked sleepily at him. “Eight-thirty appointment with Rowan, remember?”

Thran stretched and hummed noncommittally. “Eggs, if you would like them, too.”

“I’ll get them started.”

He went downstairs and had an onion and cheese omelet with toast ready by the time Thran came downstairs. The dancer looked sleepy, but not exhausted as he had last night. Bard offered a kiss with the plate he handed Thran.

“Sleep okay?”

Thran offered Bard a slight smile. “Better than I expected. I blame that on a certain hunky welder.”

“I’ll cop that plea anytime I have the chance,” Bard winked at his husband as he brought his plate to the table.

They ate quickly, dressed, and were soon on the road to the city. Thran didn’t protest when Bard drove, and he didn’t talk much on the way. Despite his release last night, he was still preoccupied with yesterday’s debacle with Kiefer, not that Bard blamed him. Maybe one of Rowan’s cappuccinos and a little of her TLC would help.

Rowan greeted them with her usual bright, teasing banter before she sent them to Marisa. Thran’s mane was slathered with whatever Marisa used to enhance his white hair, carefully rinsed, slathered again – this time in conditioner – then encased in plastic wrap and a hot towel. By the time Bard had his shampoo and conditioner, Thran was asleep in his comfortable chair under the warm dryer, his cappuccino forgotten beside him. Rowan came back to regard him, and cast Bard a sidelong look.

“That is one exhausted dancer.”

Bard nodded. “Would it be too much to ask you to let him sleep, and do me first?”

“Absolutely not. All he needs is a little snip here and a little snip there, unlike a certain artist I could mention.”

“Um, I’m sorry about that,” Bard gave Rowan a chagrined shrug. “Life intruded.”

Rowan nodded wisely. “It has a habit of doing that. Come on, then. Let the tired dancer sleep.”

Rowan wielded her magical scissors, combs, razors, and dryers until Bard’s locks were back to the graceful tousle she’d given him back in January. When he was restored, he went back with Rowan to ease Thran awake.

“Come on, honey, let’s get you detailed and dried,” she urged, as Thran opened his eyes. "Or do you
want to look at your hunky husband for a few minutes first? Not that I blame you, not in the least.”

“My saint, you are restored,” Thran said, stretching in his chair. “Tcha, you did not have to let me sleep so long.”

“Oh, yes, I did,” Rowan put her hands on her hips and a look of mock affront on her face. “How else could I get Bard away from you long enough to make him spill all your secrets?”

“I have no secrets from you, krasivaya,” Thran waved a dismissive hand. He gave Bard a considering expression. “But a certain metal sculptor... mmmm. It bears no contemplation.”

“Oh, give, honey!” Rowan begged with exaggerated urgency. “Tell me everything while I snip!”

She led Thran off, leaving Bard to chuckle in the waiting area over his café au lait. He didn’t have long to wait – perhaps half an hour passed before Thran appeared, his hair resplendently white and silky. They bade Rowan a fond and appreciative farewell, then Bard drove them back home. Again, Thran was virtually silent on the return journey.

“I am sorry, Bard,” Thran sighed when they neared their exit on the highway. “I am poor company, I know.”

“You’re worried, and I understand why. Hell, I am, too. But Lettie seemed hopeful last night that Headmaster L’Eärendil wouldn’t pitch UVB out for one rotten apple. So you have reason to be hopeful, too.”

“I try to be,” Thran admitted. “But it is hard, because there are so many constraints on what I can do or say, when there were none on the fool who caused this...”

“There were constraints. He chose to ignore them, so he lost his job.”

“And perhaps he will have other things to face with the police,” conceded Thran. “Though I am sure I will have much to face with the company today.”

“Likely so. But you’ll get through it. Just take it one breath at a time.”

Thran nodded as they drove through the village. “That is the best thing I can do.”

In a few minutes, they were home. The boys and Tilda were eating breakfast, and welcomed their fathers home with food-sprinkled smiles. Thran went upstairs with Bard to change into his dancewear, while Bard put on his working clothes, for he’d continue his experiments with aluminum spheres and epoxy once Thran left for the studio.

“You said you have a flying lesson today, angel?” Bard asked as they worked in the kitchen to assemble Thran’s stash of chicken, vegetables, and nuts. The children clattered by them, running outside to play.

“I do,” Thran brightened. “The last scheduled one, but I would not be surprised if it turns out not to be so.”

“Oh?” Bard looked up from the cutting board where he sliced a red pepper into slivers. “Why is that?”

“Because this is the first time we will fly in costume. Rada has reservations about the cape Irmo wants me to wear when I fly. It is to flare behind me, I suppose like flames or streams of ice, or some such thing. Rada thinks it will tangle in the wire, and I am inclined to agree with him. But Irmo...”
thinks otherwise, so we will see. If all goes well, that is good. If not, then Rada must rework the costume, and then I will need another flying lesson.”

Bard considered that as he packed the pepper strips in Thran’s bento box. “I know you’ll take all due care, angel, but I’ll say it, anyway. Don’t let a few yards of fabric mess up anything. If you think the cape won’t work, then say so. I’m sure Rada will come up with a brilliant alternative without thinking hard.”

Thran flashed him an amused look. “You are right, my saint. It would not surprise me if our Rada has not already considered how best to replace a cumbersome cape with something more elegant.”

“I’d bet on it.” Bard packed the last bit of chicken in Thran’s boxes and snapped it shut. “All right, then. Off you go.”

“I am off, and I leave, too,” Thran smiled as he put his boxes into his dance bag. He leaned over the island to offer Bard a kiss.

Bard met him half way. “Do your best, just like always.”

“I will. Until later, my saint.”

He walked his husband out to the carriage house, calling to the children that Thran was on his way out. Legolas and Tilda sent him on his way with hugs, and Bain with a fist bump and a grin. As Thran’s SUV turned down the lane and disappeared, and the children ran back into the back yard, Bard’s smile faded and his concern about yesterday’s altercation resurfaced. As he heaved the barn’s bay door up, his thoughts were not on the sculpture he was about to work on, but on a beleaguered ballet dancer who carried so much on his slender feet.
Chapter 140

Chapter Summary

The angel does damage control, a gentle soul solves a mystery, and a much-debated cape has its moment in the spotlight.

So soon as Bard’s encouraging face disappeared in his rear view mirror, Thran let his smile fade. How much of an effort had it been to keep his worry and apprehension from revealing itself to his family? No matter that Clan Ffyrnig’s sharp-eyed lioness was not in residence – the boys were far from the oblivious gamers that they seemed so often. Legolas knew his father well, and Bain knew Legolas, and between the two of them, they were the curious ferrets to Sigrid’s bold lioness. Then there was busy Tilda happily shepherding her bees and vegetables. If she weren’t yet wise enough to fathom every upset that plagued those older than she was, she was still sensitive enough to sense general disquiet. The worst of all was his husband with his all-but-telepathic ability to gauge Thran’s mood to a fine point. All of them had rallied to reassure him yesterday. Bard’s thorough ministrations last night had been the ultimate attempt to soothe and reassure him.

Bard’s attentions had clearly reminded Thran of how much love surrounded him, and had sent him easily to sleep. They had not, however, been enough to keep him from waking just before six this morning, his thoughts churning with so much worry, so many things that needed to be done, so much pointless thrashing about what to do if this or that or the other happened. He had only just fallen back asleep when Bard had woken him to get ready for their trip to the city. He had managed to get through breakfast and the trip to the city without showing too much of his upset, mostly because he remained silent. Bard had respected that, rightly thinking he was preoccupied.

Bard was twice the saint Bard thought he was. He gave and gave and gave...

Let a metal sculptor tell you not to worry because he’s got lots of love and affection to bestow on the love of his life...

Thran sighed. He felt no differently about Bard, but still... it was humbling to be so well regarded, and hard not to worry if he were worthy of it. He certainly felt more sympathy and understanding of how Bard had felt when they’d first dared to begin their relationship. That had given Thran one more reason to hold his tongue and school his expression this morning, no matter how hard it had been – was it any surprise that he’d fallen asleep as soon as Marisa put him under the warm dryer? At least he’d woken more refreshed. Rowan’s attentions had further soothed him, and of course it had been nothing but a delight to see Bard’s sexy Musketeer hairdo reappear.

But his mood had fallen again on the way home, because as soon as he’d gotten home, he’d left for the UVB studio, where he would face the fallout from yesterday, and the rest of the company. The afternoon’s flying lesson, where he would leap off a twenty-foot tower in a cumbersome costume cape while suspended on a thin wire, would be a banal undertaking after such a nerve-wracking morning.

He pulled into the UVB parking lot at eleven-thirty, half an hour before UVB’s senior people were due to arrive, and an hour and a half before the rest of the company was scheduled to appear. Despite his early arrival, Thran recognized Irmo’s car, and Abebe’s, and Lettie’s. They were no less anxious than he was, then. Thran ignored them all to search for the unassuming wagon that Ori drove.
It was here, too. Did that bode well, or ill?

Thran strode into the studio as if he were Spartacus defying the Romans. There were no Romans here, only his worries, but if anything needed defying, those did.

“They’re in Lettie’s office,” Simone murmured, as soon as Thran entered. Simone was usually their pianist, but this morning, she’d stationed herself at the lobby desk to watch for him.

“Merci, ma chère,” he murmured, barely remembering to nod acknowledgement as he strode past. As he expected, the ballet master, artistic director, choreographer, and UVB’s all around expediter were gathered around Lettie’s desk. All of them looked up at Thran’s entrance, but the one Thran regarded was Ori. The young man looked well rested, and his welcoming smile had a confident edge to it. Thran dared to relax an edge of his concern.

“Good morning, all,” he raised a hand in welcome.

A host of good morning wishes murmured in reply. “I hope you slept well,” Lettie continued.

Thran shrugged. “I hazard no better than many of you. Where do we stand this morning?”

Lettie leaned forward. “We’re on good footing with our dancers’ contracts. As you know, they already state explicitly that illicit drug use – meaning anything not prescribed by a doctor for a specific reason – is grounds for dismissal and termination of contract. So we can deal with Kiefer’s dismissal without issue. Our contracts also include clauses that restrict speaking to the media or providing information to media outlets without express permission, which cover us about the leaked information. Even so, Adam will draw up an even more strongly worded amendment about nondisclosure. We can squeak by without it, but we all agree that we need more specific protection given the original work we’re doing. That’ll be good going forward, as well, because none of us expect Immortal to be our only original work. That new clause will be in all of our contracts going forward, and we will ask everyone in the company to sign the amendment to cover the rest of this season.”

“That is good news,” Thran agreed.

“Yes, yes,” Irmo chimed in, nodding vigorously. “I am like the rest of you – I do not want another company to steal our innovations because of a sneak thief.”

Today, the often-contentious choreographer’s sentiment met with nothing but agreement.

“I’ve got some good news about that.” Ori interlaced his fingers around one knee and looked thoughtful. “Those articles on the Internet that you sent me, Thran, were not from any of the dancers.”

“Wait,” Abebe frowned, and so did Irmo. “What articles?”

“They are the reason why Lettie mentioned our concern about nondisclosure,” Thran explained, then gave a succinct summary of what Sigrid had discovered yesterday. This was met with universal apprehension.

“So somewhere we have a mole,” Abebe surmised, glowering in anger. “Someone wants us to look bad.”

“That is a rat, not a mole,” Thran agreed. “But I understand – you mean mole as in a spy.”

“Exactly,” Abebe agreed. “And I agree with you, he or she is a rat, too.”
“But you said none of the dancers were behind the articles, Ori?” Lettie drew the group back to the central issue.

“That’s right,” Ori nodded.

Lettie’s smile was cautiously hopeful. “If that’s the case, then that’s a relief.”

“How sure are you?” Abebe questioned.

“Oh, quite sure,” Ori replied thoughtfully, without any smugness or arrogance. He looked as if he considered a math problem, which was likely true. “It didn’t take much to unravel it, so if you’re interested, I’ll explain.”

“Absolutely, we’re interested,” Abebe exclaimed, which drew chuckles of agreement from his colleagues.

“Really? Oh, all right, then,” the quiet Ori looked gratified. “I’ll leave out all the computer jargon, so I’ll just say that I looked at the coding behind what Thran sent me – how it was prepared, how it was posted, where it originated, and so forth. The person behind it wasn’t all that technically adept, in that I was able to identify the host server pretty quickly...” Ori looked at the blank faces around him, and smiled shyly. “Oh, well, I’ll leave out that bit, too. Suffice it to say that I sorted out where the stuff came from without a lot of effort. But the most important clue didn’t take any computer sleuthing at all.”

“It didn’t?” Abebe asked. “What did you do, ask each of the dancers?”

That brought a chuckle, but Ori’s expression was impish. “I didn’t have to. That grainy picture that was in the material you sent, Thran? I did a little photo enhancement on it, and there was the answer, plain as day – every one of the dancers in the company was in the picture.”

Ori tapped on his tablet, and turned it around for everyone to see the picture displayed there. It was the picture Thran had seen on Sigrid’s laptop last night that showed the Underworld portion of the stage, but Ori’s enhancement software had sharpened the image. There was Thran in the middle of the picture with Charisse and Luka before him; around them were arrayed the rest of the company.

“So if all of the dancers were in the picture, then none of them could take the picture?” Thran asked.

Ori nodded. “That’s what I think. There are remote control cameras, but I don’t think that was what was used to take this picture. It’s blurry, so I think our mole took it on the sly with a mobile phone. If the mole had used a digital camera, the quality would likely be better, but someone holding up a camera would have attracted notice. If someone waves a mobile around, we all think it’s just an animated conversation.”

“That makes sense,” Lettie nodded.

“So if the picture shows all of the dancers, who could have taken it?” Abebe raised his hands in puzzlement.

“The picture gave me some hints to that, too, just in where it was taken. It was shot straight on, which meant the mole stood along the centerline of the auditorium. The auditorium has two side aisles, not a center one, so the mole would have had to stand in the middle of a row. But that’s not where the mole was. This picture was taken from the back of the auditorium, not down near the stage, which makes sense if you don’t want someone to see what you’re doing. And it’s not at the level of the seats, but higher.”
“It was taken from the light and sound booth,” Irmo said at once.

Ori nodded vigorously. “That’s exactly what I think, too.”

Lettie’s eyes narrowed. “One of the technicians, then?”

“I thought it likely,” Ori tapped his chin with a finger as he considered the screen. “So I did the most obvious thing first – I searched the Internet for ‘Immortal ballet and Thran Oropherson,’ which nicely presented this very picture. Through one means or another, I traced it to the links Sigrid had found, as well as a blog.” The equanimity that usually graced Ori’s face was lost in mild exasperation as he turned his tablet around to type quickly. When he turned it around again, Thran and the others saw the original blurry picture atop a typed message.

“The entry accompanying the picture reads, ‘This picture just earned me a hundred bucks! That makes five hundred so far!’ I think we have a youthful paparazzo who sold this picture to whoever wrote the blog. And I can say with a high degree of certainty who this youthful paparazzo is. I looked at the list of student interns, and made a list of everyone who works on the light and sound teams. And there I found Greta Wurlitzer.”

“What makes you think it’s her?” Lettie asked, frowning as if she thought she’d missed something, but didn’t know what.

Ori scrolled to the top of the blog. The banner read *Greta’s Gossip*, and the top graphic displayed a multi-tiered organ console.

“Hardly original,” Abebe sniffed.

“Hardly.” Ori agreed. “But she’s not the end of the story. Did she take the picture? I think so. Did she post the articles Sigrid found? I think not. I think she sold the picture to whomever did post the articles.”

“So who posted the articles?” Irmo asked, holding his hands up impatiently.

“There are ways to identify the exact person,” Ori shrugged noncommittally. Thran read that to mean there were illegal ways to do that, and that Ori had employed however many of them he needed to do exactly that. Given his posture and lack of excitement, he’d determined that the person wasn’t worth pursuing. “But we don’t need to. There are five articles from this same source, all of them vaguely insinuating and catty, but they haven’t revealed anything of importance past a blurry picture. We’ve just four weeks to go before *Immortal* opens, and we have too much to do to pursue him or her directly for something so trivial. If we dismiss Greta Wurlitzer from the interns, that removes this person’s source of information, and that leaves her with nothing more to post.”

Thran and his colleagues exchanged considering glances. “What if the person who wrote the articles convinces someone else to provide information?”

When Ori grinned, he looked enough like his brother that Thran smothered a smile. “I don’t think that will be an issue. I leave it to you to consider whether a reminder to the interns about nondisclosure would be prudent.”

“So we have dodged a pair of bullets,” Thran said smoothly, before anyone else noticed Ori’s minor slip. “But we have one more to consider.”

All attention snapped to Thran. “What’s that?” Irmo barked.

“We must consider whether Kiefer was the only dancer who resorted to cocaine as a means of
That was a serious enough topic to divert everyone from what Ori had said. “What do you have in mind, Thran, other than we hope no one else did?” Lettie asked.

“I want to tell the company that yes, there was an incident. They all know there was, so we look foolish to deny it. They will make their own inferences when we tell them about the baggage check, as well. But I want to say further that we take this very seriously, and not only because we are in a school. If anyone else relies on means to enhance performance that our contract expressly forbids, or for some other reason wants to end association with UVB, then he or she is free to request a release from contract, no questions asked, without repercussions. But if we discover a problem later, then there will be the fullest repercussions possible under the law.”

“I suggest that you say only that there was an incident, and Kiefer’s no longer with the company, without further details. Anything else is a violation of privacy... yes, despite the fact that he was blatant about what he did,” Ori held up a hand in placation. “Then say that UVB takes its contracts seriously, and if there are any reasons why anyone feels she or she can’t honor the contract in its entirety, then UVB will offer a release, no questions asked, without repercussions. I know you want to say more than that, Thran, but we can’t without opening ourselves to legal issues.”

Thran wasn’t the only one to sigh in frustration. “Welcome to the land of lawyers,” was Abebe’s observation.

“I agree,” Ori gave the ballet master a sympathetic smile. “But because this is the land of lawyers, we have to take what we say as seriously as the litigious folks do. And at least saying that we take all terms of our contracts seriously lets us cover everything, not just one thing.”

“We’ll have to take what comfort we can from that,” Lettie sighed with a less than cheerful expression. “And we should be grateful that Headmaster L’Eärendil didn’t pitch us out on our ears. We can stay in the school, but we’ll be under much closer scrutiny. Given how close we are to the premiere, we managed to avoid all of the dancers having to pass a drug test. But as Thran said, all of our baggage will be searched each morning, and the school may very well call for random drug tests if we give them any reason to suspect anything.”

The group spent the last few minutes before the dancers would start to arrive planning who would say what. Lettie would give the overview; Abebe would describe the need for the baggage search, and the watchful eye that would follow them during rehearsal. Thran would finish with the reminder of what the dancers’ contracts specified, and the chance to dissolve association with the company if anyone desired. That done, the only thing left to do was to wait.

Thran went outside to catch a well needed breath of late spring air. He was not surprised when Ori came out to stand beside him.

“Who is she?”

“Oh, you noticed that,” Ori sighed. He flitted a sheepish look at Thran.

“I did. Your brother has taught me well.”

“He taught me well, too,” Ori’s grin appeared and vanished as quickly as morning mist. “Our article writer is Greta’s older sister, Noëlle. She’s a media studies student at a nearby college, it doesn’t matter which one, with a minor in modern dance. She’s a fair to middling student, more than anything else. The server she posted on is somewhere on campus, so I think the articles were a class assignment – you know, the kind where your grade depends on how many hits your item
“I have not heard of such a thing.” Thran admitted. “This is a phenomenon?”

“It is,” Ori nodded. “There was a famous one some time ago where the class assignment was to put something out on the net and see how many hits it got. Anything receiving a hundred hits or more earned the students an A. One team of students CGI-ed a short video of an eagle swooping down to snatch a baby in a park. It got over a million hits. Needless to say, those students got their A.”

Thran mulled this over. “I feel better, then, in one regard – we suffered no harm that we know of. But on the other... I would have liked it better if the articles had been positive instead of negative. Were these articles widely read?”

Ori shrugged. “Sigrid said it best in the email she sent me – nasty sells. I wish that weren’t so, but it’s true nevertheless. The first one was read a few hundred times, but it didn’t have much content, so the following ones were read less. The last one with the picture picked up a bit, but the comments on all of them were dismissive because they had so little content.”

“So this was not particularly malicious.”

Ori shook his head. “I don’t think so. But I’d still dismiss Greta from the interns. It’s worth sending a message that this isn’t how a professional acts.”

One by one, dancers arrived in the parking lot, and tiptoed past Thran and Ori with subdued greetings. Thran and Ori exchanged looks before they followed a group of dancers back into the studio. Thran retrieved his bag from Lettie’s office and took himself into the studio, scanning the other dancers to see who was here. He was somewhat surprised to see Nadine, Kiefer’s partner, given how upset she’d been yesterday, but he had no reason to suspect that she had fallen prey to the same dependency that had claimed her partner. Besides, Kiefer, the rest of the company was in place – no, Piero, one of the four hip-hop dancers, was missing. As Lettie, Abebe, Irmo, and Ori filed into the studio, Thran refused to think about what that absence meant.

“Good afternoon,” Lettie began, and the dancers arrayed themselves around her and the other leaders of the ballet. “I’m sure all of you are as concerned as I am about what took place at the Imladris Academy yesterday afternoon. All I may legally tell you is that there was an incident, a very serious incident, and that Kiefer Standaal is no longer part of UltraViolet Ballet.”

“While I will not speculate on the particulars of yesterday’s incident, I can tell you that I have looked long and hard at what this company is trying to do. We want to bring a brand new ballet, something unlike anything else, to life. This takes an incredible amount of work and dedication and sacrifice, which all of you have given without complaint. I’m proud of you all for the huge effort you’ve made. This huge effort is very important to all of us who lead our company – me, Irmo, Abebe, and Thran. We understand that this level of sacrifice is hard, and at times it seems to demand more than we can give. We sacrifice our bodies to learn the roles, to rehearse the roles over and over and over again until our bodies dance them without thought. It’s important that you care for yourselves, mentally and physically, to meet these demands.

“The contracts that each of you signed when you joined UltraViolet Ballet are quite specific about all of the things that will be demanded of you, and what things are deal breakers. I hope you take these things very seriously, and that you will continue to do all in your power to abide by them.”

The dancers looked among themselves and murmured as Lettie nodded to Abebe, who stepped forward. “The Imladris Academy, where we’re going to premiere our ballet, has rules and regulations that are just as important for us to follow. Their goal is to provide the best and safest
experience for its students. None of us wants to provide the Imladris Academy a reason to think that we present a risk for its students, so it’s important that we follow their rules, as well as ours, to show our good faith. After yesterday, we have agreed that we will allow school security to search all baggage that we bring into the school each day. I don’t have to tell you what they don’t want to find – weapons, alcohol, and drugs. Cameras are out, too - not your cell phones, but separate cameras. As for the cell phone cameras, understand that you cannot post any photos you take of the *Immortal* set or costumes. You don’t have to worry about things like asthma inhalers, or legal medications. Just make sure you bring the prescription slip that came with the medication that has your name on it, and you’ll be fine. OTC drugs for colds and sinus are okay, too, and so are the usual lunches, snacks, teas, hot water heaters, and so forth. We’ll make sure the school understands why we need scissors and sewing kits for our shoes, and so forth. Just be smart, and this will be business as usual.”

The dancers’ murmurs grew louder as Abebe nodded to Thran, and he stepped forward.

*Gods, help me to stay calm!*

“Yesterday was a very hard day for me,” he admitted, swallowing. “The effort we make here is very important, and I appreciate your willingness to bring *Immortal* to life. The contracts and terms we must follow are also very important. Please, I ask you to take these terms as seriously as I do. Do not put yourself and the effort of so many at risk. If any of you has come to the point where you worry that you cannot uphold these terms, then speak to any of us, at any time, and we will offer help. If any of you has gone past that point, and you feel you cannot fulfill your contract any longer, then speak to us, and we will release you from your contract, without risk, without question, without ramifications, without consequences. Stay only if you can meet each and every part of your contract. Please, do not leave yourself and us in a position to discover a problem later, where we will be in no position but to pursue consequences.”

He looked around at the company soberly. “Please, consider all that we have said.”

Abebe and Lettie nodded in agreement, and the artistic director spoke again. “It’s important that each of you have the time and privacy to consider what we have said, and how you want to approach your continuation with UVB. On Monday, we will ask each of you in private what your response is. We will email you information of how this will work before Monday.

“Lastly, I want to call your attention to one particular section of our contracts that covers talking to the media. In the interest of everyone’s privacy, we will not make any statement to the public about anything about *Immortal* between now and our premiere, other than the already scheduled promotional pieces. We will not grant permission to anyone else other than our PR firm to make statements, either. So respect your colleagues and the effort we all make and maintain privacy. We will cover this with our technical crews as well, and anyone else connected with our effort.

“I appreciate your patience, all of you. We’ve all worked so hard to bring this ballet to the world. All of you are professionals, and you know that the hardest three weeks are yet to come – the last push before our first performance. So please, take care of yourselves, take care of each other, and we’ll get through this. Thank you for hanging tough.”

Abebe waited a few seconds before he clapped his hands. “All right, everyone. Thran, Charisse, Luka and Irmo are off for their in-costume flying lesson, and the rest of us will go through the Underworld scenes. Get into your practice wear, then we’ll do barre.”

Thran was about to flag down Ori for a quick tête-à-tête, but four dancers intercepted him. “Thran?”

“Yes?” Thran replied. Ah, it was Nadine and the three remaining hip-hop dancers.
Nervous looks flitted back and forth. Immediately, Thran gestured towards the studio doors. “Come, we will go into Lettie’s office.”

The four dancers followed silently. Thran let them precede him into the office, and he shut the door behind them. “Now, we can speak in private.”

“We appreciate that,” one of the hip-hop dancers, Umiko, said softly. “We... don’t think Piero’s.... um, coming back, either, because....”

Thran made a quick decision. “I do not need to know, Umiko. I will not put you in the position to say anything. It is answer enough that he is not here today.”

“It’s... we didn’t know, but...”

“And I didn’t know about Kiefer, either,” Nadine blurted.

“And we hope that you won’t dump the rest of us because they’re...” Antonio fumbled.

“Tcha, I do not dump anyone as long as he or she honors the contracts,” Thran replied. “As long as that is so, then all is well.”

“Well...” Umiko looked at her friends. “We thought that because we had that little Montagues-and-Capulets thing we added to the scene, that with two of us down, you’d... but we can work out something with the four of us, so it won’t leave a hole...”

“That is perfect,” Thran nodded, smiling. “That will be a relief, not to have to replace such a creative element. I will speak to Irmo. But you must be patient with him, for he will want to fuss, but please bear with it, and him.”

“Oh, we will,” Donni assured him breathlessly. “This is the best opportunity for us, it really is, and we’ll so whatever we need to do to make the most of it – as per our contracts, of course,” she added hastily.

“Of course,” Thran replied with a small smile. “I thank you very much.”

“We thank you, too,” Umiko swallowed. “This.... it’s been hard for us, too.”

Thran opened the door and let the four dancers precede him on the way back to the studio. Lettie waited in the lunch room, so he ducked in briefly to tell her about Piero, then he hurried to snare Irmo, where he explained in spare words that two of the six dancers in the Montagues-and-Capulets side scene were out, but Irmo was not to make an issue of it, merely work with the remaining four as needed to revise their interactions. For once, Irmo did not vent his agitation.

“Why is Piero gone?” he asked. His tone was irritated, but calm.

“I do not know, and it does not matter. There is no need for any of us to comment on it. Merely address the changes you and the dancers must make. That is your focus.”

Irmo nodded. “It is well that I’ll be with you this afternoon for the flying, then. Abebe will see that the dancers work on their part, and tomorrow they will likely have most of it in place. They worked very quickly to make that scene, so changing it will likely be easy for them.”

Irmo had rarely shown such forbearance, but Thran wasn’t about to question it. “Likely so,” he agreed. “I will speak to Abebe, then I will see you at the flying lesson.”
Irmo lifted a hand in agreement, and headed out of the studio, leaving Thran to advise Abebe of the change. The ballet master took it all in stride, and finally Thran was able to collect his bag and find Ori in the mix. Once again, he summarized the loss of Piero, and the young man nodded without surprise.

“I wondered, when he wasn’t here this morning.” He sighed. “Any reason why?”

“I did not ask, and I will not speculate. I merely took his colleagues at their word. Lettie will call him to confirm.”

“All right. I’ll be here with her to sort things out about Monday, Thran. I hope the costume test on the wire goes well.”

“So do I,” Thran gave a wry smile. “I myself am in the Edna Mode camp of No Capes, but we shall see. Rada will be there to help make sense of it all.”

“That’s good,” Ori nodded at once. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then? At the ballroom?”

“At the ballroom. Au revoir for now, mon cher.”

Ori gave him a bright smile and a wave as he paused by Lettie’s office door and Thran went on towards the lobby. As he waved goodbye to Simone and got into his SUV, he took a deep breath. It hadn’t gone too badly, and the two lost dancers could be worked around. Thank the gods.

It could have been much, much worse.

* * *

Thran was the last of the four UVB people to arrive at the Fly By Nighthawks studio. Rada was also there, with four garment bags and one box in tow. Two of the garment bags were opened, as Luka and Charisse had already gone back to the restrooms to change into pieces of their costumes. Rada handed Thran the tights and boots that he’d wear as Death on the battlefield, so Thran followed Luka into the restroom to put those on. Luka was already in his singlet, leggings, and boots, so once Thran donned his, they joined Charisse, Irmo, Rada, Robbie, Tink, and Half Ton in the studio. Rada and Irmo watched closely as the riggers took their usual pains to get the Luka and Charisse into their flying harnesses. As this was the first time Rada and Irmo had seen the harnesses, they had several questions for the riggers, who patiently explained and demonstrated. Rada had his notebook open, scribbling rapidly as the explanations went on.

Once the harnesses were in place, Rada produced the tunics for Maid and Soldier. Thran was impressed at the care Rada took with fitting Charisse and Luka, making sure that the costumes didn’t bind them, or impede the harness. He took note of exactly how the wire attached to the back of the harnesses, even snapping pictures with his mobile to get the precise details. The riggers had both dancers take a couple of preliminary flights up to the platform for Irmo and Rada to see the effect, then the lot of them worked to refine the flight and the costumes to match Irmo’s vision. Thran stayed on the fringes, paying attention to Irmo and Rada’s adjustments while he warmed up for his turn.

Charisse’s dress dipped low enough in the back that Rada didn’t have to make any changes to allow the wire to attach to her harness; he had only to open the center back seam of Luka’s tunic to accommodate the wire.

Very easy, Thran thought. Would his much more complex costume go so well? Likely not.
Irmo fussed a little more, not about the costumes, but to correct how Luka and Charisse held their arms and legs for their flight. Both dancers were well used to Irmo’s manner by now, and made the adjustments without complaint, despite how contrary they seemed. The result was worth it, for now the pair seemed to float upward solely on the force of their love rather than on wires. Once again Irmo had transcended his supposed ignorance of human emotion to turn the result of a mechanical necessity, the wire, into so much more. Who would see the Soldier and the Maid ascend to the heavens and not understand that their love was what gave the ballet its name?

Thran put aside his reverie as Robbie and Half Ton turned their attentions to him. On went his flying harness atop his thin tee, then the riggers adjusted it carefully. With all the poking and prodding from two riggers, Rada, and Irmo, he felt more like a store mannequin than a dancer, but he took it in good stride. Death’s armored tunic went over both arms and fastened down the back with Velcro, then the billowing cape of beautiful electric blue fastened at the throat and anchored on both shoulders.

“No capes,” Tink muttered, as she helped to drape it. Thran raised his eyebrows at her and offered a pained smile.

“Agreed,” he murmured back. “But I am only the poor dancer.”

“You’re the one flying in the thing,” she replied. “It’s not a good idea, and if it causes the least wrinkle in anything, I’ll say so.”

“So will I,” Thran assured her, as the choreographer and costumier approached.

“Irmo, I do think it’s too bulky,” Rada said gently. “Death’s gravity must come from Thran’s dancing, not a costume that weighs him down.”

“There is no weight!” Irmo scoffed, pulling up an edge of the cape and letting it flutter free. “See how light it is? Barely more than silk! What else is so light that it will flow like clouds behind him as he flies?”

Rada’s usually placid demeanor shifted into pale disagreement. “It’s a distraction, Irmo. Look at the rest of the costume – the ritual characters, the delineation of the ancient armor, how it accentuates Death’s attenuated frame. Those are all things we want the audience to recognize immediately. The cape obscures that.”

“The audience will see those things as soon as Death begins his descent,” Irmo argued. “The cape will flare around him like storm clouds, the appropriate backdrop for all that you mention!”

Tink rolled her eyes, and despite his opinion about the matter, Thran grinned. “Then let us find out. Hook my wire, then up I go.”

Because Thran’s tunic fastened in the back, there was no need for Rada to open any back seam. The cape, however, was another story, so Robbie called for Rada to open the center seam opening before he fastened the wire in place. With Robbie and Half Ton tending his wire, Thran climbed to the top of the tower. Tink climbed up to hand him his headdress; when he had it on, she passed him his gloves with the attenuated fingers.

“All set, Thran?” Robbie called up.

“Ready,” Thran waved. He took two running steps to launch off the tower, spread his arms wide, and off he went –

A sudden jerk set him off balance – the cape had caught on something. As gravity pulled him forward, the Velcro strips that held the cape to his shoulders tore free, leaving the fabric to tighten
across his throat like a garrote. He tore at it, finally prying the Velcro apart. There! Yes, the pressure against his neck was gone, so he heaved a grateful breath – but the cape still held him tethered to the tower. At the near end, the thick neck seam of the cape held firm against the wire. At the far end, the hem of the cape remained caught on some part of the tower. He was in no danger now that the cape was not around his neck, because Robbie and Half Ton held him securely.

“We’ve got you, Thran – don’t fight it, or you’ll make it harder for us to get you free!” Robbie called up. “Are you okay?”

“I am okay,” Thran called back down as he kept his arms and legs still. As Robbie and Half Ton inched him lower, Rada ran forward with a pair of scissors for Tink. She swarmed up the tower and cut the cape near the point where it’d caught so that Robbie and Half Ton could lower Thran to the floor.

“Karma has spoken,” Thran said calmly, as Robbie came to unhook him from the wire so he could take off the offending cape. He bundled it in Rada’s arms, then turned a firm gaze on Irmo. “No capes, Irmo. No discussion. No capes.”

If the adamant light in Thran’s eyes wasn’t enough of a deterrent, then the stern expression on Robbie’s face was, so Irmo swallowed any protest. “Then we are left with only half a costume.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Rada said in his gentle voice, gathering up his fourth garment bag. “Of course I didn’t want the cape to cause any trouble, but I thought that in case it did, I should have a backup plan, one that would eliminate the cape while still giving you the fanfare you wanted, Irmo. So let me just add these…”

Rada dug into his bag and took out streamers of iridescent blue cloth that he stuck down the length of Thran’s arms, anchoring them at strategic points with dots of the ubiquitous Velcro. Similar strips went down the backs of Thran’s legs, and another trio of strips went down Thran’s back. The strips were all cut in wavy lengths to resemble cold flames. The effect was enhanced when Thran waved his arms experimentally.

“Ah, interesting!” Irmo admitted, struck at the way the strips reflected the light. “Yes, yes, this looks promising, Rada! Thran, see how this works when you fly.”

Thran took off his gloves, but left his headdress on to climb atop the tower again. Tink tossed him his gloves, and when the riggers were ready, he flung himself off the tower again.

This time, Thran soared from the tower across the studio without incident. As gravity pulled him back towards the tower, he leaned into the turn as Robbie had taught him, got himself properly facing back the way he’d come, and did his best to make Rada’s streamers flare out behind him.

“Yes!” Irmo crowed. “Yes, yes! Ah, that is it! Rada, you are brilliant! The streamers are like fire, like icy blue fire, and much lighter than the cape. Yes!”

“How did the streamers feel, Thran?” Rada asked, smiling at Irmo’s reaction. “Any hindrance at all? Any drag atop the platform?”

“None at all,” Thran confirmed. “Robbie, what do you think?”

“They’re all well away from the wire, which is my primary concern,” the rigger rubbed his beard. “My only suggestion is to keep the leg streamers short at the ankle so they don’t catch on something like the cape did. They can be longer on the thighs, lower back, and upper arms if you want, as long as they’re clear of the wire.”
Rada scribbled more notes in his book, humming to himself in concentration. “Variegated colors, I think, purples and blues, but no reds, those are for the mortals...”

“Please, fly again,” Irmo urged. “Let us consider how the arms and legs should move to make the best display of the flames...”

Thran made a half-dozen flights before Irmo zeroed in on the movements he wanted, then made several more to refine them. The riggers and Irmo had a long discussion about how best to unhook Thran from the wire once he alit on the stage, for he couldn’t dance effectively with the wire in place. Irmo was adamant about wanting the unhooking to be out of sight of the audience, so as not to ruin the fantasy. Could one of the seemingly dead soldiers come up stealthily behind Thran to do it? Everyone agreed that that would likely be visible given the soldiers’ pale tunics. Perhaps someone clad in black could slip onto the stage during Thran’s flight down, unhook him from behind, then disappear again.

“We will find a way,” Irmo vowed. “When do we practice flying on our stage, Thran?”

“We start next week, yes?” Thran looked to Robbie.

“That’s right. We want to get the hardware in place, then recheck our equipment to match the stage. We’ve used all the measurements we took out there earlier for this setup, but we recheck everything as a matter of course.”

“I thank you for that,” Charisse inserted. She and Luka had stayed to watch Thran’s progress. “I do not want my first flight to be my last. So, Robbie, you check and recheck as many times as you like!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Robbie offered her a sketchy bow and a raffish grin. “We want it right, too. It’s hard to get paid if our flyers don’t soar the way they expect.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Charisse pretended to tease. “So unreasonable!”

“So we’re good for today,” Robbie said. “Let’s get you out of the harnesses, and we’ll see you all at Imladris next Wednesday.”

Rada and the riggers helped the three dancers out of their costumes, then their flying harnesses. It wasn’t until Thran stepped out of his harness that he realized how tightly he’d been strapped into the contraption. His sore erector spinae twinged, but he kept his face impassive.

At least his feet didn’t hurt. And the damned cape was no more.
Chapter 141

Chapter Summary

The saint savors life, the cherubs play detective, and the angel reaps the rewards of the cherub’s deductions.

Bard almost believed that his life had turned into the classic cliché of heaven on earth. His children, all four of them, were happy and healthy. He was an artist again, with commissions to work on, a wonderful representative, and a gallery that beautifully presented his work to the public. His house was restored to the beauty he’d always hoped it would be, even the garden beds, and it was full of the sights, sounds, and scents of a happy, active family and lots of good food. Around them were friendly neighbors, a picturesque village, and a marvelous school. The bounty was everything he’d hoped to give his family.

The one thing that belied the heavenly surroundings, of course, was Thran.

Yes, Bard’s ethereal angel of a husband was happy to be with Bard and their children, and yes, he was engaged in exciting, original, challenging work. But the strain he was under to drag a young, inexperienced, and underfunded ballet company up to a higher plane of professionalism was not merely financial, but mental as well. To create an exciting new ballet was creatively exhausting. Added to the financial and mental stress was the daunting physical challenge to dance Immortal’s difficult central role with seemingly effortless strength and grace.

Financial, mental, and physical challenges, all demanded of a single man... there was nothing heavenly about that combination.

If Immortal’s premiere hadn’t been just a month away, Bard might have begged Thran to take a break, but even he recognized how impossible that would be. Bard couldn’t dance in place of Thran, and he couldn’t do more than he already had to inch the creative process along. Nor could he help the complex financial arrangements along. Despite his string of successfully completed commissions, he didn’t have the money to support UVB past providing the ballroom and muffins, and he certainly didn’t have the financial smarts to help with the accounting. He urged Thran to delegate as much as he could to Ori, Lettie, Abebe, and Irmo, and refused to worry about the strain Thran’s worthy colleagues already faced. None of them faced the load Thran did, and if Thran faltered, all of them lost.

Other than that, all Bard could do was to see to everything else but Immortal – children, house, logistics – and hope that good food, attentive back rubs, and a sympathetic ear were enough to sustain Thran for the few hours he was at home.

Once school let out, Bard made sure the children were well occupied until their summer camps began in two weeks. Sigrid, of course, was more or less self-sufficient, bicycling to and from the Blue Mountain Bistro on her own. Bain and Legolas joined Derry and Kíllian to rattle around the neighborhood, so Bard made sure he kept plenty of cookies and sandwich makings on hand to satisfy a horde of hungry boys when they clattered through the kitchen. Elanor was a frequent visitor, as well as one or two other little girls from families down the lane as Tilda grew more outgoing. He played a lot of video games, and made a lot of French toast and pancakes.
Being present for the children left Bard with less time in the barn, but he wasn’t concerned; his sketchpad got a enough of a workout that he had a whole stack of sketches for Bilbo to look at for Celebrian’s gallery. He also sorted out how to anchor all those aluminum spheres for the rotating Andromeda galaxy sculpture to an armature, so once the children’s camps began, he’d be ready to put that together. In addition, he managed to make molds for Rahmiel so he could cast him once the children were in camp.

There were always house things to work on. Rosie worked with him on designs for the stained glass to fit in the two round windows in the central hall. He called Mrs. Mathom about a mantelpiece for the main room, and thought about paint for that room – maybe a pale amethyst that matched the sofa pillows, and complemented the grey-green paint in the central hall and dining room? He pried the gazebo’s broken post out, slathered it with construction adhesive, and clamped it to restore it to its original strength, which should cure the sagging roof when he put it back into place. He mowed the lawn, a mundane task that nevertheless seemed like a triumph because nothing more pressing needed doing. Soon, he’d be ready to prowl the junk shops, consignment houses, secondhand emporiums, and thrift stores to see what he could put to good use to fill their echoingly empty house.

He’d have to go on his shopping forays alone until Immortal made its premiere. Maybe after that, Thran wouldn’t have to work so relentlessly to the exclusion of all else, and could go with him. At the very least, once the village arts festival had come and gone, Bard would insist that Thran take a few days off, even if he had to chain Thran to the bed as one or both of them had threatened so often.

No matter how much Thran liked bondage, maybe Bard wouldn’t have to resort to it if he finally got those fragments of Indonesian daybed out of the garret room and pieced them back together. That might be just the thing to encourage Thran to spend a few more blissful moments in bed.

He carted the fragments downstairs and into the barn, where he had room to lay them out and examine them in detail. The wood looked to be weathered teak. A piece of the bottom frame was missing, but it was only a decorative piece – thankfully not one of the carved panels – and not a structural element. The matching piece across the other end was in place. If he could carve something close, he’d put it in place, and make that side the head of the bed where it’d be hidden against the wall. He picked through his tools for a tiny pry bar. If he could get the matching piece out without destroying the whole panel, he could use it as a model for the replacement...

He ended up having to disassemble the entire piece of the frame to free the bit he wanted. After so much effort, he was relieved to find that the piece would fit in the other section without much more than a little shaving on the upper edge. He made a paper template of the piece, and jogged out to the gazebo. The floor of that was made of teak, and a couple of the boards were rotten on one end and needed to be replaced. He pried one up and carried it to the barn, where he traced his pattern over the part that was still solid, and then cut out the shape with his jigsaw. The weathered floorboard didn’t quite match the grey of the bedframe, and it wouldn’t have quite as ornate a design incised into it, but it would do for something that would be probably never be seen. After a little sanding, it was ready to fill the gap in the frame.

He got the two frame pieces reassembled. With those together, he could attach all four to the four corner posts to complete the bottom frame. Now, to measure it, and figure out what size of mattress it needed...

Now that was decidedly odd. The size was exactly square, eighty inches on each side. Wasn’t that close to a king-sized bed? Daybeds were the size of sofas, weren’t they?

He trotted upstairs to the bedroom to measure Thran’s mattress. Seventy-eight by eighty inches.

So... why had the storeowner said this was an odd size that no one wanted?
Whatever this was, it was an antique, but maybe no one had wanted something so old. Maybe no one had wanted to repair it, or didn’t want such a big daybed. Or maybe the owner had merely forgotten it was there until Bard had poked and prodded that day back in November, and had said whatever popped into his head to help him unload a pile of scrap. It didn’t matter. Bard hadn’t paid for much more than a pile of scrap, and he didn’t care whether it had provenance or not. Anything he did with it was better than nothing.

He moved on to see what he could do with the top sections, but he’d only started to sort out the pieces when Sigrid appeared, home from her stint at the bistro. At her herald, he called back from the barn, and she appeared to say hello.

“Wow, Da, is that the bunch of boards that you had piled in the main room for so long?”

Bard chuckled. “It’s been all over the house – in the ballroom, the main room, our bedroom, and the garret. I figured it was about time to make it into something useful, or pitch it out for firewood.”

“Not firewood, Da. The carving’s beautiful,” Sigrid protested, running a hand over one of the carved posts. “What’s the rest of it? Some kind of canopy?”

“I think they’re panels rather than a canopy over the top. It’s a lot of bits and bobs, but the wood all looks the same, so I think it all goes together somehow.”

“Can I help you figure it out?” Sigrid asked. “I’ll change my clothes and be back.”

“All contributions kindly accepted,” Bard smiled, so Sigrid ran into the house to change out of her khaki pants and bistro tee. When she reappeared in shorts and casual tee, Tilda was with her.

“Hi, Da!” the little girl said, following after her sister. “Sigrid said you were doing a puzzle out here.”

“That’s just what it is,” Bard agreed.

“Yeah, Til; it’s a furniture puzzle,” Sigrid pointed to the bits and pieces beside the assembled frame, then the lower section Bard had already assembled. “Somehow, all of this goes on top of that.”

“Ooh, like a hat!” Tilda exclaimed.

“I guess it is like a hat,” Bard agreed, laughing at his daughter’s whimsy. The three of them laid out each piece where they thought it would go, laughing when they had pieces left over here and not enough pieces over there. Legolas and Bain appeared in the midst of the sorting, home from gadding about with Kúllian and Derry all afternoon, and Bard explained all over again about the bits and bobs that had languished in the junk shop for years until Bard asked about them.

“So what does the top look like?” Legolas considered the four collections of pieces.

Bard held up his hands and shrugged. “No idea. Flat panels, I think. But the whole thing’s odd, because the shop owner said it was a daybed, and it’s clearly not. A daybed is the size of the fainting couch in the solarium. This is twice as wide.”

Bain stooped between two of the collections, looking back and forth between them. “Huh. Weird.”

“What’s weird, boyo?” Bard asked.

“It’s... huh. I wonder...” The boy got up to consider the frame that Bard had put together, walking all the way around it. “Yeah, this is the same way. Look, Da. Say this part’s the head of the bed, and
that’s the foot, and those are the sides, yeah? The head and the foot are the same. And the two sides are the same. But the head and foot are different from the sides. See how this bit’s got a single groove around the carved part, and the other one’s got a double groove? I think the shop owner sold you the leftover bits of two different daybeds.”

Bard peered closely at the carved pieces that Bain had noticed. “You’re right, Bain. That’s it, of course! It’s just the long pieces of two daybeds.”

“So the guy sold you a lot of scraps of carved lumber,” Bain grimaced. “I don’t think so,” Bard shook his head. “Think about small history, and I bet you can sort out why I think that.”

Bain’s eyebrows went up as he and his siblings gave the bits and bobs another look.

“If it were just bits and bobs of two daybeds, you wouldn’t have gotten the pieces to go together, Da,” Sigrid ventured.

“Bard is very good with tools, though,” Legolas mused, frowning at the frame. “Maybe he pieced the four pieces to go together like that?”

“Did you, Da?” Tilda asked.

“Take a look,” Bard invited. “See if you can figure out if I did or not.”

The children looked at the fittings. “No, all the notches to let the pieces fit together are old, so you didn’t cut them,” Bain said.

“There’s sawdust over here, though,” Tilda added, pointing to the dusting of wood crumbs by the jigsaw. “So you cut something, Da.”

“I had to make a missing piece,” Bard said, pointing to the small curled piece on the head of the frame.

“Oh,” Tilda nodded. “So that’s why there isn’t very much sawdust. So I agree with Bain. You didn’t cut anything other than that little piece.”

“The metal bits that hold the frame together are old, too,” Sigrid agreed. “And the screws holding them in are all old, and haven’t been touched for however long.”

“So... the pieces came like this.” Bain looked at Bard. “So... somebody had two old broken daybeds and made one big bed out of them?”

Grinning, he went around to ruffle each of the children’s hair. “Good eyes, everyone. I agree, it looks like someone made one bed-sized frame out of two daybed frames. They used only the long pieces of the two, and that’s why it’s square. Small history comes through.”

“Yeah!” Bain crowed. “So all we have to do now is sort out which parts of the top go with each part of the bottom, and that’s that.”

“I’m not so sure it’s that simple,” Sigrid said. “It doesn’t seem to be the same on each side.”

“Do we know that the tops even go with the bottoms?” Legolas asked, holding up two pieces.

“I think they do,” Tilda said. “Or some of them do, anyway. See how that part of the bottom has that little leaf in it? That same leaf is in this part of the top.”
The children and Bard took Tilda’s leaves as a fresh start to mull over the collections of pieces. But even then, there didn’t seem to be enough pieces to go around.

“This makes no sense,” Bain frowned at the collection. “There’s this one long bit, and then there are these bits that should match it but don’t, and then there are these other things that should match but don’t.”

“Oh! I think I’ve got it,” Bard said. “That long bit, that’s the fanciest bit, isn’t it? It matches the foot, so let’s say that’s the top to that side. It’s the part you’d see the most, right? So if we take that part and put it aside, we’ve got those two bits that match, and these other two bits that match. Those make up the two sides.”

“That can’t be right, can it?” Tilda said doubtfully. “That would make one side one way, and the other side a different way.”

“If you put one of each kind on each side, you’d have two that matched,” Bard offered.

“But that doesn’t leave anything but this long, plain bit for the header, Da,” Sigrid protested.

Bard nodded. “You’re right, sweetness. So maybe the person who built this figured that since the head would go against a wall, it didn’t need any fancy bits.”

“Yeah, Da, look!” Bain and Legolas had pieced together two of the piles. “See, these two bits match the long fancy bit, so they go on the sides near the foot. The other two bits don’t match the foot, so they go on the sides near the head.”

“So that means the person had the two long pieces of the tops to one day bed, but only one to the other, and just made do,” Legolas guessed.

“There are these leaf parts left over,” Tilda held up two small panels, each carved with graceful tendrils. “Maybe the person put those on the plain board at the head to dress it up a little.”

“The perfect touch,” Sigrid smiled at her sister. “And that means we’ve accounted for all the bits.”

“Aha, I know we’re right!” Bain chortled. “Look, Da – that screw hole lines up with this bit that goes at the head. So that makes one whole side, which means the other one has to go the same way. We figured it out!”

“You did,” Bard complimented his son. “You’re all going to be on that show about history detectives or something.”

“Or the one about the workshop,” Tilda prompted. “The one with the guy who fixes up all the old stuff.”

“That one, too.”

“So can we put it together now that we know where everything goes?” Bain pressed.

“If I have the right size wood screws,” Bard said. “And we’ll have to carry everything upstairs first. It’s no good to put it together out here, when it has to go upstairs in the house.”

“Oh... right,” Bain agreed sheepishly.

“But we can put the side panels together out here first, then carry them upstairs,” Bard amended.

“Okay, good – I know where the cans are,” Bain jumped up. “Come on, Legs – you can help me
carry them."

“I can help, too,” Tilda scampered after them.

“You bring the screwdrivers, little doll. You know where those are.”

“Okay, Da!”

Bain and Legolas carted the big cans of miscellaneous screws from the tool bench, and Tilda brought the bucket of screwdrivers. Bard soon had four children busily fitting screws here and there until they found the right sizes, then they assembled the two sides. While the children carted the panels into the house, Bard disassembled the base so that it could be carted upstairs. Then the mattresses had to be hauled off Thran’s bedframe, and the bedframe itself dissembled. Only then could the children reassemble the bits and bobs of the bottom frame with its mended posts. Bard and Legolas held up the top panels while Tilda doled out screws for Sigrid and Bain to fasten the panels into the posts. When the plain board at the top of the head was in place, Tilda tugged on Bard’s tee.

“Let me do the little leaves,” she begged. “I can do the screwdriver for those because they’re small.”

Bard hoisted Tilda up to sit on his shoulders. “Go for it, little doll. Legolas, you hold the leaf bit in the right space.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Bain protested. “The one you just took apart.”

“I think so,” Tilda nodded. “Screwdriver, please.”

Sigrid found the right screws, Legolas held the wood so Tilda could fasten it into place, then Bain held the second bit for Tilda to fasten. All of the children helped Bard get the mattresses and bed linens back into place, then stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Wow, it looks amazing,” was Sigrid’s opinion. “Are you going to paint it, Da?”

Bard shook his head. “I’ll rub a little silver gilt over some of it, maybe. But I like the grey wood just like it is.”

“What’re you going to do with the old bedframe?” Bain asked.

Laughing, Bard gave a gentle tug on Bain’s hair before he pointed to the bed. “That is the old bedframe, boyo. By about a hundred years.”

“Okay, Kukla, let me figure out which one goes where...” Legolas turned the two pieces this way and that. “Hmm... this way, I think?”

“I think so,” Tilda nodded. “Screwdriver, please.”

Sigrid found the right screws, Legolas held the wood so Tilda could fasten it into place, then Bain held the second bit for Tilda to fasten. All of the children helped Bard get the mattresses and bed linens back into place, then stood back to admire their handiwork.

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Bard shook his head. “I’ll rub a little silver gilt over some of it, maybe. But I like the grey wood just like it is.”

“Okay, Kukla, let me figure out which one goes where...” Legolas turned the two pieces this way and that. “Hmm... this way, I think?”

“I think so,” Tilda nodded. “Screwdriver, please.”

Sigrid found the right screws, Legolas held the wood so Tilda could fasten it into place, then Bain held the second bit for Tilda to fasten. All of the children helped Bard get the mattresses and bed linens back into place, then stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Wow, it looks amazing,” was Sigrid’s opinion. “Are you going to paint it, Da?”

Bard shook his head. “I’ll rub a little silver gilt over some of it, maybe. But I like the grey wood just like it is.”

“What’re you going to do with the old bedframe?” Bain asked.

Laughing, Bard gave a gentle tug on Bain’s hair before he pointed to the bed. “That is the old bedframe, boyo. By about a hundred years.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Bain protested. “The one you just took apart.”

“I’ll put it up in the garret for now,” Bard decided. “Last chore of the day, then we’ll start supper.”

“Can I have it?” Bain persisted.

“It’s too big for your mattress, and besides, it’s Thran’s. He’ll decide what he wants to do with it, once he gets a minute to think about anything.”

“That won’t happen for another month,” Sigrid observed tartly, as the children ferried the pieces of bedframe up to the third level. “Immortal’s all that’s on his plate until July sixteenth. Or really, July twenty-third, because there are three performances – the sixteenth, the twentieth, and the twenty-third.”

Legolas sighed. “I’ll be glad when all of them are over. Papa’s never worked so hard before. He’s so
“He is,” Bard agreed. “And you’re right that he’s never worked so hard before, Legs. This is the first time he’s created a ballet, managed a ballet, and danced a ballet, all at the same time.”

“A hard ballet,” Sigrid shook her head, but before she could say more, Bard gave her a look. Legolas was already concerned about his father, and Sigrid voicing her disapproval of the pointe dancing wouldn’t help.

“A hard ballet,” Bard echoed. “But we’re in the home stretch – just four more weeks. We’ll keep doing everything we’re doing to help make things at home as easy for Thran as possible. Once the premieres are over, he can relax a bit, and he’ll be with us more. So, what sounds good for supper?”

The children helped maneuver Thran’s bedframe up the narrow servants’ staircase and into the garret room while they considered what to make for the evening meal. They settled on hamburgers, beans, and salad; summer was only a handful of days away, so it seemed an appropriate menu to herald the start of the cookout season. The children bustled to get the table set, the salad ready, the ground meat shaped into patties, and the beans properly seasoned and set on the stove to simmer. Tilda proudly sat at the kitchen island to slice the buns in half and arrange them on a cookie sheet to toast under the broiler. Legolas presided at the grill tonight, but he bolted from his station when his father appeared through the mudroom door.

“Papa!” the blond youth exclaimed in surprise. “You’re home early! You’re just in time for supper!”

Amid the children’s welcomes, Bard gave his husband a quick once-over. Good, he didn’t look so tired, and his smile was wide and unforced. He returned Legolas’s hug with equal fervor, returned Bain’s fist bump, pecked at Sigrid’s cheek when she kissed his, and returned Tilda’s salute with the bread knife with a grin and a wave. Once the happy clamor died, Bard was free to give Thran a quick hug and a kiss.

“What a nice treat,” he grinned. “Everything went well with the flying lesson today?”

Thran rolled his eyes. “Oy, I have a story for you all about that. But first, I will change my clothes. I am eager to let the dancer go for a few hours and be part of Clan Ffyrnig again.”

“Go,” Bard urged him towards the hall. “I have chicken if you’d rather –”

“A hamburger is perfect, lyubov moy,” Thran assured him. “I will be quick.”

He disappeared down the hall, but at the end, he turned to give Bard a glad smile. Smiling in return, Bard turned back to the children. “Okay, let’s set a place for Thran, and get another plate and glass out. Make it so, troops.”

“Aye, Cap’n!”

The mood, already happy, grew more so because Clan Ffyrnig would be at full strength for the evening mess. By the time Thran reappeared in shorts and tee, everything was in place, but the tall dancer was not focused on food yet.

“What is this beautiful thing that has appeared in the bedroom, Bard?” Thran said as soon as he crossed into the kitchen. “It is beyond words!”

“It’s a bed!” Tilda shouted with a proud smile. “We all helped Da with it. It was a puzzle, but all of us figured out a little piece here and there until we got it to go together. Bain figured out most of it.”
“Did you? You have a story to tell, too, then,” Thran replied, smiling in surprise. “I am eager to hear it.”

“Everything’s ready,” Bard announced, fishing the cookie sheet of buns from under the broiler. “Queue up, you lot. Let’s fill our plates, then we can tell our stories while we eat.”

The children excitedly lined up to get their buns, then Legolas doled out the patties from the grill. Lots of hands stretched across the kitchen island to spoon up beans and salad, and to dress sandwiches with condiments. Once everyone was seated, the children regaled Thran with how they sorted out the bedframe, which gave Thran time to eat without having to do more than smile and nod.

“You are all the great detectives!” Thran declared. “It was not an easy puzzle, but it was still no match for the four of you. Clan Ffyrnig is very persistent.”

“The part I liked is how we all figured out a piece of the puzzle,” Tilda told Thran. “Even I did – the leaf parts.”

“It was fun,” Legolas smiled at Tilda. “I liked using the tools.”

“Be very careful when you say that,” Thran teased his son, with a wink at Bard. “Our Bard will put you to work.”

“I’d like to learn how to do a few things,” Legolas shrugged. “One day I may need to know.”

“Good lad,” Bard nodded. “Everybody needs to know how to use a hammer and a screwdriver and a saw.”

“The saw I know how to use,” Thran agreed. “And the screwdriver. Not so much the hammer. But it cannot be but so hard, yes? Place the nail, then hit the nail.”

“As long as you hit the metal nail instead of your fingernail, you’re good,” Bard returned, which got a laugh from the children. “Now that you’ve heard our day’s excitement, tell us yours. How was the flying lesson? What happened about the cape?”

“The flying lesson was perfection,” Thran said, spreading his hands wide. Then he let them fall to his side like lead weights. “The cape, though – that was a most dismal failure.”

“Uh-oh,” Bain said.

“What happened, Papa?”

“Are you all right?” Sigrid asked, frowning in worry.

“Oh, no, Ada! What happened with the cape?” Tilda pressed.

“I am fine, but the cape is no more. Wait until you hear what happened to it, Kukla. I put on the cape, I climb atop the tower, I fling myself into the sky as I have been taught, but do I fly? No. Not more than a few feet do I go. The cape catches on some bit of the tower, and there I am caught, because the cape does not give way, and it holds me to the tower. Tink must climb up the tower with scissors to cut the cape free, then Half Ton and Robbie let me down, and then they unhook me from the wire. I take off the cape, I give it back to Rada, and then I tell Irmo that karma has spoken, and there will be no more capes. Edna Mode is right, yes? No capes!”

“Did Irmo buy it, or did he pitch a fit?” Sigrid asked with a cynical smirk.
“Our Rada came well prepared to spare us the fit,” Thran gave her a knowing look. “He does not like capes, I do not like capes, the riggers do not like capes, only Irmo likes such foolish things. But as soon as the cape is gone, Rada produces blue and silver streamers like tongues of cold, icy flames to attach to the arms and legs of Death’s armor, streamers that attach with Velcro, so that if any get caught, they pull free without trouble. It is much easier for Death to dance with the streamers than the cape, and He looks twice as compelling. Irmo forgets about the cape because now he adores the streamers, Rada looks like the genius he is, and the humble dancer is grateful not to lug such a monstrosity around the stage for all of Act I. A win-win-win, yes?”

“That’s a relief,” Bard exhaled. “I’m glad that all worked out in practice, and not during the performance.”

“Yeah, that’d be pretty embarrassing,” Bain snickered. “Death tries to make His big entrance, and instead he gets stuck on His cape.”

“To be sure,” Thran grimaced. “Oh, before I forget, I passed on your good wishes to Rada and little Sebastian, and he was very happy to hear them. He tells me to tell you that Sebastian is very well, and misses so many admirers so quick to offer him snacks.”

The conversation passed on to other things, and once everyone had enough to eat, they chipped in to clean up the kitchen. The children passed around the book for another chapter of Harry Potter – they were through the second book and on to the third now – while they sipped their tea and munched cookies. At length, the children dispersed for showers, video games, and conversations with boyfriends, leaving Thran and Bard alone in the sitting room.

“What’s the rest of the story about the cape, angel?” Bard asked lowly. “Were you hurt?”

“My back was not happy at the sudden jerk when the cape caught,” Thran admitted. “But Robbie and Half Ton caught me quickly, and I was able to free the cape from around my neck immediately because of the Velcro. So then it caught on my wire, not me, and only for a few seconds until Tink cut the cape free. I was in no danger.”

Bard slipped an arm around Thran’s shoulders. “I worried that the reason you were home early was because you got hurt.”

“I... could have been hurt, I think, if Robbie, Half Ton, and Tink had not been so careful, if I had not freed the cape from my neck,” Thran allowed. “But I am all right.”

“Everything went okay this morning?”

Thran filled him in on what he, Lettie, and Abebe had told the company, and about the additional dancer who would no longer be part of the company. While Thran’s words were somber, he sounded pleased that most of the dancers had been positive. The results of Ori’s sleuthing were just as big of a relief.

“Thank the gods for Ori,” was Bard’s heartfelt pronouncement. “He’s earned his keep twice over today.”

“He most certainly has,” Thran agreed. His sigh was deep and profound. “So have you, lyubov moya. Such a confection I find in our bedroom! It is twice as beautiful as I thought it would be. And the children were so smart to figure out so much about how to put it together. I am sure you had nothing to do with that, not at all.”

Bard chuckled as he stroked Thran’s arm slowly. “I wished you could have seen them, angel. Sigrid
and Tilda were great to start it off, and when the lads came home, all it took was a side mention about small history, and all four of them were off. They worked together so well. I was quite proud of them. They put most of it together, too.”

“Of course they did. You did not hand them the right screws and the right tools and hold the tall parts for them, I am sure.”

“Maybe a little,” Bard allowed.

Thran hummed. “Yes, maybe a little. I cannot wait to crawl into such an elegant bed tonight.”

“It’ll feel just like your bed. Same mattress and sheets.”

“Tcha,” Thran scoffed, but gently. “I do not speak of mattress and sheets, silly saint. I speak of ambience. My old bedframe was very elegant, but when compared to this one, it was cold and stark. Its replacement is exotic and sensual, and I am sure a magical djinni will appear as soon as I touch the pillows.”

“You have to watch those magical djinnis,” Bard cautioned with a crooked smile. “They’re capricious creatures, as liable to deliver mischief as blessing.”

Long, pale fingers traced a light touch across Bard’s thigh. “I hope so.”

That roused a hum from Bard. Lately, Thran had been so tired when he got home that Bard had constrained himself to backrubs and massages to help Thran get to sleep. Would tonight be different?

As if in answer, Thran’s lips nibbled on a lock of Bard’s hair, drawing Bard to close his eyes to better enjoy the soft touches. He hummed again in enjoyment. “I... think I’d better get a shower.”

“I hope not a cold one,” Thran murmured in reply. “Rounds first?”

“Rounds first,” Bard nodded, swallowing. “Come on.”

They circled the house as they usually did, then drew each other upstairs. They saw the children into bed, then closed themselves into their bedroom. The tall bedframe fit the space well, and the soft grey color of the wood made the piece seem airier than a darker color would have. It contrasted well with the moody blue-grey walls, and the grey silk sheets beckoned to them both.

“It looks wonderful even without bed hangings,” Thran offered, smiling.

“It does. The bed hangings will be better for winter, anyway,” Bard agreed. “For now, it looks fine.”

“Into the shower with us,” Thran urged Bard.

“Right after you,” Bard agreed as he peeled off his tee.

Despite how good it was to wash off the day’s sweat, Bard didn’t linger under the warm water. He finished first, gave his hair a perfunctory drying, and turned the hair dryer over to Thran before he retreated to the bedroom. He didn’t wait for Thran before he climbed into bed, savoring the exotic carved panels and the luxurious sense of being in a secret cocoon. Smiling, he plumped the pillows, and thought about what kind of djinni awaited the arrival of an angel.
Chapter Summary

After an angel and a djinni engage in detente, Clan Ffyrnig goes about its Saturday rounds. Is a celebration in the works?

The angel came out of the bath and into his chamber with great anticipation. Even within these exalted halls of the Heavenly host, the exotic bed that had been bestowed upon him was palace as well as sanctuary, made of beautifully carved of wood that had weathered to a soft grey. It spoke eloquently of the earthly green and growing things the angel loved – vines lush with flowers and leaves wound across the intricately carved panels at the base, up and around the four posts, and across matching panels that crowned the posts. But the lovely carving was not the only delight that awaited him. Within this sanctuary were soft, downy pillows and a thick, plush mattress, all dressed in silk linens of silvery grey that matched the luscious color of the wood. A thousand mortal rajahs could not savor a more sumptuous delight –

What was this? Did the bed already host a rajah?

The dark creature lounging among the pillows was no mortal rajah. He was beautiful, for all he was a creature from the depths of Hell – no surprise, for had not the denizens of Hell once been angels themselves? Dark, tousled hair fell into his brown eyes, but didn’t disguise the small horns at his brow. Equally dark tufts kissed his skin above upper lip, under lower lip, and on the chin. Powerful, muscular body, and an equally muscular and substantial cock at rest against the creature’s thigh – for of course he was naked; such creatures were inured to Hell’s extremes, and had no use for clothing.

He did not have cloven feet, or a long leathery tail tipped with an arrowhead. No devil, then, but something much more desirable.

The angel furled his wings and sat on the side of the bed. “So this magnificent bed is home to a djinni.”

The djinni’s smile was impish. “A bed’s a much better place for a djinni than a lamp, I assure you.”

The angel hummed, as much to agree with the djinni as to admire him. “I well imagine. Much more room to... recline.”

The djinni grinned, not at all abashed at the intent look that the angel bestowed upon him. “Among other things.”

“And who has seen fit to bestow such a beautiful gift upon me?”

The djinni grinned again. “Ah, I grant you, it’s not often an angel from Heaven receives a gift from the Lord of Hell, but every now and again, the cosmos aligns just so. That incident with the dragon last month...”

“Ah, the dragon,” the angel nodded sagely. “She was a very small dragon.”
“Young, last of her kind, really more of a pet than anything else, and it was kind of you not to run her through like that mad Saint George. My Lord appreciated your forbearance.”

“She seemed more frightened than frightening,” the angel shrugged. “Lost, perhaps? An engaging creature, if I am honest. It seemed more merciful to return her alive than dead.”

“An angel of mercy to all creatures. Imagine that.”

Smiling, the angel shrugged modestly. “I hope she is well and out of harm’s way?”

“She is,” the djinni nodded. “So to finish the tale, my people talked to your people, and the powers that be decided that Rahmiel, angel of mercy to all earthly creatures, as well as those above and below the earth, deserved a token of thanks. So here I am.”

“I see,” the angel interlaced his fingers around his knee. “I fear you have the advantage of me. You know my name, but I do not know yours.”

“Oh, you know what they say about a djinni and his name,” the angel’s visitor winked at him. “‘If ye seek dominion o’er the fiercest djinni, dinnae speak his name, for in the speaking, so shall the djinni rule ye.’ I’ll spare you that, so djinni must suffice.”

“Most merciful of you, then,” the angel agreed. “Djinni it is.”

“Now, as to the particulars of the token bestowed upon you, it’s the usual contract – three wishes, et cetera and so forth.”

“I make three wishes, and you grant them to me?”

“The usual caveats that apply to mortals apply to you, too, of course – you can’t ask for world peace, or for large pieces of the earth to fall into the ocean. And we’ve had to add a new exclusion about fictional worlds becoming reality – Star Trek, Hogwarts, and X-Men are right out. And be very careful about how you make each wish. I had one incredibly bratty princess ask me to reduce her weight by fifty pounds, and she was such a pain that I removed her arms and legs and turned her into a very large steamed bun. But I’ll go easy on you, since you did spare the dragon.”

“You are merciful, indeed,” the angel nodded gravely. “I will choose wisely. May I ask a question before I make my three wishes?”

“Of course,” the djinni nodded. “I don’t guarantee I’ll answer it, though. I can’t tell you a thing about my Lord and Master, of course.”

“I would not presume to ask such an impertinent question,” the angel assured the djinni. “I must confess my curiosity about this beautiful bed, though.”

“Why didn’t I get stuck in a lamp?”

Then angel nodded.

The djinni’s smile was sly as he reclined against the pillows. “I would think the answer to that would be obvious. Then again, maybe not. I’m not usually bestowed upon Heavenly angels.”

“I am not always particularly angelic.”

The djinni’s gaze flickered over the angel’s pale body. “Just as I am not always particularly demonic. You know the Taoists’ yin-yang?”
“Both halves have something of the other.”

“Exactly. We’re no different.”

The angel smiled in anticipation. “Then I am ready to make my first wish.”

The djinni held out his hands, beckoning to the angel. “Your wish is my command.”

Then angel eased beside the djinni. With one long, slender hand, he stroked the djinni’s cheek. When the djinni countered with a growl of arousal, the angel smiled most slyly.

“I wish you to kiss me.”

The djinni rose from the pillows to enfold the angel in his arms, and bestow touches both gentle and assured. As lips nibbled and nipped at his, hands stroked over his body, magically knowing exactly how to elicit the deepest pleasure possible with mere fingers. Those fingers insinuated themselves through his hair, over his clavicle and chest, down between his pectorals, across his ribs. Such soft touches coaxed him to return those touches with his own, and so he gave in to his desire to stroke the djinni’s wonderful body. He found sensitive nipples that craved his lips, and a hollow at the base of the djinni’s throat that was the perfect niche for kisses, and uncounted more secret spots that responded eagerly to his touches.

The djinni was more than generous, bestowing not a single kiss but a thousand, each one replete with passion, desire, and want. Sadly, no matter how completely the angel savored each one to its last essence, he could not prolong them to the end of time as he desired. When the djinni drew away, though he looked fondly at the angel, his tender look was not enough to assuage the angel’s loss.

“You are generous, angel. You wish for a kiss, yet you give me a thousand.”

“I would give you a thousand more if I could.”

The djinni stroked the angel’s hair with tender fingers. “I have never been so rewarded.”

“Why would I not match your generosity with my own? You light such a desire in me. Please, I wish you to make love to me.”

“That is your second wish?”

“It is,” the angel nodded.

The djinni eased the angel onto his back carefully, so as not to hurt his wings, and lavished kisses on him until he was all but delirious. As before, he met each kiss with his own; this time, however, he so inflamed his partner that the djinni’s cock plunged inside him without effort. Such a sweet joining it was, delicately done, yet plumbing so deep that the angel cried out at the intense pleasure. He curled his legs around the powerful thighs and glutes of the one who impaled him, keeping him close. It was impossible not to fill his hands with the thick unruly hair that made the djinni’s dark corona, or kiss the soft lips that hovered so close to his. What a delight it was to trace his hands over the djinni’s muscled back, then to massage the glutes that drove the meaty cock so far into him.

“So good, so good,” he moaned, his breath stuttering past his control.

The djinni sat back on his heels, still stroking the angel, but now he engulfed the angel’s aching cock in his hand. Just when the angel thought his pleasure couldn’t rise any higher, the djinni stroked him inside and out in rhythm until the angel was nearly past thought. But no matter how his pleasure soared, all consuming and delirious, how cruel would it be to neglect the one who gave him such
pleasure? He groped for the djinni’s delicious torso, found his nipples, and stroked him in rhythm with his pleasure, until they were joined in passion as well as body. When his climax crashed over him, the djinni’s erupted in the same heartbeat. He pulled the djinni’s straining body to his, and cradled it until they both were spent. Even afterwards, he drew the djinni to rest against his chest, stroking and caressing his back.

“You are doubly generous,” the djinni said at last, raising his head to smile at the angel. “I hope I have pleased you as well as you have pleased me.”

“You have, sweet djinni. So much so that I know what my third wish must be.”

“Name it, and I will make it so.”

“I wish you to be free. You may go wherever you wish, but I offer you my home, and myself. Let us spend our existence together. I want to cherish and worship you every night, as well as you have cherished and worshipped me tonight.”

The djinni stilled. “You would free me from my servitude?”

The angel laughed. “Servitude to whoever your Lord bids you please in this bed, yes. The chance to savor more delight with me in this bed, no. Though perhaps it would be servitude for a djinni to abide with an angel.”

Chuckling, the djinni rolled over on his side, and drew the angel to rest his head against the djinni’s shoulder. “No more than it would be for an angel to abide with a djinni. I imagine it might provoke consternation in both our realms, though.”

“All opposites require some small oasis of détente between them, of your yin-yang. Let us be that oasis.”

The djinni kissed the angel, then waved a hand in an arcane gesture. “So let it be written, so let it be done.”

A faint puff of orange smoke tinged the air, and consternation rumbled from Hell to Heaven and back again... still, neither realm saw fit to do more than rumble. Perhaps they embodied more wisdom than was generally thought, even among their own kind. But whether they did or not, the angel lay back in the beautiful bed, nestled in the arms of the djinni.

Both were well pleased.

* * *

Saturday morning – such a flurry of action, even for a bright summer morning! Sigrid bicycled off to the bistro, Legolas and Thran rose early to have breakfast before Legolas’s fencing class, and Bard made muffins for the dancers who would soon descend on the ballroom. When the muffins were done, Bard tinkered in the barn with his aluminum spheres, checking the three kinds of epoxy he’d used to adhere a few of the smallest spheres to an aluminum rod. Yes, the first was definitely too yellow, and the second was stickier than he wanted, so the third was the one he’d use. The mechanism that would power the slow rotation was complete, and a seemingly infinite supply of aluminum spheres in four sizes waited on his workbench in their boxes. He loved the anodized colors reminiscent of nineteen-fifties retro science fiction – cool blues and silvers dominated the
palette, punctuated with vibrant yellows and cranberry reds. A few ebony blacks, yellow greens, and forest greens also stood ready to punctuate the vast array of stars that made up any galaxy. Now that he had settled on the glue that would hold the smallest spheres in place, he’d start on the aluminum armature that would make up the center and the radial arms of the piece, and once he had that done, he’d weld the largest spheres in place.

He grinned. Thran and his romanticized image of welding, imagining Bard as a bare- and broad-chested hunky blacksmith, wielding hammer and tongs and acetylene torches without any concern for flying bits of molten metal or sparks... His angel would be so disappointed when he finally saw the truth behind his lustful imaginings.

Bard grinned again. Last night’s enthralling revelry between an angel and a djinni proved that revealing the truth about welding wouldn’t deter their sex lives. Bard’s welding jacket and helmet might not be the sexiest of garments, but Bard would spin a tale about what was underneath, and Thran would fling himself into the fantasy without hesitation. The result would delight them both.

It was almost time for Bard to pick up Legolas from fencing, so he closed the barn bay and returned to the house. Tilda and Bain were up, munching muffins.

“Morning, children,” Bard greeted them. “I’m off to pick up Legolas in a few minutes. Do either of you want to come along? I thought I’d stop at a couple of the junk shops on the way home.”

“Would you stop at the one where you got Sigrid’s bike?” Bain asked. “Legolas and I were talking about maybe we could each get one, and then biking back and forth to see Derry and Kíllian would be faster than walking.”

“I can do that,” Bard agreed. “That’s a good idea. How about you, Til? Would you like a bicycle, too?”

“Ooh, yes, please!” the little girl nodded at once. “Elanor has one, so it’d be fun if we could bike together. She said there’s a bike trail that goes all over the village. There’s even a shop that rents bikes to visitors. It’d be fun to go all the way around the whole village.”

“One of the summer festival events is a bike race that does just that,” Bain mumbled through a mouthful of muffin. “Derry told me about it. He helps his parents run it – it’s a fundraiser for the next year’s festival. It’s just one race, but there are a whole bunch of different classes. Some are by age; there’s a team class that Derry says a lot of families do together, and a best-decorated bike competition. It’s the Friday near the end of the week.”

“The village goes all out for this festival,” Bard commented.

Bain nodded and swallowed his huge mouthful of muffin. “Derry said the bike race always needs helpers, so I thought I’d like to be one.”

“Remember you’ve got summer camp starting in a bit.”

“It’s cool, Da. Camps don’t run during that week because of all the stuff going on in the school for the festival.” He grinned toothily. “Such as a certain ballet you might’ve heard of.”

“I might have,” Bard chuckled, ruffling Bain’s hair. “I’d forgotten about camps not running during the festival. It’s great that you want to help with the bicycle race. Okay, you two, finish your breakfast, and brush your teeth. The bus into town leaves in ten minutes.”

“Okay, Da!” The children grabbed the last of their muffins, downed their milk or juice, and ran upstairs. Bard had just time to duck into the ballroom to tell Thran that he was off to fetch Legolas
before the children were ready, then they piled into Bard’s truck and headed down the lane for the Gondors’ fencing studio.

Legolas was all for looking for bicycles with his siblings, so Bard headed to that shop first. No sense in looking for big stuff elsewhere if he had to ferry a truck bed full of used bicycles home. Not that he minded – this was the shop where he’d gotten the beautiful bed that now resided in his house, as well as the family’s flatware, so there was no telling what they’d find.

The children headed directly for the back of the shop where the bicycles were, but Bard didn’t follow them right away. The bins of sterling flatware were still full, so he picked out another two-dozen place settings, and yet another dozen teaspoons. Six people went through knives, forks, and spoons – always spoons – faster than lightning. They needed more glasses, too, so Bard sorted out another dozen glasses – etched crystal, and far too beautiful to be banished to a junk shop. But as he’d learned when he’d tried to sell his mother’s pieces, few people wanted such things now, and the market was so flooded with them that ten dollars bought enough to fill a cabinet.

The owner gave him a couple of liquor boxes still sporting their cardboard dividers, so Bard packed them with glasses and flatware, and carried them to out the back to find the children.

“Any luck?” Bard called when he spotted the three children by the racks of bicycles.

The children waved him over. “There’s a nice one for Tilda,” Bain pointed. “There’s just one thing she doesn’t like about it.”

“It’s pink,” Tilda wrinkled her nose.

“It’s not a very nice pink, either,” Legolas agreed. “Sort of like that stuff you take for earaches.”

“Yeah,” Tilda snorted, sounding very Bainish. “Like I want a bike that looks like nasty bubble gum-flavored medicine.”

The children were right. It had a lot of features that an all-terrain bicycle would have, but Bard couldn’t imagine that any child who liked rigorous terrain would like that color – no, that wasn’t fair. Honestly, he couldn’t imagine that any child, period, would like that color.

“It’s a terrible color,” Bard agreed. “But aside from that, is it a good bicycle?”

“I think so,” Bain said. “The brakes are good, it’s sturdy, it’s not too small, it’ll still fit when Til gets taller... it’s just that gods-awful color.”

When Bard checked over the bicycle, he found that his son had assessed it well. “We can paint it easily enough, little doll. I’ve still got some of that Majorelle blue that I used on the garden benches, or you can choose any color you want.”

“That blue is good,” Tilda nodded. “Or maybe purple!”

“Okay, let’s put that one aside. What about you, lads? Any possibilities?”

“We’d just started to look,” Legolas explained. “We wanted to make sure the one for Kukla was okay first.”

“I thank you,” Bard nodded. “Carry on, then, Lieutenants.”

“Aye, Captain,” Legolas gave him a smile, and he and Bain returned to their perusal of the bicycles. The selection was much greater today than when he’d visited with Sigrid, mute evidence that more
than a few village families had cleared out their garages and sheds during the year’s spring cleaning.

Despite the successful solution to the ugly pink bicycle paint, Tilda turned a pouty face towards her father.

“How come they’re Lieutenants now, and I’m still an Ensign?”

“They’re older than you, that’s all.”

“When will I be old enough?” Tilda persisted.

“Oh, I should think that when you’re twelve, you’d be old enough. Maybe a little before, if you’re extra responsible.”

“That’s a whole year.”

“Some things take time,” Bard nodded. “But you’ll get there, and when you do, I have no doubt that you’ll make a good Lieutenant.”

Tilda’s sunny disposition didn’t let her remain downcast for long, so she acquiesced with a smile, and went to help her brothers scan the racks.

At length, both Legolas and Bain found sturdy bicycles, and they soon were out in the parking lot to load their choices into Bard’s truck.

“Did you know that bikes were originally called velocipedes in England, Kukla?” Legolas asked.

“Really?” Tilda looked up at Legolas with interest. “It sounds like velociraptor.”

“They both mean fast, don’t they? When I was in boarding school, I heard a boy from England say it. It was such an interesting word that I asked him about it, and we became good friends. He was the one who taught me about bangers and mash.”

“Mmm, bangers and mash,” Bain hummed. “Can we have that for supper, Da? Or maybe lunch?”

“I don’t know – can you?” Bard teased gently as they got into the truck. Once the children were in, he loaded the boxes of silver and glasses onto the front passenger seat.

“May we?” Bain rephrased hastily, rolling his eyes at Legolas, who grinned.

“Maybe we’ll grill bangers tomorrow,” Bard replied. “Tonight’s Cajun catfish with cornbread, plus the usual veg and fruit.”

“Ooh, cocktail sauce,” Tilda hummed. “I can make that, Da.”

“You can?” Legolas gave Tilda a curious look. “Is it hard?”

She shook her head. “You just mix ketchup and horseradish in a bowl. Just like you mix mayonnaise and pickle relish for tartar sauce.”

“I never knew that,” Legolas admitted. He put his hands to his head and probed carefully. “Uh-oh. I must be growing up. I just learned two new things outside of school, and it didn’t hurt.”

That got a laugh out of everyone in the truck as they headed home.

After lunch, Bard showed Tilda how to sand the ugly pink paint on her bicycle, then he taped off the
unpainted bits and let Tilda dab Majorelle blue over the frame. Her hand, while not as steady as
Bard’s, was still good enough to keep stray daubs and drips from staining the rest of the bicycle. It
would need another coat tomorrow, but Tilda was excited that it would be ready to ride shortly
thereafter. Bain and Legolas didn’t have to wait, so they rode off to see their mates with promises to
be home in time for supper.

Bard’s mobile chimed. The caller ID brought a smile to his face. “Hello, Rosie! How are you?”

“We’re all fine, Bard! How’re you?”

“There’s always something in play around here,” he grinned. “Dancers galore today. I just got back
from the junk shops with some bicycles for Legolas, Bain, and Tilda. Tilda decided to paint hers to
match the garden benches, so that’s the latest development. You?”

“Sam’s at the garden center, of course. I’m in the thick of Festival stuff. But I wanted to give you a
call. Tomorrow’s Father’s Day, you know.”

“So it is,” Bard recalled. “Oh, do you have something planned for Sam?”

“For you and Thran, too, I hope!” Rosie countered. “I figured both of you had no more idea about it
being Father’s Day than the Man in the Moon, so it’s up to me to change that.”

Bard’s chuckle was sheepish. “It’s been a bit busy, yes. What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing complicated. Just a cookout in the afternoon? Maybe a few games? Badminton,
horseshoes, lawn darts? Bocce? At two?”

“I’ll have to check with Thran’s schedule, Rosie. This close to the festival, I won’t speak for him.
His company wants everything to be perfect for the premiere.”

“Can you let me know as soon as possible? I know I should have called you earlier, but things got
away from me, too. It’s nothing fancy, just good food, good friends, and a good time.”

“That’s sweet of you to think of us, Rosie. I’ll check with Thran right now, and get back to you in a
tick.”

“Thanks, Bard. Talk to you soon!”

When Bard disconnected the call, Sigrid had parked her bicycle beside Tilda’s to admire Tilda’s
handiwork. “Tilda said that was Miss Rosie, Da?”

“It was,” he confirmed. “She asked us to share a Father’s Day picnic with Clan Gamgee. I’ll check
with your Ada to make sure he doesn’t plan to dance tomorrow, so keep your fingers crossed.”

Tilda solemnly set down her paintbrush on the can lid, and crossed both sets of fingers. “I hope he
doesn’t. Miss Rosie always makes deviled eggs, and lots of times those cupcakes with the chocolate
drops in the middle, so I hope we can go.”

“Looks like you’re through the first coat on your bike, little doll.”

“I am. It already looks so much better!” Tilda gave Sigrid a disgusted look. “It was earache medicine
pink, Sigrid. It really was.”

Sigrid gave an elaborate shudder. “Ugh. That sounds ghastly and then some. This looks great, Tilda.
You did a good job on it.”
Tilda gave an emphatic nod. “Anything was a better job than that pink, but thanks, Sigrid.”

“Let’s cap the paint, then and take the brush in to soak in the mineral spirits. Then I’ll see if Thran’s at a point where I can interrupt him.”

In a few minutes, Bard called Rosie back. “We’re set for tomorrow, Rosie. Thran’s looking forward to it as much as I am. So let’s talk food.”

In a few minutes, they decided on a menu, so it wasn’t long before Bard was in the kitchen. A big package of sausages and another of sandwich rolls moved from freezer to fridge to thaw. Tilda was poised to make her favorite fruit, yogurt, and gelatin concoction. While his youngest daughter mixed and stirred, his oldest daughter made fruit skewers for appetizers, and Bard put a pan of chocolate-orange brownies sprinkled with coconut flakes in the oven. When they came out of the oven, Clan Ffyrnig was ready for tomorrow’s gathering.

Once the children were in bed, Bard and Thran retired to their bedroom. Thran finished his shower and got out to dry his hair while Bard scrubbed. The air was finally warm enough that Bard didn’t bother with the hair dryer. After a good toweling, then a shake, his hair was done and he was ready for bed. He gave Thran’s glute a squeeze as he left the bathroom, which earned him a hum and an appreciative smile. Bard savored that smile as he slid into bed to wait for his husband to join him.

Thran soon appeared. Despite the reviving shower, Thran still looked tired and achy. He clambered into bed like a man overboard falling into a lifeboat, flopped back against the pillows, and heaved a long breath.

“Long day,” Bard offered with a sympathetic caress down Thran’s arm.

Thran nodded wordlessly. His eyes were closed and he didn’t move, even though his loose braid lay trapped under his shoulder. Bard eased it free and laid it on the pillow, then smoothed a stray hair from Thran’s cheek. While Thran took his usual three deep breaths to settle himself for sleep, Bard admired the beautiful body that lay beside him, so elegantly long and graceful, muscles clearly sculpted and refined from head to toe –

“Why do you have socks on, cariad?” Bard asked softly, as if he didn’t know. Thran didn’t open his eyes, but he grimaced as if he knew Bard wasn’t as clueless as his question seemed.

Thran heaved his last long, slow, cleansing breath, but remained silent. Bard didn’t press, but propped his head on one hand and traced the other lightly across Thran’s torso.

“So my feet do not bleed onto the sheets,” he finally said. “You do not have to look, Bard. I confess they are both a ruin.”

“What happened?” Bard asked, his voice soft and quiet.

“Too much. The dance in general, the pointe work, the constant repetitions... all of it, too much. I have never worked so hard before. My brain feels as battered as my feet.”

Bard kept up his soft stroking.

Thran grimaced again. “That was a very selfish thing I said. I should not have said it.”

“I’m the one you can say it to, angel. I know how hard you work, how much body and spirit you put into everything you do. There is no part of you that’s selfish. Just a lot of you that’s tired, and sore, and eager for the labor to end.”
Thran heaved another deep breath. “I am eager for this to end. There are only the subtlest, the most miniscule refinements left to make, so let us make them, and then let us dance. No more rehearsal – the performance. Let us bring Immortal into the world, and deal with whatever comes afterward.”

“A deluge of acclaim,” Bard smiled. “Just another few days, and the world will know what an amazing thing your ballet is, just as I know. You’re almost there.”

“I know,” Thran sighed, finally opening his eyes to meet Bard’s gaze. His lips curved in a faint smile. “You take very good care of me.”

Bard snorted. “If I had my way, I’d sentence Irmo to dance an hour’s worth of his own direction, and then see what he thinks about the condition of his feet. Maybe he’d appreciate the effort you put into things, and be a bit easier on you.”

Thran’s smile remained, but where before it had seemed grateful, now it seemed solemn. “He knows what he does to my feet, Bard. What I do to my feet.”

“Oh, maybe so,” Bard conceded. “Please, angel, tomorrow, stay off your feet as much as you can. Enconce yourself in one of the Gamgees’ lawn chairs, and supervise the children when they play badminton.”

“I will give that more serious consideration than you know,” Thran confided. “I confess that I look forward to the cookout. It will be a happy time, with nothing of dance about it.”

“Sausages and burgers,” Bard warned. “Shall I take some chicken breast with us?”

“Whatever we have will not matter,” Thran smiled. “I will enjoy whatever there is, wherever it is, with whomever there is.”

Thran curled around Bard with one last sigh, and Bard snuggled him close. The tired dancer fell asleep quickly, no small blessing, and Bard was grateful to shut his eyes to follow him.

July twenty-third wouldn’t come fast enough.
Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig savors a sweet respite from the rigors of dancing and sculpting. Very soon, they will savor such carefree moments all the more.

When Thran woke on Sunday morning, he was alone in bed. He lay still, savoring the exquisitely fleeting moments where he could pretend that his body was refreshed and healthy. All too soon, reality would dissipate his illusion of health and vigor – back would twinge, feet would ache, broken blisters would sting as the air hit them, lungs would gurgle with congestion, and overextended muscles, tendons, ligaments would feel heavy, stiff, and cold. Each morning, the mirage dissipated faster and faster, so was it any wonder that his face tightened in an anticipatory grimace, waiting for the day’s first stab of mortality?

This morning, much of the pain held off. Of course his feet ached, but his back didn’t hurt so much – it felt only the least bit tight. Of course the skin over his metatarsal knuckles felt raw, but it didn’t burn. And as for heaviness throughout his body... that seemed more memory than reality. His head and throat weren’t clogged with snot, either.

He’d felt better in his life, but lately, he’d felt much worse.

What had happened?

It was best not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Thran rolled onto his back and opened his eyes, smiling as the upper part of the bed canopy met his eyes. Such a sumptuous nest this was! And such a delightful liaison an angel and a djinni had made in it not two days ago – the stuff of ancient myths. Maybe making a pact with a demon had eased his body in more ways than one.

He drowsed a while longer, thinking of the delight this bed had hosted, but eventually rolled over.

And groaned.

Bard’s clock radio read eleven-thirty-two. He’d slept almost twelve hours.

He hadn’t done that in weeks.

No wonder he felt better.

He’d missed breakfast with his family. He hadn’t done his barre, his yoga, his pointe work. He hadn’t helped Bard make anything for the afternoon’s cookout. He hadn’t spent any time with his children. He hadn’t –

You took care of yourself, angel. You desperately needed to. That’s what’s important right now. You're no good to anyone half dead.

Thran smiled reluctantly. Bard’s powers were such that he didn’t have to be in the room for Thran to hear his reassurance.
He eased carefully out of bed to pad to the bathroom, deal with necessities, splash water over his face, and comb and braid his hair. He thought about shaving, but he was eager to see his family, so he sat on the bed to ease off his socks. His feet were still bruised, scraped, and blistered, but at least the raw bits weren’t bleeding. He bandaged the pressure points, slipped on a clean pair of socks, put on his comfortable trainers. Only when his feet were protected did he pull on underpants, shorts, and tee.

He came downstairs to silence... not entirely. The world outside the house introduced itself through open windows and doors – birds’ twitters, an occasional rustle of breeze, the far-off sound of a lawnmower. Those were sounds he hadn’t noticed before – probably because he’d lived only in dormitories and flats, where such quiet sounds, if they ever were part of his world, were lost in the racket of urban streets. These pastoral sounds weren’t frantic, but peaceful.

The perfume from the flowers on the front porch was much nicer than car exhaust, too. And was that green scent the perfume of a fresh-cut lawn?

The kitchen smelled of someone’s scrambled eggs and toast, and the kettle was still faintly warm. A note on the kitchen island read *In the back yard.* Than perused the refrigerator for a trio of cold hard-boiled eggs and a seeded wheat roll. He downed the eggs while he waited for the kettle to steam, then took his tea and his roll outside to see what his family was doing.

Bard, the boys, and Kukla were in the gazebo. It was a small octagonal structure, white wood with a black shingled roof, but charming with Victorian trim in the corners between posts and horizontal roof supports, a balustrade that matched the one on the front porch of the house, and lattice panels that covered the space between the ground and the floor supports. Three wide steps and handrails led to the planked floor, which was big enough to host only a very small table and perhaps four tiny chairs, or perhaps two bigger chairs with a small side table between them. Hooks in the horizontal roof supports showed where baskets of ferns or flowers hung in the summer. Right now, tables, chairs, and hanging plants were not in evidence, but a orderly array of tools were. Repairs were in progress, then.

Legolas spotted him, and offered a bright wave. He was seated on the bottom step of the stepladder, and Bard stood on the next to top step, fiddling with something overhead. Bain stood at the back of the ladder with his hands on the sides, and Tilda sat in the grass nearby with a large glass orb in her lap, wiping it carefully with a damp rag. The globe was lobed like a melon, and the glass was creamy orange.

“Hi, Papa!” Legolas called. “We’re fixing the gazebo!”

“Yeah,” Bain grinned. “Legolas and I are the ballast to make sure Da stays steady.”

“An admirable job,” Thran grinned back. “And Tilda, you tend a large pumpkin!”

She looked up, laughing. “No, Ada! It’s not a real pumpkin, but it looks like one. It’s the globe for the light that goes up there. It was dirty, so since I’m too small to be ballast, I get to be the globe washer. Da’s the wire guy.”

“So I see,” Thran nodded. “The light did not work, then?”

“The light never worked,” Bard replied. A small coil of new electrical wire hung on a nail near the center apex of the roof. Bard shook the coil out, leaving about three feet of wire to dangle down from the plastic tube from which it emerged. “Daphne bought the lamp, and I hung it, but we never got the wiring done, so it just looked cool, nothing more. So I had the electricians run the conduit and so forth out here so it met code, and put in a covered outlet so we can have Christmas lights if we want.
I didn’t have them connect the fixture, because it needed work, so that’s what I’m doing. We got the broken post back in place, too. Be careful; I stole a floorboard to fix the bed frame, so there’s a hole on the left side.”

With expert hands, Bard cut about two feet off the wire, then threaded what remained through a small box. He trimmed the sheathing off the ends of the wire, split it into three strands, then climbed down.

“Thanks, lads. Now just have to rewire the lamp. Thran, did you have more breakfast than a roll? I can make you some before I rewire the globe. Lunch won’t be until two, when we go over to the Gamgees.”

Thran shook his head. “I had three eggs, and now tea and my roll – quite sufficient. Why does the lamp need new wires?”

“It’s hung out here for ten years,” Bard explained. “It’s simple to do, so I might as well take the time to bring it up to snuff with the rest of the wiring. Safer that way.”

Everyone gathered round as Bard sat beside Tilda. “You’ve got the pumpkin cleaned out all right, little doll?”

She nodded. “I wiped the inside and the outside. There was a bug on the inside.”

“I’m surprised you found only the one,” Bard grinned, as he picked up the internal workings that had fit into the globe. “Okay, this won’t be too hard. I just have to replace these bits with the pieces from the wire that I just cut off...”

He stripped the remnant of wire down to three pieces of wire, one black, one white, and one green. Thran had no idea of what Bard did, but in some fashion all the old bits came out and the new bits went in, then the combination of bits got attached to the small, plastic box at the center of the gazebo ceiling. Bard twisted the ends of wires together and topped them with brightly colored bits, then tucked them neatly inside the plastic box. It made more sense once Tilda passed an electrical bulb up to Bard for him to screw into the thing. Ah, that was the base of the light, then, and perhaps the globe went over it in some fashion? Yes, Tilda had him pass the globe up to Bard, then a swirling wire thing that fit over the lip of the globe. Ah, the wire thing formed a crown of leaves, vines, and curling tendrils, a fine finishing touch for a pumpkin lamp. Bard held the globe securely against the base and fastened three small screws to hold it in place. Once Bard was sure the globe was well anchored, he climbed down.

“Okay, I’ve got to throw the circuit breaker to restore the power out here.”

“How do you do that?” Legolas asked curiously.

“Come on, I’ll show you the circuit panel.”

Thran trailed along back into the house and down into the cellar. On the wall of the ancient cellar was a modern electrical panel, and Thran paid as close attention as the children did to Bard’s explanation about how each switch in the panel controlled the flow of electricity to a section of the house. Bard pointed to the one labeled Outside Back and pushed the switch from off to on.

“So now that the power’s back on, we can test the gazebo lamp.”

“That’s all there is to it?” Legolas looked bemused. “Just flip a switch?”

“To turn the power on and off, that’s it,” Bard confirmed, pointing to a much heavier wire that
entered at the top of the panel. “The electricity comes into the house from the local electrical grid right here. The panel takes the electricity and divides it up into smaller zones – this one runs to the kitchen wires, and that one goes to the mudroom, and those are for our bedrooms. These switches are called circuit breakers. They turn the power on and off to each zone. When you close one, the electricity keeps going from here to all of the wires in that zone. When you open one, it literally breaks the circuit – it stops the electricity so it can’t go any farther. That means you can fix the gazebo lamp, or put in a new chandelier in the dining room, or replace a broken outlet, without electrocuting yourself.”

“Always a plus,” Thran observed, as they trooped back to the gazebo.

“I certainly appreciate it,” Bard gave a wry grin. “All right, troops, prepare to fire phasers.”

Bain slithered to a small, unobtrusive box at the base of one of the posts. “Phasers armed and loaded, Captain!”

Tilda frowned. “You can’t load phasers, Bain. You load photon torpedoes.”

“You can’t?” Legolas looked quizzical.

“Whatever,” Bain rolled his eyes. “Phasers armed and locked on, then.”

“That’s better,” Tilda nodded.

“How do you know so much about Star Trek, Kukla?” Legolas shook his head.

“We have all the original episodes on DVD,” Bain explained. “You want to watch them, Legs? They’re old, but the stories are good.”

“Lieutenant, hit the light switch first, please,” Bard prodded, sharing an amused look with Thran.

“Oh, yeah!” Bain snapped back to the mission at hand. “Firing phasers!”

The pumpkin lamp glowed, and the children cheered. In keeping with the spirit of the scene, Thran put the last bit of his roll in his teeth so he could offer enthusiastic applause. He took the roll out of his mouth to say, “Well done!”

“We have ignition,” Bard nodded, grinning at the children. “Good job all round, troops.”

“What next?” Legolas asked brightly, as Bain switched off the lamp.

“A bit of scraping to take off all the loose paint. Replace those couple of rotten floorboards and the broken lattice. Put on a fresh coat of paint to match the rest of the house. A few plants around the edges, and we’ll be in business. If you three start on the scraping, I’ll put the electrical stuff away. Please stay off the ladder until I get back.”

“Okay, Da; okay Bard!” the children replied, and set too. Thran stuffed the last bit of roll into his mouth and helped his husband collect wire snips, the bits of discarded wire, Tilda’s cleaning cloths, and the small box of brightly colored things. As they headed to the barn, Thran held up the box.

“What are these, lyubov moya?”

“Wire nuts,” Bard replied. “They’re non-conductive, so when you join wires as I did from the gazebo box to the lamp, you screw the bare ends of the wire into a wire nut so nothing fries.”

“Why such bright colors?”
“Green’s for ground, red’s for live, black’s for common,” Bard shrugged. “Those are the usual ones for residential, but there are other colors, too, like white and yellow or orange.”

“I have no idea what any of that meant,” Thran shrugged as he smiled. “But as long as you do, we are in good hands.”

Bard chuckled. “The short answer is that you have to make sure the wires make a straight path all the way around a circuit. If you cross wires, bad stuff happens.”

“That is all I need to know,” Thran agreed as he handed Bard the box of wire nuts to slide it back in the rack of similar boxes.

“I need to know something,” Bard gave Thran’s braid a gentle tug. “May I ask you to stay out of the ballroom today, please? I won’t pitch a fit if you don’t, but you’ve worked yourself to a thread these past weeks. I’d like it very much if you’d please take a break, just for today.”

Thran sighed. Bard’s voice had been matter of fact, as if he’d asked for Thran to get a package of chicken from the freezer, or take a load of laundry out of the dryer. Thran had intended to do at least a minimum barre, nothing rigorous or straining, nothing that would stress his feet, but if he were honest, he still savored the sensation of ease after his long sleep, and he was loath to give it up.

“Immortal has claimed more than enough of me,” he exhaled. “Today, at least the part of it I have not slept away, I want to spend with you and our children.”

“That’s perfect, angel. Thank you.” Bard gave him a glad smile, but his gaze turned calculating. “Um, could I push the envelope and ask you to stay off your feet today, too? And please don’t try to shit me, Thran. Your feet need the rest desperately, and you know it.”

“They do, I admit it,” Thran confessed. “But what does it say if I go to a picnic, only to plant myself in a chair and refuse to move? That seems ungracious.”

“Rosie and Sam will understand, and if they don’t get it on their own, I’ll tell them. Besides, this is a Father’s Day picnic, so the fathers aren’t supposed to work.”

“Do you know how to not work?” Thran gave him a wide-eyed – and patently false – look of surprise. “This I want to see.”

“That’d leave poor Rosie to haul everything, and I won’t let that happen,” Bard grinned. “Besides, it’s cooking. That’s not work.”

“So you say.”

“And maybe a little badminton with the children. That’s not work, either.”

“So you say again. But did you say bocce, too? I enjoy that.”

“Maybe Rosie will pull out the Go board. She’s a fiend.”

“Another game I enjoy. And chess.”

“Sounds like we have the makings for a good winter board games night.”

“Indeed. With soup and a fire, it will be perfect.”

“Hot bread, too.”
Thran hummed. “Delicious. But today, with the sun bright and the warm air and the flowers, we will have a good summer lawn games day.”

“That’s no lie. And wait until you see Sam’s gardens. They’ll be stunning already, and when we get to late August, his place will look like all the gardens in heaven.”

“I look forward to see them. Is there something I can do to help us get ready for the picnic, or have you already seen to it all?”

“We’ve got everything ready. Wasn’t a lot for anyone to do. So relax and enjoy.”

“I will. And beforehand, I will watch Clan Ffyrnig descend upon the gazebo.”

Bard chuckled. “Let’s hope everyone stays interested enough to get it painted tomorrow.”

“They have started, so they must finish, yes? That is the way of things?”

“I think that’ll be the case. With four of us painting, it’ll go quickly.”

“Not five? Oh, tcha, I just realized – Bard, you will think me such a fool,” Thran winced, as they came out of the barn. “Sigrid has been at the bistro every day since school ended, yes? No days off?”

“Normally, she’d have two days off a week, yes,” Bard nodded. “But she wants to make up the time she expects to miss for her driving class. It’s in the afternoon, but she’ll have to leave work two hours early to take it. So over ten days, that’s twenty hours, or about three days, so she offered to work them ahead of time to show she’s reliable. She should have those covered by the end of this coming week, so then she’ll be here a couple of days each week after that.”

“Our lioness is so like her father,” Thran smiled, as they returned to the gazebo where three children busily applied wire brushes and sandpaper.

“She’s a good soul,” was Bard’s proud assessment. “She won’t miss all of the picnic. She’ll be over as soon as she gets home from the village.”

“Excellent,” Thran agreed. “So, the children have scraped much of the gazebo already.”

The children had, even though they hadn’t used the ladder to reach most of the gazebo’s inner roof. Bard climbed up to tackle that, and Thran found gloves and sandpaper and sat on the floor to smooth one side of the old balustrades while Tilda did the other. The boys worked on the floor and the posts, and after an hour or so, everything had been scraped and sanded to Bard’s standards. Brooms and dustpans came out to remove the grit, and the gazebo was ready for Bard to replace the rotten floorboards.

“I’ll call about those tomorrow,” Bard said, as they collected their tools to put them away. “Those are teak, which I can’t get at the homeowners’ meccas. There’s one specialty lumber place I’ll try. Then we can paint.”

“Then flowers!” Tilda announced. “Lots of flowers!”

“Maybe some ferns for the hooks?” Legolas suggested.

“Or big baskets of geraniums or something,” Tilda insisted.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Bard agreed.

“I hope it’s close to two,” Bain groaned as he put the brooms back on their hooks in the carriage.
house. “I’m starving!”

Thran pulled out his mobile. “Very close. We have just time to wash the grit from our hands, and perhaps put on a clean shirt.”

“Awwww, we don’t have to dress up, do we?” Bain moaned. “I thought you said this was a picnic!”

“It is, so no worries, boyo,” Bard assured him. “With all the running around and eating, there’s no point in wearing anything fancy, but wear something without holes. And I don’t have to remind all of you to be considerate of the smaller children, yeah? Make sure you play some of the games with them.”

“Merry-Merry will want to dig in the flowerbeds,” Tilda piped up. “He has a sandbox, but he likes Mr. Sam’s nice, soft dirt better.”

“His father’s own child,” Bard chuckled. “We’ll keep an eye out for him.”

The family went inside to rinse faces and hands, and exchange grubby tees for clean ones. Bard handed round the food they were to bring, and pocketed the house key. From force of habit, Thran keyed the security system as they crossed the yard. A moment later, Rosie waved an enthusiastic greeting, and three small children ran towards them to carol hellos.

“Happy Father’s Day, Bard, Thran!” Rosie called, coming towards them with a big smile on her face. “I’m glad you could come visit on such short notice!”

“Clan Ffyrnig is always up for any gathering that involves food,” Bard grinned, tousling Bain’s hair. “Especially the lads.”

“Oh, don’t I know it?” Rosie laughed. “Well, we’ve got just the thing. Sam’s added a new attraction to the outside – a pizza oven! I’m looking for volunteers to help me feed it this afternoon. Any idea where I might find some?”

“A pizza oven?” Legolas gaped, meeting eyes with Bain. “Oh, that’s brilliant. I can do that!”

“Lead me to it!” Bain chortled. “What do we have to do, Miss Rosie?”

“Right that way!” Rosie pointed to the table on the terrace where Sam presided over a spread of individual pans, dough, sauce, and toppings. As he knuckled dough into a pan, Merry-Merry kneeled on a chair beside his father, trying earnestly to climb over the table to reach the red pepper strips.

“Oh, Merry-Merry, save some of the pepper for everyone else, why don’t you?” Sam admonished, scooping him up and over his shoulder. As Merry-Merry giggled, Sam spotted his visitors.

“Bard! Thran! Welcome! Hi, children! Thank goodness you’re here! Someone’s got to make these pizzas, and it’s not going to be Merry-Merry, unless eating all the red pepper counts.”

“Hi, Mr. Sam!” the children chorused, and scampered to array themselves around the table and fill a pan. Thran was gratified to see Legolas boost little Rose up beside him and help her put toppings on one of the pizzas. Elanor and Tilda put Frodo between them and made sure he got the toppings on the pizza, not the table. Bain helped Sam ferry the pans into the oven, so Bard handed Rosie his bags of sausages and buns and grabbed Merry-Merry from Sam. Thran collected the items the Clan Ffyrnig children had scattered on the table, and turned to Rosie.

“I have Tilda’s fruit gelatin, and Sigrid’s fruit skewers, and Bard’s brownies,” Thran offered. “Where should I put those, Rosie?”
“I’ve got all the food on the table by the grill, Thran,” Rosie pointed. “Once the children finish their pizza making, I’ll clean this off so we can all sit down.”

Thran put his containers as directed. When he turned around, he saw that Legolas and Bain now presided beside the pizza oven, while Sam and Bard laid out sausages on the grill. Bard still had Merry-Merry draped over his shoulder, who seemed quite content to be there. Chuckling, Thran glanced at Rosie.

“I see Merry-Merry is still the sack of potatoes.”

Rosie laughed. “He’s happiest when someone’s carrying him around, yes. I think half the stuff he does is just to get someone to do that, because he doesn’t do anything terrible, just messy or annoying.”

“Tilda says that he likes to dig in the flowers. So perhaps soon he will be a good helper for Sam.”

“I certainly hope so! Right now, he treats the plants more like cushions than anything else. Can I get you a glass of wine or something else to drink?”

“Just water, if you would.”

“How about a little lemon or lime in it?”

“I do like that. Lime would be very nice.”

“Coming up. I’ll bring it out to you. Please find a comfortable place to sit. I’m sure your feet would appreciate the rest, this close to Immortal’s premiere.”

Thran heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Ah. I see Bard has already drawn you into his plan to make sure I survey the festivities from one chair or another.”

“Oh, I’ve heard a few tales about all the dancers who have to soak their feet in ice water down in the Imladris Academy training room,” Rosie grimaced. “Gods, just the thought of that makes me shudder. So sit, and let your feet rest without having to resort to that today. I’d love to hear how the ballet is going, too, so once the children are done making the pizzas, maybe you can fill me in.”

“Oh, I’d like to hear that, too,” Sam called. “Children, make sure you make some pizzas for your parents, too, not just you!”

“I made you a veggie one, Papa!” Legolas called. “With extra onions!”

“And I made you pepperoni and onion with extra cheese!” Tilda called to Bard.

“All right, then!” Sam nodded approvingly. “Rosie, I’ve got your sausage and cheese, and a pepperoni for me, so we’re in good shape. How’re they coming, boys?”

“Almost done!” Legolas said, peering into the oven. “They smell sooooooo good!”

“They do,” Bain agreed, nudging one of the pies with a long spatula. “Who had the red pepper one?”

Thran found a comfortable padded chair by the middle of the table. Most of the pizza toppings were already on crusts, so he collected the last bits and scattered them over the last two crusts, and slid them to Legolas and Bain to ferry into the oven. Rosie swept the empty sauce and topping bowls back to the kitchen, and returned with a tray of glasses and cups. She plunked down Thran’s glass of
iced water spiked with a big slice of lime, then arrayed the rest of her load down the table. Bowls of vegetables, snack chips, and dips went down the middle. By then, Legolas and Bain had a stream of small pizzas coming out of the oven, announcing the toppings on each one as it came out. As soon as Bard and Sam put the sausages and buns on platters to fill out the food table, Sam called to the children.

“Grab your plates, and help yourself, everyone! Time to eat!”

Everyone filled a plate from the several dishes on the table – pizza, sausages dressed with sautéed onion and peppers, either on a roll or not, Tilda and Sigrid’s fruit offerings, a big vegetable salad, and the children’s favorite deviled eggs. While Thran passed on the sandwich roll, he helped himself to a little of everything else. As much food as was on his plate, however, the children inhaled theirs in a matter of seconds, and then dispersed to the yard to play, leaving the adults to eat at more leisure. Thran updated Sam and Rosie about UVB’s progress at the school, then gladly listened to all the Gamgees had to say about what else would be part of the arts festival. For the first time, he heard Bard confirm that he’d have more sketches at Celebrían’s gallery, and perhaps a sculpture or two. Rosie planned an exhibit of her glass. A stage would go up in the small community park at the center of the gallery district to accommodate a long list of musical acts, from ethnic Celtic, Ghanan, Latin, and Japanese to traditional bluegrass, rock, and jazz.

“The effort to organize all this must be extreme,” Bard observed, helping himself to another quarter of a pizza.

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Sam shook his head, smiling at his wife. “Every year, Rosie swears this is the last time she’ll take such a big part, but then the next year rolls around, and she’s right back in the fray.”

“Some of it is the biggest pain in the you-know-where that you can imagine,” Rosie admitted, snaring Rose to wipe deviled egg off her face before turning her loose again. “Dealing with a couple of the non-artist residents who complain about the traffic and the annoyance is terribly snarky. But each year, we get more and more people to come, and now we’re getting some recognition outside of New York for the quality of the work you see here. I have high hopes that UVB and Immortal will only add to that. All of us, even the cranky people, end up benefitting from the festival. More artists, more juried shows, and more prestige and recognition for their work turn into more sales, more money for the shops, and more tax revenues for us to keep the roads and the park and so forth in good repair. So yes, I keep doing it.”

“And a good thing you do, too,” Sam nodded firmly. “You’re good at it, and thank heavens some of those flibbity artists have someone to keep them organized.”

That sent a laugh around the table, and talk drifted to other topics. When there was a pause, Thran asked Sam for a tour of his gardens, and the enthusiastic gardener led him and Bard around to show them the sights. Thran was charmed at the small pond where beautiful red and white fish swam under the pads of a small yellow lily, but he didn’t get to ask about it before Sigrid joined the party. She was quick to help herself to the fare, and by the time she had finished, Thran let himself get drawn into a game of bocce with Bard. Legolas and Sam opposed them. Sam was by far the better player, but the other three did their best, more interested in camaraderie than competition.

The younger children took over for badminton, then lawn darts after that, which lasted only until Rosie brought out dessert. In addition to Bard’s tropical brownies, she had the cupcakes that Tilda liked so much, and three kinds of ice cream. Thran was glad to savor his treat from his comfortable chair, but it was funny to watch the children troop back and forth between dessert trays and yard, as if they needed frequent refueling to keep their games going. Even so, Merry-Merry would not be the only child who would have no trouble dropping off to sleep tonight. When it was time for Clan
Ffyrnig to go home, the little boy was curled in one of the chairs with half a brownie clutched in his hand, despite being fast asleep.

“So Happy Father’s Day to both of you, Thran and Bard!” Sam declared. “It’s about time that beautiful old house of yours looked as sprightly as she does, and we got you back working in that barn for good, Bard! And that ballroom – Thran, it’s a pleasure to hear music coming out of it. Though what’s this I hear about sword fights, too? Just what kind of ballet dancing goes on in there?”

“Legolas’s ballet dancing,” Thran quipped, smiling at his son as everyone laughed. “But that is only a joke, Sam. Legolas is a fencer, and the ballroom is the perfect stage for that, just as it is for ballet. We have hosted his teammates once or twice, which all seemed to enjoy.”

“Papa fences, too, Mr. Sam,” Legolas called from the yard. “He is a good fencer, too, not just a good dancer.”

“Thank you, synok,” Thran offered his son a laughing salute with his water glass.

“They’re amazing,” Sigrid chipped in, giving Legolas an admiring smile. “And we’ve had a few soccer games in there, too, so you never know what kind of athletes you’ll run into in our ballroom.”

“I should say not,” Sam agreed. “That old house isn’t old anymore, is it? Not with all that excitement going on. She’s young again.”

In a few minutes, as Clan Ffyrnig collected containers and plates to take home, Rosie put her hand on Thran’s arm as they stood by the pizza oven.

“Your beautiful house isn’t the only thing that’s regained her spirit again, you know,” she murmured quietly, smiling at Bard and Sam as they played a few more minutes of badminton with the youngest children. “Bard’s regained his, too, and that is entirely your doing.”

Thran met Rosie’s frank gaze. “So have I, and that is entirely his doing. He is my treasure.”

“He is a treasure,” Rosie nodded. “Daphne was one of my best friends, Thran. When she died, I missed her terribly, but I was more worried about Bard. He was a shadow of himself, and I was afraid he’d never recover. But to see him now... I’m so happy to see him restored, and I can tell you that Daphne would be, too. You’ve been the best thing for Bard, and I’m so glad.”

Thran took Rosie’s hand and brushed a kiss on the back of it. “Thank you for such a warm welcome, Rosie. You and Sam have been Bard’s firm friends, and he has spoken fondly of you both so many times. I am honored to be your friend, too, especially given your closeness to Daphne. Be sure that she is not forgotten, nor is Vileria, my wife and Legolas’s mother, whom we lost seven years ago. They remain part of our lives, especially the children’s. This is very important to all of us.”

“I’m so happy to hear that,” Rosie patted Thran’s hand. “I’ve missed her more than I can tell you. I’m glad she won’t be forgotten.”

“That will never be so,” Thran smiled at the small woman as he touched his heart. “She and Vileria have made us what we are, so they will always be here.”

Rosie smiled bravely, so Thran leaned over to give her a comforting hug. “Bard and Sigrid have a scrapbook that they slowly add their old pictures to. I am sure that when they finish it, they would be happy to show it to you, so you can see just how close Clan Ffyrnig holds Daphne. And perhaps it would let you add your memories to theirs, and keep her in focus a little better.”
“I’d love to see those old pictures, Thran,” Rosie nodded. “That’s the sweetest thing, to offer me a look.”

“I will tell Bard,” Thran assured her. “Thank you for the best Father’s Day I have ever had. To spend it with such friends has been wonderful.”

“You’re welcome, Thran,” Rosie smiled. “I hope we get together again soon.”

“We will,” Thran replied, as he took his leave. He waved to Sam who was trying to get the brownie out of Merry-Merry’s hand, with little success, then to Rose, Elanor, and Frodo, before lengthening his stride to catch up to Bard. The children had run ahead of their fathers, so Bard fell into step beside Thran with a concerned look on his face.

“Rosie seemed awfully intent there at the end. Everything all right with the festival?”

“All is well. She did me a great kindness.”

“Oh?”

“She told me that she and your Daphne were very close, and that she missed Daphne very much. She also said how glad she was that you and I had found each other and were so happy together, and that Daphne would be just as glad for us as she was. I was very touched.”

“Oh, poor Rosie,” Bard hummed. “She and Daphne were close, very true. That was a kind thing for her to do. That’s Rosie in a nutshell.”

“I told her that you and Sigrid worked on a scrapbook of your photographs, and that when you were finished, perhaps she would like to see it. She said that she would.”

“She and Sam are in a bunch of the pictures,” Bard nodded. “I know she’d like to see them again. When we get a breath, we’ll have to get the rest of the photographs in there, and then have an unveiling over soup one evening.”

“A good future plan,” Thran nodded. “And now, lyubov moya, though I was an obedient patient today and sat down most of the time, I am still very tired, and will be glad to bathe and spend the rest of the evening quietly.”

“All that fresh air and good company,” Bard teased, as he unlocked the mudroom door. The children clattered in; the boys bolted upstairs to play zombie apocalypse, Tilda decided to get a shower, and Sigrid was eager to call Finn. Thran gratefully went upstairs to soak off the rigors of serious picnicking in the shower, and settled on the sofa in the sitting room with Bard until the children went to bed. Thran went upstairs to bid them all goodnight, then crawled into bed with a silent groan of pleasure. It felt good to let everything go, and merely lie back against the pillows in silence.

As Bard cycled through the shower, Thran lazed in their beautiful bed, savoring the soft breezes that wafted through the windows. The dim light of Bard’s bedside lamp cast intricate shadows of the bed’s carved panels across the sheets. What if they hung bed curtains of thin, white cotton like mosquito netting from the top of the bed, so they would drift and flow with the breezes? That would be a graceful touch to an already exotic setting. And perhaps panels at the window to match?

Thran smiled. When this ridiculous ballet finally made its premiere, he would give the three performances his all. Once the world recognized Immortal for the wonder that it was, he would take a week off, and make Bard take a week off, too, and they would make all those trips to the junk shops that they’d talked about. And they would buy some curtains, too.
When Sigrid headed downstairs to make her breakfast, Bard registered it, then gladly went back to sleep. He quite enjoyed not having to get up at six to get the children ready for school. In another week, he’d have to be up a little earlier to get everyone ready for camp, but he still had one more week of no morning schedule, and he fully intended to take advantage of it.

He wanted to have a couple of sculptures ready for the festival...

That thought deviled him for a few minutes, until he eased out of bed with a sigh. He already knew what he wanted to make, so he headed downstairs to make himself porridge and tea, wolfing it down so he could get to his clay sooner.

Because the client who’d commissioned the steampunk orrery had opted for hand blown glass globes rather than metal-cast heads of the deities for whom the planets had been named, Bard was free to use his designs for the latter however he chose. He’d mentioned to Thran some weeks before that he liked how carved totems from around the world represented a clan’s history. Some from the native tribes in the Pacific Northwest were his particular favorites. So what if he shaped his portrait globes into pieces he could stack into totems? It would be great to do one big one, but if he made smaller ones, he could take commissions for individualized combinations. He wanted to talk to Bilbo today about it.

He put up his stand in the solarium, and got out his clay. Perhaps fist-sized pieces? No, just a little bit bigger...

He got Mercury, the gods’ messenger, right away – a boyish, laughing face that reminded him of Bain, with his winged helmet. That sparked his ideas about the faces that would follow...

Venus would have long wavy hair swept up atop her head, and a serene expression – that was certainly Sigrid on prom night.

Uranus, god of heaven – that had to be Thran as his angel.

Oh, he couldn’t forget the Sun. That would be Tilda, smiling in her usual sunny way.

So which was Legolas – Neptune, god of the seas, or Ares, god of war? No, he’d be Ares, with bow in hand.

So that left him to be Earth, Neptune, Jupiter, or Saturn. Saturn was agriculture, Jupiter was high lord, Neptune was water, and Earth was... well, earth. Bedrock.

Bard was definitely the bedrock of Clan Ffyrnig, so Earth would look like him.

As for the rest, he’d let his hands figure out how to shape their features.

Thran appeared, looking much refreshed. Thank the gods Bard had persuaded him to take yesterday easy, because he looked better today than he had in weeks. His body looked comfortable, without pain that made him favor one side or the other. His face wasn’t haggard, and he had a faint smile on his face as he came into the solarium. Two days of solid, much-needed sleep, yesterday’s casual picnic, and convivial company had done him good.
“Oh, what is this new wonder you make?” Thran asked, coming to Bard’s side to brush a good-morning kiss on his lips.

“Remember the idea I had for the orrery? To make the globes into the heads of the gods?” He described his idea about totems, and to make the heads resemble their family members.

“Oh, so who am I to be? Let me guess – Pluto, god of the underworld!”

“Try Uranus, god of the heavens, angel.”

Thran looked surprised, then gratified. “You humble me, my saint. You should be Uranus, lord of the heavens. Or Jupiter, the most high.”

“I’ll be good old Earth. But tell you what – you can be Pluto, too, and maybe I’ll double as Saturn, the god of agriculture.”

“Saturn should be Tilda, with her Dinky Farm.”

“She’s the Sun.”

“Most appropriate,” Thran agreed. “So you have done Mercury, that is Bain, clearly. Venus will be Sigrid, then, and you are the Earth. Mars?”

“Legs. The bow.”

“Ah. True. You as Saturn, then me as Uranus and Pluto. Who are Jupiter and Neptune?”

Bard grinned. “No idea yet. I’ll let my fingers sort those out.”

“I like how you have chosen me to be a big gas giant, and a small rock.”

“And Saturn and Earth aren’t a big gas giant and a small rock, too?”

Thran grinned. “Very true.”

“There isn’t any choice but big gas giant and small rock, remember.”

“Also true. There should be something in between.”

“Like what?”

Thran shrugged, chuckling. “I do not know. The children would come up with something whimsical... a planet made of marzipan, perhaps. Or marshmallow.”

“So you’d rather be a sticky-sweet air ball?”

Thran laughed outright. “Put that way, perhaps it is better to be a big gas giant or a small rock.”

Bard snorted. “Maybe so. Have you had breakfast?”

“Not yet. I wait for the kettle to get hot for tea.”

“I’ll keep you company while you eat. And pack you a lunch.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”

They worked together in the easy way that Bard had come to love so much, what Thran had dubbed
their intimate *pas de deux* to assemble the lunch of small bites that Thran could nibble on until he came home, and then to make a vegetable omelet and tea for Thran’s breakfast.

“More of the same today at the school, then?” Bard asked as he brought their tea to the table.

Thran nodded. “Let us hope that the weekend has calmed Headmaster L’Eärendil’s worries about Kiefer’s stupidity. And I expect that Lettie and Ori will have things to tell me about whether we must ask the dancers to sign additional clauses about holding to contract, and the searches of dance bags, and so on. I hope these things do not cast a pall on the company. We have only a few days to go, and much still to do.”

Bard offered a commiserating grimace as he reached across the table to squeeze Thran’s hand. “I hope all goes well, too. Call me if you need anything. Not that I can imagine what you’ll need, but I’m here, regardless.”

“Thank you, my saint. Today will be a happier day for you, I hope.”

“The market to restock the fridge, and the lumber yard, I hope. I need a couple of teak boards for the gazebo. Then I’ll roust the troops to paint.”

“Do not neglect your art, Bard. You said yesterday you wanted to have a little sculpture to show for the festival, so you must give yourself time to do it.”

“I’m cutting it close,” Bard agreed. “But if it’s a choice between getting a piece done and neglecting the children, you know what my choice is. I can afford to hold off for them now, and I don’t want to short them again. I already have a big stack of sketches for Celebrían, so I’ll have something on hand.”

“Good,” Thran smiled. “The omelet is gone, and so is my tea, so I must be off, Bard. And I leave, too.”

Bard chuckled. “I’m off, too, and I’m not going anywhere. At least not until the boys and Tilda get up.”

“That may take half the morning,” Thran chuckled as they went upstairs to brush their teeth.

Bard saw Thran off to the school just a short time later. As he came back into the house, he found Legolas yawning widely in the kitchen, his head stuck in the fridge.

“You’re up early, Legs,” Bard greeted.

“I’m so hungry my stomach woke me up,” the blond youth confessed sheepishly. “May I eat the last of the eggs?”

“Sure. I’m heading to the market in a few minutes, anyway. Will you hold down the fort while I’m gone?”

Legolas brightened. “I get to be the officer on the bridge?”

“Sure. You know the usual protocols.”

“Okay, yes! I can do that.”

“Good lad. I’ve got a call to make to the lumber yard, but then I’ll be off.”

Legolas went back to his perusal of the fridge, so Bard called the specialty lumber yard to confirm
that yes, they had the four boards he needed for the gazebo floor. He got the shopping list and the
stack of grocery bags, and then with a farewell to Legolas, he set out. The lumber yard was on the
other side of the village, but they had the boards ready for him when he got there. He also got a few
sheets of heavy-duty white vinyl lattice to replace the old, broken bits, so he was soon at the market
to stock the stores. An hour and a half after he left, he was back home to unload his purchases.

The children came out to help him carry in the groceries, and the lumber went in the back yard by the
gazebo. There was the usual flurry of activity to get everything put away, then the children were
eager to get to work on the gazebo. First, Bard made a quick call to Bilbo to float the idea about his
stackable totems, which Bilbo liked, with one caveat.

“My only concern is about the quality of your pieces, Bard,” the agent told him. “I’ll be blunt –
please don’t risk your reputation with something you do quickly to try to turn a quick dollar. Take
your usual pains with it – think Rahmiel, not chia pets! There’s nothing wrong with the mass market,
but I don’t think that’s the right place for you.”

“That was just my worry, too, Bilbo, which is why I called. I’ll take my usual pains, never fear. I
wanted to see what you thought about the stacking idea, that people could buy one or three or all of
them, rather than making only a single piece.”

“I suggest limiting it to only a certain number of pieces,” Bilbo replied. “That will make it a more
limited run, which means you’ll sell fewer, but at higher prices, and they won’t be ubiquitous.”

“That sounds perfect, Bilbo. As usual, you’ve come up with a good solution all around.”

“I’m very pleased that you like it, my boy. I can’t wait to see some sketches or pictures as you
complete the pieces. The sooner you can get me some of those, the sooner I can get some publicity
out about them.”

“Will do, Bilbo,” Bard promised. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I look forward to it! Goodbye, Bard!”

Bard ended the call, then ran upstairs to change into his grubby clothes. He shoved his mobile in his
back pocket and ran downstairs to join the children in the yard. Out came the saw, the tape measures,
the pry bars, the hammers, the nails... Bard set to with a will, gratified to have the children so
enthusiastic about their project. The floorboards went down first, then big drop cloths to protect the
floor while the children started to paint. Bard did the inside of the roof, but the children did the posts,
the gingerbread, and the parts of the frame under the floor. While they painted, Bard pried off the old
sections of lattice, then cut replacements from the vinyl lattice sheets he’d bought. Once the paint on
the frame dried, it’d be a simple matter to nail up the new panels, which would wear so much better
than the painted wood.

“Who’s getting ready for lunch?” Bard asked.

“Oh, yeah!” Bain crowed, and Legolas and Tilda were quick to add their eager voices to their
brother’s.

As the children’s exclamations echoed, Bard felt the back pocket of his shorts rumble. His mobile.
He pulled it out.

It was Mr. D.

Bard didn’t know what to think when he put the mobile to his ear.
“Bard? Mr. D here. I’ve got some worsisome news. Ye and yers need to watch yer backs, ye ken?”

“Yes?” Bard managed to ask calmly, but he must not have been all that calm. All three of the children had their eyes glued to him.

“Lance Dunmont ran off from Second Chance yesterday.”
Chapter 144

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffynig hunkers down.

Thran entered the Imladris Academy with a calm, solemn expression. Inside, however, he was neither calm nor solemn. Such a conflagration of feelings surged inside him! Fury, because Kiefer and Piero’s idiocy had endangered *Immortal*, UVB, and him. Fear, because so much rode on the successful staging of *Immortal* – a sizeable chunk of his money, his professional reputation, and the opportunity for UVB to be more than the modest company it was. Weariness, because the burden of having to worry about so much more than merely his ability to dance was so great. Loss, because *Immortal* demanded his total devotion – blood, bones, and soul – and he missed almost all of Clan Ffynig’s life. Dread, because no matter how patient Bard was, no matter how well he understood the sacrifice needed to stage *Immortal*, surely his patience was not so boundless as to handle children, home, and his burgeoning career with so little help from Thran. Pain, because his body hurt from the rigors of the dance, mental and physical.

Four more weeks. Just four more weeks.

First, though, he had to get through this meeting with Headmaster Elrond L’Eärendil, to assure him of so many things – that UVB had renounced all association with Kiefer Standaal. That UVB did not tolerate drug use among its company, and that any sign of it was grounds for instant termination. That UVB would submit to any and all constraints that the Imladris Academy required, to ensure that no other dancers or principals would be found on school property in possession of illicit materials.

He might as well drop to his knees and beg the headmaster to do whatever he wanted, as long as *Immortal* would remain in house.

He didn’t know whether to be disgusted at being brought to this point, or at being willing to do whatever was required to keep *Immortal’s* premiere alive.

It didn’t matter. The operative word was disgust, and humiliation wasn’t far behind. The school hallway was empty, so he allowed himself a grimace.

What if the headmaster ended the student interns’ participation? To hire so many technicians at such short notice would cost so much that Thran’s assurances to Bard about the state of his finances would venture on lies. And what if –

*No more what ifs. All you do is torture yourself. Find out what the headmaster has to say, and then cope.*

He squared his shoulders and went into the conference room.

Ori, Lettie, and Adam looked up at his entrance. Their visages were no happier than his, and none of them murmured so much as a hello. He didn’t, either. Instead, the quartet traded grim looks, and got down to business.

“I’ve gone over the contracts, Thran, as we discussed on Saturday,” Adam murmured. “The good
news is that we won’t have to rewrite any of them. But I thought it prudent to offer more reassurance to the Imladris Academy, especially given how little time we have left before *Immortal’s* premiere. I’ve drafted a simple statement that the signee agrees to abide not only to the terms of our contracts, but also to the Imladris Academy’s rules of conduct. They’re no more or less stringent than our contract, so no one should have any problems signing it. But it would offer a show of solidarity to the school that we respect their concerns.”

“I will be the first one to sign one,” Thran agreed, sitting beside Ori. “I will sign it in front of all the company, too, to show them that I am committed to this.”

“That would be a nice touch,” Adam nodded, and so did Ori and Lettie. “We also agree to submit to a baggage search each time we enter the school, and there will be a couple more security officers in place. I’ve spoken briefly to Headmaster L’Eärendil about all of this, and he seemed satisfied. Of course, what made the biggest impression was the fast action you and Ori took last Thursday.”

Thran gave Ori a firm pat on the shoulder. “Thank Ori for that. I was too furious to be as sensible as he. I am profoundly grateful that you realized what we should do so quickly, Ori.”

The young man reddened, but his smile was warm. “You’re more than welcome, Thran. And despite Kiefer being so rash, we owe a bit of thanks to him, too. He admitted to everything, so there shouldn’t be any problem about the charges. Thank the gods he had just a hair under the amount of cocaine that the law uses to determine personal use or intent to distribute, so we don’t have to deal with that, only him using it.”

“Thank the gods is right,” Lettie murmured, staring at her lap. “Thran, I talked to Piero, the dancer who didn’t show up Friday. Of course he didn’t say boo about Kiefer, but he asked to be released from his contract, so I did so. None of the other dancers have come forward, so I hope it was just those two.”

“That brings up an item for future consideration, if not today,” Adam mused. “UVB signed temporary contracts with several dancers to provide the non-ballet elements. Going forward, I want to beef up our contracts with temporary artists to protect us further against such things. I’ll get started on that while we have time to consider it, so there’s nothing any of you need to think about today. But I wanted you to be aware that I will work on it.”

“Thank you, Adam,” Lettie agreed. “It’s almost time for us to meet with the headmaster, so let’s review the points we need to make.”

Ori bent over his tablet. “One – apologies, of course. Two – Kiefer’s no longer with us. Three – we reiterate our adamant stand against such things. Four – our contracts already explicitly state that such things are grounds for instant dismissal. Five – we’ll sign statements to further abide by the school’s policies. Six – we’ll submit to the baggage search and the extra security officers.”

Thran exhaled. “Let us hope that will be enough. One concern, though – do you think the headmaster will end the student internships?”

“Oh, gods,” Lettie blanched. “That would be ruinous, Thran. At this late date, to replace them –”

Thran wearily motioned her silent with a wave of his hand. “I am just as aware as you are of how ruinous it would be, so I hope that Headmaster L’Eärendil will not require that. But it is a worry.”

“I... don’t think that will be the case, Thran,” Ori said slowly. “The students have been big supporters from the start, and there have been no complaints that I know of. In fact, the consensus has been good because the interns had to maintain their grades to be on the crews, which several
parents complimented. So let’s hope the good we’ve done there, both with stage crew experience and the incentive to be responsible, will work in our favor.”

“I hope so,” Lettie and Thran chorused, bringing a pained smile to all faces.

“It’s almost time for us to meet with the headmaster,” Lettie said as she checked her mobile. “Keep your fingers crossed, everyone.”

Half an hour later, when they walked out of the conference room with the headmaster, Thran was all but limp with relief. The headmaster had been serious and concerned, but he had listened to all the quartet had to say, and pronounced himself satisfied that the company had done all it could to address the matter honestly and speedily. It was clear how seriously UVB considered this breach, and he felt confident that it was an isolated incident.

Headmaster L’Eärendil went on to say that he would not eliminate the student interns who provided such valuable support on the light, sound, and stage crews. In fact, he complimented the company on what good mentors they had been. Thran hardly heard that part, so relieved was he that the interns would remain in place.

Soon after, he had another reason to thank the gods for their kind regard when Lettie and Adam explained the new statements that the company would sign affirming their intent to abide by the school’s policies. Thran was the first one to sign one, but the rest of the company, en masse, was right behind him. They were no less anxious to preserve Immortal than Thran was, and it brought a lump to his throat when each dancer handed him a signed paper without reservation. As Ori took them to make copies for the school, the headmaster offered the dancers a gratified smile and his sincere thanks.

There was likely more concern about the keeping of jobs and preserving of shots at professional recognition than regard for school rules behind the mass signing, but Thran had no complaint. In a way, the company’s quick agreement was a compliment to Immortal, and confirmation that it was just the stunning spectacle Thran thought it was. No one would care if it received its premiere or not if it were a dud.

The security guards did a cursory baggage search, and at last the company was allowed to get back to their work. As Abebe called the dancers to the barre, the weight on Thran’s shoulders lightened the least bit, and the queasy knot in his stomach eased a hair. He took his place beside the other dancers, relieved to lose himself in the familiar routine.

All would be well now.

* * *

“What happened?” Bard managed to say evenly into his mobile.

“The bastard stashed stuff for a week, then disappeared at lights out last night. By the time anyone realized he was nae spewing his guts in the toilet the way he claimed, it was dark and impossible to track him. The camp called the police, so there’s an alert out, and we’re patrolling the roads. From what some of the other students said, he’s well able tae hunker down on his own for a bit, so there will be searches conducted on foot and by air.”

“Sounds like he had help.”
“Hardly. He threatened the couple of lads who figured out what he was up to, enough to keep them quiet for the time he needed. Even they didn’t think he’d make a break that fast. I just got the notice myself, so I wanted you and yours as much notice as I had.”

“How far’s the place from here?”

“A good two hundred miles.”

That wasn’t far. All it would take was one unaware motorist to pick up what looked like a hitchhiking backpacker, and he’d be back in the city in a matter of hours. Or Greenwood Dale on the Lake.

What if he’d hit the village at the same time Sigrid had biked into the bistro?

What if he’d happened along here when Bard had been at the market, when the rest of the children had been home without him?

What if he’d gone to the school, or the UVB studio, where Thran was?

*Get a grip. Panic won’t help. He’s not here now, and it won’t take long to make sure Sigrid and Thran are okay. So just get a fucking grip.*

“That’s something,” Bard murmured.

“I’ll call yer local constabulary, let them know,” Mr. D grumbled. “That’ll give this more weight than if ye call them about it. Just watch yer backs, and more likely than not we’ll reel in this sad excuse of a wastrel soon enough.”

It wouldn’t be soon enough. *Three seconds ago wouldn’t be soon enough. He managed to hide in New York City for weeks without anyone ever getting a line on him until he showed up at my art show. He knows how to hide, and hide damned well.*

Just how long would they have to live under the shadow of an angry teenager’s malice?

“I appreciate the call,” Bard murmured. “Keep me posted, if you would.”

“You know I will, Bard.”

Mr. D disconnected the call, leaving Bard to wonder what he would tell the three children who stared as if their gazes were laser beams fit to riddle him with holes. He didn’t have very long to wonder.

“That was about Lance,” Bain blurted. Tilda’s face was already pale, but at her brother’s words, her eyes darted around the yard as if she expected the boy to jump out from behind the bushes. Her gasp was almost a whimper, enough that Legolas put his arms around her.

“I won’t let him get near you, Kukla,” the boy assured her. Bain bit his lip in chagrin, but he patted his sister’s knee in comfort.

“I won’t, either, Til. We won’t let him bother you.”

Bard shoved his mobile back in his pocket, and gathered all of the children into his arms. “We need to stay calm, children. Come on, we’ll put the tools away, and then we’ll head inside for lunch, and I’ll tell you what I know, all right? Steady as she goes.”

“Okay, Da,” Tilda’s voice wavered, but she obediently helped the boys and Bard clean up the paint,
the tools, the leftover bits of lumber. He kept the children in sight as he locked the carriage house and
the barn, and shepherded them all inside.

“Put your brushes into the mineral spirits, everyone, then wash your hands,” Bard asked, moving
past the children and into the kitchen. Once he was out of their sight, he pulled out his mobile and
texted Sigrid.

Everything okay at the bistro?

The seconds crawled as he waited for an answer. Finally, his mobile buzzed.

Yes. What’s up?

Don’t bike home. I’ll pick you up at three

What happened? Is everyone ok?

Everyone is fine. Will explain when I see you

Lance?

Bard sighed. Sometimes, having such smart children meant you had to tell them things you didn’t
want to.

He ran off last night. They’re looking for him. I’m picking you up only as a precaution

Sure, Da.

Don’t get snarky with your old Da

If he tries to get near me, I’ll break his other foot

Despite himself, Bard smiled. His daughter was every bit the lioness Thran thought she was.

Don’t get cocky. If you see him, call the cops. Will see you at 3

OK

Bard shoved his mobile back in his pocket, but it buzzed again, so he pulled it out. It was another
message from Sigrid.

Love you, Da

Bard swallowed as he typed back. Love you, too, sweetness

“Was that Thran or Sig?” Bain asked soberly.

Bard sighed. Clearly, he could hide even less from his children than he thought. “Sig. I told her I’d
pick her up at three.”

“Did you tell her why?” Legolas asked, coming in with Tilda.

“I didn’t have to,” Bard replied with a shake of his head. “She’s just as smart as all of you are.”

“I’m not sure I want to be so smart,” Tilda wavered. She swallowed hard and searched Bard’s face
for assurances he couldn’t give her. “Not if it means I have to worry about Lance Dunmont. And I
do, don’t I?”
“What happened?” Legolas asked quietly, his hand protectively on Tilda’s shoulder. Bain put his hand on her other shoulder, and squeezed in reassurance.

“Let’s sit down,” Bard invited, and the children led the way into the sitting room. When Bard sat down, the boys flanked him, and Tilda sat in his lap. “I don’t know much. That was Mr. D who called, and he said that Lance ran away from the wilderness camp last night. It’s a long way from the nearest town, and two hundred miles from here. The police are looking for him, and there are alerts on all the roads, so he’s going to have a hard time getting past all of that. Even if he gets to the city, he doesn’t know where we live, so we aren’t in any immediate danger. Mr. D sounded confident that he’d get picked up before he got far, but wanted to let us know so we’d keep an eye out for him.”

“Why did he run away?” Tilda pressed. “Wasn’t it a nice place? Why would he want to run into the woods when he could stay there?”

“I don’t know, little doll,” Bard confessed. “He’s had a tough time of it, and it’s made him mean. It’s just like if someone throw rocks at a dog, it can learn to hate all people, no matter how nice anyone is after that. So Lance is likely angry and not thinking clearly.”

“But running away means even more people will be mad at him, and he’ll just get meaner,” Tilda worried. “And he still wants to hurt Sigrid!”

“We’ll do everything we can to watch out for him, Tilda,” Bard tried to reassure her. “We have our security system, remember, and I’ll pick up Sigrid at work – we’ll all go, so no one’s left alone. And when we get her, we’ll go to the school and make sure your Ada is okay. Remember that a lot of police officers are looking for Lance. They took what he did very seriously, and they won’t just shrug it off and say oh, well, when he shows up, he shows up.”

“I hope not,” Tilda gulped.

“Let’s have some lunch, then, and we’ll all feel better after that. We worked hard today on the gazebo, so half our problem is that we’re hungry. What’s everyone feel like?”

As Bard shepherded Tilda into the kitchen, the boys ducked down the hall. He opened the fridge and asked Tilda to get out the cheese, the bread, the sliced ham, the mustard, the carrots, the apples, the oranges. By the time she assembled all that on the kitchen island, the boys would be back, and she might not realize that they’d locked every door in the house, and armed the security system to boot.

Clearly, Bain’s street smarts had rubbed off on his brother.

* * *

After a hearty lunch, Legolas, Bain, and Tilda seemed calmer. While Bard was no less concerned, he forced himself to move and speak quietly and slowly, so that he didn’t telegraph his worry to the children. He kept everyone busy making sandwiches and tea, and after they ate he distracted them by getting them to bake the week’s cookies. Molasses hermits, vanilla brownies, and lemon bars were simple, one-bowl affairs, and he could easily move back and forth between the children to help each one as needed. Before long, the aromas of their treats wafted through the kitchen, which helped to dissipate their worry. By the time the cookies were out of the oven to cool and the dishes were washed and put away, it was time to fetch Sigrid.

“Okay, shoes on, everyone,” Bard prompted, pulling on his own trainers. “Make sure you tie your
laces, please."

So that you can run if you have to, he thought silently, but the boys looked at him as if they heard every word. When he cut his eyes to Tilda, then back to them, they silently nodded and said nothing. He stuffed his wallet in his pocket and took his keys off the rack by the door, and out they went to the carriage house.

Gods, was it better to have the children wait by the mudroom door while he checked the carriage house, or better to take them with him? Neither kept them out of harm’s way if Lance lurked nearby, so Bard didn’t say anything as he led the way to the carriage house. The children fell in beside him, but both the boys looked around them. They went inside the side door, got in the truck, and settled in their seats before Bard opened the bay. He pulled out the truck out and keyed the bay door to shut, all the while checking for any signs of their errant juvenile delinquent. Nothing. He glanced at Legolas sitting beside him, who returned his gaze steadily.

Off they went down the lane.

No one said anything while Bard drove into the heart of the village. The tourist trade was in full swing as people trooped up and down the sidewalks, perusing galleries and shops. Bard found a parking spot on the curb just a few doors up from the bistro, so he pulled into it.

“Tilda, I’ll get Sigrid,” Legolas offered, unfastening his seatbelt. “It’ll be quicker than if we all get out.”

That was true, and Bard had given up trying to figure whether it was safer for them to move quickly or together. He nodded at the blond youth.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Legs. If you see anything, yell. If Sigrid’s not ready yet, wait for her inside, then the two of you come out together.”

“Okay, Bard.” The boy slipped from the truck and dashed across the street through a gap in the traffic, and disappeared inside the Blue Mountain Bistro. In a couple of minutes, he reappeared around the corner with Sigrid beside him as she walked her bicycle across the street. Bard got out to unlock the back of the truck so the two children could hoist Sigrid’s bicycle inside, then shooed them inside the truck while he locked up.

“Legolas told me everything,” Sigrid said without preamble, when he got back behind the wheel. Legolas had moved to the back seat, and she’d taken his place beside Bard. “So now we’re off to the school?”

Bard nodded. “Thran doesn’t know yet, and this isn’t the sort of thing I want to tell him with a text. I thought he’d feel better knowing we’re all okay and calm. So everyone, stay calm, okay? Thran’s got enough to worry about, and he doesn’t need to add us to his list.”

Sigrid clearly wanted to say more, but she held her tongue, likely because she didn’t want to upset her sister. But Tilda heaved a big, exasperated sigh, and slumped between her brothers.

“I know everything, Sigrid, so you don’t have to be quiet. I’m scared, but I’m not that scared.”

Sigrid turned around to give her sister a smile. “That’s a brave thing to say, Tilda.”

In the rear view mirror, Bard watched Tilda perk up a bit at Sigrid’s praise. “I don’t feel very brave, but thank you.”

“My history teacher, Mr. DeFilippo, told me that being brave doesn’t mean you’re not scared,” Bain offered. “It means you do the right thing even though you are scared.”
“I’ve heard that, too,” Legolas added. “So it must be true.”

“Exactly right, lads,” Bard smiled. “So we’ll do the right thing, which is stick together, and look out for each other. That way, we’ll come out all right.”

The children traded smiles, which reassured Bard a little. Still, ten years of bad and worse circumstances hadn’t given him much hope in the murmuring of platitudes. He rarely offered them, because mouthing them felt more like tempting the devil to strike rather than to stay away.

He hoped he hadn’t just given the devil a reason to consider the former.
Despite the shiver of worry that nagged him, Bard kept his demeanor resolute and calm as he drove the children to the school. He pulled into the lot, parked near the auditorium, and scanned the area before he opened the door. Nothing and no one unexpected appeared – as far as anyone could tell, today was just another ordinary summer day in the country. He shepherded the children to the door and let them precede him inside. A security guard spotted them and came up right away.

“The school’s not open today, folks,” the security guard said. “If you want the office, it’s open eight until two, so you can come back tomorrow.”

The quick challenge reassured Bard that it wouldn’t be easy for Lance to worm his way inside, so he met the security guard’s polite words with his own. “Actually, we’re looking for Thran Oropherson with the UltraViolet Ballet Company. They’re rehearsing *Immortal* in the auditorium. I’m his husband, Bard Bowman, and these are our children.”

The guard’s expression didn’t change. “I need to see some ID, please. And let me call someone inside to come escort you.”

Bard duly pulled out his driver’s license. To his amusement, most of the children did, too – only Tilda didn’t have identification with her. “Ask for Ori Goldman, Thran’s assistant. He knows all of us.”

The guard talked into his walkie-talkie. “Yeah, snag Ori Goldman, would you, Bert? Got some folks here for him.” He scanned Bard’s license, then the children’s student ID cards. “Yeah, a bunch of Bowmans and an Oropherson-Borodin. They say they’re Thran Oropherson’s family.”

“They are Thran’s family,” Ori’s voice could be distinctly heard to say. “I’ll be right there.”

The guard flashed them an apologetic look. “Sorry, folks.”

“Not at all,” Bard assured him, as he and the children put their IDs away. “I appreciate you looking out for the company so well.”
The guard looked surprised, but gratified. “Um, you’re welcome, then.”

The auditorium door opened, and Ori stuck his head out, smiling when he spotted Bard and the children. “Hi, Bard! It’s all right, Ernie – they really are Mr. Oropherson’s family.”

“Thanks, Ori,” Ernie nodded, and gestured for the family to follow the young man. “I’ll remember next time, folks.”

“Thanks, officer,” Bard held up a hand in appreciation as he followed the children after Ori.

“Sorry about that, Bard, children,” Ori grimaced once the door had closed on the security guard, then he smiled. “It’s good to see all of you again.”

“We’re not sorry, Ori, not at all,” Bard said softly. “In fact, we’re relieved. We received some disturbing news this morning. We’re actually here to make sure you and Thran and everyone else is okay.”

“Oh?” Ori’s face spasmed in concern. “What’s happened?”

“Lance Dunmont,” Tilda blurted.

“Oh, for all the –” Ori broke off what he was about to say. “What’s happened?”

“Dwalin Fundin called me this morning. Lance ran away from his wilderness camp last night. The police are looking for him, but so far, no one knows where he is.”

Ori shut his eyes briefly, then his lips thinned to a worried line. “That is not good news.”

“No, it’s not.”

Ori sighed. “Children, would you mind if I steal Bard for a minute?”

The children looked among themselves, but it was Sigrid who replied. “I guess not, but we’d rather know what’s going on.”

“I’m afraid all of you know more than I do about that,” Ori replied frankly. “I won’t keep him long, I promise.”

“Okay,” Sigrid agreed with reluctant nods from her brothers and sister. “We’ll sit back here.”

“Thank you,” Ori offered sincerely. Then he led Bard down the aisle until they were out of earshot of the children. They didn’t have to go far; the intense music that accompanied Death as he reaped his battlefield harvest cranked up again. It made just as fitting a backdrop to Bard’s mood as it did a war zone.

“What’s up?” Bard asked softly.

Ori’s expression was even, but that was likely for appearance’s sake only. “Not that there’s ever a good time to hear that Lance Dunmont is on the loose, but today is bad timing, to be sure.”

“Why?”

Ori grimaced. “Thran’s carrying so much, Bard. You know about what happened last Thursday, I assume.”

Bard nodded.
“We dodged a lot of bullets from that one. We could have gotten kicked out of here, we could have lost our interns, we could have had to deal with a lot more than we did. Thanks to all of the gods without exception, we resolved that this morning.” Ori summarized the outcome of the meeting he, Thran, Lettie, and Adam had had with Headmaster L’Eärendil. “Thran was wound as tightly as a clock spring, and it was a huge relief for him to take that pressure off. But now this...” Ori looked towards the stage where Thran danced through a sea of dead and dying soldiers.

“He’s pulled in so many directions,” Bard murmured. “He’s told me how mentally exhausted he is, and how it worries him that he has to think about so much more than merely dancing. Is there anything we can do to just let him dance, and not worry about the rest?”

“Exactly what I’ve told Lettie and Adam,” the young man agreed. “This close to the premiere, he shouldn’t have to think about anything else but dancing his role. If he can’t focus on that, the whole ballet will not be what it could be, and we’ll all lose out. I’ll talk to Lettie and see if there’s anything else we can do so all he does is dance.”

“Do whatever you can. I’ll take care of him at home.”

“What about Lance?”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky, and the police will pick him up before he gets anywhere near any of us. If not, then we’ll do the same as we did before – no one goes anywhere alone, and we watch our backs. It’ll be easier in a week, when the children are in camps here at the school. Everyone will be in the same place.”

“I think you ought to hire a bodyguard, Bard,” Ori whispered. “At least one, and better two, because there are six of you.”

Bard gave Ori a long look. “He’s a kid on the run, Ori.”

“He’s a kid on the run who’s too stupid to back down, and he’s escalated his attack each time,” Ori came back sharply. “He’s obsessed with Sigrid, and at this point I can’t imagine him confronting any of you just to demand an apology. You’ve got four lovely children, one of the world’s best dancers, and a damned good sculptor to think about, any of which have more decency, common sense, and talent in a fingernail paring than this ‘kid on the run’ has in his entire existence. No matter what horrors turned Lance into what he is, you need to protect yourself from him until he’s caught.”

“He’s a juvenile. He won’t stay loose for long, and when he’s caught, they’ll cycle him through the juvenile justice system and he’ll be out again in a year. We can’t live surrounded by bodyguards for the rest of his life.”

“That camp was his last chance to avoid being tried as an adult and sent to federal prison. One of the terms of his stay was that he stayed at the camp for at least six months, or all previous charges would be reinstated. He’ll be in prison for a long time.”

Bard winced, but not just at the thought of having a couple of enormous bar bouncers lurking around the family to glower at the bushes. Ori’s normally placid and friendly face was fiercely intent – was this what his older brother looked like in the middle of a “negotiation?”

“Please, Bard. See sense,” Ori urged. “I can have two good ones in place in a matter of hours. Just until he’s caught.”

“Okay,” he conceded. “I’ll think about it.”

Ori tsked. “It might help Thran to worry less.”
“Or it might help Thran worry more. I don’t know. Hearing about Lance will be bad enough, as we’re about to see.”

Ori turned to follow Bard’s gaze to the stage, where the dancing had momentarily stopped. Thran had spotted the two of them, and watched them intently. He was such an expert at physical nuance that he knew something was of concern, because he looked wary and didn’t smile. Indeed, he held his hand up to Irmo and made his way to the stairs off the stage, despite the choreographer’s annoyed protests.

“Here we go,” Bard exhaled, and beside him Ori did the same thing. They both walked down the aisle to meet Thran halfway.

* * *

Yet again, Death danced across the battlefield to collect the fallen souls. How many times over uncounted millennia had He crossed a similar field strewn so thickly with bloody fruit? How many flocks of vultures and carrion crows had bowed down to Him, honoring His claim on the wandering souls before stooping to devour their mortal shells? So many... so many. How many souls had risen on a battlefield with shock and terror because their incomprehensible conflicts had ended their lives so abruptly and with such violence? The old, the terminally ill, and the despairing rose from their beds to greet Him with relief, eagerness, even joy, glad to lay down their burdens and follow Him to their new abode. Not so soldiers. They invariably reeked of anger and rage, pain and fear, and took a long time to accept their fates. Some even tried to shake their bodies awake, until the carrion crows drove them away. But Death was patient, and granted such souls the time they needed to accept the inevitable –

“No, no, you with the trailing scarf, I do not want you to break towards Death, but away from him!”

Thran blinked as Death receded and returned his body to him. It was Irmo who had spoken, delivering another one of his admonishments. He was right this time, as he usually was; Gerard had gotten turned around and had not stepped in the correct direction. Thran let Death’s possession fade, flexing his arms and shoulders to keep them loose while Irmo demonstrated to Gerard what he wanted. He looked out over the empty auditorium –

Was that Bard talking to Ori? Perhaps he came to sketch? But no, he might do that next week, when all of the children would be in camp and he was free to work on any of his art he chose. Today, he would not have left the children at home... yes, there were the children at the back of the auditorium. All four of them looked intent on each other... they discussed something serious. Every now and again one of them cast a worried look towards Ori and Bard, whose discussion was no less serious.

Thran crossed to the steps that led down to the auditorium, ignoring Irmo when he fussed at the interruption. He strode up the aisle to meet his husband and assistant, both of whom walked down the aisle to meet him.

“Bard,” Thran called, trying to resist the frown that wrinkled his brow. “What is it? The children?”

“They’re fine,” Bard turned to point to them sitting at the back of the auditorium. “In fact, they’re right there.”

“I saw them,” Thran’s voice dropped half an octave. “Why are they right there?”
Bard’s jaw tightened, but he wasn’t angry at Thran’s growl. “Because I’ve got something hard to tell you, angel. I’m sorry. Mr. D called this afternoon to tell me that Lance ran away from his wilderness camp last night. The police are searching for him, but he wanted to let us know.”

Oh, gods. Oh, gods... The blood drained from Thran’s face so quickly that he felt lightheaded. His stomach clenched hard. His hands knotted into fists. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from shouting, but he couldn’t suppress a mutter. “Oi, suka blyad. Chert, chert, chert!”

“I picked up Sigrid and we headed over here to let you know that we’re all fine. I’ll get us home so you don’t have to worry. I don’t think you or the company is in any danger, but when you leave to come home, don’t let any of the dancers go out alone. Call me when you’re on your way, and I’ll watch for you to make sure you get in okay.”

“I told Bard that you ought to hire a couple of bodyguards,” Ori insisted. “Just for peace of mind, Thran.”

Thran still reeled from the resurgence of an old threat, but he struggled to remain his composure. He rubbed his temples, trying to ease the pain that throbbed there. As he turned to Ori to protest such a heavy-handed tactic, Bard flinched and groped for his front pocket – his mobile – and moved farther down the aisle to answer it.

“It’s the prudent thing to do, Thran,” Ori urged. His lips were downturned with distress, and in a tone most emphatic the small man launched into a litany about escalating attacks and safety of the children and how another layer of protection was needed because Lance had been so elusive to track down before. It was all too much to take in.

“Think of your children, Thran,” Ori pressed. “You want to make your best effort for them as well as for Immortal, don’t you? Then get bodyguards so they’re as protected as they can be.”

Bard rejoined them. “Get them.”

“Get them what?” Thran gaped at Bard, but his husband stared at Ori, not him.

“I want the bodyguards. As soon as you can find them, Ori.”

“What?” Ori’s eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped. “What happened? Who called you?”

“That was Mr. D again.” Bard’s jaw clenched, and his posture was hard and stiff. “I’m sorry, angel; there’s no easy way to say this. A guy driving heading east to the city on the back roads didn’t hear the alert, and picked up a hitchhiker about five this morning. The boy slept for the duration until the guy stopped at a gas station about ten miles from the city, whereupon he jumped the guy as he made his way back to the car and knocked him out. He stole about forty dollars from the guy’s wallet and his phone, but that wasn’t the worst of it – he also stole the guy’s handgun right off his belt. By the time the guy came to and staggered into the gas station snack shop to get the attendant to call the police, the boy was gone. The guy identified Lance from his mug shot.”

“Oh, gods, oh, gods!” Thran gulped. “So now this angry child is armed. He does not even have to confront us now! He can wreak his havoc entirely unseen!”

“Which is why I’m taking Ori up on his suggestion about bodyguards. This is more than we can handle ourselves, angel. I want as much protection for the children as we can get.”

“You are right.” Thran groped for the back of the nearest seat and sat down. He wanted to bury his face in his hands, but in deference to the children, he managed to keep himself from doing so. “Yes, lyubov moya. You are right.”
“I’ll get on it,” Ori said, already pulling out his mobile.

“What do we tell the children now?” Thran whispered, when Bard stooped down beside him.

“I don’t know,” Bard shook his head. “Tilda’s already scared. The rest are apprehensive, but they’re not panicky. I’ve got to say something – Sig said that if the fucker comes near her, she’ll break his other foot for him, and I don’t want her to be quite so cocky.”

Thran looked at Bard, but there was no smile on his husband’s face. “You called him a fucker, or did she? I would not blame her if she did.”

“No, that was me,” Bard cast a surreptitious look back at the children, all of whom looked militant. “They won’t sit back there much longer without asking what the hell’s going on.”

“So I repeat, what do we tell them?” Thran whispered. “I do not know what to do.”

A strong hand grasped his knee. “We’re in a spot, cariad, there’s no denying it. So we’ve got to keep our heads, or that fucker will have us so cowed that none of us will know our ass from a hole in the ground. Ori’s getting us some help. And while I wish we didn’t have to do this, we have to tell the children so they understand why we have to be so careful right now.”

Thran nodded. His face must have looked awful, because Bard squeezed his leg for reassurance.

“I won’t tell you just to worry about Immortal. I know you can’t. But Lance’s luck has to run out sometime, yeah? He’s gotten away with more than anyone so stupid has had a right to. So odds are he won’t continue to be so lucky, especially now that he’s committed assault and robbery. That’ll kick the police into high gear, because he’s not just an errant kid anymore. He’s armed and dangerous.”

“Forgive me if I do not find that particularly reassuring,” Thran growled.

Bard sighed. “I don’t, either.”

Thran glanced at the children. “They are about to descend upon us.”

“I know. Better we go to them.”

“Thran!” Irmo barked from the stage. “We are waiting!”

“You must wait a little longer!” Thran growled, mustering his Prince of Ice glare. It was likely a sickly one, but he did the best he could, then followed Bard to the back of the auditorium where four anxious children waited.

Oh, gods.

* * *

“Da, what’s going on?” Sigrid blurted when Bard and Thran came towards them. “What did Ori tell you? And you got another call? Was it Mr. D?”

“Okay, let’s settle down,” Bard urged. How did he expect the children to do that? He could hardly settle himself. But he grabbed his worry by the throat and stifled it, so that he could look his children
in the eye and be strong for them.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” Tilda’s eyes were the size of saucers and her mouth was downturned at the corners.

“Settle down,” Bard repeated, but quietly. He took a marshaling breath, and gave Thran a look. The tall dancer was still pale, and he looked no less settled than the children. “All right, everyone. We all need to stay strong, because no, it’s not the good news we wanted to hear. I’m sorry. I’ll just say it straight out, and then we’ll talk about what to do.”

The children all had their eyes glued on him. So did Thran. This was one time he had to be at his calmest, no matter how awful the news was.

“Lance hitchhiked into the city this morning. He assaulted the man who drove him in, and stole some money and a handgun before he ran off.”

“Oh, son of a bitch – sukín syn – he’s batshit crazy!” the older children muttered, neither quietly nor calmly. Between the frightening news and her siblings’ curses, Tilda started to cry.

“Steady on, everyone,” Bard said, gathering Tilda into his arms. “This is hard news, yes, but we don’t have to resort to curses to get past it. That just frightens us, which we don’t want. We’re better than that, and we won’t let this get the best of us. Everyone take a deep breath.”

“But he’s going to shoot us!” Tilda wailed. “Why can’t the police stop him? Why?”

“They’re trying, little doll,” Bard rubbed her back. “He’s very good at hiding, I guess, in places that the police don’t think to go. But they’re doing everything they can to find him, and they’ll do everything they can to keep us safe.”

“Which isn’t much,” Bain muttered under his breath, and Legolas whispered agreement.

“I’m sure there’s a search going on right now where he was last seen,” Bard offered, hoping it was true. “They won’t stop just with a search there, either. Because he hurt someone, and because he’s tried to hurt us in the past, the police won’t stop looking for him now. They’ll look until they find him.”

“Ori works to get us some help, too,” Thran mustered a firm voice to add. “We will have someone to watch over us, so that Lance cannot come upon us unaware.”

“What, a bodyguard?” Sigrid asked at once.

“Exactly so, lioness,” Thran nodded. “But that does not mean that we have nothing to do for ourselves, yes? We will stay calm, and listen to each other, and watch out for each other.”

“Thran!” Irmo bellowed. “Parlez à ta famille quand tu rentres chez toi! Maintenant, nous travaillons!”

Thran’s cheeks flushed bright red, and his eyes flared angrily. Bard put a hand on his arm, urging restraint.

“Do what you need to do for Immortal, Thran. We’ll hunker down here until I hear from Ori, then I’ll let you know what’s up.”

“Thank you,” Thran growled. It was a struggle for him to look at the children without glaring, but he tried. “You are all so strong and brave, mes petits. I am very proud of you.”
“Nous allons être bien pendant que tu as tendance le grand bébé, Papa,” Legolas murmured, and if Bard didn’t know exactly what that meant, his children’s expressions told him that it didn’t compliment Irmo.

“Vraiment,” Sigrid muttered back.

Thran was so irate that he didn’t rebuke the children for their irreverence, merely turned on his heel and headed back towards the stage. He was only halfway down the aisle before he lit out with a blistering string of French, none of which Bard understood, though the intent was clear. Legolas half winced, half grinned at his father’s barrage.

“What did he say?” Bain asked.

Legolas shook his head. “You don’t want to know. I think the expression is that Papa cut Irmo four ways until Sunday.”

“Close enough,” Bard said. “Okay, we’ll be your Papa’s audience for a while, until I hear from Ori. Come on, we might as well move closer to get a good view of the action.”

Everyone obediently moved down the aisle until they were just a few rows from the front. Thran and Irmo snarled back and forth a few more times, but once Thran found his worst glare, Irmo subsided. As the dancers began the scene again, the children quieted, and were soon intent on the swirl of the soldiers as they fought and fell. When Death made His entrance – He didn’t fly today, merely took his place where He would land – Bard let himself get drawn into the scene. His husband was such a powerful dancer, commanding the stage, the other dancers, and the audience so completely that no one could look away. He was not Thran Oropherson, but the Lord of the Underworld, inevitable and inexorable possessor of all mortal souls.

Too bad that Death wouldn’t reach out to possess Lance Dunmont’s soul right this instant. If that happened, Bard would be the first to offer the Lord of the Underworld heartfelt applause, untainted with a single drop of regret.

Sadly, that wouldn’t happen, no matter how much Bard wished for it. With all that Thran had to bear right now, it was up to Bard to take the lead to protect their children. In addition, it fell to him to find the words to reassure them until Lance was run to ground.

Maybe the police would have better luck with their searches this time than they had in April.

Maybe.

As if he felt Bard’s frustration, Thran wielded his knife onstage with more fury than was Death’s norm. As he watched his husband channel his fury into his dancing, an echo of the same emotion sparked at Bard’s core.

So what if Lance had a gun? Bard had rage, and it was growing.
Chapter 146

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig acquires three guardian angels.

Chapter Notes

I decided to endow our three guardian angels with some serious mojo, so:

Charmeine – angel of harmony
Adofo – the special one from God

Michael – angel of loyalty, the warrior angel, and protector of the people
Kusiel – angel of punishment

Gavreel – angel of peace
Agyenim – the great one from God

For those who remember Ori's scene list that included the titles of the music that accompanied each one, please note that the Arnold Schoenberg piece is now replaced with a continuation of the Prokofiev piece, which includes Juliet's theme to accompany Charisse's Maid.

I don't own any rights to any of the Pokémon stuff. But I do get a kick out of all the people wandering around trying to catch them :-)

Just simmer down, bastard.


Thran’s stressed to the max, and the children are scared. You can’t get your anger at an enraged child get the best of you – that’ll make you just as stupid as Lance. You’ve got to be the sensible one, or we’ll all go to hell in a hand basket.

Gods... that was so easy to say, and so hard to do.

Bard clenched his jaw, then forced himself to relax – physically, if not mentally. He did his best to plaster a bland expression on his face. As well as his children knew him, even Legolas, if he looked anything but calm and collected, they’d get even more agitated, and almost anything would spook the lot of them. It was nearly an impossible task, but he did it by keeping his eyes on Tilda – the youngest, the most scared, the one who trembled. He forced himself still and just in time – when she looked over at him, he was able to offer her an encouraging smile. She relaxed enough to return his smile, then she turned back to the stage to watch the company dance.

“All right, good!” Irmo called, waving his hands to signal the end of the scene. “You have it now. So we will try again, but this time with the mist and the film clips and the lights for the battle, yes? It will
Thran disappeared Stage Right – that was to Bard’s left. The house lights went down, then so did the stage lights. Slowly, an eerie, faint green light suffused the stage, and mist began to gather over the floor from both sides. High above the mist at Stage Right, a cold blue light grew, illuminating a crouched and brooding figure who regarded the stage below him – Death, Lord of the Underworld. Even without his costume armor, Thran was a forbidding, alien figure, for he wore his practice headdress and gloves. He remained immobile as the first faint strains of the Kyrie from György Ligeti’s Requiem began. Below him, black and white images projected onto the black panels at the back of the stage depicted a stark, flat, grassy plain. In came the soldiers, one at a time at first, then in groups, until the two forces had assembled. As both forces postured at each other, the stark landscape became overcast with roiling clouds. The posturing turned increasingly violent, and suddenly the two forces fell upon each other like tidal waves. The projected images turned chaotic and jagged with a cascade of war scenes, echoing the flash of the soldier’s swords and knives as they fought. The deep mist churned around the soldiers like a living, grasping creature, a harbinger of the death that eagerly engulfed those who fell.

As the music died, the last soldier fell into the mist. In the few seconds of silence that followed, the cold blue light brightened, and Death rose to his feet. Thran held his forbidding regard long enough for the first clashing chord of Prokofiev’s Knight’s March to crash over the stage. Because he wasn’t rigged to fly down onto the battlefield, he disappeared behind the set and reappeared to stand where he would land after his flight. The projected images behind him showed a scattered flight of carrion crows and vultures, swirling when Thran drew out Death’s knife and launched into His solo to collect the souls of the dead. One by one, He cut the souls of the fallen soldiers free of their bodies, and one by one, they rose to follow Him.

Charisse appeared as the Maid with the other civilians, piteously searching for her Soldier, turning the strains of Prokofiev’s theme for Juliet into a lament. At the last second, just as Death stooped to free the soul of her Soldier, his beloved’s cries revived him, and Luka reached out for her. Spotting her, he crawled over the stage, forcing Death to stay His hand. The Maid threw herself beside her Soldier, stroking his face and shaking him awake as Death circled them, looking more curious than threatening. As the Soldier rallied, he embraced the Maid in celebration of his survival, and the Maid helped him towards Stage Left.

Death retreated to shepherd His collection of souls off Stage Right, but at the last second, He turned back to watch the Maid attend her beloved. When the Lord of the Underworld stretched out a hand to her, it was no mere gesture. His head drooped, He took one yearning step after her, and His hand strayed to His heart, as if it ached. The Maid saw none of this, but spent all her regard and affection on the Soldier. Only when she helped her Soldier offstage did Death turn back to His collection of souls to take them down to the Underworld. His steps, though were reluctant.

The house lights came back on. Bard blinked, surprised at how quickly he’d become entranced in what he’d seen, despite the frightening turn of events with Lance. He scanned the children quickly – the scene had been quite dramatic, and might well have exacerbated their apprehension. But even Tilda seemed to have momentarily forgotten her fear as she’d gotten caught up in the story.

“Wow,” Sigrid gulped. “That was intense.”

“It looked like a real battle,” Bain agreed.

“I thought so, too,” Legolas nodded. “The black and white films and the flashing lights made it much more exciting.”

“I liked Mam’quelle Charisse,” Tilda said, after thoughtful deliberation. “She brought Luka back to
“She did,” Bard agreed with a smile. “I bet Luka’s glad.”

“I am,” Luka pirouetted towards them to offer a wave and a big smile. “She’s wonderful!”

Laughing, Charisse waved to the family before she caught Luka’s arm and drew him back into the company.

Bard managed to catch Thran’s eye and offered him an impressed smile and a thumb’s up. His husband smiled in return, put his hand to his heart, and bowed slightly before he turned back to Irmo. He looked easier now that he was back to the dance, which reassured Bard. The children looked less upset, too, another plus.

Was he wrong to be glad that they were calmer? A crazy teenager was intent on mayhem, and he was glad that his family was calmer? They all had reason to be pissed to the gills.

* * *

The last time Thran had endured so much worry about anything was after Vileria had been killed at the train station. Physically, Legolas had not been badly hurt, a few cuts and bruises only. The emergency team at hospital had barely had time to bandage his wounds before Thran had rushed to his side; in fact, he had been the one to wipe the spatter of Vileria’s blood from his son’s cheek. Legolas had been too numb to cry, and had stared in wide-eyed, unblinking silence at Thran as if he didn’t know where he was or what had happened. In desperation, Thran had bundled the boy in his arms and rocked him while he cried for both of them. He had relinquished his son only when he’d had to identify his dead wife, lying on a cold metal table in the hospital morgue. The blast had not touched her face, and he hadn’t had the courage to look past the blood that had soaked her clothing. Just to look at her pale face had been hard enough. It had seemed to be coated with thin, white wax, and without Vileria’s spirit to animate it, it hadn’t seemed to be hers. It could have belonged to a thousand other women. For one impossible moment, Thran had thought that perhaps there had been a mistake, and someone else had died, and Vileria had just been lost in the confusion of the wrecked train station.

But it had been her wedding ring on her right hand, and her favorite pearl earrings in her ears, and her silver swan charm on its braided chain around her neck that he had given her the first time she’d danced Odette after Legolas had been born.

In tears, he’d removed her jewelry gently, then hugged and kissed her for the last time. Then he’d returned to Legolas.

His son had not spoken for several weeks after the accident, and worry for his small, blond son had shoved Thran’s grief for Vileria aside. The knot in his stomach had not diminished, nor had the lump in his throat receded when he had scanned Legolas’s blank face...

That knot, that lump... he felt them now when he looked at his husband and his children. Months had passed before Legolas had finally come out of his silence and cried for his mother. How many...
months would pass this time before the threat from an angry child was no more?

Seven years ago, Thran had danced despite his worry for his son. He’d argued and fought and demanded until he and Legolas had been granted the right to emigrate from Russia to this country, no matter how badly he’d wanted only to hold his son in his arms. He had found a place to live, a company to dance for, a babushka to help with Legolas, a maid. He had done all these things no matter the knot in his stomach, or the lump in his throat. He had even more to look forward to now, with his family, his ballet, his company. So fuck the knot and the lump – he would dance.

If he had the good fortune to lay his hands on Lance Dunmont again, this time he would do much more than kick him into a tree.

The company continued its practice, running through the second battle where Luka’s Soldier fell, and his Death left Charisse’s Maid to despair outside the locked gates of the Underworld. He forced himself to notice that the black and white projections on the walls of the set added much more depth than he’d expected. He paid strict attention to Irmo’s direction. He supplicated Death to grace each of his steps with His power...

His concentration vanished when Ori walked down the aisle with three people behind him. Even from this distance, he immediately recognized Ori’s companions as professional bodyguards. The first was a tall, rugged white man with a military crew cut to match his erect, disciplined carriage; the second was a shorter, muscular black man with hair as closely cropped as his male colleague; the third was a tall, wiry black woman with hair trimmed in a two-inch, impeccably-shaped corona. There was nothing cocky or ostentatious about them, but their expertise was so obvious – the balanced carriage, the swift assessment of surroundings, the quiet confidence of expert fighters... and a certain finality in their gaze. All three wore black clothing – innocuous polo shirts, neat black chinos, and black specialty athletic shoes with thin soles – parkour shoes, perhaps. They followed Ori slowly down to where Bard and the children sat watching the rehearsal, and Ori gestured, clearly introducing his three companions to Bard and the children.

As soon as the scene ended, he ignored Irmo to join his family.

“Good,” Ori nodded, when Thran came towards him. He indicated the woman, the black man, then the white man. “Thran, this is Charmeine Adofo, Gavreel Agyenim, and Michael Kushiel. They’re here to look after you and yours for a bit. Charmeine, Gavreel, Mike, this is Thran Oropherson, executive director and principal dancer of the UltraViolet Ballet Company.”

“Mr. Oropherson,” Gavreel murmured in a deep voice as he leaned forward to shake Thran’s hand. He had a firm grip, a calloused hand, and was clearly the man in charge.

“Mr. Agyenim,” Thran responded, shaking the bodyguard’s strong hand firmly.

“Call me Gavreel. Easier to pronounce.”

“Then I am Thran, which is also easier to pronounce.”

“Hello, Thran. Charmeine.”

“Charmeine.”

“Hi, Thran. I’m Mike.”

“Mike.”

“Charmeine, Gavreel, and Mike are very highly skilled and will look after you very well,” Ori said,
smiling encouragingly. “I’ve given them the details of what we’re dealing with. They’ll escort you home, take a look at things for you, and offer some advice as well look out for you.”

Irmo chose that moment to bark at Thran. Ori slid his eyes to the choreographer, then back to Thran.

*You need to go home with your family,* Ori’s look meant.

For the second time in his life, Thran conceded to something other than the dance. He turned to Irmo and walked towards the stage.

“Something calls my attention, Irmo. I will see you here tomorrow.”

He ignored Irmo’s irate protest, and turned back to his family.

“I’ll explain it to him,” Ori said.

“Thank you, Ori,” he patted the young man’s shoulder gratefully. “Please convey my apologies to le maestro.”

He found his bag in where he’d left it in the seats near the stairs, and returned to his family. The three bodyguards murmured briefly, then Charmeine and Mike went up the stairs onto the stage and disappeared behind the scenery, paying no attention to the agitated Irmo as they went. Gavreel beckoned to him and his family, and they followed him up the aisle towards the lobby.

It was far from a grand procession, but it was a weighty one.

* * *

Life turned surreal. A trio of avenging angels walked down the aisle of the children’s school auditorium and took charge of Bard, his husband, and their children with grave courtesy, but also calm expertise. Mike and Gavreel were as big as any bar bouncers that Bard had ever seen, but both of them carried themselves like soldiers of long and probably clandestine experience. Neither would have looked out of place in combat fatigues and bristling with weapons. Charmeine was probably from the same background, but her poise was more deceptive. She was the chameleon of the three, able to put aside the men’s military bearing to appear like any other civilian, albeit a tall, athletic one. Mike and Gavreel might be the ones with the obvious automatic pistols at their backs, but another one hid discreetly under the tail of Charmeine’s untucked polo.

“Wait here, please,” Gavreel murmured in a low, courteous voice when they reached the exit doors, then slipped into the lobby. Seconds later, he stuck his head back into the auditorium and beckoned them after him. When they came into the lobby, Mike and Charmeine were there, looking out into the parking lot.

“Which cars are yours?” Gavreel asked.

“Mine’s the blue pickup in the fourth row,” Bard replied. “Thran’s is the silver SUV in the front.”

Gavreel gave his colleagues a look, and they slipped outside.

“What’re they doing?” Tilda whispered, peering under Legolas’s shoulder.

“Casing the parking lot, I imagine,” Sigrid replied. She looked very calm for a girl who had an
angry, vindictive teenager after her. At Tilda’s confused expression, Sigrid relented. “Don’t worry, Til. They’re just making sure that we’ll be safe going to the cars, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Tilda nodded. “Good. I don’t want to see Lance Dunmont for anything.”

Gavreel remained impassive, intent on his colleagues looking over the lot. At length, he glanced at Bard.

“They’ve found nothing of the boy, and nothing seems to have been tampered with. If the young ladies would ride with Thran, and the young gentlemen with Bard, we would appreciate it,” Gavreel asked in the same courteous voice, so the family separated as requested. Gavreel saw the girls into the back of Thran’s SUV, then took the passenger seat beside Thran. Charmeine waited for the boys to climb into the back seat of Bard’s pickup, then hopped in beside Bard. Mike got into a nondescript beige sedan.

“Let Thran and Gavreel go first, please,” Charmeine directed, so Bard waited for Thran to pull out of the lot before he followed him.

“How did you decide how to divide us up?” Bard asked, when he could contain his curiosity no more.

Charmeine kept her eyes on the SUV in front of them. “The back windows of the SUV are tinted, so it is hard to see if anyone is in the back seat. Your daughters are the most vulnerable, so we placed them there to offer them the most protection. Your husband is also the most vulnerable of you two, and Gavreel is the obvious deterrent.”

“So what are we, chump change?” Bain snarked.

“Bain,” Bard warned, glancing back at his son in the rear view mirror.

“Sorry.” Bain gave Legolas a look, who returned it with commiseration.

Charmeine laugh was light and amused as she looked in the side view mirror, watching to see who followed them. “We are innocuous. We do not call attention to ourselves. We hide in plain sight.”

“Um, you don’t look like a bodyguard,” Legolas ventured apologetically.

Charmeine turned around to give Legolas a smile. “Thank you. That’s the nicest compliment I can get on the job.”

“Really?” Legolas stuttered, eyebrows almost to his hairline.

“Sure. While everyone looks at big, obvious Mike and big, obvious Gavreel, they don’t see me. That’s exactly the way I want it. I can take better care of you when people don’t even know I’m here.”

That spoke of layers upon layers of something Bard knew nothing about. Even the boys seemed to realize they were out of their depth, and subsided into silence with an exchange of subdued looks. Charmeine glanced at Bard long enough to wink, then went back to her careful study of everything around them. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Bard smothered a small smile, and drove the rest of the way home in silence.

As they turned down the lane to the house, Charmeine glanced at Bard once again. “When we reach your home, would you please stay in the truck until we take a look around?”
The politely worded question wasn’t really a question, but a direction. Bard nodded in concession.
“Of course. Do you want me to park down from the house, or pull right into the driveway?”

“Into the driveway, please. We haven’t been followed, and if the boy doesn’t know where you live, he won’t be here. If he knows and isn’t here, well and good. But if he knows and he’s here, we’ll find him. Let your truck idle. If any of the three of us tell you to leave, drive to the nearest police station and stay there.”

“Got it,” Bard nodded.

Ahead of him, Thran was likely getting the same instructions. He hoped Tilda wasn’t freaking out past all redemption, but at least Sigrid was there as a steadying influence. He followed Thran into the driveway, waited until Thran had turned his SUV around to point towards the lane, then maneuvered around him so that the truck was oriented similarly. Charmeine slipped out, and flitted around the back of the house on light feet. Ahead of him, Gavreel stayed in the SUV until Charmeine appeared on the roof of the house – how did she get there? – then he got out to check around the carriage house. Mike turned up in the back yard, prowling around the barn. In a few seconds, Gavreel reappeared to speak to Thran. The carriage house bay went up, and Thran backed the SUV into its spot. Bard followed him to park the truck, then he and the boys joined Thran and the girls outside the mudroom door. They went inside with a collective sigh of relief.

“We’ll check the house, then you can relax,” Gavreel said, as Charmeine went past him. She was back in a moment, nodding that all was well.

Bard checked the clock on the oven as the family trooped through the kitchen. It was after five, and as the children scattered, he turned a look on the bodyguards.

“What’s the procedure now? I’d like to feed the children. It’s been a long day for them.”

“Of course,” Gavreel nodded. “Charmeine would like to talk to each of you at some point, but she can do that after you eat.”

“You’re welcome to sit down with us,” Bard offered.

“We appreciate that, but we’ll be about our business for a bit,” Gavreel demurred.

“All right. I generally make extra of everything, so if you want a bite later, please help yourselves.”

“You’re a generous man,” Mike smiled.

“All right, troops,” Bard called. “I need a couple of sous chefs, front and center. Jambalaya tonight!”

“What can I do, Bard?” Thran asked. He looked so tired that Bard gave him a hug.

“You’re beat, so why don’t you go upstairs and shower? You’ve got twenty-five minutes before supper, so take advantage of the break.”

Thran sighed. “I would rather help you and the children, but you are right that I would appreciate the shower.”

“Then go. I’ve got this.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya,” Thran kissed Bard’s temple, and took himself upstairs.

Tilda and Bain sorted themselves out to help, so Bard got out rice, sausage, veg for stir-fry, fruit, and
kale, and put them on the counter. As he worked, the bodyguards spoke lowly just out of earshot, then Charmeine slipped into the sitting room to talk to Legolas. Mike and Gavreel disappeared to prowl outside.

He wondered what Charmeine would ask the children. He’d find out soon enough when she approached him.

As he sautéed onions and red peppers for the jambalaya, Tilda and Bain talked softly, comparing notes about their three bodyguards. Tilda was impressed – and somewhat reassured – with how big the men were, and Bain described Charmeine’s comment about not wanting to stand out. Bard let them run as he concentrated on the food, because both seemed reassured that Lance would have a hard time getting past the trio. Thran reappeared looking more refreshed, so he took over the veg while Bard threw biscuits together and put them in the oven. Charmeine disappeared to join her colleagues outside before they sat down to supper, so they had at least the illusion of normalcy, but it was still a subdued affair. It had been a long, trying, frightening day, and Bard wasn’t surprised at the lack of conversation, or how quickly everyone downed the food.

Thran took charge of the cleanup, with Sigrid and Legolas in attendance. Charmeine reappeared to have a quiet word with Bain; when the boy went upstairs to play video games with Legolas, she coaxed Tilda into the sitting room to speak with her. She spent long enough with their youngest child that Bard grew concerned, and stuck his head in to check on her. To his surprise, Tilda was explaining Dinky Farm to the bodyguard, who listened attentively.

“No, it’s the other button to switch from the orchard to the apiary,” Tilda said, leaning forward to show the woman on the controller.

“Oh, I see,” Charmeine smiled. “My son’s a lot better at computer games than I am.”

“You have a son?” Tilda looked interested. “How old is he?”

“Just seven. But he’s already really good at computer games. He likes some of the Pokémon ones. I like this game better, because I don’t have to push the buttons so fast. I have time to think about what I want to do.”

“I like that, too,” Tilda nodded. “I have time to decide whether I want to pick the apples or collect the honey. Usually you have to do the apples first because they’ll spoil if you don’t get them in time. The honey keeps longer in the hive. But sometimes I like to think about whether I should start another orchard or buy sheep, too.”

“Looks like you sucked Charmeine into your favorite game, Tilda,” Bard said, coming into the room. “Be careful, Charmeine. Tilda’s the resident queen of the bees.”

Charmeine’s smile was warm. “So I’ve learned. Very good, indeed, Tilda. Perhaps I can play again sometime? I’d like to speak with your dad now.”

“That’d be nice,” Tilda nodded. Her smile faded, and she looked back at the television screen before she met Charmeine’s gaze again. “But... mostly, I hope you keep Lance away.”

Charmeine’s face remained inscrutable as she handed her controller back to Tilda, but her demeanor was kind. “I promise you that I’ll do my very best at that, Tilda.”

“He has a gun now, Miss Charmeine. If he shoots at you, will you shoot him?”

“I won’t let him harm you,” Charmeine replied.
“Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I enjoyed your game.”

“I’m glad. I’ll go upstairs so you can talk to Da.”

Tilda went to put down her game controller, but Bard held up his hand. “That’s okay, little doll. Keep playing your game. Charmeine and I can talk in the main room. Maybe you can get Thran or Sigrid to play with you until we’re done.”

“Okay, Da,” Tilda leaned back on the sofa. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Bard held his hand out towards the hallway, so Charmeine rose from her seat. She offered Tilda an encouraging smile before she followed Bard.

“Oh, I forgot that there’s no lamp in here,” Bard said as they reached the main room.

“It’s okay; there’s enough light,” Charmeine assured him, so Bard sat down on one end of Thran’s beautiful sofa. The woman perched on the other end to face him.

“The house is a work in progress,” Bard felt compelled to explain. “This is the last room we have left to do. So what can I tell you that the children haven’t already said?”

“I have a clear picture of what happened at the park, but I’d like to hear what you have to say about it,” the bodyguard asked, so Bard gave his side of the story. Charmeine then asked him to recount the events at the April Fool’s Follies, both the rehearsal night and the day of the performance. He did so, but he had nothing to add to the tale of Lance’s appearance at his art show, as he’d seen nothing of it. She had few questions about anything he said, but it seemed as if she weighed something more than merely the tales he told.

“Does this help?” Bard asked, when Charmeine continued to look thoughtful.

She cocked her head to one side. “You’re a close family. You love each other very much. That’s good and bad.”

“Good and bad?” Bard blinked. “How so?”

“You love and support each other so well – it’s obvious, even to me who’s known you for just a few minutes. That’s the good part. The bad part... Lance Dunmont desperately wants to belong to something the way you do. His family is nothing like yours, which is why he turned to the gangs looking for someplace to belong. That’s a violent, dangerous world, and he’s adopted its methods. But the harder and more violently he tries to belong to something, the more elusive it becomes, so he tries harder still. A famous scientist once defined insanity as doing the same thing twice and expecting different results.”

“Albert Einstein,” Bard said.

“That’s right. Lance's efforts haven’t worked so far, and they won’t in the future, either.”

Charmeine fell silent, then leaned forward. “You impress me as a practical, down to earth man, Bard. You seem to be the kind who wants to know what’s what. Am I right?”

Bard nodded. “Right as rain.”

Charmeine smiled briefly. “Then let me give you my assessment about what we’re up against here.”
Bard nodded again. “I guess we’re past the angry boy phase.”

“Unfortunately, that’s my guess, too. This boy is past anger, past reason. Believe it or not, he’s probably not feeling much but black despair and rage, without any hope of that changing. None of the paths open to him give him what he wants, which is regard, respect, standing. He blames your family for that, so he’s out for revenge, no matter what happens to him. He wants to take from you what you took from him. This makes him very dangerous.”

Bard blinked again. “I won’t stop loving my family, even if I could. None of us could.”

Charmeine shook her head. “No.”

“So he can’t take that from us.”

“No.”

Bard looked into those calm, compassionate eyes, and gulped as he put together what she wanted him to see. “So... if he can’t take our love for each other, then... he’ll try to hurt one of us, maybe even try to take one of us.”

Charmeine nodded. “I think so. His main target might be Sigrid, but I don’t think he’ll turn down an opportunity at any of you.”

Bard wrung a hand over his mouth. “They gave you the tough job, didn’t they? To tell me that.”

Charmeine offered a sympathetic smile and a shrug. “Someone’s got to do it.”

“Did you tell Thran this? Because I’d rather you didn’t. He’s already worried about so much, and I’d just as soon take this weight for him.”

Charmeine laced her fingers around her knee. “I haven’t. If you prefer I didn’t, then I won’t. But understand why I told you, Bard. I don’t like scaring people, I really don’t. But I want to be honest, and more than that, I want to make sure your family works with Mike, Gavreel, and me. We’re here to protect you, and there may be a time when we tell you do to something that you don’t understand, and we’ll want you to do it right that second, without hesitation, without question. So I tell you how serious this is so that you’ll do that something, right that second, without hesitation, without question.”

Bard nodded. “Okay. I understand. I’ll make sure the children know to do whatever you ask. Thran, too, though I expect he already knows that. And I’ll follow orders, too.”

“I appreciate that. Your children have had a tough day, so we’ll talk tomorrow morning with you about your schedules, and how we can best cover them. For tonight, here are the things I want you to do to help us out.”

Charmeine said many of the common sense things that Bard expected – stay away from the windows, don’t go outside at night, keep the security system active, keep an eye out for anything strange or unusual, keep an ear primed for odd noises, don’t answer the door without looking to see who was outside first.

Bard nodded at the instructions. “We’ll do all of that. But just for the record, the children come first, all right? If something happens, you take care of them before me. And you take care of Thran before me, too. The children first, then Thran, then me. Please.”

Charmeine smiled. “You’re very predictable, Bard.”
“Maybe so,” Bard took a deep breath. “No apologies.”

“None required.” Charmeine got to her feet. “I’ll leave you and yours in peace now. Please lock the door behind me, and arm your security system. We’ll watch over things from outside.”

“Thank you,” Bard murmured.

Behind him, the front door opened as Charmeine went outside. He stayed where he was, trying to find a sense of normalcy, without success. He sat so long that Thran came to find him, peering into the lightless main room.

“Bard? Lyubov moya?”

“In here,” Bard murmured. Gods, he’d better get himself in hand. He didn’t want to add any more upset to Thran’s state of mind.

The tall dancer sat beside Bard and took his hand to massage it gently. He sighed deeply. “I am no more settled.”

Bard’s hum was deep, barely audible, but he didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t make Thran worry. He looped an around Thran’s shoulders and hugged him close. If he couldn’t think of anything to say, at least he could let his body convey his affection.

“This is all so... unnerving,” Thran confessed at last.

Bard snorted. “That’s an understatement.”

Thran stroked Bard’s thigh and sighed. “I have a terrible confession to make.”

“Oh?” Bard gave Thran a look. “About what?”

“I told Charmeine that if a situation arose, the children were more important than me, and even you. I hope you can forgive me.”

Bard laughed softly. “I volunteered the same thing. So I hope you can forgive me, too.”

“Neither of us have anything to forgive.”

“No.”

They sat together in the twilight. There was nothing more to say.
Chapter 147

Chapter Summary

When a saint works his magic, both an angel and a cherub try to reveal the man behind the curtain. Only one is successful.

Chapter Notes

As usual, I still don’t own any rights to Harry Potter, but I do appreciate how useful his adventures are to calm Clan Ffyrnig’s fears.

Thran and his husband sat silently in the dark, but it didn’t prevent the children from finding them. One by one, they ventured into the main room to settle around their fathers. Tilda was first, of course, burrowing between them to link her arms with both of theirs. The boys were next, Bain settling beside Bard and Legolas beside Thran. Finally Sigrid came in and sat on the floor between her fathers, draping Tilda’s legs over her shoulders and wrapping her arms around them.

“I’m still going to work tomorrow,” Sigrid said into the silence. “One of those bodyguards will just have to sit in the bistro all morning.”

Bard shifted beside Thran. “I should have asked Charmeine about that. When she talked to me, I was too... flustered to think about it.”

Flustered? Bard was never flustered.

Suka blyad, Thran. The angry teenager who threatened our family now has a gun. How could that not fluster him?

When something threatened Bard’s family, he didn’t get flustered. He got angry. Very, very angry.

“They can’t expect us to hide in the house all day,” Sigrid persisted. “What about next week, when all our camps start? What about Ada’s ballet, and your sculpture, Da? We can’t stop living. We’ll kill each other if we have to hide in here for the foreseeable future.”

Bard stirred beside Thran again, but this time, it was to swiftly lay a hand on Bain’s thigh. The boy had likely been about to blurt something ill advised, something that would frighten Tilda, such as Lance will kill us if we go outside, too.

Thran didn’t want to hear that any more than Tilda did. The knot in his stomach was already painful.

“We’ll see what our guardian angels have to say tomorrow morning,” Bard said. “But no matter what they tell us, I want all of you to be on your best behavior with Miss Charmeine, Mister Gavreel, and Mister Mike. They’re here to take care of us, so it’s important that we listen to them, and do exactly what they say, right away. Not just you children, but Thran and me, too. Does everyone understand that?”
A murmur of agreement went around the sofa.

“There are a couple of things they’ve asked us to do tonight to help them. We don’t have curtains, so
don’t stand in front of the windows. Please stay in the house, too – tonight is not the time for a
midnight stroll around the yard. If you see or hear anything odd, tell Thran or me right away, so we
can get our guardian angels on it. I’ve got their numbers programmed into everyone’s mobile, so if
you can’t find us, call one of them.”

“Are they going to be outside all night, Da?” Bain asked.

“That’s what they said,” Bard nodded.

“I’m scared,” Tilda said in a very small voice.

“They’ve got guns, Til,” Bain said, thinking that would reassure his sister. “Lance may have one, but
I’ll bet he doesn’t know how to use it, but Miss Charmeine, Mister Mike, and Mister Gavreel sure
do. And they have better guns, too. So we’ll be okay.”

“I’m still scared. I don’t like guns,” Tilda said.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Bard said quietly, putting a hand on Bain’s shoulder to head off a debate.
“And it’s okay not to like guns. They’re just tools, and people can do good or bad with them just like
they can with a lot of other things. I don’t think our three guardian angels are going to run around the
house shooting at anything, Tilda. They’d rather catch Lance without any shooting. But the
important thing is that we have Charmeine, Gavreel, and Mike to watch out for us, and we have our
security system, and we have all of us. Those are all good.”

“I guess so,” Tilda ventured.

“I have an idea,” Bard said. “Who’s already gotten a shower?”

“I have,” Thran volunteered.

No one else had.

“So why don’t we all cycle through, then we’ll pile into our bed and read Harry Potter until we fall
asleep?”

“What if we don’t fall asleep?” Legolas asked.

“I bet we do.”

“What, all in the same bed?” Bain seemed dubious.

“Why not?” Bard shrugged. “It’ll be like camping, except indoors. Just the kind of camping you like,
Thran.”

Despite his upset stomach, Thran grinned. “It is. This is a good idea, Bard.”

“Can I bring my torch?” Tilda asked.

“Sure. Then it’ll really be like camping,” Bard encouraged. “Come on. Everybody upstairs. I’ll grab
the book.”

The novelty of Bard’s suggestion had everyone intrigued, so the children followed Bard upstairs
without much urging. As Thran opened the doors of their bedroom wide, Bard got Tilda started on
her shower, then ducked inside the master bathroom for his scrub. Thran had just plumped the pillows on their bed against the headboard when Tilda appeared in her sleep shirt.

“Ah, Tilda, there you are!” Thran said lightly. “I need your help. We need many more pillows for all of us. And remember to bring Mr. Bun, if you would like him to hear about Harry.”

“Ooh! Okay! I'll be right back.” Tilda disappeared again. She returned with both of her bed pillows, Mr. Bun, and a small yellow torch. She plunked them in bed and climbed in. “Did you remember the book?”

“Your Da has it right here,” Thran reached over to Bard’s nightside table to retrieve the book. “See, here is the bookmark where we stopped last time.”

“I want to see.”

Tilda took the book from Thran and perused it until Bard came out of the shower dressed in tee and shorts. He rubbed a towel over his head, grinning to see Tilda already beside Thran. Once he hung up his towel, he flopped down at the foot of the bed to kiss Tilda’s hair.

“I think someone forgot to comb her hair,” he gave her a questioning look. “Did Mr. Bun forget to remind you?”

“No, I forgot all on my own,” Tilda sighed.

“Go get your comb and brush, then. I'll do it for you.”

“Maybe Ada would make me one of those fishtail braids?” Tilda asked, glancing at Thran.

“Maybe Ada would,” Thran nodded.

“Goodie!” Tilda ran out again. Before she returned, both of the boys came in, but she called to them from the landing. “No, you need pillows! Lots of pillows! Go get some!”

The boys reappeared with armloads of their bed pillows as well as Sigrid’s, which were duly added to the heap. By the time Sigrid appeared, the Indonesian bed had turned into a fort with a ring of pillows around the edges.

“What happened to my bed pillows?” Sigrid asked, combing her hair. “Oh, I see they’ve been conscripted. Be right there, all.”

Sigrid squeezed into the pile, grinning at the close quarters. Thran had Tilda close beside him to complete her hair braid, and the boys had commandeered the middle. Sigrid and Bard lounged at the foot.

“Oh, forgot something important,” Bard said, as Tilda opened the book again where they’d stopped reading last time. He climbed out of bed, ran downstairs, and returned with tins of cookies.

“The children made these this afternoon, so it seems fitting that we sample them to make sure they’re okay while we read,” Bard said, handing one of the tins to Thran.

“Three kinds of cookies?” Thran questioned, as the children oohed over the treats. He chose one from the nearest tin. “Our house has become a test kitchen for a cookie company, it seems. What are these?”

“Those are molasses hermits,” Legolas told his father. “I made those. Bain made vanilla brownies,
and Tilda made lemon bars."

"Wow, the hermits are great, Legs," Sigrid said through a mouthful. "Can I read first?"

Tilda passed the book to Sigrid, and soon everyone settled to hear the latest development in Harry’s adventures. As one after the other read a few pages, the mode turned from nervousness to something calmer. The novelty of indulging in sweets despite the late hour was also roundly embraced, and a lot of crumbs ended up scattered across the sheets. They ended up reading two long chapters rather than their usual one. By the time the second chapter drew to a close, Tilda was asleep.

"I’m off to bed," Sigrid yawned, gathering up her pillows. "I have to get up to go to the bistro tomorrow. And I know Miss Charmeine’s going to take me, Da, because I told her when I talked to her that I wasn’t going to let that dickwad cost me my job."

"We’ll see what the morning brings, sweetness," Bard said in a comfortable voice. "If they think it’s okay, and one of them will stay with you, then I think it’s okay. I’ll get up with you to see how it falls out."

"Okay," Sigrid agreed, leaning over to kiss Bard goodnight. She clambered over Bain to bestow a kiss on Thran’s cheek. ‘Night, Da; night, Ada. I’ll see you in the morning.’

"Night, sweetness; night, lioness,” the men replied, and Sigrid offered them a wave as she headed for her room. “Leave your door open if you want.”

"Okay, Da," she murmured, and vanished into her room.

The boys were next, sleepily munching one last cookie apiece as they debated whether to camp out in Legolas’s room or Bain’s for the night. Thran and his husband sent them on their way, and put the tops on the tins to keep the last few cookies from getting stale.

"So many crumbs," Thran observed, for the sheet was well sprinkled.

Grinning, Bard tried to corral as many crumbs as he could so he could sweep them into the bathroom wastebasket. “This would be a lot easier if there weren’t a sleeping child planted firmly in the middle of the bed.”

Tilda was the child planted firmly in the middle of the bed, with her yellow torch lying beside her.

"We could leave her where she is,” Thran offered, brushing a crumb from her cheek.

"We could. But I think I’ll try to get her into her own bed," Bard replied. “She gets a pass on the toothbrush tonight.”

He eased Tilda into his arms. Thran nestled the yellow torch in Tilda’s lap, and Bard bore her out of their bedroom and into hers. While he was gone, Thran got most of the cookie crumbs into the wastebasket, and set the cookie tins on his dresser. He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, where Bard soon joined him.

"She didn’t stir, but I’ll leave the doors open anyway, just in case.”

"A wise move,” Thran agreed.

"The boys are in Legolas’s room, booping and beeping away, as Sigrid would say. I asked them to keep it down, and not stay up too late, but between you and me, if they do stay up, it’s okay.”
“True.”

“I’ll just say goodnight to Sig, then I’ll be in.”

“You just want me to be the one to clean up all the crumbs.”

Bard chuckled. “And a good job you’ll make of it, too, funny dancer. Back in a tick.”

Thran waved a hand as he brushed his teeth, so Bard disappeared.

It was too easy to imagine what his husband would say to their oldest child.

* * *

“Sweetness?” Bard stuck his head inside Sigrid’s room. His daughter had laid out her bistro tee and shorts for the morning, and was getting into bed.

“I knew you’d show up sooner or later,” she said.

“So here I am. Thanks for putting on such a brave front for the other children, especially Tilda.”

“You’re welcome. But I know why you’re really here. You want to caution me not to be too cocky about this, and not to go looking for trouble, and no job’s worth leaving myself open to that dickwad.”

“So I am. I’m also here to tell you that I don’t really know what the right thing to do is, other than to listen to Charmeine, Gavreel, and Mike. They’re the experts; we’re not. If they think that going to work tomorrow is too dangerous, then I’ll respect that decision, and I don’t want you to think that I won’t.”

Sigrid’s businesslike expression disappeared, and a combination of resignation, exasperation, and uncertainty replaced it. She crossed her legs under her and held her hands wide. “I don’t know what the right thing to do is, either. Maybe going about our usual stuff is bad. But staying at home might be worse, because we’d all be here, and if Lance finds out where we live and shows up when we’re all here, he’d have a go at all of us, even Tilda. Isn’t it better to spread out the risk? And the police know whom to look for, so he won’t exactly be able to show his face around the village, would he? Wouldn’t it be better for me to be there, and away from the rest of you? It’s me he’s after.”

Bard sat down beside her, and took her hand. “What did Charmeine say to you tonight? Because I bet you said all of this to her.”

“Of course I did. I told her I felt awful for bringing this down on us because of what I did in the park that day. This is my fault.”

“First off, this is not your fault, sweetness. It was Lance’s fault, because of what he did in the park that day. Second off, all of us, even Tilda, would have done just what you did when he, Manny, and Jinks went after Legolas. We wouldn’t have left Legs to get beaten up, would we? In fact, we didn’t. Third off, if Manny hadn’t run off to drag in Angelo and his goon, this would’ve just blown over. Things might’ve been a little edgy for a while, and we might still have moved here when we did. So don’t shoulder the blame. That’s my habit, I know, but you don’t need to take after your old Da in that regard.”
“There are worse things than taking after my old Da,” Sigrid riposted, but her smile was soft. “Okay, this isn’t my fault. But I still don’t know what to do about it.”

“What did Charmeine say?”

“She said I was really smart, but she was sure I knew that. But she also said she was inclined to enjoy a good cup of coffee in the morning, and that if I knew where she could find one, we’d go check it out.”

“What else?”

“She wanted to know everything I knew about Lance, so I gave her the full dossier. Some of it was hearsay around school, and I told her that. But it’s no secret that he’s a bully, and I told her that, too. With examples.”

Sigrid heaved a huffy exhale and tried to look annoyed. But Bard gave her a look, and she grimaced. “Yes, Da, I’m scared. If you tell the boys, I’ll hate you forever.”

Bard smiled. “I won’t tell the boys.”

“And you just can’t tell Tilda. She’ll die. And you can’t tell Ada, either. He’s already too overloaded.”

“I won’t tell them, either.”

“Well...” Sigrid swallowed, and ventured a glance at Bard. “Since you’re the keeper of secrets, I’ll tell you what scares me the most.”

“Okay.”

“Lance is a coward. I’ve been in his face twice now, and made him look bad, so he’ll want to pay me back, just like he said. But what if he does it like the coward he is, and decides to hit me indirectly? What if he goes after Tilda? Or tries to mess up Ada’s ballet?”

Bard exhaled. This was exactly what Charmeine had told him earlier this evening, albeit in different words. “I worry about that, too. Which is why we don’t have one bodyguard to look after you and you alone. We have three to look after all of us.”

Sigrid swallowed, but nodded. “Lance will think two or three times before he tackles any of them.”

“Maybe four. Especially Mike. He’s big enough to break any of us in half just with a look.”

“Gods, yes,” Sigrid snorted, then she relented and put her arms around Bard. “Poor Da. You have to be the strong one for the rest of us wimps.”

“There aren’t any wimps in Clan Ffyrnig, sweetness. Maybe we’re scared, but we’re strong. We’ll get through this.”

“I know. I’m still sorry you have to keep the stiff upper lip for everyone.” She disentangled herself from Bard to hold out her fist. “Here. I can’t take it all the way you do for me, but I can at least commiserate.”

Chuckling, Bard bumped his fist against hers. “A kind offer, gratefully received. So better get to sleep, sweetness, or you’ll be too tired for anything but one of Miss Dís’s quadruple espressos.”

“Oh, gods, I’d bounce off the walls for a week,” Sigrid chortled. “You’d better go to bed, too. Ada’s
“stomach is likely in a terrible knot, so go calm him down.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bard grinned, kissing Sigrid’s cheek. “Does Finn know what a lioness he’s dating?”

“Entirely. Oh, I didn’t call him. Can I?”

“Would you save it for tomorrow, please? Let things settle a bit, and see what’s what before you get your knight in shining armor all upset.”

“Oh.” Sigrid agreed, somewhat to Bard’s surprise. “I’m beat, to be honest, and it’d take me an hour to calm that doofus down.”

“Sounds like he’s not that much of a doofus.”

Sigrid’s expression turned sweet. “I guess he isn’t. He’s moving out to Killian’s this week, he said. He said he’d gotten a job out here, but I don’t know what it is yet. And he will be in school in the fall.”

“That’s great, sweetness. So off to bed, yeah?”

“Okay, Da. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sig. See you in the morning.”

Bard gave Sigrid’s hair a gentle tug, then waved goodnight before he went back to his bedroom. Thran was still picking crumbs off the sheets, drawing Bard’s low chuckle.

“You’ve probably recovered enough crumbs to make at least two cookies.”

“Not quite,” his husband brushed a few more into the wastebasket. “I found a breeding colony under our pillows, and had to start anew.”

“Looks like you’ve got everything. I’ll get out the vacuum tomorrow and give everything a good once over.”

“We will haul the rug down to the porch and shake it.”

“If we got a pet brush, we could pretend the rug is an angora goat or an afghan hound, only flat.”

“Tcha, next you will think it needs a flea collar.”

“If it does, then so do most of us. The amount of hair we shed is alarming.”

Thran’s chuckle was unforced, so perhaps Bard’s gambit with reading and eating cookies in bed had eased him as well as the children. He took the wastebasket Thran handed him and returned it to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and came to bed to find Thran already stretched out. He’d stripped his tee, but still had on the soft knitted shorts he kept at the side of the bed in case of nighttime guests. Bard followed suit, dropping his tee beside the bed, but leaving his shorts in place. He turned off the nightside table lamp, climbed into bed, and nestled Thran close.

“Lyubov moya?” Thran’s voice whispered into the dark.

“Hmm?” Bard rumbled, stoking Thran’s arm stretched across his chest.

“You said that when you talked to Charmeine, you were too flustered to ask her whether Sigrid should go to the bistro tomorrow. That is not like you.”
Bard winced. Thran had caught his momentary lapse. “I’ve never been in a situation that required bodyguards before.”

“True.” Thran’s fingers traced slow circles over Bard’s chest.

“Have you?”

“A few times. Mostly when I was on tour with Mariinsky. It was more to keep the dancers away from too much conversation with foreigners, than to keep anyone away from us. Our guardians were not nearly so personable as Charmeine, Mike, and Gavreel, either.”

Bard chuckled understanding. “I imagine not.”

A silence followed. Bard shut his eyes, but didn’t expect that the conversation was over. Thran continued to rub his chest slowly, but he didn’t exhale the way he usually did when he was ready to sleep, nor did he snuggle in the last little bit.

“Come on, angel. Out with it,” he said at last.


“No crumbs. Don’t make me wait for the other shoe to drop. What’s on your mind?”

“There are no shoes in our bed for me to drop.”

“You’re not as ignorant of American idioms as you’d like me to believe, you know. Just tell me what’s on your mind.”

Thran sighed. “You are a very suspicious man.”

“I know when my husband has something on his mind he wants to talk about. So spit it out.”

“Tcha, my saint. You are also a very rude man. I do not spit in bed.”

“Thran,” Bard warned.

“All right, all right. I still consider the word... flustered. You are not a man who flusters.”

“So you say.”

“So I know. If you do not want me to be evasive, then you should not be, either.”

“How can I be evasive? I don’t have any idea what you want to talk about, do I?”

“Oh, my saint, you know very well. You are not flustered, I think. So what are you, and why did you tell the children that you were flustered instead?”

Damn it, Thran, don’t ask what you don’t want to know. And don’t ask me enough that I have to tell a lie, either.

“Bard...”

“I was flustered,” Bard replied. “That’s no lie, Thran.”

“If you say so. I say you were something else.”

“Okay, smart ass. Tell me what I was.”
“I would say you were frightened, which would be sensible. I am frightened, too, if not enough to dash madly about like the chicken without its head I hear so much of. But I would also say you were angry about the stupid boy who does not leave well enough alone. That would be something you would not want to tell me or the children.”

Bard kept his eyes shut, and absolutely did not think about just how angry he was – no, how angry he might be. “You’ve seen me angry, angel, to my regret.”

“It was for a good reason. This is for a much better reason.”

“I can see how you’d think that.”

“I can see how you’d think that. Just tell me if I am right or not.”

“I’m not angry right this second. It wouldn’t solve anything. It wouldn’t help anything. Better I keep my head on straight for now. So if you want a word to describe my mood, try watchful. The only thing I can do right now that makes sense is to watch out for us, so that’s what I’ll do. If that changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

Bard kept his breathing slow and deep, and his muscles relaxed. To his utter relief, Thran snuggled in that last little bit, and sighed as he adjusted his head on Bard’s shoulder.

“You are a terrible liar, lyubov moya.”

Bard grinned. “I did not tell you one single lie, cariad.”

“Were you raised Catholic in Wales? If so, you know the difference between a sin of commission, and a sin of omission.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Mam was Church of Wales, which is Anglican, if you must know, and Da was nothing, and I’m nothing right along after him. So no distinction of sins taught here.”

Thran hummed. “Ah. You keep something from me so that I will not worry. But now that I know that, I will worry anyway.”

Bard grumbled low in his throat. “Fucking hell, Thran. Now you’re making me worry about you worrying, which is more than ridiculous. We’ve got enough on our plates without anyone making up stuff to add. So yes, I was flustered, yes, I am worried, no, I am not angry right this second, but yes, I am exasperated at my husband for being such a pain. If you don’t cut it out, I’ll have to suck your cock or something until you think about something else.”

“You do not have to suck my cock. Sadly, we are both too tired for that, and neither of us is in the mood,” Thran sighed, unperturbed at Bard’s exasperation. “What we both need is closeness, and that we have, if you would let us enjoy it. I do not understand why you have such an urge to talk so much before we sleep.”

Bard snorted but quietly. “Cast it however you want, silly dancer. But I’ll second the therapeutic benefits of a good snuggle any day. So I’ll hush if you will.”

Bard pressed a firm kiss on Thran’s hair and urged him closer. Though Thran didn’t speak, his body conveyed how widely he smiled as he settled into Bard’s arms.

Thank the gods that his mother had never taught Bard about sins, whether commission or omission, so he’d been honest about that to Thran. Still, he knew the difference. If he had to resort to a little evasion about what he was worried about, then so be it. Thran had too much to worry about already,
and he didn’t need to share Sigrid and Bard’s worry about how devious Lance might be when he struck at Clan Ffyrnig.

Lance *would* strike. If not tomorrow, then one day soon. Better Bard worry about that than Thran.

If anger simmered in Bard’s heart along the way, so be it.
Chapter 148

Chapter Summary

A saint has a trying day.

Chapter Notes

I wanted to post today because despite no matter how difficult transitions of power are, they can't keep me from writing. Stay strong, all.

Amazingly, no one got up in the middle of the night. The first inkling Bard had of anything was when piano music whispered faintly from his clock radio. Blindly, he stretched out a hand to switch the music off, then lay still to see if Thran would stir. He didn’t. Once Bard was sure that his husband remained asleep, he eased from the bed to visit the bathroom. Necessities, a little water over the face to wash the sleep out of his eyes, two big glasses of water to start the day off right... He snared his tee from beside the bed and his mobile from the nightside table, and eased out to the landing. He got the pocket doors closed without any indication that Thran had roused, and tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen. He filled the kettle and set it on the stove, then he delved in the pantry for the box of dried porridge and the cinnamon, and the fridge for the almond milk and raisins. The porridge and some water went into a bowl, then that went into the microwave –

His mobile chirped. He pulled it out to find a text message from Charmeine.

Good morning, Bard. How is Sigrid today?

His oldest daughter came into the kitchen with her bistro tee on and a determined look in her eyes. Bard smothered a wry grin and typed back an answer.

We don’t call her the lioness without reason

Then we need to talk. May I join you?

The teakettle awaits your attendance

LOL!

Bard pointed to the cabinet. “Charmeine’s on her way in. Would you get her a cup for tea, please?”

Sigrid grimaced, but she nodded obediently and reached into the cabinet for a mug. “Okay, Da.”

“Thanks, sweetness.” Bard ambled to the mudroom, switched off the security system, and opened the door. There stood Charmeine in a fresh blue polo shirt. “Good morning, Charmeine. Porridge, or eggs?”

A smile suffused the woman’s face. “It’s good of you to offer, Bard, but I’ve had breakfast. I’ll take you up on the tea, though.”
“Right this way. Sig, show Charmeine the tea so she can choose some for herself.”

“Okay, Da. Hi, Miss Charmeine. We’ve got several kinds, so it might take you a while.”

“Goodness, yes,” Charmeine nodded at the several containers of various flavors. “Impressive. But this one looks like a good morning tonic. Thanks.”

Bard poured steaming water into the three mugs, and the trio sat down at the table. Of course, Sigrid was the one to broach the conversation.

“I want to go to work this morning, Miss Charmeine. I don’t want that dickwad to think I’m scared of him.”

“I know you don’t, Sigrid,” Charmeine conceded with a shrug. The shrug alone told Bard how this conversation would go, but he said nothing. Better the professional talked sense to his fierce daughter than him – Sigrid would just dismiss what he said out of a parent’s urge to protect his child.

“Uh-oh,” Sigrid sat back in her chair looking betrayed. “I thought you said you’d go with me, and everything would be okay.”

“I said I’d check it out first, and if it checked out, then maybe we’d go. You see, Sigrid, there’s more at stake here than just you and an angry boy. If he’d just run away from his school, that would be one thing – not a very good thing, but a runaway is not nearly so dangerous as an armed robber who beat his victim unconscious and is now in possession of a firearm. That means he can cut a lot wider swath than just an unarmed runaway.”

Sigrid bit her bottom lip, and her eyes dropped to her lap.

“The chance may be remote that Lance Dunmont knows where you work, Sigrid. The chance may be remote that he’d be foolish enough to come into Greenwood Dale on the Lake during daylight hours when so many people could identify him, too. But he hasn’t behaved so wisely so far, so we have to consider what happens if he comes into the Blue Mountain Bistro with that gun. He could hurt many more than just you – your colleagues, the patrons, the people on the street. And what about your boss, Dís Durin? If she knows someone’s after you – and believe me, she knows, because I talked to her – and someone gets hurt, and then someone decides to take her to court over it, she could lose her business, and that’s a terrible price to pay.”

Sigrid looked so downcast that Bard’s throat tightened in sympathy. But Charmeine was right. He offered the bodyguard a sympathetic look – she really had gotten the short end of this duty, having to deliver so much bad news.

“So we can do this the easy way, which means you won’t go to work because you won’t put so many people in harm’s way. Or we can do this the hard way, which means I tell you that you won’t go to work because I won’t put so many people in harm’s way.”

Sigrid gulped. “This is so unfair.”

Charmeine nodded. “It is. Lance Dunmont has caused so many people so much trouble, and he’s thrown away every chance everyone’s given him. He has been and continues to be supremely unfair.”

Sigrid cast Bard a look, but he wouldn’t discount a word of Charmeine’s explanation. “Charmeine’s absolutely right about how unfair this is, sweetness. It’s not fair that you have to bear the brunt of it. But I know you don’t want to put anyone else at risk.”
“You’re right. I don’t,” Sigrid gave a heavy sigh. “But now I’ve left Miss Dís hanging for today. She
doesn’t know I’m not coming in.”

“She knows,” Charmeine admitted. “I talked to her last night. She was upset for you in no uncertain
terms, if it’s any consolation.”

“And now she’s shorthanded, too,” Sigrid swallowed hard. “Maybe I can call Finn? He’s my
boyfriend, and he said he was looking for a job. If he hasn’t gotten one yet, maybe he could fill in?
He’s kind of a doofus, but a really decent guy...”

Sigrid put her hands over her face. Bard didn’t have to see her ribs spasm in a sudden inhale before
he slid over to Tilda’s chair and leaned into her shoulder.

“It’s decent for you to offer, Sig. I’m sure Miss Dís would appreciate the referral.”

“Oh, Da,” the girl whispered, ducking her head into Bard’s chest. “I wanted to make some money
for college! I bet I won’t be able to take my driver’s class next week, either! That rat dickwad is
ruining everything!”

“I know, sweetness,” Bard put his arms around her. “He’s not making it easy, not at all. Sometimes
that’s how life goes. But you know you’ll get your driver’s class eventually, and Miss Dís will have
you back as soon as she can. This isn’t forever.”

“It’s close enough,” Sigrid snarked, wiping an angry hand over her eyes. She cut a look over at
Charmeine, and gulped down her upset. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t your fault.”

“You have every reason to be angry,” Charmeine murmured sympathetically. “You’re right that it
isn’t fair, and it’s messing up a lot of your plans. I can’t offer anything that changes that. But Mike,
Gavreel, and I are in constant touch with the police and other authorities, and as soon as we run
Lance Dunmont to ground, you can resume all the things you want to do.”

Other authorities? Hmm... was that Mr. Nori and his “associates?”

“Thank you,” Sigrid murmured. “So... what can I do? Or do I have to stay here at the house until this
is over?”

“It might seem that way before all is said and done,” Charmeine shrugged frankly.

With a roll of her eyes, Sigrid sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “Gods. It’s
like being grounded, then.”

“Maybe not quite so bad,” Bard offered. “We’ll see what’s up with the rest of the clan, and go from
there.”

“Okay,” Sigrid said. “I understand this is the thing to do to protect everyone else. But I hate it
anyway.”

“You’re allowed,” Charmeine offered her a smile. “If you’d felt differently, I would have thought
something was wrong.”

Sigrid nodded. “Okay. Thank you for being kind about it. I’m going to call Finn and see if he got
that job he said he did, or if he’s still looking. At least I can try to keep this from affecting Miss Dís
any more than it already has.”

“That’s fine, Sigrid,” Bard smiled. “Give him my regards.”
Sigrid went upstairs, leaving Bard and Charmeine at the table. Bard let out a long exhale.

“You really did get the short end of the stick on this job.”

Charmeine belatedly took up her tea to sip. “It’s usually my job to say such things. It’s never easy, especially when the client is a decent person who didn’t ask for any of this. I’m sorry your daughter is the one who has to bear the brunt to avoid so much possible harm.”

Bard hummed agreement. “Let’s talk about the other children. All of them, including Sigrid, start summer programs next week, all of them at the Imladris Academy. Tilda’s signed up for an art class, Bain for soccer camp, Legolas for archery camp, and Sigrid for driver’s education. Are they out of the picture, too?”

Charmeine put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Tilda will be inside the building, won’t she?”

Bard nodded.

“The boys will likely be outside for the most part.”

Bard nodded again.

“And your husband will be in rehearsal at the school, correct?”

Bard nodded a third time.

“Your husband and your youngest daughter will be at minimal risk, being inside a building where security will be in place. We understand completely about what’s at stake with Thran’s ballet and the upcoming festival. It may encourage you to know that the village has already put extra security around the school because so many people keep milling around the school hoping to get a glimpse of your husband and the other dancers. Because security is already in place for the festival, the school, and the ballet, my team will be in addition to that, so we can work within that to see to Thran and Tilda. The athletic fields, however, are more vulnerable. If you could switch the boys to something that remains inside the building, then that would work. If not, then they’ll have to keep Sigrid company at home.”

“What if Sigrid were in the school building, too?” Bard asked.

“We could go with that, yes,” Charmeine nodded. “In fact, having all of you in one place makes our job easier.”

“I can make it my business to be in the building, too,” Bard said. “I’ve got a standing invitation to sketch anything about Immortal, or I can volunteer to help with Tilda’s ceramics class. I volunteer once a week during the regular school term, anyway.”

“What about your studio work here?” Charmeine questioned.

Bard gave her a somber look. “In case you don’t know, I work metal – casting, welding, chemical patinas, and so forth. Some of it’s dangerous. All of it calls for concentration to do safely. If you think I can concentrate properly on those things when my mind is on my children and husband, you’re mistaken. Better that I’m with them.”

“Understood,” Charmeine nodded. “What about this week? You said the children’s camps don’t start until next week.”
“You’ll want us all to stay here, right?”
“As much as possible, yes.”
“Thran will still go to the school.”
“Understood. Mike will see to him.”
“I’ll need to go to the market at least once. The children go through a lot of food.”
“We can handle that, too.”
“Can we be outside in the yard?”
Charmeine nodded.
“Okay, I’ve got one sculpture I can work on. The boys like nothing better than to spend hours playing video games, so they’ll be good for a while. The girls could help with the sculpture if they’re inclined. Oh, what if Legolas wants to practice his archery in the yard?”
“We can go with that, sure.” Charmeine raised an eyebrow. “Is he good?”
“Near Olympic quality. We’re not talking kiddie bows and suction cup arrows here.”
“Then absolutely.”
“Can he go to his fencing lessons? He is Olympic quality at that.”
“His lessons are inside?” At Bard’s nod, she nodded back. “We can go with that, too.”
“Okay, we’ll make do, then. But I hope Lance gets picked up sooner rather than later.”
“So do I. He wasn’t very smart when he chose to mug and rob someone of a gun. That puts him in a whole different category of nasty, and a lot more people are on the lookout for him.”
Bard hummed noncommittally. “If there are more people to look, that’s good. But he’s had more luck than anyone has any right to enjoy ever since this started, so I won’t get my hopes up.”
“Unfortunately, that’s the realistic way to look at it,” Charmeine sighed. She got up from the table, rinsed out her mug, and put it in the dishwasher. “Thanks for the tea. I’ll take a look around outside. If you’d give Mike a ring when Thran gets up, I’d appreciate it. He’ll be ready to go with him to the school whenever Thran’s ready.”
“He generally leaves about ten,” Bard informed the bodyguard. “As for when he comes home, that can be anywhere from six to ten. It might be later, the last week before the premiere.”
“We’ll handle it,” Charmeine assured him. “Please tell Sigrid that I sympathize.”
“She knows,” Bard exhaled. “She just doesn’t suffer fools well, and Lance is at the top of her Do Not Suffer list.”
“Right now, he’s at the top of mine, too,” the woman shook her head as she paused by the mudroom door. “Until later, Bard.”
Bard raised a hand in farewell as the woman let herself out. He sat at the table in silence until he remembered his bowl of porridge in the microwave. It was cold, so he zapped it for another minute.
to restore it to something he wanted to eat. Once it was warm, he doctored it with raisins, cinnamon, sugar, and almond milk, then returned to the table to eat it. By the time he finished it, Sigrid was back in the kitchen, looking a bit more resigned to her fate.

“I talked to Finn.”

Bard looked surprised. “It’s not even seven-thirty. What teenaged boy is up at this hour during the summer?”

“Finn is. He’s packing the last dribs and drabs so he can move out to Kíllian’s today. I told him about Lance and the bodyguards and not being able to work, and asked if he had a job yet. He had a couple of leads, so I asked him if he wanted to talk to Miss Dís. He did. So I called her first, and told her how sorry I was. I told her that I had a willing replacement if she wanted one, so she and Finn will talk this afternoon. I hope she likes him, and I hope he isn’t a doofus. She said she wanted another person anyway, so maybe if the cops can get Lance off the streets, she’ll keep me and Finn both.”

“I hope things work out all round,” Bard nodded. “But if it does, I don’t have to tell you that work is no place for drama, right?”

“No, you don’t,” Sigrid conceded. “Maybe you should tell the doofus, though.”

Bard put his chin in his hand and regarded his oldest child. “What exactly is a doofus?”

Sigrid looked up from making a bowl of porridge for herself to roll her eyes. “Someone who acts goofy. Finn doesn’t do it all the time, but he makes these terrible jokes, and he knows they’re terrible, so he makes this stupid face where he crosses his eyes and sticks his tongue between his teeth and wobbles his head back and forth. It’s so stupid.”

“Not too bad as things go.”

“I guess not.”

“If he didn’t do it, he wouldn’t be Finn.”

Sigrid snorted. “That’s the truth.”

“Think of it as an endearing trait. Like Ada when he gets excited.”

Sigrid brought her bowl to the table with a snicker. She sat down, then with an impish look on her face, she waved her hands. “What is this endearing trait? I gesticulate in its general direction.”

“I think it’s cute,” Bard chuckled. “He isn’t trying to be funny, but he is.”

“He’s hilarious. My very funny Russian Ada,” Sigrid averred, spooning up her porridge. “It’s not very funny to be stuck at home for the foreseeable future.”

“I’m going to try to finish the Andromeda sculpture this week, before camps start,” Bard offered. “I can put you to work if you want.”

“What’re you going to do after that? The totem thing?”

“I expect I’ll be at the school, if I can get Bain and Legs into something inside the building. Charmeine said you could go, too, if there was something you wanted to do inside the building.”

“Yeah? So I guess the driver thing is out?”
“The classroom stuff isn’t, but the driving practice is. I don’t know if you can delay that part, or if you have to delay the classroom stuff until you can do the driving practice. Why don’t you find out?”

“Sure, I can do that. If I have to delay the whole thing, there was this writing thing. Maybe they still have an opening.”

“I’ll see what they might have for the lads, too. They can’t be outside, either, except in the yard.”

“So it’s not just me.”

Bard shook his head. “No. It’s not just you.”

Sigrid winced. “Gods. I halfway wish I hadn’t done what I did in December. But that would have left Legolas to those maggots, so I had to do what I did.” She mugged pulling her hair with both hands. “Gah! Anything I did would have ended up stinking!”

Bard nodded. “Welcome to the school of hard knocks. Sometimes there are no good choices, just bad and worse. Though I think you made a good choice. You stood up to a bully, and you didn’t toss Legs under the bus.”

“This could still turn out... bad,” Sigrid ventured.

Bard nodded, but it was a reluctant gesture. “We don’t know how it’ll turn out. All we can do is the best that we can, all the way, and hope it all comes out okay.”

“That sucks.”

“It does. But sometimes life does. We’ll hang tough.”

Sigrid finished her porridge. “That’s all we can do, so we will, like it or not. So... when the school office opens, I’ll call about my stuff, and see what I can salvage.”

“That’s the best thing you can do, so go for it.”

Sigrid gave him a look that was half smile, half annoyance, but he took the former as his due, and left the rest for Lance. The girl tidied up her dishes, then disappeared down the hall to go upstairs. She passed Thran along the way, because her greeting came back into the kitchen. There was a brief conversation before she continued upstairs; Thran drew near the kitchen.

Bard smothered a rueful smile. First patient of the day dealt with; the second approached.

“Good morning, lyubov moya,” Thran murmured. He wore a tee and his sleep shorts; his hair was already combed and braided, and he looked reasonably alert. “Sigrid tells me that she is grounded.”

“Until Lance is run to ground, more or less,” Bard agreed. “She handled it pretty well for being so disappointed.”

Thran’s hum was pure commiseration. “I half expect that I will be grounded along with her. When does our Judge Charmeine appear to tell me so?”

“She doesn’t. Mike will appear to accompany you to the school when you’re ready.”

“Oh.” Thran looked a hair more reconciled. “How did I escape Sigrid’s fate?”

Bard gave his husband a rundown on all that Charmeine had said this morning, and how he planned to call the school about camps for the boys.
“At this late date, though, I don’t know what we’ll be able to arrange. I may have to find something for the entire crew to do for a while. Maybe paint the main room.”

“We shall see,” Thran conceded. “So I must call my attendant, I assume?”

“You’ve got time to enjoy your breakfast beforehand. What can I get you?”

“I will get it, my saint. Call the school, if you would like. That is more important.”

Bard pulled out his mobile, and went into the sitting room to make his call. He got someone in the office right away, and inquired about the possibility of changing the boys’ camps. As the young man looked for openings in other sessions, both of the boys in question tumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen. As Thran made them breakfast, he explained about the problem of their outdoor camps, which the boys met with less protest than he expected. The young man returned to Bard’s call, saying that there weren’t many openings left in the sports camps, but he had several slots available in a general weight training session.

“Hold on, I’ll check.” Bard covered the mobile speaker to call to the boys. “Lads? Would you come in here, please?”

“What’s up, Bard?” Legolas asked. Bain trailed behind with his mouth too full of something to speak. Bard explained about the weight training session, just as Sigrid came in.

“Yeah, I guess,” Bain shrugged after he swallowed his huge bite. “That’s better than nothing, and it’ll help for conditioning.”

“Do they have three spots?” Sigrid asked quickly.

“I’ll ask.” Bard relayed the question to the young man, who answered affirmatively. At Bard’s nod, the three children looked at each other, and shrugged agreement. “Yes, I’d like all three, please. Yes, here is the information...”

Bard got the three children’s camp session reordered, then hung up. “Okay, you lot. All of you start weight training next Monday.”

“Good,” Sigrid said, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s just what I need to work out how pissed I am at Lance Dunmont.”

“I take it the driver’s class wouldn’t let you put off the driving practice, then?” Bard asked.

Sigrid shook her head. “It makes sense, but still... There weren’t any spots in the writing thing, either. At least the weight training will help my running in the fall.”

Tilda appeared, rubbing her eyes. “Morning,” she said, rubbing her eyes.

“Morning, Kukla, little doll, Tilda,” the family greeted.

“What’s for breakfast?”

“I made the boys fried eggs for sandwiches,” Thran stuck his head in the sitting room.

“Eggs!” Bain yelped, bolting up to dash into the kitchen with Legolas on his heels. “Dibs on the last rye bagels!”

“There are two, one for each of you,” Thran demurred. “If you want another sandwich, you can use the plain or the everything ones.”
“Everything bagels,” Bain hummed.

Tilda wandered into the kitchen, where Thran put on an egg for her to boil. The morning settled into something close to normalcy, and Bard said nothing to dispel it so that he could savor it as long as possible. It wasn’t until Mike arrived to accompany Thran to the school that the children fell silent. A lump grew in Bard’s throat as he watched their faces as Thran drove away with Mike beside him in the SUV. The lump didn’t dissipate as the children filed back into the house in silence. It didn’t dissipate when the boys met his invitation to play zombie apocalypse without a murmur, or when Tilda refused to leave the house, even just to venture to the barn with Bard.

Bard eased a little when the boys came out to the barn, intend on building Legolas an archery target. Sigrid was the next to join the family to help Bard with his sculpture; on her heels came Tilda. Gavreel was a discreet presence during the activity as he made his rounds, and kept an eye on things as Legolas and Bain set up their target in the back yard. With the bodyguard to watch over the boys, Bard worked on his aluminum armature for the Andromeda galaxy model, which went quickly. When he cranked up his torch to weld the arms to the central post, both the boys came to watch. From there, he cut the largest aluminum sphere into half, notched out pieces of each half to fit around the central post with its radiating arms, and welded the halves into place. Finally, he spot-welded the next largest spheres around the center and on the arms closest to the center.

After lunch, he began to painstakingly glue three sizes of small spheres on the arms while Legolas, Sigrid, and Bain tried out the archery target. Tilda remembered that her bicycle needed one more coat of paint, so Bard got her set up to do that in the front of the barn where she felt more secure. Everyone seemed relaxed as the afternoon progressed.

It took steady hands to place the aluminum spheres. After over an hour, Bard was glad to take a break to see how Tilda had fared. She looked up with the most relaxed smile she’d shown all day, so Bard was quick to praise her careful paint job. She was easy enough to walk outside with Bard to see what the other children were up to. They found Legolas acting the instructor for Bain and Sigrid.

“Don’t jerk when you draw the bow, Bain,” Legolas cautioned, as the younger boy drew the bow back. “Pull it back smoothly, then take a breath in, then out. Spot the target, then let the arrow go without moving anything but your fingers.”

“It’s a lot harder than it looks,” Bain said when his arrow had flown off to the outside corner of the target.

“It is,” Legolas agreed. “Okay, Sigrid. You try.”

Sigrid took a breath, pulled her bow back, then exhaled, holding very still. She sighted at the target, and let the arrow fly. It went into the target at the second ring.

“That’s good,” Legolas encouraged. “Very good for your first time.”

“Bain’s right at how hard it is,” Sigrid agreed. “You have to be so quiet.”

“Your mind as well as your body,” Legolas explained. “You have to let everything else go, and just concentrate on the target.”

The youth pulled his bow, smoothly sighted along the arrow, and stilled. When the arrow flew, it hit the very center of the target, drawing impressed murmurs from both of his siblings.

“You make it look easy,” Bard shook his head.

Legolas gave Bard a smile. “Just as you make welding look easy, when I know it’s not. Practice
makes the difference with everything.”

“It’s great of you to show Sig and Bain how to shoot, Legs.”

“Would you like to try, Bard?” Legolas invited.

“Sure, I’ll give it a go,” Bard shrugged, pleased that Legolas had offered.

“Okay, then. Here, Sigrid, you give your Da your bow. That one fits a taller person better.” When Sigrid passed over the bow, Legolas described how to hold it. Then he explained how to nock the arrow, draw it back, and let it go. Bard listened intently, drew the bow a time or two to see how much force it took, then took the arrow that Legolas handed him. He did all that Legolas had told Sigrid and Bain – take a breath, let it out, and sight the target.

*What if Lance stood right there in front of the target, right now?*

Focus narrowed to zero as he let the arrow go.

“Wow, Da!” Tilda jumped up and down. “Look, right in the middle!”

Bard didn’t know how to feel when he looked at the arrow protruding from the middle of the target. Swallowing, he handed the bow back to Legolas.

“That was excellent!” Legolas grinned widely. “You’re a natural!”

“Thanks, Legs,” Bard gave the boy a smile that reflected none of his internal ambivalence. “You’re a good teacher.”

“Do it again, Da!” Tilda begged, jumping up and down.

Bard shook his head. “Better to quit when I’m ahead, little doll. It’s time for me to start supper, anyway.”

Bard went back to the barn to tidy up the aluminum spheres, put Tilda’s paintbrush in the mineral spirits, and lock the barn. Then he went inside to start supper. He didn’t ask for sous chefs.

Supper came and went. It was a more animated affair compared to last night’s, even though Thran wasn’t there to share the grilled spareribs, coleslaw, and baked beans with them. Bard couldn’t help but laugh at how enthusiastic the children were about eating the meaty treats with their fingers, which helped keep the mood light. Afterwards, while the boys went upstairs to continue their zombie apocalypse, Bard, Sigrid, and Tilda played a long game of Dinky Farm. It was a relief to think about nothing other than computerized beehives and orchards.

At eight, Bard’s mobile chimed. Thran was on his way home.

Despite himself, Bard swallowed down a surge of relief. The effort to remain calm and cheerful all day had taken more energy than he’d realized. How good would it be to let down with another adult?

“Thran’s on his way home!” he called upstairs to let Legolas know, then he dashed to the mudroom to disarm the security system. The kitchen was next, to get out the beginnings of Thran’s supper. In a few minutes, the mudroom door opened, and Thran’s steps came into earshot.

“Welcome home, Thran!” Bard sang out, sticking his head around to the mudroom. “How’s the dancer?”
“Tired,” Thran murmured, coming into the kitchen. His weary face revealed the truth behind his single word, and he looked no more able to deal with anything than Bard. Thank the gods that Legolas trotted into the kitchen to give his father a hug, because Bard had time to school his face to reflect the same reassuring calm it had all day.

All he could think about was aiming that arrow at Legolas’s target, and why it had flown so straight.

It wasn’t a story he could tell anyone tonight.
Chapter 149

Chapter Summary

The angel and the saint labor to endure an endless round of waiting. Will it soon be over?

Thran got behind the wheel of his SUV and waited for Mike to climb in beside him. The bodyguard was not any taller than Bard, but he likely outweighed Thran and his husband by at least forty pounds. It was all muscle, which meant that Mike could be the perfect nimble linebacker for any professional American football team. He could just as easily have been the perfect Russian military security escort, too. Thran had seen enough of those during his career. Mike had a distinct advantage over his soviet counterparts – he met Thran’s eyes with a direct gaze, and dispensed with the silent intimidation that Thran had endured so often, whether because of profession or personal inclination. Thran decided to reward that honest regard with his own honesty.

“So now that we are on our way, I will tell you what will meet us when we arrive at the school.”

Mike nodded. “Gavreel tells me you’re no stranger to having a bodyguard.”

Thran shook his head as he started the SUV and pulled out of the carriage house. He closed the bay behind him, waved goodbye to his solemn family without revealing how much their worry bothered him, and started down the lane.

“I am not. I danced in Russia for many years and often was so attended.”

“As much to keep you in line as anything else, I imagine.”

“Exactly so. To deal with the fame, also. The latter is what you will see today. There will likely be a few aficionados of the ballet at the school. They are usually young girls who want only to say hello or ask for an autograph. I do not begrudge them this, so there is no need to make them keep their distance. They are not allowed in the school, so will confine their attentions to the parking lot. There is also a security guard who patrols outside to make sure that none of the vehicles are tampered with. So all you need look for in the parking lot is Lance Dunmont.”

Mike smiled. “You have done this before.”

Thran shrugged. “I do not seek to tell you how to do your job, by any means. Only to prepare you for what you will see.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Once we go inside, the auditorium is to the right. We have use of the corridor and some of the rooms directly to the left of the auditorium, but for the most part, the dancers are in the auditorium. The set crews may range farther than that.

“There are four dressing rooms behind the stage. I share one with the other principal male dancer, Luka. Our principal ballerina, Charisse, has one to herself. The last two are for the corps, one for the ladies and the other for the gentlemen.”
“The important people from UltraViolet Ballet are Abebe, the ballet master; Irmo, the choreographer; and Ori, my assistant. Círdan is the set designer, and Rada is the costumier. I will introduce you to them as soon as we arrive. Abebe has charge of all of the dancers. Irmo designs how the ballet is to be danced. He is quite volatile, so do not be surprised at his antics. Ori sees that everything runs smoothly. If you need anything, Ori is the man to ask. Círdan oversees the student interns who make up the stage crews, and Rada takes charge of the costumes. Rada is not always in residence when we rehearse, but the rest are.”

Mike asked several questions about the layout of the school, which Thran duly answered. He finished with a description of what a typical day was like so that Mike would understand what he would see. Thran would have added a description of the trouble with Kiefer, but Mike was already familiar with that. Thran was glad of that; he didn’t have to rehash the depressing details. He was glad to turn into the school parking lot.

“Do you want me to drive around the school so that you have a better idea of its layout?” Thran offered.

“I appreciate the offer, but I scoped it out yesterday once Gavreel, Char, and I divided up how we wanted to see to you and your family.” Mike grinned. “You got stuck with me.”

“I got the biggest one,” Thran teased, smirking.

“You sure did. You’re the most obvious target, so you get the biggest deterrent.”

“I appreciate the honor, by all means. But isn’t Sigrid the one Lance wants most?”

Mike nodded without embarrassment. “She is. But she’s a lot harder to find right now. You’re not. Everyone in your village knows where you are for the next three weeks, so it makes sense that that’s where our little nuisance might decide to prowl first. So here I am.”

“Ah.” Thran pulled into a parking space and turned off the SUV. As he expected, a flurry of half a dozen young girls waited on the sidewalk. He pointed at them for Mike’s benefit. “So it begins. Showtime.”

“For both of us,” Mike agreed. “If you would, let me get out first and have a look. Then I’ll come around and open your door.”

“Oh course,” Thran nodded. “At your convenience, then.”

Mike got out and shut his door. He scanned everything thoroughly without appearing to do so as he ambled around the back of the SUV and forward to Thran’s door. Thran reached for his bag on the seat behind him so that he was ready to get out when Mike opened his door. Thran got out, put his bag on his shoulder, and strode purposefully for the entrance. He put on his public face for adoring teenaged girls, smiling serenely at the cluster who went into giddy flutters of delight.

“Bonjour, mes petites,” Thran greeted them. “You are all well this morning, then? Sarah, you have honored me with another visit, I see.”

“May I have your autograph again, Mr. Oropherson, please?” the pleading Sarah begged, a cry that the rest of the girls echoed at once.

“Bien sûr,” Thran agreed, taking the first of several pens thrust at him. “You are all so kind to ask.”

“Will you practice all day today again, Mr. Oropherson?”
“Of course, ma chère. That is how one becomes good at anything, yes? Practice, practice, practice.”

“But you’re so amazing already!” one of the girls gushed. “Not like any of us!”

“But how do you think I became so amazing, as you say?” Thran grinned. “I was once a beginner, too. So always the practice - just as your teachers tell you, so mine told me. That is the only way to become accomplished. Dream, yes. Never give up the dream. But practice is the only way to make the dream come true.”

“It’s so amazing that you’re putting on this new ballet right here in our school! That is so cool!”

“I am glad you are so excited for Immortal. That makes me very happy.”

“Are you really going to dance on pointe? That’s so amazing!”

“Do you think so? I think I am already quite tall enough, don’t you?”

“But I saw your picture with the Weird Sisters in their shop, and they’re the best fitters of pointe shoes in New York City!”

“I have heard that of both of them. They were very kind to me when I visited.”

“So you must be dancing on pointe, then, right? Because you bought shoes!”

“They carry my favorite shoes there. And I enjoy Elle and Jessa very much.”

“So you did buy shoes there? Oh, then you are going to dance on pointe in Immortal!”

“Ah, you are the great detective,” Thran grinned, signing away. “You have constructed a good hypothesis.”

“Oh, can’t you tell us? I think it’d be so amazing if you did it!”

“Thank you, ma chère. We must wait and see what Immortal brings. Au revoir, mes petites!”

Thran smiled for one last photograph, then made his way towards the school. He sensed rather than saw Mike fall in behind him, and he let them into the school, leaving the excited girls behind.

“Good morning, Ernie,” Thran greeted the security guard who presided before the auditorium. May I introduce Mike Kushiel? Mike, this is Ernie Laneer, one of the most excellent security guards who keeps such good watch over us.”

The two men shook hands. From their considered regard of one another, both recognized a fellow professional, but Thran chose to make the recognition explicit.

“Mike is here to bolster our forces, Ernie. Please give him every consideration, as I am sure you will grant Ernie, as well, Mike.”

“Sure thing, Thran,” Ernie nodded. “Another set of eyes is always good.”

“I appreciate that,” Mike nodded. “We’ll talk, I’m sure.”

“I’ll be here,” Ernie nodded.

“Thank you, Ernie,” Thran said, then led Mike through the auditorium doors and down the leftmost aisle. “I do not know what information is the most helpful to you, but ask and I will tell you what I
“If you introduce me to your principals, that’d be a great start, Thran,” Mike replied, scanning the auditorium with a practiced eye. “Then I’ll take a look around to see what’s what. You just be about your business, and I’ll be about mine.”

“A good plan,” Thran agreed.

As he promised, Thran introduced Mike to Abebe, Irmo, Ori, and Círdan. There was no discussion about why Mike was here; only the guarded looks from all of the principals revealed that everyone knew exactly why Mike was here. While Thran was relieved that he didn’t have to explain, his dismay at Lance’s escalation was more than enough to lower his mood. He acknowledged it in silence, and took his place onstage to limber up before the company’s barre began. As was their habit, Ori came to sit beside him so they could go over the day’s plans and any unforeseen concerns.

“How are Bard and the children?” Ori asked quietly, when they’d discussed the usual items.

“Sigrid is upset because she cannot go to work, because it would be too dangerous for her employer and her customers if Lance were to strike her there. The boys are upset because they cannot start their soccer and archery camps on Monday, because the athletic fields are too hard to police, so they must be inside the school to lift weights. Sigrid will be with them, since she cannot take her driver’s class because it, too, is too hard to police. And while Tilda will still attend her art class, she is still very afraid. I do not blame any of them, of course. How one stupid boy causes so much angst is beyond credence.”

“And Bard?”

Thran sighed. “He carries on, Ori, as he always does. But his gaze is sharper, and his jaw is set, and his patience has an edge to it. Do you remember the day that he threw Irmo out of the house?”

Ori grimaced. “He was calm, yes, and he was civil, yes. But... no one dared gainsay him that day, not at all.”

“He does not suffer any threat to our family kindly.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to react otherwise. I hope we can get a line on Lance soon.”

“Nothing from your brother?”

Ori shook his head. “Nothing, but it’s not for lack of trying. Nori’s put out the word and even offered a nice reward. But he hasn’t had a nibble.”

“That does not encourage me,” Thran murmured. “Unless it means that Lance has gained enough wisdom to go to his grandmother in Florida at last, but I cannot believe that.”

“Nor can I,” Ori nibbled his stylus thoughtfully. “The local police haven’t seen or heard anything, either.”

“Suka blyad,” Thran muttered as he stretched forward to wrap his arms around his shins, coaxing his hamstrings out of their morning repose. “Where does this boy hide that no one and nothing can find him?”

“I don’t know,” Ori sighed with equal dismay. “I do not know. If it’s any consolation, the police are upping their patrol around the school until the festival. If they can’t find his hiding spot, we’ll have to wait until he tries to find us. It’s not as if the school building’s going anywhere, so if he shows up...”
here, someone will spot him.”

Thran wondered if he should offer to stand in front of the school with a target on his back. Lance might want Sigrid, but maybe he’d be dumb enough to try for a ballet dancer instead.

As Ori got up to start his rounds, Thran continued with his warmup. Gradually, the company assembled around him, and Abebe stepped forward to begin the morning barre. Thran gave himself to the familiar routine, trying not to think about angry teenagers, bodyguards, his family under siege, and how much depended on Immortal’s success. How telling was it that he had to resort to thinking about his sore feet and back and his aching stomach to keep the other problems at bay?

The barre proceeded. Thran paid it strict attention, but it didn’t have its usual calming effect; his mood seemed to sink with every moment that passed. It was not unexpected; he usually suffered from a lowered mood about two to three weeks before any new performance. On the one hand, the premiere was near enough that rehearsals were nothing but exhausting grinds. On the other, the premiere was too far off for him to tap into the excitement of an impending performance. This time, however, he had much more to drag down his mood. He shut his eyes and forced his concentration on feet, ankles, hamstrings, hips, glutes, spine, lats, delts, biceps, neck, hands, fingers...

Once barre was done, Irmo set the company to work on the grand entrance to the Underworld, where Death introduced the souls of the dead soldiers to their new abode in all its variety. While this scene wasn’t technically difficult for Thran to dance, it did call for him to completely occupy his role. It was up to him to set the mood, showing how completely Death directed His affairs. Here He called various factions to order, and there He issued a decree. Over here He ordered denizens to dance for the amusement of the new souls, and over there He punished a miscreant. Thran mustered his concentration as the dancers spun and leaped in time to the rapidly shifting music, which was a collection of world music snippets to show the diversity and vast breadth of Death’s realm. Irish step flowed into dub step, and that to Klezmer to didgeridoo to plainchant to jazz to Japanese drums –

“Thran!” Irmo barked. Dancers came to a stop, then the music followed suit. Thran turned towards the agitated choreographer, who stood at the front of the stage with his hands in the air. “Come, come! The barre is over, and now is the scene! You dance as if you are asleep!”

Thran swallowed; the choreographer might be abrasive with his assessment, but he spoke nothing but the truth. “My apologies, Irmo. I do. Begin again, and I will attend as I should.”

A ripple went through the company at Thran’s meek acceptance of Irmo’s chastisement, but they resumed their places for the beginning of the scene. As the music restarted, Thran forced himself to the scene, where he must convince all on the stage and in the audience that Death was the ultimate master of all He surveyed.

If only they danced Death’s declaration of love for the Maid, where Death was not in control, and was helpless to control His fate. Thran would have danced that with all the desperation Irmo could have asked for.

* * *

Thran was thoroughly wrung out by the time the company dispersed for the night. His body was well exhausted, but not as exhausted as his thoughts. To hold his worry for his family at bay so completely that he danced to the peak of his ability was no easy task, no matter that a huge
bodyguard prowled the school on his behalf, no matter that two more surely kept an equally attentive watch on his family at home, no matter that Mike’s mobile, Ori’s mobile, Thran’s mobile, and all the security communications remained silent. Silence meant no trouble, but it also meant that the waiting went on without respite. He was glad to pack his bag, bid his colleagues a good night, and follow Mike silently out to the SUV. The bodyguard was scrupulous to scan the parking lot for anything untoward, and he hovered as Thran dealt with the trio of young dance enthusiasts, posing for a photograph and signing autographs. He was his usual courteous self, but he didn’t linger, and he climbed into the SUV with a silent groan of relief. Mike climbed in beside him and waited silently for Thran to send Bard a text message that he was on his way home.

“Do you go through this every day?” Mike asked as they pulled out of the parking lot. He kept his eyes on the side mirror, and even turned around in his seat to check for pursuit out of the rear window.

“I do,” Thran agreed. “Every dancer does.”

“You’ve got what... three more weeks of rehearsals?” Thran nodded. “They’ll be this intense?”

“The few days before the premiere will be more so. There are the light, sound, and technical rehearsals, where all is identical to the performances but for the costumes. These are where we coordinate the music, the films, the set changes so that all goes smoothly. After those are the dress rehearsals, where the dancers are in their costumes. Normally we would have but technical and one dress, but given how many student interns work for us, we will have two of each so that they are fully comfortable and ready. And tomorrow will be the first practice on stage with the riggers – the team who will make me fly from the highest part of the set down to the floor. Charisse and Luka also fly at the end of the ballet, but where I fly down, they fly up. So yes, we have intense days ahead of us. The performances will be a relief, to be honest.”

“You guys could give the Army Rangers a run for their money.”

Thran chuckled. “We are strong, yes. But we seek to refine and perfect a very precisely choreographed impression. Your Rangers are warriors – masters of improvisation, able to handle anything that comes at them.”

Mike grinned at the distinction. “That’s a good way to look at it. I guess Swan Lake is the same every time, eh?”

“The steps vary from one choreographer to another, but for a single run, yes, the steps are the same each time. But two dancers will dance those same steps and leave very different impressions, or a dancer will make different impressions on two different days. The differences are nuances only, variations on a single theme.”

Mike nodded. “I see the distinction.”

“Before we reach home, I want to speak to you about might be a variation on a single theme.”

“Shoot,” Mike agreed.

“This boy with the vendetta, Lance... his theme so far has been to attack at public venues. First the school, then the school again, then the gallery where my husband held his art show. These were all events that were well publicized, and required no sleuthing on Lance’s part to discover. So I wonder if he will continue that tack, and will not attack us at our home.”

“That’s a scenario we think is very likely,” Mike nodded. “It’s no secret that you’re in rehearsal at
the school, and it’s no secret when the festival is, and it’s no secret what days you’ll present your ballet. So my money’s on Lance lying low until one of those public performances, when it’s most likely that your family will be with you.”

“That is what I think, too. So I think for the major rehearsals and the performances, my family should not be with me until Lance is caught.”

“If you hadn’t suggested that, one of us would have,” Mike agreed.

“My children and husband will be most disappointed, and I will be sorry that they will not be there. But their safety is more important to me than their attendance at a premiere. With all the security at the premieres, it would be hard for Lance to escape notice, and you, the school security, or the police will have a good chance to catch him. Once he is safely caught, my family will see the ballet.”

“You’re setting yourself up as bait, you know.”

Thran shrugged. “You said yourself that I am the most obvious target. To postpone Immortal would devastate many people who count on it to raise money for the village festival, or to enhance their careers, or to bring something new and exciting to life. It would devastate me because I have put my soul into Immortal. So I will not let an angry child ruin the hopes of so many.”

Mike shrugged. “If you did cancel, that’d only delay the situation, because Lance would only wait until the next time, assuming he managed to stay loose.”

Thran agreed. “And I do not want that, not at all. I do not want this to drag on so long that my children come to fear every unexpected sound, and must hide in our house or in the school. I do not want my husband to give up all thought of his art because he worries about his children, or me. So I do not like to be bait, but if that is how we bring this to an earlier end, then so be it. But you will please not speak to my family about bait, please. It is enough that I know. They do not need to.”

Mike’s nod and expression were casual, but Thran didn’t doubt that the bodyguard took him seriously. “You got it.”

Conversation lapsed as Thran drove the rest of the way home. He was no more the target of an angry child than he had been before he and Mike had spoken, but to acknowledge that he was the most obvious target in the family was sobering. His stomach tightened in sympathy, but he said nothing as he pulled into the driveway.

When Mike got out to scan the area, Gavreel came from around the side of the house to join his colleague. They conferred briefly, then nodded for Thran to open the carriage house bay and back his SUV inside. Mike saw him to the mudroom door, where Thran thanked him for his protection throughout the day.

“You’re welcome,” the big man replied. “I’ll see you again tomorrow morning about ten, then?”

“That will be perfect, Mike,” Thran nodded. “Have a good evening.”

“You do the same, Thran. See you tomorrow.”

Thran let himself into the house, shut the door behind him, and leaned against it. All the tension and apprehension of the day came to roost on his shoulders, and he shut his eyes as the lump in his throat grew large, and the knot in his stomach tightened.

Fuck the lump and the knot, just fuck them both...
Rapid footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Bard, of course, probably working to make Thran’s supper. His husband was too much the saint. Thran couldn’t bear to burden him with the travails of his day, so he schooled his face out of its gallows gloom, and into what he hoped was only weariness.

“Welcome home, Thran!” Bard called, sticking his head around to the mudroom. “How’s the dancer?”

“Tired,” Thran murmured, coming into the kitchen. Legolas bounded into the kitchen from upstairs to give his father a glad hug, which Thran returned with more than casual pleasure. “Hello, synok! You have had a good day, then?”

As his son chattered eagerly about archery targets and weight training and zombie apocalypse, Thran let the rush of words cascade over him, easing his somber mood.

So what if I am bait? Better me than my son, or any of the children. Or my saint.

His resolution encouraged him to smile, and now he could meet Bard’s eyes with confidence.

Did a similar façade obscure Bard’s face? His husband smiled, but there was a studied nonchalance in the way he moved, rather than his usual unconscious ease.

Perhaps his saint sought to keep a secret of his own, just as Thran did.

As the rest of the children came into the kitchen to welcome him home, he found varying degrees of apprehension on their faces, so he said nothing that would worry them. He told them that tomorrow he would learn to fly on the stage and not in class, and that Luka and Charisse sent them their warm wishes. The boys went back to their video game, and Sigrid decided to call Finn to see how his move had gone today. Tilda, however, still sat in the sitting room with her drawing books, within earshot of the kitchen, so when Bard sat with Thran as he ate his supper, he spoke only of what UVB had practiced today. He did not mention Mike. Bard sat with him to tell him about the children’s day; he made it sound quite wholesome and happy. He did not mention either Charmeine or Gavreel.

They both lied, then. The only question was how much.

In deference to the children, Thran continued his sin of omission until he and Bard could retreat to the shower and then to bed. When they settled against the pillows, Thran let his breath escape in a long, slow exhale. Would Bard speak first, or would he?

Bard drew Thran near, settling his head against Bard’s shoulder and his arm across Bard’s chest. One hand stroked Thran’s hair slowly, and the other traced light trails down Thran’s arm. He sighed once, but didn’t speak.

His husband chose to remain the saint, then – always comforting, never asking to be comforted.

They were both tired. They had not spent time together all day. Perhaps now was not the time to bring up anything other than how glad he was to be home. They could talk about more serious things in the morning...

... which would likely cast a pall over the rest of the day.

Thran sighed again. What had Bard said once to him, about situations that provided no good choices, only those that were bad or worse?

Bard shifted onto his side, so Thran moved with him until his back was pressed against Bard’s chest.
Bard’s arm went around his ribs, and his lips pressed a kiss against Thran’s spine, but he didn’t speak. Thran didn’t, either; how could he speak of why he wanted Bard and the children to stay away from his rehearsals and performances until Lance was caught?

It was Bard’s nature to hold silence. He was empathetic enough to figure out all that burdened Thran, and generous enough to take on everything else so that Thran didn’t worry more.

They were both under so much pressure. A fight at this point was too devastating to contemplate.

A fight had happened because they had not talked to each other. Never again – no matter how late, how tired, how unpleasant it might be to speak, better to talk now than to let the pressure build.

“We are both liars,” Thran blurted.

Bard’s hand stilled. “What?”

“I said that we are both liars.”

“What?”

“Most of the time, it is for a good cause – we do not want to worry our children about the vindictive Lance. But here we are in bed, and both of us promised that we would be honest with each other, and neither of us wants to. Even if we did, neither of us knows what to say that does not worry the other. Neither of us wants to say that we are worried and scared and tense. Worst of all, both of us think that such lies between us might well be the best tack to take.”

Bard’s hand tightened over Thran’s ribs, and his cheek pressed against Thran’s back. After long seconds, Bard wrapped his arm around Thran’s shoulder. “I don’t know what to do, either. The children... no, to them, I won’t say any more than I do. But you... you’ve already got too much on your plate without me saying a word, angel. I love you. I can’t bear to make your path through this worse.”

“The children, agreed. But me... I cannot bear for you to make your path through this worse because you hold silence. Since I think I know what you hold silence about, I will speak it so that you do not agonize and try to keep it from me. I know Sigrid may be Lance’s ultimate target, but I also know that I am the most obvious one. He will likely strike at me because it is so easy to know where I will be until the festival. I have already spoken to the bodyguards of this, and they agree with me. So yes, an angry boy with a gun is after all of us, but I am at the front of the line.”

Bard stopped breathing for a long second. He urged Thran to turn over so that he could enfold him in his arms and hug him hard. “When I talked to Charmeine, she said she thought you would be at minimal risk because of all the layers of security around the school. It’d be a lot harder for Lance to sneak in there. But... you’re right that everyone knows exactly where you are, and you’re right that I worry about that.”

Hearing Charmeine’s assessment calmed Thran a little, and so did Bard’s close embrace. “Ori says the police will patrol more, and the school has security, and I have Mike with me. Those will deter Lance.”

“Maybe you should take Gavreel or Charmeine with you, too.”

“No, Bard. That would leave you and the children with only one of them.”

“Only until next Monday. After that, the children will be in camp, and I’m coming to the school, too, so all three of the bodyguards will be at the school to look out for all six of us.”
“That will be fine until the children’s camps end in the afternoon. Then I want you to take them home with Charmeine and Gavreel. More importantly, I do not want any of you to come to the final rehearsals, or the premiere. Those are when Lance may think to strike, because I am absolutely guaranteed to be at the school. You must keep Sigrid and the other children away then.”

Of course Thran expected Bard to argue, and so he did. Thran shut his eyes and let the protests flow over him without response, refusing to argue.

“Mab i ast, Thran!” Bard finally muttered in frustration. “You are the most stubborn, bull-headed bastard on the planet!”

“You are the Taurus, not I. I am the Libra, who tries very hard right now to stay balanced.”

“Balanced between the devil and the deep blue sea,” Bard growled back.

“Between concern for my children and husband and self preservation, perhaps. But I will not be alone, Bard. The police, the school security, our bodyguards will be between me and Lance. Honestly, do I like this? Hell, no. But better I stand as the public target, not the children. And better you stand between the children and anything else here. That is what parents do.”

Bard fell silent. “I can’t argue with that, you bastard.”

“Nor can I.”

“All right. We’ll stay away from the rehearsals and the premiere.”

“Thank you, lyubov moya.”

“Cariad,” Bard whispered, stroking Thran’s hip. “Just... please... be as careful as you can. Please.”

“I will. The only hero I want to be is onstage – merely a role I dance.”

“You are my hero every day, and you will be for the rest of my life.”

“As you are and will be mine.”

Conversation lapsed, and Thran almost let matters lie. But... there had been that tension in Bard’s body when he’d welcomed Thran home...

“Lyubov moya,” Thran whispered.

“Hmm?”

“I have been honest. So I hope that you will be, too.”

“About what?”

If the conversation hadn’t been so serious, Thran might have grinned at the casual evasion in Bard’s question. “When I came into the house this evening, I had to work very hard to put a casual expression on my face, so that when you saw me you did not worry. When I saw you, I think you had to do the same thing.”

Bard sighed. “Son of a bitch, Thran. I can’t keep a single secret around you.”

Thran gave into his grin. “You cannot. So why do you try? Just tell me.”
“I couldn’t then, not with the children near. And you looked so tired... I wasn’t about to say a word about anything other than I was glad you were home, and what could I get you for supper.”

“Ah, there was something, then. Tell me. The children were not so well behaved today? You cursed at your Andromeda sculpture?”

“The children were a lot better behaved than anyone had any right to ask of them. They were great. Sig and Til helped me with all the little spheres after I welded the armature –”

“Suka blyad, I missed the welding again,” Thran snorted. “You do this just to tease me, I am convinced. You know I want to see it, and so you do it when I am not here.”

“I had to hurry up and do it because I want to get the whole thing done before Monday, angel. The client gave me permission to show it at Celebrían’s gallery during the festival if I finish it, and since I won’t have much else to show other than sketches, I want to. I won’t have time to work on it once camps start, because I’ll be at the school.”

“What will you do at the school?”

“Sketch your ballet, if you’re okay with that.”

“Of course I am.”

“I appreciate it.”

“I still want you to do a book of your sketches about Immortal. You must sketch if you want to make the book.”

“True.”

“So this is what you worked to hide from me? That you will finish your sculpture and then be at the school? Tcha, I do not think so.”

Bard fell silent. When he exhaled, it was long and measured. “Legolas was kind enough to show Bain and Sigrid how to pull a bow and sight the target. He asked me if I’d like to try, so I agreed. He’s a good teacher, by the way – very kind and supportive as well as clear. You would have been proud to see him.”

“I would have been, yes. But this is not what you wanted to hide from me.”

Bard shook his head. “No. It’s not. I did everything Legs told me and the children...”

Thran waited. After some seconds, Bard swallowed and continued.

“In that last second, just before I let the arrow go, I thought, what if Lance stood right in front of me? Everything disappeared except for that. So when I let the arrow go, it hit pretty close to the dead middle of the target, as if Legs had shot it instead of me.”

Bard fell silent again. When he remained silent, Thran said, “Ah. It upset you to think that you could shoot Lance.”

Another swallow. “Not at all. I’d shoot him in a heartbeat, without hesitation, without remorse. That was what upset me. That I could get that angry.”

Thran pressed a kiss on Bard’s chest. “It does not upset or surprise me at all. You are the most patient and gentlest of men, Bard, until you are pushed past all bearing. Lance has done that. So do not feel
guilty or remorseful about it, my saint. You are justified because you want to protect your family, which is your most precious treasure. If you cannot get angry about a threat to your treasure, then what is there to get angry about?"

“You’re right,” Bard conceded. “Still...”

“Whatever efforts either of us must make for our children and each other, we will do so. If I have to pound Lance into pulp with my hands, then I will. I know you will do the same. I will not feel regret or guilt about any efforts either of us make to protect ourselves.”

“I won’t, either.”

“Good.”

Bard’s body relaxed beside him; feeling that, Thran relaxed, too. How much better it was to lie with his husband at peace again?

“So we’re good?” Bard murmured.

Thran sat up enough to kiss Bard’s lips. “I am if you are.”

“I’m good.”

“Then all is well again.”

“In here it is. But that’s all we ever have control of, anyway.”

“True.”

More seconds passed while Bard stroked Thran’s hip in that soft way that felt so soothing.

“You were right to make us talk, angel. It’s hard for me, even when all I want to do is to help.”

“I know, my saint. Be at peace. We are in accord.”

“Thank the gods.”

Nothing more needed to be said after that.

* * *

The next several days passed, enough that living under the watchful eyes of bodyguards lost its novelty. The children stayed in the house or the barn while Bard finished his Andromeda sculpture. They went with him to the market when they needed groceries, with two bodyguards trailing them in the nondescript beige car. They insisted on painting the second coat on the gazebo. Legolas went to fencing on Saturday with one bodyguard in tow; Thran went to the school as he had all week. Sunday was the perfect hot summer day for prowling around the junk shops, but the family really couldn’t do that in good conscience, so everyone stayed home and did the same things they had all week, except Thran, who didn’t do much at all, thank the gods. Bard had worried about him, because he seemed a little thinner, and he was certainly wearier. What had Legolas said about how thin Thran had gotten after Vileria’s death? He’d make a perfectly emaciated Death before long.
On Monday, the children’s camps started. Bard stayed at home to move his Andromeda sculpture and his pine tree to Celebrían’s gallery for display. When he delivered a stack of sketches to Bilbo and Frodo for consideration, he apologized for not getting further along on his totem piece. When he explained why, Bilbo understood, but was visibly disappointed. Bard felt no differently; to have another new original piece in combination with Andromeda would have been a strong sign of the health of his career. The lost opportunity was one more cost the family paid because of Lance’s vendetta. Bard didn’t like it, but he liked leaving his family more vulnerable even less. If he stayed at home to work, then one of the bodyguards stayed with him. If he went to the school, all three bodyguards were in place to care for the children.

Once his sculptures went in the Ilithien Gallery, Bard joined the rest of the family at the school. He was elated to see the story he and Thran had sketched out months ago over lunch become such a vivid, colorful, stunning performance. The Underworld portion of the set was amazing – a series of boxes could be reconfigured in seconds to change the single set to give the impression of the vastness of Death’s realm, from throne room to one enclave or another. The bare portion of the set was just as amazing as the perfect foil for the black and white images that created a stark prairie, then a chaotic battlefield. The flying was incredible, even if it didn’t send Thran sailing over the audience. Just his flight over the stage from left to right and then back again was so dramatic that Bard got goosebumps the first time he saw it.

He had so many scenes to draw, from the ones that were part of the ballet itself to all the behind-the-scenes events, that choosing not to work on his totem sculptures didn’t seem so rancorous. How much fun was it to draw the wrestling team as they slid the stage back and forth, then draw the petite Charisse flying in a grand jeté like some gossamer butterfly? The lifts that she and Luka performed to perfectly convey the undying tenderness between Maid and Soldier were almost too beautiful to render in anything other than stardust and moon glow, but Bard did his best with his mundane pencil. Of course it was glorious to watch Thran dance. None of the wear and tear on Thran’s body showed when he danced. Irmo might be the world’s most difficult choreographer, but he was also a brilliant one, creating steps that made the most of Thran’s height, expressiveness, and considerable technical expertise. No matter how hard the steps – and they were hard – Thran conjured them into magic. Even the pointe work that had upset the family so badly was beyond reproach. Thran floated on his toes as if he weighed nothing, matching Charisse step for step. At the days flowed by, sketch after sketch poured from Bard’s pencil as if he were as possessed as Thran was. Before he knew it, he’d filled half a dozen sketchbooks, nearly three weeks had passed, and the ballet was less than a week away.

Not once in those three weeks had anyone – police, security, bodyguards, Mr. Nori’s organization, villager, or Clan Flyrnig – caught a single glimpse of Lance Dunmont.
Chapter 150

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig receives some welcome news. But does a new woe now stalk the stage of Immortal?

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to the timelessly-cute Tinker Bell.

A welcome diversion greeted Bard when he brought the children home from their camps Monday afternoon. He was in Thran’s SUV, given that he had four children, two bodyguards, and himself to haul. These days, it was Thran who drove Bard’s truck, because he had only himself and Mike to transport to and from the school. Once Charmeine and Gavreel got out and checked the yard, he backed the SUV into its spot in the carriage house, and the children piled out. He got the children into the house, then Gavreel accompanied him to the edge of the lane so he could collect the family mail from its box. He found the usual market circulars, a flyer from a window and door replacement company, a coupon for an oil change, a couple of bills...

And a slim, business-sized envelope.

He didn’t wait to get back to the house before he opened it and scanned the contents. At his wide, delighted grin, Gavreel quirked an eyebrow.

“Good news, then?”

Bard’s grin widened, if that were possible, and he clenched a fist in exultation. “The best news, short of someone picking up Lance Dunmont. Just the best. I want to keep it a surprise until Thran gets home.”

“Understood,” Gavreel nodded. “I’m glad you have something good to keep your perspective.”

Bard hummed. “It hasn’t been easy. The children are used to being outside a lot more than they have for the past month, and you know how they’ve chafed under the restrictions.”

Gavreel’s laugh was deep and rich, and his body shook when he tried to contain his amusement. “Oh, if I had a nickel for every time they’ve run around the house, I could retire to a big estate on Maui.”

Bard chuckled, too, but his sigh wasn’t amused. “To be honest, I thought Lance would’ve made a mistake and gotten picked up by now. I don’t know where he’s hiding, but he must have stealth technology to stay under the radar for so long.”

Gavreel scanned the lane again, scrupulously keeping to his duties. “It’s not that hard, sad to say.”

“What do you think he’s done, then?”
Gavreel gave Bard a resigned look. “All he had to do was to steal a car, drive off someplace nowhere near here where no one’s looking for him, and lie low.”

Bard’s brow wrinkled. “He could’ve stolen the car of the man he robbed, but he didn’t. He fled on foot.”

“He was smart not to steal that one. If he had, the police could’ve put out an alert right away, because he was armed and dangerous, he was an escapee, and they knew exactly what car to look for. But he didn’t. I think he ran off once he got the gun, then stole a different car, something innocuous like a base-model sedan, that no one would associate with him. He drove off somewhere, maybe dumped it and stole another, and then took himself far off where there’s little risk of anyone looking for him.”

“You make it sound easy.”

Gavreel’s smile was wry. “Did you know that people steal about three hundred cars a day in New York City alone? That’s about one every five minutes. You don’t think the police have the wherewithal to find them as fast as they’re stolen, do you? And if you don’t know which of the three hundred to concentrate on, you’ve lost the game before you started.”

Bard shook his head. “I guess so. So rob a guy, do a quick flit away, steal a boring car from a place where lots of others get stolen, and you’re home free?”

Gavreel nodded. “Shameful, indeed. Life in the big city’s got a lot of benefits, but it’s got problems, too, and finding a stolen car is one of them.”

“I guess it’s too much to hope that he took that boring sedan and drove to Florida.”

Gavreel shook his head. “Possible, but not likely, I’d say.”

Despite Bard’s elation about the contents of today’s mail, his smile faded. “Just five more days before the premiere.”

“It’s getting close,” Gavreel agreed. “This is the hardest part, Bard. No one’s seen or heard anything in weeks, and that’s just what Lance wants. It’s hard for children to understand that, but please, urge yours to hunker down just a few more days. The last thing we need is for any of them to dash out on some joyride, only to run into Lance hoping for just that opportunity.”

“I don’t think any of them are prone to that, but I take your advice seriously,” Bard assured them. “I was thinking it might be a good plan on the day of the premiere to take the children to a film? None of them wants to miss the ballet, and I don’t either, so a film might help them get their minds off what they’re missing?”

Gavreel nodded as they got to the mudroom door. “That’s a good plan. We can post Charmeine in the theatre with you and the children, and I’ll keep watch in the lobby. Plus there’s usually a security guard on duty at night, so Charmeine and I can speak to him or her.”

“That’s great,” Bard nodded. “It’ll be good for all of us to get out. Maybe we won’t be where we want to be, but we’ll be out, anyway.”

“And hard to find.” Gavreel offered Bard one of his deep nods. “All right, Bard. I’ll be about my usual, so ring if you need anything. Enjoy your supper.”

“Thank you,” Bard replied.
Gavreel took himself off with his usual deliberate stride, eyes already scanning everything around him. Despite his suspicion that Lance had not retreated to Florida, Bard relaxed a little of his worry. Gavreel and Charmeine were both so competent that if the boy were foolish enough to come here, it wouldn’t matter whether he were armed or not before the Clan Ffyrnig’s bodyguards ran him down.

He came through the mudroom with the mail. All of the junk stuff went right into the paper recycle bin; the bills and the exciting bit came with him into the kitchen. The children were already around the table, munching their usual snack of cheese and crackers and fruit, so he ducked into the pantry to drop the bills into the wire basket they’d designated as the mail collector. The other envelope went behind the boxes of pasta to keep it a surprise until Thran came home. When he came out of the pantry, he brought the bins of flour and sugar with him – tonight’s news needed pie to make it a proper celebration.

“Ooh, what’re you going to make, Da?” Tilda asked, when Bard rummaged in the cabinets for his deep pie pan.

“Pie. Maybe blueberry,” Bard replied. “I haven’t made that in a long time, and since we just went to the market yesterday, I’ve got enough berries.”

The children might be knee deep in Double Gloucester and Gouda, but neither was a deterrent to them expressing enthusiastic approval of Bard’s plan. As Bard put together his piecrust, the children finished their snack and Legolas suggested they go outside to kick Bain’s soccer ball around. Sigrid and Bain were eager supporters, but Tilda held back.

“Can’t we play in the ballroom?” she asked.

“We’ve been inside all day,” Sigrid coaxed. “It’ll be good to be outside for a little while, Til.”

“I don’t want to go outside,” Tilda grimaced.

Bard looked up to find the same look of worry on the older children’s faces.

“Mr. Gavreel and Miss Charmeine are outside, Kukla,” Legolas reminded her. “And we’ll be out there, too. No one will bother us. We’ll make sure.”

“I know, but...” Tilda darted a look at Bard. “I just don’t want to go out there.”

“It’s okay,” Bard told her. “You can help me with the blueberries if you want. The rest of you go outside. Just make sure you tell Gavreel and Charmeine that you’re outside, and please...”

“Don’t go out of the yard,” the three older children chorused.

“We know, Da,” Bain snorted. “Believe me, we really know.”

“I know you do, and I’m sorry we still have to watch out. Gavreel just told me that it’s very important that we stay careful. Things have been quiet for a while, but we want to go a little bit longer before we get things back to normal. So tell Gavreel and Charmeine, and keep your eyes open a little longer.”

The older children murmured acceptance, and trailead towards the mudroom door. Both Sigrid and Legolas looked back before they went outside.

“You can play on my side, Kukla, if you come out,” Legolas offered.

But Tilda shook her head with finality. “Thank you, Legs. But I’ll stay in here and make blueberry
“It’ll be a good one, then,” Legolas conceded, and followed Sigrid outside.

Tilda watched the other children file outside with a wistful look on her face. Bard resisted the urge to tell her everything would be all right if she went outside, but he couldn’t honestly say that, and he wouldn’t lie to her. Sometimes it was hard for a ten-year-old to hold a lot of faith in arcane ideas such as reduced risk and statistical advantage.

The anger in the depths of Bard’s heart stirred again. How often did it rear its head of late? Several times a day, such as when he caught one of the children complaining about being cooped up, or when Tilda adamantly refused to trust all manner of precautions. Her wistfulness revealed that she wanted to go outside, but she couldn’t bring herself to do so.

*If I ever get my hands on Lance Dunmont, I’ll –*

Not useful. Impotent anger didn’t help. Better to think about how to help Tilda. Maybe Bard should talk to Dr. Firenze – a counselor, maybe?

Maybe nothing would help until Lance was caught. After that, maybe Tilda would ease. If not, then he’d talk to Dr. Firenze right off.

Bard thrust his concern yet again into the back of his mind, and turned his attention to Tilda and blueberry pie. He turned on the oven, and got the recipe card from Daphne’s well-worn box. While he made the crust, Tilda mixed berries, sugar, lemon juice, and a dash of cinnamon in a big bowl to macerate. He rolled out the bottom crust and formed it into the bottom of the pie pan, then let Tilda fill it with her berry mixture while he rolled out the top crust. They decided a lattice top would look festive, so Tilda carefully cut the top crust into long, thin strips with pinked edges, then together they wove the pieces across the top of the pie. Bard found the cookie sheet to keep the pie from dripping over the side and into the oven, and Tilda rummaged among the kitchen tools for the silicone strips that kept the edges of the crust from burning. A sprinkle of turbinado sugar went over the top, then into the oven went the pie, and into the sink went the dishes to rinse for the dishwasher.

“How much longer do you think it’ll be before... you know?” Tilda asked, as she put the spatula into the dishwasher.

Bard didn’t have to ask what Tilda meant. It was the same question she’d asked him over and over since the day the bodyguards had arrived – how long would it be before someone picked up Lance? He shook his head with regret. “I don’t know, little doll. I wish it had happened yesterday.”

“I’m tired of staying inside all the time.”

“You’re as safe as we can make it with Charmeine and Gavreel to watch out for you. And your brothers and sister watch out, too.”

Tilda shook her head. “I know. But I’m just too scared. I wish I wasn’t.”

Bard handed Tilda the berry bowl, dried his hands, and then kneeled so he could look up at his daughter. “I’m sorry, Tilda. You know I want Lance caught just as much as you do.”

Tilda gulped and looked down at Bard with a mixture of sadness and defiance. “I wish he were dead. I know it’s bad for me to wish that, but I do – I wish he were dead. Because then he couldn’t hurt Sigrid, and I’d never see him again.”

*Gods, I wish the same thing,* Bard thought, but he couldn’t admit that to anyone, not his daughter,
and not even himself. “I understand, Tilda. You don’t want anyone to hurt your sister, which is a
good thing. Try to think about that instead. Lance isn’t worth thinking about.”

“Okay,” Tilda murmured. Bard hugged her to his chest, shutting his eyes as she wrapped her arms
around him. How many times had he said the same thing to her? The only new wrinkle was that this
was the first time Tilda had dared to say she wished their tormenter were dead. That was
understandable, but still worrisome.

As soon as the festival was over, Bard would call Dr. Firenze.

As soon as the festival was over...

All life seemed to be on hold, waiting for the village festival to arrive and Immortal’s premiere with
it, as if that would bring resolution to their woes. Maybe it would. If he were honest, Bard expected
two things to happen – Thran’s grueling schedule would ease, and Lance would make his
appearance. If there were any justice in the universe, a third thing would happen – Lance would be
cought and summarily disappear into the depths of the criminal justice system, never to bother
anyone again.

Bard shivered. Never was an unlucky word. Saying it all but begged for a challenge.

That spun him back around to the same old problem – Lance was loose, and there was nothing he
could do to change that.

He felt no better about it than Tilda did.

He shifted to press a kiss on Tilda’s cheek, and she stayed in his arms for a few more seconds before
easing away. She went into the sitting room to get her art workbook, sketchpad, and pencils, turned
to a fresh page, and soon was engrossed in a new drawing.

Swallowing his frustration, Bard stayed in the kitchen. Maybe he’d think about what to make for
supper. Yes, that would be more productive.

He settled on grilled chicken, a big pot of farro, green beans with onion and speck, carrots with
ginger, and caprese, the tomato, basil, and mozzarella salad his family liked so much in the summer.
He piled chicken pieces in a huge bowl with seasonings and oil to marinate until he was ready to
grill, set the bowl in the fridge, prepped the veg for the pots, and measured out the farro. The caprese
was a dish he made just before serving, so he’d done as much as he could ahead of actually cooking.

He was still unsettled about Tilda, so he passed through the sitting room and went into the solarium
to look for a new distraction. Despite the new windows, it was noticeably warmer in here than in the
rest of the house. Maybe he should think about window shades to reduce the heat during the hottest
part of the day. Maybe some of those matchstick bamboo ones, or linen Roman shades... hmm,
neither of those seemed in keeping with the Moroccan fantasy of the room, so he’d borrow Thran’s
computer and look at what houses in Morocco used.

He switched on the fountain, which added a cooling sound to the room, if it didn’t actually affect the
temperature. Some of the plants looked like they could use a good drink, so he toted the watering can
to the mudroom to fill it. As soon as Tilda saw him with the watering can, she came into the solarium
to help. They shared a companionable few minutes watering the plants, trimming off dead flowers or
leaves, and sniffing the blooms appreciatively. Through the windows, they watched the older
children and Charmeine pass the soccer ball between them while Gavreel watched from the sidelines.

“I want to go out for a few minutes, little doll,” Bard said. “Do my chin-ups, check the barn, maybe
play a little soccer with the other children. Do you want to come with me?"

After some internal debate, Tilda agreed to venture out with Bard. She stuck close as they went outside, but waved to her siblings as she followed Bard to the barn. She counted his chin-ups for him – twenty-five today – and helped him peruse his workbench for errant materials – not that there were any, as Bard hadn’t worked in the barn since the children started their camps, but it was something to do. Then he coaxed Tilda with him into the back yard, where she relaxed enough to exchange a few kicks with the others. But she stayed near the house, and frequently looked around herself. Bard’s jaw tightened to see her caution, but at least he’d gotten her out of the house for a few minutes. When he went back in to take the pie out of the oven, Tilda went with him.

Once the pie was done, it was time to start supper, so Bard got everything underway. Sigrid came in to help Tilda with the sous chef duties, and the boys came in just before the food was ready.

They hadn’t made much of a dent in their hearty supper before Thran arrived home. Of course he looked tired and pale, but his smile was wide, and he was quick to change into comfortable clothing and make a plate for himself. He sat down with his family with a big sigh of relief.

“Everything went well at the school today?” Bard asked from the other end of the table. “I’m glad to have you home, but when you come home early, I hope everything’s fine with Immortal.”

“All is very well,” Thran nodded. “Our final rehearsals are at hand – the two technical ones are tomorrow and Wednesday, then our dress rehearsals are Thursday and Friday. And Saturday is the big day at last. So today we broke early to prepare for the big push that starts tomorrow.”

“I still wish we could go to the premiere,” Sigrid grimaced, leaning back against her chair and staring at her plate. “And yes, I know why we can’t, and yes, I can live with it because we have to, and yes, I wish we didn’t have to.”

“It’s not as good as the premiere,” Bard agreed, “but it’ll be good for us to get out and see a film.”

“Nothing scary,” Tilda said, eating her carrots.

“Nothing scary,” Bard nodded. “We’ll find something that we all want to see. But before that, I have something exciting to tell everyone.”

“I knew there was a reason for that blueberry pie!” Bain chortled, pumping his fist and sharing a gleeful grin with Legolas. “What is it, Da?”

“I’ll save it to go with the pie,” Bard grinned. “So eat up, everyone.”

No one in the family ever had to be encouraged to eat, but with the added incentive of a surprise in store, the food disappeared even faster. Eager hands helped to clear the table of plates and condiments, and soon Bard handed slices of pie on to Bain beside him, who added scoops of vanilla ice cream. When everyone, even Thran, had a slice of pie at his or her place, five expectant faces turned towards Bard.

“So what’s the surprise?” Sigrid asked. “Come on, Da – you look like you’re about to burst!”

“Yeah, Da! You do, Bard! Just tell us, Da!” the other children clamored, drawing Thran’s chuckle.

“It must be a good one, lyubov moya,” the elegant dancer added his voice to the fray.

“It is,” Bard beamed. “Wait right here.”
Everyone exchanged mystified glances as Bard ducked into the pantry to retrieve his envelope.

Legolas’s curiosity was more than he could contain in silence. “What is that?”

“This,” Bard held up the envelope as he sat down at the end of the table, “is our copy of the adoption papers. No stepfathers or stepchildren anymore. The four of you officially have two Das, and Thran and I officially have four children. Clan Ffyrnig is solid past anyone ever breaking us apart.”

The light in Thran’s eyes was the brightest Bard had seen in weeks. Bard hadn’t gotten a lump in his throat thinking about this moment until now, but the indescribable delight on his husband’s face conjured one effortlessly. If Bard had ever wondered just how deep Thran’s love for their blended family was, this moment confirmed that it had no limit.

“Hmph,” Sigrid snorted with mock exasperation. “I guess that means we have to stop being nice to each other now.”

“No, Sigrid!” Tilda protested. “It’s nice! It’s good! It means Legolas is our real brother now, and he has to stay here forever.”

Legolas laughed in surprise. “Forever? That’s a long time, Kukla!”

“So? You’re my brother forever now, and you have to call me Kukla forever.”

Legolas nodded, and the smile he turned on his youngest sister was affectionate. “I can live with that very well.”

“You better,” Tilda folded her arms over her chest and tried to frown, but a happy smile ruined her effort and took any sting out of her words. “And you have to show me how to play zombie apocalypse, too.”

Bain rolled his eyes. “Oh, I knew that was coming. We won’t get a minute’s peace, Legs.”

“Maybe we’ll wait a while on that, Til,” Bard amended. “This doesn’t really change anything as far as we care. But it means that the powers that be have to treat us like the family we are, and that makes me very happy.”

“It makes me very happy, too,” Thran said simply, and held up a forkful of his pie. “I make a toast to Clan Ffyrnig, the fiercest of clans.”

“To Clan Ffyrnig!” everyone chorused, and eagerly dug into blueberry pie. It was an unconventional toast, but most delicious, and far sweeter than any sip of champagne.

* * *

“Do you feel any different?” Thran murmured to Bard that night when they lay beside each other in the dark.

“Why, because the adoption came through?” Bard murmured back.

“Yes.”

As Bard considered, he absentely caressed Thran’s hip in slow, delicious circles. As Thran’s
endorphins rose, his busy thoughts quieted, which was a blessing all on its own in addition to the soothing touches. Thran shut his eyes to better savor both sensations.

“I guess I feel relieved, because it means our children will stay with us regardless of what happens. Why? Do you feel different?”

“I do,” Thran’s mumble was drowsy. “Yes, I feel the relief that you do, but I also feel great pride as well as humility because your children agreed to let me be their father. It is a great honor. It may be the greatest honor I have ever received, second only to when you agreed that we belonged together.”

Bard squeezed Thran’s glute, and graced the top of his head with a kiss. “Gods, angel. You put me to shame.”

“I do not. You have known for years what things are most important to you, and you have fought with every gram of your being to protect those things. I have sacrificed, too, but not the way you have. You do not feel different now that you are legally Legolas’s father, because you have been his father since we married.”

“Maybe so. But you’re right that it’s an honor. Our oldest son is a wonder and a half, and I love him very much, and I can’t imagine my life without him.”

“I feel no different about our fierce lioness, our jester Bain, and our sweet Kukla. We have a great bounty in all our children.”

“That’s no lie, cariad. Gods, that is no lie.”

Bard held Thran a little closer, and if his breath hitched just the slightest bit, Thran chose not to comment on it.

* * *

Thran woke at three a.m. His thoughts were aswirl, a roiling stew of elation over the completed adoption, excitement about Immortal’s impending premiere, and worry about Lance and finances and UVB and uncounted other things. But his thoughts were not what had woken him. His stomach was just the faintest hair off...

His stomach had felt full of knives and daggers for weeks. That was nothing new. In five days, it would calm when he danced Immortal for the first time outside of rehearsal. Lance would make his appearance or not, the practice and worry and struggle to create and present a new ballet would be over, the financial drain would lessen, and the mental and physical pounding he’d endured would ease.

After so many weeks of intense rehearsals, small nibbles snatched between ballet scenes, rather than complete meals, were all his stomach could manage. He should not have eaten such a large supper. To indulge in blueberry pie and ice cream afterwards had not been wise, either, no matter how much he’d wanted to celebrate with his family. He should have resisted. Only a few days more, and he could relax the strict discipline he’d held himself to.

He went back to sleep.
The alarm hadn’t gone off when Thran woke again, but the sun was up. He lay quietly, waiting to see which ache and pain registered first, so he knew which one to favor when he got out of bed with ginger care. Mostly, he felt tired, but his back and his feet had recovered enough overnight that they didn’t scream for attention. He shut his eyes, and tried to lull himself back to sleep. Every scrap of rest he could glean over the next several days were vital so that he mustered the strength to get through the last four rehearsals before Immortal’s premiere.

He didn’t fall back asleep, but he did drowse until Bard’s clock radio alarm went off. Bard roused and padded into the bathroom, returned to dress in tee and shorts, and sat on the edge of the bed to offer Thran a light caress, telling him it was time to get up. Thran snaked out a long hand to stroke his husband’s thigh.

“Eggs or porridge?” Bard murmured.

The thought of sugary porridge didn’t appeal. “Eggs. Hard boiled, please?”

“I’ll put them on.”

Bard slipped out of their bedroom, leaving Thran to stretch fingers and toes, arms and legs, back and shoulders, hips and thighs. When everything was reasonably limber, he sat up to brush the stray hair out of his eyes. He paced to the bathroom, dealt with the usual ablutions, then returned to the bedroom to grab the clean shorts he’d put beside the bed last night. He pulled on the shorts, bent to get a tee from his dresser, then straightened to arm his way into the tee. For a second, he felt dizzy, but it passed so quickly that he didn’t think more about it. He padded downstairs, where the children were already gathering around the table for breakfast. Tilda was deep in a bowl of porridge with apples and cinnamon, and Bain and Legolas busily assembled their latest variation of fried egg sandwiches. Sigrid had an oatmeal bagel in the toaster, and Bard tended his pot of simmering eggs.

Why did the smell of fried and boiling eggs seem unpleasant?

Thran’s stomach twinged as if to answer that question. Of course, after the past month it was no wonder that everything irritated it. He offered Bard a good morning kiss, Legolas a hug, Bain a fist bump, then got teacups from the cabinet for him and Bard. He added slices of ginger and lemon to the teapot, then filled it with hot water from the teakettle to make a soothing tea that would settle his stomach. As he carried the pot to the table, he gave a quick fluff to Tilda’s hair, then Sigrid’s, and sat down. Bard followed behind to set a bowl containing two eggs and a plate for the shells in front of him. The family ate quietly, if one ignored the boys’ noisy chewing.

“Slow down, lads,” Bard said with a look at Bain and Legolas as he brought his bowl of eggs to the table. “Egg sandwiches are not the things to inhale down your windpipe.”

That got a snicker from the girls, but the boys duly slowed down.

“I expect to come home with all of you this afternoon,” Thran offered as he shelled his eggs. “Today is the technical rehearsal, so the morning will be barre and a few last refinements, then the afternoon we will go through Immortal as if it were the premiere, to make sure all the rigging, the lights, the sound, the films, the music, and the set changes go smoothly. If anyone must stay late, today and tomorrow it will not be the dancers.”

“That’s great,” Bard smiled from his end of the table. “It’s happening at last, angel.”
“I am glad,” Thran said frankly. “After so many months of so many hours, we are all glad that this week we will dance a lighter schedule. That will give us a little more energy for our premiere.”

“I still wish we could go,” Sigrid blurted.

The tension ratcheted up as everyone at the table gazed at the girl. Wincing, she bit her lip in regret. “I’m sorry. I’m not helping. I’m sorry.”

She got up and carried her empty plate to the sink, rinsed it, put it in the dishwasher, and went upstairs. The other children exchanged glances, but no one said anything more, and Thran was left to sip his tea and nibble his eggs as his stomach twinged in sympathy to the tension everyone felt.

After breakfast, Thran packed his bag while the older children changed into their shorts and tees for their weight training class, and Tilda put on her oldest shorts and tee that could stand the splatters of clay and water typical of ceramics classes. Bard packed lunches for everyone, then amassed his stack of sketchbooks and pencils. Today, however, he added something different to his collection of materials.

“Ooh, you’re going to do colored pencils today?” Tilda asked, peering around Bard’s arm to see what he put in his carryall.

“Maybe so,” Bard gave her a smile. “I thought I’d limber them up a bit so that when your Ada puts on his costumes Thursday, I’ll be ready to do them justice.”

“That’d be cool,” Sigrid enthused. “I want to sneak in there on Thursday to get a firsthand look at them.”

“And to see Mr. Rada, too,” Tilda added. “Maybe he’ll have Sebastian with him.”

“I am sorry, children,” Thran said. “The technical rehearsals today and tomorrow will be when you have your camps. But Thursday and Friday, the dress rehearsals will be in the evening, just as the performances will be. Yes, we will make sure all is well with the costumes, but we will also make everything as close to what the real performance will be for the production interns. This is their debut, too, so we will help them be old hands by the time Saturday arrives.”

That met with many groans. Bard didn’t groan, but he looked disappointed, because he’d stay with the children during all of the rehearsals and the performance to guard them against anything Lance might try. His gaze was understanding, though, telling Thran that while Bard regretted his family having to miss the rehearsals, he didn’t blame Thran for it.

Lance, Lance... such a high cost a single angry boy extracted from so many people...

Everyone piled into Thran’s SUV for the ride to school with Charmeine, Gavreel, and Mike trailing them in the undistinguished beige car. The day promised to be hot and humid, which Thran met without enthusiasm. He disliked temperature extremes, but he endured cold better than heat – extra sweaters and wraps were easy to add when he was too cold, but there was only so much he could strip off when he was too hot. Too much heat made him feel sick, as if he ran a fever, a distinctly unpleasant sensation. He was quick to turn on the SUV air conditioning, even though the trip to school was short. When they arrived and their chaperones motioned them forward, he got out with the rest of the family and walked briskly into the school. Ernie was there to greet them, so Thran bade farewell to Gavreel and the older children as they grabbed their lunches and headed for the gym. Charmeine and Tilda were next, off to the art studio. That left Mike, Bard, and Thran to let Ernie poke through their bags before passing them into the auditorium. Mike set off on his usual
prowl around the auditorium to scan dressing rooms and backstage to make sure all was well.

“Dance well, angel,” Bard gave Thran’s braid a gentle tug. “I’ll be in and out as things go, so yell when you see me if you need something. Maybe I’ll see you for lunch.”

Thran’s stomach twinged again. Gods, Saturday could not get here fast enough – how tired he was of enduring his complaining gut!

“We will see how the morning goes. I suspect that we will do barre, then go right into the technical rehearsal without break, as we will be well warmed and ready. But if we cannot share lunch, we will go home together, in any case.”

“Good enough,” Bard nodded. “Hang tough, cariad. We’re almost there.”

Bard drifted off to a seat in one of the front rows to unpack his drawing things, offering one last smile before Thran went up the stairs and onto the stage. Thran smiled back, then let the day’s business settle over him. He waved to the crewmembers who scurried around the stage as they prepared for their upcoming efforts, heading backstage to his dressing room. Several members of the corps flitted up and down the hall, murmuring good mornings and hellos as he threaded through them. As he did each time he navigated down the hall, he smiled at the signs someone had stuck to the dressing room doors. A drawing of an old-fashioned telephone booth crammed with bodies and bristling with protruding arms, legs, and torsos identified the male corps’ dressing room. The sign for the women’s corps’ room had a very small clown car with a flurry of dancers in tutus dancing around it. Charisse’s door had a picture of Peter Pan’s Tinker Bell with her name written beneath it in curly letters. The door to Thran and Luka’s room showed a tall, white, shaggy yeti beside a short, black, shaggy puppy. The drawing made Thran smile, because the names written underneath the caricatures were completely unnecessary. Anyone who spent even a few minutes watching the rehearsal knew which of the pair was Thran, and which was Luka.

He went into the dressing room to change out of his shorts and tee and into his dancewear. While he had several new pairs of his usual dancing slippers, he was down to his last two pairs of pointe shoes – one worn, the other new. He would dance on pointe for only seven minutes during each performance, so the worn ones would do for the week’s rehearsals, then he would wear the new ones for the premiere and subsequent performances. Thran liked to wear a new pair of shoes for opening night, just because putting them on when they were in pristine condition reinforced the excitement of opening night.

His worn pointe shoes were not pristine. They would stand him in good stead for the week’s rehearsals, but their appearance reflected how he felt – well able to dance, but ragged around the edges. He laid them on the top of his bag, ready for when he would return here after Act II. His pointe scene was the first one of Act III, so he would have time to make sure he put them on snugly, tying the ribbons properly without hurrying. He put on his dance belt and tights, then sat down in the room’s solitary chair to put on his regular shoes for barre. When he stood up, he felt that momentary flash of dizziness, but it cleared as quickly as it had earlier this morning. Thran sighed; one more thing to ignore today.

Luka came in as Thran took a thin tee out of his bag. The auditorium was warm, and the stage lights would be broiling, so he’d wear as little as possible so he stayed as cool as possible.

“Morning, Thran,” Luka raised a hand. He was subdued, but still offered a smile with his wave.

“Morning, Luka. You are well?”

“As well as any of us, I guess,” The young man smiled apologetically. “I’m not a fan of hot weather.
It’s draining, even this early in the morning.”

“I am of the same mind.”

Luka plunked down his bag, kicked off his flip flops, and unbuttoned his shirt to toss it onto his bag. It was a bright tropical print, all wild green ferns and yellow-beaked toucans. He stripped off the rest of his clothes, pulled on his dance belt and tights, and dug for his shoes. “I can’t believe we’re got less than a week to do before we do this before an audience for the first time. We’ve worked on it for so long that it almost seemed as if we’d be in rehearsal forever. One endless loop.”

“Another thing we agree on. It has been a very long effort. Thank you for so much hard work. You have been a pleasure to dance with.”

Luka’s grin was self-deprecating, without embarrassment. “Not at first I wasn’t, but at least I’ve come far enough along to know that now. I appreciate your patience with me, and everything you taught me. I’m a much better dancer now.”

“You are,” Thran shrugged, grinning as Luka realized he was being teased. “But you must thank Charisse, too. She has been a great teacher.”

“She’s wonderful,” Luka sighed, staring at the ceiling with a blissful expression. “She’s just the most wonderful person, not just a wonderful dancer, and I am the luckiest man alive to be the one to dance with her. She’s just wonderful.”

Luka’s ecstatic praise brought a chuckle to Thran’s lips. “Then dance to be just as wonderful, so that everyone who watches the two of you believes that the Maid’s love for her Soldier is justified.”

“I will,” Luka avowed, looking determined. Thran smothered laughter at the young dancer’s enthusiasm, because it was charming and sweet, and the dance world would turn such innocence into something more worldly soon enough. For now, Thran was happy to appreciate it.

Luka held the door for Thran to pass through first, tacit acceptance of Thran’s status as the senior dancer. So he was the one to come onstage first, and he was the one to notice the nauseating stench first. Someone had just gotten very, very sick.

“Oh, my gods,” Luka recoiled, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Someone’s spewed breakfast...”

Thran’s stomach clenched hard, whether because of the horrific smell or in sympathy didn’t matter. Sure enough, in the wings of Stage Right, one of the corps dancers – Llandro – was bent over a bucket, his ribs still heaving. Such things were far from unusual. Between the bad eating – and purging – habits of many dancers, and the unspoken rule to dance no matter how ill one was, buckets were a regular sight on both sides of every ballet stage. Thran had availed himself of one or two over the years, but only when he had had to dance while sick, or when the pain of one injury or another had gotten the better of him. As far as he knew, Llandro hadn’t suffered an injury, and he wasn’t a purger. So...

Llandro was sick.

Thran made a beeline for the edge of the stage. Thank the gods, Bard was where Thran had left him, comfortably slumped in his seat as he worked on his sketch. When Thran called to him, his husband came forward right away.

“Gods, what happened, Thran? You’re white.”

“Please, find Ori. Tell him to go out and buy several large bottles of hand sanitizer and several more
of that horrible pink stomach remedy. Tell him to do this before he does anything else this morning.”

“What happened?” Bard demanded, but before he’d completed the words, the awful smell of vomit reached him, and his face blanched. “Oh, gods. Did someone flip breakfast, or get food poisoning, or did a nasty stomach virus come to call?”

“I expect the latter, but I will find out. Please, find Ori.”

“I’ll find him, and if I can’t, I’ll go out myself. And don’t tell me no. I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay,” Thran gulped, as Bard turned and strode up the aisle to look for Thran’s assistant.

He hoped Llandro had food poisoning. But the roil of his stomach told him not to put any faith into that.

Stomach viruses traveled from one person to another like wildfire, and antibiotics didn’t affect them. Lots of hand washing and hand sanitizer might help it from spreading to everyone, and doses of the nasty pink solution might ease a few of the stomach cramps that would soon follow. But neither cleanliness nor palliative doses would keep any virus from cutting a swath through the company.

How many of the company would succumb, and what would become of *Immortal’s* premiere when they did?
Chapter 151

Chapter Summary

The angel endures, the saint nurtures, and a ballet draws near.

Chapter Notes

I don't own any rights to Flushed Away, or The Incredibles.

Bard didn’t bother to pack up his drawing supplies, but he did snatch his car keys before he went to look for Ori. Gods, as if poor Thran didn’t have enough to worry about, now a stomach bug plagued the company. He’d thought Thran had looked a peaked this morning when he’d nibbled his breakfast eggs in tiny bites washed down with an entire pot of lemon ginger tea, so he probably had a touch of it already. Would this ballet ever get off the ground? Either the gods didn’t like the idea of a ballet about one of their own, or they demanded blood sacrifice before they’d bestow their blessings.

Bard sent them all a harried protest – and he might as well admit to a thorough tongue-lashing, too – as he searched for Ori.

“Ori!” Bard hastened to the slight man’s side when he found him in the auditorium lobby, just coming in from the parking lot. Ernie had checked Ori’s bag, and both of them turned at Bard’s call. Ori bid Ernie a hasty farewell and rushed to Bard’s side.

“What’s happened? Lance?” Ori asked breathlessly.

“If only,” Bard replied, dragging a hand through his hair. “Someone’s got a stomach virus and just spewed onstage.”

“Oh, damnation,” Ori squeezed his eyes shut in distress. “We just can’t seem to catch a single break, not a single one.”

“I think Thran’s got a touch of it, too, so there may be others. Regardless, he sent me out here to ask you to head to the drugstore for hand sanitizer and stomach meds, but I’ve got a better idea. Find out from Thran, Lettie, or Abebe if there are any non-OTC anti-nausea drugs that might help, and then get a doctor to call in a prescription for them. I’ll get the hand sanitizer and the OTC stuff, and probably some tissues and so forth while you do that.”

“What about Lance?” Ori demanded, grabbing Bard’s arm as Bard turned for the exterior doors. “You’re supposed to lie low, Bard! Take one of the bodyguards with you!”

“That fucker’s not after me,” Bard growled. “He’s after Sigrid and Thran, so the bodyguards stay here with them. Trust me – if I run across Lance Dunmont on the way to the drugstore, he’ll be the one who needs the bodyguard, not me.”

“Okay, Bard,” Ori gulped. “I’ll work this end of it.”
“Call me if you want me to pick up anything else, meds or not,” Bard asked. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Ori lifted a hand as he hurried into the auditorium. Bard strode out to the parking lot, remembering to rake his gaze over anything that moved before he got to the SUV. Nothing. He got in and drove to the big box shopping center, descended upon the pharmacy section of the general department store, and filled a cart with the things Thran had requested, plus a family bundle of antiseptic wipes and another of antiseptic soap dispensers to supplement the school bathrooms. The pharmacist counter wasn’t busy at this early hour, so he approached the student pharmacy intern with a tidy beard, natty bow tie, and white coat festooned with professional credentials, a name tag, and several pins and badges for one association or another. Unfortunately, the young man explained what Bard already knew – that what people called stomach flu wasn’t the same as influenza at all - the former was really gastroenteritis, which attacked the gut, and the latter, the real influenza, attacked the respiratory system. Viruses caused both, which antibiotics couldn’t combat. The best thing to do for gastroenteritis was to drink lots of liquids to stave off dehydration, rest, and wait it out. As most of the prescribed remedies to reduce nausea caused sleepiness as a side effect, Bard didn’t expect Ori to call him with a request to pick up any of those. The nasty pink stuff, as Thran dubbed the best-known OTC remedy, was the best option when coupled with rest and fluids.

The company likely couldn’t indulge in rest until later this afternoon, but fluids were something Bard could offer. After thanking the intern for the information, Bard headed to the kitchen staples aisle, where he got a case of sports beverages, two of water, and several boxes of saltines.

At the last minute, he went back to the cleaning supplies aisle and got two plastic buckets, a gallon of bleach cleaner, a package of sponges, and a box of disposable medical gloves. All might come in handy if the virus made serious inroads.

He loaded everything into the SUV and headed back to the school, where he found the dancers in the midst of their barre. Mike and Ori came out to help him unload his supplies, and they carted everything backstage while Bard told them what he’d learned at the pharmacy.

Ori’s disappointment was palpable. “I heard the same thing from Lettie, Abebe, and Thran, too. So hope that all of this stuff keeps the virus this from infecting too many of the corps. We’ll tell the corps when they go home this afternoon not to do anything but rest and treat whatever symptoms they get as best they can. Unfortunately, dancers accept that performing when they’re sick is part of the job, so unless someone’s on the verge of dying, they’ll all be back here tomorrow.”

Mike shook his head. “I told Thran that dancers could give Army Rangers a run for the title of toughest profession, but I never expected this.”

Ori gave Mike a grimace. “They can’t do anything else, really, Mike. If they don’t dance, they’re replaced. Positions are hard to come by, so they dance through everything, or they don’t dance at all.”

Mike shook his head again. “Tough customers, the lot of ‘em.”

Ori gathered up several bottles of hand sanitizer, soap, and a few packages of wipes. “I’ll put these in strategic places, and get Abebe and Thran to put the fear of the gods into everyone about using them. The ones who aren’t sick will understand, because they don’t want to get sick. But the sick ones have to use this stuff, too, to keep from spreading it.”

“I’ll help,” Bard said, and grabbed the bleach and sponges. While Ori put bottles of hand sanitizer and wipes around, Bard wiped down backstage doorknobs, light switches, and portable barre rails, then started on the bathroom door handles, stall door locks, toilet levers, faucets, and light switches.
By the time he’d wiped down everything he could think of, the dancers had cycled through the restrooms in anticipation of starting their technical rehearsal, so he started all over again with his sponge. The smell of bleach grew pervasive, but at least it was better than the stench of vomit.

By the time the technical rehearsal was over, a second dancer was heaving into one of the buckets Ori had put in the wings. Thran looked very pale, and he grimaced now and again, but so far, he held his own.

Bard hoped it stayed that way.

“Ew, Da, you reek of bleach!” Sigrid when Bard came to collect the children once camps were dismissed.

“There’s a good reason for that,” he replied, and soon she, her brothers, and Gavreel had heard about the latest trouble to beset UVB and Immortal. “I think Thran’s got a hint of it, so all of you, wash your hands like there’s no tomorrow from here until this passes, because we’ve got enough to worry about without a stomach virus on top of it. If you need to use the bathroom, do it now, because I’ll lay about with the bleach when I get home just to make sure your bathroom and the kitchen is disinfected before anybody touches anything.”

“I’ll help,” Legolas said, his eyes dark with worry. “I don’t want Papa to be sick, but if he is, I don’t want to share it.”

“I appreciate that, Legs. Let’s collect Tilda, then we’ll get your Papa and go home.”

The children and Gavreel followed Bard to the art studio, where Tilda remained behind the other students, happily concentrating on the lump of clay before her on a simple potter’s wheel. Charmeine sat unobtrusively in a corner, content to keep a quiet eye on things. As they came in, Tilda flattened the lump of clay and then drew the edges of it up into the sides of a vessel. She flattened the clay again and redid the sides before looking up to see her family.

“Look! I finally got it! I got the sides to come up like they’re supposed to!” she said proudly.

“Wow, look at you!” Sigrid gave the pot an impressed look. “You did it just like a pro!”

“What is it, Kukla?” Legolas asked. “A vase? A cup?”

“It’s just practice on how to make the sides,” Tilda shook her head. “Tomorrow I’ll decide what to make. It took a long time to figure out how to make it smooth.”

“It looks cool, Til,” Bain said, touching a finger to the clay. “Wow, that’s stiffer than I expected.”

“It takes a knack to learn to use a wheel,” Bard commented. “You picked it up pretty quickly, Tilda. That’s great.”

“Thanks, Da.” Tilda’s nose wrinkled as Charmeine joined them. “Ugh. Somebody smells like too much laundry bleach.”

“That’s me,” Bard nodded, and explained about the stomach virus.

Tilda looked worried. “Uh-oh. One of the girls got sick this morning and had to go home. It smelled awful.”

“Uh-oh, indeed,” Bard grimaced. He pointed to Tilda’s clay-covered hands. “At least you’ve got to clean up before you go home. Make sure you use lots of soap and water after you wash off the clay,
and use a paper towel to turn off the faucets, okay?”

“Oh, Da,” Tilda nodded. She gathered up her clay and returned it to the big class bin, and cleaned up the wheel and area before she went to the sink to clean off her hands. She washed three times with lots of soap and water before she was satisfied with her efforts. She waved goodbye to her instructor, then joined her family and their two bodyguards to retrace their steps back to the auditorium. Thran and Mike waited for them in the auditorium lobby. Thran looked drained and uncomfortable, but he was still on his feet. He blanched, though, when Bard got close enough for the smell of bleach to register.

“What happened to you?” Thran swallowed, as if the smell was enough to upset his stomach.

Once more, Bard explained how he had spent the day. “Consequently, I left all my drawing stuff down in the auditorium. I’ll go get it, then I’ll be right back.”

He ducked into the auditorium for his things, slung his bag over his shoulder, and detoured to the stage long enough to flag Ori down. The young man conferred with several members of the stage crew, but he excused himself and came over to Bard.

“What’s the prognosis, Ori?”

“Two of the dancers have it. If you want my opinion, I think Thran will have a full-fledged case before the night’s over,” Ori said worriedly. “If he does, don’t let him come here tomorrow. It’s just the technical rehearsal, and we’ll work around it if he’s not here. Better he stays home and gets it out of his system so he can dance in the dress rehearsals, and more importantly, the premiere on Saturday. So don’t let him out of bed if he gets sick, Bard. Please.”

“If he’s that sick, he won’t be able to drive, and neither I nor Mike will do it for him. As you said, better we sacrifice a technical rehearsal than the premiere. He was okay for the rehearsal today?”

“His dancing was its usual perfection, but I know he’s uncomfortable. The crews have a couple of things to smooth out, but nothing major. They could run through tomorrow without a single dancer if they had to. Thursday and Friday are more important for the dancers, so we’ve got a little leeway.”

“Do you need more soap or bleach or stuff for tomorrow? I’ll drop off some more.”

“We’re good for tomorrow. Thank you so much for all the scrubbing you did. That probably did more for everyone’s general well being than anything else. I’ll pick up some more water and crackers – both settled a lot of nervous stomachs as well as the ailing ones.”

“Good. Okay, Ori, I’ll wrangle the principal dancer. If he goes down for the count, I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay, Bard.” Ori looked forlornly around the stage. “I’m sure he’s sick, Bard. He didn’t eat all day, and he’s been really good about keeping himself fueled until now. He kept things in control through sheer act of will, but when he gets home, make him go straight to bed and keep him there. You have to. If he can’t dance on Saturday, we don’t have a replacement, we don’t have Immortal, we don’t have a company.”

“I know it, Ori. I’ll take good care of him. I promise.”

Ori nodded. “Good enough. Good luck, Bard.”

Bard offered a wave. “Stay well, Ori. UVB needs Thran to dance, and Thran needs you to run things.”
Ori flashed an appreciative smile, then turned back to the stage to return to his discussion with the stage crew. Bard retraced his steps up the auditorium aisle and out to the lobby to rejoin his family. The bodyguards fanned out to do their parking lot check before allowing the family to come out and pile into the SUV. Bard expected Thran to make a point about driving home, but he headed right to the passenger seat without a word. They drove home in near silence, waited for the bodyguards to clear the yard, then parked the SUV in the carriage house and went inside the house.

“All right, troops,” Bard said, as the children and Thran came into the mudroom behind him. “Commander, you’re upstairs in the shower, then in bed. Ensigns and Lieutenants, everyone grab a bleach wipe and set to. Sig, you’ve got the half bath. Wipe down the faucets, the toilet handle, the light switch, and the doorknobs. Don’t get the bleach on the marble, please. Bain and Legolas, you’ve got the children’s bath, same thing – handles, faucets, and light switches. Tilda, you’ve got the mudroom faucets, light switches, and doorknobs, especially the inside and outside knobs on the doorknobs. I’ve got the kitchen. Any questions?”

“No, Captain,” the children chorused, as Tilda took the package of wipes that Bard handed her.

“Make it so, then,” Bard nodded, so the children grabbed their wipes and scattered.

Thran gave Bard a pale smile. “You have us well trained, Captain.”

“I hope so,” Bard turned a pointed eye on his husband. “Because if you try to bullshit me about you’re not sick and you can help, I’ll spank you. So go wash or whatever you have the energy to do, then get in bed. You’re confined there until this shit passes.”

“I think it will be when this vomit passes, but that is too much information,” Thran swallowed with distaste. “I will not even make a single joke about those who enjoy spanking. You already know that is not one of my kinks.”

“Right now, I want to know that you’re on your way upstairs while you’re still under your own power. Go.”

Thran handed Bard his dance bag, and went without further comment. Bard snared one of the bleach wipes to cleanse every handle in the kitchen – faucets, dishwasher, stove, and especially the fridge. Doorknobs to the pantry, butler’s pantry, and mudroom. The faucet itself. Light switches in the pantries and throughout the kitchen. A marble-friendly wipe took care of the kitchen island and counters.

He grabbed another bleach wipe, and headed upstairs to do swab the doorknobs and light switches in all of the children’s rooms. When the smell of bleach was pervasive throughout the house, he hoped that a few million viruses had lost their lives in the assault.

“All done, Captain!” the boys appeared from their bathroom.

“Us, too!” Sigrid and Tilda called from the first floor.

“Good job, one and all,” Bard replied. “I don’t have to tell you to wash your hands a hundred times over. And if anyone feels queasy for any reason other than the smell of bleach, sing out right away. Thran’s in isolation until he’s over this nasty stuff, so wish him well only from a distance.”

“How long will Papa be sick?” Legolas asked, his brow wrinkling in worry as he looked towards Bard and Thran’s bedroom.

“These things usually cut a swath for about twenty-four hours, so let’s hope that’s true this time.”
“Can we have a snack now?” Bain asked.

“Sure,” Bard agreed. “Food smells likely make Thran feel even sicker, so stick to the usual cheese and crackers and fruit for now. I’ll figure out what to make for supper that doesn’t smell much so he stays as comfortable as possible.”

“Okay, Da.” Bain and Legolas headed downstairs, and soon they joined their sisters to rummage in the fridge and pantry.

Bard stuck his head into his bedroom to check on how Thran was doing. The tall dancer lay in bed curled around a pillow with his eyes shut.

“Would a hot water bottle help, angel?” Bard asked.

“Maybe,” Thran murmured. “Gods, it hurts even to talk.”

“Then don’t. Just lift a finger once for yes, and twice for no. Are you queasy?”

A finger went up once.

“Did you manage to get a shower?”

A finger went up once again.

“A little ginger or mint tea might help settle your stomach.”

“The idea of anything in my stomach is unbearable.”

“Even a dose of the dreaded pink stuff?”

Thran cringed. “I will try, but I cannot promise to keep it down. I hate the way it tastes at the best of times.”

“Okay. I’ll bring you a hot water bottle and so forth.”

Thran lifted a finger and shut his eyes. Bard dug the hot water bottle out of the linen closet, filled it, snugged it in its flannel cover, and brought it to Thran with the bottle of dreaded pink stuff. The ailing dancer managed to down a dose with many a choke and a shudder, then curled around the water bottle. Bard kept an eye on him as he plied another bleach over the bedroom doorknobs and light switches, then repeated the process in the bathroom. He cleaned the toilet for good measure, too.

“Gods, that reeks,” Thran moaned.

“I’m sorry, angel.” Bard went around the bedroom and bathroom to open all the windows so the outside air could help the pungent fumes dissipate. “It’ll clear out in a minute.”

“I will survive. Go, you should not be near me. You must see to the children.”

“I will, once I’ve got you settled. I need to get you a bell or something so you can call for help when you need it.”

Despite how uncomfortable he felt, Thran smiled. “When Legolas was small, Vileria and I had a baby monitor to hear him at night if he cried. Perhaps you need one for me.”

Bard grinned. “Good idea. I’ll think about it the next time we visit the baby superstore. Until then,
we’ll make do with mobiles. Put yours under your pillow. I’m on your speed dial, so call me if you need something.”

Thran stretched out a long arm, snared his mobile lying on his nightside table, and slid it under his pillow without ever opening his eyes. Bard resisted the urge to stroke Thran’s hair or kiss his forehead; the former would likely make Thran’s nausea worse, and the latter would expose Bard to just the germs he wanted to avoid. Instead, he made sure Thran’s path to the bathroom was clear, the door was wide open and the toilet seat was up.

“I’ll see to the children, *cariad,*” Bard said softly. “Your job is to get through the nasty.”

“You will get me up and to the school tomorrow morning, no matter what,” Thran whispered. “Promise me.”

“I promise to get you to the school in time for your performance on Saturday night,” Bard amended. “Anything before that depends on the bug.”

“I have to be at the rehearsals.”

“Or already filled me in - you have to be at one of the dress rehearsals, that’s all. So stop worrying because it’ll make your stomach hurt even more. Just be until the bugs clear out.”

“Bastard.”

“I am, but I’m *your* bastard. Now rest. I’ll be around if you need me.”

Bard left Thran to his misery before his husband could make another rejoinder. He headed downstairs to find the children in the kitchen, talking quietly over their snacks. They were understandably worried about Thran, asking about what would happen to the ballet if Thran were too sick to dance.

Bard had already asked himself the same questions, so all he could do was offer his hope that this stomach virus would roar through in twenty-four hours, which would give Thran time to rally in time to perform. All of them had suffered from similar ailments at least once, and recognized the truth in Bard’s words. They put the best face on it that they could, and decided to sacrifice Thran’s stash of cold cooked chicken breasts to make sandwiches so that they avoided any cooking odors that might further upset Thran’s unhappy stomach. A big platter of veg with hummus supplemented their sandwiches, and ice cream and cookies capped their supper with a little sweetness.

After supper, the family dragged out the old familiar Flushed Away, then The Incredibles. The children cycled through showers and headed to bed with concerned words for Thran, which Bard promised to relay. When they were all settled in bed, Bard made the rounds alone to see that the house was secure, then headed upstairs. Thran seemed to be asleep, so Bard grabbed his nightclothes and towel, and showered in the children’s bathroom.

Once he dried off, he debated where to sleep tonight. If he slept beside Thran, the same virus that had laid Thran low might strike him. If, however, he slept downstairs on the sofa or upstairs on his old bed in the garret, he might not hear Thran if he needed help.

Germs be damned. He’d sleep beside his husband.

He tiptoed into the bedroom. Thran had curled himself into a knot on Bard’s side of the bed, nearest to the bathroom, so Bard slipped in on Thran’s side, and tried to make himself comfortable without disturbing his husband. Thran didn’t stir, so Bard dared to relax.
The next thing he registered was the sound of heaving. Bard scrambled into the bathroom blinking against the bright light, but managed to wrap an arm around Thran’s trembling body as his husband tried to keep himself upright over the toilet. He hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so he managed little more than dry heaves. Bard grabbed Thran’s braid to keep it out of the way until his husband’s spasms eased.

“Here, rinse your mouth out,” Bard urged, grabbing the bathroom cup to fill it with water. He guided Thran to the sink so Thran could spit out the foul taste in his mouth, then supported him back to bed. He turned on the nightside light, then returned the bathroom to wring a washcloth out in cool water. Sitting on the side of the bed, he wiped Thran’s face carefully –

The skin around Thran’s eyes looked as bruised as if he’d been in a fight.

“My eyes?” Thran whispered, looking at him in resignation.

“Bloody hell, angel. You look like you’ve been punched.”

“I do not throw up easily. I cannot relax and just let it happen. So the small capillaries around my eyes break. My pale skin makes it look far worse than it is.”

Thran didn’t quite look like a raccoon, but Bard didn’t speak to how close the resemblance was. Instead, he gently swabbed his husband’s face, and arranged his braid out of his way on the pillow, and retrieved the hot water bottle to refill it and return it to Thran.

“You need to guard yourself against dehydration, angel. If you don’t think you can keep anything down, I’ll bring you a cup of ice chips. And you should try another dose of the pink stuff.”

Thran suppressed a shudder. “No pink stuff. The very idea nauseates me.”

“Okay, no pink stuff. I’ll bring you some ice chips.”

Thran didn’t say anything, so Bard padded downstairs to slather his hands with soap and water and then hand sanitizer before he touched anything. He got a plastic cup and filled it with chips from the freezer, and brought it and a spoon upstairs to Thran. He fed Thran a small chip to see how his husband would fare, then did a quick wipe of the bathroom. He washed his hands again to get rid of the bleach smell before returning to Thran. Then he sat on the side of the bed to feed Thran a few small ice chips.

“I am very thirsty, but I don’t think I can put anything in my stomach,” Thran whispered.

“Just stick with the ice chips, then. We’ve got lots.”

“I can manage the ice myself. Go to sleep.”

“You’ll feel better if you rested, and didn’t fuss.”

“You are still a bastard.”

“I’m still your bastard, and I’m a smart one, too. Just let everything go, so all your body has to do is heal. Don’t talk, don’t argue, don’t worry.”

Thran sighed, but either he lacked the energy to argue, or he recognized the sense in Bard’s words. He took the ice chips as Bard fed them to him, and in a few minutes his eyes closed in sleep. Bard lay down on the unfamiliar side of the bed, but wondered how long it would take him to fall asleep...
Thran was up three more times before the sun rose. By the time the clock read six-thirty, it was clear that Thran was in no shape to go anywhere. Bard snatched another hour of sleep, then got up to wash and get ready for the day. If the children were well, there was no reason they couldn’t go to their camps. Once they all appeared for breakfast, none the worse for wear, Bard called Charmeine and Gavreel to discuss options. He agreed to let the two bodyguards get the children to and from camp, while he stayed home to tend to Thran. Mike would be on hand to watch over the property, so while he didn’t like being apart from the children, he thought they were just as safe at school as at home. He made the children’s lunches and saw them off in Thran’s SUV.

At nine, he called Ori to tell him that Thran was still very sick, and could barely hold himself over the toilet to throw up, much less walk or dance. Ori reported that three other dancers had come down with the virus, but Llandro, the dancer who’d showed symptoms first, was feeling slightly better.

“I made Lettie put her foot down that if someone starts to throw up, they’re out until they stop. I’ve got everyone slathering enough soap and water and sanitizer and bleach wipes around to make the entire auditorium a sterile clean room.”

“Good, Ori. I’ll keep you posted on Thran. He’s asleep for the moment, which is the best thing for him.”

“Thanks, Bard. I hope this passes soon, and that he’s more himself by the end of the day.”

“Me, too. Hope all goes well today at the technical rehearsal.”

Bard ended his call. The house was uncharacteristically quiet without Thran and the children bustling about. The doors and windows were closed because of the hot and humid temperatures outside, too, so not even the distant sounds of lawnmowers or street traffic disrupted the silence. On the good side, he didn’t hear Thran throwing up again, which was a relief.

To stay occupied, but near to hand in case Thran needed him, Bard lugged his clay and stand up to the children’s study, where he could work on his often-interrupted totem heads while Thran slept. He made good progress on Mars before the scramble of unsteady feet alerted him to Thran’s latest foray into the bathroom. He scampered after his husband, there to steady him as his stomach turned itself inside out. Not much came out, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. How hard was it to watch nausea wrack a body usually under such exquisite control?

If watching Thran so wracked was hard once, it was just as hard the next eight times. All morning and afternoon, Bard did what he could to steady Thran when nausea would not be denied, carry him back to bed, and wipe his face. Around he went with the antiseptic wipes to keep everything as clean as possible. He coaxed cup after cup of ice chips down Thran’s throat, trying to keep him hydrated. Finally, late in the afternoon after the children came home, Thran fell into a deep sleep, and his stomach calmed. Bard risked cooking rice and chicken for the children’s supper in the hopes that the aromas wouldn’t affect his sleeping husband. His mobile didn’t chime throughout their meal, so that was a promising sign. After everyone had finished, Bard left the children to clean up while he went upstairs to see if Thran were still asleep.

“Bard?” Thran’s voice came weakly when Bard came into the room.

“Right here.” Bard had found out early this morning that sitting on the bed jostled Thran, which was enough to send his stomach into spasms, so instead he kneeled beside the bed. “Do you have to get up?”

“No. I think my stomach is better. It does not hurt the way it did.”
“That’s great, angel. I’ll bring you some ice chips.”

“I am so thirsty. Would you bring me something to drink? Maybe a few sips would stay down.”

“Absolutely. I’ll bring you something right now. Be back in a tick.”

Bard trotted downstairs, grabbed a bottle of sports beverage from the pantry and a glass from the cabinet, and ran back upstairs. Thran had turned over onto his back, and struggled weakly to stick a pillow under his head. Once Bard set his things down, he arranged the pillows against the headboard and helped Thran to sit up against them. His husband sank back against the pillows with a sigh and a wince.

“I’ll turn on the light, so watch your eyes,” Bard warned, and Thran shut his eyes accordingly. The added illumination revealed a pale, emaciated face with dark eye sockets, but that face was more at peace.

“You look more comfortable,” Bard offered, reaching for the bottle and glass he’d brought upstairs. “How do you feel?”

“So tired,” Thran murmured, licking dry lips. “Very thirsty. My ribs and abs feel as if I have been in a fight. But my stomach does not feel like it is about to erupt out of my throat.”

“That’s great.” Bard poured the glass half full and handed it to Thran. “Here, angel. Just a few sips to see how they settle in your stomach.”

Thran held the glass to his lips as if he weren’t sure he’d end up with a mouthful of poison or ambrosia. He let a few drops slide down his throat, and licked his lips to moisten them. “Ugh. This tastes very artificial. What is it?”

“The most innocuous flavor of sports beverage I could find,” Bard replied. “I didn’t think anything that was purple, blue, red, or neon yellow would help. This is the plain one. You haven’t eaten or drunk anything for two days, so you need all the electrolytes and such. It probably tastes better with ice, but I didn’t know how something cold would feel after so much heaving.”

Thran hummed. “You take good care of me.”

“A certain dancer took good care of me, too, when I had the flu a few weeks ago.”

Thran offered him a thin smile. “I had a much harder time to keep you in bed.”

“Stomach viruses pack a much harder punch than the flu does. How does the liquid feel going down?”

“So far, so good.” Thran took another sip. “It feels good on my throat. I am parched.”

“You are. As soon as you can handle it, I’ve got enough tea and so forth to float a battleship. You’re so dehydrated that you look like that beef jerky Kíllian loves so much.”

“How picturesque,” Thran leaned back into the pillows with a rueful smile. “How did the ballet rehearsal go today?”

“I’ve no idea. I was more interested in whether you survived your devoted service to the porcelain goddess,” Bard quipped. “Now that you have, I’m more interested in getting you ready to resume your devoted service to Terpsichore.”
Thran rolled his eyes. It was mostly bravado, but it was the most animated expression Thran had shown in two days, and it drew Bard’s relieved grin. He reached under the pillow to retrieve Thran’s mobile.

“Ah, good. The dancer is more irritable than his stomach at last. I’m calling Ori to tell him you’ve turned the corner. If you’re good, I’ll let you talk to him, but only for two minutes. You’ve been through the wringer, and you need to let your body recover. Lots of Russian gesticulations when you talk to Ori are not on the agenda.”

“You are a tyrant,” Thran grumbled, as Bard opened Thran’s mobile and placed the call.

“So sue me,” Bard replied without apology. “If you don’t want to do that, drink your juice.”

Thran glowered, but he did as he was told, as Bard put the mobile up to his ear.

“Hello?” Ori answered breathlessly. “Thran?”

“Hi, Ori. It’s Bard. I thought you’d like to know that Thran’s stomach calmed down about four this afternoon, and he slept solidly after that. He’s just woken up now, and I think he’s on the mend. He’s having some liquids, and if they stay down, I’ll get him rehydrated again. I’ll let you know in the morning how he is.”

“Oh, that’s great news, Bard, just stellar. I’m so relieved,” Ori breathed. “Tell him I’m glad he feels better.”

“You can tell him yourself if you want. But I’ve told him he can’t gesticulate or get agitated, and he can’t talk to you for more than two minutes, because he looks like he’ll blow away in a stiff breeze. If you have anything to say that needs more time, I’ll get back on.”

“No, that’s perfect. Everything went well today. We had five dancers out, including Thran, but we still got the technical rehearsal off without a hitch.”

“That’s great news. All right, here’s the sick one. I’ll talk to you in the morning, Ori. Hang in there.”

“Thanks, Bard. This is the best news I could get, really. Put him on.”

“Okay, here he is. And I’m counting.”

A laugh whispered from the mobile. “I’ll count, too.”

Bard held the mobile out to Thran. “All yours.”

Thran took the mobile eagerly. “Ori? Yes, I am better. Weak, yes, but the nausea has passed. Bard has taken good care of me. How did the rehearsal go today?”

Thran listened intently as Ori filled him in on the day’s progress. The news must have been good, because Thran had little to say while he listened. At length, he said, “Ah. That is a relief. Yes, thank goodness all went so well. I will rest tonight, and hope that I will see you tomorrow, if my jailor allows it.”

Bard stuck his tongue out at Thran, who stuck his out in reply. “Yes, I gesticulate in Bard’s general direction. Yes, I will rest. Thank you, Ori, to see to everything so well. Yes, I will be the good patient. All right. Yes, here is Bard again.”

Thran handed his mobile back to Bard, who put the device to his ear. “He’ll pay for that jailor
comment. I’ll tell him he can’t go anywhere until he’s drunk two dozen bottles of sports drink.”

“You do that. I’ll let Lettie know that Thran’s on the mend, and we’ll hope for the best tomorrow. You know the dress rehearsal’s not until seven in the evening, I hope? So he’ll have that much more time to recover.”

“I’m counting on that,” Bard replied. “So let me get on with dosing the dancer, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, Bard. I’ll talk to you then.”

Ori disconnected the call, so Bard handed Thran’s mobile back to him. “You’ll excuse me while I scrub down, Thran. I have no intention of letting your germs get the better of me.”

Bard ducked into the bathroom, washed his hands thoroughly, and rubbed hand sanitizer over his hands as well as his cheek and ear. Overkill, maybe, but watching Thran spew his guts for twelve hours was as close to doing it himself as he wanted to get. By the time he reappeared in the bedroom, Thran had finished his half glass of sports drink, and was pouring himself another glass.

“This is nasty, but I admit it tastes far better than the nasty pink stuff,” Thran said.

“It wouldn’t take much to taste better than that,” Bard agreed. “You rest. I’ll let the children know that you feel better and start them on their showers.”

“I miss them, but do not let them come in here,” Thran urged. “So many germs still. They do not need to host any of them.”

“I’ll let them know.” Bard risked a quick pull of Thran’s braid. “I’m glad you’re better, angel. I’ll come back and help you clean up a little, as soon as you feel up to it. Keep sipping your stuff. I made plain rice and plain chicken tonight, so anytime you feel hungry, I’ve got broth and stuff that’ll be easy on your stomach.”

“First, the electrolyte nectar,” Thran eyed his glass dubiously. “At least I will not be thirsty much longer.”

“Good,” Bard waved, as he headed downstairs to see the children. They all looked up at him when he came into the sitting room.

“How is Papa?” Legolas asked anxiously. “Is he still getting sick?”

“He’s awake, and his stomach is calm, and he’s able to drink some of the sports drink. So I think he’s on the mend at last.”

“Most excellent!” Bain pumped his fist, as Tilda clapped her hands and Sigrid heaved a big sigh of relief. “Stellar!”


“He’s awake, but he doesn’t want any of you to get too near him yet. You can stand by the door and say hello. I’m going to get him through the shower if he can manage it in a bit, and I want all of you to start the cycle, too. You’ve got camp tomorrow, and then if Thran goes to his rehearsal, the rest of us will go see a film.”

“You go see Ada first, Legs,” Sigrid urged. “Then you can shower to get rid of the germs, and the rest of us will go after.”
“That’s a good idea, sweetness,” Bard patted her shoulder, as Legolas jumped up and ran upstairs to look in on his father. The relieved smile on the youth’s face buoyed Bard’s spirits – finally, things were looking up.

Over the course of the next hour, the children went upstairs to see Thran, then take their showers. After hers, Sigrid retreated to her room to talk to Finn, who had taken her place at the Blue Mountain Bistro as she had hoped. The youth had fit in well at the bistro, and Sigrid was impatient to return, because all indications were that Miss Dís intended to keep Finn on after Sigrid returned. That would be a wonderful end to the months where she’d seen her boyfriend only sporadically. Tilda was ready for bed after her shower, and the boys gladly retreated to a last couple of video car races before they followed their sister to bed. Once Bard bid them all goodnight, he helped Thran through the shower – he didn’t dally, because Thran was weak after his bout with the virus. Once he got Thran back into bed, he got his shower, and felt much the better for it.

The next job was to warm up a little plain rice and a bit of chicken, which Thran carefully nibbled over the course of half an hour. Both of them were elated when the bland food settled without upset. A large pot of tea followed the rice and chicken, until close to midnight Thran finally stopped feeling so thirsty. Bard left his husband to drink the last of the pot while he cleaned up the dishes and checked over the house. He came back upstairs to find Thran all but asleep, still on Bard’s side of the bed.

“No, don’t try to move over, angel; where you are is fine,” Bard assured him as he got in on Thran’s usual side of the bed. “You’re closer to the bathroom over there, just in case you need it, and I’m fine over here. The important thing is that you rest.”

“I feel like I could sleep for a month,” Thran mumbled. “I drink my tea, I eat my rice and chicken, I have a shower, and I am exhausted.”

“Throwing up is hard work. So sleep. You don’t have to get up tomorrow. Sleep until noon. Or later.”

“I might,” Thran admitted. “Forgive me that I do not snuggle with you. I think only to keep my germs to myself.”

“I’ll wash the sheets tomorrow,” Bard murmured back. “That’ll kill a few more of the bastards.” Thran hummed in response. A long, elegant hand snaked out to stroke Bard’s thigh. “A pox on them.”

“Indeed. Sleep well, angel. Sing out if you need anything.”

A soft chuckle accompanied another caress along Bard’s thigh. “I have all I need, lyubov noya. Thank you.”

Bard kissed his index finger, then traced it over Thran’s arm. “You’re welcome. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

In seconds, Thran was asleep. As his breath settled, Bard sent a silent apology to the gods for his earlier diatribe, thanks for an end to Thran’s misery, and a plea for the night’s rest to restore Thran as much as possible. Unless Thran couldn’t stand up tomorrow morning, he’d demand to go to the school to dance his dress rehearsal. The more energy he recovered during the night, the easier it would be for him to get through that dress rehearsal, and he more energy he’d have for Friday’s rehearsal and Saturday’s premiere.
So much rode on that premiere. If Bard had a way to drain some of his strength and pass it to Thran, he’d do it. But short of that, he’d support Thran every other way he could.

He fell asleep thinking of how best he could do that.

* * *

Thursday morning dawned. Bard got up, fed the children, and sent them off to their camps with Gavreel and Charmeine in Thran’s SUV. Then he worked on his clay in the children’s study until Thran finally roused at just after noon. When the bathroom door closed, Bard got up from his stool and padded into the bedroom, listening for signs of nausea, but to his relief he heard only the normal morning noises. The door opened, and Thran appeared. He was still pale, but he was steady on his feet, and his face showed no discomfort.

“You look so much better,” Bard greeted, coming forward to hug his husband gently. “I hope you feel better.”

“I do. Still light and ungrounded, but I am hungry, and thirsty, and that is good enough for now.”

“I’ll make you some breakfast. What sounds good?”

Thran opened his dresser to find underwear, tee, shorts. “Perhaps more rice. Something very bland and light.”

“Just the tick.”

Bard washed the clay off his hands while Thran dressed, and ducked into the children’s study long enough to throw a cover over his clay. Coming behind him, Thran put a hand on his shoulder.

“Your totem pieces? I thought you worked on those in the solarium.”

Bard flipped up the cloth to show Thran how far he’d gotten on a pair of the heads. “I couldn’t hear you when I was down there. I moved up here so I could lend a hand when you needed it.”

Sighing, Thran gave Bard a reluctant smile. “What am I to do with you, my saint? You become the angel of mercy in all but name.”

“Complain, complain, complain,” Bard teased as he covered the clay. “You won’t think so well of me when I make you drink a gallon of tea with your rice.”

“I will do so gladly. And after I do so, I will call Ori and tell him that I will be at rehearsal tonight.”

Bard shot Thran a concerned look as they came into the kitchen. “Would you wait until you see how breakfast settles, please? Yes, I know the premiere’s in two days, and yes, I know dress rehearsal is very important, but please, see how you feel in an hour before you call Ori.”

“If it will reassure you, then yes, I will do so. But I already know that I am well enough to dance a rehearsal. I will not make everyone associated with Immortal worry about whether I am fit to dance or not. I will not be as strong as I want to be, but I will be strong enough.”

Bard held up his hands. “Tell me that after breakfast, and I won’t say another word.”
After a bowl of rice, two plain scrambled eggs, and an entire pot of tea, Thran did just that. Bard had not expected otherwise, but it reassured him to see Thran’s face ease from its terminal pallor and deathly weariness. He was still pale, but his eye sockets weren’t so dark, he moved without discomfort, and he was more animated than he had been in days. So Bard listened without complaint while his husband called Ori.

“Hello, Ori! Yes, it is me this time, not Bard. Yes, I am much recovered. Yes, I have slept well, my stomach does not ache, and I have eaten a good breakfast. I will be at tonight’s rehearsal without fail. We plan to meet at five for barre, yes? Then the rehearsal. Yes, I look forward to it. Yes, I am even more relieved that you are that this nasty bug has passed. How are the other dancers? Four will be in place tonight? Good – tell the other two that they will be welcome tomorrow, but do not come tonight. We cannot afford for anyone else to get sick. Yes, I will. So until tonight, mon cher. See you at five – a bientôt.”

As Thran disconnected the call, he eyed Bard warily. Perversely, Bard offered his husband a grin.

“No, I won’t tell you no, or tell you to see reason, angel. You know what you can and can’t do to prepare for this ballet better than I do.”

“What will you tell me?”

“Only one thing. When you go tonight, I go with you.”

“You have to be with the children.”

“Tomorrow night, I will be. Tonight, I’m with you. You’ll be exhausted when the rehearsal is done, so better I’m along to help you so Mike can concentrate on his job.”

“But the children.”

“The children will be in a film theatre two towns over. No one will know where they are but us, and there will be two professional bodyguards with them.”

Thran gave Bard a long look.

“I’ve thought about this all day, angel. You won’t talk me out of it.”

Thran continued to stare at Bard, but Bard stared back without a blink. At length, Thran sighed, and lifted a hand in concession. “It is clear that I will not. As you will, lyubov moya.”

“Thank you.”

Thran lifted his hand again.

During the rest of the afternoon, Thran rested on the sofa of the sitting room, sipping his tea or sports drink to keep his hydration up. At three, he had some plain chicken, plain yogurt, plain rice, and more tea. By the time the children came home, he felt much restored, and greeted them with a wide smile and many thanks for their concern. Bard told them about the change in plans for tonight, which none of the children liked; all of them but Tilda wanted to accompany Bard when he took Thran to the school. But Bard insisted. He sweetened the deal a bit by saying the bodyguards could take them out for pizza before the film, which quieted most of the protest. The children quickly bathed and dressed for their evening out, and Thran went upstairs to collect the things he’d need tonight for his rehearsal. They saw the children, Gavreel, and Charmeine off in Thran’s SUV, then Bard, Thran, and Mike set off in Bard’s truck for the school.
The last part of *Immortal’s* preparation was at hand.
Chapter 152

Chapter Summary

The angel rallies to dance, but a feral child adds a murderous epilogue.

Yes, it’s time for Lance to reappear.

Thran sat in the back seat of the truck as Bard, Mike, and he set out for the school. His dance bag lay beside him. So he was no better than baggage, was he, relegated to the back seat? After the previous twenty-four hours of lying flat in bed, the unwilling prisoner of his stomach, he was little better than baggage. His abs and ribs still hurt from all the heaving, and he was tired. His arms and legs trembled so much that he hoped he could muster the strength to lift Charisse the few times he had to do so. And as for dancing on pointe... the thought bore no consideration. He could have easily spent the next two days in bed asleep.

But tonight was dress rehearsal, and so many people depended on him. Just to appear at the school would reassure everyone that Saturday’s premiere would not be a disaster. But he would do more than merely appear. He would dance, just as he would Saturday night, and everyone would relax. All would be well.

In honesty, the hard part would not be to dance. He had danced when sick before, and this time would not be so bad. He was past the worst of the virus, and had only to marshal his strength. Once the music started, the dance would transport him past everything but his performance. The hard part would come after, when he would be exhausted. He’d be lucky to get to the truck under his own power.

So be it.

As Bard drove the short distance to the school, Thran shut his eyes and focused on the evening’s efforts. He would make his barre as gentle as possible – no grand jetés, and only gentle hops and jumps. Mostly stretches, and quiet, focused breathing to energize the body. If he were well limbered, he would dance well during rehearsal without the jetés at the barre, and the breathing would help his strength.

“I will not sign autographs before we go in today,” he murmured. “I must focus.”

“Understood,” Mike replied.

Bard flicked him a glance in the rear view mirror, but he didn’t say anything. He probably saw past Thran’s claim that he needed to focus. There was nothing wrong with his focus that a few giggly girls would interrupt, but better to say that than to admit that he needed to save every scrap of energy for the stage. Bard was already concerned enough.

“I’ll let you and Mike off at the door,” Bard said, as they turned into the school parking lot. “If you’re quick, you’ll get past most of the girls and so forth with just a wave.”

“Looks like we’ve got more to deal with tonight, Thran,” Mike observed. “Looks like photographers and reporters, too.”
Thran silently cursed the lot of them. Likely the story of the stomach virus scourge had gotten out, and vultures had alit hoping for a juicy meal. He mustered a calm unruffled expression as Bard maneuvered the truck as close to the school doors as possible. Mike bolted out at once to pull open Thran’s door. Thran already had his bag over his shoulder, and stepped out smoothly. Mike slammed the doors shut, and Bard pulled away. Mike positioned himself between Thran and the descending crowd, and they moved quickly towards the door. Thank the gods, a security guard stood there, waiting to open the door for them.

“Thran! Over here! How are you feeling today? Did illness keep you away yesterday? Mr. Oropherson! Is it true that half the company has stomach flu? Does this mean you intend to cancel Immortal’s premiere? Thran!”

“I am very well, thank you!” Thran called, smiling and holding his arms wide. “The company is well, and of course we are most excited to premiere Immortal on Saturday! It is the most wonderful ballet, and I cannot wait to dance it! I hope you will be with us then!”

He and Mike managed to get to the school door ahead of most of the throng, and Mike and the security guard kept everyone back for Thran to slip inside. Mike followed, then pulled the door firmly shut after them.

“Glad to see you, Thran,” Ernie hailed from his station in front of the auditorium. “There’s a pack of them out there tonight for sure.”

“Excitement abounds,” Thran shook his head, smiling ruefully, as he opened his bag for Ernie’s inspection. “I like it better when the excitement surrounds someone else.”

“Comes with the territory, I guess,” Ernie shrugged as he gave Thran’s bag a cursory poke. He’d learned that Thran never carried anything but dancewear, a water bottle, and his lunch. Too boring by far.

“I suppose. But better it follows Immortal then the poor dancer who presents it, yes?”

“I can see that, yeah. Okay, Thran, you’re spotless as usual.”

Thran rezipped his bag and put it over his shoulder. “Thank you, Ernie. May all be quiet for you this evening.”

“I’d love that, yeah. Break a leg tonight!” the security guard wished him.

Thran offered Ernie a wave as Mike opened the auditorium door. As he came into the vast space, welcome calm fell over him. He was where he needed to be, and soon he would dance.

Mike set about his usual scan, so Thran proceeded leisurely down the right aisle towards the stage. Members of the set crew already bustled back and forth, and when he looked back at the light and sound booth above the seats, figures moved there, as well. He lifted a hand in greeting, smiling when several hands waved back. A few of the corps dancers wandered on the stage in their practice wear, hailing him in relief when they spotted him. He came onstage to meet them, assuring them that he was much better, and ready to dance. One of the men looked just as peaked as Thran did, but he smiled gamely, proof enough that he was ready to do his best. Thran’s pride in UVB’s courage swelled, bolstering his determination to dance well tonight. For the first time, Immortal would appear complete with costumes, sets, music, lights, and a band of dancers who had sacrificed much, and he would do all of it equal justice.

Mike came onstage to tell him his dressing room was clear. Before he went back to change, he
looked back over the auditorium, looking for Bard. Yes, there he was – he came down the aisle with Charisse and Luka, and several of the corps trailed behind.

“Man, what a mess!” Luka heralded, grinning. “A whole bunch of people seem to think we’re putting on a show in here!”

“Oh, mon Dieu,” Charisse shook her head. “All of them are vultures, oui? So sure we are all sick, all dying, too ill to put on anything but the last act of Hamlet! Snap-snap-snap with the cameras, and not one of them looking with their eyes.”

“They are pretty thick out there,” Bard admitted. “There are two more security guards to help the dancers through the flow.”

“It is too bad we told the very sick dancers to stay home,” Thran gave an evil smile. “They could have offered their bounty to the pushy ones. But that would put the children and the devotees through such suffering, which none of us wants, so I suppose it is better that the sick stayed home.”

“Oy vey, I feel like I’ve run through a gantlet!” Ori came up looking frazzled. “What a horde!”

“Maybe they’ll go away once we all get inside,” Luka offered. “There won’t be anything more to see after that.”

“One should live so long,” Charisse sighed. “Eh bien, time to dress, and calm down.”

“Exactement, ma chère,” Thran agreed, so all of the new arrivals headed for the dressing rooms. Bard came after Thran and Luka to the dressing room, but he had a perverse smile on his face.

“That is a most interesting smile, lyubov moya,” Thran observed, as Bard squeezed into the corner so Thran and Luka could change.

Luka snickered as he sorted out his practice wear. “Your hubby’s a funny man, Thran.”

“Of course he is. Ah, did some of the reporters just discover this?”

Bard turned red, but his smile didn’t diminish. “All I did was walk into the school with you and Charisse. The reporters were interested in our Tinker Bell, not me.”

“They weren’t after they asked you what part you danced,” Luka grinned. “You said you played the extinguished role of Otis. T. Driftwood, whoever that is.”

Bard snickered. “It’s Otis B. Driftwood. He’s the opera impresario that Groucho Marx played in A Night at the Opera. He makes a shambles of everything.”

Thran laughed. “You are a clown indeed, Bard.”

Bard looked quite pleased with himself. “Every now and then. For the next few hours, though, I’m the artist who has the pleasure and privilege to draw both of you and the rest of the company as you dance the most amazing ballet. It’ll be beyond spectacular.”

Thran sent him a small smile. “Thank you, my saint. We will do our best.”

“Our very best,” Luka said firmly. “And then on Saturday, we’ll do even better.”

“You will,” Bard nodded.

Bard’s simple, firm assurance was more eloquent than a thousand more flowery words.
Bard slipped out to talk to Ori, leaving Thran and Luka to finish dressing. They wound their way through the crowded hall to the corridor beside the auditorium, and went into the large room where they would do their barre. This was yet another reason why the dress rehearsals were in the evening – camps were not in session, so the room was available to the dancers, so that they did not have to appear on the stage before their performance when the audience would be filtering in to find their seats. The set crew also didn’t have to haul the portable barres on and off the stage, either, so could concentrate on getting everything ready for the performance.

Bard eased in just after the dancers had assembled, and Abebe began to call the figures. The piano from the music room tinkled softly, and Thran gave himself to the movements without concern for what went on around him. He noticed once that Bard plied his colored pencils tonight, with one stuck behind his ear, another caught between his teeth, and another six at the ready in his right hand while his left hand sketched over the paper. Ah, it felt good to stretch, even if his ribs were sore. He so rarely missed his daily meditation at the barre that to resume it after yesterday’s agony felt good. He still chose to omit the grand jetés, but that was the only concession he made for yesterday’s illness.

When he was well warmed, he headed back to his dressing room with the other dancers. Now the excitement began to build, because his costumes and makeup awaited him. Someone had found another chair for the dressing room, so he and Luka both had a perch before the mirror to create the faces of their characters.

Thran’s headdress would provide the fringe of hair around his face, so he brushed the sides of his hair up and away from his face, pinning it at the back of his head so that the strands streamed down his back. Beside him, Luka rubbed something in his hair that made it curl smoothly rather than frizz. As they began on their make up, Bard slipped in, leaning against the wall behind them to sketch them as they dabbed and brushed. Thank the gods for makeup – Thran’s dark eye sockets and gaunt cheeks would vanish behind layers of grey, blue, black, and white, and become Death’s angular, ageless, inexorable face. Sharp angles hinted at the skull beneath the pale face. In contrast, Luka’s cheeks and lips were rosy as befitted the living.

Luka finished his makeup first, so he got into his costume first. His tights were ivory to the calves, then dark grey to define the Soldier’s boots; his dancing slippers were a matching grey. His military tunic was a matching ivory with white and silver braid across the chest and on the collar. Rada had chosen to make the tunics sleeveless to save fabric, and therefore reduce the cost, but the dancers liked them because they were cooler and less confining, and Irmo liked them because they didn’t hide the beautiful bodies beneath them, and made the contrast between the mortals and Death even starker. Once Luka eased his tunic on over his head, he left the dressing room to find the costume intern who would give him the green and red glow sticks for the front of his costume.

Makeup done, Thran stripped off his practice wear, and got into his dance belt and body stocking. Because the body stocking Thran wore in Act III of the ballet had created such a sensation, Rada had decided to make a similar garment the starting point for all of Death’s costumes. In Act I, Thran’s body stocking was painted like armor on the arms and legs, with shimmering iridescent blue and purple streamers that fluttered as he flew down to the stage to reap the fallen soldiers’ souls. Thran took pains to adjust the body stocking until it was comfortable, because his flying harness went over top, and any fold or tightness could be excruciating when he flew.

Once Thran got his body stocking to his liking, Bard stuck his head out of the dressing room to alert Robbie and Tink, who came in with Thran’s flying harness. Robbie was clad as a denizen of the Underworld, but Tink was clad in head to toe black, even down to her hands and face. The riggers methodically got Thran into his harness, adjusting this and that to make sure he was ready to fly safely. Only then was Thran ready to maneuver into his tunic, so Tink stuck her head outside the
dressing room to call for the costume team. Two techs appeared immediately with his tunic, headdress, and gloves.

The sleeveless tunic that went atop Thran’s body stocking and flying rig was replete with arcane symbols and slight padding across the chest to give Death a stylized, armored breastplate. More streamers accentuated the back and shoulders. Reflective as well as luminescent paint added to the costume’s glow, and channels up and down the tunic held lengths of children’s glow necklaces, already glowing a deep ultraviolet blue.

Next was the headdress that slightly elongated his skull. It was covered with silky strands of white hair to supplement Thran’s own, and the techs pinned it in place with an army of bobby pins. Atop the headdress went a jeweled crown, and nestled behind the crown went an armored helmet with curled horns at the sides.

Once everything was in place, Thran admired the effect in the mirror. This was the first time he’d seen the costume fully illuminated, and he and Bard shared an appreciative grin. Tink and Robbie made sure the hook for Thran’s line was clear, then excused themselves to alert Mike that Thran was ready to go onstage, and to check their rigging one last time.


Thran made a theatrical gesture into the mirror for Bard’s benefit. “Rada has created a wonderful costume. It is vivid enough to dance itself.”

“As long as it helps you dance well, angel.” Bard eased away from the wall behind Thran, and tapped the front of Thran’s costume. “Once Mike gets here to escort you to the stage, I’ll find a good seat to watch the show. But know I’m in here, too.”

Smiling, Thran took Bard’s right hand and mimed a kiss on his wedding ring – only to remember that he still wore his. “I should have taken my ring off and put it our box before we left home, lyubov moya. And normally, I would take it off now and have you hold it. But this once, because I have the gloves, I will wear it when I dance. It will add your strength to mine.”


They shared one last look, then Mike came in to escort Thran to the stage. Thran put on his dancing slippers, gave himself one last critical look in the mirror, and pulled on his costume gloves with their elongated fingers, completing the transformation. Bard led the way to Stage Right where Thran would climb up to his perch, then took his leave. Mike waited until Half Ton – dressed as an Underworld inhabitant – Robbie, and Tink surrounded him to attach his wire, then he faded backstage. With Tink beside him, Thran climbed up to Death’s perch overseeing the battlefield, and settled into his brooding crouch. Tink checked his wire once more, and the comforting upward pull of the wire assured him that Robbie and Half Ton were ready. Tink stooped beside him.

“You’re ready to go, Thran. Break a leg.”

Thran held up his gloved hand for Tink to tap with her fist. Then she was gone, leaving Thran alone on his perch. He shut his eyes, and willed Death, Lord of the Underworld, to manifest within him.

As if in response, the lights at his feet came up to bathe him in more blue light.

So much hard work. So many months. So many obstacles. But at last, here he was, ready to sacrifice himself in a story of immortal power greater than anything Death wielded.

As the house lights went down, as the curtain went up, as Ligeti’s Kyrie began its low rumble, Thran
forgot himself, his husband, his children, his life.

For the next ninety minutes, he was Death.

* * *

Below Thran, the darkened stage began to glow with a cold, faintly greenish light that revealed only the empty floor and the featureless black matte walls at the back of the stage. As the first film projected onto the walls, the nothingness slowly transformed into a stark prairie where leaden grey clouds loomed over only slightly lighter grey stubbled grass. A light breeze fluttered the sparse grasses. Soldiers clad in white tunics crept onto the prairie from Stage Left, while others clad in dark grey tunics crept from Stage Right. All had bright red glows at their hearts, symbolizing their mortal lives. Slowly they mustered their fury, and turned it into a swirling, chaotic dance where carnage and death ebbed and flowed with the eerie music. As each fell, the red glow abruptly vanished, to be replaced with a ghostly green one.

When the last soldier fell, a moment of silence and stillness fell as the lights on Thran’s platform waxed in intensity. He rose to his feet, felt the wire that would suspend him tighten in response, and let the massive dissonant chord of Prokofiev’s music fill his body with Death’s implacable force. The black walls now showed swarms of vultures and carrion crows swooping over the prairie. Thran launched himself from the platform, reveling in the rush of air over him as he swept down over the killing field, turned, and flew over it once again to land in the midst of the slain. He struck his pose as Tink came behind him to unhook his wire, then fell back to vanish offstage when he was free. He launched into the dance that had begun this ballet so many months ago – Death Collecting Souls on the Battlefield. He drew Death’s knife to free the mortal souls from their dead bodies, leaving them to trail weakly behind him as he continued his harvest.

He paused in the act of reaping when the first civilians appeared at the Stage Left, searching the bodies and lamenting when they found a fallen loved one. Out of the group ran Charisse, the Maid who searched so desperately for her Soldier, the very one who lay under Death’s hand. At her cries, the Soldier rallied, forcing Death to stay His hand as the Maid beseeched him with such frantic insistence. Around the pair Death danced, his harvest forgotten as he found Himself dazzled by the Maid’s beauty and vibrant nature. As she embraced Luka’s Soldier with glad relief, Death stretched out a yearning hand to her, but was powerless to touch either her or her Soldier. He gathered the souls He collected and retreated with them, leaving the lovers to savor their reunion, but stretched out a longing hand towards them before He left the stage.

From the wings, Thran watched Luka and Charisse dance their pas de deux that beautifully defined the depth of their devotion to one another. Before it was over, however, the riggers tethered him to his line again, and saw him up to Death’s high perch again to oversee the second battle. Again he soared down, backed by the projected film of swarming vultures and carrion crows, and again Death reaped His harvest of souls. This time, the Maid could not recall Luka’s Soldier, and he rose to follow Death despite all the Maid’s tears. At the end of the scene, the ornate wire gates to the Underworld slid across the stage to block the Maid from following Death’s procession. The curtain fell, and the house lights went up.

Backstage, Thran dashed into his dressing room with a pair of dressers to help him out of his gloves, armored helmet, flying harness, and body stocking. Gods, what a relief it was to be done with the stiff harness! It was so much more freeing not to have it squeezing his torso. On went a new body stocking, the one that he would wear for both Acts II and III. This one was painted to reveal Death’s
attenuated body and musculature. Atop it went his armored tunic again. He retouched his makeup, replaced his armored helmet, and waited for the signal that the next act was about to begin before he pulled on his gloves. He joined the group of soldiers at Stage Right. The thrum of music started again, and up went the curtain.

Death led His string of souls onto the stage, and as they proceeded, the stage began its rotation, thanks to the Imladris Academy wrestling team. Slowly the gates of the Underworld appeared. At Death’s gesture, the gates slid to either side of the stage to reveal Death’s realm in all its dizzying blur of color and diversity. Unlike the mortal world that Death saw in only black and white and greys, the Underworld was rich with colors. Over the millennia, the various cultures had softened, faded, and blended with each enclave taking on aspects of others, while retaining its core essence. Every inhabitant featured the same ghostly green glow at the heart.

Death led His newly collected souls into His realm. Two denizens of His kingdom appeared to take His armored tunic, replacing it with an elaborate, flowing, floor-length court robe rich with jewels and elaborate trim, all in the same electric blue and silver pallet. Two more carefully removed the horned helmet from His headdress, leaving the jeweled crown in place atop His long white hair. Revealed in His splendor, Death took His new subjects through His kingdom. As they went, already some of the new souls found themselves taking on aspects of one enclave or another, acquiring a necklace here, or a hat there, as the kingdom assimilated them.

At the back of the group wandered Luka’s Soldier, distraught over his separation from the Maid – Charisse danced in the front of the stage, away from the rest, to show how completely she occupied her Soldier’s thoughts, no matter how exotic the disparate cultures of the vast Underworld were. Slowly, the stage rotated again, revealing Charisse as she danced her despair and loss to the Lachrimosa from Mozart’s Requiem. Halfway through, Luka appeared behind Charisse to dance his despair that mirrored hers, synchronizing his steps to hers to make a poignant pas de deux where the partners never touched.

At length, the Maid’s grief grew too terrible to bear, and she resolved to journey to the Underworld. Luka disappeared, and the stage rotated to show the gates of the Underworld. Her lament was so terrible that Death agreed to hear her petition, and the gates slid back to allow her into Death’s throne room. Rachmaninov’s The Isle of the Dead backed the Maid’s plea to replace her Soldier in Death’s kingdom. Despite the Soldier’s protests, Death was so entranced by the Maid that He accepted her offer, and once more the gates of the Underworld closed, this time to leave the Soldier outside in a swoon. The curtain fell.

Again Thran raced back to his dressing room. The next scene, when Death did His best to woo the Maid, was the most difficult of the ballet. He had more than the pointe work to master – his costume was so formfitting that he had no wherewithal to hide any misstep. Every step, turn, gesture, and nuance had to be perfect, or the audience would see the mistakes. He stripped off crown and robe, shimmied into the small kilted loincloth that went over his body stocking, and began the most important part of all of the ballet’s costume changes – off went his dancing slippers, and on, oh, so carefully, went his pointe shoes. Carefully, carefully, he settled his feet into the shoes, arranged the elastics, and then wound and tied his ribbons, making sure to tuck the ends out of sight. He had time for a few quick stretches so that he stayed warm and limber, and back he was in the wings, waiting for the curtain to rise.

The first notes of Vieuxtemps’ Elegy for Viola and Piano, Opus 30, began, Charisse paced in distraught despair, clad only in tights and leotard, both white, a bright red glow at her breast to show that she still lived. The interweaving notes of piano and sonorous viola were the perfect accompaniment to her pas de deux with Death as He helped her into a sumptuous gown of shimmering blue, then showered her with jewels, a lovely crown, silken linens for her bower. But
though she wore Death’s gown, she cast His crown aside, and didn’t see the other rich gifts He offered her, because thoughts of her lost Soldier overwhelmed everything else. Luka, dressed in white tights and a white singlet that bore his red heart, came to dance just out of reach to symbolize how strongly he was in her thoughts. In desperation, Death rose on His toes to show the depth of His regard for the living Maid, but found Himself cast out of the pas de deux as the memory of her Soldier strengthened so much that the pair touched. The Maid slipped out of the richly jeweled blue gown to dance an impassioned, tender pas de deux with her Soldier before they whirled offstage. Despairing, Death fell to His knees in the midst of His rich gifts, and the lights died.

Thran raced to his dressing room to trade his pointe shoes for his regular dancing shoes, and his loincloth for his court robes and crown. As he changed, he imagined Luka dancing as the Soldier returned to mortal life on the earth, dreaming and despairing for the Maid who had taken his place in the Underworld. Tchaikovsky’s Valse Sentimentale was the accompaniment to the Soldier’s despair. Mirroring the scene of the Maid’s despair, Charisse appeared as the ghost in the Soldier’s thoughts, matching her steps to Luka’s. As the Maid disappeared, the Soldier resolved to offer his petition to Death, and dashed offstage.

As the stage rotated for the last time, Robbie, Half Ton, and Tink raced to get Charisse and Luka into their flying harnesses, and their tunics over top. As the Dies Irae from Verdi’s Requiem began, Luka appeared outside the gates that blocked mortals from the Underworld, angrily banging on the gates. Charisse appeared on the other side, reaching a hand out to him. So agitated were both of them that Death bade the gates slide open. In deference to the Maid’s pleas, Death allowed the Soldier to beseech Him for the life of the Maid. The Soldier exacted Death’s promise to return the Maid to the mortal world upon the Soldier’s death, then dramatically took one of the dead souls’ knife to plunge it into his breast, falling dead at the Maid’s feet. In fury, Death ordered His subjects to cast the Maid from His Kingdom. Reluctantly, several denizens of the Underworld came forward to force the Maid outside the closing gates, but at the last second, she eluded them, snatched the knife still protruding from her Soldier’s breast, and plunged it into her own to fall dead beside him.

The Underworld froze for several seconds of silence before Tchaikovsky’s Hymn of the Cherubim began its mournful chant. Even Death’s fury cooled in the face of the devotion and sacrifice of the couple, and stood by in sorrow as His subjects, Robbie, and Half Ton among them, reverently carried the Maid and the Soldier to lie side by side before their Lord’s throne. Hidden from the audience, Robbie and Half Ton attached Charisse and Luka’s lines to their harnesses; when they signaled that the lines were secure, they faded backstage, and the dancers moved back to offer their sorrow on bended knee. Death stepped forward to free the souls of the two, and they rose to reveal the green glow at their hearts, symbolizing their deaths. Despite their sorrow, both consoled each other with a brief pas de deux that despite their deaths, now nothing would keep them apart. Even Death’s final attempt to persuade the Maid to accept His regard was sad, for once again, the Maid had eyes only for her Soldier. In homage to their devotion, Death bowed a concession, and cast a handful of glitter upon them both. The green glow of their hearts changed to pure white, and Death raised His hands to raise them from His kingdom up to the heavens, where they would eternally shine together. Charisse and Luka made one last turn about the stage, and leapt into the air to rise to their heavenly station at Stage Left. As they embraced on the platform, the Soldier fell to his knees before his love, and the gates to the Underworld slowly closed almost completely shut. Death remained outside, looking up at the devoted lovers, even stretching a hand up to beseech them one last time. But the lovers had eyes only for each other, and Death conceded defeat before He returned behind his gates. The gates closed behind Him, and the lights dimmed until only the Maid and the Soldier remained illuminated. As the Hymn of the Cherubim reached its end, the dancers on the stage flitted into the wings, the spotlight faded, and the stage went dark. On the last note, the curtain fell.

When the house lights went up, such a wave of exhaustion fell over Thran that he sank to his knees in the wings. Around him, the chorus went out to practice their bow, then Luka, then Charisse. He
got to his feet to go out for his own, and managed to stay on his feet to line up with the other dancers to take a collective bow. When the bowing finally stopped, he sank to his knees again.

“I am fine, merely tired,” he assured everyone. When Mike came from the wings to lend him a hand, he forced himself up, pulled off his gloves, and heaved an exaggerated breath with a bright grin. “Look, we have finally gotten Immortal on its feet, and it is so wonderful that I am completely overwhelmed.”

“I’ll help you back to your dressing room, Thran,” Mike offered, as the other dancers milled among themselves in excitement. “Come on.”

Thran was too weary to speak his agreement, but gladly followed Mike backstage to the row of dressing rooms. Gods, all he wanted to do was sink into the nearest chair, so he crowded hard on Mike’s heels as the big bodyguard pushed open the dressing room door.

A deafening bang shocked Thran nearly out of his skin. In front of him, Mike doubled over and sprawled onto the floor. As blood began to pool underneath the fallen man, Thran was too shocked to move. As movement returned, he backpedaled hastily, but a hand reached out and jerked him into the dressing room and slammed him against the far wall. As the barrel of a pistol was jammed into his ribs, a face swam into view.

Lance Dunmont had finally surfaced.
Chapter 153

Chapter Summary

Will the saint slay the dragon who plagues Clan Ffrnig?

Chapter Notes

Please be advised that this chapter has some disturbing, distressing, potentially triggering parts. Lance is a sadistic, psychotic piece of work, so read cautiously. I love you guys, and I don't want to cause any pain.

Bard sat back as the house lights came up. What a performance the UltraViolet Ballet Company had put on! The stark beginnings in the mortal world, then the complex, nuanced Underworld with its uncounted enclaves; the innocence and hope of the Maid and her Soldier, then the irrevocable finality of Death. To upend everything with the simplicity and strength of love... it had been magnificent.

The most magnificent part of all, of course, had been Thran. No matter how sick and exhausted Thran was, no matter how much love colored his eyes, Bard had expected wonder, technical wizardry, and dazzling technique. As many times as he’d seen Thran dance in the ballroom, in the studio, even rehearse on this stage, he knew that his husband was a dancer of rare skills. But all of that knowledge had not prepared Bard for Thran during performance. No matter that he’d watched Thran put on his costume and a flying rig, seen the dozens of bobby pins that kept his wig on, smelled the paint that covered his face, it wasn’t the same as seeing Thran under the lights, dancing to the music, living his role. Words seemed trivial and shallow when faced with Death’s implacable glare.

As for Death’s impossible love of a mortal Maid... no words described His heartbreaking loss with the same depth of feeling as Thran’s performance on pointe. He was light, as if Death were beyond gravity. He was alien, as if Death shared as much kinship with other peoples across the universe as He did with humans. He worshipped, yearned, begged, and despaired, all while floating above the ground. Even the petite Charisse didn’t rival him for control or expressiveness. No wonder Thran had slaved so much to do something so impossible for a man his size. The effect was worth every blister, every callus, every ache and pain.

When Thran appeared onstage to take his bow, Bard was too overwhelmed to do anything to stand and applaud. His eyes stung, and the lump in his throat was so large that he couldn’t cheer outright the way he wanted. He scraped the back of his hand across his eyes, so he didn’t realize that Thran had sunk to his knees until he looked up again. Mike was already helping his husband backstage, so Bard got up to hasten after them.

The crack of a gunshot shattered everything.

Bard froze as fast as everyone else, but he jerked into motion again a half second before everyone else. He tore up the stairs, across the stage, and down the hall to the last dressing room. The door was
open, and he skittered to a stop.

Mike lay sprawled on the floor, blood pooling under him. Bard was only vaguely aware of Ori bursting in after him, but the small man was beside him as they went to help Mike.

“Lance has Thran,” Mike gasped. Blood flecked his lips, and the front of his red polo shirt was soaked with blood. “Wanted Sigrid. Thran said... not here. Lance said then we’ll go home and wait for her. Grabbed Thran’s bag, forced him out the emergency door. Kid’s got a cheap thirty-eight caliber snub-nosed revolver, five shot.”

Mike’s eyes rolled up into his head when he forced out the last word.

Ori had his mobile in his hand, already dialing 911. He dug into his pocket and forced his car keys into Bard’s hand. “Take my car. I’ll see to Mike. Hello? There’s been a shooting at the Imladris Academy. I need an ambulance STAT. Also, there’s a kidnapping in progress...”

Bard didn’t wait to hear more. He took Ori’s keys and bolted through the same emergency exit that Lance must have used when he grabbed Thran. As he raced for the parking lot, he caught a quick glimpse of his truck turning out of the parking lot. He found Ori’s car, threw himself into it, and raced after the fleeing truck.

His heart wasn’t in his throat. It was in his truck, a quarter mile ahead.

* * *

Lance slammed Thran into the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him. He gasped, trying to suck air back into his lungs.

“Where’s Sigrid?” the boy snarled, putting his face an inch from Thran’s. He was filthy, and the reek of sweat and an unwashed body sent Thran’s long-suffering stomach into spasms. Bile rose into his mouth, but he swallowed it down with a convulsive shudder. It was harder to keep his trembling legs from collapsing beneath him, but as he sank, Lance rammed the barrel of his gun into his abdomen and jerked him upright again, forcing a cry from him. “Not so high and mighty now, are you, freak? Get Sigrid Bowman! I want her!”

“Not here,” Thran gasped, swallowing more bile. “She is not here!”

“Where is she? Get her!”

“I don’t know where she is. Nowhere near here, because of you.”

“I bet she’s scared, isn’t she? Scared of me? She ought to be. Come on, faggot – we’ll just go home and wait for her.”

Lance grabbed Thran’s dance bag and threw it at him. When he struggled to catch the bag, Lance grabbed him by the hair at the base of his neck and dragged him out of the dressing room, through the emergency exit at the end of the hall, and outside. Under Lance’s prodding, Thran had all he could do to lurch towards the parking lot – his dancing slippers slid on the grass.

“Move! Or I’ll shoot you right here!”
Thran did his best.

“Find your car. Find it now.”

Lance had Thran’s car keys in his hand, so Thran stumbled towards Bard’s truck. Lance unlocked the doors, looked inside the cab, and shoved Thran towards the driver’s seat. When Thran climbed in, Lance slammed the door and got in behind Thran. A dirty, scraped hand thrust the keys at him.

“Drive home. And don’t think I don’t know where you live.”

Thran put the keys in the ignition, pressed in the clutch, and started the truck. Bard always left the truck in first gear, so he released the emergency brake, let out the clutch, and drove slowly out of the parking lot. He flicked a glance in the rear view and side view mirrors; people had run out of the auditorium, but they were too far away to do anything to help him. He turned out onto the street just as slowly, but Lance smacked the side of his head with the butt of his gun.

“Faster!”

“There is a speed limit.”

“It ain’t ten miles an hour. Move it.”

Thran duly sped up to twenty-five. His heart pounded so hard it was hard to hear over it. His stomach knotted almost as badly as it had in the depths of the virus. Think, think! This vengeful child had just shot a man, perhaps had killed him. In another heartbeat he might be the next one fighting to breathe with a bullet in his lung. What could he do to help himself?

Lance grabbed Thran’s bag from the front passenger seat and rummaged through it. With a murmur of triumph, he pulled out Thran’s mobile.

“Where’s Sigrid?”

“I told you I don’t know where she is. It takes no genius to think that you would come to find her where everyone knew where I was, does it? So her father sent her away and did not tell me where. So I cannot tell you.”

“You fucking faggots think you’re so smart, but you’re not. Call her and tell her to go home.”

“She will not go home.”

“Why not? Too scared?”

“If you choose to think so, fine.”

Lance smacked Thran with the butt of his gun again, drawing Thran’s hiss. “Don’t sass me, faggot. I’ve had enough of that for a lifetime, and I’m not taking it from trash like you.”

“I cannot drive the truck if you hit me silly, and then where will you be?”

“Right now, I’m right where I want to be. Yeah, I thought so. You’ve got Sigrid’s number on your mobile. Maybe she won’t listen to you, but I bet she’ll listen to me.”

“What is the point to call her? She cannot give you anything you want. Do you even know what you want?”

“I know exactly what I want from her. She made a big mistake last Christmas Day, calling me out
like that in front of my set. Made me look like shit, didn’t she? Then she and the rest of your fucking family crossed Angelo, and made him look like shit, and somehow you got him offed in the slammer. Then his gang turned on me, tried to take me out, and then when all was said and done, all of the gangs decided to blame me for the whole fucking mess. Told me I was not even worth killing, that they’d let me live just to show how little I meant to anything. Same shit I heard at home every fucking day. All of them, calling me nothing.’”

“There are counselors at school, or at the wilderness camp. They could help you –”

Another clout on the head. “Fuck them! Fuck every bastard one of them! Telling me I was wrong. Nothing about me was ever right. Them and their shit about getting along and earning respect and working together, which was just another way of saying they thought I was scum and needed to remember my place at the back of every line. It was all bullshit. Total fucking bullshit. Not one bit of me in any of it, was there? Way too much of why I had to be just like them. Yes, ma’am, no, ma’am, fucking please and thank you! Fucking suck my cock and like it!”

Thran slid a glance at the driver side mirror. It was hard to tell in the dark, but that might be Ori’s car a few vehicles behind him. Someone was near to help him. If he kept Lance talking, maybe he would make a mistake.

“You are very angry,” Thran ventured.

“Damned right I am,” The boy snarled. “Not one damned soul in this world gives a shit about me, do they? Kick me, that’s what’s on my back. I had to choke down a lot of shit to get anything from anybody, didn’t I? Then I finally get my toe in the door with Angelo, and I was doing good, until your sad lot came along. You wanted to make me look bad just like everyone else! Sent me to jail where they kicked me around, then that wussy wilderness camp where they kicked me around for the week I was there. Living wild was better than that – no one but me, myself, and I to please.”

“That must have been hard. How did you eat? Where did you stay?”

“You’d like to know, wouldn’t you? There are lots of places to hide, aren’t there? There’s niches in a lot of highway overpasses, but you’ll have to figure out the rest on your own.”

“I thought perhaps you stole a car and lived there.”

“Maybe I did, and maybe I didn’t.”

“Maybe you had to steal food?”

“Shit, that was the easy part. Check out any dumpster behind any restaurant. They throw tons of stuff away. Anything you want.”

“Still, it must not have been easy.”

“Better than to scrape along with the shit pickings you left me after Christmas fucking Day. Thanks for nothing.”

“If you had let the children have their soccer ball, or just kept it and sent them on, none of what happened after Christmas Day would have happened.”

“Yeah, nothing but I looked like a wuss in front of Manny and Jinks, didn’t I? You can’t put this one on me, faggot. If Sigrid had just kept her fucking mouth shut like any other ho, none of what happened next would have happened.”
A glance in the rear-view mirror showed Lance with his head down. Yes, he had Thran’s mobile, for he held it to his ear. “Hi, Sigrid Bowman. Surprise, surprise! Guess who this is.”

Thran bit his lip, trying not to moan as he thought of how terrified Tilda would be if she were anywhere near her sister. “Yeah, this is Lance. Know why I’m calling you on the faggot dancer’s mobile? Because I’ve got a gun pointed at him, that’s why. If you don’t want me to do more than point a gun at him, then you’d better haul your fucking ass up to your house in twenty minutes. What, you can’t get here in twenty minutes? Too bad, bitch! Guess your faggot dancer’s gonna suffer. I shot his bodyguard, did I forget to tell you that? So I can shoot him too, just as easy. In the ankles. That’ll keep him from dancing again, for damned sure. Oh, really? You’re half an hour away? Better hurry then. Sure, call the cops if you want. I don’t care. The more the merrier. Didn’t I say you were gonna pay? Now’s the time.”

Lance punched the mobile to disconnect the call. Even his brave lioness had to have quailed to hear such an evil speech, and his throat tightened to think of it. He was no less terrified at the prospect of Lance deliberately maiming him past ever dancing again. Even worse, what punishment might Lance decide to extract from Sigrid when she arrived at home as Lance had ordered? Rape? Death? Both? Maybe Charmeine and Gavreel and the police wouldn’t allow her to expose herself that way. As terrified as Thran was, he didn’t want his daughter to endure whatever sadistic punishment Lance chose to mete out.

There was nothing he could do right now to remove the danger to himself or his child. He’d have to choke down his terror and let matters proceed until a chance, however slim, arose.

* * *

Bard kept several cars between him and his truck, in case Lance were smart enough to watch for pursuit. Once he was sure the truck was on the way home, he ducked down a street two blocks away and wound through the side lanes until he was a block away from the house. He parked. Before he got out of Ori’s car, he pillaged the glove box, looking for anything he might use as a weapon. He found a ring of Allen wrenches – they didn’t seem promising. A kit of computer tools – small screwdrivers, mostly – no more promising. Oho! A multitool that had two kinds of screwdrivers, a wire nipper, tiny scissors, a magnifying class – yes, a knife blade! It was small, but good quality, so Bard folded it up and stuffed it in his pocket. He got out of Ori’s car, and sprinted towards home.

* * *

Thran’s throat closed when the car he thought belonged to Ori turned off a quarter mile from home. Gods, he was alone now, alone with a psychotic, gun-bearing boy bent on maiming and destroying Thran’s family. Never had he been so sure that he was about to die.

He looked at the wedding ring gleaming on his left hand, and swallowed his terror down. Bard would tell him not to give up, not to stop fighting, as long as he still breathed.

He pulled into the driveway, stopping halfway between the house and the carriage house. The outside landscaping and security lights around the house were on; within, the dining room windows
revealed only a bit of the light that originated from the stove hood in the kitchen. It was clear that no one was at home. Thran pushed in the clutch and stepped on the brake, not sure what to do.

“Turn it off. Leave the lights on.”

Thran switched off the key, and palmed the ring in his hand. But Lance smacked him with the gun again, and thrust his other hand forward.

“Uh-uh. Give me the keys.”

Thran let Lance grab the keys from him.

The door behind Thran’s opened, and Lance edged out of the seat, brandishing the gun. He backed up a step, then yanked open Thran’s door.

“Get out. Hurry up.”

Thran took a surreptitious breath, marshaling his strength in case the next few moments gave him any opening at all. He couldn’t leave Sigrid to whatever this angry, feral boy had planned for her.

“Give me a moment. I have had the stomach virus for two days, and I am exhausted.”

“Tough shit. Get out. Now!”

Thran didn’t have to act weak; his limbs felt like rubber bands that had been stretched to their breaking point. He got his feet on the ground, holding onto the open door for support. He expected Lance to back up, keeping his distance from a man so much taller than he. But he didn’t. Did he intend to shoot him here, and leave his body slumped in the driveway?

For the merest fraction of a second, Lance lowered the gun just the least bit...

Without hesitation, Thran launched himself at the boy, punching and elbowing and kicking, both hands grabbing for the gun to hold it high. As his knee found a soft target in Lance’s stomach, sending the boy’s breath gusting out in an audible whoosh, Thran forced his fingers between Lance’s and the barrel of the gun. Another hard, well-placed knee, and the gun was in his hand! Lance went berserk, clawing and biting and snarling like any feral mongrel in a dogfight. Thran stumbled as he shoved Lance away from him, but the boy was back on him in a fraction of a second, clawing for the gun. Again he shoved the boy away, but his stomach knotted past his ignoring it, doubling him over. As Lance came at him again, Thran heaved the gun as hard as he could, high into the sky and straight towards the lane. It disappeared in the dark, arcing over the lane to land somewhere in the field on the other side. Thran didn’t hear it land – he was bent over his knees, retching.

With a howl of outrage, Lance seized a handful of Thran’s hair, and hurled him into the side of Bard’s truck. He hit with excruciating force, dazzled when pain shot through his hip, shoulder, and head. He couldn’t keep his feet, nor could he get his hands up to block Lance’s furious backhand whipping towards him. It landed on his temple with such brutal force that bright lights flashed before his eyes, and the enraged face of his attacker faded into the night.

* * *

Bard flitted through the four back yards that lay between him and his property. He crossed the
Gamgees’ yard, then Will Whitfoot’s, pausing at the property line. He didn’t want to trigger the motion sensor that would switch on the lights to illuminate the back terrace. So he skirted along the edge of the property, rounded the ballroom, and peeked out to see the side of the house. Nothing. He risked crawling along the side edge of the house, then the porch, to see around the corner across the front lawn. There was his truck – was Thran driving? Because it was in motion, turning so that its headlights shone out towards the lane. The truck stopped, then shuddered to a standstill because someone didn’t know to push the clutch in when he applied the breaks. Thran knew how to drive a manual transmission, so Lance was at the wheel.

Where was Thran?

Lance got out of the truck and darted across the lane. Bard still couldn’t see Thran, but maybe he could sneak closer – no, before he’d fully formed the thought, Lance was back, cursing and swearing. He circled around the truck to the opposite side, still swearing, staying there several seconds. What was he doing? Should Bard try to get closer? Given that he couldn’t see what Lance was doing, and he didn’t know where Thran was – still in the truck, maybe? – Bard retraced his steps, again steering clear of the motion sensors in the back. By the time he made his way around and drew closer on the other side of Will’s line of yew bushes, Lance had had time to finish what had occupied him so.

He’d dragged what looked to be an unconscious Thran in front of the truck. He’d propped his husband, still in his ballet costume, to sit in front of it with his legs outstretched before him. Then he’d bound his wrists and neck to the front grille.

Lance got behind the wheel of the truck, and slammed the door shut.

He started the engine.

* * *

When Thran’s vision cleared, his wrists and neck hurt. It was hard to breathe. Engine noise deafened him. Other pains manifested – stomach, cheekbone, temple, hip, shoulder – gods, too many to count. He raised his head, and found it a little easier to breathe. Where on earth was he? There were his feet before him, so he was sitting down. Past his feet was the driveway, and past that was the lane. To the left was the carriage house; to the right was the barn. He saw all of them on the periphery of the lights that blazed on either side of him. If he could just rub his eyes...

Something held his wrists. When he tried to look, something held him by the throat, too –

Oh, gods, Lance had tied him to the front of Bard’s truck – ohgodsohgodsohgods –

He was about to die.

* * *

“Ori, he’s tied Thran to the front of my truck! He’s going to drag him down the lane and kill him –”
“Bard, Bard, listen to me! We’ve got a few minutes, so listen to me!” Ori begged. “Lance called Sigrid and told her he’s got Thran. He told her to meet them at the house. Gavreel, Charmeine, and the police all know this. They’re bringing Sigrid to the house – the other children are safe, they won’t be there – and a hostage negotiator, so Lance won’t do anything until they get there. A sniper team’s on the way, too. So hang on.”

Lance wouldn’t want to negotiate anything. He’d want to inflict as much damage as he could, to take away as much of the family’s joy as he could. All that was certain was that maybe the boy would be content to wait until Sigrid appeared. That gave him a little time.

“My truck’s a stick-shift, manual transmission, Ori. Lance doesn’t know how to drive it. If the snipers shoot him, the truck’s in gear, and it’ll drag Thran for however long it takes to get Lance out of the truck. Make sure the snipers damned well know that.”

“I’ll tell them.”

Bard hung up, and shoved his mobile back in his pocket. He wormed his way back as close to the right side of his truck as he could, staying behind the yew bushes and out of Lance’s line of sight. That was no good. He crawled around to the very end of the row of bushes, wondering whether he could crawl to the side of the truck without Lance seeing him...

Out past the end of driveway, a flurry of cars parked at the side of the lane. Car doors slammed.

Bard didn’t dally. He stayed low as he ran from the bushes to the back of his truck and dropped to his hands and knees. There was no indication that Lance had seen him, so he took a deep breath and patted his front jeans pocket to make sure Ori’s multitool was still there.

“Lance Dunmont?”

Bard peered under the truck, but he couldn’t see more than a pair of feet. Male feet. At least they didn’t belong to Sigrid.

The truck jolted a lick forward, then stopped. The boy had learned how to use the clutch, because the truck didn’t stall this time. But gods, what had that done to Thran?

“I want Sigrid Bowman. Anyone else, and the faggot dancer enjoys the ride.”

“I’m here, asshole.” Sigrid’s voice snarled.

Oh, gods. Now there were three members of Clan Ffyrnig in this.

The truck jolted forward another six inches.

“Gods, Lance! Stop it! I’m here!” Sigrid’s voice rose to a near shriek. “You’re going to break his arms! Please, Lance! Leave Thran alone!”


“Then let Thran go. I did what you wanted.”

The truck jolted forward again. Bard didn’t wait to hear more. He rolled under the truck onto his back with his head pointed towards Thran, made sure he stayed in the exact middle between the tires, and prayed that Lance didn’t get the idea to turn the truck in either direction. Then he shoved himself forward one painful inch at a time, until he was almost behind Thran. He reached a hand above his
head to touch Thran’s back, and inched himself forward to the right of Thran’s body, until he could peek past the bumper.

Thran couldn’t look down because of the wire wrapped around his neck, but his eyes found his. His husband was terrified, but he hadn’t cried out or given Lance any reason to suspect what was going on. Bard inched forward until he could reach his arms up to the wire that bound Thran’s right wrist to the grille of the truck.

“You haven’t done half of what I want you to do,” Lance crowed. “You want to save your daddy’s fucktoy? Is he yours, too? I want to see you on your knees, right in front of me. Do it.”

Bard craned his neck around. Sigrid’s face was white, but she didn’t waver. She sank down to her knees on the driveway, her eyes fixed on his, but her expression gave no indication of what she saw. Bard turned back to Thran, groped for Ori’s multitool, and used the nippers to snip the wire around Thran’s wrist. Another snip, and the wire around his neck was cut, too. Thran fumbled to slip his wrist from the twisted ends, then to bend the wire ends away from his neck.

The truck jolted again, for no other reason than to get a shriek out of Sigrid. It succeeded, and it nearly got one out of Bard, too. Thran gasped, because he was still tethered to the truck by his left hand. He scrambled to slide forward before the motion broke his arm.

“For all the gods, Lance!” Sigrid pleaded. “Come on! Please, please, don’t hurt Thran!

“That’s one of the things I wanted from you,” Lance taunted. “I love to hear you beg. You deserve it. You fucking ruined my life, Sigrid Bowman, and now I’m going to fucking ruin yours.”

Bard slid back far enough to go behind Thran and roll to his other side. He slid up again, and clipped the final wire. Thran slithered flat, and he and Bard hurried to crawl back under the truck, keeping as evenly between the wheels as possible.

“I’m going to break every bone in your faggot dancer’s body until he looks like leftover road kill...”

Bard drove himself straight back under the truck without regard to how much skin he scraped off his back and elbows. Thran was almost as fast despite how badly he shook. When they were both crouched behind the truck, Thran clutched at Bard’s shoulders. His eyes were wide and unblinking.

“He is unarmed,” Thran rasped. “I got the gun from him and threw it across the lane. That is why he had to tie me to the front of the truck.”

Bard’s rage flared. This time, he didn’t squelch it.

He stood up, and strode down the driver’s side of his truck. Lance was too busy taunting Sigrid through the open window to see him coming until the last second, but it made no difference. Bard reached through the open window, grabbed a handful of greasy hair, and smashed Lance face first into the steering wheel. While the boy recoiled, Bard reached past him to turn off the key in the ignition, which kept the truck from rolling into Sigrid as she scrambled to her feet. Then he yanked open the door, grabbed the boy by his shirtfront, and threw him out of the truck and across the driveway towards the carriage house. The boy was still rolling when Bard dragged him up by his shirtfront and punched him, sending him into the grass. Then he stamped his foot onto Lance’s chest hard. The boy’s face was a bloody ruin.

“Get up,” he snarled, as uniformed policemen ran up the driveway. “Please, get up. Do it, and I’ll make you wish you’d never heard of my family. Just do it.”

Two policemen urged Bard away, but it took a second before Bard mastered his rage enough to
comply. He backed away as the two policemen got the groggy boy to his feet. A third pulled out a set of handcuffs –

Lance lunged at the policeman in front of him, grabbing for his service revolver, actually pulling it from the officer’s belt –

_Ohfuckohfuckohfuck, how many chances did one enraged child get to inflict such mindless carnage?_

“Sigrid!” Bard howled, as Lance and the policemen struggled. The boy went berserk, seemingly impossible to hold, restrain, subdue, stop. “Sigrid! Thran! Run! Oh, gods –!”

The deadly tangle with a gun at the center of it spilled onto the grass, ending only when a single shot split the summer night.

When the policemen sorted themselves out, Lance lay still at last.
Chapter 154

Chapter Summary

The angel, the saint, and the eldest cherub deal with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Please proceed with caution. There may be bits that are distressing, but not like in the previous chapter. Be safe, all.

When Bard stormed around the end of the truck and went for Lance, Thran crawled to the bottom of the front porch steps and huddled there. Not a single atom of strength remained in his body, and he was helpless to move farther. He turned in time to see Bard reach inside the window, grab Lance, and smash him into the steering wheel with an audible crack. The truck engine died. The door flew violently open, and Bard dragged the stunned boy out from behind the wheel and hurled him across the driveway with so much rage that Thran cowered. After Lance sprawled across the driveway, Bard stalked after him, hauled him up, and punched him so viciously that the blow landed with a sickening crunch. The boy fell to the grass, moving only feebly.

“Get up.” Bard’s voice was a feral snarl that sent a shiver up Thran’s spine. “Please, get up. Do it, and I’ll make you wish you’d never heard of my family. Just do it.”

Gods, make Lance look into Bard’s eyes, hear his words, and know what real terror was! Even the police who converged on the pair hesitated at his husband’s savage voice. If Bard had fallen to his knees to kill the boy, Thran would not have been surprised, and he might not have tried to stop him if he’d had the physical resources to do so. But his husband forced himself calm, and stepped back to let the police take the boy into custody –

At Bard’s agonized howl of warning, Thran instinctively rolled into a ball. He could not have moved from his huddle even if Lance had run at him with gun in hand, but he got his head up to see what evil loomed. It was beyond him even to muster a vestige of his Prince of Ice glare, but he would face his attacker, even if he were to die for the affront –

No one came towards him. A tangle of bodies – Lance and the police – tumbled over the grass. Sigrid was not in sight, but Bard barred the way between Thran and the thrashing, struggling group –

A single gunshot echoed. Thran clapped hands over his ears and his body mustered enough energy to convulse. Who had shot? The police? Had the shot hit anyone? Had Lance somehow managed to snatch another weapon to inflict still more mayhem on his family or the police?

Were Bard and Sigrid all right?

When Thran uncurled and opened his eyes, Bard stood motionless beside an equally motionless knot of policemen. At their feet lay a crumpled, unmoving knot of filthy jeans, grey stained tee, and battered trainers that had been Lance Dunmont.
It was over.

Thran slumped against the bottom stair, overwhelmed with relief as the last rush of adrenaline waned. He went cold, and his body shook beyond his ability to still it. When two of the police stooped beside Lance to feel for a pulse, Bard rushed to Sigrid, who flung herself into his arms. How tightly did Sigrid cling to her father, one arm around his neck and the other hand clutching a handful of his hair, her face buried in the crook of Bard’s neck? The elemental rage that had enflamed her father was gone, and once again he was the nurturing parent that Sigrid needed to reassure her. They both seemed to be physically unhurt, for which Thran was supremely grateful.

They were all right. They were.

He laid his head on the stair, no longer able to hold it up. He had never felt so tired in his life. Even the weight of his ballet headdress seemed heavier than lead. He shut his eyes, and let everything go... until steps came towards him. Before he opened his eyes, arms went around him – Bard’s on one side, and Sigrid’s on the other. They propped him up to sit between them on the bottom stair, and both put their arms around his waist for support and comfort.

“An ambulance is coming,” Bard said, as Thran leaned his head on his husband’s shoulder, and wrapped an arm around both his husband and his daughter.

“I do not need an ambulance. I am exhausted.”

“You’re bleeding, Thran. You need an ambulance.”

“Where is there blood?”

“Nowhere important, you crazy dancer. Just your head.”

“Tcha, I will not go to hospital dressed like this. I will be a laughing stock.”

Sigrid’s laugh tried to be snarky, but it was too weepy to pull it off. “I don’t believe you. You’ve been kidnapped and beaten up and tied to the front of a truck, and you’re worried about what you look like to go to hospital?”

Thran mustered a smile. “That should tell you I am not hurt. My vanity is intact.”

He reached up to extricate the bobby pins that held his headdress in place. When Sigrid and Bard saw what he was about, they helped him pull out all the pins until he was able to get the headdress off.

“So much better,” he breathed.

“The ambulance will be here in just a few minutes, angel. Please tell me that you won’t argue about that.”

Thran sighed. “I am too tired to argue about anything. But please, let me go inside long enough to put on something other than this ridiculous costume, and to wash my face. Please.”

Bard fished out his keys. “Are you okay to stay with him, sweetness?”

Sigrid scraped the heel of her hand across her face and she gulped down tears. “You couldn’t tear me away, Da.”

“Okay. I’ll be quick.”
Bard trotted up the porch steps and disappeared into the house. Sigrid wrapped her arms around Thran, and the two of them clung to each other for several seconds. Sigrid’s tears started again, and Thran held her close. He felt just as emotional, but tried to keep the tears from falling. He didn’t want to alarm his daughter.

“I was so scared, Ada. So scared.”

“You were very brave, lioness. Thank you.”

“I saw Da under the truck. I knew what he wanted to do. I knew Lance wanted me to beg and crawl and cry and scream, too. So I did it so he kept looking at me, and Da had time to get you loose.”

“You were both very brave, and you both saved my life. I love you both so much.”

“I love you, too, Ada.”

“Are Kukla, Bain, and Legolas all right?”

Sigrid gave a big sniff as she nodded. “Gavreel’s with them. Charmeine came here with me. She’s back there.” She pointed to the police cars in the lane, then gulped. “I heard the police officer say Lance was dead, Ada. Da wouldn’t let me look, but he did. The police said... he... got sh-shot through the heart. They couldn’t do CPR.”

Thran sighed. “Gods forgive me, but I am relieved.”

“So am I.”

Bard clattered out of the house and down the porch steps. He and Sigrid got the top of Thran’s body stocking off, and a long tee on that gave Thran some semblance of modesty for him to peel off his dancing slippers, the rest of his body stocking, and his dance belt. On went underwear and shorts, and Sigrid took one of the baby wipes from the box Bard had grabbed from the mudroom to dab gently at his face. Before she was finished, two ambulances pulled into the driveway. Two EMTs erupted from the second ambulance with a gurney and rushed to Lance. They loaded the boy onto the gurney, then into the ambulance, and roared away, lights and siren at full intensity.

The two EMTs from the first ambulance were less frantic; they unloaded cases of supplies, and headed for Thran.

“I am fine,” Thran said as both EMTs set their cases down and squatted beside him, before either EMT could say anything.

“No, he’s not,” Sigrid and Bard both chorused, drawing Thran to exhale in exasperation.

“He had a stomach virus yesterday, he was exhausted before that, and he danced the lead role in a ninety-minute ballet tonight,” Bard said.

“Then he got kidnapped at gunpoint, and beaten up, and almost run over by a truck,” Sigrid continued. “My Ada is the only person I know who’d try to claim he was all right after all of that, unless he was my Da.”

The first EMT grinned. He was short, no taller than Luka, but much slighter, with short, straight, sandy brown hair, a clean-shaven face, and frank eyes. “You do seem to have an interesting definition of ‘all right.’ Will you let us check you out just to make sure? Just for your family’s peace of mind, of course.”
“Better you see to the remains of my attacker.”

“Crew Seven’s seeing to that,” the EMT assured him. “In the meantime, we’d like to see to you. Can you lie down for me on the walk?”

Thran didn’t have much bravado left, so he waved a hand in concession. The two EMTs helped him to lie down, which was almost his downfall; it felt so good to be horizontal that he could have easily stayed there for a week, no matter the bumpy flagstones. Hands roved over his body from skull to feet to check for broken bones – they found none, but plenty of bruises. A gentle hand drew each of his eyelids up and a bright light shone in his eyes, destroying his night vision. Fingers probed his wrist for a pulse, and a stethoscope slipped under his tee to check his heart rate.

“What’s all this bruising on your face?”

“Some of it might be theatrical makeup.” Bard offered the box of baby wipes. “We hadn’t gotten it all off before you got here.”

The second EMT, a petite woman with two long braids of reddish brown hair, took one of the wipes. “Thanks. I’ll get this side, Kev. Okay... yeah, it looks like everything on this side is greasepaint.”

Kev cleaned the other side of Thran’s face with another wipe. “Hmm. Laurie, I’ve got three parallel but superficial cuts, open but no longer bleeding, each about a half inch long, surrounding contusion on the temple, but normal dilation of the pupils. Huh. Odd marks. Do you know what caused them?”

“I still had on my costume headdress. Bard, show them the pins that held it on. They were likely what left the marks when Lance pushed me into the side of the truck.”

“Ah, good old bobby pins,” Laurie nodded at the handful that Bard showed her. “They’d do it. You said he pushed you into the side of a truck?”

Thran pointed at Bard’s truck sitting in the driveway. “That one. Mostly I hit my hip and shoulder, but I was very tired, and did not get my hands up in time to soften the blow. So I hit my head a little.”

“Did you lose consciousness?” Kev asked as he carefully swabbed the small cuts at Thran’s temple.

“Everything was blurry for a few seconds.”

“Do you have a headache now?”

“I don’t think so. I have very many bruises, though, and they certainly hurt.”

“Okay, we’re going to play Twenty Questions while we check the rest of you out,” the female EMT said. “My name’s Laurie, and he’s Kev. Can you tell me your name?”

“Thran Lesavich Oropherson.”

“Can you tell me where we are, Thran?”

“On the stone walk in front of my house.”

“Do you know what happened to you?”

“The dead boy shot my bodyguard at the Imladris Academy and made me drive him here. When he ordered me out of the truck, I took his gun away from him, and threw it into the field across the lane, which he did not like, so he slam – pushed me into the side of the truck. I did not like that, but I have
had a stomach virus for two days and was too weak to fight back. Please, tell the police where I threw the gun, so they find it before someone else does.”

“You’re doing great,” Laurie encouraged. “We’ll tell the officers about the gun just as soon as we’ve seen to you, Thran. Can you recite the months of the year backwards for me?”

“In English, Russian, or French?”

“Well, my goodness!” Laurie gave Thran an exaggerated look of surprise. Sigrid gave a hiccup of laughter before she exchanged a longsuffering look with her father.

“Sorry, Laurie,” Bard inserted. “My husband’s being a bit of a smart ass tonight.”

“So I see,” Laurie grinned. “You’d better do it in English, Thran. I wouldn’t know if you were right or not in either of the other two.”

Thran dutifully recited the months backwards in English.

“Excellent.” Laurie held up a finger about two feet in front of Thran’s face. “Okay, I want you to try to touch my finger with your left index finger, then touch your nose as fast as you can.”

Thran did so without problem.

“Do the same thing again, but with your right index finger.”

Thran did that with equal ease.

“Great,” Kev nodded. “Your hearing, vision, reflexes, and coordination are in good shape. We’re going to test your sense of touch now. When you feel a touch on your body, tell us where you feel it, okay?”

“Okay.” Thran did so as the EMTs tapped his arms, legs, hands, feet, sides, chest, and head.

“Excellent again. Now comes the hard part, Thran. I know you’re really tired, but we’ve got to check your balance when you’re on your feet. If you get the least bit dizzy or think you’re about to fall, we’ll catch you. Ready for a hand up?”

“I am ready.”

The EMTs helped Thran to his feet. To his relief, he was able to stand under his own power. He was even able to stand on first one foot, then the other, and walk a straight line. The EMTs did a little more probing of his back, shoulder, and hips before they let him sit back down on the steps.

“Okay, Thran,” Kev squatted down beside him. “Believe it or not, you’re actually in pretty good shape for what you’ve been through. You have no symptoms of concussion, so we won’t require you to go to hospital.”

“Wait,” Bard leaned in. “What about a CT scan to make sure he hasn’t got a concussion?”

“Most of the time, a CT scan can’t pick up signs of a concussion,” Laurie explained. “An MRI can’t, either. They can pick up fractures, or evidence of blood pooling internally. Thran’s passed all of the cognitive and sensory tests with flying colors, so it’s not likely he’s got a concussion. He is, however, dehydrated, and suffering from exhaustion. Now, I’ll let you in on a little secret – a hospital is no place for dehydrated, exhausted people. We’ll tell you how to make sure he gets more rest and fluids here at home, but I want you to watch out for a few things, too. I don’t think he’ll have these
problems, but you still need to check. If he falls asleep, wake him up in about three hours. If you
can’t wake him up, then he needs to go to hospital. If he starts to slur his speech, or has trouble
thinking, he needs to go to hospital. If he complains of a really bad headache, or he starts to vomit,
than he needs to go to hospital. Is that clear?"

Both Sigrid and Bard nodded.

“Good. Lots of fluids, then, but nothing with caffeine. Not just water, but a mix of non-caffeinated
electrolyte sports drink, herbal tea, juice, or broth. No soda, alcohol, coffee, caffeinated tea, or
chocolate. Light, non-spicy foods such as rice, noodles, salted crackers. The salt will help him retain
a little more liquid. Go easy on the sugar. No TV, reading, or computer until tomorrow – you want to
let his brain completely rest, and those can hinder recovery if it turns out he does have a concussion.
Any questions?"

“I want to take a shower,” Thran ventured.

“Hold off until the morning, only because you’re so tired,” Kev replied. “The shower’s not the place
where you want to collapse due to exhaustion, because then you really might give yourself a
concussion.”

After spending hours dancing to the utmost of his physical limits, then the fight with Lance, Thran
felt grimy enough to hum in disappointment. At least the EMTs had agreed that he didn’t have to
spend the night in hospital.

“Any other questions for us?” Laurie asked, looking at Thran, then Bard and Sigrid.

“We’re good,” Bard nodded. “Thanks for checking Thran out so carefully.”

“Welcome,” Kev replied, closing his case of supplies.

“Our pleasure,” agreed Laurie.

“Please remember to tell the police about the gun,” Thran reminded the pair.

“I’ll take care of that right now,” Kev assured him. “Laur, you’ll do the form?”

“Got it right here.” The woman held up a clipboard. “I need someone’s signature for the insurance
claim, please?"

“I’ve got it,” Bard reached out a hand for the clipboard. “Where do I sign?"

Laurie drew Bard off to the side to explain the forms, and Kev packed up the medical cases and took
them back to the ambulance. Sigrid sat down next to Thran again, crowding close despite the warmth
of the summer night.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Ada. So glad.”

“Me, too,” Thran admitted. “I did not want to spend the night in hospital. I wanted to be here, with
my family.”

“So do I,” Sigrid whispered.

“Promise me something, lioness.”

“What?”
“Do not tell the boys and Kukla what happened. Kukla is already terrified, and both of the boys will worry too much, though Legolas will show it and Bain will try not to. Let it remain between the three excellent co-conspirators.”

Sigrid swallowed hard. “I don’t think I could talk about it, anyway, Ada. Not for a while. So you’ve got a promise.”

Thran found her hand and squeezed it. “Thank you.”

“What are you two conspiring about?” Bard came to sit beside them as the EMTs went to talk to the police.

“Not to tell the boys and Kukla about tonight. They do not need to know the details, only that we are all right.”

“Amen to that,” Bard said, swallowing hard. “Amen.”

* * *

Bard sat with his husband and daughter on the bottom porch step for a long time. The lights of his truck were off at last, but past the driveway a pair of police cars parked at the side of the lane still had their emergency lights at full rotation, sending a barrage of red and blue light careening into the sky. At least both were out of sight behind the small rise at the end of the yard, so the trio didn’t have to endure the blinding lights themselves, only the wavering reflections. The squawks of the police communication units were loud, but clipped and cryptic, and Bard couldn’t make out what anyone said.

He didn’t want to make out what anyone said. It was enough to sit in silence with Thran and Sigrid, and try not to think about what had happened. He needed distance and daylight before he thought about how much danger half of Clan Ffyrnig had braved tonight.

Six police officers still clustered beside his truck as Kev and Laurie joined them. A moment later, a pair of officers with torches headed across the lane, presumably to act on Thran’s information about Lance’s gun. All that lay across the lane was a drainage ditch, an ancient wire fence, and an empty field. Thank the gods for that field – if it had been anything more manicured, Lance might’ve found the gun where Thran heaved it, and then there was no telling what tragedy would have followed. Just thinking about that made a tremor run through his body.

Thank the gods that Lance’s body no longer lay in the grass. Bard had made himself watch when the police officers had turned the boy over on his back, and pulled up his tee. The hole in the boy’s chest had been deceptively small, but its placement had told Bard all that mattered. He didn’t need to see the policemen call the ambulance without ever attempting to resuscitate. CPR was pointless when the heart had been so precisely struck.

For once, Bard appreciated bureaucracy – only a medical examiner or coroner could pronounce death at the scene, not a police officer or EMT. So that meant the first team of EMTs had treated Lance as gravely wounded and whisked him off, no matter how clear it was that he was past recovery. Declaring him dead at the scene could have meant that his body would remain in place for hours while someone tried to contact next of kin, and determine whether the body should go to a funeral home or the morgue. Bard hadn’t wanted the younger children to see that stir, or the body, so
when he’d run inside to get clothes for Thran, he’d called Gavreel to tell him that the crisis was over, and everyone was well, but not to being the children home yet. He promised to call as soon as the body was removed, which Gavreel wholeheartedly supported.

Bard hadn’t wanted Sigrid or Thran to see the body, either. He’d kept Sigrid from looking when she’d bolted into his arms, and he wouldn’t let Thran look, either. It was enough that he’d seen it. No one else needed the gut punch of looking at a bloody corpse in the front yard.

At length, Bard left Sigrid and Thran on the step and found the officer in charge of the scene. He wanted to know if he could call Gavreel to bring the three younger children home, and if he could take Sigrid and Thran into the house.

“We’ll be a while yet, and at some point we’ll need a statement from you, your husband, and your daughter. We’ll be out here tomorrow, as well, because police officers were involved in an incident where a police firearm was discharged.”

Bard winced. “Gods. The boy grabbed the officer’s gun. What was he supposed to do, let the boy take it?”

“It needs investigation,” the officer shrugged, professionally neutral.

Bard held up his hands. He understood the point, but Lance’s reign of terror had gone on long enough that dragging it out any longer was painful. “May I have the rest of my children come home now? And take my husband and daughter inside?”

“That’s fine,” the officer nodded. “If you, your husband, and your daughter would please come down to the station tomorrow to make your statements, though, I’d appreciate it. I’m sure you’d like to get this wrapped up as soon as possible, and so would we.”

“We’ll do so. My husband’s got to rehearse tomorrow evening, so in the morning?”

“That’s fine,” the officer nodded.

“Thanks,” Bard replied, and pulled out his mobile to call Gavreel’s number.

He picked up right away, his voice smoothly neutral. “Hello?”

“Hi, Gavreel. It’s over. There are still a lot of police here, but the worst is over. It’d be better to park in the Gamgee’s driveway two doors down and walk over through the back yards. That’ll keep the children away from the worst of it. I’ll call the Gamgees to let them know you’re coming.”

“Will do, Bard. I’m glad everything’s well. See you in a few.”

Bard disconnected the call, and quickly gave Rosie a call. Of course she had seen the lights and heard the noise, but all Bard could bring himself to say was that something had happened but was now over, and that the children would be home in a few minutes, and could they please park Thran’s SUV in their driveway until the morning? Of course Rosie agreed at once, so Bard thanked her gratefully. He stuffed his mobile back in his pocket, and went back to Thran and Sigrid.

“The other children will be home in a few minutes. Gavreel will put the SUV in Sam and Rosie’s driveway and walk them over, so they’ll miss the flurry in the front yard. I’m going to unlock the house, and have them come in through the solarium. And we’re free to go inside. We three will need to go to the police station tomorrow sometime to make statements, but for tonight, we’re done.”

Thran was too tired for much reaction. He had enough reserves to get himself up the porch stairs and
into the house, and Sigrid followed along with equal quiet. Bard shut the door on all of the flashing lights and squawking police monitors, got them both settled in the sitting room, and put the kettle on for tea. Then he went into the solarium to wait for Legolas, Bain, and Tilda to arrive.

He didn’t have long to wait. When Sigrid got up to make tea, he caught the first glimpse of figures coming across the back of the yard. He went outside to call to them, and soon Bain, Legolas, Tilda, Charmeine, Gavreel, and Ori came inside.

“Is Sigrid here? What happened? Where is she?” Bain and Tilda clamored.

“Where is Papa?” Legolas pressed, looking scared. “Is Papa all right, too?”

“Sigrid’s fine and so is your Papa, Legs,” Bard assured them. “They’re both in the sitting room.”

The three children ran through the solarium to burst into the sitting room. Bard lingered with the three adults.

“How’s Mike? Have you heard?”

“He’s already in surgery,” Charmeine said. “The bullet went through his lung, but Ori knew how to keep pressure on the wound to keep his lung from collapsing, and he had the ambulance there in record time. Barring complications, Mike’s odds are good.”

“That’s great,” Bard exhaled. “He was shot at such close range... Ori, you’re a champion.”

The slight young man swallowed. “Is Thran all right?”

“He got knocked around, and scared nearly to death, but the EMTs checked him out, and he’s in decent shape. He likely doesn’t have a concussion.”

“And the boy?”

Bard lowered his voice, and both bodyguards and Ori leaned close. “He didn’t make it.”

While all three exchanged glances, none of them looked sorry, matching Bard’s opinion of the outcome. He dug into his pocket and handed Ori his car keys as well as his multitool.

“Thank you for the car loan, and for this, too,” he said, indicating the multitool. “It saved the day. I’ll tell you the story tomorrow, but right now, I’m knackered, plain and simple.”

“I’m sure,” Ori said. “I’d like to see Thran before I go, but I won’t stay long, and I’ll see that Charmeine and Gavreel get home.”

“Righto.” Bard told Ori where he’d left his car, then the small man and the two bodyguards came in to see that Thran was indeed all right. It was clear that the dancer was on his last dregs of strength, so the trio didn’t linger. Bard saw them to the solarium door, and gave both bodyguards bear hugs.

“Thank you for protecting the children, both of you,” he wished them. “This was bad, but it could have been much, much worse. Charmeine, thank you for sticking to Sigrid until the last bit. Gavreel, the rest might’ve run you ragged, but thank you for sticking with them. And Ori, you saved Thran’s life tonight, as well as Mike’s. Without a doubt. I don’t have words for how much both of those mean.”

Ori accepted his hug with an equally heartfelt one in return. “I’m glad I helped, Bard. And I’m even more glad that the siege is over.”
“Me, too.”

“I kept those Saturday premiere tickets for you and the children. And for both of you, too, Charmeine, Gavreel. If Thran dances Saturday, you’ll see it.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Bard smiled.

“Take care of Thran tonight,” Ori urged. “I’ll call you in the morning, but not early.”

“Okay. Thank all of you again.”

The three faded into the dark to retrace their steps across the back yard, then down the two blocks to where Bard had left Ori’s car. Bard locked the solarium door, and went back to the sitting room to rejoin his family.

Everyone looked up at him. Legolas sat beside his father with his arm around his shoulders. Bain and Tilda were on either side of Sigrid, each one holding one of her hands, and Tilda was practically in her sister’s lap. She and the boys looked worried, and Sigrid looked drawn and numb. Thran looked exhausted. Bard sat beside Thran, and rubbed his thigh slowly.

“Is it over?” Tilda asked into the silence.

“It’s over,” Bard nodded.

“Was it Lance?”

Bard swallowed, but he forced his voice to be soft and gentle. “It was Lance.”

“Is he dead?”

Bard nodded. “He won’t bother anyone again.”

“Good,” Tilda said without heat, but also without apology.

Bard thought about what might have turned a fifteen-year-old boy so terribly, terribly dark. Likely his life had been no less terrifying than he’d made it for Bard and his family – or anyone else he’d touched.

Still, he didn’t rebuke Tilda for her relief.
Chapter 155

Chapter Summary

Clan Ffyrnig deals with the aftermath, and looks ahead to Immortal's premiere.

Chapter Notes

I don't rights to "The Princess Bride," but I sure enjoyed Mandy Patinkin's most famous line ever :-)  

The crisis had passed, and Bard was back in the reassuring quiet of the sitting room with his family around him. How good was it to sit back against the sofa and let every muscle go? Gradually, the sting of scraped skin on his elbows and back registered, and so did the ache in his left knuckles. Thank the gods he’d had jeans on, or his legs would be no less scraped. He felt drained – a pale shadow of what Thran must feel. But Thran sat next to him, and all of his children were here and unharmed, and he didn’t have to move –

Thran’s thigh trembled under his hand.

Bard cast him a look. His husband was as white as his hair, and slumped against the sofa like a rag. If the children hadn’t been there, he would have carried him upstairs to bed for a long, long rest... but rest wasn’t what Thran needed first. “You need calories, and liquid, cariad. Something bland. Noodles? Potato? Oatmeal?”

Thran hummed. “Gods, a potato with butter and salt and pepper and chives would be divine.”


“Popcorn,” Bain said, but without his usual exuberance. “What about you, Sig? Popcorn? I’ll make it for you.”

“That’d be great, Bain,” Sigrid nodded. She still looked pale and drawn, but her smile for her brother was warm and appreciative. “Just great.”

“May I have bread and butter?” Tilda asked in a small voice. That was one of her favorite comfort foods – a plain roll or slice of bread spread with soft butter.

“I’ll make you some,” Legolas offered. “Papa, perhaps some tomato soup, too?”

“That would be perfect, too, synok,” Thran agreed. “After the potato, please?”

“Looks like we’d better limber up the microwave,” Bard said, patting Thran’s thigh. “Food’s on its way.”

Bard got into the kitchen before the children, so none of them saw him wash Lance’s blood off his knuckles. That was something nobody needed to think about. As he scrubbed a big potato for Thran,
Legolas helped Tilda with her rolls and butter, and Bain cycled a bag of popcorn through the microwave. As it popped, Bain rummaged in the pantry for spices and seasonings, and put them on a tray. When the corn was done, he dumped it into a bowl, and swept the collection off to the sitting room. Bard started Thran’s potato, and got out the salt, pepper, chives, and butter that Thran liked. Beside him, Legolas mixed water into a can of condensed tomato soup. Bard chopped Thran’s potato into a bowl and loaded it with condiments. He carried the bowl, a spoon, and a big glass of water into the sitting room to find the coffee table loaded with snacks, from cheese and peanut butter to cookies and popcorn. Bard decided that one of Tilda’s rolls with peanut butter was a good choice; Tilda crawled into his lap to eat hers with him. Thran ate his potato as if every bite were the best thing he’d ever tasted. As soon as he finished it, Legolas brought him his soup in a big mug. The soup and the water disappeared after the potato without delay.

“I do not care what the EMT said about the shower,” Thran said into the silence.

“What EMT?” Legolas looked up from the cheese cracker he was making for Sigrid in alarm. “What about the shower?”

“He said I should not get a shower because I am exhausted. So I will not. But he said nothing about the tub, and now that I have eaten, I will not be so filthy any longer. I will sit in the tub and wash. No one will argue with me about this.”

“Sounds good,” Bard said mildly. “Nothing wrong with saving a little wear and tear on the sheets, to be sure.”

Thran swallowed, and gave him a tremulous smile. Uh-oh, the night’s terror was about to discharge. Bard eased Tilda out of his lap, stood up, and offered his husband his hand. “Come on. I’ll give you a hand up the stairs. Crew, would you please put all the leftovers away?”

“Aye, Captain,” the children murmured, as Thran pushed himself to his feet and let Bard support him up the stairs. By the time they reached the bedroom, Thran was shaking again, and his breath caught. Bard eased him onto the bed, quickly shut the pocket doors, and returned to Thran’s side to put his arms around him.

“It’s okay, angel,” Bard whispered. “You’ve been through hell, and you’ve been brave for the children, so you can let go now.”

Thran wrapped his arms around Bard’s waist. “Oh, gods, Bard! I thought I would die. So many times, I thought I would die, and that he would hurt our lioness...”

In a spate of choked, whispered words, Thran told Bard everything that had happened from the time Lance had shot Mike to when he had taken Lance’s gun, and Lance had tied him to the front of Bard’s truck. In sympathy, Bard’s throat knotted, and he stroked Thran’s back in reassurance.

“I thought I was about to lose you, angel. I couldn’t bear the thought of being without you. That’s why I did something as insane as crawl under a moving truck. Because I wasn’t going to lose you. I wasn’t.”

“When I felt your hand on my back, I knew it was you. I knew. You saved my life.”

“It wasn’t just me, angel,” Bard rubbed his shoulder. “You took his gun. Sigrid kept him distracted, and I cut you loose. It took all three of us.”

Thran’s ribs heaved, and he couldn’t say anything for a long while. Bard shut his eyes and didn’t speak as he held his husband tightly in his arms, uncaring of how gritty Thran was. It was Thran’s
scent in Bard’s nostrils, his touch on Bard’s body, his voice in Bard’s ears, his ravaged face in Bard’s sight. What did Bard care about grit, the smell of sweat and fear, or the ravages of exhaustion? All of them were sweeter than the cold, antiseptic reek of a body on a morgue slab.

At length, Bard got Thran into the bathroom, handed him his toothbrush, and got out the jar of cold cream that Thran used to clean theatrical makeup off his face. They brushed their teeth in silence, then Thran carefully wiped the vestiges of his makeup from his face, and unfastened the clip he’d used to pin his hair back. As the pale locks fell around his face, he looked so haggard – would even sitting in the tub be beyond him?

When Bard turned on the shower faucets, Thran gave him a look, but Bard shrugged.

“The EMT didn’t want you to stand in the shower. He didn’t say anything about sitting in it. There’s more room in there for me to help you wash than in the tub, and the sprayer means you can wash your hair if you want. I’ll put a bath mat in there, too, so you don’t have to sit on the bare tile."

“You are a saint in truth,” Thran said with heartfelt thanks, so Bard handed him a clean cotton mat from the linen closet. As the warm water cascaded down, the dancer put the mat on the floor of the tub, and eased down into a cross-legged position with a groan. Bard kept a close eye on him as he shed his clothes. He wouldn’t put it past Thran to fall asleep before he washed anything. Bard slipped into the shower cabinet, got the handheld sprayer, and knelt beside his husband.

“I’ll do your hair, so keep your eyes closed,” Bard asked. His husband merely shut his eyes, and let Bard soap and rinse as he would. He smoothed conditioner onto the long white strands and let it soak in while he carefully washed Thran from head to foot. He had a couple of minor scrapes on his back from pushing himself from under the truck, and the small cuts at his temple looked just as minor now that the blood had washed away. His neck, thank the gods, showed only a slight red mark where the wire had crossed it. Both of his wrists were bruised, but not badly.

Most of Thran’s wounds were internal, then.

His were, too.

“Your back and elbows are scraped,” Thran murmured as Bard rubbed his washcloth over himself, then played the sprayer over both of them to rinse off the suds.

“Nothing to worry about,” Bard shook his head. “They barely stung when I first got them wet.”

Thran sighed and wiped water out of his eyes. “I think I must get out while I still can. I am very tired.”

Bard helped Thran out of the shower. The exhausted dancer managed to dry most of his body off, but he didn’t argue when Bard pulled out the stool, sat him down, and directed the dryer over his hair. He let Bard comb his hair through once, then padded to bed and crawled into it.

“Just five minutes, and I will help you see to the children,” Thran mumbled.

“The children will understand, angel,” Bard reassured him as he pulled the sheet within Thran’s reach. “They know as well as I do that you need to sleep. I’ll see to them.”

Thran’s eyes had closed before Bard had finished speaking. Good. That was the best thing for him. Bard found a clean tee and shorts to put on, then went downstairs to see what stir the children had gotten into while he’d seen to Thran. Had they badgered Sigrid?

Gods, let them have been more humane than that.
He needn’t have worried. The children had put all of the food away but the cookies, and the open tin sat in Tilda’s lap. The little girl sat in Sigrid’s lap, and their brothers sat on either side of Sigrid. No one said anything, but at the sound of Bard’s footstep, Bain looked around anxiously.

“I got the cookies out, Da, not Sigrid,” he hastened to explain. “I thought they’d help –”

“It was a good idea, boyo,” Bard reassured his son. “In fact, it was a great idea.”

He helped himself to one of the molasses hermits, then sat on the sofa opposite the children to chew it. The clock on the TV showed that it was close to midnight. Gods, it seemed to be much later than that.

“Is Papa all right?” Legolas asked, his blue eyes full of worry.

“He’ll be okay, Legolas. Mostly he’s exhausted because he was sick yesterday, and he danced the whole ballet tonight. He’s clean and dry now, and he went right to sleep. When you go upstairs to bed, you can look in on him if you want. What he needs most of all is to sleep.”

Legolas’s face cleared as Bard’s words reassured him. “Okay, I will. Is it okay if I go up now?”

“Sure. I’m sure you’ll be quiet, but I don’t think he’ll hear you.”

“I’ll go up, too, Da,” Bain inserted. “It’s kinda late.”

Bard raised an eyebrow. He couldn’t remember the last time Bain had willingly gone to bed, no matter the hour. Maybe he never had. Likely he and Legolas would end up in the same room.

“Before you head upstairs, lads, let’s talk about tomorrow. It’s your last day of camp, so we’ll be up at seven-thirty again to get there on time.”

“Oh, yeah,” Bain looked surprised. “I forgot about camp.”

“Just the last day. Next term, after the festival, you’ll go back to the things you and Legs originally signed up for – archery, fencing, soccer.”

“I get to stay in ceramics,” Tilda sighed, laying her head on Sigrid’s shoulder. “I like that.”

“I’m calling Miss Dís tomorrow,” Sigrid murmured softly. “Finn took my place, but he told me she still wants me back. The festival will be really busy as long as the weather’s good, so she needs me.”

“That’s great, sweetness,” Bard smiled, relieved to see a little color come back into her cheeks. “I’ve got some good news, too. Thran’s probably going to be sore tomorrow, but in all likelihood, he’ll dance the premiere on Saturday just like he planned. If he does, then we’ll all be there to see it.”

Tilda’s bright smile as she sat up and clapped her hands was the most normal expression Bard had seen tonight. “Oh, goodie! I can wear my bee dress after all!”

“You can, indeed, little doll,” Bard chuckled. “Lads, both of you and I need to see about suits, too. But we’ve got to get through camp first, so let’s get everyone in bed so Friday gets here sooner.”

“Okay!” Tilda exclaimed, drawing everyone’s chuckles at how fast she got up.

“Make sure you brush your teeth, all,” Bard reminded everyone as they went upstairs.

Legolas ducked into the bedroom to assure himself that his father was well and truly asleep, but after that the regular routine of tooth brushing and hair combing and changing into sleep tees and shorts...
seemed to help everyone relax. All of the children got into bed far easier than he expected. Only Tilda made any reference to the day’s traumatic events.

“So tomorrow I can go outside?” she asked sleepily, as Bard put Mr. Bun on the pillow beside her head.

“As much as you want, little doll.”

“Good.” Tilda shut her eyes and sighed as she snuggled into her pillow. “But I’m sorry I won’t get to see Miss Charmeine anymore. Or Mr. Gavreel or Mr. Mike. They were nice.”

Tilda didn’t know that Mike was in hospital, and now wasn’t the time to tell her. “They were all very nice,” Bard replied as he smoothed Tilda’s hair off her cheek. He gave her a soft kiss. “And they took good care of us. Sleep well, little doll.”

Tilda nodded, all but asleep. “Night, Da. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Tilda.”

Bard made sure Tilda’s night light was on, and the one in the children’s bathroom. He looked in on Thran, who was still soundly asleep even though Bard’s bedside lamp was on. Despite the late hour, he wasn’t ready for bed yet, so he left the light on and returned to the sitting room. The open tin of cookies was still on the coffee table, so Bard replaced the lid and put it back in the pantry. He scrounged in Thran’s wine fridge, but nothing was open, so he got the open bottle of red wine from the butler’s pantry and poured himself a good glassful. Then he went into the sitting room and found a televised soccer match that provided inconsequential, reassuring background noise. As he settled on the sofa, he took a long, slow breath.

He’d seen to Thran, and the children. Could he finally let down at last?

He took a sip of his wine – no, he took a good, long swallow of it – and shut his eyes. The low drone of the soccer match put a mundane façade of normalcy on the moment, but Bard’s thoughts were anything but mundane or normal. Now that he didn’t have Thran or the children to tend, nothing distracted him from thinking of all that had happened in the driveway not three hours ago.

The glare of truck headlights that stabbed down the driveway and into the lane... the unnatural angle of Thran’s neck bound against the truck grille... Sigrid on her knees, locking eyes with him... the bite of gravel through his shirt as he wormed his way under his truck, then reached up with Ori’s multitool to cut Thran loose... Thran’s terrified, unblinking, wide-eyed stare that begged him for rescue... Thran’s gasp as Lance jounced the truck forward while his arm was still bound to the grille, and his grimace of pain as he scrambled to slide forward before his arm bent past breaking... Thran’s fingers digging into his arms by the back of the truck to tell him that Lance was unarmed... his fury lending power to his blows as he dragged Lance out of the truck and onto the lawn... the deafening shock of gunfire... the limp tangle of unmoving limbs that had once been a human being...

Gods, how would he ever get to sleep tonight with such a barrage of images flashing through his mind, over and over and over again?

A step at the door of the sitting room told him he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t sleep. Sure enough, Sigrid looked in on him with haunted eyes. He patted the sofa beside him.

“I wondered how long it’d take you to join me.”

Sigrid came slowly into the room, and sat down beside him. Bard looped his arm around Sigrid’s shoulders, and drew her close.
“I can’t stop seeing it all.”

Bard sighed. “I can’t, either.”

“How am I supposed to sleep with all this noise in my head?”

“I don’t know, sweetness. I guess it’s like echoes. Eventually they stop bouncing off the walls, and
that’s when you go to sleep.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.”

“It might not.” Bard gave her shoulders a squeeze. “You get a pass on camp tomorrow if you want.”

“What about the boys and Tilda?”

“Let them get back to normal. That’s the best thing for them. You’re in a different situation, so if you
want to sleep in the morning, that’s the best thing for you.”

Sigrid’s swallow was more of a gulp than anything else. She rubbed the heel of her hand under her
eyes and swallowed again. “Is this what it’s like to be an adult?”

“How so?”

“When you go through something that you can’t tell Tilda and Bain and Legolas about because it’d
scare the shit out of them, and you don’t want to do that, so you just hold it all inside?”

Bard leaned Sigrid’s head onto his shoulder. “That’s it, sweetness.”

“Well, it sucks.”

Despite himself, Bard chuckled. He rubbed Sigrid’s shoulder in commiseration. “Sometimes it does.”

“Yeah,” Sigrid whuffed, half defiant and half miserable.

“You know you can talk to me or Thran. We were there, too, and we know what it was like. You
were so self-possessed, you stayed so calm... I was so proud of you.”

“You were the brave one, Da. Gods, you crawled under your truck! You could have gotten run over
with Thran! You saved his life.”

“Not just me. I told Thran, and now I’ll tell you – it took three of us to save Clan Ffyrnig’s Russian
angel. Thran took Lance’s gun. You kept Lance distracted. I cut Thran loose. No one of us was
enough.”

Sigrid hummed. “I guess you’re right.”

“I know I am. And it’s a fit end to the crisis.”

“How do you figure that?”

“What’s the one thing Lance wanted, the one thing he never got?”

“I don’t know.” Sigrid thought for a moment. “Respect is what he said.”

“What he wanted was to belong to something. In other words, he wanted a family. But he didn’t
have one, and nothing he did gained him one. Clan Ffyrnig is a family, and that’s what saved us. We
worked together and we came out all right.”

“That makes Lance a sad story,” Sigrid murmured. Her face twisted in anger. “But I don’t want to feel sorry for him! He hurt so many people, Da. So, so many. He scared Tilda to death, too, and I’ll never forgive him for that. What did Tilda do to him? Nothing. He was a mean, hateful, spiteful rat!”

“Think about what he might’ve gone through to end up that way.”

“Okay, it was probably horrible, but that’s no excuse for what he did.”

“No, it’s not,” Bard agreed.

“What did he expect, all the times he did such horrible stuff? He had to know he would get slammed for it.”

Bard sighed. “Maybe he felt justified because he thought the world had slammed him first. All that’s sure is that nobody found him in time to help him before he got slammed.”

Sigrid swallowed. “I just want my brain to stop thinking about Ada hanging on the front of your truck like a broken doll.”

“It’ll take a while. I hope it’ll be easier in the morning, when the sun shines.”

“Me, too. Tilda doesn’t want to know what happened, so that’s okay. But I don’t know how I can look at Bain and Legolas without everything showing on my face.”

“Did they pester you about what happened when I took Thran upstairs?”

Sigrid shook her head. “I thought they would. I dreaded all the questions I was sure they’d ask. But neither of them said a word, and they were both really sweet to me. It was weird.”

Bard quirked a wry grin. “I expect they’ll end up in one room or another, if they aren’t there already, poring over a computer to find out what happened.”

“I hope they don’t ask me anything. I wouldn’t be able to look Legolas in the eye and tell him that I thought Ada was about to die.”

Bard swallowed. He didn’t want to admit to anyone that he’d thought his husband and his daughter might die, and maybe him along with them.

“It’s a tall order, but the best thing we can do is go on with our lives,” he said at last. “Lance was a shadow over all of us – he scared us, he hurt us, but he paid the ultimate price for that. As much as we can, let’s try not to let a shadow continue to scare and hurt us from beyond the grave.”

“A shadow,” Sigrid mulled. She took a deep breath. “I like that. A shadow blocks the sun for a moment, gives you a bit of a chill, and then it’s gone. It doesn’t last.”

“That’s right,” Bard comforted. “It might be hard to remember that for a while, until a little time passes and we get back to other things. But after that... a shadow is a good way to look at what happened. Lance was a shadow that didn’t last.”

Sigrid sighed, and watched the soccer game without seeing it. After a while she stirred, and patted Bard’s arm. “I think I’ll go upstairs now. Will I have to go to the police station tomorrow to make a statement or something?”

“Thran and I have to go, too. If you don’t go to camp, you can go with us. If you do, I’ll take you
there in the afternoon."

“Okay,” Sigrid replied. “Maybe I won’t go to camp, then. Mostly I went to that weight training class to vent, and I don’t have to do that now, so...”

“If you still have to vent, that’s okay,” Bard assured her. “If you need to talk to someone other than me or Thran, that’s okay, too.”

“What, like a therapist or something?” Sigrid gave him a speculative look.

Bard shrugged. “Sure. When you need a doctor, then you see one. It doesn’t matter whether your ankle hurts, or your thoughts do.”

Sigrid looked thoughtful. “Okay. That’s good to know. I’ll see how things go for a few days.”

“Good enough.”

Sigrid pressed a kiss on Bard’s cheek. “I love you, Da.”

Bard returned the caress with a smile. “I love you, too, sweetness.”

Sigrid gave him a smile that was more reconciled than the one she’d worn when she’d come in, and headed upstairs. Bard stayed on the sofa to watch the soccer match until his wine was gone. The talk with his daughter had done him good, too, and the images flitting through his brain like ninja warriors had calmed a little. He really didn’t want to turn off the television, or the lights, so he left them on as he washed his wineglass, and made one more round around the house to check the security system, the windows, the doors. At the last second, he turned off the game, then the lights, and went upstairs. The light he’d left on in the bedroom was a welcome beacon to keep him from having to confront the dark. He did a quick listen at the children’s doors, but didn’t hear anyone stirring. He suspected that both of the boys were in Legolas’s room, but that didn’t concern him, so he left them alone.

After a quick brush of his teeth again, he shed his clothes and slid into bed beside his husband. Thran was so solidly asleep that Bard didn’t want to wake him up, but the EMT had emphasized how important it was to check Thran for a concussion. Reluctantly Bard put a hand on Thran’s shoulder and shook him gently.

“Angel, I hate to wake you, but I’ve got to check you for the concussion,” Bard said, shaking gently.

Thran barely moved, but his eyes fluttered, registered Bard, and shut again. “Go away.”

That was encouraging, and made Bard smile. “I will, angel, I promise, just as soon as I make sure you’re all right. The EMT said I had to check you –”

“Décembre, Novembre, Octobre, Septembre, Août, Juillet, Juin, Mai, Avril, Mars, Fevrier, Janvier,” Thran graved, trying to curl around his pillow. “Six times seven is forty-two. Hello, my name is Inago Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

Bard snickered. “That’s pretty good. I guess you don’t have a concussion.”

“Then turn out the light, lie down, and be quiet.”

Smiling, Bard did all three. As he settled into bed, Thran snaked out a long arm, pulled him close, and curled around him with a sigh. In a heartbeat, the exhausted dancer was asleep again, leaving Bard to lie in the dark and the silence alone.
He wasn’t alone. The soft breath on his back reminded him that his husband was still with him. Maybe there was noise in his head, but it couldn’t drown out the faint whisper of that soft breath. All was not well quite yet, but it would be. That promise was in every one of those soft breaths.

Bard closed his eyes, and slept.

* * *

It was after nine before Bard woke the next morning. He registered the time with an internal groan; after all of last night’s conflagration, he’d forgotten to set the alarm to get up for the children’s last day of camp. He edged out from under Thran’s outflung arm to slip into the bathroom, then pulled on his shorts and tee to see if anyone else were up. He heard nothing downstairs, so he stuck his head in the children’s rooms. Tilda and Sigrid were both asleep in their beds; Bain and Legolas were sprawled on Legolas’s bed in his room. There was no reason to get them up and hurry them to camp, not after last night, so Bard left them asleep and padded downstairs to make tea. As he waited for the water to boil, he took a look through the dining room windows out the front to see if there were still police officers in the front yard. To his surprise, there were. Had they been here all night?

Bard made his tea, put on his shoes, turned the security system to daytime mode, and ambled out the mudroom door to see what went on in his front yard.

The grey-haired officer in charge told him that they were almost finished their investigation. Of course he wouldn’t tell Bard anything that had come out of it, but he did ask Bard if he had a garden hose hooked up to a faucet.

“Sure, I can get that for you. Do you need a bucket or anything else, too?”

“No, sir, the hose will be just fine. I understand you have children, so we’ll go ahead and clean up the site for you.”

Lance’s blood, he meant.

Bard grimaced. “I appreciate that. I’ve got a ten-year old daughter. She doesn’t need to see that.”

“I’ve got a granddaughter about the same age,” the officer offered. “They’re not ready to deal with anything like that at their age.”

“Is anyone ever ready to deal with anything like that?” Bard asked, shaking his head. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re probably right,” the officer allowed. “At any rate, I’ll see that it’s cleared out. You’ll be able to put your vehicle away, too. That’ll give them less to be interested in.”

“Who?” Bard frowned in confusion.

The officer pointed towards the end of the driveway. In the field across the lane, several reporters with cameras still hunkered down. The thought of so many people snapping pictures of him in his canvas shorts and plain blue tee didn’t please him.

“Oh, for the love of the gods,” Bard said in exasperation. “They really are vultures.”
“They really are,” the officer nodded. “A word to the wise, Mr. Bowman. Keep your children away from the front of the house for a day or so. They don’t need to be in the stir. It just upsets them, and I’d expect they’re already upset enough.”

“You could say that,” Bard agreed with an ironic glance at the officer. “We’ve got to go out later to make our statements at your station, but we’ll keep the children close.”

“Good. I’ll see about wrapping things up, and if you can put the hose out, I thank you.”

“It’ll be right at the edge of the carriage house,” Bard promised. He went into the carriage house to suit actions to words, made sure the faucet was on, and then went back inside the house. He didn’t venture near where Lance had fallen last night. He didn’t want to see that spot in the daylight until the police had flushed the stains off the grass and into the soil.

Inside, he retreated to the kitchen. Mixing up a batch of muffins – blueberry lemon today – gave him something productive and familiar to do. It was just as well that he started on them as soon as he got inside; no sooner had he put them in the oven to bake than his mobile chimed. He didn’t field one call before he was on to the next. Bilbo, of course, had seen the morning news and was worried about him and the family. Lettie and Ori and even Irmo were next. Gods, what if they’d called Thran first and hadn’t been able to wake him? He ignored the calls long enough to check that Thran was still sound asleep. His mobile wasn’t on his bedside table, and it wasn’t in the sitting room – maybe it was still in Bard’s truck. He traipsed outside again to ask the police officer if he could retrieve Thran’s things from the truck, and brought everything inside when the officer assented. Yes, everyone had tried to call Thran on his mobile, and when they hadn’t reached him, they’d called Bard. At least he was able to reassure everyone and Thran could stay asleep, as he so desperately needed.

Along the way, he was relieved to hear that Mike had come through his surgery well, and now recovered in the ICU. The bullet had lodged in his lung, but the surgeons had been able to remove it, and after several infusions of blood, he was out of danger.

Thran, or Sigrid, could so easily have been in Mike’s place. Or worse.

Bard suppressed a shiver. This aspect of the shadow that had plagued Clan Ffyrnig would take the longest to put behind him, but Bard was determined to do so.

He made himself two soft-boiled eggs, and sat down at the kitchen table to wring every sensation of comfort and satisfaction from them. The warm, runny yolk, perfect to dip the edge of his muffin into, the salt and pepper to spice the just set white, the sweet blueberries and rich butter...

Legolas and Bain tiptoed into the kitchen. They looked surprised to see Bard; maybe they thought they were the first ones up.

“Morning, lads,” Bard held up a hand in greeting as he got up from the table. “Blueberry muffins are still hot if you want some. Eggs, or porridge?”

Legolas came right to him and engulfed him in a big hug.

Surprised, Bard belatedly put his arms around the tall youth. “Hmm. I didn’t realize you liked blueberry muffins so much. I’ll have to make them more often.”

“All the media websites are full of what happened last night,” Bain said somberly as he snared a muffin to chew. He looked out of the kitchen window, not at Bard. “The police took video of the whole thing.”
Bard winced. “And you watched the whole thing.”

“Course we did,” Bain snorted, but without his usual emphatic scorn. “I can’t believe you crawled under the truck, Da.”

“I’m glad you did,” Legolas hugged Bard a little harder. “You saved Papa’s life. Thank you. That’s the most awesome thing anyone’s ever done in the world.”

“You’re welcome, Legs,” Bard patted the boy’s back. “But don’t give me all the credit, by any means. Your Papa was very brave, and he took the gun away from Lance. Then your sister kept Lance focused on her so I could get under the truck to free your Papa. So it was all three of us, not just me.”

“I’ll give her a big hug, too,” Legolas promised. “She was amazing. So were you.”

“It all came out well,” Bard shrugged. “Please, don’t either of you regale Tilda with what you saw. She doesn’t want to know, and she doesn’t need to know.”

“We won’t,” Bain promised.

“Thanks. So, breakfast...”

“Bain and I can do fried eggs and bagels for sandwiches.”

“Help yourself,” Bard nodded, and went back to his chair at the kitchen table to watch the boys putter through the making of sandwiches. It was just as well that he hadn’t gotten the children up for camp; not only had they all needed the extra sleep, but seeing all the reporters in the field reminded him that another contingent had probably camped out the school, waiting to see Thran. The children didn’t need to endure such badgering. It was also likely that a lot of their fellow campers had seen or heard of what had happened last night, and they might have decided to quiz the children about it. Tilda, especially, didn’t need that. By the time camps resumed in a week after the festival, enough of the noise should have died down, because people would be more interested in some new event rather than last week’s news.

Sigrid was down next. She looked subdued, but much better than she had last night. Legolas immediately got up to engulf her in another big hug, and to thank her, which touched her so much that she returned the boy’s hug with equal fervor.

“Course I helped,” Sigrid snorted, to shore up her bravado. “We’re Clan Ffyrnig, Legs. You know that.”

“I do now,” the boy agreed. “I thought I knew before, but now I really know.”

Tilda arrived in a few minutes, so talk of the night’s events was put aside. Egg bagel sandwiches aside, the blueberry muffins hadn’t lasted long under the boys’ barrage, so Bard mixed up another batch. Just as the aroma of the new batch rose, Thran came into the kitchen. He moved stiffly, but after last night, it was a wonder he could move at all. His wrists were purple, and the small wounds on his temple looked red, but all in all, he passed muster. The tall dancer offered a smile and a wave to the children, but he didn’t reach the table before Legolas had graced him with his patented bear hug. Thran looked a question at Bard, who waited until Tilda went to peek into the oven to mouth, “The boys know.”

Thran’s eyes flickered in response, and he gladly enjoyed his son’s enthusiasm. Legolas lapsed into whispered Russian, which Thran answered softly, clearly assuring the boy that he was fine.
Fine. This time, Bard was the one to snort. Thran had no idea what fine meant. But this morning, even Thran’s definition of fine was a blessing.

After everyone had devoured the second batch of muffins, Thran excused himself to the main room to return all his calls. He kept it brief, explaining that he was due at the police station to make his statement, so Bard urged the children upstairs to put on clothes so they would be ready to go out when Thran was done. When everyone assembled in the kitchen to go outside, Thran held up a hand.

“Before we go out, I want to tell you that we will likely acquire several reporters to dog our trail. Bard and I will see that they do not bother you. You do not have to talk to them, and in fact it is better that you do not – to talk to them is to encourage them, and that we do not want. If you want to say anything, speak French among yourselves.”

“That might be fun,” Bain said with a snarky grin.

“Don’t get too carried away,” Bard warned. “Discretion is the better part of valor.”

“What does that mean, anyway?” Bain shrugged.

“It means that it’s better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt,” Sigrid intoned.

“Gods, you sound just like Da,” Bain snarked. “Okay, I’ll be good.”

The family made a beeline for their SUV in the Gamgees’ driveway, and were away before anyone followed them. The first stop was the police station, which ended up being two hours of not-much-fun for the younger children. Bard went first so that he could take the children outside to peruse the shops in the center of the village. Sigrid was eager to duck into the Blue Mountain Bistro, but not just to tell Miss Dís that she was anxious to get back to work. Finn stood behind the counter, making an espresso for a customer, but his face lit up to see Sigrid. As soon as he could step away, he had enveloped her in an exuberant hug – it seemed to be the day for such displays – and they went off for a few moments to chat. Dís gave them a fond look, and then narrowed a more considering one on Bard.

“I saw the news. I’m sorry you had to go through all of that, and glad that it’s finally over.”

“Thank you,” Bard exhaled. “Me, too. The worse hour of my life.”

“I don’t doubt it. I’m happy for all of you. And, to be honest, I’m happy for me, too. I needed Sigrid back a week ago.”

“What, Finn’s not up to snuff?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Dís gave the boy a motherly expression. “But your Sigrid is stellar. Fast, quick learner, and a hard worker. Keep your fingers crossed for good weather for the next week, Bard. I’ll put even Sigrid to the test during lunch then.”

Bard held up his hands with all of his fingers crossed. “I’ve got a few reasons of my own to hope everything goes well, Dís. The ballet goes live tomorrow.”

“How’s Thran? I hope he’s well enough to dance.”

“Nothing will keep him from dancing that premiere. Tonight’s the last dress rehearsal, then tomorrow is the real thing. The whole company is so excited.”
“Have you seen it? How does it look?"

“It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. It’ll be wonderful.”

“Good!” Dís tapped her knuckles on the counter emphatically. “I can’t wait to see it. I’ve got tickets for Wednesday. We’ve got lots of art exhibits and music performances scheduled, but this is the festival’s first dance piece. We need this to take the whole village a bit farther.”

“Thran will give it his all. All right, let me break up the excited teenagers, and I’ll let you get back to business.”

“Thanks. Sigrid, first thing tomorrow morning, seven-thirty sharp, all right?”

“Absolutely!” Sigrid beamed. “I’m so happy to be back! I’ll show this guy how it’s done, won’t I?”

“I won’t mind if you do,” Finn gave Sigrid such an affectionate smile that the girl reddened, and tried to roll her eyes as if she didn’t care.

Laughing, Dís shooed her towards the door. “Go, go! Or this guy won’t remember beans about how to make a latte for the next hour!”

“I’ll call you, Sig!” Finn waved, as they exited the shop.

Bard’s mobile rang to say that Thran was finished, and it was Sigrid’s turn, so they headed back to the police station, and saw Sigrid into the interviewer’s room for her statement. Thran offered to wait for her, so Bard shepherded the three younger children to the cheese shop, then the Ilithien Gallery to check on his pieces. Celebrían greeted him gladly, and showed him his Andromeda Galaxy piece hanging from the ceiling and turning slowly as he’d envisioned it. His bronze pine tree was in another room, but looked handsome near a collection of ceramic birds. Celebrían had already sold several of his sketches, so she expected visitors during the coming week to account for many more. That was a relief. Bard hadn’t liked missing the chance to present more of his sculpture for sale during the festival, but at least he could anticipate sales of his sketches to salvage the week.

Sigrid was finally done her statement, so Thran drove them to the shopping mall to see what chance they had to rent suits for Bard, Legolas, and Bain for tomorrow’s premiere.

“You’re okay to dance, then, angel?” Bard asked Thran as they ventured into the mall.

“There is nothing that will keep me from dancing the final rehearsal tonight, or the premiere tomorrow,” Thran said firmly, unconsciously echoing what Bard had said to Dís earlier. “Too many people, me among them, have worked very hard for this premiere. It will go on as we planned.”

The confidence and eagerness in his voice made the awkward chore of getting fit for a tuxedo less of one. It was more fun to watch Legolas explain all the ins and outs of the various suits to Bain than it was to look at his reflection in the mirror. But the most fun was to watch Thran turn into an impresario, asking the clerk for this or that or the other. His experience at gala events had made him most persnickety, but the results were well worth it. On such short notice, there were no gimmicky colors or styles, only the most classic of black tuxedos, even for the boys, but that was just the look Thran wanted.


Bard didn’t think he looked like James Bond, but when he caught Thran looking at him in the mirror with a most intent expression and a slight smile, he decided that he looked quite good enough to
Suits in tow, the family hastened through the mall towards the parking lot. Thran’s long, white hair attracted enough attention that passersby stopped to stare and comment among themselves. Even Tilda noticed, so the family hurried along at a good clip to reach their SUV. When they got home, the police were gone, and all signs of last night’s events were gone, other than Bard’s truck parked in the middle of the driveway. They put both vehicles into the carriage house and came into the house. The children had a snack, but Bard planned to make something a little more substantial for Thran before he went to rehearsal.

“Can we go tonight, too?” Sigrid asked.

Thran shrugged. “I do not mind if you come, not at all. But we have tickets for you to go tomorrow to the premiere, so do you want to see the same thing two days in a row?”

“I do,” Sigrid said at once. “I’ve worried and hoped and feared about Immortal, too, so yes, I want to see it both times. Tonight will be like a private performance. We deserve that.”

“I’d like to go, too, Papa,” Legolas said.

“If Legs goes, then I do, too,” Bain nodded. “He’s worried about it a lot, too.”

“What about you, Til?” Bard asked.

“I still want to wear my bee dress tomorrow,” the little girl said. “But a private performance – that sounds special.”

“I’m up for it, too,” Bard agreed. “We need an early supper, then. We didn’t have lunch because we ate breakfast so late, so let’s see what I can scare up that’s fast.”

“Ravioli!” Tilda crowed. “The cheese ones!”

Everyone chipped in to get a substantial lunch/dinner on the table. Thran ate sparingly of his usual roasted chicken, rice, and sautéed veg, but the hungry children ate mounds of ravioli in tomato sauce and cheese, as well as the veg. Lots of fresh fruit and cookies filled in the last corners. Thran collected his dance things, the children tidied their clothes and collected books and games to occupy themselves while the ballet company warmed at the barre, and they were off again.

The expectant expressions on the children’s faces calmed a little more of Bard’s anxiety from last night. They were happy and excited about getting their private view of Thran’s ballet, as carefree as if nothing untoward had happened last night.

Thank the gods. The shadow had already begun to lift.
Chapter 156

Chapter Summary

The final rehearsal for Immortal is at hand. Will the shadow of yesterday's crisis affect it?

As the children piled into the back of the SUV, Thran tried not to think about the last time he’d been behind the wheel of a vehicle.

Last night, when he’d driven Bard’s truck.

Las night, when Lance had been in the back seat with a gun, goading him on.

Last night, when he thought he might die.

Better to think of today.

Today, he would drive his SUV. Today, Tilda would be in the back seat behind him with Sigrid beside her, and behind them would be Legolas and Bain. Today, Bard would be beside him. Best of all, today no one would be frightened, but happy and excited.

Would he ever look at Bard’s truck the same way again?

Of course he wouldn’t. Every time he looked at that truck, he’d know how much Bard loved him – enough to risk his life to save Thran’s.

He would not ask Bard to drive them to the school for his rehearsal. He would not let a dead boy frighten him with memories of the evil he had tried to inflict. Thran would drive his family himself, because doing so reclaimed more of his life.

When the children had buckled themselves into their seats, and Bard sat beside him, he drove the SUV out of the carriage house. He paused a moment to regard their house – the fresh white paint that shone brightly in the hot summer sun, the red door that beckoned a welcome, the myriad pots and planters with their riot of blossoms that cascaded down each side of the porch steps and over the top of the balustrade, the lush shrubs and flowers that nestled around the house to ground it. He admired the beauty before him, and how well it reflected the happy family that lived inside. This was the enduring memory that he’d hold onto.

This.

Now it was time to think of the night to come – the last dress rehearsal before tomorrow night’s premiere. How wonderful it was to savor the excitement that coiled in his belly, untainted by worry and fear! At long last, Immortal was ready to greet the world!

That brought to mind another bit of reality. Thran turned off the SUV engine, and turned around to meet five sets of curious eyes.

“Before we go, there is something I must tell you, children,” Thran said, pitching his voice to reach the boys in the back seat. “When we get to the school, there will likely be many people waiting for
us. There will be people who want my autograph or to take a picture. There will also likely be many reporters there.”

“Reporters?” Tilda had been looking out of her window at the pot of yellow and orange marigolds by the corner of the carriage house, but now she looked at Thran and her father with a mystified frown. “What for?”

“Because of last night, Til,” Bain said from the back.

“Because of the ballet premiere tomorrow, Bain,” Bard said quickly, with a warning glance at his son.

“Last night?” Tilda looked frightened. “What about it? Wait, no – I don’t want to know.”

“All you need to know, Tilda,” Bain said with a fierce look on his face, “is that last night Thran, Sigrid, and Da kicked ass.”

Bard turned around to skewer his son with a steady gaze. “Enough, Bain.”

“Yes, Da,” Bain murmured, glancing at Legolas.

The blond youth glanced back, and swallowed. “But they did, Tilda. Especially your Da. He saved Papa’s life. And so did Sigrid.”

“Lads, that’s enough,” Bard said. His voice had lowered several tones, and brooked no discussion. Both of the boys looked militant. Tilda looked apprehensive enough that Thran said, “Have respect for your sister, both of you. You make her uncomfortable. Please apologize.”

“Sorry, Tilda. Sorry, Kukla.”

“Okay,” Tilda murmured, but she looked a thoughtful question at Sigrid, who didn’t quite meet her sister’s eyes. Before the older girl could say anything, though, the little girl sighed. “I guess you’d better tell me. Everybody knows but me. But I don’t want to hear any squishy parts.”

“It was amazing, Til!” Bain leaned over the back of his sisters’ seat and met Tilda’s gaze with an excited expression. “There was this video online, and it –”

“Video?” Sigrid screeched, turning sideways to glare at Bain, as if he were personally responsible. Thran felt no less shocked than she did, and his expression surely mirrored hers of rampant teenaged outrage. So half the planet was going to see him hung up on a truck grille? He flicked Bard a glance –

What was this? Bard knew about the video?

“Someone made a video?” Sigrid said in the same shriek. “That took nerve, and not the good kind!”

“Yeah, and it showed the whole thing –”

“Did you know about this?” Thran demanded of Bard. “You did! And you did not tell me? Why did you not tell me?”

“Stop, stop, stop!” Bard held up his hands in a plea for silence. He gave the boys a harried glare. “This is out of hand, and that doesn’t help anyone. So yes, someone made a video, but I don’t think it’s a police one, because the police would never release something like that –”
“You have seen this video?” Thran demanded.

“I haven’t,” Bard admitted. “The lads told me about it this morning.”

“It showed the whole thing, Papa,” Legolas said apologetically. “At least the part once Sigrid arrived. I was glad I saw it, because it proved that Sigrid and Bard saved your life.”

“Sigrid and Da saved Ada’s life?” Tilda said with a little gasp. “Ooooh, now I know you’d better tell me what happened!”

Silence fell over the clan as Thran locked eyes with Bard.

“We’ve got to tell her something, Da,” Bain protested. “Everyone’s going to know about it, and that means everyone’s going to talk about it. Better Til hears it from us than everyone else.”

Bard looked militant, but Thran bowed to the inevitable. He put a placating hand on Bard’s knee.

“Bain makes a good point, lyubov moyu. The reporters at the school will surely say something about last night. We should respect our Kukla enough to tell her about it, so that she is prepared for what she might hear from them.”

Bard swallowed, but as Thran knew he would, he nodded. He met Tilda’s eyes. “Bain and Thran are right, little doll. And I don’t want you to worry about anything you hear outside of Clan Ffyrnig. So here goes.”

“No squishy parts, please.”

“No squishy parts. But some parts are scary. Just remember that everything turned out all right.”

Tilda nodded. “Okay.”

“So last night, Lance went to the school to look for Sigrid. He couldn’t find her, because she was with you and the lads at the films, yes? So he got mad, and he... hurt Mr. Mike.”

“He hurt Mr. Mike?” Tilda’s eyes widened in distress. “Is Mr. Mike all right now?”

“He had to go to hospital, but he’ll be okay.”

“Hospital? What happened to him? Did Lance hit him?”

“Um, it was a little worse than that. Lance, um, had the gun remember? And... he shot Mr. Mike. But Mr. Mike will be okay. He’ll be okay.”

Tilda gulped, but her gaze didn’t waver. “Okay, that’s good. I’m glad he’ll be okay.”

“So... Lance still had the gun, and he made Ada go with him to the house because he was still mad at Sigrid, and he wanted to talk to her. But when they got to the house, Ada got the gun away from him and threw it away so Lance couldn’t find it.”

“Good for Ada!”

“Very good. But Ada’s been very sick, so he couldn’t keep Lance from hitting him, and...”

Tilda considered Bard. “Is this the squishy part?”

“No, this is the scary part.”
Tilda considered some more. “Ada is okay, so... I can stand the scary part.”

“Okay. It’s scary, but it didn’t last long, so...”

“Just tell her, Da,” Bain said in an exasperated tone, rolling his eyes. “This is the part where Da and Sigrid were heroes, Til, so don’t let him welsh out of it.”

“They were?” Tilda turned a wide-eyed look on Bain, then looked back at Bard. “Okay, tell me the hero part, Da.”

“Well, Lance knocked Ada down. He didn’t have his gun anymore, so he... he tied Ada to the front of my truck and threatened to run him over unless Sigrid talked to him. But it was okay, Tilda, because Sigrid did talk to him. She was very brave, and kept him talking for a long time. He was so busy talking to her that he didn’t see me crawl under the truck to untie Ada. Then Ada and I crawled to the back of the truck, and then we were safe.”

“Except for Lance,” Sigrid growled. “That’s when Da dragged him out of the truck and punched his lights out.”

“So everyone was okay, Kukla. Sigrid and Bard saved Papa,” Legolas finished the tale.

The frown on Tilda’s face revealed that she didn’t think the story was over.

“But... you said Lance is dead? Did he fall and hit his head? Or did you...”

“No, no, Kukla,” Thran hastened to say. “Your Da only got Lance out of the truck. The police officers came right away to take him into custody, and your Da moved away to take care of Sigrid and me. But Lance did not want to go with the police, so he fought them. None of us had any part in that. We do not know exactly what happened, other than the boy tried to grab one of the officers’ guns. It went off, and the bullet struck him, and he died.”

Tilda mulled all that she’d heard, then scanned her brothers and sister. Sigrid nodded, then so did the boys. She looked back at Bard and Thran and sighed. “Okay. Thank you for telling me. It’s not easy to know, but at least I do now. And everyone is okay. And I don’t have to be afraid of Lance anymore.”

“No,” Bard said, offering her an encouraging smile. “No one has to be afraid anymore.”

Everyone lapsed into silence, so Thran restarted the SUV and headed down the lane. The trip took only a few minutes, and the children were silent for the most part, though the boys murmured among themselves in the back. He glanced at Bard, who looked more or less reconciled to what had been said. Upon consideration, Thran decided that despite the unpleasant surprise of a video record of his being held hostage, at least they’d talked about what had happened as a family, and there were no more secrets. He felt lighter because of it. Better to let it out into the air than let it fester unsaid.

They reached the school. Thran turned into the parking lot and found a space some distance away from the horde of people standing outside the doors to the auditorium. He turned off the SUV, and turned to look at the children. “There is a technique that will help us get into the school, children. Move briskly, and all the while we smile and nod. You do not have to say anything. Bard and I will say anything if we need to.”

“We can talk more about things once we get inside, if anyone wants to,” Bard said, scanning the children. “We’ll have time for that while Thran and the other dancers warm up. Then we’ll enjoy our private performance of Thran’s wonderful ballet.”
“Yeah, Til?” Bain said from the back. “You stick with Legs and me. He knows all about how to ignore reporters, so he and I will make sure you’re okay.”

“You will?” Tilda gave her brothers a surprised look, but when they nodded, her expression changed to a gratified smile. “Thank you, Legolas and Bain. That’s very kind of you.”

Thran smothered a chuckle at Tilda’s dignified answer. “Then I will make sure that our lioness and your Da are equally okay. Shall we go?”

“Let’s do it,” Sigrid replied, giving Tilda a smile as everyone got out of the SUV.

“Do not stop, mes chers,” he said as everyone clustered around him. “The great buffoon dancer must get to work, and so on and so forth. Follow Bard, who will see you into the school if I have to stop.”

“Yes, Papa; okay, Ada; right, Thran,” the children said. Everyone shouldered his or her bag, and walked purposefully towards the school. The boys closed ranks around Tilda, who looked around with more interest than apprehension, Thran was relieved to note. He and Bard flanked Sigrid, and as the reporters recognized him, Thran looked to his family.

“So it begins,” he said with what he hoped was a reassuring wink. He marshaled the professional smile that he reserved for reporters, and braced for the barrage. He didn’t have long to wait.

“Thran! Thran! Over here! How are you this morning? Did you suffer any injuries last night? How does it feel to have survived your ordeal? Are you fit to dance?”

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Thran smiled. “I am well, thank you; I hope you are the same. Hello, Anna, Mark; nice to see you again. Yes, I am quite fit, and delighted to dance our last dress rehearsal tonight. I hope you will all be here tomorrow for the premiere of our new ballet, Immortal. I am excited to bring it to the world after so much hard work.”

The clamor degenerated into the spate of breathless questions that was more akin to a feeding frenzy of sharks than a polite exchange of questions and answers.

“Is this your husband? Bard, what went through your mind when you learned your husband had been kidnapped? How is the bodyguard who was shot during your kidnapping, Thran? Young lady, young lady, over here, please – it must have been a terrifying moment when you saw Thran tied to the front of that truck; can you tell us about that moment? Mr. Bowman, were you frightened when you had to crawl under the truck? Thran, is it true that the boy who attacked you was bent on revenge?”

Thran slid to one side, guiding Sigrid and Bard ahead of him towards the school door where security guards already came forward to help them out of the fray. Legolas and Bain grabbed Tilda’s hands to pull her after her father and sister. Turning, Thran stopped to draw the reporters towards him rather than after his family.

“My family and I are well, and suffered no lasting harm last night. We have put it behind us. Tonight, I rehearse Immortal, and tomorrow night, our premiere performance opens the Greenwood Dale on the Lake Arts Festival. That is a proud honor for the UltraViolet Ballet Company, and we intend to do it justice. Thank you for your concern and your good wishes!”

Thran gave one last wave and turned to follow his family. The questions continued to bombard them as the security guards held open the doors for them. At the last second, Tilda wriggled from between her brothers to call to the reporters.

“My Da is a hero! And so is my sister!”
She gave an emphatic nod, and disappeared into the building. As surprised laughter swept through the reporters, Thran gave them a shrug.

“She is right. Goodbye!”

“Oh, Tilda, now you’ve done it!” Bain groaned as the security guards pulled the door shut after Thran. “You’ll be an Internet meme before the night’s out.”

“Is that bad?” she looked at Bain doubtfully. “I told them the truth.”

Bain rolled his eyes, and Legolas tried to smother a chuckle, both of which drew Thran’s grin. Sigrid wrapped an arm around Tilda’s shoulders to hug her. The resilience of children was just the thing to put life into correct perspective.

Ernie waited for them at his usual station, and welcomed him with a relieved expression. “Evening, Thran! Man, it’s a relief to see you tonight! You look great considering what happened. I’m glad you’re doing well. How’s Mike?”

Thran put his bag on Ernie’s table for the usual search. “Good evening, Ernie, thank you for your good wishes. I am well, a few bumps and bruises only. I talked to Ori earlier, who said that Mike rests comfortably in hospital. He is expected to make a full recovery, which is good news for all of us.”

“That’s the best news. Mike’s a great guy,” Ernie nodded emphatically as he gave Thran’s bag a cursory look. As the children and Bard opened their bags for the guard, Ernie gave them all a quick look. “Go on in, kids. None of you have anything I have to worry about. Have a good evening, all of you. Thran, best of luck tonight.”

“Thank you,” Thran replied, and the children murmured the same. Everyone followed Thran into the auditorium. He spent a few minutes with Bard and the children until they settled with their books, music players, and sketchpads.

“We’ll be fine, Thran,” Bard assured him, stroking his back. “All you have to think about for the rest of the night is *Immortal*. We’ll be here when you’re done.”

“Thank you, *lyubov moya.*” Thran offered Bard a touch in return, then collected his bag and walked up the stairs to the stage.

As usual, Thran was early; very few people, even of the stage crew, were in house yet. He liked the time alone with his thoughts before the rigors of a dancer’s world descended upon him. Today, however, he had more reason to arrive before most of his colleagues. He hadn’t been sure how quickly he would be able to escape the reporters, so he was gratified that they hadn’t delayed him as long as he’d feared. That gave him more time to address the real reason he’d come early.

He ached all over.

At least he felt better now than he had when he’d gotten out of bed this morning, but still... he had much work to do to limber sore muscles, bruised wrists and hip and shoulder, stiff neck, creaky sacrum.

He went backstage and passed the dressing rooms to the one he and Luka shared –

*Suka blyad.*
Had anyone mopped up all the traces of Mike’s blood? He hesitated before he touched the doorknob, not sure of what he’d see when he opened the door.

“Angel?” Bard came up behind him. His face must have revealed his apprehension, because Bard put a hand on his shoulder. “I thought you might want company.”

Thran didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “I do. I don’t want to see...”

“I’ll look, okay?” Bard didn’t wait for Thran’s acquiescence before he grasped the knob and stuck his head inside. “It’s okay. Not a trace.”

“Thank the gods,” Thran breathed. “It is one thing to say I will think about the ballet no matter what, and another to do so when confronted with...”

“Understood,” Bard said, pulling the door open. “I’ll give it a good once over while you change. The children asked if they could see your dressing room, so if it would help distract you, I could bring them back here.”

“That would help, yes,” Thran nodded. “They do not know that Mike...?”

“I didn’t tell them, so I don’t think so.”

“All right. As long as there are no signs, let them come back.”

Bard gave the small room a thorough inspection while Thran got into his practice clothes. When he was dressed, Bard disappeared to fetch the children, leaving the dressing room door wide open. Thran concentrated on his breathing, and did a few ginger stretches to coax the aches from his body while he waited for the children arrive. Their snickers about the cartoons on the dressing room doors were welcome sounds as they came down the hall.

“It’s so small in here!” Tilda commented.

“It is not bad for just Luka and me,” Thran explained. “And of course Charisse has the next room all to herself. But the corps must fit into the next two, and when they are all in there, it looks like the telephone booth and the small car cartoons in truth! That is why a nearby room holds the costumes, as well as extra mirrors and tables. It is very hard for all of the company to get ready at once in such small rooms.”

“Hello!” Luka appeared at the door. “Thran! Gods, I’m glad you’re okay! Hello, Bard! And Sigrid, Tilda, Legolas, and Bain! It’s so nice to see all of you again! How are you? Have you come to see us dance tonight?”

“Hi, Luka!” the children greeted the dancer.

“Yes, Ada said we could come to see you tonight,” Tilda beamed. “It’s our private performance!”

“Then we’ll dance extra well tonight, won’t we?” the young man grinned. “Just for you!”

“Come on, children,” Bard slipped out of the dressing room. “Let Luka change his clothes, and maybe Thran will show us the costumes before he has to warm up.”

“Of course,” Thran nodded, and the children filed out. “Say goodbye to Luka, but do not wish him good luck – that is bad luck!”

“I know what to say, Papa,” Legolas gave a mischievous grin. “Merde, Luka!”
“Oh, Legolas,” Thran winced, as the children dissolved into laughter and Bard gave him a jaundiced eye. “Do not glare at me, Bard. It is the tradition.”

“Vraiment,” Luka snickered. “That really is the tradition, Bard, so don’t blame Legolas or Thran.”

“Of course it is,” Bard shook his head as the rest of the children repeated the epithet gleefully. “Ethereal dancers, my foot.”

Luka lifted a hand in laughing acceptance of their good wishes. “Beaucoup de merde! Thank you! See you soon!”

As Luka ducked into the dressing room, Thran led the way to the big room at the side of the auditorium where the dancers warmed up. Rada was already there with the costume mistress, shaking out a new body stocking for Thran to wear during Acts II and III.

“Well, look!” the costumier beamed at the children. “You are all a happy sight. Sebastian has missed you!”

“Is he with you tonight, Mr. Rada?” Legolas asked.

“Sadly, no,” the costumier looked disappointed. “He’s very active in the summer, of course, and much too busy to be happy in my coat pocket, much less this tiny little shirt pocket. So he is at home, busily snuffling away in his habitat. He’ll be most upset to have missed you.”

“We’re sorry to miss him, too,” Sigrid assured him, then pointed to Thran’s armored tunic for Act I. “But we’re glad to see your costumes close up. This blue is amazing!”

“Thank you, my dear,” Rada beamed, and gave the children a quick look at each of the costumes hanging on their labeled hangers. Bard took the chance to edge up to Thran and rub a hand over his back.

“Okay, angel?”

Thran nodded. “Thank you for the distraction. I will warm up slowly and carefully, and then I will be restored.”

“Then merde, and nothing else.” Bard drew Thran’s hand up to press a surreptitious kiss on his wedding ring. “Do you want me to hold this for you?”

Thran shook his head. “It helped me to stay brave last night. So I will keep it with me tonight. My magic talisman.”

Bard’s eyes warmed. “You won’t need a magic talisman tonight, angel. Immortal’s wonderful, and so are you.”

Thran held Bard’s hand long enough to kiss his ring, then let it go. “My saint.”

Bard’s smile widened into a loving expression for Thran alone. He cocked his head back towards the children. “All right, troops. Time to let Thran get ready.”

With a wave to Rada and the costume mistress, then another for Thran, Bard shepherded the children back to the auditorium.

Thran moved one of the portable barres into place, and gave himself to his warmup. Despite all the aches and twinges, they seemed to ease when he remembered Bard’s private smile.
After Bard and the children left Thran’s dressing room, they tiptoed carefully onto the stage to return to their seats. The Underworld portion of the set was turned towards the audience, so they got a close view of everything as they passed. So many relics, trinkets, and keepsakes from uncounted cultures filled the set that it was hard to fathom how long it had taken to amass them. They lingered, trying to guess which artifact was from what culture. The only ones that Bard recognized with any authority were a small plaster bust of Plato, and a sketchy semblance of a Japanese Torii gate at the back of the set. Even after they resumed their seats, the children continued to point out one thing or another. Bain and Legolas both had their mobiles out, researching one thing or another, while Tilda turned to a new page in her sketchbook to draw her version of the miniature Sphinx perched in one nook of the set. Bard sat beside her to begin his own sketch, but his showed Bard and Legolas in animated discussion about Roman aqueducts. After a while, Sigrid and Tilda wanted to visit the restroom, so Bard put his drawing things aside to escort them.

There wasn’t any reason for Bard to worry about the girls now... but he felt better going with them, anyway.

When they returned, Legolas and Bain had begun a game. The girls borrowed Legolas’ music player, their heads close together so they could each plug in one of the ear buds while Tilda drew and Sigrid read. Bard got up to draw a picture of the children sitting together. When he finished that, he moved back far enough to get a good view of the stage, and plied his colored pencils. This was the first time he’d had an uninterrupted view of the Underworld set, so he took advantage of it. Even as more of the set crew arrived to prowl over the stage, he continued to sketch unperturbed. He got far enough along to capture this view of the set before the crew swung into action, rearranging it for the first Underworld scene. He had just time to block out this arrangement before the wrestling team arrived in their matching tees to turn the blank part of the set towards the audience. Bain was full of questions about how the set turned, but all of the children listened as Bard described the handholds that the wrestlers used.

Sigrid’s mobile buzzed; she pulled the earbud out of her ear to listen to the call. “Hello? Hi! Yes, I’m in the auditorium. What? Yes! I’ll be right out!”

Sigrid jumped from her seat even before she’d clicked off her mobile. “Finn’s out with Ernie, Da! I’m going to get him – be right back!”

She bounded up the aisle. Bard let her go; it was a relief to see her usual confidence and enthusiasm return. In a few minutes, she was back with the stocky blond boy beside her.

“Hi, Mr. Bowman!” Finn waved. “Hey, Bain, Legs! And Til, hey!”

The children and Bard returned Finn’s warm greetings, chatting briefly before the boy and Sigrid drew off to seats out of earshot. Bard left them alone; there was no reason why Sigrid couldn’t unburden herself to her sympathetic boyfriend. More than likely, the conversation would bring Sigrid some relief after holding back in front of Tilda and the boys.

More of the dancers came down the aisles, waving to Bard and the children as they walked by. Ori appeared with his usual smile to hand Bard the family’s tickets for tomorrow night’s premiere, and stayed to chat until Irmo came. The set grew quiet again as the dancers hurried to begin their warmup in the room where they’d left Thran. The boys were immersed in their game, so Bard and Tilda took
turns challenging each other to draw various animals. To even the odds, Tilda could draw in the normal way, but Bard had to keep the point of his pencil on the paper. They had a zoo full of animals – a monkey, a giraffe, a pride of lions, a hippopotamus, two elephants, and an okapi – by the time the house lights dimmed.

“It’s starting!” Tilda whispered, sitting up straight.

“It is. Here, put your pencils in your box, and put your sketchpad away so you can enjoy the show.”

“Okay!” Tilda dove for her bag and quickly stowed her drawing things. Bard followed suit, then settled into his seat. No matter that he’d seen the show last night – he couldn’t wait to see it again. The boys moved to seats farther forward, and Sigrid and Finn were to his left, so he had a good view of the children as the set dimmed.

As the battlefield music began, Tilda leaned over to whisper. “Look, Da! There’s Ada up at the top! This is when he’ll fly?”

“That’s right,” Bard whispered back. “It’s amazing.”

Tilda was so excited about Thran’s upcoming flight that the battle scene didn’t alarm her. She had seen the scene before, but with the full effect of lights, costume, and video, it was much more exciting. At Thran’s flight, she oohed and clapped her hands. The boys were no less enthusiastic. If tomorrow’s audience were as excited about what they saw, Immortal would be the talk of the festival. May the ballet world take equal notice!

At the first intermission, Tilda had lots to comment about. But once the second act began, she was enthralled by the myriad of different dancers, dance styles, the amazing set, and costumes. The entire act seemed to fly by, and so did the second intermission because Tilda and the boys had so many things to say about what they’d seen.

“Thran hasn’t danced in his pointe shoes yet,” Tilda commented. “Did he decide not to do it, Da?”

“You’ll have to wait and see, little doll,” Bard grinned. “We’ve got another act to go.”

“And here it comes!” Tilda clapped her hands as the lights dimmed again. Out came Charisse as the Maid, and there was Thran in his minimal costume and pointe shoes. Gods, how did Thran look so light, as if all he had to do to drift skyward was raise his arms? And how alien was he – so tall, as slender as an eyelash, as pale as funeral ashes compared to Charisse’s rosy Maid and Luka’s vigorous Soldier. When he threw himself into a split jump, head and arms thrown back, Tilda gasped, but the Maid and the Soldier never saw him. Was it hard for Charisse and Luka to be so close to that beautiful jump and not register the least notice of it?

When the Maid fled, leaving the Lord of the Underworld to collapse in despair, Tilda moaned sadly. The ballet raced to its conclusion, and all too soon Charisse and Luka flew up to take their places in the heavens. The Maid and the Soldier embraced before he dropped to one knee to offer his devotion to her, and below the Lord of the Underworld held out one attenuated hand in longing and loss before disappearing behind the gates to His kingdom. The lights fell, then the curtain, then both went back up for the company to take their bows. Tilda clapped enthusiastically as she jumped up and down. The boys added their applause to the company, and to the left, Sigrid wiped her cheek before she, too, stood up to applaud.

When Thran came forward to take his bow, Bard punctuated his applause to yell, “Bravo!”

Thran laughed when the children took up the call, but it was a laugh of triumph as well as
amusement.

Tomorrow night, the children wouldn’t be the only ones to yell bravo, and Bard would be there to hear them.

The house lights came up, and the dancers dropped out of their roles, back to mortal dancers who had put in a hard night’s work. Despite their weariness, they were smiling and elated, some just as exuberant as the jumping Tilda.

“That was incredible!” Sigrid exclaimed as she and Finn rejoined Bard and Tilda. “Just incredible!”

“Even better than incredible!” Tilda jumped up and down. “Fantabulous!”

“Ginormously amazing!” Bain called to her, grinning.

“Magnifique!” Legolas added. “Papa, c’est magnifique!”

“Merci, mon fils!” Thran called back, laughing. “We go to cool down, and then I will come down to you!”

Bard waved in acknowledgement as Thran and the other dancers made their way backstage.

“I have to admit that Ada dancing on pointe was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Sigrid said, as the set crew came on stage to snug everything down for the night.

“It was,” Bard nodded. “He was right about what a stunner it’d be. It’ll bring the place down tomorrow night.”

“I hope it does,” Tilda agreed. “I want everyone to love it!”

“They’d better,” Sigrid’s murmur was fierce. “He’s put so much blood and sweat into it, and we’ve all helped. Especially you, Da. How many gallons of paint did you put on our ballroom in record time?”

“A lot,” Bard admitted. “What’d you think, Finn?”

The boy chuckled shamefacedly and glanced at Sigrid. “I figured it’d be a lot of jumping up and down, and that’s it. Boy, was I wrong. Those battles were amazing! And Thran flying down over the battlefield – that was something. I’m glad I came.”

A certain teenaged girl was, too, if Sigrid’s smile was any gauge, but Bard merely smiled back and held silence about the obvious.

Ori came over to chat for a few minutes as they waited for the dancers to reappear after they’d changed out of their costumes and cooled from their exertions. It wasn’t long before they appeared in ones and twos, waving at the children as they headed home.

“You were great!” Tilda told them as they went by, drawing their happy laughter.

“Yeah!” Luka crowed as he went by, pumping his fist. “We were! Only one little mistake, but that’s good luck, you know. A perfect final rehearsal’s not a good omen.”

“I didn’t see a single mistake, Luka!” Tilda insisted. “It was all great!”

“You are our cheerleader, Tilda!” Charisse came up behind Luka. “But yes, there was one tiny little mistake. Luka and I were supposed to fly up slightly apart, so that the audience sees us better. But
we went together. It is a small thing, but good to keep the superstition without causing much consternation.”

“It all looked wonderful,” Sigrid assured her. “I can’t wait to see what the audience thinks tomorrow.”

“They’ll think it’s the best thing since sliced bread,” Luka chortled, rubbing his hands together.

“Yes, they will,” Bard avowed, amused at the stale metaphor that was typical of Luka’s jokes. “So get a good night’s sleep, because tomorrow life changes.”

Luka and Charisse wished the family and Ori goodnight, and made their way up to the entrance to the auditorium. Ori looked after them thoughtfully, then looked back at Bard.

“You’re right, you know.”

“About what?” Bard asked.

“Tomorrow, life will change. For all of us. The world will finally see Immortal, and it’ll be something else. A sensation isn’t overstating it.”

“I don’t think so, either, Ori.”

“So enjoy your last night of anonymity. Tomorrow night, everyone will know who Thran is, and Irmo, and Charisse and Luka and Rada. But they’ll know you, too, because you helped write the story, and once your pictures hit, they’ll know you for that, too.”

“Yeah, Da!” Bain and Legolas had come up to join them. “You’ll be famous!”

“I’ll leave that to Thran,” Bard held up his hands. “You’ll be famous, too, Ori, as the magician who kept Irmo focused, and made everything come together when it needed to.”

“Oh, I hope not,” Ori blinked, and gave Bard a wink. “My brother wouldn’t like that at all. See you tomorrow!”

“Bye, Ori!” the children waved.

Several more minutes passed before Thran appeared, but he was beaming. “Here I am, children! I hope it was not too terrible to wait so long. Of course Irmo had four things to tell me, but I did not listen, because Immortal is already perfect, and it is too late to change anything. It will make its premiere tomorrow just as you saw it, and what do you think about that?”

“I think someone is giddy,” Bard grinned. “Not that you any reason to be, not at all.”

“I am, I admit it!” Thran gave an expansive shrug. “I am very giddy, and very happy.”

“I liked it a lot,” Tilda assured him.

“I loved it,” Sigrid leaned in to pat Thran’s arm. “I’m sorry I gave you such a hard time about the pointe dancing, Ada. It was perfect. Just perfect.”

“Thank you so much, lioness,” Thran put an arm around her to hug her, and brushed a kiss on her hair before releasing her. “I am grateful.”

“It is a very wonderful ballet, Papa,” Legolas added his opinion.
“I liked it, too, Thran,” Bain’s expression was mischievous. “It even had ‘more stuff blows up’ in it!”

Laughing, Bard collected his bag of drawing supplies. “Get your things, children. It’s time to take the conquering hero home.”

Clan Ffyrnig bid Finn a farewell in the parking lot, amid Sigrid’s assurances that she’d see him tomorrow at the bistro. Their drive home was animated as the children discussed the parts they liked, and voted for what they thought was the best part. The boys like the battles, Tilda liked the Underworld dances, and Bard and Sigrid liked the pointe dance. But all agreed that the most dramatic moment was when Thran flew across the battlefield.

Thran listened to all of the discussion in silence, but his face never lost its smile. He still smiled as the children showered and got into bed, even when he and Bard retreated to their bedroom for the night.

“I bet you wake up with that same smile on your face tomorrow morning,” Bard teased, when Thran came out of the bathroom to join him in bed.

“I might.” Thran reached out a hand to stroke through Bard’s messy curls. “It feels good to be so happy.”

“Oh, I’ll second that in a heartbeat,” Bard picked up the end of Thran’s braid to dust it over Thran’s nose. All that did was encourage Thran to chuckle. “You were amazing tonight. I’ve seen you dance in the ballroom, in class, in the studio, so many times, and I thought that was the sum of it. But none of them are as stunning as to see you perform. You become the role – you don’t dance it, not at all. You live it. That took my breath away.”

Thran stilled, and his smile of delight changed to one of love and affection. “That is how I felt at your art show. Your sketches are so full of life, too. I hope you captured good sketches of the rehearsal tonight. To combine your art and mine... that would be a delight.”

“I did get some good ones.”

“I am still too excited to sleep. Perhaps you would show me?”

“Sure. I left my sketchbook downstairs, but I’ll fetch it. Back in a tick.”

Bard grabbed his shorts at the side of the bed, but didn’t bother to put them on before he went downstairs, grabbed his sketchbook, and returned to the bedroom. He dropped the shorts by the bedside and got back into bed. Thran had plumped the pillows against the headboard, and crowded close when Bard pulled up his knees and rested his sketchbook against them. He would have flipped past the animal drawings, but Thran stayed his hand.

“What are these? Something for Tilda, I think?”

“We had a contest. To make it fair, I had to draw all of mine without lifting my pencil.”

“Who won?”

Bard shook his head. “She had fun coming up with unusual animals, like the okapi, and I had fun watching her draw, so we both won. She gets better every day. Theodred challenges her in just the right ways, and she tries things on her own. That’s exciting to watch.”

“I hope she will show me her animals. I am sure they are wonderful.”

“She did some cute ones. I bet she’d be happy to show them to you.”
“I will be sure to ask. So show me what you came up with after the animals – oh, you did the Underworld! In color! I like this one very much! So much detail!”

“It’s a good match to the one I did earlier of the flip side of the stage.” Bard turned back to near the beginning of the book to show his sketch of the stark black and white set. “I’d like to go back to this one and add a little green to show the light on the bottom part, and a little blue on your perch. That would be a great sketch to make, too – the empty set with you perched on the top, waiting.”

Thran hummed in agreement. “That one would be very dramatic, yes. I hope you do it. So what is next, after the Underworld?”

Bard showed him the other views he’d done of the Underworld set, including one where the stage hands worked to maneuver the pieces into another configuration. The first sketches in the lot showed the children intent on their activities as they waited for the rehearsal to start.

“I like them all,” Thran sighed, as Bard shut the sketchbook and laid it on the floor by the bed. “The colored pencils are wonderful. I have not seen you use them before.”

“The troll market inspired me. That’s such an amazing set – it includes all the colors that aren’t in the mortal world. Mere black and white wouldn’t do it justice. I want to use them to draw scenes from the ballet, too. So much motion and life! I want to see if I can do them justice.”

“You will,” Thran said with quiet confidence. “Your sketches will make a wonderful book. After tomorrow, when everyone sees how wonderful Immortal is, they will clamor to see your version of it.”

“That’ll be funny.” Bard glanced at Thran with a teasing grin. “You’ll make me a famous sketch artist before I make me a famous metal sculptor.”

“Tcha,” Thran waved an airy hand. “You will be a famous artist on your own merits, regardless of the medium. Rahmiel alone will be a sensation when you cast him. That reminds me – I thought of a companion piece that will complement Rahmiel perfectly.”

Bard’s eyebrows went up in interest. “Tell me.”

Thran sat up to turn off his bedside table lamp, so Bard did the same. They arranged themselves in their usual tangle of limbs, with Thran’s head on Bard’s shoulder and his arm across Bard’s chest.

“Your Rahmiel descends from heaven and alights on the earth to offer succor to a beleaguered saint,” Thran murmured softly, long fingers tracing light circles across Bard’s chest. “That is how you saw me that day in our apartment building, when I leaped down the stairs to meet you. So you must also show how the angel sees his saint, when he breaks his wings and falls to earth, no longer able to fly. That is when the saint rises from the earth to offer succor to the beleaguered angel.”

A lump suddenly appeared in Bard’s throat, but he swallowed it down to press a kiss on Thran’s hair. Was that how Thran saw him? It was such an unrealistic, idealized image. “I love you, too, angel.”

Thran raised his head to regard Bard. “I am serious. Promise me you will do this piece.”

“I’ll see what I come up with.”

“Promise me.”

Bard swallowed again. How could he deny that soft, loving voice anything? “It won’t be dramatic,
like Rahmiel.”

“It will be the truth, which has its own drama, if a quieter one. Please.”

Bard conceded with a long exhale. “I promise.”

Thran kissed Bard’s lips, and laid his head back on Bard’s shoulder with a sigh. “Then I am happy. Thank you.”

Bard couldn’t think of a single word to answer Thran. So he gathered his angel close, grateful once again that he still could.
Chapter 157

Chapter Summary

Put on your glad rags. We've got front row seats with Clan Ffyrnig to the world premiere of Immortal.

Chapter Notes

Hal and Ari appear courtesy of johnnysmitten. Thank you, my dear ❤️!

"The euphemism" is a nod to "Halloween is Grinch Night," where the young protagonist who needs to use "the euphemism" gets caught in the Sour Sweet wind. That term made it into my vocabulary and has stayed there ever since. And no, I don't own any rights to the Grinch or his specials :-).

Translation Notes:

ya lyublyu tebya = I love you (Russian)
Printsessa Ognya = Princess of Fire (Russian)
Sledi za mnoi = watch over me (Russian)

Saturday hadn’t yet dawned when Thran woke. All the liquids Bard had urged him to drink after his rehearsal had cycled through, so he slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom to relieve himself. He didn’t turn on the light, and he didn’t drag matters out – he wanted to get back into bed before he completely woke up so he’d fall back asleep quickly. Sure enough, he drifted off in a few minutes without trouble.

When next he roused, the sun was up. From the brightness of the room and the angle of the light, dawn had arrived some hours ago. Bard wasn’t in bed, but the bathroom door was closed. Thran reached into the drawer of his nightside table to snare the tube of lubricant. He cached the tube under his pillow, and closed his eyes while he waited for Bard to finish in the bathroom. Would he come back to bed, or would he duck into the closet to dress?

The door opened. How disappointing – Bard was already dressed. It must be later than he thought. Perhaps he could distract Bard from whatever he’d been about to do.

"Lyubov moyya," he murmured, looking at Bard through his lowered lashes. He reached a hand across the sheets, beckoning.

“Morning, angel,” Bard sat on the side of the bed to stroke Thran’s hair. “I’m glad you slept so long. You’re still catching up from the virus and everything else that’s happened this week.”

“Is it late?”

“After nine. I’m glad I didn’t wake you up when I got up to get Sigrid and Legolas’s breakfasts.”
“Sigrid went to work again,” Thran remembered. “Oh! Legolas’s fencing lesson!”

“Taken care of. I was about to drive him, but he asked if he could bicycle to the studio. He, Killian, and Tara are going to meet up with Bain and a few others after fencing and do something, so I said that was okay. I hope you’re all right with that. He left about an hour ago, and just texted me that he got there safely.”

“I appreciate that you saw to him. I am relieved that he was not afraid to go out on his own, too.”

“Me, too.”

Thran hummed. “Where is Kukla?”

“Still asleep. Last night wore her out.”

Thran smiled in anticipation. “Good. Then you must help me fulfill an old ritual.”

Bard gave him a long look, but the corners of his lips quirked. “Does it require me to get into bed with you?”

Thran snaked out a long arm to pull at Bard’s shoulder. “It requires you to be naked first. Then you must get into bed with me.”

“You feel better.”

Thran’s grin was coy. “The longer it takes you to strip, the longer it takes before we both feel better.”

Bard pretended to think about that, then eased his tee over his head one slow inch at a time.

“You are the slowest bastard,” Thran growled, reaching up to yank Bard’s tee out of his hands and throw it on the floor.

“Yeah? You’re the greediest,” Bard snickered, poking Thran in the ribs. Flinching, Thran erupted from his pillows to grab the poking fingers and wrestle Bard flat onto his back. He straddled Bard with an evil chortle, forced Bard’s wrists over his head, and dove in for a deep kiss. It didn’t take long for Bard to abandon his mock resistance and kiss him back with equal intensity. Thran let his husband’s wrists go as he found better things to do with his hands, stroking through Bard’s hair and caressing his shoulders, then lower. In response, Bard’s nipples hardened, his body tensed, and his voice trembled in a breathy moan.

“You wish that you were naked now, yes?” Thran teased, shifting so that he could cup a hand over Bard’s cock and rub it through his shorts. Despite the intervening fabric, it hardened fast, drawing Thran’s grin. “Think how much better this would feel if you were.”

“Then strip me bare, you fucker. You know you want to.”

“Yes, I do.” Thran rolled aside just enough that he could yank Bard’s shorts off his hips. “Prove that you want me to just as badly.”

Bard shimmied the rest of the way out of his shorts and underwear, and kicked them off the bed.

“What are you going to do now, randy dancer, now that you’ve got me the way you want me?”

“I do not have you the way I want.” Thran rolled back atop him to grind his hips against Bard’s cock, drawing Bard’s moan. He groped for the tube of lubricant, squeezed out a handful, and slicked it over his cock with savage strokes, reveling at Bard’s startled surprise when he smeared his
husband’s opening with greedy fingers. Before Bard could do more than curse him, he’d pushed Bard’s knees wide, positioned himself, and pressed in that first inch. “Mmm. Now I have you the way I want. Yes, such a morsel for a summer morning.”

“Son of a bitch, you fucker! Give your fucktoy a chance!” Bard writhed under him. “I’m not open!”

Thran wrapped himself around Bard, not venturing any farther inside until his husband had a chance to relax. “You will be. Just lie still.”

“Gods. Pinned to the bed by a dark angel in record time.”

“I wanted to make sure your lust did not get the better of you before mine did.” Thran shut his eyes and reveled in Bard’s warmth and tightness. “Oh, gods, you are impossible to resist.”

“Just what ritual am I taking part in?” Bard’s breath hitched as Thran pressed a fraction of an inch farther in. “The one where you deflower the virgin, like you told me about a million years ago?”

Thran grinned as he pressed a kiss at the corner of Bard’s jaw. “You are as tight as one. Do not worry, my handsome one. I will be gentle.”

Bard bit at Thran’s lips. “You’re a right bastard. But if you want to fuck a virgin you can actually get into, you’d better tell him a story to help him relax.”

“Oh, of course. In Russia, dancers used to be told that sex just before a performance is not good. It dissipates energy that one should save for the stage. But all of us were young and vigorous, so it became a challenge, yes? Even Vileria and I, though we were not compatible, would make a point to engage on the morning of a premiere, or even the first performance of an old chestnut... if not always with each other. We would laugh that a good performance on one stage led to the same on another.”

Bard had relaxed underneath him, so Thran ventured a little father in. His husband’s silent moan made him smile, and so did the quick flutter of his eyelashes. “Mmm, angel...”

“Mmm, my saint... such a look in your eyes, so much want... you make me love this ritual all the more.”

“Give me a couple of minutes, and you’ll have a wolf on your hands, not a virgin.”

“I must take my advantage while it remains to me, then,” Thran breathed, rocking gently to deepen his penetration. “You are so hard to resist...”

Thran insinuated a hand between their bodies, found Bard’s cock, and caressed it gently. The escalation drew a moan from Bard; his head went back, and his back arched. Thran sat on his heels to admire what happened to his hunky welder husband when Thran ruthlessly stroked him within and without.

“Gods, angel, I won’t last long like this. You have no mercy, you take no prisoners – mmm, gods... I can’t resist...”

“Do not resist. Take all I give you, and revel in it. There is nothing more erotic than you when you are consumed.”

Bard took him at his word, and abandoned himself to the carnal delight that Thran aroused in him. Unresisting, he lay back and moaned softly as Thran worked him, his fingers tightening on Thran’s thighs.
“Oh, gods, Thran, you have me, I can’t stop –”

“Come for me, my saint,” Thran crooned as he sped up his stroking. “Gods, you are so sweet, so tight, you will take me with you when you come...”

In seconds, Bard erupted beneath him with a gasp. As his orgasm engulfed him, his back arched off the mattress, his eyes closed, his hands clawed red streaks down Thran’s thighs, and he clenched so hard around Thran’s cock that Thran gasped. Before he could stop himself, Thran whipped his hips forward, thrusting deeply into that spasming tightness, and drove himself to climax hard after Bard. Hands spread across his glutes like talons, forcing him in deeper, possessing him as completely as he had Bard mere seconds ago. He fell forward as he spasmed, unable to escape when Bard wound arms and legs around him – as if he wanted to escape such a complete release. His husband held him close until his last shudder had calmed, then pressed a kiss on the crown of his head. Thran raised his head to meet Bard’s laughing eyes.

“Feel better now?”

Thran eased out of his husband with a satisfied exhale. “Oh, lyubov moya, you are a sweet delight. You indulge me so well.”

“It’s not like I had a choice,” Bard teased, taking up the loose braid of pale hair that cascaded over his chest and twitching the end of it over Thran’s nose. “You see how much I hated it, too.”

Thran chuckled as he reclined to one side of Bard, pillowing his head on his elbow and tracing his fingers in slow circles over Bard’s chest. “As much as I.”

Bard turned on his side to face Thran, and shifted his legs to intertwine with Thran’s. “So did we complete your ritual to your satisfaction?”

“It is not yet complete,” Thran snuggled beside Bard. “The end is a nap.”

“Ah. The most important part,” Bard replied with mock seriousness, drawing Thran’s snicker. “The blissed-out nap.”

They lay quietly for some minutes, fingers soothing over skin until both of them blurred into a drowsy reverie. Eventually, Bard stirred.

“Stay in bed if you want, angel. Tonight is a big one, so rest while you can. I’ll see what Tilda and Bain are up to, and do my usual Saturday morning putter.”

“I will be down soon,” Thran replied with a sleepy yawn. “Too much time in bed is not good for the body.”

Bard gave him an amused smile as he bent for his shorts and tee. “I should sketch you the way you look right now, angel. You’d never convince anyone that you ever wanted to get out of my bed. You’re the seer who belongs to my king.”

Thran stretched like a lithe feline, then rolled onto his belly. He drew his knees up under him and gazed up at Bard with a submissive expression. “To serve my king is my fate and my duty. But it is also my pleasure. I await his next command to serve on my knees, as I should, unless it is his pleasure that I serve on my back instead.”

Bard grinned. “So says the man who just ravished me on my back to within an inch of my life. You’re such a bastard.”
Thran stretched full length across the bed with an unrepentant smile on his lips. “I am. But I am your bastard.”

“And I’m a lucky man. See you when you get downstairs.”

Bard ducked into the bathroom to wash off, reappeared in his shorts and tee to stroke Thran’s hair, and slipped out of the bedroom.

Thran savored his languid ease for little longer before he got up to wash and find clothes for the morning. He came downstairs to find Bard making cheese, onion, and chive omelet for two. A peek through the oven door revealed a pan of biscuits baking. Thran snared his husband with an arm around his shoulder and kissed his temple.

“You treat me so well.”

“You need a good breakfast every day, but today especially. What time do you need to be at the school this afternoon?”

“I want to be there at four. The performance is not until seven, but we will warm up slowly and carefully, and I will go early to try to avoid as much of the press as possible. That will not be easy.”

“Harder than you think.” Bard slid the omelet onto a plate, cut it in half, and slid one piece onto a second plate. He handed Thran the plates to put on the table while he fished the biscuits out of the oven. “I checked the Internet this morning. There is one hellacious media storm out there about what happened Thursday night. What few tickets to any of Immortal’s performances that hadn’t sold are gone, and people are clamoring for more. I expect there will be an army of reporters outside the school all day.”

Thran snorted as he put the plates down, then came back for forks and knives. “They want to see if I will fall on my face, or if I am covered in bruises, or some such other ghoulish thing. That is always true when a dancer is rumored to be unsound.”

Bard brought the biscuits, the butter crock, and the honey bottle to the table and sat down. He hummed in acknowledgment of Thran’s cynicism, then smiled to himself.

“What does that mean, your smile?” Thran questioned as he pulled his chair closer to the table.

“It means I can’t wait to see their jaws drop when Death flies across the battlefield in all of His implacable majesty. You will be the sensation of the year.”

Thran smiled in appreciation. “I intend to be. I am well, I am strong, and I have loved well. Nothing will stop me.”

Bard laughed. “Nothing will. So what’s on the agenda between now and three-thirty?”

Thran took a bite of his omelet. “I will have this delicious breakfast, I will do my barre. I will rest. I will have lunch. Then I will be off. You do not have to be at the school until six-fifteen or six-thirty.”

“I’ll get you to the school, so we don’t have to drive two vehicles home. Besides, the girls would appreciate the ride in your nice SUV rather than my well-loved truck.”

“That makes good sense. Thank you, my saint. I cannot wait to see all of you in your finery. You will be a handsome family in your elegant suits and dresses.”

“We’ll put on our best show to celebrate your best show,” Bard quipped. “Tilda might steal the show
in her bee dress, though Sigrid intends to give her a run for the money in the blue dress she wore to the dance.”

“They will both be adorable. So will you in your tuxedo, and the boys. I will be the clown in my wig and costume.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll bring down the house. But you won’t if you don’t eat your breakfast. I won’t push the biscuits, but I will the eggs and cheese. Protein.”

“Yes, the protein. Forgive me if I do not eat a biscuit. I promise to eat one tomorrow.”

“Only if you want to. Fruit instead?”

“I will get it. I thought I saw a grapefruit in the refrigerator.”

“There’s one left.”

“Would you like half?”

“Only if you want only half,” Bard shrugged. “You know what you need to fuel the night’s performance.”

Thran sliced the grapefruit in half and brought the pieces to the table. Tilda and Bain came into the kitchen, the former still rubbing her eyes. Bard got up to scramble an egg for Tilda, then Bain took over to make fried eggs for the breakfast bagel sandwiches he and Legolas liked so much. The children joined their fathers at the table to eat. Tilda was excited that she would finally get to wear her bee dress. In contrast, Bain bemoaned having to wear so many clothes on such a hot day.

“You’ll survive, boyo,” Bard replied. “The house AC is on, the SUV AC will be on, and the school AC will be on.”

“It’ll still be hot.” Bain took an enormous mouthful of his sandwich.

“You’ll get hotter kicking the soccer ball around with Legs, Killian, Derry, and who knows else. Be home at three, please. A lot of people have to get through the shower before we leave for the school at six.”

“Kay, Da,” Bain mumbled as he continued to wolf down his sandwich.

Tilda nibbled her biscuit, but wrinkled her nose at the carnage that ensued on her brother’s plate. “That’s gross, Bain. Really gross.”

Bain favored her with an egg-smeared smile. “You just don’t know what’s good, Til.”

“She knows a bit more than you do about manners, boyo,” Bard said, before Tilda could reply. “I taught you better than that – chew with your mouth closed, talk only when your mouth is empty, put in your mouth only things that are smaller than your head.”

“This is not bigger than my head, Da!” Bain protested, hefting his sandwich. Thran had to cover his mouth to smother his amusement at the boy’s outrage.

“You’re talking with your mouth full and chewing with your mouth open, though. So clean it up.”

Bain swallowed his mouthful in a huge gulp. “Yes, Da.”

Tilda wrinkled her nose again and made a disapproving noise, but Bard’s glance at her kept her from
saying anything else.

Thran smiled to himself. It was a gift for life to get back to normal.

After breakfast, Thran went off to the ballroom to do his barre. The familiar routine helped him set aside his excitement about tonight’s impending performance. He was not in the habit of dwelling on what would happen before he danced a role in performance for the first time; that generated too much nervous excitement too early in the day, and that could dull his responses when he went onstage. An hour before the curtain went up, the excitement would boost him in a way he could use. Nine hours beforehand, better he thought of something else and saved energy.

Even so...

Tonight’s performance was so much more than merely an opening night. It was a new ballet for a new company. Neither company nor ballet was traditional, but incorporated modern, popular, and urban dance elements. It also signaled a new role for him, not just as principle dancer, but also as ballet director. Tonight’s performance would determine much of his future.

It was hard not to think of that.

When Thran finished his barre and yoga, he joined Tilda and Bard in the sitting room. Bard had cleared the clutter off the fruit crate coffee table, and spread old towels over it. While Thran lounged on one of the sofas with one of Bard’s art books, Bard worked on his totem pieces that he’d set aside to be with the children during the past three weeks. Tilda sat nearby with some of the clay to practice what she’d learned in her pottery camp. They passed a companionable time until lunch, when Bard made chicken salad for sandwiches. Thran passed on the bread, but a bit of the chicken atop a vegetable salad with an accompanying sweet potato made a good lunch. Thran napped briefly while Tilda read and Bard continued on his sculpture.

At two-thirty, Thran shaved, showered, and tended to his hair. He twisted the silky strands into a loose braid to keep it under control until he danced.

At three, he made sure his makeup box and dancewear were ready for the night. When he put his only remaining pair of unworn pointe shoes into his bag, the tingle of anticipation returned to warm his belly and would not calm. How often had he and Vileria laughed about who would feel the excitement of an opening night first? Despite her claims otherwise, she always had. She had been higher strung than he, so much that she had been dubbed the Princess of Fire, apt consort for the Prince of Ice, and their teasing banter back and forth had been a great diffuser of her nervousness. It was another ritual he had missed since her death.

This was not the first premiere where Vileria would not be beside him in the wings, but it was an especially notable one. This was a premiere of a ballet he had labored long to bring into being, with a role that was his alone. He went into the children’s study, and there on the children’s memory shelf was Vileria’s photograph. There were her dark eyes that still smiled at him with such warm mischief. A few bright yellow marigolds and a red geranium blossom glowed from the glass vase beside her picture; Daphne’s photograph was on the other side. He sniffed the flowers, and nodded to Daphne’s image. Then he kissed his index finger and touched it to Vileria’s cheek.

“Ya lyublyu tebya, Printsessa Ognya,” he murmured. “Sledi za mnoi.”

He put on the light khaki linen trousers and plain white cotton shirt that he would wear to the school, rolling the sleeves up in anticipation of the hot afternoon. He collected his bag, a pair of socks, and his lightweight white trainers, and came downstairs to the kitchen to fill his water bottle and stow a few light snacks in his bag. Bain and Legolas bounded in from outside, red-faced and sweating from
the torrid temperature. Legolas had braided his long, blond hair to keep it out of his face, but strands straggled from the twist and stuck in lank, wet strings against his neck. Bain’s shorter, darker, curlier hair was so wet that it looked like it’d been dunked it in a bucket and left to plaster itself flat to Bain’s head. Their shirts were soaked, and they looked too filthy to sit on anything other than one of the garden benches.

“You both look like beets,” Thran teased, as they pulled glasses from the cabinets and filled them at the kitchen faucet. “Thirsty beets.”

“Oh, that’s no lie,” Bain panted, when he came up for air. “It’s roasting out there!”

“How was fencing today, Legolas?”

“Very hot,” Legolas shook his head. “Aragorn had us work on endurance today, so a lot of running, lunges, pushups…”

“Yeah, a regular boot camp,” Bain grimaced. “Course, that’ll be me in another week, out on the soccer pitch. So ugh all around.”

“Ugh, indeed,” Thran waved a hand as the savory aroma of sweaty teenaged boys reached his nose. “You are both ripe beyond contemplation.”

“Ah, the smell of summer,” Bard grinned as he came into the kitchen. “Maybe I should take the two of you outside and wash you down with the hose before you venture inside.”

“That’d feel good,” Legolas grinned. “I’m still too hot to shower yet. I’d just steam up all over again.”

“Put some ice in your water for a bit,” Bard suggested. “I’m about to take Thran to the school, but when I get back it’ll be time to clean up for tonight. Supper’s at five today so we get to the school in time. Remember that Sigrid will be home in about half an hour.”

“Okay, Da; okay, Bard,” the boys acknowledged.

“I’m ready any time you are, Thran,” Bard said.

Thran pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. He held up his shoes and socks. “A moment only.”

Legolas chugged down another glass of water while Thran pulled on his socks and laced up his shoes. As he rose, Legolas came to his side.

“Under the circumstances,” Legolas grinned, holding out his arms in celebration of his sweaty, aromatic condition, “I won’t hug you, Papa. I want to wish you beaucoup de merde without making you smell like you’ve wallowed in it.”

He held out his fist for Thran to tap with his own. Bain came up beside his brother to offer his fist in turn. “Yeah, Thran. Lots and lots of merde.”

“Hey, wait for me!” Tilda ran into the kitchen from the sitting room. “I want to wish you merde, too!”

Laughing, Thran tapped the small fist that Tilda thrust at him. “Never has one dancer had so much merde wished upon him!”

“Then here’s mine, too,” Bard grinned, tapping his fist against Thran’s. “Lots of merde. From Sigrid,
“I thank you all,” Thran offered a little bow to his family. “So let us be off, Bard, and get the show on the road, as they say. Mes enfants, I will see you after the ballet.”

“It’ll be great!” Tilda assured him. “Wait and see!”

“I will do my best to make it so,” Thran agreed. “See you soon.”

Thran offered a final wave to the children, then followed Bard through the mudroom. He retrieved his sunglasses from the basket under the key rack before he went outside. The heat hit them like a stifling physical presence as they got into the SUV and pulled out of the carriage house. Thank the gods that Bard cranked the air conditioning up full blast as they headed down the lane. Bard let Thran consider in silence as they drove, but when they pulled into the school’s parking lot, his husband took one look at the gathering of reporters and star spotters milling before the entrance and snorted.

“Gods, it’s a horde. I’m not letting you out in that alone. I’ll play bodyguard for a few minutes to make sure you get inside the school in one piece.”

“I appreciate that,” Thran admitted. Bard parked a row away from the front of the school to give them a chance to get out of the SUV before the throng descended on them. “I have my bag. I am ready.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

They hurried out of the SUV and strode towards the entrance, Thran following Bard closely. Two security guards hurried forward to urge the crowd back. In seconds, they were surrounded.

“Thran! Thran! How are you today? Are you ready to dance? Is it true you plan to dance on pointe tonight? Have you learned anything more about the boy who attacked you? How is your bodyguard? Is he still in hospital?”

“Come on, everyone, please let Mr. Oropherson through. Come on...” Bard kept moving and talking calmly. The two security guards flanked Thran, letting Bard forge their path forward.

“I am well, thank you, and excited to dance Immortal in performance for the first time tonight,” Thran smiled and waved. He held onto Bard’s belt as they plowed through the sea of faces. “Yes, I suffered no lasting injuries, yes, I am well, thank you. Thank you for your good wishes.”

Bard had reached the school doors. He pulled one open and urged Thran in ahead of him, then ducked in after him and pulled the door closed as the security guards remained outside by the door. Both Thran and his husband heaved a long breath, glad to be through the gantlet. It was also a relief to be out of the hot sun and inside the cool building. As Thran took off his sunglasses, he found that Ernie wasn’t in his usual spot in front of the auditorium – in fact, the usual table where Thran put his bag for Ernie’s check was gone – so Bard walked with Thran right into the auditorium, down the aisle, and across the stage. As they passed the dressing rooms, they found that Abebe and a few of the dancers had already arrived, and greetings filled the air. Thran offered his smiling replies, and then ducked into his dressing room with Bard close behind.

“Okay, you’re where you need to be, angel,” Bard said with a light caress on Thran’s back. “Kiss me before I make the return trip, yeah?”

Thran took Bard into his arms to add a hug to his kiss. “It is always a pleasure to kiss you, my saint.”
“This is an important kiss. It’s the last one I’ll get from my husband the dreamer. The next time I kiss you, you’ll be my husband the genius behind Immortal, my husband the star who danced the role no one else can.”

“The best part is that I am your husband both times.”

“It is for me, too. But no false modesty, Thran. Immortal is wonderful. It’ll be everything you want it to be, and more. I can’t be prouder of you for all the blood, sweat, and toil you’ve lavished on it. It’s all worth it.”

Thran smiled. “Thank you, lyubov moya. But remember that you have made Immortal what it is, too. The story, the costumes, the artwork... the Lord of the Underworld would be far different and not as wonderful without your touch.”

“I appreciate the thought.” Bard eased out of Thran’s arms. “Now forget all the hard work, the angst, the trials and tribulations. They’re all done. Just think about dancing. You’re the best there is at that. So leave it all on the stage, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

Bard put out his fist to bump Thran’s, but Thran took up the proffered hand to kiss Bard’s wedding ring. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Bard kissed Thran’s ring in return, and offered a loving smile as he walked to the door. He turned back at the door with arched eyebrow. “Merde, angel. Lots and lots of merde.”

Thran laughed. “Good luck with the gantlet, lyubov moya.”

Laughing, Bard offered a wave, and was gone.

Still smiling, Thran put his bag on the counter under the mirror and took out his bag of nuts. Eating a few now would ensure that he had a good stock of energy three hours from now when he had to dance. He made himself comfortable on one of the chairs, and propped his calves and feet up on the counter by his bag, taking advantage to relax while he could. Soon the other dancers would arrive for their warmups, and the excitement of the night would take hold of them all.

Immortal’s birth was imminent.

* * *

Bard would have liked to exit the school from a different door, which might have let him avoid the crowd outside the auditorium, but in the interest of security, the door he and Thran had used to enter was the only one open. Bard was all for making the school as secure as possible, but he took a deep breath before he ventured outside. The crowd was back at the edge of the parking lot, so he managed to skirt most of them before any of them noticed him. They latched on him at once, but he held up his hands and mustered his best Jersey accent.

“Hey, youse guys, I’m just the hired help, y’know? I don’t know nothin’.”

That threw enough of them off that he got into the SUV and drove off before any of them thought too hard about his attempt, which gave him something to chuckle about.

Time to head to the florist shop to pick up the flowers he’d ordered for Thran. Bard had read that
male dancers traditionally didn’t get flowers onstage, even if they were the stars of a production, and even if the ballerinas did. The only exception was if a male dancer danced a female role, such as the ugly stepsisters in Cinderella; then they could receive flowers onstage. The traditions were slowly changing in this country, if not Europe, and he’d checked with Lettie to see what she thought about the idea. She’d explained that many men did get flowers, but they were always collected backstage rather than presented onstage. Ballerinas often shared their bouquets with their male partners, as well. Because this was part of a festival, and not quite the usual circumstances of a ballet presented in the city, Lettie thought Bard’s desire to get something for Thran wasn’t out of place.

“I don’t care if they’re not presented to him onstage,” Bard had told her. “I just want him to get something from me and the children.”

“Hold onto them when you go into the auditorium for the performance,” Lettie had advised him. “It’s bad luck to send them before the performance. And Thran is Russian, so make sure you specify an odd number of flowers. Even numbers are sent only to funerals, so don’t do that.”

“Odd number it is,” Bard had acknowledged. “And I don’t want roses. Any suggestions about something else?”

Lettie had given him several, so after due consideration, he’d decided to get five Stargazer lilies, five pink carnations, five green carnations, and eight sprays of Viscaria. The lilies symbolized the realization of Thran’s hopes for *Immortal*. The pink carnations symbolized the toughness Thran had needed to see *Immortal* come to life; the green ones were a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Victorian age, when they were a surreptitious symbol of gay pride. Viscaria, also known as the Rose Angel, had been known in Victorian times as a playful invitation to flirt – literally, an invitation to dance with the one who sent the flowers. It was a popular flower to offer dancers, so Thran would likely recognize the symbolism.

Bard dashed into the florist shop, collected his bouquet, and dashed out again to hurry home. He had a lot of children to get ready.

Sigrid was home by the time he returned, and oohed at the bouquet he stashed in the fridge to stay fresh until they left. Legolas was already in the shower. When the boy was out of the bathroom, Bard sent Bain into his bathroom – with strict orders not to see how much water the handheld spray could put on the ceiling – and Tilda into the children’s bathroom. Bain and Tilda exited; Sigrid and Bard took their place. He shaved and showered, and borrowed a little of Thran’s fancy hair oil when he dried his hair. Everyone assembled at the kitchen table for a quick supper of hamburgers and salad.

“I got the hair chalk at the drugstore,” Sigrid said as everyone ate. “Sixteen colors.”

“I want green to go with my dress,” Tilda said.

“Wait, what’s this?” Bard’s eyebrows quirked up.

“I asked her for it,” Legolas explained quickly. “I wanted to do my braids blue for Papa’s ballet. It doesn’t make a mess to put in like the dye does, and it washes right out, Bard. So I can help Kukla if you say it’s okay.”

Sigrid got up from the table to fetch the hair chalk and handed the box to Bard to examine. “It’s really easy, Da, and festive. I’d like to do a blue streak, too, to go with my dress.”

“I want one, too, Da,” Bain said. “It’s just a little bit of fun.”

“Fine by me, as long as everyone’s clothes stay clean.”
“Hooray!” Tilda clapped her hands, as the boys tapped knuckles.

“I got you something, too, Til.” Sigrid rooted around in the bag and brought out a packet of six small, fuzzy bumblebees. “They were in the clearance rack by the cash register. I think they’re leftover spring decorations, so they were maybe all of a quarter. I thought they’d look cute in your hair.”

“Really? Ooh, let me see!” Tilda took the packet. “They’re cute! Da, if Sigrid puts my hair up like she did hers for her dance, I can stick the bees in the pouf part.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Bard winked at Sigrid. “That was sweet of you, Sig.”

“Welcome.”

“Okay, troops, let’s get through supper and clean up,” Bard urged. “We’ve got a lot of dressing up to do. Is it better to do the hair chalk before or after we dress?”

“Before. We’ll need a big towel,” Legolas warned.

“Okay. Everyone do your hair, then we’ll see about the color. Then dress.”

“Aye, Captain,” the children chorused, trading pleased grins. The prospect of hair chalk made everyone zip through the remains of supper in record time. With five people helping, cleanup went quickly, then everyone trooped upstairs to get dressed.

As Bard got his suit out of the closet, he cocked an ear to eavesdrop on the girls’ discussion of hairstyles. Gods, even Tilda knew about French twists and chignons; she wouldn’t be a little girl much longer. He hoped she and Sigrid didn’t get too fancy with her updo, but he needn’t have worried. Sigrid drew Tilda’s hair into a tail at her nape, braided it, and wrapped it around her head to make a coronet, which looked sweet rather than too grown up. At their call, Legolas came out in shorts and nothing else to help with the chalk; a similarly attired Bain came along to supervise. They covered the children’s bathroom floor with a towel, then wrapped another around Tilda’s shoulders. She held a mirror while Legolas painted green and yellow chalk along the strands of Tilda’s braid, then sprayed it with Sigrid’s hairspray to keep the chalk from powdering off. As a final touch, Sigrid put the small bees in place around the braid. A delighted Tilda scampered off with Sigrid to maneuver into her slip and dress without touching her hair. When the youngest child was dressed, Sigrid disappeared to recreate the tousled pile of curls anchored with Thran’s hair sticks that she’d done for the school dance. Bain and Legolas stayed in the bathroom to do Legolas’s braids in three different shades of blue, and Bain got several stripes of different blues.

“What about you, Da?” Bain asked. “Just a couple?”

“You’d better let me do those,” Sigrid called, coming into the bathroom. She had on a ratty tee, but her hair was done. “The guys will leave you with nothing but blue hair.”

“That’d look cool, Da,” Bain urged, and Legolas nodded in agreement. “Do the whole thing in blue!”

“I’ll pass on that,” Bard held up his hands. “What about you, sweetness?”

“You’ve got steady hands. I want just the ends on the top in blue and green.”

Bard put the mirror in Sigrid’s hands, and between the two of them, he got the job done to Sigrid’s satisfaction. On went the hairspray, and she was ready to put on her dress.
“Are you sure you don’t want just a little streak?” Sigrid coaxed.

“Oh, what the hell,” Bard gave Sigrid a mischievous grin. “Just one, and don’t make it obvious. Dark blue, not your electric blue.”

“Okay. Classy blue, not punk blue.”

“Is there such a thing?” Bard shrugged, chuckling. He watched in the mirror as Sigrid gave him one dark blue streak at the top of his head that wasn’t too outrageous, then set it with hairspray.

“Oh, you’re done,” Sigrid said. “I’ll put the towels away. Go put on your suit.”

“Yes, madam,” Bard feigned a dignified butler’s bow and went into the bedroom. He traded his shorts for tuxedo shirt and pants before Tilda came to the door.

“Are you ready, Da?” Tilda called from outside the bedroom.

“Almost.” Bard opened the bedroom doors, smiling when she twirled to make her dress flare out. “You look great, little doll.”

“You were smart,” Tilda declared. “You told me to get something cool so I wouldn’t get so hot, and you were right. It’s still hot, but this isn’t so bad.”

“Guess I know a few things, yeah?” Bard grinned. “You need to get your shoes.”

“I’ll put them on just before we leave. I like being barefooted.”

“How’re you doing, lads?” Bard called to Legolas and Bain. “All right?”

“Legolas sorted me out,” Bain called. “These studs are a pain!”

“It’s just a different kind of button, Bain,” Legolas explained.

“Maybe, but it’d be easier if they sewed the buttons on the shirt, wouldn’t it!” Bain snorted, drawing Bard’s laughter.

“Sigrid? You’re okay?”

“I’ll need you to hook my dress when I get it on,” came Sigrid’s voice from her room.

“Okay. Come in when you’re ready.”

Bard retreated to the bedroom again to finish the rest of his studs and cufflinks. On with the vest, the tie, the socks, the shoes. A quick shake of his hair – the blue looked nice – and a check on his earrings. His wedding ring was where it belonged. Ugh, it was already hot before he got his jacket on, so he’d leave that for last. Maybe he wouldn’t put it on until they got to the school. Wallet in one back pants pocket, mobile in the other, tickets in the inside breast jacket pocket. He was ready.

“I’m good to go!” Sigrid called, sticking her head into the bedroom. “Wow, Da, you look fantastic!”

“Thanks.” Bard hooked Sigrid’s frothy blue dress for her. She had on the same necklace and earrings that she’d worn for the dance, and she had the same small bag. “You look amazing, too. And look at the two of you, lads! Both of you are stellar!”

“You do look great,” Sigrid put her arms akimbo, a funny posture for such an ethereal dress, and circled the boys on the landing. Both boys struck a pose that was more rock star than James Bond,
drawing Bard’s laughter. “Clan Ffyrnig looks in the money tonight.”

“I look great, too,” Tilda twirled around in her dress. “I’m the bee girl! Queen of the bees!”

“If you twirl any faster, all the bees will come out of your hair, Kukla!” Legolas joked.

“I’m going to carry my jacket until we get to the school,” Bard told the boys. “Even with the AC, it’s hot.”

Bain immediately shrugged out of his jacket. “Even just the shirt and vest is hot.”

“But we’ll look stellar,” Sigrid consoled.

“Easy for you to say when you have a dress with no sleeves in it,” Bain said.

“You won’t die, Bain,” Bard said. “This is Thran’s big night, and we’re going to go all out for him. He’s worked harder than humanly possible, so it’s not such a big deal that we dress up for four hours. Everybody ready?”

“Ready,” the children chorused.

Bard pulled out his mobile. “We’re a hair early, but that’s okay. We want to get a parking space so we don’t have to walk too far in the heat.”

“Absolutely,” Bain nodded, miming a wipe across his brow. “Let’s go!”

Bard got Thran’s flowers out of the fridge and his keys from the rack in the mudroom, then shepherded the children ahead of him as they left the house. Everyone piled into the SUV, Bard put the flowers on the seat beside him, and cranked the AC to its maximum. Despite Bain’s snarking about his suit, the heat, and the pain of dressing up, he was just as excited as Tilda for the upcoming premiere. That same excitement had Bard just as eager to get to the school as it did the children, so it was with relief that they turned into the parking lot. People had already started to arrive, but the lot was still only half full given the early hour. The crowd of reporters had swelled, but they were distracted for the moment with someone who’d just arrived. The family got out of the SUV, the boys and Bard donned their jackets, and Sigrid took charge of the flowers. They were able to steer clear of most of the crowd by quick maneuvering, and made it into the lobby of the auditorium before any of the reporters could chase the family down.

“Oh, that’s better,” Legolas breathed as the cool air of the lobby registered. “That’s so much better.”

“Absolutely,” Bain agreed, fanning himself.

The auditorium was already open for seating, so Bard got out their tickets and led the children towards the ticket collectors. They got their programs, and passed into the auditorium. Ori had saved them very nice seats on the aisle of the center section, five rows from the front of the stage. That gave them a close view without having to crane their necks for the entire performance. Once they found their seats, Sigrid stashed the bouquet in hers so that Thran wouldn’t see it if he stuck his head out from behind the curtain.

“Wow, Da. Look at the program,” Sigrid said. “That’s your artwork, isn’t it?”

Bard took a belated look at the program. It was a nice, glossy paper stock, typical of what made up any theatre program in the city, and it was a small booklet, filled with the usual ads from sponsors, small blurbs about the principals, and so forth. But the cover – gods, it was his artwork, indeed. It seemed like years had passed since he’d drawn that first sketch of Charisse and Luka dancing their
love for each other, while behind them Death stretched His hands wide. UVB’s promotional team had made a beautiful cover of it, stark and elegant.

“Da?”

“Um, yes, sweetness. It’s my artwork. It looks wonderful.”

“Look at what it says inside,” his daughter persisted. “Look, Bain, Legs, Tilda – it says right there on the inside that Da wrote the story, and designed the costumes with Rada, and did the art.”

“It does,” Bain read, then looked at Bard. “Wow, Da.”

“Thran and I did the story together, not just me,” Bard amended. “And Rada did most of the costumes. I mostly made suggestions when he asked me.”

“I bet you didn’t,” Sigrid gave him a hard look as she pointed to her program. “And this proves it. You had a big part in making this thing so amazing, and you can’t tell me otherwise.”

Bard pretended to cringe under his daughter’s withering words. “I wouldn’t dream to.”

“Good. Don’t.” Sigrid flashed a smug grin and dusted off her hands. “My work here is done.”

Bain snorted. “Geez. I feel really bad for Finn.”

Legolas gave a sympathetic hum, but Sigrid ignored both of them to savor her victory.

“How long before it starts, Da?” Tilda asked.

“About forty-five minutes,” Bard replied.

“That’s not so long,” Tilda shrugged. “Oh! Look, Da – there’s Ori! And who’s that with him?”

The small man came down the aisle, looking quite different from his usual unassuming persona. He was in a black tuxedo with a jaunty red plaid bow tie and matching cummerbund, but his smile was the same warm, open, friendly one that he always wore.

“Hi, Bard, children! It’s the big night at last!”

“It certainly is, Ori,” Bard grinned. “You look sharp.”

“Thanks. You do, too, and so do all of you,” Ori smiled at the children. He stepped to one side to indicate the small, ginger-haired and -bearded man with sharp green eyes behind him. He was dressed in an impeccable blue suit, with a French-cuffed white shirt and cufflinks made from old gold coins – Roman, perhaps? Wouldn’t it be apt if the coins were stamped with Caesar’s image? A dark green plaid tie, solid dark green pocket square, and black Italian leather shoes completed his ensemble. “This is my brother, Nori.”

Bard offered his hand. “I’m pleased to meet you in person, sir. You’ve been a good friend to Thran, to me, and to my children. Thank you.”

Nori’s expression didn’t shift much from the closed expression he probably wore as a matter of course, but his posture softened a bit as he shook Bard’s hand, and the tiniest of smiles touched his lips. “I appreciate that. I’m pleased to see that you and yours are well. My congratulations on a job well done.”

He meant Bard’s efforts on Thursday night. Bard hadn’t thought about that much, and he wouldn’t
spoil tonight by starting now. He gestured towards the children. “I had great motivation.”

Nori’s eyes warmed. “The best kind.”

“I think so. I hope your brother Dori is well. Please give him our regards. He’s a kind soul.”

“He’ll be pleased that you think so,” Nori nodded. “It was good to meet you.”

“And you. Enjoy the show.”

Nori nodded once, and turned to make his way back up the aisle. Bard gave Ori a wide-eyed look of surprise. The young man chuckled.

“I know. I was surprised he asked to meet you. He usually prefers to keep most things at a distance. I appreciate what you said to him.”

“I meant it. Thran’s quite fond of him. And whether your brother admits it or not, he’s been an ally, and I do appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Keep your fingers crossed for tonight. It’s been a long time coming.”

“It has. Thanks for your part in all of it, Ori. It wouldn’t have done so well without you.”

Ori’s smile was pleased. “Thanks, Bard. Enjoy.”

He followed his brother up the aisle. Bard wasn’t surprised to see that the pair had seats in the last row, and a couple of large men sat to either side of them. Such was the life of an... expeditor.

Bard turned back to the children, sure that he’d face a barrage of curious questions about Ori’s brother. But instead, Bain was focused on someone coming down the aisle.

“Da, isn’t that the man who makes the cupcakes?”

Indeed, Hal Galadhrim was striding down the aisle, resplendent in a black tuxedo with a bright fuchsia cummerbund and pocket square. His blond hair was smoothly combed back and a small bit was braided down the center of his hair, leaving the rest to flow smoothly over his back and shoulders. Behind him, in a black tuxedo embellished with a deep emerald green cummerbund and pocket square, was his boyfriend, Ari. In contrast to Hal’s sleek hair, Ari’s was a riot of luxurious brown curls that framed his face and cascaded over his shoulders. He leaned over to murmur in Hal’s ear, pointing out the family to his friend. Hal’s eyes widened, and Bard could all but hear him reply to Ari with his patented, “Oh, my god!” exclamation.

“Bard! You look fab!” Hal hurried forward with arms outstretched to hug him. “And look at all of you! Tilda, Sigrid, you two are the belles of the ball! I love your hair! And the bees – adorable! Legolas, aren’t you and Bain the debonair pair? Oh, my god, you all look marvelous!”

“Hi, Mr. Hal,” Legolas waved. “I’m glad you came to see Papa’s ballet.”

“Oh, you know I wouldn’t miss it for the world, would I?” Hal beamed. “Ari and I – oh, I’m just a rude old pig, but it’s because I’m just that excited about Thran’s ballet! I am so sorry – this is my friend, Ari. Ari, you know Bard, of course. These are his and Thran’s children, Legolas, Bain, Sigrid, and Tilda.”

Ari reached forward to shake everyone’s hand. “Hello, one and all. You all look wonderful. I bet you’re very excited to see Thran’s ballet, aren’t you?”
“We saw the dress rehearsal last night,” Tilda revealed. “But I’m glad to see it again because I get to wear my bee dress tonight!”

“Ah, a lady of discerning style,” Hal nodded seriously. “It’s a very nice dress.”

“Thank you,” Tilda nodded gravely.

“So you’ve seen the ballet already, then?” Hal gave the family an eager look. “How is it?”

“It’s amazing, Mr. Hal,” Legolas said. “Really amazing.”

“Yeah, especially the part where he –”

“Don’t tell, Bain!” Sigrid interrupted with an exasperated look for her brother. “You’ll spoil it. Don’t be like those people who rat out the end of the film before you get to see it!”

“Oh, I almost had it!” Hal clutched his hands to his heart and pretended to cry. “Almost!”

“You’ll just have to wait like the rest of us, Hal,” Ari shrugged, a fond smile on his lips.

“Oh, you,” Hal rolled his eyes. “Bard, I was sorry I couldn’t make your gallery show, so I made sure Ari and I got tickets for this, because despite what this big lunk pretends, he was just as excited to see *Immortal* as I was. If you can believe that. Actually, I don’t think anyone can get as excited as I can about anything.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Ari leaned in to say conspiratorially, as Bard chuckled. “But then, if you know Hal, you know that, too.”

“I’m learning,” Bard nodded. “I hope you enjoy it. Thran’s put so much work into it – the whole troupe has. And I’m not giving anything away to say that it’s a stunner. It’s just as amazing as Legolas says.”

“He would know,” Hal nodded vigorously. “You’ve seen a lot of ballet whether you wanted to or not, haven’t you?”

“I like to watch Papa dance, Mr. Hal. He’s very good. And tonight, he’ll dance with one of his favorite partners. And the other male principal is good, too. So I hope you like it.”

“I know I will,” Hall smiled. “Is the first ballet the rest of you have seen?”

The children nodded.

“Other than the impromptu ones a certain White Russian is prone to do around the house,” Bard quipped.

“The White Russian? Oh, that’s hilarious! That’s also the name of one of my favorite drinks, but that’s another story,” Hal waved his hands. “You’ve certainly picked the absolute best ballet to start with, haven’t you? It’s so good to see all of you! Enjoy! Caio, children!”

“Bye,” Ari offered an indulgent smile, as he followed Hal to find their seats.

“Mr. Hal is a hoot,” Bain said in an aside to Legolas.

“He certainly is,” Legolas shook his head. “And he makes the best cupcakes.”

“The best ones ever,” Tilda nodded in complete agreement, drawing Sigrid’s laugh.
“Hey, before we sit down, we should take a couple of pictures,” Sigrid suggested, digging in her bag for her mobile.

“Good idea, sweetness,” Bard seconded. “Who knows when we’ll all get so dressed up again?”

The family’s seats were close enough to the edge of the stage that Bard could line the children up in front of it to take a few pictures. As soon as Hal saw what they were doing, he rushed over and insisted that Bard stand with the children for pictures. The flamboyant blond made sure to take several pictures with everyone’s mobiles, so they’d all have a few. Ari took some of Hal with the family, then they took some of Hal and Ari.

By the time the stir over photographs was over, the theatre had filled considerably. The attendees ran the gamut of people dressed as elegantly as Clan Ffyrnig, to people in shorts and tees. Bard didn’t care what any of them wore; the important thing was that they’d come to see Thran dance. How wonderful was that? Bard had to force himself not to grin ear to ear.

“Okay, children, now’s the time to visit the euphemism if you need to,” Bard urged. “It’s almost time for the ballet to start.”

The family trooped out to the restrooms, reconvened outside the auditorium, and went back inside together.

“Wow, the place is packed.” Bain surveyed the auditorium as he followed Legolas down the aisle. “I’ve never seen it this crowded during school.”

“We don’t have enough students to fill the place, not like this,” Sigrid replied, following her brother. “There isn’t a single seat anywhere that’s empty.”

“Papa will be so happy.” Legolas smiled. “A big crowd always helps him dance even better.”

“Then he ought to dance his most amazing ever,” Tilda said firmly. “Right, Legs?”

“Absolutely,” the blond boy grinned at his sister.

They took their places – Bain, Legolas, Bard, Tilda, and Sigrid. The rest of the row had filled in, so Sigrid stowed their bouquet under her feet, and sat back to wait for the ballet to start.

In two minutes, the house lights dimmed, and a spotlight illuminated the leftmost edge of the curtain. The general swirl of conversation paused, and an excited silence grew as the audience turned their attention forward.

Lettie appeared from the wings, walking across the stage. She looked beautiful in a bright red flowing gown that sparkled with golden highlights in the spotlight. A smattering of applause broke out, and she smiled and waved at the notice.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m Lettie Johnson, artistic director of the UltraViolet Ballet Company. It is our proud honor to open the Seventh Annual Greenwood Dale on the Lake Arts Festival with the performance of a new ballet. It’s taken a lot of hard work to bring this ballet to you, and you should know that a large part of that effort came from the students here at the Imladris Academy. They made up an invaluable part of our set crew, our lighting crew, our sound crew, and our design crew. The school’s wonderful art department designed and produced the beautiful programs you received when you arrived. I hope we have many parents in the audience tonight, because you have so many reasons to be proud of your children’s efforts. Please join me in a big round of applause for the students.”
The applause was loud and excited, bringing a big smile to Lettie’s face.

“Of course, UVB would also like to thank Headmaster Elrond L’Eärendil for his strong support of our efforts to bring our ballet to you. The school staff has been most supportive as well, and so have all of you associated with the festival. This year promises to be the biggest and best one yet.”

More applause rang through the auditorium.

“Thank you so much. And now, without further ado, UltraViolet Ballet gives you Immortal.”

“Oh, gods, I’m going to die from the excitement!” Sigrid whispered to Tilda as Lettie exited the stage.

“Me, too!” Tilda whispered back, as the spotlight disappeared and the house lights dimmed completely.

_I might, too._ Bard thought, as the curtain went up. It remained dark for several seconds, then the cold, ultramarine blue light on Death’s perch slowly rose, revealing the Lord of the Underworld on His perch. A rippling whisper rose from the audience as they realized who crouched above the stage. Below, wan, green light grew across the misty floor of the stage, and the blank stage walls reflected the bleak, windswept prairie.

As the first low rumble of György Ligeti’s _Kyrie_ began, Bard forced himself to take a deep breath. This might be the last one he took until the first act was over. Slowly, the opposing soldiers crept across the stage, their hearts glowing red as they screwed up their courage and erupted into battle. The stage erupted into chaotic stew of rising music, projected images, flashing lights, swirling mist, and the contorted struggles of the soldiers. Death, however, watched impassively from above, never moving from His crouch. One by one, the soldiers fell, the red glow at their hearts snuffed out and replaced by sickly green. The last chord of the Kyrie faded away, and the battlefield fell still.

The audience waited, unbreathing. When Death rose from His crouch, however, a collective inhalation of anticipation replaced the silence. The first terrible, dissonant chord of Prokofiev’s music clashed, and projections covered the stage walls with swarms of carrion crows and vultures.

When Death flew down to the battlefield in a swirl of glowing blue flames, the audience’s inhalation turned to a gasp. As the second chord sounded, Death stalked soundlessly to the edge of the stage to stare out into the audience. He drew His reaping knife, and turned back to the fallen soldiers to begin His harvest.

Gods, Bard had seen this ballet twice in as many days, and he still got a chill down his spine when Death had towered above him at the edge of the stage. What had that done to those who hadn’t seen it before?

Ever the implacable lord, Death gathered His souls with a remorseless and patient hand. He was far from remorseless and patient, however, when the Maid made her appearance. How frantic was she, searching the field of the fallen for her Soldier? With her long hair flying about her, the Maid threw herself on one dead solder after the other. Death paused as He waited by a soldier not yet dead, only to retreat a step when the Maid threw herself on the breast of the man. Yes, this was her love, her heart, and through her ministrations he slowly came back from the brink of death. How Death studied the Maid as she tenderly saw to her Soldier, restoring him until he could rise. As she called to the other battlefield attendants to help her bear her Soldier away, Death paused, considering. She and her attendants disappeared, and only then did Death recall His harvest. He reached out a tentative hand after the Maid, but collected His souls and retreated.
The Maid and the Soldier took the stage for their joyful pas de deux. The restored Soldier and his loving Maid spun a giddy, happy reunion that had the audience murmuring in admiration for the skill of the dancing as well as the emotion. Their happy reverie didn’t last, though, as the soldiers mustered for the next battle. Death appeared again on His perch to oversee the carnage. When the Soldier fell this time past the Maid’s ability to restore him, when the glow at his heart changed from red to green, her grief and despair found their echoes in the moans from the audience. Death added the fallen Soldier’s soul to His harvest, and led him with the rest of the dead down to the Underworld. The Maid followed, as the stage rotated to reveal the massive gates of the Underworld. The rest of the stage was dark, not yet revealing Death’s realm. At Death’s gesture, the gates opened, and He led the souls of the newly dead inside. Behind them came the Maid, but the gates closed despite her pleas, separating her from her lost Soldier. She was left outside, accompanied only by her grief.

The curtain fell.

Bard held his breath. Oh, gods, please, please...

The applause was immediate, a wave of sound that echoed off the ceiling and crashed over him like a sudden storm, but the best kind of storm.

Oh, thank you, gods.

Immortal was on its way.

“Oh, ye gods and little fishhooks,” Sigrid breathed beside Tilda, as the house lights went up. “That was even better than last night. Did you see how he looked over the audience like he was about to come down and take us after the soldiers?”

“That was amazing!” Bain agreed, grinning. “Gave me a chill, that’s for sure. It was great!”

“It was creepy,” Tilda said, as they all stood up to stretch their legs. When she looked up at Bard, however, her smile looked just like her brother’s admiring expression. “But it was a good creepy. Ada’s supposed to be creepy then. Don’t you think he looked creepy, Legs?”

“Eerie, too,” Legolas nodded. “I forgot how hot I was in this jacket, he was so creepy.”

“Oh, great,” Bain rolled his eyes. “You had to say something about how hot it was, didn’t you? I’d forgotten about it until you mentioned it.”

Legolas snickered. “Take off your jacket, then. No one will care if you take it off, as long as you put it on at the end. That’s when everyone will take pictures.”

“Who’s going to take pictures?” Sigrid leaned forward to look at Legolas.

“A lot of people,” Legolas shrugged. “They always do after Papa dances. Sometimes I would be in them, sometimes not. It’s exciting the first couple of times, but after that, it’s just a lot of bright lights. Anyway, have your jacket on at the end, Bain and Bard, just to make sure.”

“Advice from an expert,” Bard nodded appreciatively. “I’m glad one of us knows what we’re doing.”

“That’s the truth,” Sigrid snorted, laughing. “Even so, I think people like it so far, don’t you?”

“I think they love it,” Legolas smiled proudly. “You can hear it in how the audience sounds. If they didn’t like it, they’d sound restless or they’d mutter grumpy things. But tonight everyone’s gasping,
and oohing and aahing, and clapping. They’re excited.”

The theatre lights blinked, signaling the end of the intermission. The family kept standing until the people in their row had filtered back to their seats, then settled themselves for the second act.

Bard didn’t need to keep Legolas’s words in mind about the sound of the audience for long. As the house lights dimmed and the curtain went up, the stage revealed Death as he led His latest harvest of souls into the Underworld. Spontaneous applause broke out as the lights revealed the fantastic set in all its complexity. After the stark one-dimensional feeling of the mortal world, the swirl of bright colors, layers of detail, and detailed mishmash of cultures and costumes was breathtaking. Attendants came to remove Death’s armored tunic and helmet, and array Him in His regal robes. Then He led his new subjects through His realm, observing here, dictating there, clearly the master of all. The various enclaves put on their shows, expressed in the different dance forms, sometimes squabbling among themselves, sometimes joining forces to dance together. The kaleidoscope cast by the older inhabitants soon drew many of the new souls this way and that, and they found themselves dancing with one group or another, or festooned with hats or belts or other articles of clothing that blurred their plain military tunics.

The Maid’s Soldier, however, was not so drawn. He lagged after the others, almost dancing as if he tried to escape straight into the audience, only to be forced back as if a wall held him in place. Eventually he wandered away from the rest, and the stage rotated again for him to dance his longing for the Maid he’d left behind. After a few steps, he disappeared to reveal the Maid in her grief. She danced a pas de deux with the ghostly memory of her love, and resolved to plead with Death Himself to return her love. Down she went to the Underworld, made her plea, and was ushered into Death’s presence. As the terms of her bargain were made, the audience was rapt. Soon it was the restored Soldier who despaired outside the closed gates to the Underworld, and the curtain fell again.

The applause was even louder this time.

Bard couldn’t stop smiling. The second intermission flew by, and he was too distracted to notice much that anyone said to him. Tilda and the boys clustered in the aisle to share their excitement, but Sigrid stayed beside Bard.

“I can’t stand it,” she murmured to him, looking around in distraction. “The next scene is the scene, and I just can’t stand the suspense.”

“I’m right there with you, sweetness,” Bard admitted. “I’m wound as tightly as a clock spring.”

“Nobody has clocks with springs in them anymore, Da,” she said with authority, but her swallow revealed the real reason behind her snarky tone.

“You know what I mean well enough, though,” he riposted with the same tone, drawing her chuckle.

“Yes, I do. Gods, I don’t know whether to wish this were over or not.”

The house lights blinked again, signaling the imminent start to the third act.

“In eight minutes, it will be over. And Thran will be king of the world.”

Sigrid’s smile was wide. “Yes, he will. I can’t wait to see it happen.”

The children filed back into their seats, and Bard forced himself to breathe deeply again. The pointe scene was next.
The house lights darkened. The curtain rose on the blank part of the set, where the Maid danced in agitation, worry, and grief back and forth like a caged animal desperate for the release that was not to be found. Death entered, stripped of all His finery to make His appeal to the Maid. He was so tall, so spidery and thin, so alien with His mane of stark white hair, His grey face seemingly chiseled from old marble. How tenderly did He array the Maid in the beautiful gown He gave her? How many other priceless gifts did He bestow? To His dismay, though she wore His gown, the Maid was blind to everything else. Even when He rose to his utmost height, she did not see Him – but the audience did. No matter how hot the auditorium was, the thrill of shock, amazement, and incredulity that rose when Thran danced on pointe sent all of Bard’s skin into gooseflesh. Thran all but levitated on the tips of his pointe shoes, and when he arched back into arabesque on pointe, the audience broke into awed murmurs. The Maid was oblivious to the tour de force that went on beside her; all she saw was the memory of her Soldier. When at last her loss overwhelmed her and she ran from Death’s presence, He fell to his knees in anguish at her rejection, and the lights went dark.

The audience erupted with a spate of applause and cheers that didn’t die until the lights came up to reveal the Soldier. Mirroring the earlier scene of the Maid’s despair, the Soldier told the tale of his with equal poignancy. The ghostly appearance of the Maid made him firm his resolve to petition Death to let him resume his place among the dead, thus returning the Maid to the mortal world. The stage revolved, and the Soldier made his petition before the assembled denizens of the Underworld. But Death, desperate to keep the Maid in the hopes of eventually winning her regard, refused all of the Soldier’s pleas. The best that the Soldier could do was to remind Death that if he should die, Death must return the Maid to the mortal world. Reluctantly, Death acknowledged that part of their bargain. Satisfied, the Soldier stole a blade from one of the dead, and stabbed himself, expiring before the horrified Maid.

The captivated audience rang with gasps and cries. Infuriated, Death turned on the Maid, ordering His subjects to hold her before she could embrace the body of her fallen Soldier. Reluctantly, the dead forced her outside the gates, which slowly started to close. At the last moment, the Maid tore herself from the dead, fell to her knees beside her Solder, and thrust his dagger into her breast.

As the Maid fell beside the Soldier, as everyone else on stage, even Death Himself, froze, the audience cried out again. The emotion that swirled around Bard was all but palpable as Verdi’s Dies Irae ended.

Quietly, Tchaikovsky’s Hymn of the Cherubim began.

Death’s fury cooled to sorrow and grief as the dead brought the bodies of the Maid and the Soldier to lie in state before their Lord’s throne, then drew back to kneel in sorrow around the pair. With a sad gesture, Death relented, freeing the souls of the devoted lovers. The Maid and Soldier rose to reveal the green glow of the dead at their hearts. They smiled at one another, and danced a loving pas de deux because nothing had the power to separate them again, not even Death’s final declaration of His regard. Death bowed, conceding the depth of their devotion, and raised His hands over them to wield His ultimate power. The audience sighed when the green glow of their hearts changed to pure white. Death raised His hands once more, ready to free them from His kingdom to fly up to the heavens, where they would eternally shine together. The couple danced one last turn together around the stage, then with Death’s gesture they flew into the air. After they embraced on high, the Soldier fell to his knee before his love, and the gates to the Underworld began to close. Death remained outside, gazing at the devoted lovers in longing, reaching up with a pleading gesture one last time. But the Maid and the Soldier saw only each other, and Death bowed His head in concession. He returned
behind His gates, which drew closed after Him.

Gradually, all of the stage lights dimmed, until only a single spotlight illuminated the Maid and the Soldier. As the *Hymn of the Cherubim* drew to a close, that last spotlight faded, leaving the stage empty and dark.

On the last note of the *Hymn*, the curtain fell.

A heartbeat later, the auditorium exploded into thunderous applause and cheers. The noise was so loud that Bard didn’t immediately register how many people rose to their feet and yelled, or how many others wiped tears from their cheeks before they stood to applaud. Bard rose with them to pound his hands together in as much relief as awe.

So many people had put so much into making *Immortal* what it was. Story, sets, costumes, choreography, light, sound, music. But all those efforts paled beside what the UVB dancers had done with them. They had created a world that had let no one in the audience think of anything else for ninety minutes. Head and shoulders above all those dancers had been Thran. He had not just made Death, Lord of the Underworld, live.

He had made *Immortal* immortal.

The curtain rose to reveal the empty portion of the stage. One by one, the corps dancers who had danced the various enclaves of the dead appeared to take their bows. When Luka appeared to take his bows as the Soldier, the applause grew, and a few people ran forward to toss flowers at him – good, Bard wouldn’t be the only one to break with the tradition against offering flowers to the male principals. The young dancer gathered them up with a gratified wave and many bows of appreciation. The clamor grew when Charisse appeared for her bows as the winsome Maid, and several more people ran forward to lay bouquets on the stage for her. She picked up several, and bestowed half of them on her Soldier, who took them with a bow on bended knee to his partner. It was several seconds before the bouquets stopped coming to them both, and the applause continued unabated throughout. But at last, both dancers turned towards the wings and beckoned to the one dancer who wasn’t yet onstage.

When Thran appeared with a grand jeté, the place went mad.

Bard was overwhelmed to hear it, see it, feel it. No matter that Europeans thought it gauche to bestow flowers upon male dancers – uncounted numbers of American blossoms flew onto the stage as Thran took bow after bow. Sigrid grabbed their bundle of flowers and thrust it at Bard.

“Give it to him!” she urged. “Go on!”

Bard took the flowers, edged past the girls, and strode down the aisle. He didn’t toss his bouquet at Thran’s feet, but held it out to him. Thran came right to him, stooping to take the flowers with a wide grin of triumph, love, relief, exhaustion – more emotions than Bard could count. The roar from the audience was too loud for Thran to speak over, so instead he kissed the knuckles of his gloves and held them out to Bard. Bard kissed his and touched them to Thran’s for a second before backing away. Before Thran rose to his feet, he gathered an armful of the other flowers, bowed over and over to the audience, then went down the line of the corps to give each of the dancers one of the bouquets. The only one he kept in his arms was Bard’s.

How long did the applause go on? Five minutes? Ten minutes? A lifetime? However long it continued, it was long enough for the corps to take several bows, and for Luka and Charisse to be loudly hailed and showered with bouquets time and time again. It was long enough for Thran to
bring Irmo from the wings to take a bow – for the first time, a look of utter humility and gratitude suffused the impetuous choreographer’s face. It was long enough for Thran to take bow after bow after bow, each one to deafening acclaim. Even after the curtain came down, the applause continued until Luka, Charisse, and Thran had to make repeated appearances from the sides of the stage.

The weight of the world vanished from Bard’s shoulders. It was over, it was done, and it was a triumph. Tonight, no one stood taller in the ballet world than Thran.

All six feet and five inches of him.

On pointe.
Chapter 158

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the premiere party! It's time for UltraViolet Ballet and Clan Ffyrnig’s well-deserved celebration.

“Oh, mon Dieu, listen to it!” Charisse put one hand to her mouth and grabbed at Luka with the other. As soon as Tink got the line unhooked from Charisse’s flying harness, the ballerina threw both arms around Luka. “C’est incroyable! Luka, we have done it! Thran! Where are you, Thran! Thran, notre rêve s’est réalisé!”

Thran pulled off Death’s regal robe and thrust it into the arms of the nearest costume assistant, then dodged through the rest of the company to join Luka and Charisse. He enveloped both of them in a hug that was as much relief as it was celebration.

Immortal was real. No longer relegated to the practice stage as an idea that had yet to meet the world, it was fully realized, staged, performed...

Acclaimed.

The corps scrambled to take their bows, but Thran was too overcome to see them go. He sank to his knees, lightheaded, remembering at the last second to loose his arms around Luka and Charisse so that he didn’t drag them down with him. Now that Immortal had premiered, he had no words for what he felt, either praise or curse. After so many struggles, after not performing for eight months, after upending so much of his life, from new company to new family to new home to new ballet, the world spun around him like a kaleidoscope.

“Oh, gods – Thran!” Luka fell to his knees beside him to shake his shoulders. “Are you faint? Thran!”

“I am fine,” he said, gripping Luka’s arms. “Go, go! Take your bows. You deserve them. Savor, mon cher. Yes, go, go!”

Luka swallowed, but Thran pushed him, and off he ran. The applause and the cheers grew as Luka appeared, which pleased him greatly. When he didn’t get to his feet, Charisse regarded him with a frown, so he mustered a smile for her. “Vraiment, ma chère, I am fine. So much hard work, so many trials, but we overcame them all. It quite overwhelms me.”

Charisse gave him a wide smile. “Do not miss a single bow of your own, mon cher. Not after all that hard work, all those trials.”

Thran climbed to his feet. “Go, so that you do not miss any of yours, either. You were wonderful.”

“We all were. Oh, Thran, listen to it! We are stars!”

He saw Charisse out onto the stage to take her bows, laughing in delight when so many flowers came onto the stage for her. How adorable she and her Luka were, giving their reverences and waving to the crowd, remaining in character just enough to convey the sweet, youthful affection between the Soldier and the Maid. He gave them a long interlude to let them bask in the acclaim they
were due. But soon they turned to him waiting in the wings, and beckoned him to join him.

He ran out of the wings, hurling himself into a grand jeté that carried him to the center of the stage. If his excitement had magically transformed into the energy that powered his jump, he might not have landed on the stage, but flown out of the building and up to the very edge of the atmosphere. If the wall of emotion that washed over him when he appeared had been transformed similarly, he could have flown around the moon and back. Perhaps some of his performances before tonight had been met with such a clamor, but this one was special. He hadn’t merely danced a role to perfection – he’d created that role first.

Then he’d owned it.

Flowers flew onto the stage. He’d never had the ballerina’s honor to receive them before. His teachers at the Mariinsky would have been appalled – how gauche, they would have said.

It wasn’t gauche. It was appreciation. It was honor. It was love.

As if he’d heard Thran’s thoughts, Bard appeared at the edge of the stage, smiling ear to ear, holding a bouquet out to him. Gods, how handsome was his husband in his tuxedo, his carved silver earrings giving him a rakish glamour – and was that a streak of blue in his hair? He scanned for the children, and found them smiling, applauding, waving, Kukla jumping up and down as if she were a pogo stick – all of them had colors in their hair. Laughing, Thran went right to the edge of the stage to take his husband’s offering. Oh, Bard had done his research – Stargazer lilies to celebrate the realization of a dream, and pink carnations to recognize so much hard work done with grace. What was this? A sly nod to his preferences with the green carnations? And gods, the coup de grace, the Viscaria that was an invitation to dance!

A lifetime would not be long enough to spend in the cradle of Bard’s arms, whether they danced or did anything else.

The tumult of the audience was too deafening for Thran to speak. It was just as well – words were beyond him. He kissed his knuckles and held them out to Bard, who mirrored the gesture. The unselfish love and pride in Bard’s eyes were a gift beyond any flowers.

Bard backed away, graciously leaving Thran to accept the tribute he was due. But he had not been the only one to garner that tribute, so he gathered up as many of the bouquets that he could gracefully carry, and bowed over them with heartfelt appreciation. Then he went down the line of the corps, giving each of them at least one of the bouquets, male and female alike. The only one he kept for himself was Bard’s. That one would go home with him.

He went backstage and returned with Irmo for him to take a bow. The man might be infuriating at times, but he also possessed the genius to give Immortal’s story life with his choreography, and it was only right that he was recognized for it. How surprising was it to see the man so firmly ensconced in his private world look out over the audience and humbly realize that the greater world appreciated his efforts, his gifts?

The applause seemed never to stop. Even after the curtain fell, the clamor drew Luka, Charisse, and Thran out time and again. The number of bouquets that were laid at their feet would fill their ballroom. They would need buckets to hold them all.

It was a lovely problem to have.

Thran had no idea how much time passed before the applause finally died, and the house lights went up. He left the stage to the Theatre Ninjas, who offered to collect the piles of flowers and bring them
to his dressing room. He asked them to stack them on one of the tables in the costume and warmup room instead, and told them they were welcome to take some for themselves if they liked. He had the bouquet that meant the most.

Backstage was a frantic, jubilant place as the dancers milled back and forth, all hugging and chattering excitedly. The scent of flowers was rich, as almost every dancer had two or three bundles in their hands, and Charisse and Luka had their arms full. No one had made any move to change out of costumes or remove makeup – they were still too excited to want the evening to end. It was still early, barely past nine he heard someone say, so it was no wonder everyone was still wound so tightly. Lettie came into the stir, laughing and embracing everyone she met. When she got to Thran, her hug was exuberant.

“You were incredible,” she said simply. “Just incredible. I can’t even find words to describe how incredible you were. I’m just overwhelmed.”

Thran’s smile was elated. “That will be the word of the night, Lettie. Overwhelmed. I cannot believe that we have done it. *Immortal* is out in the world.”

“The djinni’s out of the bottle to be sure, never to be put back in. I can’t wait to hear what the critics have to say about it. There’s not one of them who wasn’t here tonight, and there’s not one of them who can’t say it was brilliant.”

“There is likely one gremlin somewhere who might try, but let us hope he was not here tonight,” Thran grinned. “Gods, I am giddy.”

“You have every right to be, Thran,” Lettie avowed. “Oh, I want to announce this before anyone gets away – excuse me.”

Lettie turned to call down the hall. “Hey, everyone, before anyone flits away, remember the premiere party’s in the village at the Green Dragon. The school’s anxious for us to clear out so they can lock up for the night, so I move we adjourn for a well-deserved celebration as soon as possible.”

A cheer went up, and the stir calmed as dancers got out of their costumes and cleaned off their makeup. The costume handlers ferried everything back on the proper racks – they’d be back early tomorrow morning to see that everything was cleaned and ready for Wednesday’s performance.

When Thran and Luka retreated to their dressing room to change, the young dancer was so excited that he spilled his armload of flowers all over his bag, the counter, and the floor. He couldn’t stop babbling his excitement, which drew Thran’s chuckle. He set Bard’s flowers aside; shed his gloves, loincloth, body stocking, dancing slippers, and dancer’s belt, and put on his underwear, trousers, socks, and shoes before he tackled all the pins that anchored his headdress. Without that on his head, he felt much cooler; the body heat from so many dancers had turned the dressing rooms into saunas. It helped to prop the door open once he and Luka were decently attired so that they could catch whatever breeze came down the hall. Luka had far less makeup to remove, so when he was done he bundled up his flowers and ran out to catch Charisse so they could ride together to the premiere party.

Thran remained behind, working methodically to remove Death’s face from his, and combing the rigors of Death’s trials from his hair. When it was smooth, he took pains to arrange it into an elegant fishtail braid. This might be a celebration for UVB, but likely the press would follow them there, and of course there would be pictures taken. He wanted to look elegant, whether the pictures were for friends or the press.

First, however, it was his pleasure to return to his family. They deserved to attend the celebration,
He put on his shirt, gathered his bag and Bard's flowers, and eased across the stage to sneak a look out from behind the curtain. Yes, Bard and the children were still in the auditorium. Most of the audience was gone, but Hal and Ari stood talking with his family. Thran stepped from behind the curtain and came down the stairs to join them.

“Thran! Oh, my god!” Hal heralded, throwing up both of his hands as Thran approached, then rushing forward to give him a bear hug. He held Thran at arm’s length to gaze at him in awe. “That was the most amazing ballet I’ve ever seen! Oh, my god, I cried like a baby at the end, didn’t I, Ari? That was just so, so incredible. And damn, my friend, I can’t believe I saw you actually poised on the tips of your shoes like you were about to fly off into space! I’m just beyond words. Completely and totally beyond words!”

“For Hal, he’s beyond words,” Ari put his hands on Hal’s shoulders to peek around his boyfriend, smiling. “Not like anyone else is beyond words, but then Hal isn’t ever like anyone else, is he?”

“No, he is not,” Thran agreed, laughing. “Thank you, my friend. It is a delight to see you so excited.”

“Oh, both of you,” Hal waved dismissively, but the wink he gave Thran was well aware of the impression he made. “I refuse to apologize one bit for any of it. It was the most amazing thing I’ve seen in ages, and that’s that.”

“You do me a great honor,” Thran gave him a little bow. “Thank you.”

“It was great, Thran,” Ari agreed. “Congratulations on an amazing performance.”

“Thank you, Ari.”

“And oh, my god, what a treat it is to see your family all dressed up for the occasion,” Hal put his hand to his heart and leaned in confidentially. “The children are adorable, but honestly, Thran, that husband of yours... what a vision!”

“He is my treasure,” Thran agreed, chuckling.

“Well, let us be off, my dear,” Hal gave Thran another hug. “You’ve given the world something to talk about, without doubt. I hope this makes you millions. I’ll have several ideas about what you might want to do with them once you have them.”

“Thank you, Hal. Ari, it was good of you to come.”

“I wouldn’t have missed, it, Thran,” Ari reached forward to shake Thran’s hand. “Even if Hal hadn’t threatened me with death by lack of cupcakes, I still would have come.”

“That is a most horrible fate!” Thran laughed. “Goodbye!”

The two men took their leave, waving and exchanging goodbyes with Bard and the children before they went up the aisle. Thran turned to his family in their finery, shaking his head at how wonderful they looked.

“Look at you! Such debonair men, such lovely young ladies – are these the same children who tear up and down the stairs and bounce on the beds and play uncounted games of car race and zombie apocalypse?”
“Yes!” Tilda jumped up and down. “It’s still us!”

Legolas gave his father a big hug. “It was wonderful, Papa. Even better than last night.”

“You were so eerie when you stalked to the edge of the stage and looked out at the audience,” Sigrid agreed. “That gave me goosebumps.”

“Super weird, Thran,” Bain assured him.

“Ah, good!” Thran beamed. “Just as I meant! I will do that each time, then.”

“Let’s get Thran in the SUV, then, children,” Bard urged. “I’m sure he’s tired of standing.”

“Oh, but I need your help,” Thran hastened to say. “I have so many flowers to take home that I need you all to help me carry them.”

“Ooh, all those flowers?” Tilda jumped up and down again. “We get to take them home?”

“All of them,” Thran nodded. “I gave away as many as I could, so the rest are for us.”

Thran led them back to the costume room, where a table full of flowers still remained. The girls oohed and aahed over the collection, and the boys marveled at how many there were. As the children sorted through them, Bard nudged Thran with his elbow.

“May I give the genius behind Immortal a kiss now?”

Thran turned soft eyes on Bard. “Only if I may give the other genius behind Immortal a kiss, too.”


“You, foolish man!” Thran gave Bard a mock glower. “The one in the most elegant tuxedo, with the most bewitching earrings, and the most exciting blue streak in his hair. Was that your idea?”

Bard chuckled. “I had to show solidarity with the children.”

“You did not. You did it because it was hot.”

“It certainly is. Next time you have a premiere, could you make it December? July is way too hot for a tuxedo. I can’t wait to get out of this jacket.”

Thran tsked. “Tcha, you exasperate! You know very well I referred to you, not the weather.”

Bard leaned in for a quick kiss. “Too much talking. Not enough kissing.”

Thran kissed back with a smile. “Ah. Something we agree on.”

“At last.” Bard dipped in for another quick peck, then regarded the children piling flowers in their arms. “Looks like they need a little help, cariad.”

“By all means,” Thran agreed. He set Bard’s bouquet to the side, then he and Bard scooped up the remaining flowers. He carefully set Bard’s bouquet on top of his armload, drawing Bard’s appreciative smile.

“What course I am careful of this one, lyubov moya. The others are all very fine, of course. But this one is the one I most care about.”
“Make sure you count all the flowers. I made sure there were only an odd number.”

“Listen to you! You are a refined sender of flowers. You send me congratulations for the achievement of my dreams, appreciation for grace under pressure, a nod to my life, and an invitation to the dance. And you consider how superstitious Russians are with their bouquets.”

“Superstitious? You?” Bain paused to look around at Thran. “Superstitious how?”

“Let us talk as we carry the bounty to the SUV,” Thran suggested.

Bard and Thran got the last of the flowers into their arms, and the family led the way to the lobby. As they exited the auditorium, the two security guards warned them that a host of reporters and well-wishers lingered outside. Thran tsked.

“I should have thought,” he looked at Bard apologetically. “I do not want to put the children through this.”

“Can I dash out and drive the SUV around to the emergency exit by the dressing rooms?” Bard asked the guards, but when they vetoed that, Sigrid snuck a peek through the outside door.

“Let’s just go, Da. They want to talk to Ada, not us, and Luka and Mlle. Charisse are out there. Ada will be okay with them. We can wait in the SUV.”

The family shrugged, so they forged out of the building. The heat was still uncomfortable, so everyone was eager to get to the air-conditioned SUV. Of course, the reporters dove after Thran, so he sent his family ahead of him as he joined Luka and Charisse to answer questions. It was some minutes before he was able to break away gracefully. On the one hand, it was good that so many were interested in the three dancers and their ballet, and their publications would help spread the word of Immortal’s success, which was all to their good. On the other, the dancers were tired, and wanted to get to their party before they were too exhausted to enjoy it. After some minutes of scribbling autographs, answering questions, and smiling for photographs, Luka and Thran escorted Charisse to her car, then Thran saw Luka to his. Bard had kept careful watch, and he drove up as soon as Luka got into his car. Thran dove into the front seat, smiling and waving one more time as Bard drove them out of the parking lot.

“They like the ballet, Papa,” Legolas called from the back. “That’s good.”

“Very good,” Thran smiled as he leaned back in his seat. “I am very happy.”

“Do you want to go right to your party?” Bard asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Let us go home first, and put all the flowers in water, and then you and the children can change into something cooler. For of course you are all invited to the party, too.”

That got a big hooray from the children, so they drove home. Thran had been right about needing buckets to hold all the flowers; he put Bard’s bouquet into a vase for the kitchen table, but they filled three big buckets from the carriage house with the rest.

“They will last overnight this way,” Thran said as he unwrapped cellophane from some of the bundles, snipped off the stem ends, and put the flowers in the buckets. “We can arrange them better in the morning. No, I can do it while you change. Please, no holes, trousers for the boys and perhaps a summer dress for the girls?”

“I don’t have a summer dress,” Sigrid shrugged. “But I can wear my work pants and a nice top.”
Thran nodded assent, so the family went upstairs to change. In a few minutes, Legolas and Sigrid came down to help, both dressed in khaki pants and colorful shirts. Tilda appeared in her same bee dress, and Bain had on his soccer jersey. Bard wore a pair of dark blue trousers and one of his nice shirts with the sleeves rolled up. As they piled back into the SUV, the mood was festive.

It was time to party.

* * *

Lettie had reserved the party room in the Green Dragon for UVB’s celebration. The Indonesian-inspired restaurant specialized in grilled skewers, especially seafood, and was popular with villagers as well as tourists. Their light, protein-rich fare was a good choice to feed a crowd of dancers at any time, but especially late at night after a performance, and the dancers relished the chance to sample the treat. When Bard and his family arrived, the party was already busy, and Thran was greeted like the star he was. Bard gave Thran a little push towards the other dancers, sending him off with a smile.

“Da, look! Scallop skewers!” Bain breathed, pointing to the buffet table.

“Chicken satay, too,” Legolas pointed.

“What are those round white things?” Tilda asked.

“Scallops,” Legolas said. “Like those we had at Kasim's, remember?”

“Oh, the round things in my casserole!” Tilda exclaimed in recognition. “I liked those.”

“I like them, too,” Legolas agreed, smiling.

“They have a juice bar,” Sigrid continued. “And champagne. You have to get some champagne, Da.”

“Can we have some, Da?” Bain asked breathlessly.

“Skewers and juice, yes; champagne, no. Take only a couple things at a time, and be polite. Leave most of them for the dancers, please. This is their supper, and they’ve worked hard tonight.”

“Okay, Da!”

He shepherded the children to the buffet table, chose a couple of skewers and a glass of beer for himself, and scanned for someplace out of the way for them to sit. Rada and Ori, ensconced in a corner, waved to him, so he pointed the children towards them.

“Hi, Mr. Rada!” Tilda heralded. “Is Sebastian with you tonight?”

“Sadly, no, Tilda. But he appreciates you asking after him. He misses seeing all of you.”

Bard took the seat next to Ori. The children chatted with Rada; Ori and Brad watched the dancers laugh and talk together as they nibbled their snacks. It was a relief to see everyone so jubilant at how well Immortal had been received. Charisse and the Irish step dancer giggled over a joke from the belly dancer, and Thran listened as some of the corps dancers told him about someone they’d seen in the audience – a ballet critic they all knew of, apparently.
“It’s good to see everyone laugh,” Bard observed.

Ori nodded. “And no one’s leaning over a bucket to throw up. That’s even better. Thran really impressed my brother, by the way.”

“I hope he impressed everyone who saw him tonight.”

Ori’s expression was grimly amused. “Most people who saw him tonight were impressed because he danced like an angel. Nori was impressed because he didn’t let Thursday night keep him from dancing like an angel.”

Bard regarded Thran and Legolas as they conferred over the buffet table, debating the merits of the chicken satay over the scallop skewers. They laughed at something Bain said, seemingly carefree.

“After the effort everyone’s made, especially Thran, nothing short of a double leg amputation would have kept him from dancing tonight.”

“I know it.” Ori took up his glass of beer and held it out to Bard. “Here’s to stubborn Russians.”

Bard touched his glass to Ori’s with a clink. “Amen.”

The two men drained their glasses in solemn salute.

The party went on under Bard and Ori’s benevolent watch, blessedly free of most of the speeches that might have punctuated such a gathering in the city. Lettie and Abebe both had a few words to say, and so did Thran; all of them spoke their appreciation for the hard work everyone had put in to make *Immortal* a success. When the champagne went around to toast that success, Bard indulged in a single glass, smiling as he recalled the last time he’d had some – the night Clan Ffyrnig had moved into their house. That night had celebrated the start of his and Thran’s life together. Tonight, they celebrated the start of UltraViolet Ballet’s life as an innovative, creative force, with Thran at the heart of it.

The first celebration had been more personal, while this one was more public. But both were milestones, just as Bard’s first gallery show had been. Bard took another sip of his champagne, savored the laughter of his children, his husband, and his friends, and was content.

Just before midnight, the dancers bade each other elated farewells. Tomorrow was Sunday, their rest day, but Monday promised to be a jubilant reunion. Despite the late hour, it was hard to corral the children to go home; they’d discovered the ice cream bar at the end of the buffet table, and it was clear that all of them had indulged heavily in the treat. But eventually Bard got Bain and Tilda away from the ice cream, and Thran coaxed Legolas from the tray of scallop skewers. Bard finally found Sigrid with Charisse among the ballerinas; because she could rightfully claim to have danced as Thran’s partner, she had become an honorary member of the dance community for the evening. She revealed her usual pragmatic streak as they left the Green Dragon and headed for the SUV.

“They were all nice, and it was so sweet of them to invite me into the fold, but no, I don’t think I’ll become a dancer anytime soon,” she told Bard. “I don’t mind the hard work, but I do like to eat more than they do. Two tiny little shrimp skewers and no ice cream is not for me.”

“There was ice cream?” Thran blinked in feigned surprise.

“You know there was ice cream, Ada,” Sigrid grinned. “I saw Legolas and Tilda bring you some.”

“It was a welcome treat,” Thran admitted, as they piled into the car. “And no vegetables. After so many weeks of unending rehearsals, we are all sick of unending vegetables – salads, carrot sticks, 

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celery spears, snow peas. Tonight, we are triumphant, so we celebrate with delicious seafood for the body, and decadent ice cream for the spirit. Perfection."

The family laughed as they headed home.

In an hour, the children were in bed, Bard and Thran had made their rounds, and Bard had rinsed off the evening’s sweat. He turned the shower over to Thran, who needed a more thorough scrub. Bard was still too wound up from the evening to get into bed yet, so he pulled on his shorts to wander downstairs. He ducked into the solarium, where he could just see the gibbous moon sinking in the west; it would set in perhaps an hour or so. A few clouds obscured the stars right overhead; perhaps it would rain overnight, but the bright moon in the west revealed that the morning would be clear, and likely as hot as it had been today. It would be a fine day to enjoy the lush gardens, the shifting sunlight that illuminated each room of the house so beautifully, the stir of the children as they came and went.

Something drew him from the solarium through the sitting room, down the hall, through the still unfinished main room, and into Thran’s sanctum, the ballroom. It was mostly in darkness and shadow; the setting moon was too low to add its illumination to the room, but the wide expanses of pale cream paint and white woodwork were bright enough to reflect what little light there was. He looked out of the bay window at his Ring Thing sculpture nestled in deep beds of flowers and small shrubs. A small spotlight at the base of the sculpture revealed the slowly undulating rings as the slight breeze stirred them. In the dark, the colors of the anodized rings disappeared into ribbons of black and white, but the motion was still soothing.

“You are pensive, my saint.” Thran’s whisper was as soft as the hands that came to rest on Bard’s shoulders. Bard shifted until they stood side by side, their arms looped around each other’s waists.

“Do you know that next Saturday, the day you dance the last performance of Immortal for the festival, is the eight-month anniversary of the day we met?”

Thran sighed deeply. “You are right. So much has happened since. We are together, we are here, you sculpt again, I dance again.”

“The children are happy.”

“I am very happy, too, and so are you.”

Smiling, Bard said, “Very much so.”

“Would you dance with me?”

Bard gave Thran a quick glance in the dark. “You’ve danced your feet off today, cariad. How can you want to dance even one step more?”

“Because I want to dance with you, if only once around the ballroom. You did invite me with the flowers, yes? What better way to end a day like today?”

Bard grinned. “Is this another ritual?”

Thran chuckled. “Only if you believe in old songs, lyubov moya. A plea to save the last dance for me.”

Bard took Thran in his arms as his husband had taught him. “First dance, middle dance, last dance, any dance... they’re all yours.”
They began a slow waltz. They made two full circuits of the ballroom before Bard eased them to a halt before the window where they’d started.

There was no reason for either of them to speak.
Chapter 159

Chapter Summary

It's the day after Immortal's world premiere. What better day to say goodbye to Clan Ffyrnig?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first day of Clan Ffyrnig’s new life began Sunday morning. It began quietly, privately, with delicious, drowsy touches and lazy stretches in bed with Bard, intermingled with soft sighs and low murmurs of nothing so serious as what to have for breakfast. It continued with a slow amble about the house to regard the gardens from the ballroom window, then the solarium, then out for a brief moment on the terrace. It was already hot under the summer morning sun, and Bard’s pine tree was in Celebrían’s gallery for the festival week, but that didn’t keep Thran or his husband from enjoying the enormous bright green elephant ear leaves, the lush shrubs, and the big urns overflowing with purple, yellow, and white flowers. The urns reminded them of the buckets of flowers waiting for them in the mudroom, so they scrounged the few vases from Bard’s mother that he’d stowed in the butler’s pantry, but they still had two buckets full waiting for suitable vessels. They made a few small arrangements with drinking glasses to compliment Bard’s bouquet on the kitchen table before hunger got the better of them. Thran put on the teakettle and arranged cups and dishes while Bard made a cheese and chive Egg Puff to go with the leftover biscuits he’d made yesterday. Soon they sat down amid the flowers to eat.

Life continued with deceptive quiet as they cleaned up their breakfast and adjourned to the sitting room with their tea. Thran’s computer sat on one of the sofas. Atop it was a sticky note. *Ada! Read your email!* Love, Sigrid, it read.

Thran traded looks with Bard, but duly opened his computer and clicked on his email app to find a message from Sigrid. When he opened it, it read, *Ada! Look at these!* Several Internet addresses appeared below Sigrid’s words.

His husband shrugged and offered a crooked smile. “She wouldn’t have sent you the email unless it contained good news. Go on. Take a look at what the future holds.”

Ah, so Bard considered today to be a cusp, a turning point, too. Was the quiet, private, early morning beginning to Clan Ffyrnig’s new life about to give way to a lively, public midmorning?

“True enough,” Thran conceded. “So let us see.”

The first several linked to online reviews of *Immortal’s* premiere of last night; the last one linked to a video broadcast from one of the city news stations. All of them offered glowing praise for the ballet. The video showed several stills and two short video clips that UVB’s PR team had produced to advertise *Immortal*, but the reviewer had been in attendance last night and had nothing but high praise for the endeavor.

Thank the gods. The risks had paid off, and *Immortal* had debuted with all the acclaim Thran could
have hoped for.

Bard gave Thran a sideways glance. “What was he on about? A ‘troubled production?’ Did I miss something?”

Thran grinned. “I do not think so, my saint. There was Kiefer, there was the tight budget, there was the clamorous appeal to donors, there were so many things to do and not enough time to do them. You knew of all of these things. Perhaps the only thing you did not account for was the media’s penchant for drama... a penchant our PR person might have fed to some small extent.”

“Drama sells better than smooth sailing, you mean.”

“Exactly so, my saint.”

Thran’s mobile rang. They exchanged glances again, as Thran dug into his shorts pocket for the device.

“Hello, Thran? Ori here.”

“Good morning, Ori! You are well today, I hope?”

“I’m over the moon, Thran, and I hope you are, too. Have you seen any of the reviews?”

“Our Sigrid left me a note before she went to work. Bard and I have just seen several. I am delighted.”

“The clamor’s already started, and I expect today to be frantic. We could schedule a performance for every night of the festival and still not meet demand, so that may lead to some questions about moving to another venue after the festival. I’ll keep an eye on that for us. But I wanted to ask you about something... what if we record the next two performances of Immortal, and then offer a nice DVD for sale? We could give a portion of the receipts to the school if you’d like, but more importantly, it’d provide a good source of funds for UVB.”

“Which would be most appreciated,” Thran agreed at once. “I like that idea very much, Ori.”

“Great! Lettie’s already on board with the idea, so I’ll let her know that you are, too, and I’ll set it up for Wednesday and Saturday.”

“That is wonderful! Thank you for looking out for us.”

“For me, too. I told Nori I’d taken the job you offered me.”

“Suka blyad,” Thran gave an exaggerated wince. “Should I expect retribution?”

Ori’s chuckle was without irony. “He’d already resigned himself to my defection. He wished me well, and UVB, too. I did tell him I’d still look into a few of his knottier data things on occasion, so he was satisfied. So you’re in the clear.”

“That is even more wonderful news. I could not be more delighted. I would be lost without you, and so would Irmo and Lettie.”

“I appreciate the kind words, Thran. Anyway, we’re a success, so take today and celebrate.”

“I will. Oh! Before you go, have you heard how Mike is? Can we visit him yet?”

“He’s still in the ICU, but if all goes well he’ll move to a regular room tomorrow or Tuesday. Then
we’ll be able to visit.”

“Let me know when we can. I want to see him. I owe him many, many thanks.”

“I will.”

“Thank you, Ori. Now, do not let Immortal take all of your day today. Make sure you celebrate, too.”

“Thanks! I’ll call you if anything important comes up, but more than likely I’ll see you tomorrow at the school.”

“I will see you then, mon cher. I thank you for the good news.”

Thran clicked off his mobile and relayed the gist of the discussion to Bard, who chuckled at Nori’s reaction to Ori’s permanent status at UVB.

“That’s stellar. UVB got half again as far as it did because that young man can cut a deal like no one but Nori himself. And he’s not nearly so intimidating to his friends. That’s just stellar.”

“Agreed. So how should we celebrate?”

“I have take the tuxes back to the mall once the lads get up, but other than that, the day’s yours. What would you like to do?”

Thran sighed. “So many possibilities... You will think me most perverse, lyubov moya, but... after we return the suits, would you consider a trip to the secondhand shops? I have not gotten to do that since... hmmm, since we bought the children’s bookcase desks, I think? I would like to do something for us today, not the dance.”

“That’d be great,” Bard agreed. “The perfect thing for a summer day.”

They perused more of the links that Sigrid provided while they waited for the children to wake up. With each one he read, his worry receded a little more. He refused to think of what would come after this triumph – he wanted to savor it to its fullest first. Cusp or not, it was a moment that he wanted to linger.

* * *

Eventually Bain, Legolas, and Tilda appeared for breakfast. When they’d exclaimed over the flowers and eaten their breakfasts, everyone dressed for their foray to the mall. As Thran came out of the closet looking elegant in sand-colored cotton trousers, long-sleeved Philippine shirt of the lightest white embroidered cotton, and a wide brimmed Panama hat, Bard looked him up and down and gave a low whistle.

“Except for the braid, you look like a nineteen-forties film star. Very elegant.”

Thran gave him a mischievous smile. “Thank my pale skin. It is very easy for me to get a sunburn, so I must cover up.”

“Good point. But you’re still very elegant. I’ll have to step up my game.”
“Thank you, lyubov moya. We will make time to take you shopping.”

“We’d better. I want to look respectable next to you. Today, though, you’ll just have to slum with a welder in shorts and a tee.”

“Wear that tropical shirt I have seen on your side of the closet. Then you will look artistic. Or would you prefer to borrow my Wolverine tee that Legolas gave me for Christmas?”

Bard laughed. “I’d forgotten about that Hawaiian thing. I wonder if it still fits?”

It did, but just barely; Bard’s daily chin-ups had broadened his shoulders to the point that he could hardly button the shirt across his chest.

“I think I’d better wear a tee.”

“I like it,” Thran purred, flicking a finger at the offending button to pop it open. “Much better.”

Bard snorted. “I’m definitely wearing a tee. I don’t need to prove to the rest of the world that my husband can undress me that easily.”

“Mmm, the idea,” Thran purred again, smiling. “Perhaps you will wear it later so I can see just how fast I can get you out of it.”

“Bastard.” Bard threw the shirt at him and dug in to his dresser for a clean blue tee. “Let’s roust the troops before you decide you don’t want us to leave the bedroom today.”

“Such a temptation,” Thran eyed Bard up and down as he pulled the tee over his head. “I will resist for now. Later tonight, perhaps not.”

“Neither will I, so you’ll be in just as much trouble as I will.”

“What a delightful prospect.”

“You trill like a cheetah,” Bard snorted as he stuffed his wallet in his back pocket and prodded Thran towards the door. “Come on, kitty, kitty. Return the suits, then secondhand shops.”

They collected the boys and Tilda, and made their run to the mall. Returning the suits took only a few minutes, but the trip out of the mall took longer. Tilda saw a cute sundress that she asked to try on, then the boys saw tees, then Thran saw a shirt for Bard in the import shop. When they finally emerged from the mall, all of them but Thran had a bag. Most of the bags held old clothes, because after Tilda insisted on wearing her airy blue sundress, the boys had followed suit. They forged out of the mall, then headed for the nearest secondhand shop.

They passed the late morning and early afternoon in leisurely fashion, browsing in one shop after the other. Despite the heat, it was a welcome respite from the weeks of Thran’s grueling rehearsals and Bard’s labors on the house. Was this a sign of things to come? He’d hadn’t been aware of the sensation in the mall, but here in the secondhand shops, the change in his life was obvious. What a relief it was not to consider every penny when Tilda and Bain found a couple of books, or Legolas found a used videogame. When Bard saw a quartet of crystal vases for the flowers, a folding Moroccan side table for the solarium, and a round, fringed Chinese rug for the bedroom landing, he didn’t hesitate. They were things they needed, discarded things that needed a new home, and Bard was grateful that he had the wherewithal to buy them.

Oh, there was another sign of how life had changed – Thran wasn’t able to browse as much as he wanted, as several people approached him to offer compliments on last night’s premiere. Likely his
husband had expected this, given the care he’d taken with his appearance. He was used to being something of a public figure, but this was the first time Bard had seen Thran deal with so many admirers. How gracious his husband was, despite the frequent interruptions. Bard filed that away – from now on, Thran would attract more attention, and in time, maybe Bard would, too. He’d take pains to do Thran justice when they were out together, both in bearing and appearance.

Yet another reason to appreciate his change in finances – he certainly had some thinking to do when he looked for new summer clothes. Just exactly how did a saint dress to complement an angel? He was still smiling about that when Thran escaped the attentions of the most recent admirer.

“Your adoring public.” Bard gave him a commiserating smile.

Thran sent a chagrined look skyward before he met Bard’s eyes again. “I expected some, but not so many. Who knew that so many people who frequent junk shops also like the ballet?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Bard chuckled. “I’m sorry you haven’t gotten to look as much as you wanted to.”

“We will be back again. Besides, I have seen very little I want today, other than the rug you bought. I like that very much. The sage green background will complement the landing paint exactly, and the rose, green, and purple medallion and border are beautiful. Though I did see a silver gilt table that might suit the main room, but I was intercepted before I got to look closer.”

“Where is it? Let’s look now while we have the chance.”

“In that far room, I think. I caught only a glimpse. Perhaps it has a Greek Key motif around the edge? That is one of my favorite patterns...”

They ventured into the far room, both of them signaling the children where they were headed. The children trailed along behind.

“That one in front of the sofa?” Bard questioned, as he homed in on the table. But Thran hesitated, and veered off to the left. “Wait – that’s not it? Oh!”

Thran had found a dusty piano – no, two of them. One was a pale brown upright, but it was the ebony baby grand that had drawn Thran. He opened the keyboard cover to stroke the keys.

“A piano?” Tilda questioned, coming up beside them. “This is a great big one.”

“It is not a grand piano, only a baby grand.” Thran stroked the keys with a light finger. As the boys came to see what was so interesting, he pressed one key, getting a soft note in response.

“Do you know how to play it?” Bain asked.

Thran nodded. “Though I have not for some years.”

“Give it a go,” Bard urged.

“Yes, play something, Papa,” Legolas asked.

“Yes, do!” Tilda clapped in anticipation.

Bain and Legolas grabbed the bench in front of the upright and slid it in front of the larger instrument. Thran sat down to play a few slow bars of a Viennese waltz. But then he gave a mischievous wink to Bard, and launched into his favorite Maple Leaf Rag. The piano was out of
tune, so the results were not as on key as they might have been, but it was still a jaunty rendition, and good enough to merit applause from his family when he was done.

“I have not had the pleasure to play for too long,” Thran said ruefully, stroking the keys. “This is a good piano, though clearly it is out of tune.”

“Will you buy it, Ada?” Tilda asked.

“I do not think so, Kukla. It needs work, and it is likely expensive.”

The children murmured understanding, but when Thran got up from the bench, he cast a look back at it, which tugged at Bard.

You’ve been thinking of the future all morning. There’s no reason to stop now.

“Why not, angel?” Bard nudged him as they walked away. “If it’s in good shape, isn’t a terrible price for a baby grand, and you’d play it, why not? Besides, if you ever decide to teach master classes in the ballroom, or have UVB in to dance regularly, you’ll need a piano, won’t you?”

Thran gave him a long look, then looked back at the piano.

“Go on, look it over,” Bard urged. “If you don’t look, you’ll always wonder whether it was junk, or the one that got away.”

It took a few seconds for Thran’s smile to appear, and when it did, it was half accusation, half anticipation. “You are a child of the devil.”

“And you’re the angel who freed the djinni from his servitude to spend your life with him. Go look at the piano.”

After much probing and study, another round of Scott Joplin ensued, which drew the proprietor to appear. Bard left the haggling to Thran, so he ambled over to look at the table that had been the original reason why they’d ventured into this room. It needed a glass top, but the wooden frame was sturdy and the gilt wasn’t tarnished or spotty, and the openwork edge did feature the Greek Key design that Thran liked. It’d match his cushy sofa very well. He ambled back to Thran and the proprietor to see if that would provide any leverage or incentive.

“... meet in the middle?” Thran was saying. He saw Bard’s quirked eyebrow. “Yes, lyubov moya?”

Bard leaned in to whisper in Thran’s ear. “Table’s good. Seventy-five.”

Thran straightened without reacting, so Bard ambled away again.

“I agree to that price if you also throw in that oval silver gilt table over there.”

The deal was struck. The piano and the table would be delivered sometime next week.

Clan Ffyrnig celebrated the deal with a late lunch at the Blue Mountain Bistro, which Sigrid laughingly prepared and delivered.

“Did you look at your email?” she asked, sitting down beside Legolas after she’d arranged their plates.

“We did,” Thran smiled. “I am very happy indeed. So here we are to celebrate so many wonderful reviews.”
“We’re celebrating the piano, too,” Tilda piped up.

“The piano?” Sigrid’s brow wrinkled. “What piano?”

“The one Papa just bought,” Legolas grinned.

“It was your Da’s fault,” Thran winked at Bard. “So in a few days, the ballroom will be properly fitted with a piano.”

“That’s awesome,” Sigrid exclaimed. “And let’s see... Til’s got a new dress, and I’ve never seen either of those tees before. You all have been on a tear.”

“Da got a shirt. And we got a rug and a table and four vases and two books, too, Sigrid,” Tilda said excitedly.

“And a video game,” Legolas amended with a grin.

“Oh, a junk shop run,” Sigrid nodded. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“We’ll be back before long,” Bard assured her. “The house is still half empty.”

“Not for long,” Sigrid said with a confident shake of her head, as she got up to fetch the clan’s gelato. “With Clan Ffyrnig on the hunt, the junk shops don’t stand a chance.”

* * *

Shortly before midnight, the children had gotten their showers and were in bed, restoring themselves for camp tomorrow. Bard, however, wasn’t quite ready for bed yet, and descended from the bathroom to settle in the solarium. The blue lanterns shone dimly, and the lotus lamp on the marble-topped table glowed gold at its heart. The fountain bubbled softly, and the air smelled fresh and green. Clad only in a pair of sleep shorts, Bard settled onto the fainting couch, and idly swirled the contents of his glass while he waited for Thran to appear. He had only a few minutes to wait before Thran padded into the solarium; the elegant dancer hadn’t bothered to belt his blue cotton kimono, which more than hinted at the beautiful body underneath. Bard hummed in appreciation as he looked him up and down.

“You look comfortable, lyubov moya,” Thran murmured, smiling.

“You look delicious.”

“What do you drink?”

Bard handed Thran his glass for a sip. “Just some very cold water with a wedge of lime. Cool for the summer.”

“Very refreshing.” Thran handed Bard’s glass back and sat on the end of fainting couch to gaze around the solarium. “This is such a beautiful room.”

“A beautiful room for a beautiful dancer.”

“As well as a beautiful artist.”
“A striking couple.” Bard saluted Thran with his glass. “Has it sunk in yet that *Immortal’s* a big success?”

Thran crossed one knee over the other, interlaced his fingers around his knee thoughtfully, and after some seconds shook his head. “Not entirely. A little, after all the compliments paid to me during our travels today. I try not to think about it so much.”

“You never impressed me as someone who was uncomfortable with the fame aspects. You are so graceful in public.”

“Thank you,” Thran nodded. “I am not uncomfortable, but I do not like the ego of those who think they are superior when they are the media’s darlings. Ego does not make me a better dancer – in fact, it can make me a worse one, if I think I no longer have to work to be the dancer I want to be. Tomorrow I will be back in the studio, at the barre, just as any other dancer is who labors to coax perfection from his body.”

“You’ve already done a good job of that.” Bard sat up, picked up the end of Thran’s braid, and dusted it down Thran’s sternum. “I’ve got the sketches to prove it, too.”

Thran leaned forward to brush a kiss on Bard’s lips. Bard kissed back, taking his time, savoring each nuzzle and nip.

“I told Ori last night, and he agreed with me, that life will change now that *Immortal’s* live. The festival performances will be just the start of it. Someone will want to put on more performances somewhere, so lots of new opportunities will open up. Whatever you choose to do with them, I’ll support.”

“I will not be the only one with new opportunities,” Thran observed. “You already attract notice with your sketches and sculpture. So life will change for both of us.”

Bard nodded. “Not the important things, though. Our children, our home, each other.”

“Those stay constant,” Thran agreed. “Out in the world, you may be the eminent artist, and I the eminent dancer, but here is our reality.”

“I’d hoped you’d say that,” Bard breathed, nipping at Thran’s lips.

“You did not,” Thran nuzzled back. “You knew that is what I would say, just as you would.”

“True. So let’s see if we agree about this next bit.” Bard set his water glass aside. “What should two such eminent people do in private to celebrate the successful culmination of so much hard work?”

Thran’s eyebrows went up at Bard’s sly expression, then he grinned gleefully. “We go upstairs and fuck like rabbits?”

Bard nipped at the hollow at the base of Thran’s throat. “I was thinking we go out to the gazebo and fuck like stealthy teenagers.”

Mosquitos, heat, the potential for discovery... “You truly are the devil’s child.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, angel? Here’s our chance to court scandal, or at least outrage the neighbors.”

“You are not the devil’s child. You are the devil himself.”
“I’ll take that as a yes.” Bard grabbed Thran’s hand and pulled him out of the solarium door and across the darkened back yard to the gazebo. Thran went without resistance, smothering laughter until they reached the garden folly. Before his husband could protest, Bard backed him up to the balustrade at the back of the gazebo, went to his knees, and nuzzled Thran’s robe aside enough to engulf Thran’s cock in his mouth. He was rewarded with a soft, sudden gasp of breath, then a sudden tension in Thran’s body, then the sudden hardening of Thran’s cock. It was so easy to enhance Thran’s pleasure – he kneaded firm glutes with practiced fingers, with each pass teasing closer and closer to Thran’s opening. When Thran’s cock grew too large for Bard to take all of it in his mouth, he wrapped one hand around it to stroke in time to his licking and sucking. He hummed softly, letting the vibrations further entice Thran towards release. When he finally ran fingers over Thran’s opening, even teasing inside, Thran could not resist, and spasmed hard. His moans grew so loud that he pressed both hands over his mouth, leaving Bard to work him through his climax.

Bard swallowed everything that Thran gave him, and held him until he was steady on his feet again. He pressed a kiss just above Thran’s spent cock, then sprinkled more up Thran’s abdomen and chest as he rose. He briefly suckled both nipples before he straightened. Just for effect, he dragged his forearm across his mouth and pressed his last kiss on Thran’s lips.

“Ty grebanyy huiesos,” Thran whispered, before returning Bard’s kiss with another full of tongue. “You suck me off far better than that stealthy teenager you tell me of. You could make a fine living at it.”

“I specialize in services provided exclusively to a certain elite dancer I could mention. That was tonight’s special. An even hundred, thank you very much, and a steal at twice the price,” Bard shot back with a grin.

“That much?”

“I don’t work cheap.”

“Suka blyad, I do not have a single centime in my pocket.” Thran slipped his hand inside Bard’s shorts and cupped a hand over his cock to rub slowly. “You will have to take it out in trade.”

Gods, those long, slender fingers wrapped around his cock and possessed it like they never intended to give it back. When soft lips and fingers descended to tease his nipples, Bard could think of nothing else but the delight that flowed throughout his body. How he ended up pressed back against the balustrade where Thran had been so transfixed, he didn’t know, or care. He leaned back as an ethereal shadow in the dark fell to his knees to return the blessing Bard had offered. His pleasure spiked so high that he had little time to savor the warm, wet caresses on his cock before he shot right to orgasm. Now it was he who clutched at the shoulders of the one who consumed him, and he who had to stifle his cries of release.

“Oh, gods,” Bard breathed, as Thran rose to envelop him in his arms. “That was a rush.”

Soft chuckles whispered in his ear. “I take it that my bill is paid in full, yes?”

“An understatement.” Bard exhaled, savoring the lassitude that followed his release. “Gods, I’ve spent all day thinking about how our lives are about to change. But here’s one thing that won’t – we know how to enjoy ourselves.”

“Flagrantly.” Teeth nipped at the lobe of Bard’s ear, then tugged gently on the earring that pierced it. “That is because we are in love. No matter what comes, I want that never to change.”

Bard grinned. “Imagine if it gets better with age.”
“We will explode,” Thran snorted. “I prefer to leave the explosions to the boys.”


Thran slapped his forearm. “I think they descend now.”

“Time to go. Hmm, I seem to be hot and sweaty again.”

“Imagine that.”

“I’ll need another shower before I get into bed.”

“A quick one,” Thran said, wrapping his robe around him as they padded back to the house. “Otherwise, we will have to wait until morning to fuck like rabbits.”

“A horrible prospect,” Bard agreed, laughing.

They turned off the lights and fountain in the solarium, rinsed off their exertions, and helped each other to bed.

The future beckoned brightly.

Chapter End Notes

Dear Readers (and you are dear to me),

I began what I thought was a "short" holiday tale 14 months ago, and, look what happened! The "short" tale turned into a saga of almost a million words. That is mind-boggling - what WAS I thinking?

I have made so many friends during the telling of Clan Ffyrnig’s amazing eight-month journey from dire need to bountiful bliss. Thank you for reading along with me through thick and thin. Your encouragement, enthusiasm, all the comments, and so much help have been the best gifts I could have asked for.

I particularly thank johnnysmitten for letting her Hal and Ari come over to play. I also thank RhosgobelRabbit and Wenderful52 for proofreading. Hail to MaleficentGirl for all the recipes and just plain attitude, MirkyKing and Leemitage for general gleeful enthusiasm, MirkyKing and plotbunniesincolour for their wonderful artwork, Morkovna and Fen_Assan for Russian help, emilyclad for French help, revoluutions for Welsh help, and judge_fudge for ballet help. You all went above and beyond!

The rest of you were no slackers, either. So many of you offered your perspective, advice, and general enthusiasm without stint. One reason this tale is so long is because so many of you had so many interesting and intriguing observations about the characters and story that I just galloped along after. Thank you so, so much!

I am off now to finish the tale I interrupted to write this one, "Rites of Passage," about young Fili and Kili. I hope you all will take a peek at that one if you're interested. In the meantime, please check out "Summer Heat," the short tale that follows this one in "The Angel and The Saint" series. It's a new one that ties up a few loose ends from this long saga, and gives us a glimpse of what follows for Clan Ffyrnig.
After "Rites of Passage" is done, let's all hope the muse decides to revisit Clan Ffyrnig. I will miss funny Kukla, sassy Bain, gentle Legolas, spirited Sigrid, and of course, the ethereal angel Thran and his hunky saint Bard. They have been wonderful companions, and I will miss them.

Namaste,

the Eldritch Mage
Hi, all,

I wanted to share the good news that came in the post today - I received the certificate of registration for my ballet treatment for "Immortal!" In other words, "Immortal" is my copyrighted work, which is amazing. My treatment includes the story, stage setup, costume designs, and so forth.

I'll probably grin like a fool for a week, but I don't care.

Thanks to so many of you who supported me as I wrote "Season of Light and Shadow," cheered me on with comments and kudos, and loved Clan Ffyrnig as much as I did. You are all awesome!

Kind Regards,

Eldritch Mage

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!