

Follow You Down

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Follow You Down

by [swilmarillion](#)

Summary

Angband Enterprises: one of the most successful defense contractors in the business. But Melkor doesn't want to be one of the best—he wants to be THE best, consequences be damned, and he's not going to let the likes of Fëanor Finwion or those stuffed shirts at Valinor stand in his way. Luckily, his friends tend to have a little more sense and a lot more restraint. Between them, they just might make it to the top instead of running themselves into the ground. A slightly silly, hopefully fun modern AU.

Notes

The whole Angband gang makes appearances within. There are as many canon-parallels as I can squeeze in (sometimes they're sometimes poorly made, but hey, what can you do :) I've all but resigned myself to the realization that this fic is going right on to the end. Enjoy (I hope).

Sunday Papers

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Do me a huge favor and head over to the [FYD fanart section](#) of my tumblr and give these amazing works some love! You guys are the best and I am #blessed.

Fate of Embattled Company in Question?

It has been almost three years since disgraced CEO Melkor Bauglir was sentenced for his role in the insider trading case that rocked leading defense contractor Utumno, Inc. Despite public outcry over what was perceived as a light sentencing, as well as the defendant's adamant refusal to admit to any wrongdoing, the former executive is tentatively scheduled for release from Mandos County Correctional Facility in three weeks' time. Leaving accusations of preferential treatment aside (Mandos is considered, by many, to be a so-called "country club prison", often catering to an upper class clientele facing charges in white collar crimes), there is growing interest in what role—if any—Melkor will have in the company upon his release.

Those who have been following the story will recall that the company has undergone heavy rebranding since the lengthy trial that put Melkor behind bars. The company moved its office from its native downtown location to a more sophisticated uptown locale, and the name on the doors has now become Angband Enterprises. Perhaps the biggest change, however, is the hand that steers this massive, marauding ship. With Melkor facing prison time, command of Utumno—now Angband—was appointed to one Mairon Smith, former COO and director of Research and Development. For the past three years, Mairon has been at the head of the company—ostensibly filling the same role that Melkor vacated—and yet—

“Marlon?” called out a grating, disinterested voice. “Venti espresso macchiato for Marlon?” Mairon tore his eyes away from the newspaper and blinked at the girl behind the counter. He stalked irritably over to where she waited, scanning the crowd with a look of boredom and snatched the drink from her hand, wondering vaguely how anyone could get Marlon from his name. He pointedly ignored the tip jar and swept out of the shop, pausing only to scoop the newspaper he had been eyeing off the table before he left.

It was a short walk down the street to the office, but Mairon was nevertheless annoyed. Snow had fallen in earnest overnight, and the sidewalks were coated in half-melted slush that splattered under his feet, ruining the shine of his shoes.

“Rough day already?” asked the receptionist sympathetically when he finally traipsed into the main office. Mairon merely glared at him, shaking the snow from the upturned collar of his coat.

“Send me Thuringwethil,” he snapped, pressing the button for the elevator. The doors opened almost instantly, and he stepped into the shining silver interior and tapped the button for the top floor. He snapped the paper irritably in front of him as the doors closed, trying to shake out the creases without spilling his coffee. The elevator doors opened, and he stepped out, eyes still scanning the pages in his hands.

He walked down the empty hall, feet carrying him to his office by force of habit. Frowning at the interruption, Mairon fished through his pocket until he found his keys, unlocking the door and

sweeping into the dark office, pausing to flip the light switch. He set his coffee and the newspaper on his desk before turning and shrugging out of his coat, hanging the wet wool to dry on the coatrack by the door. Shivering despite the layers of his suit, Mairon settled himself behind his desk and smoothed the newspaper in one hand, curling the fingers of the other around the warm paper cup that otherwise sat untouched.

He read the article three times, each time swearing he couldn't possibly be any angrier, and each time somehow finding another little snippet to push his blood pressure closer to stroke level. He read the last line again, his fingers crumpling the corner of the page as the words echoed in his mind. *It remains to be seen if Mairon will be interested in sharing his newfound power once his former employer returns.*

"You look like an absolute delight this morning," drawled a deep voice from the vicinity of the doorway.

Mairon jumped at the unexpected sound, so engrossed in the article that he hadn't heard anyone come into his office. He spilled coffee onto the paper, blurring the words that were driving him crazy, and he glowered up at the unwelcome intruder. "Goddammit, Gothmog," he said, yanking out a desk drawer and pulling out a stack of napkins to begin mopping up the desk. "What is wrong with you?"

Gothmog laughed gleefully as he crossed the threshold into the office, his shoulders barely seeming to manage the passage through the doorway. He leaned both hands on the edge of Mairon's desk and looked down at his old friend, still grinning. "What's eating you?" Gothmog asked, picking up soaked napkins and tossing them toward the garbage. Mairon winced as they fell three feet short, leaving hot coffee to seep into the carpet.

"Nothing," he said shortly, standing up from behind his desk and going to dispose of the napkins himself.

"Oh, right," Gothmog said. "Just your usual winning personality, then."

"Blow me," Mairon said, coming back to the desk and trying unsuccessfully to coax coffee out of the newspaper with a napkin.

"If you like," said Gothmog, grinning wickedly as he leaned across the desk to ruffle Mairon's hair.

Mairon swatted his hand away reached up to compulsively smooth his hair back into place. "I ask you again," he snapped, scowling at his head of security sourly, "what is wrong with you? And what do you want?"

"Your hair is fine," Gothmog said, trying not to laugh. "And I just came to say hello, like a good friend does on a Friday morning. I didn't expect you to be in such a pissy mood. What has your panties in a twist, anyway?"

"Nothing," Mairon said irritably, abandoning his attempt to salvage the newspaper. "Will you just—hey, give that back!"

Gothmog had snatched the paper out of his hands, holding it out of reach as he scanned the coffee-soaked words. "Come on, Mai," he said, shaking his head. "I thought I told you to quit reading this stuff."

"I don't remember asking you for advice, Ann Landers," Mairon shot back, leaning into

Gothmog's massive shoulder to pull the newspaper away. He folded the wet pages and shoved them irritably into the top drawer of his desk. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think I'm paying you to hang around my office and harass me. Remind me, Gothmog, what am I paying you—"

"Whatever it is, it's not enough," interrupted a decidedly female voice from the doorway. Mairon glared up at the newcomer, an incredibly pale woman in a well-cut black suit. Her sharp, white teeth flashed in an almost threatening smile as she stepped into the office.

"I do what I can," Gothmog said, puffing out his already oversized chest and grinning back at her.

"I'm sorry, can I help you?" Mairon grumbled, annoyed at having been interrupted from telling off Gothmog.

Thuringwethil looked him up and down. "Probably not," she said decisively.

Mairon rolled his eyes. "What do you want?" he asked resignedly, folding his arms across his chest and giving his coldest look to the two employees invading his office.

Thuringwethil arched one thin, manicured eyebrow at him. "You called me," she said pointedly.

"Oh," said Mairon. "Right."

Thuringwethil looked skeptically at Gothmog. "What's with him today?"

"Short-stuff here has been reading the op-eds again," Gothmog said.

The lawyer's eyebrows knit together into a threatening glare. "What did I tell you about reading that drivel?"

"Number one," said Mairon acidly, "I am not short. Five foot eight is not short. You two are just freaks of nature. Number two: Gothmog, for the love of God, get off my desk before you crush it. Number three: stop telling me what I can and cannot read. I'm an adult, last time I checked, and I don't need your help deciding what kind of media I can consume. Jesus, is it alright if we just act like coworkers during business hours?"

Thuringwethil and Gothmog exchanged a look that made Mairon want to scream. Gothmog, however, stopped leaning on the desk and sauntered to the door. "He's all yours," he said dryly to Thuringwethil as he passed through the doorway.

Thuringwethil shut the door and advanced on Mairon, holding out her hand as she stopped on the far side of the desk. "Give it to me," she said in a tone that brooked no argument. Mairon rolled his eyes, but he pulled out the top drawer and retrieved the crumpled newspaper, depositing it sullenly into her outstretched palm. He watched gloomily as she shredded the pages and tossed them into the trash before returning to the desk and taking a seat opposite him.

"So," she said when she was seated comfortably, legs crossed and leaning back in the chair, chin resting in her palm. "You wanted to see me."

Mairon swept the article and the ensuing scuffle from his mind and focused. "I want to make sure everything is still on track for Melkor's release. I wouldn't put it past those bloodsuckers to try and keep him locked up. Honestly, I have never seen such a grudge."

"The terms of the deal are solid," Thuringwethil said unconcernedly. "I made sure it was airtight before we agreed. It doesn't matter how much they hate him; Melkor's getting out on Monday, and there's nothing Tulkas or Oromë or any of them can do to stop it, litigation or otherwise."

“Good,” said Mairon, finally picking up his coffee. “Because I swear—”

“Let it go,” she said.

He took a sip of coffee and let his retort dissipate. “You’re sure everything is good to go when he gets back?”

“I’m sorry, were you not here the last three years?” He drummed his fingers on the desktop, and she sighed, relenting. “Look, that was the point of shuttering Utumno. It shuts down as a company, which the boss isn’t allowed to control anyway, and we transfer everything in your name under sale to Angband Enterprises. It’s all legal, believe me. You just have to sign the papers when he gets out.”

“And you have them ready?”

“Yes,” she said. Just like the other twelve thousand times you’ve asked me, she added to herself.

Mairon took another sip of coffee and tapped his thumb on the desk. “So the contract—”

“Mai,” she said, affecting the gentlest tone she could muster. “Stop worrying about what some hack at *Ea Times* is writing about you. It doesn’t matter what he thinks. We know the truth.” She leaned forward, ducking her head to get into his line of sight. “He knows the truth,” she added softly.

Mairon set his coffee cup down carefully on the coaster on his desk, the corners of his mouth just tugging down into the smallest hint of a frown. “Thank you, Thuringwethil,” he said coolly. He glanced at his watch. “I have a 9:30, so if you’ll excuse me...”

Thuringwethil stood, tucking an errant strand of black hair behind her ear. “Don’t stress,” she said insistently before turning and walking away. As she reached the door she paused, turning to face him once more. “Oh, and Mai?” He looked up to where she stood, smiling sweetly at him from the doorway. “Make another comment about vampires and I’ll break your fingers.”

Pressure

Chapter Summary

Gothmog and Thuringwethil try to be good bros and take Mairon out for a drink. Mairon can't shut off his brain.

Chapter Notes

Poor Mairon is upset by questions regarding his loyalties.

“Earth to Mairon.”

Mairon jumped, scattering the papers in his hand across his desk and watching ruefully as several of them listed over the edge and onto the floor. Gothmog chuckled and sauntered into the office, bending down to retrieve the papers on the floor before flopping into the vacant seat across from his boss. Mairon eyed the chair as it groaned ominously, silently promising he would take it out of Gothmog’s pay if he broke the wretched thing. He shuffled the papers back into a cohesive stack and pursed his lips at the head of security. “Did you need something?”

“Well, Thil and I are going for drinks after work today.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

“You haven’t been out with us in months,” Gothmog complained.

“Yeah, well,” Mairon grouched. “Someone has to keep this place running, and it’s not exactly you, is it?”

“Well, tonight it’s not you, either.” Gothmog grinned. “I checked your schedule. No late meetings, no appointments, no nothing. You’re free and clear.” Mairon tried and failed to come up with a reason to decline, but his mind was infuriatingly blank. Gothmog’s grin widened as he sensed victory. “Come on,” he wheedled, leaning forward. “It won’t kill you to have a little fun.”

Marion narrowed his eyes. “Fine,” he said, standing up quickly and going to retrieve his coat. “But I’m telling you right now, Gothmog.” He shrugged his coat over his shoulders and turned to point menacingly at his friend. “One drink and I’m going home.”

Gothmog had managed to secure them a booth. The sight of Gothmog was usually enough to procure whatever it was that Gothmog was after—300 pounds of muscle on a six-foot-four frame didn’t typically hear the word no very frequently. Bodies crowded all around them, a thumping

bassline pounded relentless out of the innumerable speakers hidden on all the walls, and yet in their little corner oasis, the three heads of departments at Angband Enterprises managed to relax.

Well, their version, anyway.

“Who’s that new guy in your department?” Thuringwethil asked Gothmog, tapping a black fingernail on the rim of her wine glass.

“Othrod,” Gothmog said. “Real smart kid. Mairon found him actually. Where’d you say he’s from?”

“Somewhere out east, I think,” said Mairon. “He’s doing well?”

“He’s a quick learner.” Gothmog shrugged. “As long as he listens, he’s alright with me.”

“You know who I can’t stand?” asked Mairon, nursing his vodka Redbull.

“I honestly don’t think we have the time,” Thuringwethil said.

“That new receptionist,” said Mairon, ignoring her completely. “What’s his name?”

“Gelmir, I think,” said Gothmog. “He’s alright, Mairon.”

“Alright? What is alright about having to give the same instructions three times?”

“Well, when the instruction is to crank the heat up to a hundred,” Gothmog muttered into his beer.

“I pay for the heat,” Mairon said testily.

“And we live with it.” Gothmog downed the last of his beer. “Besides, you don’t pay for the heat. The company does.” He slid to the edge of the booth and stood up. “I’m going up for another round. Want anything?”

Thuringwethil tilted her glass to catch the last drops of wine on her tongue. She handed her glass to Gothmog. “I’ll have another.”

Gothmog turned to Mairon. “How about you?”

Mairon eyed his half-empty glass. “I only agreed to one,” he reminded them. He slid out of the booth and stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

Mairon pushed his way through the throngs to the back of the bar and into the restroom, which was blessedly empty, the thudding of the music muffled as the door swung shut behind him. He savored the moment of relative calm as he used the facilities, rearranging his hair carefully before bending to wash his hands. He heard the thud of the door over the rush of the water, and he glanced in the mirror reflexively to see who had entered the room.

A deep chuckle echoed around the walls, and Mairon felt suddenly claustrophobic, but he forced himself to calmly finish washing his hands, turning to rip a paper towel from the dispenser before finally rounding on the man leaning against the sink.

“Easy way to tell the bar’s gone to shit,” said that deep, arrogant voice.

Mairon looked him over, from his v-neck sweater to his cheap, scuffed shoes, with a look of deep disdain. “You missed a spot on the second urinal,” he said dismissively, brushing past him on his way to the door.

“A bit off your game, aren’t you?” The big man turned as Mairon passed, tracking him with his eyes. “What’s the matter, Ginger? Missing your partner in crime?”

Mairon’s face was impassive. “I was never charged with any crime,” he said coolly. “If I recall correctly, you couldn’t quite manage to catch me.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, shrugging. “I didn’t seem to have that problem with your boss. We put that asshole right where he belongs.”

“Not for much longer,” Mairon said. “Three days, and Melkor’s a free man.”

“Could be,” said Oromë, cracking his knuckles. He leaned forward, looming over Mairon. God, he had forgotten just how tall the man was. “Then again, maybe not. Three years was the minimum sentence. Might be that someone feels he needs to cool off for a few more years.”

Mairon rolled his eyes, refusing to lean away as Oromë’s face inched closer to his own. “If you’re going to make threats, at least have the resources to back them up. You know as well as I do my lawyer runs circles around anyone you government hacks can cough up. Melkor’s getting out in three days, end of story.”

Oromë snorted. “Maybe you’re right,” he said, shrugging. “But we’ll just have to see how long it lasts. I know how people like you work, Mairon. Sooner or later, you’ll be back to the same old shit that landed you in trouble in the first place. And who knows? Maybe this time it’ll be you we’re hauling off to Mandos in chains.” He grinned, a flash of bright teeth against the dark expanse of his skin. “I hear things have gotten pretty comfy for you at the top there, Ginger. Some people are wondering if old Melkor’s got a place to come back to.”

Mairon inspected his nails with an air of deep disinterest. “Remember that lawyer I was talking about?” he drawled, sounding incredibly bored. “She can handle the whole threats and harassment thing too, you know.”

Oromë straightened up slowly. “Who’s harassing?” he asked, grinning. “We’re just having a nice chat.”

“Right,” said Mairon. “Well, I’d love to spend my Friday night indulging your ridiculous cop thriller revenge fantasy, but I have a life. So if you’ll excuse me...”

“Remember,” said Oromë as Mairon turned toward the door. “We’re watching you, punk.”

God, though Mairon as he slammed the door behind him. The man was a walking cliché. He stalked back to the table, where Gothmog eyed him with relief. “There you are,” Gothmog said. “Where the hell did you go? And why are you making that face?” Mairon leaned on the edge of the table, gripping the sticky wood under shaking hands. He let his chin dip toward his chest, breathing hard. “Mairon, what—oh, shit.” Gothmog saw Oromë threading his way through the crowd a few feet away, coming from the direction of the bathroom. “Tell me you didn’t talk to him,” he said nervously.

Mairon raised his head and leveled a glare at his friend. “I need another drink,” was all he said.

Thuringwethil threaded her way through the crowd and returned to the booth, frowning as she took in the sight of Gothmog kneeling on the bench, his arms on the divider as he leaned over the back of the booth, grinning and chatting up a pair of what looked to be college-aged blondes. Thuringwethil rolled her eyes and stepped up to side of the booth, holding her wine close. “Hey,”

she said, leaning in toward Gothmog with a dangerous smile. “I’ve forgotten. Was it today or tomorrow that you’re getting those STD test results back?”

“What did you do that for?” Gothmog demanded as the two women beat a hasty retreat, eyeing him murderously.

“Where is he?” she demanded, all pleasantries dropped from her tone.

“He’s right—oh, shit.” Gothmog’s eyes fell on the empty booth.

Thuringwethil shoved a hand against his chest. “You were supposed to be watching him.”

Gothmog pulled out his wallet and tossed a few bills on the table. “Take care of the tabs,” he said, sliding past her and out of the booth. “I’ll find him.”

It was starting to snow again outside, with a wind so cold it cut right through his jacket. Gothmog turned up his collar and dialed Mairon’s number, frowning as it went to voicemail. He paced absently past the entrance of the bar as he began to text, glancing up perfunctorily as his feet carried him past the alley to the side of the bar. He paused, peering down into the darkness. He frowned, putting his phone back into his pocket with a sigh, and started down the alley.

He leaned against the wall, letting his shoulders just barely brush against those of the solitary figure that huddled in the dark, nursing a cigarette and a scowl.

“You don’t even smoke,” Gothmog said, plucking it from his fingers and taking a drag.

Mairon shivered as the wind whipped down the narrow backstreet. “Yeah, well,” he muttered.

“What did that asshole say to you, anyway?” Gothmog asked, holding out his hand.

Mairon took the cigarette from his fingers. “The usual,” said Mairon, exhaling a thin stream of smoke. “The deal’s going down, he’s staying in jail, blah blah blah.”

Gothmog nodded slowly, taking the half-burned cigarette from Mairon’s hand. “You know he’s full of shit, right?”

Mairon ran his fingers through his hair, dislodging several vivid red strands from the elastic that held them. “I know,” he muttered. He leaned his head back onto the frigid bricks and sighed. “I know,” he said again, “but I’m just so done. I don’t want to do this anymore, Gothmog.”

“What are you talking about? You love this crap, Mai. You could spend all day in those damn flight labs. I’ve seen you do it.”

“I wish I could,” he said, taking back the cigarette. “That’s why I came here. I want to design things. I want to build. I don’t want to sit behind a desk and let people speculate about when I’m going to organize a coup.”

“Is that what you’re so upset about? Look, the only people who suspect you of trying to take over the company are those idiots at the newspaper, and that’s only because they have nothing better to write about.”

“Are you sure?” he asked sourly.

“Who would ever think—” He rolled his eyes at the pointed look Mairon gave him. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Why not?” Mairon demanded. “It’s the oldest trope in the book. Give your subordinate some power and he’ll take the rest as soon as you’re down.”

“Right, but you’re forgetting who we’re talking about here. I’ve known Melkor a lot longer than you have, kid, and let me tell you something. He is—and I say this with love—the most paranoid, distrustful son of a bitch I’ve ever met. Believe me, the only way you got to where you are, is because he trusts you—a hell of a lot, I might add. Whatever reservations you have, I guarantee he’s already dismissed them. So quit beating yourself up. It’s all going to be over in a few days anyway. He’s coming back, and that’ll be the end of it, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, but he still looked troubled. “I just wish he knew...”

“Knew what?” prompted Gothmog as the silence stretched on between them.

Mairon shook himself, as though he hadn’t realized Gothmog was still standing there. “Nothing,” he said firmly. He took the cigarette back, burning it down to the filter before throwing it to the ground and crushing it under his foot. “Come on,” he said, blowing smoke from the side of his mouth. “Let’s get out of here.”

Welcome Home

Chapter Summary

Melkor's back in business.

Chapter Notes

In which Melkor re(takes) Angband, has a few drinks, wreaks a bit of havoc, and whines about his community service. A return to normalcy in Angband.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Who are you?”

Gelmir jumped, the chair skittering back as he jerked his head up to find a very amused man leaning on his desk. The office was not technically even open yet; Gelmir hadn't even heard the door open, and yet here he was, looking down at Gelmir with what could only be described as a predatory grin. “G-Gelmir,” he said, staring into a face that looked vaguely familiar. A wide jaw stretched to accommodate the leer that twisted his lips, eyes so dark they were nearly black watching him with obvious amusement. The stranger tilted his head, letting inky hair spill over his shoulder onto the desk.

“Gelmir, huh?” he asked, arching his eyebrows. “You work here now? What happened to the other one? The girl?”

Realization hit Gelmir like an axe, and he stood up hurriedly, sending his chair careening backwards into the wall in his haste. “Mr. Bauglir,” he managed, his anxiety increasing as the smile faded slowly from Melkor's face.

“Oh, Gelmir,” he said, clucking his tongue. “Not off to a good start, are we? I mean, what kind of employee can't even recognize his boss?” He clucked his tongue again, shaking his head disapprovingly. “It's really not looking so good for you, kid.”

“S-sorry,” stammered the receptionist desperately. “I wasn't—I didn't—”

“Can you at least take me to my office?” Melkor asked, the vulturine grin returning to his face. He waved a hand unconcernedly at the foyer. “New building and all that.”

“I can take you,” said a quiet voice from behind them.

Gelmir turned with a look of relief. “M-Mr. Smith can take you,” he said redundantly.

Melkor waved a disapproving finger in front of his face as he rounded the desk. “That's Dr. Smith to you,” he said reproachfully. “Do you think Mairon spent four years getting a PhD to be called mister?”

“Sorry, sir,” Gelmir said helplessly. “Sorry.”

“Oh, leave him alone,” said Mairon, grinning. He tapped the button for the elevator, folding his arms across his chest and watching as Melkor finally sauntered away from the desk. “The poor kid looks like his eyes are about fall out of his face.”

“Come on,” demanded Melkor, trailing him into the elevator and looking back with a grin as the doors began to close. “You’re no fun.” Alone in silence once more, Gelmir lowered his head onto his shaking hands and tried to remember how to breathe.

On the sixth floor, Melkor was looking around approvingly. “Nice place you’ve got here,” he said, running his fingertips along the wooden panels as they passed. “I like what you’ve done with it.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mairon, leading him down the hall. “You need a good place if you want to do good business.”

“Hey, you were listening!” Melkor said, grinning.

“Always,” Mairon muttered, extracting a ring of keys from his pocket and opening the door before them. He turned and handed the ring to Melkor. “Those are yours. You’ve got a copy of everything.”

“That’s a lot of keys,” said Melkor, shaking them dubiously. “How am I supposed to know—”

“They’re labeled,” Mairon said smoothly, flipping on the lights and standing aside.

“Good thinking,” said Melkor, walking to the desk and throwing the keys down haphazardly.

“That’s why I put you in charge.” He pulled out the chair and dropped down into it, leaning back with his hands behind his head. His gaze wandered approvingly around the interior of the office for a moment before it came to the desk. He frowned, leaning forward. “Oh, come on,” he said lightly. “You have work for me already? I just got here.”

“Just one thing,” said Mairon, “and then the rest of the day is yours.” He came to a halt in front of Melkor’s desk, clasping his hands behind his back to stop himself from wringing them nervously. He watched Melkor begin to read, trying to stamp down the apprehension that was attempting to wind its way around his mind.

Melkor looked up thoughtfully from the pages in front of him, resting his chin in his palm. “We don’t have to do this now,” he said.

“I know,” Mairon said softly.

Melkor gave him an appraising look. “Alright,” he said, reaching into the top drawer for a pen and flipping to the last page. He signed and dated the contract before sliding it across the desk. Mairon took the proffered pen from Melkor’s hand and did the same. He flipped back to the front of the contract and put down the pen.

“There,” he said decisively. “Angband Enterprises is all yours.” As the words left his mouth, an incredible feeling of buoyancy began to fill him, and he realized he hadn’t felt so light in a very long time. Three years, perhaps.

Melkor was still looking at him strangely. “Do you want to get a drink?” he asked suddenly.

Mairon raised an eyebrow. “It’s 8:30 in the morning.”

“Is that a no?”

He sighed. "Let me get my coat."

"God is that good," said Melkor, leaning his head back and sighing contentedly.

Mairon eyed him dubiously. "Is this a good idea?"

"Absolutely," said Melkor, signaling the bartender for another round. "As lovely as Mandos was, they did not, in fact, serve twelve-year scotch."

"Fair enough," Mairon conceded. The bartender brought another scotch, and Melkor downed half the glass with a satisfied sigh.

"So," he said, setting the glass aside with a heavy clink and turning to face Mairon, "couldn't wait to get rid of the company?"

"What?" Melkor's question jarred him out of the quiet retreat of his own thoughts. "No, I—"

Melkor was laughing. "I almost forgot how easy you are to wind up," he said, grinning as Mairon scowled at him. "Seriously, though, you know you didn't have to sign over the company the minute I got back, right?"

"I just wanted to make sure it was taken care of it," he said shortly.

Melkor tapped his thumb on his jaw thoughtfully. "I wasn't worried about it, you know."

"Worried about what?"

"The company. I had complete confidence in you."

Mairon shrugged noncommittally. "Good to know."

"It's true," Melkor said firmly. "I wasn't worried about a thing while I was gone." He grinned. "Alright, I worried about a few things, but I never worried about you running the company. And you know what else? I never worried about getting it back, either."

Mairon licked his lips nervously. "Right," he said, carefully. "Um. Why would—"

Melkor sighed. "We got newspapers in Mandos, Mairon," he said gently. Mairon felt himself flush, and he looked away. "I know what they've been saying in the op-eds, about the transfer and takeover and all that. I know they tried to make it out like I took the fall for all the insider trading bullshit and that you were trying to take Utumno while I was out of the picture." Mairon looked away uncomfortably. Melkor leaned toward him, resting his elbow on the bar. "Look, I know you, so I won't waste my time hoping you weren't driving yourself nuts worrying about the shit they were printing, but I will say this. I hope you weren't worried about what *I* thought. Because like I said, Mairon, I know you, and I damn sure knew what I was doing when I put you in charge. Alright?"

Mairon sighed. "Yeah," he said, leaning his own elbows on the bar. "Alright."

Melkor picked up his glass and took a drink, grinning over the rim at Mairon. "You were worried about it, weren't you?" he asked slyly.

Mairon laughed quietly. "You caught me," he said, managing a grin.

“I knew it,” Melkor said triumphantly, knocking back the remainder of his drink.

“I’m just glad I don’t have to worry about it anymore,” Mairon said. “Any of it.” He put his head down for a moment, letting his cheek press against the cool wood of the bar. “Although, it would have been nice to know before now,” he muttered.

Melkor set down his glass, and Mairon felt the vibration through the wood. “You know I couldn’t let you come to see me, right?” Mairon lifted his head and looked over at Melkor. “The feds were already pissed they only got me for three years. They were itching for a reason to investigate Angband, and ‘new CEO visiting former CEO in prison’ is the kind of thing that gets a case opened up. You know that, right?”

“I know,” Mairon said.

Melkor leaned closer. “It wasn’t that I wanted to keep you away.”

Mairon straightened up, leaning back in his chair. “Even if you did,” he said, keeping his voice even, “it’s fine. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“But I didn’t,” Melkor said firmly. “Want that, I mean.” He leaned his elbow on the bar, resting his chin in his palm. “It’s been a long three years,” he said, his unreadable black eyes finding Mairon’s.

Mairon let himself hold Melkor’s gaze for a few seconds before dropping his amber eyes to the floor. “That is has,” he said quietly.

A few seconds of silence passed between them, and then Melkor stood abruptly. “A long three years,” he said again, “but one of us, at least has been busy. Come on, Mairon. Show me what you’ve been up to.”

“Holy fuck.”

Mairon swallowed a grin as he followed Melkor through the hangar. “These are our test models for the new Glaurung drone system,” he said, skirting the workspace that was teeming with activity. There were several drones in varying stages of completion, each being attended by a team of workers who largely ignored Mairon and Melkor as they observed the day’s work.

“Are they off the ground yet?” Melkor asked.

“Absolutely,” Mairon said. “They are in the final stages of computer system integration.”

Melkor stopped at the farthest workstation, running his thumb along the smooth lines of the wing. “Do we have a purchaser?”

“We’ve already received a requisition for 50,000 from the feds. We start production as soon as the communication system is in place.”

“Holy fuck,” Melkor repeated softly. He tore his eyes at last from the little drone and grinned at Mairon. “You’ve been busy.”

Mairon shrugged, trying and failing to keep the smirk from his face. “I’ve been on the payroll,” he

said by way of answer.

“One of my better ideas,” said Melkor, throwing his arm around Mairon’s shoulders. “And with that compliment in mind, how about you let me fly one of these?”

“I’ve gotten three calls about some kind of threatening craft being flown over private airspace in the last thirty minutes,” said Gothmog as he sauntered into Melkor’s office.

“It’s my private airspace,” said Melkor, unconcerned.

“Not when you fly into the city,” said Mairon, still a bit shaken from having to almost forcibly convince Melkor to give back the very expensive and still not licensed aircraft.

Melkor waved his hand, unperturbed. “Semantics,” he said casually.

“This is your fault,” said Gothmog, dropping into the chair beside Mairon and shooting him a look of amusement.

“Me?” Mairon sputtered, affronted. “How is it my—”

“You were with him,” Gothmog said, grinning. “It was your turn to watch him.”

“Shut up, Gothmog,” Melkor said blithely. “You’re the head of security. You deal with it.”

Gothmog laughed. “Already done. Welcome back, you hellion.”

“Excuse me,” said an accusatory voice from behind them. “Who exactly dealt with it?”

“I delegated,” Gothmog said, shooting her a sly smile. “Ow, shit! Leggo, Thil! You’re going to break my arm!”

“And a return to the traditional form of our meetings,” Mairon said dryly, standing up to close the door.

“What, fun?” asked Gothmog, rubbing his wrist and glaring at Thuringwethil, who ignored him and settled herself primly in the seat on his right.

“I was going with barely-contained chaos,” said Mairon, returning to his seat on Gothmog’s left.

“Fortunately, the two aren’t mutually exclusive,” Melkor said, rubbing his hands together. “Alright, kids. What are we doing?”

“We’re having a meeting,” said Mairon, trying to stem his annoyance.

“I know that,” Melkor said quickly. “I meant, what are we doing *here*?” He circled his hands vaguely to encompass the office. “Angband Enterprises. What have we been up to?”

“I gave you a report,” said Mairon pointedly, nodding at the binder sitting untouched on Melkor’s desk. “It has a detailed summary of the output from every department under the direction of research and development in the last three years.”

Melkor snorted. “Why read when I can listen?”

“Please, for the love of God,” Gothmog said. “Don’t get him started.”

Mairon glared at him. “Why not?” Melkor asked, adopting a mock-serious face. “You’re not interested in the production history of the company, Gothmog?”

Gothmog rolled his eyes. “Right,” he muttered. “I forgot. A fellow nerd.”

“Ignore him,” said Melkor, swiveling his chair slightly toward Mairon. “He’s being fired later anyway.”

Gothmog snorted. “Fat chance,” he muttered.

“Go on, Mairon,” said Melkor. “The floor’s all yours.”

Like Mairon, Melkor was an engineer by training, but there was only so much that even he could listen to. Thirty minutes in, he glanced at his watch and wondered exactly how Mairon could concentrate for so long on the same subject. He had, very early on, plucked the binder from Melkor’s desk and begun to flip through the bound pages, indicating points of interest on various charts and schematics as he felt necessary. He had spoken at length about problems in the aeronautics lab (there was a new wing design, apparently, and Melkor gathered that they were experimenting with a new alloy for the actual construction), and had only just moved on to discussing the bugs he had personally worked out of the computer system.

Melkor realized with a sinking feeling that Mairon was still only talking about one—*one*—of the company’s three in-production aircraft. With a shiver of horror, he realized that there was a virtually endless list of topics that Mairon could still potentially cover: the new projects in development, the contracts in negotiation, the current status with the investors...

Melkor stirred slightly and let his eyes wander to the other (perhaps it was generous to call them participants) in the meeting. Gothmog’s elbow rested on the arm of the chair, his cheek tucked into his palm. He was sleeping with his mouth wide open, a line of drool running steadily down into his hand. Thuringwethil had opened her laptop and was typing steadily. Melkor was fairly sure she was not working on anything related to the projects Mairon was discussing, and yet he knew her well enough to know that, if asked, she could give a terrifyingly detailed and incredibly withering summary of everything Mairon had said thus far.

Melkor looked back at Gothmog and fought the urge to yawn. Instead, he let his hands fall to the desk from where they had been resting, fingers intertwined, beneath his chin, and cleared his throat. Mairon looked up, a bit startled. “Thank you, Mairon,” he said carefully, “for that enlightening summary. Perhaps we should...reconvene at a later time?”

“But I haven’t even finished with the Glaurung system,” Mairon protested.

“Yes,” Melkor said, “and you’re doing such a good job. I’d like to get caught up so it can be a discussion rather than a lecture.”

“He means you’ve exceeded his attention span,” Thuringwethil said absently, eyes still glued to her computer screen.

Mairon frowned, but Melkor merely shrugged. “She’s not wrong,” he said.

Mairon’s face became carefully neutral once more. “Fine,” he said coolly, shutting the binder with a snap and setting it back on Melkor’s desk, neatly aligning the ends with the edge of the desk. “Whatever you’d like.”

“Come on,” Melkor said cajolingly. “It’s my first day back. Cut me a break.”

“It’s fine,” Mairon said, tucking a pen that he had been using to point with back into his pocket. “I need to meet with some people in R&D anyway.” He stood up. “Anything else I can do?”

Melkor looked at him appraisingly. “No,” he said at last. “Just take this lump with you.” He reached across the desk and nudged Gothmog’s elbow off the edge of the chair, making the big man fall forward.

Gothmog’s head jerked up and his eyes opened into a glare focused at Melkor. “What’d you do that for?” he grumbled.

“Meeting’s over,” Melkor said, grinning.

Gothmog stretched. “Alright, kids,” he said, getting to his feet with an impressive cracking of joints. “Time to go back to work.”

“You’re the only one who took a break,” Thuringwethil said icily, closing her laptop with a snap and getting to her feet. She turned her head towards Melkor. “Don’t forget your 5:00 today.”

“Shit,” he said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “What are the odds I can skip it?”

“Depends,” she said, shrugging one shoulder. “How much do you want to go back to prison?”

Melkor groaned theatrically. “What’s your 5:00?” Gothmog asked with interest.

“Community service,” Thuringwethil said. “The terms of probation.”

“Why did I let you talk me into that plea deal?” Melkor whined.

Thuringwethil slid her glasses up her long, thin nose with a pointed red nail. “I could have let you take your chances with the trial,” she said sweetly. “The maximum sentence was ten years.”

“Have I told you how much I love you today, Thuringwethil?” Melkor said, equally sweetly.

She tucked her computer under her arm. “We’re leaving at 4:30,” she said efficiently, putting a hand on Gothmog’s shoulder and nudging him toward the door.

“I can drive myself,” Melkor complained.

“Yes,” she said, starting for the door, “you can. But I have to meet your supervisor, so I’m going with you.”

“You’re killing me, Thil.”

“You signed the contracts for company succession,” she said unconcernedly, letting Mairon precede her through the door. “So I have a job either way.”

“Out, harpy.”

“4:30,” she said, flashing him a sharp smile as she reached for the door handle.

“He’s not going to read that report,” Mairon muttered treacherously, waiting just down the hall for her and crossing his arms over his chest with a scowl.

“Don’t be so sure,” said Thuringwethil, sneaking one last glance into Melkor’s office and watching him pick up the heavy binder with a sigh of resignation before she closed the door with a soft click.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Gelmir. I needed a receptionist to scare. He seemed like a good option.

Begin the Begin

Chapter Summary

An aggrieved younger brother makes an appearance. Melkor sets a bad example and meets someone rather interesting. In which Silmarils become a thing, and Mairon tries not to be annoyed.

Chapter Notes

We've got Manwë, Fëanor, a Silmaril, good guy Gothmog, testy Thuringwethil, Melkor of the one-track mind, and Mairon the perpetual ball of nerves, one step from implosion.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You have *got* to be fucking kidding me.”

“Language,” came the affronted squawk from across the hall.

“This is why you wouldn’t tell me who my supervisor was?” Melkor demanded, rounding angrily on Thuringwethil.

“Yes,” she said unconcernedly. “I figured we could save the tantrum until the last possible minute.”

“At least we agree on something,” sighed the newcomer, put-upon.

“No one was speaking to you,” Thuringwethil said icily. The man opened his mouth, swiveled his cool blue eyes between the lawyer’s stolid face and Melkor’s unrepentant hostility, and promptly shut it again. “There should be some papers to sign to certify the beginning of community service,” Thuringwethil prompted, speaking as though to an idiot.

“Oh,” he said, running a hand distractedly through his fine, blonde hair. “Yes. My clerk is in the office. He should have everything you need.”

Thuringwethil sniffed and turned to Melkor. “You have an hour here,” she said. “That’s it. Try to hold it together. I swear, Melkor, if I get a call that you’ve been arrested again, I will be sorely tempted to just leave you there.”

“You don’t trust me at all,” he said, feigning hurt.

“Correct,” she said. “I’m going to sign you into the program, and then I’ll take a cab home. One hour—you got that?”

“Yes, mom,” he said mockingly.

She glared at him and stalked back down the hall toward the office. Melkor turned to face the

person he wanted to see perhaps least in the world.

“Melkor,” said the tall blonde man who was eyeing him warily through rimless glasses.

Melkor lifted his chin, nursing the half-inch of height he claimed over his younger brother.

“Manwë,” he said with a sneer. “Are there not laws about this kind of thing?”

Manwë sighed, the picture of familial encumbrance. “You tried that at the trial,” he reminded him. “It didn’t work then, either.”

“I still say you shouldn’t be able to preside over your brother’s trial,” Melkor grumbled. “What about bias?”

“The city of Aman is fairly confident that I can separate my feelings of—”he began stiffly.

“You mean dad pulled some strings so you could sit on that bench,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “Don’t think I don’t know what he was trying to do. He wanted your stupid hand around the gavel so you could distance his precious name from whatever the fuck I was doing.”

“Watch your language!” Manwë hissed. “We’re in a school!”

Melkor snorted. “God, I forgot what a prude you are.”

“Anyway,” Manwë said, wrinkling his nose in annoyance, “how would you know what our father does or does not want? You haven’t seen him in, what, six years?”

“Hah,” Melkor said, sneering. “Try ten. But you want to know something, little brother?” Melkor had walked forward slowly as he spoke, stopping only when his face loomed mere inches from Manwë’s, and he could almost feel the discomfort rolling off his brother as he leaned away. “I could never see our father again as long as I live, and I’d still understand him better than you ever will.” He grinned nastily. “Doesn’t that just piss you off?”

Manwë’s lips tightened into a grimace of annoyance. “No,” he said flatly. “It doesn’t. Not least of all because it isn’t true. Now let’s go. The program is starting.” Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode down the hallway, the heels of his shoes clicking angrily on the linoleum. Melkor slouched after him, grinning in satisfaction.

He found his way into a classroom half-filled with adults, the majority of whom looked, as Melkor felt, as though there was a rather long list of places they might rather be. Melkor took his time traipsing through the center aisle before sprawling into a chair at the back, leaning his seat back on two legs against the wall with his hands tucked behind his head. Manwë fixed him with a murderous look before clearing his throat, seemingly remembering that there were others in the room.

“Welcome to Beleriand High School,” Manwë said, spreading his hands and smiling in what he must have thought was a welcoming manner. “This is the community outreach program through Mandos County Correctional Facility. If you aren’t here for community service, then you’re in the wrong place.” He looked around, but no one moved; indeed, it hardly seemed as though anyone was listening. Manwë clasped his hands behind his back and paced in a short line behind the desk at the front of the room. “This program is designed to allow first-time, nonviolent offenders to give back to the community in a meaningful way. Each of you has been chosen for this program in order to provide the most benefit to the students at this school. You are all highly educated, well-respected members of the community. It is our hope that through this service, you can not only help to further the education of the youth of our community, but that you might also provide them

with an example—”

“Jesus Christ, we get it already,” said Melkor loudly. A ripple of laughter spread across the room.

Manwë narrowed his eyes at his brother. “A few of the teachers have graciously volunteered their time to oversee your interactions with the children,” he said, the clipped tone of his voice the only indication that he had heard his brother speak. “They will be here as soon as school lets out.” He glanced at his watch. “You have approximately ten minutes. This program runs an hour, twice a week. Please contact my office with any questions or concerns.” He waited a moment, eyes roaming the room as though a dire concern might spring forth at any minute, and then he nodded. “Good luck!” he said, voice dripping with forced cheerfulness. He turned and strode from the room, closing the door behind him.

Melkor turned his head and studied the man sitting next to him. He hadn’t taken his eyes from the phone in his hand the entire time Manwë had been speaking, grey eyes darting across the screen as one finger gently nudged the text he was reading higher. “Hey,” said Melkor, swinging one foot in the air between the legs of the chair. The man did not so much as move, and Melkor wondered if he had heard him. “What are you in for?” he asked, raising his voice a bit.

A face full of sharp angles turned to stare at Melkor, a strand of black hair falling into disinterested grey eyes that swept over him almost cursorily. “I beg your pardon?” he said.

Melkor waved a hand at the room at large. “We’re all here for something,” he said airily. “What’s your excuse?”

“What business is it of yours?”

Melkor grinned. “Well, I think I should know if I’m sitting by an axe-murderer or something.”

The man rolled his eyes. “This is a program for non-violent first time offenders,” he snapped. “Or weren’t you listening to that pompous idiot?”

“My brother?” said Melkor, tipping his chair forward eagerly and leaning onto the desk, twisting to look at the man sitting next to him. “Are you kidding?”

A twitch of the lips, half-sneer, half-grimace. “Is this the part where I ought to apologize?”

“Why apologize?” Melkor said, grinning. “I’ve said worse. To his face. Today, actually.”

A wary smile crept onto the face watching him. “Sibling troubles?” he inquired delicately.

Melkor snorted. “You don’t know the half of it.”

The other man set his phone down at last. “Perhaps,” he conceded. “Although, since you asked, I did happen to end up here for a public fight with my own brother.”

Melkor let out a bark of laughter that sent a few heads turning in their direction. “I knew I liked the look of you,” he said appreciatively.

The man held out his hand. “Melkor, right?”

“Guilty,” said Melkor, shaking his hand. “And you are...?”

“Fëanor.”

Melkor frowned. “Fëanor,” he said slowly. “Have we met? The name sounds familiar.”

“Not officially,” said Fëanor. “Though we are in the same business.”

Melkor smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Formenos, right?”

“That’s us.”

Melkor nodded approvingly. “We should talk sometime,” he said decisively.

“Perhaps,” said Fëanor, cocking his head to the side to study Melkor shrewdly. “Though possibly in a more professional venue.”

“Fair enough.” He tapped his fingers on the desk impatiently, glancing at the clock. “Hey,” he said suddenly, a thought striking him, “doesn’t your brother work at Formenos too?”

Melkor could almost hear the grinding of Fëanor’s teeth. “Let’s just say,” he said stiffly, eyes narrowing irritably, “that one of us now has to teleconference the board meetings.”

Melkor’s laughter rang through the room, startling the vaguely pedigreed convicts and the students who had just begun to stream into the room alike. Perhaps this community service wasn’t going to be a complete waste of time, after all.

Melkor had never been what most people would have considered a typical business owner. His work day frequently started, as he liked to say, whenever it suited him—be that three o’clock in the morning, or sometime in the late afternoon. Sometimes, he didn’t show up at all, and whether or not he called to let anyone know his plans was a matter of extremely unsatisfying conjecture. Days might pass before anyone saw him. When he finally did return, it was often to dump a pile of dubiously-reconcilable receipts on the closest unfortunate accountant before going to gloat to Mairon about their new investor. Mairon could only shake his head and wonder how anything meaningful got done.

Knowing his habits, Mairon wasn’t particularly surprised when Melkor didn’t show up to the research and development meeting. They hadn’t seen him around the office for a few days, although, if Mairon was being honest with himself, he wouldn’t have held his breath for Melkor to attend even if he had already been in the building. Still, it wasn’t particularly concerning. Mairon had been in charge of the department for five years, and he had seen Melkor at only a handful of the meetings he technically should have overseen. They ran just as smoothly without him as they did with him—perhaps more so—and Mairon was more than used to writing up a report to summarize when they had finished.

It was not a particularly enjoyable meeting, at any rate. There had been a number of setbacks on the Glaurung system, but none quite so grating as the integration of the onboard computers. Perhaps what really infuriated Mairon was that it should have been his area of expertise. The fact that he couldn’t seem to figure out the bug that was causing the delays was giving him an ulcer, not to mention a staff full of incredibly irritable scientists. The meeting was quickly dissolving into a rehash of past failures with the added bonus of short-tempered sniping, and Mairon could feel a headache beginning to throb behind his right eye.

He heard the click of the door handle as it turned, and his head snapped up to glare at the intruder. “Closed meeti—oh,” he said, catching himself.

Melkor let the door continue to swing as he strode into the room, scrolling absently through his phone. He looked, as usual, hardly the part of a professional, let alone an executive; he wore faded

sneakers, dark jeans, and a sweatshirt that was almost too tight, his long hair pulled back haphazardly at the nape of his neck. He looked up as he rounded the table, surveying the tense, puzzled faces that watched him. “This looks delightful,” he said dryly. “What do you have going here?”

“Research and development meeting,” Mairon said, letting out a short sigh as he forced his voice to remain calm.

“Oh, right,” said Melkor. “I probably got an email about that.”

“You did,” said Mairon.

Melkor came to a halt at the head of the table, looking down at Mairon, who hadn’t left his seat. “Anything interesting?”

For a moment, Mairon was speechless. “I suppose that depends,” he said carefully, “on your perspective. Did you want to join us?”

“No,” Melkor said indifferently. “I just wanted to give you these.”

He pulled a rumpled sheaf of papers out of his back pocket and handed it to Mairon. “What’s this?” Mairon asked, unfurling the pages and trying to smooth down the edges.

“I read your report about the trouble with the crash tests on that new system—what’s it called?”

“Valaraukar,” Mairon murmured, eyebrows furrowing as he flipped through the scribbled notes.

“Yeah, that’s it. Anyway, I had a couple thoughts about the body dynamics. I wrote it all up for you.” His phone chimed loudly, and he glanced at the screen. “Shit, I have to meet Gothmog. Can we talk later? Read over it and let me know what you think.” He turned without another word and strode through the door.

And that was it, really. It was easy to forget—between the erratic hours, the mountains of clutter that dominated his office, the time he spent playing video games or watching football or setting up an elaborate prank as part of his ongoing war with Gothmog—what Melkor was. He was careless, sure, and impulsive, and could even be accused of being reckless, and these were generally not things that made for a good business model. Yet as Mairon let his eyes wander incredulously over the crumpled and coffee-stained pages in his hand, he was reminded that there was more to Melkor than most people saw. Most people saw, at best, a lot of wasted potential threatening to run a company into the ground, but Mairon knew better. He held in his hands the answer to a problem that had plagued them for two years—an answer that came to them in a jumble of hastily scrawled and sloppily annotated equations written on a few sheets of notebook paper, still shedding the shredded edges where they’d been torn from the binding. Two years they’d worked on the crash test problem, and Melkor had solved it in two days.

Mairon let a satisfied grin creep onto his face. Yes, most people might underestimate Melkor. But then, Mairon had always thought that most people were idiots.

Mairon looked up at the knock on his open door, his eyebrows arching in a look of deep skepticism though his eyes didn’t stray from the computer screen. “Is this a harbinger of the apocalypse?”

Gothmog lumbered into the office, frowning at him. “I don’t follow.”

“I wasn’t aware that you even knew how to knock,” Mairon said.

Gothmog affected a look of offense as he folded himself into the chair on the other side of the desk. “What’s the point of social pleasantries between old friends?”

Mairon’s fingers worked eerily fast over the keyboard, though his eyes were still fixed to the screen. “Pleasantries?” he repeated, amused. “What’s the occasion for multisyllabic words?”

“Hey, asshole, I brought you food so you don’t starve.” Gothmog leaned forward and dropped one of the two bags he had carried into the office onto the desk in front of Mairon. “The least you could do is be nice.”

Mairon typed for another few seconds before dragging his eyes away and focusing on Gothmog. “I’m nice,” Mairon said, unrolling the crumpled top of the bag. “I’m very nice. I’m…” He trailed off, the smell of a dinner long neglected wafting forth from the furrowed paper. “Definitely not as nice as you,” he concluded, reaching for the tacos as Gothmog chuckled.

“Damn right,” he said, unfurling his own dinner on the opposite side of the desk.

“Why are you bringing me food, anyway?” Mairon asked, wondering why he was so hungry even as his stomach gurgled. “It was just lunch—” He glanced at his watch. “When did it get so late?” he asked, noticing for the first time the darkness that had crept into the office.

“At least a couple of hours ago,” said Gothmog, shrugging. “Everyone’s pretty much gone for the day.”

“What kept you here?”

“Eh,” he said noncommittally. “This and that.”

Mairon looked up suspiciously. “Are you mothering me again?”

“Me? No. Definitely not.”

“I don’t need you to mother me.”

“Mm,” Gothmog said around a mouthful. “Right. And when did you eat last?”

“Lunch.”

“What, yesterday?” Mairon rolled his eyes. “I’ve been here all day, Mai, and I’m reasonably sure you’re ass has been parked behind that desk since eight o’clock—maybe earlier.”

“Not true,” Mairon began.

“Coffee doesn’t count,” said Gothmog, eyeing the empty mug on the desk.

“Whatever.” Still, he sat back in his chair, eyes closing blissfully as he chewed a mouthful of what he might, at that moment, have sworn was the best taco he had ever eaten.

“How’s it going up here?” Gothmog asked after a moment.

Mairon opened his eyes, his lips curling into a grimace. “Pass,” he said darkly.

“Come on,” Gothmog wheedled. “You’ve been up here for days—weeks, actually. What’s going on?”

Mairon rested his elbow on the desk, propping his cheek in the palm of his hand and beginning to worry the foil on his desk between his long fingers. "It's the onboard computer system," he said dully. "There's a bug with the GPS satellite integrate that I just cannot fix. Every time I patch it, something else crops up. It's driving me crazy."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get it," Gothmog said. "You always do."

"Maybe this is it," Mairon said gloomily, peeling strips of foil of the edge of the wrapper. "Maybe I've already had all the good ideas I'm ever going to have. Where's Thuringwethil? She ought to have a spare termination contract somewhere."

Gothmog rolled his eyes. "You graduated from high school when you were fourteen, and you got a PhD when you were, what? Twenty-four? I'm not worried about your brain capacity, Mai."

"Twenty-three," he corrected vaguely. "But that's my point. Maybe I used it all up already. Peaked early. Maybe—"

"Stop," said Gothmog firmly. "I'm not in the mood for a pity party. Not for you, anyway. I have honestly never seen you come up against a problem you couldn't solve. Maybe you won't get there fast, and maybe it's going to drive you up the wall in the process, but eventually you're going to find a way around whatever this problem is. I promise."

"I'm glad one of us has some faith," Mairon said morosely.

"Maybe that's your problem," said Gothmog speculatively. He crumpled the foil from his dinner into a ball and, watching Mairon from the corner of his eye, launched it haphazardly at the trashcan, grinning as it bounced off the wall four feet to the left, tumbling across the carpet. He eyed Mairon slyly, but Mairon simply stared vaguely at a spot somewhere over Gothmog's shoulder. Gothmog waved a hand in front of Mairon's face, but there was still no response. Gothmog sighed. "Look, you need to get some confidence and get out of this funk."

"I'm not in a funk," Mairon said, tilting his head slightly and fixing despondent eyes on Gothmog. "I'm in a steady downslide into irrelevancy. Another day or two, and I'll just be another of the jobless masses—"

"Alright, that's it," Gothmog said firmly. "I have no problem feeding you and caffeinating you and even giving you the occasional pep talk about crazy science shit I can't even pronounce, but only in the name of helping you get to your next breakthrough. I refuse to indulge your little hissy fit. You're stuck, and you're frustrated. So what? It happens to everyone. Get over it. You're smart. You will figure this out. It just might take you a bit longer than you're used to."

Mairon stared at him for a moment, mouth slightly open. Then, he slowly lowered his hand from under his chin, narrowing his eyes and fixing his mouth into a scowl. "Great advice," he said. "Really, you ought to consider starting a column." His eyes flitted to where the foil lay on the carpet, slowly unfurling. He pushed himself back from the desk and stalked to the offending detritus, depositing it in the trashcan. Behind his back, Gothmog stifled a grin.

"Look," said Gothmog, getting to his feet. "Maybe you ought to take a break. Stop looking at your computer for a few hours. Get some sleep in a place that isn't your office. Who knows, maybe you just need a few hours to recuperate."

Mairon pinched the bridge of his nose. "Does the word deadline mean nothing to you?"

He shrugged. "Not really. But if it means anything to you, maybe you ought to reconsider my

advice.” Mairon let out a wordless groan of frustration. Gothmog relented, taking pity on him. “Hey, if you’re really having trouble here, I know another weird science nerd you can talk to. Fun bonus: he’s probably still in the building.”

Mairon glared at him. “Is this really your best effort for stress reduction?”

“All I’m saying is he might have some ideas.”

“Right,” Mairon said dryly. “You want me to go and admit I can’t do the one thing I was hired to do. Great idea, Gothmog.”

“I think you underestimate him,” said Gothmog, an odd look on his broad face.

“Sure,” Mairon said sourly. “But even if that’s true, it’s not exactly good job security to admit you can’t do the thing they pay you to do.”

Gothmog shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said. “But I’d think about it, if I were you.” He turned and walked toward the door. “I was serious about the sleep thing,” he said over his shoulder. “You’re going to work yourself to death.”

“Hey, Gothmog,” Mairon called, catching him just as he hit the doorway. Gothmog half-turned, looking back at him. Mairon waved a hand around the office and shrugged. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

Gothmog nodded, taking one last look around the immaculate office before disappearing down the hall.

Mairon returned to his desk and sat there long after Gothmog had gone. He looked forlornly at the screen of his computer, letting his thumb tap absently on the arrow keys, his eyes scrolling through code that was so infuriatingly familiar it made him want to scream. Finally, heaving a weary sigh, he stood up, gathering the remains of his dinner from the desk and carrying it across the office to deposit it in the garbage. He stretched, looking around the room once before glancing at his watch. He bit his lip, debating with himself. Then, silently cursing Gothmog, he headed for the door and set off down the hall.

The light knock barely elicited a grunt from his boss, but Mairon was not particularly deterred; intensity was, after all, a quality he recognized. He leaned on the doorframe and watched Melkor flip through a stack of papers. “You’re here late,” he observed.

A pair of dark eyes flickered up to him for a moment. “So are you,” Melkor said. He nodded at the cluster of chairs haphazardly stationed in front of his desk before dropping his eyes back to the pages in his hand.

Mairon picked his way through the papers that littered the floor and perched on the edge of the seat, craning to see what Melkor was reading. “What’s keeping you here?” he asked.

Melkor stretched back in his chair, setting down the packet in his hand and looking at Mairon as though he had only just noticed him. “What?” he asked, nonplussed.

Mairon fought back a grin. “Must be something interesting,” he said, nodding at the stack of papers on the desk. There was an impressive collection of papers, books, and magazines scattered so thoroughly over Melkor’s desk as to make the wood invisible.

Melkor considered this for a moment, rubbing a hand against the wide arc of his jaw. “What do you know about Formenos?” he asked at last.

Mairon blinked. “Formenos,” he repeated, scanning the debris on the desk once more. He could see now the corners of a few tech magazines poking out from the edge closest to him, as well as what looked like a financial review in the far corner. He shook his head. “They’re a defense company,” he said slowly. “A bit like I us, I guess. Mainly working on guided missiles, as far as I know. Why do you ask?”

“What else do you know? What are they working on?”

Mairon’s brow furrowed in thought. “They were at a robotics conference last month with some new stuff on unmanned systems,” he said. “They’re working on some new things there, but they keep it pretty hush-hush. They’re known for being secretive, even in the industry. Why are you interested in them?”

“What do you know about Fëanor?”

“Finwion?” Mairon asked, trying to guess what exactly lay at the heart of this line of questioning. “Not much. He’s...well, I guess he’s me, but at Formenos. He does their systems stuff. Oversees operations, that kind of thing. I’ve met him a few times at conferences over the years. He’s kind of a dick, to tell you the truth. Why are you asking?”

“But do you think you could trust him?”

“Fëanor?” Mairon was utterly lost. “I don’t know. I’ve met him, like, a handful of times in passing. Business-wise he’s known for being a little weird and insular, but he’s not bad in terms of science. The work of his I’ve seen looks solid.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Melkor triumphantly, snatching up the packet of papers he had discarded and flipping through them furiously.

“I’m sorry, can you fill me in here?”

“Huh?” Melkor looked up, momentarily surprised to see Mairon still there. “Oh, right. I’ve been reading up on Formenos.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, stifling the annoyance from his voice as Melkor dropped his eyes back to the papers in his hands. “I gathered that. Why?”

“I’m interested in what they’re doing.”

“You are,” Mairon said, unable to keep the skepticism from his voice. He was reasonably sure that they only time he had ever heard Melkor express an opinion on another company was when he was dismissing them, loudly, as talentless hacks unfit to be mentioned in the same conversation as Angband. “What brings this up?”

“I ran into Fëanor the other week,” Melkor said casually, flipping to the next page of the packet in his hands.

“You—excuse me? You just ran into Fëanor Finwion on the street?”

“Well, no. Not on the street.” Melkor grinned. “Turns out I’m not the only one racking up criminal convictions while trying to run a business.”

Mairon ogled at him. “You’re kidding.”

“And I thought servicing the community was going to be a waste of time.”

“Serving,” Mairon said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Serving the—never mind. Look, no offense or anything, but you’ve never struck me as someone who’s particularly interested in collaboration.”

“That’s because no one ever has anything interesting to share.”

The unspoken implication hung between them, needling at Mairon. “But?”

“Fëanor has some good ideas. If I’m not mistaken, they have a thing or two that might really benefit us here.”

Mairon fought the urge to drum his fingertips on the arm of the chair. “Such as?” he asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

Melkor leaned forward across the desk, his voice dropping conspiratorially. “Have you heard of Silmaril?” he asked, watching eagerly for Mairon’s reaction.

Mairon wracked his brain, going back through every press release, article, and presentation he could remember from Formenos. The name Silmaril did not ring any bells. “No,” he said at last. “I can’t say that I have.”

“It’s their newest project,” Melkor said excitedly. “It’s taken a while, but I’ve been convincing Fëanor to give me a few details. From the sound of things, it’s exactly what we’ve been looking for.”

Mairon felt his pulse quicken, a chill sinking into his gut and beginning to spread. “I’m not sure I follow,” he said.

“Silmaril is the new program they’ve developed for their unmanned systems. I’m not the expert on the computer stuff, but from what I’ve gotten out of Fëanor, it’s revolutionary. It’s brand new—completely different than what we’ve been doing, and the best part is, if it does what I think it does, it will bypass the problems we’ve been having with the GPS integration.”

Mairon sat very, very still. There was a slight ringing in his ears, and he dug his fingernails into the upholstery on the underside of the chair until he realized, with a start, that Melkor was still speaking. “What?” he said absently, trying to focus.

“I know you’ve been struggling with the bugs in the Glaurung system. Maybe there’s another way around it.”

“Huh.”

“I’m one, maybe two weeks from talking Fëanor into letting us get our hands on that program,” Melkor said, oblivious to Mairon’s ambivalence. “I’m telling you, I think this might be the thing that really pushes us over the edge.”

“Is that right?”

“I just need to convince him to fork over the goods,” he said, still only half-listening. He shook his head, focusing at last on Mairon. “Any ideas on how to get an engineer to part with his program?”

Mairon drummed his fingertips on the arm of the chair. "I'm going to bet," he said slowly, "that he's not going to do it as willingly as you'd like." He stilled his fingers, letting them come up to cup his chin with a sigh. "Then again," he mused, "if there's anyone who can convince him, it's probably you."

Melkor laughed. "You're probably right."

Mairon watched his employer's fingers travel lightly along the edges of the papers before him for a moment. Then he shook his head, standing abruptly. "I should get back to work," he said, compulsively running the palm of his hand along the side of his head to where his hair was tucked into a tidy knot at the nape of his neck. "Need anything?"

Melkor glanced at his watch. "It's almost nine o'clock," he said. "Far be it from me to discourage my employees from putting in a few extra hours, but you look like you could use a break."

"That's a no, then?" Mairon said briskly.

Melkor rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself," he said, returning his attention to the papers on his desk. "But don't come crying to me when you work yourself to death."

Mairon did not respond, having already retreated through the door and started off briskly back toward his office, his mind already back on the work at his desk while a small part of him began, ever-so-slightly, to panic.

Chapter End Notes

May contain poorly drawn canon allusions that make little to no sense. Attempt to enjoy anyway.

Sitting Still

Chapter Summary

Mairon tries to fix the last of the problems with their newest system. Melkor is still stuck on Silmarils and just won't let it go. Of course, what's Melkor's problem is, sooner or later, everyone's problem.

Chapter Notes

As always, Melkor doesn't exactly know how to play well with others. Props to Mairon for impressive patience. Gothmog and Thuringwethil to the (attempted) rescue.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What are you doing?”

“Working,” Mairon said absently, picking up a screwdriver and levering up the panel from the half-destroyed drone in front of him. He peered intently into a morass of fiber optics, and Melkor strolled around the side of the work bench to peer over his shoulder. He watched for a few minutes as Mairon’s long fingers deftly picked between individual cables, replacing pieces of the communication system seemingly at random.

“Do you have a minute?” Melkor said eventually, watching as Mairon sliced a thin rubberized covering with a razor blade and considered the exposed circuit within, placing the blade between his teeth as he tilted his head to the side and ran a finger distractedly over the split edge.

“Watch yourself,” Melkor said softly, eyeing the tiny, steady pulse of the blade as the back of Mairon’s tongue beat an absentminded tattoo into the cold, dulled edge pressed between his lips.

“It’s fine,” Mairon said. Still, though his eyes never stopped moving over the tiny circuit in front of him, he reached up and plucked the blade from between his teeth, holding it in his fingers instead and tapping it on the surface of the bench.

Melkor rolled his eyes and, for a moment, regarded Mairon’s focus with a mixture of admiration and annoyance. “I need to talk to you,” he said.

“I’m listening,” Mairon claimed, twirling the razor blade in his fingers before deftly slicing the offending circuitry out of the little aircraft to examine it more closely.

“It’s about Formenos.” Melkor watched Mairon’s eyes stop scanning the circuit board, instead focusing on a particular spot as the blade in his finger stopped its incessant tapping, and Melkor had to fight not to grin at the subtle shift in attention. At last, Mairon was really listening.

“What about Formenos?” Mairon asked, a hint of impatience in his voice as the silence stretched between them.

Melkor considered the question for a moment, trying to find the right words to phrase his concern. “I am finding,” he said slowly, “that Fëanor is rather harder to crack than I had originally thought.”

“How so?”

Melkor frowned, trying to gather his thoughts. He turned so that his back was to the bench, placing his palms flat on the cool, black surface and levering himself up to sit on the crowded workspace. “You should hear the way he talks,” he said, swinging one foot back into the open space under the bench and letting the toe of his sneaker kick sullenly at the legs of the bench as it swung forward.

“I have,” Mairon said, abandoning the aircraft and circling around to the opposite side of the bench to glower accusingly at the screen of his computer. “I go to our trade conferences, remember?”

“It’s like he thinks he’s the only one who’s ever made anything worthwhile in this industry,” Melkor continued, oblivious.

“Huh,” Mairon said, scrolling through a list of error messages as his frown deepened.

“It’s insane. I mean, I get that the thing is good. I’ve read every shred of information about it that I can lay hands on—legally and otherwise—and I’m telling you, it’s a good system. It has the potential to be great, in the right hands. But the way he talks about the thing is absolutely infuriating. I don’t think I can actually stand another discourse on how Formenos is changing the course of the industry as we know it, or how Silmaril is some kind of shining, groundbreaking beacon of light—and I mean that literally. If I hear him start about how unique and unparalleled his creation is one more time, I’m either going to kill myself or him, and I think you know which one I’d pref—”

“There is an obvious solution, you know,” said Mairon, tracing an unseen line of text on the screen with one long index finger.

“And that would be?”

“Stop talking to him,” he said, stabbing at the enter key perhaps a bit harder than was necessary.

“But I feel like I’m making progress,” he complained, still kicking an irritating cadence into the underside of the bench. “Even if half of it is incredibly infuriating bragging that makes me want to punch his smug face in, he’s still dropping bits of information here and there, and it’s all useful.”

“For what, exactly?”

“For getting him to let go of the damn thing!” He aimed a particularly vicious kick at the leg of the bench. “I just need to build up a good enough argument for why he should partner with us—or better yet, sell.”

Mairon clamped one hand over the top of his shaking monitor and scowled at Melkor’s swinging foot through, eyes narrowed in annoyance. “What makes you think he’s interested in partnering, let alone selling?”

“Everyone is,” Melkor muttered sullenly, “if you find the right incentive.”

“So how much would you take for Angband?”

“What?” said Melkor sharply, jolted out of his brooding. “I’d never sell this company. Are you crazy?”

“Exactly,” said Mairon.

Melkor frowned. “Fëanor Finwion,” he said sourly, “is not me.”

Mairon couldn't stop the snort from escaping through nose. “Right,” he said. But he's just close enough.

Melkor's foot stilled at last, and he half turned on the bench, hoisting one leg up and laying it across the scattered papers and notebooks so that he could level a glare at Mairon. “Will you listen to me?”

“I am listening to you,” said Mairon, tapping a flurry of commands into the keyboard. Melkor reached forward and yanked the feed cable out of the back of the monitor, a satisfied smirk creeping onto his lips as he watched the reflected glow of backlighting disappear from Mairon's face. Mairon, to his credit, was stone-faced, simply blinking and shifting his gaze away from the darkened screen to Melkor's irritable features. Under the force of Melkor's glare, he sighed, rubbing the heel of his hand roughly across his forehead before sweeping his palm distractedly over his hair, touching the tidy knot at the nape of his neck. “I don't know what you want from me,” he said tiredly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I want you to help me,” Melkor insisted.

“I am trying to help you,” Mairon said, carefully keeping the acid out of his words. “I have an entire team dedicated to scouring trade and academic outlets looking for things we can use in our research and development. I meet with them three days a week just to talk ideas. I personally oversee every new project we have in line, every single time. We have a system on the table right now that could stand to make us more than we've ever made if I could just fix this last glitch—which, I might add, I am trying to do right now so we can meet our debut deadline. That is how I am trying to help you.”

“You do realize,” Melkor said icily, “that everything on that list is just part of your job description, right?”

Mairon took a deep breath and let it out as a short, sharp breath, collecting himself. “Yes,” he said evenly. “I realize that.”

“Good. So just do your damn job—no need to tell me what it entails. And in the meantime, would it kill you to help me out when I ask you?”

“No,” Mairon said calmly.

“Perfect. Now, about his asshole I'm trying to make a deal with: I'd really love some suggestions on how to get him to hand over the goddamn program.”

Mairon's fingers began to curl into a fist, but he caught himself, taking a deep breath and sighing tiredly as he tried to compose himself. “You want to make a deal with Formenos, yes?”

“Yes,” Melkor said impatiently. “That's what I've been telling you.”

“Then you need to win Fëanor.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Fëanor Finwion isn't a hard man to understand, but he is a hard man to deal with, and the worst thing about him is his ego.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Melkor muttered.

Mairon bit back the obvious retort. “People like Finwion don’t work well with others because they think it’s below them. They think they shouldn’t waste their own talent on those who can’t appreciate it.”

“I am not,” Melkor said testily, “below anyone, least of all Fëanor Finwion.”

Mairon rolled his eyes. “He might be arrogant, but he isn’t ignorant. He knows exactly who you are. He knows what you do, and he knows what you can offer him. But it’s more than that. You’re like him. You make things, good things—things he knows and respects. I guarantee you that the fact that someone like you is interested in his program has him absolutely preening, even if he’s still cautious in person.”

“So you think he might be interested?”

“I think he could be. I think he respects craftsmanship and ingenuity, and those are things we have in spades. I also think he values independence; I think he’s cautious, and I think he’s wary of anything that might jeopardize what he’s built.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that what you want will require walking a very thin line. You want him to know that you’re interested, and it’s likely he already does. But you also need him to know how much he could benefit from working with you. That’s what will win Fëanor Finwion. Feed his ambition. Stroke his ridiculous ego. Make him understand how much you admire his work, and how much you want to help him go further—regardless of what a load of garbage that might be. You need him to believe that. Because if he believes for one minute that you don’t respect his work, or that you want to cut him out of the deal, then I promise you that will be the end. He will never speak to you about this deal again, ever. Period.”

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Melkor said dryly, but he eyed Mairon nevertheless with begrudging respect.

“Maybe,” Mairon conceded. “But it’s the truth.”

Melkor mulled it over for a minute. “Fine,” he said, sighing theatrically. “So you’re telling me I have to be sunshine and rainbows and kiss Finwion ass for a few days?” He tipped his head back and groaned loudly. “Fine,” he said again, snapping his head forward. “Whatever. I can do that. As long as I get that damn program, I can do whatever he wants.”

Mairon tried, for a moment, to calculate exactly how miniscule the odds might be that Melkor could be capable of humbling himself before the likes of Fëanor Finwion for a few minutes, let alone a few days, and had to bite back a snort. “I’m sure you can,” he said judiciously, trying not to imagine the monumental clash of ego that must necessarily accompany any meeting of Melkor and Fëanor. He shook his head. “Is there anything else?”

“What?” Melkor’s head snapped up as he was pulled out of his own thoughts, jolted by Mairon’s voice. “Oh. I guess not.” He pushed himself up, holding his weight on his hands as he swung forward and landed easily on the ground. “Doing anything later? I think Gothmog and I are going out.”

Mairon gaped at him for a moment before gesturing vaguely at the cluttered workspace Melkor had so recently vacated. “Raincheck?” he ventured helplessly.

“Right,” Melkor said. “Of course.” He grinned, his normal pep beginning to return. “Don’t work too hard,” he said, starting for the door. “You’re worth too much to me alive.”

“A touching sentiment,” muttered Mairon darkly. He picked up the discarded circuit from the workbench and turned it over absently in his hands, staring at the door long after it closed behind his boss.

“Hey,” said Melkor, grinning as he spun a chair around to sit backwards, arms draped over the back. “How’s it going?”

Fëanor looked up from the report on the desk in front of him, red pen poised accusingly over the page, and frowned at Melkor. “Another day in paradise,” he said dryly.

“Always a pleasure to mold the bright young minds of Arda,” Melkor said, smirking.

“Right,” said Fëanor, snorting derisively. “I’ve seen black holes brighter than these geniuses.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Melkor said. “The landscape for talent these days is rather bleak—not that I need to tell you, I’m sure.”

“I stopped hiring outside help two years ago,” said Fëanor sourly. “Best decision I ever made. I was doing all the work on my own anyway. Why should I pay for a contribution I never saw?”

“Well,” said Melkor smoothly, “I can’t say that it seems to have hurt you at all. On the contrary. Formenos is doing better than ever. I was just reading a report this morning about your projected first quarter earnings—they’re through the roof. You’re on target to be the top-grossing company if you keep it up.”

“Was that data published?” asked Fëanor, sounding mildly alarmed, though he was unable to hide the smirk that crept onto his face.

“Hey,” said Melkor quickly, “if it was me, I’d be telling everyone myself. It’s always great to get the recognition we deserve, especially when it’s coming from a project with as much potential as Silmaril.”

“You know what really gets me?” Fëanor said suddenly.

“What’s that?”

“Silmaril is a great project. It deserves every bit of attention it’s getting and more. But you know what? We’ve been doing great work for years, and no one has paid us a bit of attention until suddenly we had something they really wanted. Where were all these assholes twenty years ago when I was trying to sell my first prototype? Where’s the respect, I ask you?”

Melkor shook his head. “It’s all about self-interest,” he said sympathetically. “They’re only interested in what they can get out of you, not in what you have to offer.”

“You’re damn right,” Fëanor said emphatically, “and it’s a shame.”

“It is,” Melkor agreed. “So much potential wasted because it isn’t where the money is. Not that you need to worry about that anymore. I’m sure you’ve got more interest than you know what to do with at the moment.”

Fëanor pursed his lips. “I might,” he said cautiously. “What does it matter to you?”

“It doesn’t,” Melkor said, shrugging. “What interests me is the project itself. The press on it is few and far between, but what I’ve been able to get my hands on is compelling stuff—really, it is. I’d really love to hear more about it sometime. One engineer to another, you know.”

“I see,” said Fëanor slowly. He frowned slightly, retrieving the cap of his pen from the desktop and replacing it firmly before shuffling his papers into order. “Perhaps another time,” he said lightly. “I have an appointment at five-thirty. I really ought to be going.”

“Of course,” said Melkor, watching him slip the papers into his briefcase and snap the lid closed quickly. “Maybe next time.”

He watched Fëanor sweep from the room and tried to ignore the sting of irritated disappointment that accompanied his departure.

“God, am I excited to sleep in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s Thursday,” said Gothmog, eyeing his employer warily.

Melkor picked up the glass from the table and eyed Gothmog over the rim. “So?” he inquired evenly, finishing off his whiskey.

Gothmog shrugged. “Just thought I’d check,” he said, tapping a finger on his beer bottle. He took a drink and set the bottle back down on the table, still tapping it thoughtfully.

“It’s been a long damn week,” Melkor said, rolling the base of the glass on the table and contemplating whether the last few drops of liquor were worth the effort of retrieval.

Gothmog snorted. “I saw you walk into the building at noon today.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’m just saying that some of us have probably put in a few more hours than you have this week.”

“Just because I haven’t been at the office,” said Melkor sourly, lifting the glass and brandishing it across the table at him, “doesn’t mean I haven’t been working.” He tipped his head back and let the last little trickle of whiskey trail onto his tongue.

“Is cutting out at two o’clock to get a drink considered working now?”

“Insubordinate,” Melkor muttered darkly, signaling for the waiter. “For your information, I’ve been conducting some research.”

“Into which bar has the best early happy hour specials?”

“Goddamn it, Gothmog, I’m trying to complain here.”

“You might have come to the wrong place for that,” said Gothmog, grinning as a waiter brought their drinks to the table. Melkor raised an eyebrow. “Or at least brought the wrong company,” he amended. “If you want to talk about your problems-that-aren’t-really-problems, I’m not really your guy. I’ve known you way too long for that.”

“Excuse me?” Melkor slid his empty glass to the edge of the table and plunked his new one down

between his elbows, trying to arrange his features into something resembling outrage.

“You’re pissed because you want a deal with Formenos, which means you’ve had to spend the last few weeks sucking up to that arrogant dickhole Fëanor Finwion.”

“Are there no secrets anymore?” Melkor complained.

“You’re the one who told us,” said a smooth, dangerous voice from the table’s edge.

“Hey!” said Melkor, grinning widely as he pushed himself up and helped Thuringwethil off with her coat. “I thought you had to work late.”

“I was rather more efficient than I thought,” she said, sliding into the booth.

“Impressive,” Melkor said gravely, sliding in next to her.

“Indeed,” she said coolly. “Now,” she said, plucking a wine list from the collection of menus and opening it delicately, “what are we bitching about?”

“Formenos,” Gothmog said, peeling the label of his empty bottle of beer.

“Ah, right,” said Thuringwethil, glancing over her shoulder to make eye contact with the bartender, who nearly dropped the glass he was filling. She returned her attention to the table. “I assume you’re complaining about the soul-crushing indecency of having to grovel at the feet of someone so unbelievably unworthy of your attention for something you feel should just be given to you?”

Melkor stared at her. “We hadn’t gotten that far, thank God,” Gothmog said evenly. “I was actually trying to head off a conversation in that direction before it got started.”

“I don’t like either of you,” Melkor said sourly. “You’re both fired.”

“Ha,” Thuringwethil said humorlessly, leaning over him to give her order to the frightened bartender. “Neither of those things is true,” she said, returning her attention to Melkor.

Melkor took a drink and turned his head to consider her. “I could fire you,” he said decisively, tapping the glass on the table.

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, clucking her tongue in mock sympathy. “I wrote my contract, and I am reasonably certain you didn’t read it before you signed it. You are not going to fire me.” She stretched one arm over the back of the booth and flexed her fingers at the waiter who had not quite yet approached their table. The man stopped in his tracks, staring at her hand for a moment, before gingerly placing the stem of the wine glass against her palm. She shifted her hand, curling her fingers around the stem and snatching it deftly away from the hapless server, eyes still fixed on Melkor. “Although,” she said thoughtfully, bringing the glass toward her chest and settling her back against the wall, “I suppose my certainty about the first statement is a bit less ironclad than the second.”

“He likes us,” Gothmog said unconcernedly, setting his empty bottle aside and reaching for the new one. “He better, anyway. Boss isn’t exactly flush in friends department, if you know what I mean.”

“Watch it,” Melkor growled.

“You’ve had the same two friends—me and Thil—for what, ten years now? I mean, you added Mai after a while, but other than that...” Melkor picked up a strip of discarded label and flung it at

Gothmog, rolling his eyes as it fell far short of its mark. "I'm not faulting you," Gothmog continued, unruffled. "It's not like we're any better."

"It's not a bad strategy," Thuringwethil said fairly. "Better to know and trust a few than to count a hundred who will leave you to rot when you really need them."

"She says as a member of the three friends club," said Gothmog dryly.

"I may have three friends," said Thuringwethil, fixing him with the intensity of her dark gaze, "but at least I know they're reliable."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," said Melkor. "Though at the moment, you two are really coming up short in the problem-solving department."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You want problem-solving? Fine. You're unhappy, and I'll tell you why."

"I'm not unhap—"

"It's because," she said, ignoring him, "you already know the solution to your problem. You just haven't managed to achieve it yet, and it's driving you crazy."

He scowled at her. "What do you know?"

"I know you went and badgered Mairon until he told you exactly how to weasel your way into Fëanor Finwion's good graces. And judging by how fast you're putting those away," she said, tapping her knuckle sharply against the side of his glass, "I'm reasonably certain it isn't going so well."

"Yeah, well," he muttered darkly, shooing her away from his drink. "It's not my fault it's a terrible plan."

"It's a fine plan," she said firmly. "In fact, it's probably the best plan. It just might not be the best plan for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know Fëanor, but I know his reputation, and I certainly know you."

"What's your point?"

"I can't imagine that whatever effort you've been making to ingratiate yourself over there is going particularly well." He scowled and dipped a finger into the dwindling whiskey in his glass, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye and meeting a glare so unyielding that he thought better of his original plan, flicking his wrist up sharply to splatter Gothmog with liquor rather than Thuringwethil.

"Why are you putting in such an effort, anyway?" Thuringwethil asked, cupping her chin in her palm as she watched Melkor dodge the torn up label being pelted at him by Gothmog in retaliation.

"Huh?" he asked, distracted.

"I never pegged you as mister collaboration, and you're not usually one to swoon over anyone else's work, either. What's so special about this Silmaril thing?"

"It's a good program," Melkor said, covering the top of his glass with his hand to protect it from

flying detritus. “In our hands, it could probably even be great.”

She frowned at him. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“It could put us ahead,” he said evasively.

“But that’s not it.”

He shot her a look of annoyance. “Valinor might be interested in it,” he said, sniffing unconcernedly.

“Ah,” she said, leaning her head back against the wall. That explained the rationalized things, if not explained them. Nothing like an old rivalry, she thought irritably, to really send someone as competitive as Melkor careening right over the edge into insanity.

“They’ve been poking around in it for a while now—without any luck, I might add,” he said, smirking.

Thuringwethil exchanged a look with Gothmog and sighed. “Are you even interested in Silmaril?”

“Of course I am,” he said defensively.

“Right. And were you interested before you knew that Valinor wanted it?”

Melkor drummed his fingers on the table. “That may or may not have influenced my decision to pursue Formenos for a deal.”

Thuringwethil scowled at him. “You’re going to run us into the ground for a goddamn grudge.”

“No,” he corrected her smugly. “I’m going to run both of them into the ground and spit on the ruins.”

She shook her head, turning to look irritably at Gothmog. “I think he’s actually lost it this time.”

“On the plus side,” Gothmog said serenely, “at least he has a plan.”

“Right,” Thuringwethil said darkly.

“No thanks to any of you,” Melkor complained

“Thanks entirely to Mairon,” Thuringwethil said acidly. “I doubt you and Finwion would still even be on speaking terms if it wasn’t for him.”

“Speaking of which, what’s going on with him? God, talking to him the other day was like pulling teeth. I tried to talk to him about Silmaril, and it was like talking to the goddamn wall. I mean, are you kidding me? The man makes me employ an entire department just to trawl through our competition and make sure we have the latest tech on the market. He lives for this shit. What gives?”

Thuringwethil shook her head. “Oh, sweetie,” she said once more.

“Stop saying that,” Melkor said irritably.

“It’s a term of endearment,” she said sweetly, smiling wolfishly at him.

“Not from you, it isn’t.”

She tapped her fingers thoughtfully on her sharp cheekbone. “How is it,” she wondered aloud, “that you can be so incredibly smart and yet so very stupid all at once?”

“Jesus, Thil, do I need to have some kind of seminar to teach my employees how to speak to me?”

“I’m not your employee right now, Melkor. I’m your friend, and as your friend, I’m telling you that you’re being unbelievably thick.”

“Watch it,” he growled.

“Mairon’s focused on resolving the issues with the Glaurung system,” she said pointedly.

“Focused?” Gothmog said, twisting pieces of sodden label between his massive fingers. “The kid’s practically killing himself trying to figure it out.”

“What’s your point?” Melkor asked irritably. “That’s Mairon. That’s who he is. He gets weird and obsessive and twitchy about a project for a while, and then all of a sudden, he figures it out and it’s fine. That’s how it goes. He’ll figure out the Glaurung thing. He always does.”

“Yes,” said Thuringwethil delicately. “It’s just that... hearing about a system that could potentially replace all of his hard work isn’t exactly what you might call motivating. At least not in a positive way.”

Melkor rolled his eyes in the face of her thinly-veiled disapproval. “He’ll figure it out,” he said mutinously, spinning his glass viciously and sloshing the liquid nearly over the edge, “and he’ll do it regardless of whatever happens with Formenos. That’s his job.” He picked up his glass and downed the last of the liquor before pushing himself to the edge of the booth, stretching slightly as he stood. “I’m going to take a leak,” he declared, “and when I get back, we are going to drink, and we are going to have fun, and we are not, under any circumstances, going to talk about work. Got it?”

Thuringwethil waved a hand dismissively at him, and he stalked off toward the back of the bar. “What are the odds that this is going to resolve itself in some way that doesn’t, you know, suck?” Gothmog asked.

“Which thing?” she asked, tracing the rim of her wine glass with the tip of her finger. “The Formenos business or the fact that he’s being an asshole to Mairon?”

Gothmog shrugged. “Either one.”

Thuringwethil tapped her finger on the glass. “It’s a toss-up,” she said noncommittally. “Probably for both.”

“True.” Gothmog downed the last of his beer. “Then again, as far as the whole Mairon thing goes, I’ve never known him to let one of us down—not when it really mattered.”

Almost unconsciously, Thuringwethil’s fingers went up to trace the faded white scar that followed the curve of her neck. No, she reflected soberly. She supposed he had not.

Chapter End Notes

If you're still here, thanks for sticking around! You're the best!

This garbage human is also on tumblr if you're interested (swilmarillion.tumblr.com)

All the Small Things

Chapter Summary

Deadlines are coming. Potential partnerships don't come as easily as Melkor might like. A lot of problems might be resolved by talking like reasonable adults. This suggestion, of course, is rejected outright.

Chapter Notes

Melkor finds out some things about Formenos he doesn't exactly like. After some prompting from friends, he might finally get around to talking to Mairon. It may not be the conversation Mairon expects (or the one Thuringwethil thinks they should have).

A very sharp finger prodded him in the cheek, and Mairon woke with an angry jolt. “What the—Thil,” he said, annoyed, wincing as he sat up and heard a variety of distressing cracks emanating from the vicinity of his joints. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure you’re still alive,” she said, sounding vaguely bored. “I’m not particularly interested in corpse removal. Not again, anyway.”

“What do you mean, not ag—you know what? Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“No,” she said decisively. “You don’t.”

Mairon blinked blearily around at what he recognized was his office. “What time is it?”

“Eight,” she said, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Did you sleep here again last night?”

“Close the door,” he said in answer, pulling open the bottom drawer of his desk.

She sighed and did as he asked as Mairon pulled a fresh shirt and tie from the stash in his desk. “What are you doing here?” she asked him, folding her arms disapprovingly over her chest. “I get that you’re having some issues with this system but—”

“I’m working, Thuringwethil,” he snapped. “That’s what I’m doing.”

“Don’t you snap at me,” she said coldly. “I’m just trying to point out that—”

“I don’t need your life advice,” he said, pulling on his fresh shirt and starting to button it. “In fact, I don’t need anything except to figure this out.” He reached out and tapped the top of his monitor with his index finger, shaking the screen savagely under the brunt of his pent-up frustration. “This is my problem. This is what I need to do. Nothing else matters.” He pulled his hand back and buttoned the cuffs of his sleeves. “If I don’t figure this out, you won’t have to worry about...well, worrying about me anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know about this Formenos thing he’s after,” he said. “You can’t tell me it isn’t suspicious timing.”

“In what way?”

“I’m basically screwed on this project right now, Thil,” he said, leaning his knuckles onto the desk and letting his head fall toward his chest with a sigh. “I have tried everything I can think of to troubleshoot the issues we’re having, and it’s just not working. We’re three days from the deadline with no solution in sight, and you don’t think it’s a little odd that he’s trying to get his hands on this Silmaril project right now?”

“You’re overthinking it,” she said firmly. “You know Melkor. He likes new and shiny things, and when he sees something he wants, he absolutely has to have it, no matter how hard it may be to get or how crazy he makes us trying to get it.”

“This is different,” Mairon insisted, lifting his chin and frowning, his eyes drifting unfocused along the edge of the desk. “I know Fëanor Finwion, at least professionally, and frankly, I’m surprised Melkor hasn’t killed him yet. I don’t envy that community service class, having to sit in on that clash of egos.”

“What’s your point?”

“Melkor hates to be challenged, and Fëanor has done nothing but stymie him on this thing since the beginning. I get that he’s stubborn, sometimes to the point of stupidity, but this is extreme, even for him. I was sure he’d have given up by now. The fact that he hasn’t bugs me, Thil, and if you want to know the truth, it worries me, too.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s worrying you,” she said. It was not a question, and he sighed.

“He won’t talk to me,” Mairon said quietly, tugging at the cuff of his shirt. “Of course, he doesn’t have to, it’s just that whatever’s really going on with the Silmaril thing, I could help. I know I could, if he’d just let me. The fact that he won’t...it makes me think something’s wrong.”

It was Thuringwethil’s turn to sigh. She walked forward then and perched herself on the edge of the desk, reaching forward to tuck an errant strand of blood-red hair behind his ear. Mairon managed a tired smile, recognizing the limit of her proximity to affection. “You are not the only one who deals poorly with stress,” she reminded him gently.

“That’s an understatement,” he muttered.

“Perhaps,” she said delicately, “you might talk to him.”

“No thanks,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. “He about took my head off the other night for not being helpful enough, whatever that means.”

“I didn’t mean about Formenos.”

Mairon froze, a look of slack-jawed horror on his face. He caught himself quickly, shaking his head and rearranging his features into their usual look of unruffled calm. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said coolly.

“Mairon,” she began.

“Thuringwethil,” he interrupted, “I’m sure you’re very busy. I know I am.” He looked pointedly toward the door.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “This isn’t the end of this conversation,” she said, standing gracefully from the edge of the desk and looking down at him.

He crossed his arms and looked up at her, defiant. “Goodbye, Thuringwethil,” he said firmly.

She stared back at him for a moment, registering her displeasure with a scowl before strolling slowly from the room, letting her disapproval trail behind her. Mairon watched her go with a scowl of his own, fingers digging irritably into the edge of his desk. After a moment, he slammed the bottom drawer of his desk shut with his foot and stalked out into the hall.

“At what point,” said Gothmog, stomping through the open door of Thuringwethil’s office, “do we have an intervention for one or both of those lunatics?” He grabbed the edge of the door and swung it hard toward the frame, arresting the motion when he felt Thuringwethil’s disapproving stare boring through the back of his skull. He completed the arc with rather more care and turned around once more, advancing on Thuringwethil’s desk and watching her precise typing with a scowl.

“Sit down,” she said firmly, “and stop looming over me.” Gothmog muttered under his breath as he pulled a chair up to the edge of the desk and flopped into it. “What is it now?” Thuringwethil asked, turning her attention away from the computer at last.

“He just fired four people,” Gothmog told her.

“Melkor?” she asked, frowning. “I haven’t even seen him yet today.”

“Not Melkor,” Gothmog said grimly. “Mairon. And it was brutal.”

“Ah,” she said.

“You know, between the fact that he’s my friend and that he’s been so stressed out of his mind lately, I forget how fucking scary that kid is when he’s mad. Two of the guys he fired were crying, and I don’t think the other two were even capable of speech at the point when I walked in.”

“And I’ll bet he didn’t even raise his voice,” said Thuringwethil, well-acquainted with Mairon’s particular brand of brutality.

“Like I said,” Gothmog agreed darkly, “Mairon is scary.”

“What did they do?”

“I’m pretty sure one of them pissed his pants, and another one might have—”

“No,” Thuringwethil amended, “I meant, what did they do to attract Mairon’s ire?”

“Oh,” said Gothmog, shrugging. “They were doing some test he didn’t authorize, I think. I don’t really know. But honest to God, Thil, it wasn’t anything that warranted the verbal destruction I just witnessed.

“Huh,” she said distractedly, her mind wandering.

“I’m seriously tempted to just tell him about Valinor.”

“Don’t do that,” she said sharply, pulling herself back to the present conversation with an effort.

“Why not?”

She sighed, rubbing her eyes. “It’s not our information.”

“Maybe not,” Gothmog said stubbornly, “but it is Mairon’s.” He ignored her snort. “Come on, Thuringwethil,” he said. “Mairon’s got at least as much of a beef with them as Melkor does.”

“I’m not arguing that point,” Thuringwethil said. “I’m just saying that what we know right now, that Melkor wants Formenos because of the Valinor connection—that isn’t our information to give. It’s Melkor’s. He has to make the decision to share it.”

“Mairon is driving himself nuts because he can’t figure out why Melkor wants the Silmaril thing so damn badly.”

“I know.”

“You also know he’d probably jump at the chance to screw those jerks over? It might give him the boost he needs to figure out this glitch.”

“It might, or it might not. It’s still not our secret to tell.”

Gothmog shook his head. “I still think we should tell him.”

She sighed. “Have you no self-preservation?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Melkor will tell him sooner or later, and when he does, Mairon will be pissed. That’ll be bad enough, and we’ll have to deal with it when we come to it, but it won’t be nearly as bad as if you tell him now.”

“Why not?”

“Gothmog, think,” she said impatiently. “Tell Mairon now, and not only will he be livid, but Melkor might also kill you.”

Gothmog blanched. “You’re right,” he said.

“Of course I’m right,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I still don’t like it,” Gothmog complained. “They’re driving me absolutely crazy.”

“You’re not the only one who’s just about finished with the two of them right now,” Thuringwethil said darkly.

“What did they do to you?”

“Neither one of them will take any friendly advice,” she complained. She scowled, and then a look almost like chagrin came over her face. “Perhaps I should stop trying,” she mused. “I might be just a little bit responsible for the loss of jobs you observed earlier.”

“Ignoring the fact that there is no universe in which you’re ever going to stop butting into our lives,” Gothmog said warily, “what did you do?”

“I only suggested that they ought to talk to each other like reasonable people,” she said defensively.

“Oh,” Gothmog said, waving a hand dismissively. “I suggest that all the time. They just ignore me.”

“I may have suggested they talk about more than Formenos.”

Gothmog tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling, letting out a wordless groan of frustration. “What in God’s name were you thinking?”

“I was thinking,” she said testily, “that maybe Mairon ought to deal with his problems like an adult, for once.”

“Please, Thuringwethil,” he pleaded. “I put up with a lot of shit from the two of them. I count on you for realism. You can’t start spouting crazy talk like this on me.”

“Fine,” she said acidly. “I’ll just work on accepting the fact that everyone here has the interpersonal skills of the chair you’re sitting in, and maybe I won’t be so disappointed.”

“You do that,” Gothmog said. “And in the meantime, brace yourself. I have the distinct feeling we’re going to be sorting out a lot more than this week’s typical middle-school drama in the very near future.”

“Why?” she demanded, her eyes focusing for the first time on the manila envelope in Gothmog’s lap.

“Unfortunately,” Gothmog said with a heavy sigh, “you aren’t the only one who does your job from time to time.”

Melkor let the words seep into his brain, feeling tendrils of rage creep down his spine and into his fingers, which began to methodically tear the pages of the magazine to shreds.

“What’s the matter?” asked Gothmog, sauntering into the doorway and leaning on the frame. “Rejected for *The Bachelorette* again?”

“Sometimes I wonder,” said Melkor, ripping another page from the binding and crumpling it viciously in his hands, “why in God’s name I keep you on my payroll. I mean, you could hang around and be an ass without the paycheck.”

“It is tempting,” said Gothmog, unperturbed. He ambled the rest of the way into the office and splayed his hands on the back of a chair, leaning his substantial weight on the unfortunate piece of furniture. “Then again,” he mused, “if you cut off my cash flow, you’re not likely to get things like this.” He tossed an envelope onto Melkor’s desk, scattering shredded bits of glossy magazine spread.

“What’s this?” asked Melkor, shoving the remains of the magazine to the side and picking up the large manila envelope, turning it over with interest.

“What’s that thing they say about looking long into the abyss?” Gothmog asked as Melkor upended the envelope, and a flurry of papers spilled out onto his desk.

“And who,” he growled, snatching a picture of himself out of the heap and holding it gingerly between thumb and forefinger, “is the abyss in this poorly-paraphrased metaphor?”

“Come on, smart guy,” said Gothmog, pushing himself off the back of the chair and circling around to drop into the seat instead. “Who’s got an interest in looking into you at the moment?”

“Paranoid son of a bitch,” Melkor muttered, shifting aside a few papers to dig out another couple of

photographs. “This one’s at my apartment!” He flipped through the other pictures in his hands, scowl deepening. “How’d you get ahold of these?”

Gothmog shrugged. “Personal connections still count for something in certain circles.”

“Someone owed you a favor,” Melkor translated, tossing the pictures aside and picking up what turned out to be a dictation of an overheard conversation. “Jesus,” he grouched, flipping through the pages. “This is yesterday. I hope that asshole enjoys reading three pages of me reaming the kid at Panera for putting mayonnaise on my goddamn sandwich.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Gothmog said fairly. He watched Melkor flip through the documents for a moment. “You know what this means, right?” Melkor grabbed for another stapled packet of pages, scanning the words with a grimace of annoyance. “Hey,” Gothmog said, snapping his fingers in front of the page.

“What?” Melkor snapped.

“Focus,” said Gothmog.

“I am focusing,” said Melkor distractedly, scraping another picture out of the pile and narrowing his eyes at the image of himself, engrossed in a losing battle to keep a pigeon away from his blessedly mayonnaise-free sandwich. “On how I’m going to rip that smug bastard’s lungs right out through his ribcage.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog soothingly. “The blood eagle might be a bit preemptive at this point.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Melkor mutinously.

Gothmog sighed. “What are you going to do?”

Melkor shoved the entirety of the envelope’s contents away with a growl of frustration. “I don’t know yet.”

“Good,” said Gothmog. “Don’t do anything rash. Or stupid.”

“What do you take me for?”

“Someone who does rash, stupid things,” said Gothmog, grinning. “Look, whatever you do, you have to go forward knowing the whole Formenos thing is just not going to happen.”

“Why do you say that?”

Gothmog rolled his eyes. “The man does not trust you, Melkor. He is not going to trust you. Ergo, he is also not going to work with you, collaborate with you, sell his shit to you, or whatever other ridiculous idea you’ve gotten yourself set on.”

Melkor drummed his fingertips on the desk irritably. “I can fix this,” he said.

Gothmog shook his head. “You really want to take this from them, don’t you?”

Melkor shot him a look of annoyance. “Look, I liked the thing to begin with. It’s a nice project. Finwion should have been flattered that someone like Angband was interested in it. The fact that he isn’t jumping at this chance is just insulting. Now it’s a challenge, Gothmog, and the fact that Valinor wants it makes it even more of one. Those bastards don’t deserve the air they’re breathing.”

“Tell me how you really feel,” Gothmog muttered.

“I want this, Gothmog,” Melkor said, “and I’m going to get it, no matter—”

“Really?” Gothmog interrupted him. “Because I feel like I need to remind you that the stupid thing belongs to Fëanor, not you. He created it, and he owns it. You’ll have to go through him to get it, and that isn’t looking particularly promising right now.”

“I told you,” Melkor growled, “I can fix it.”

“Really?” Gothmog said again, annoyed. “I know I’m not the one with the brilliant business sense, but I didn’t think most people usually built solid partnerships on phrases like, ‘just follow the bastard and find out what he’s really up to; I don’t like the way he’s been sniffing around here lately’.”

“He said that?” Gothmog shrugged. “What the actual fuck?” Melkor curled his hand into a fist, crushing the corners of one of the transcripts in his grip. “All I’ve done since I met that asshole is pander to his ridiculous ego, and he has the goddamn nerve to treat me like I’m some kind of cut-rate, opportunistic thief?”

“Well,” said Gothmog carefully, “I mean—”

“Shut up,” Melkor said irritably. “You know what I mean. This is low, even from the likes of him.” He snatched up the mutilated magazine from where it was slumped over the edge of the desk and brandished the shredded remains of a *Tech Times* at Gothmog. “Those pricks at Valinor tried to make him an offer, do you know that? Of course, they low-balled so far that the only thing Formenos could respectably do was laugh in their faces, but honestly. Here I am, someone with the brains and acumen and the fucking *means* to actually use the only worthwhile thing that asshole will ever produce in his life, and he has the damn gall to treat me like some kind of criminal?”

Gothmog wisely decided to let that last comment slide. “Listen,” he said, trying to make his voice something akin to placating. “Silmaril belongs to Formenos. Fëanor might be a jerk, but he made the thing. If he doesn’t want to sell, that’s his business.”

“That’s unacceptable.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Not for long.”

“Can you please,” Gothmog said, gritting his teeth to bite back his frustration, “just listen to yourself? You are obsessing over something that, let’s be honest here, we could probably make ourselves if you really put some effort into it.”

“That’s not the point,” Melkor snapped. “I will not be rejected like this—not by Valinor or Formenos or anyone else. I will have Silmaril, or no one will have it.”

“Oh my God,” groaned Gothmog, tipping his head back and staring imploringly at the ceiling for the second time that day. “Thuringwethil is right. You’re going to run us into the ground over a fucking grudge.”

“You’re goddamn right I am. Maybe you’ve forgotten what they did, but I have not, and there is no way in hell that I am ever going to give them this kind of victory when I have the chance to take it from them.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gothmog muttered, rubbing his hand across his mouth in disbelief. “Fine. I’m going to go give Thil a head’s up on prepping your next defense; she’s going to need the extra time for this shitshow. In the meantime, I have a few words of advice.”

“Don’t bother,” Melkor said. “You’re not talking me out of this.”

Gothmog laughed mirthlessly. “I have known you for a long time,” he said, “and I know when there’s no chance of talking you down from an idea, no matter how dimwitted it may be.”

“Fine,” Melkor said begrudgingly. “What’s this amazing advice, then?”

Gothmog shook his head. “This Formenos thing will be what it will be—and God help us all when we find out exactly what kind of disaster we’re heading for. But while we wait to find out, you might want to think about keeping things going around here.”

“What are you talking about?” he snapped. “Things are fine around here.”

“Right,” Gothmog said. “So your best engineer isn’t killing himself trying to fix some stupid glitch while you go down there and bug the shit out of him trying to get him to help you pull in a new project that’s basically competition to what he’s been working nineteen hours a day on for the last three weeks?”

“I asked him to help me for, like, five minutes,” Melkor said defensively. “Ten, tops. And why wouldn’t I? He’s good at the people stuff, especially getting them to crap I want them to do, so—”

“You have an incredible ability,” Gothmog said irritably, “to make literally everything about you.”

Melkor grinned unrepentantly. “You think I’m incredible?”

“In so many ways,” Gothmog said darkly. “And none of them are flattering.”

“Are you done yet?” Melkor asked, picking up a handful of pictures from the jumble on his desk. “I need to start scheming, if you don’t mind.”

Gothmog reached forward and plucked the pictures out of his hand, throwing them back onto the pile and sweeping the mess of papers and pictures off the desk and into his lap. “Just warn me,” he said resignedly, straightening everything and shuffling it back into the envelope in his hands, “before you do anything illegal.” He shook the last of the pages into the envelope and closed the brass tabs in place before hauling himself out of the chair. “Talk to Mairon,” he said, pointing the corner of the envelope menacingly at his friend and employer. He turned and stalked out of the office.

Melkor watched him go, drumming his fingertips thoughtfully on his desk.

Mairon yawned and resisted the urge to look at his watch. Though the lack of windows and steady, fluorescent lighting in the lab made it impossible to tell the time, he knew it was already late. Thuringwethil’s earlier threat had crossed his mind a few times as the evening had worn on, but each time he had said just one more section, and flipped another page neatly to the back of the stack, his red pen poised over the fresh expanse of report waiting to be critiqued. If all else failed, he thought humorlessly, he could always dig his files out of the backup.

“Hey.”

The entirely unexpected voice in Mairon's ear made him jump and sent the pen in his hand skittering across the bench and onto the floor. "Jesus," he said irritably, one hand compulsively collecting the papers that had been sent askew by his flinching, the other reaching up to lay across his chest, pushing back against the pounding of his heart. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Melkor laughed, bending to retrieve the pen from where it had fallen and holding it out to Mairon with a grin of unrepentant amusement. "I'm fairly certain I've already told you that you're worth more to me alive."

"Yeah, right," Mairon muttered, picking up the stack of papers and tapping them sharply on the desk to organize them.

"You might keep that in mind," Melkor pressed.

"Come again?" asked Mairon absently, laying down the papers once more and returning his attention to the equations in front of him, running a finger unconsciously along the edge of the stack to inch the last few wayward corners into place.

"You look terrible," Melkor said, putting what little tact he had completely aside.

"Thanks," said Mairon dryly, making an annotation.

"I just mean that you look like—"

"Like I've been working a lot?" Mairon supplied, crossing out a line on the page and letting his pen hover over the next, considering.

"Well, yes, but—"

"I thought," said Mairon, underlining a section of text with infinite care, "that was what you wanted from me. To do my damn job."

Melkor frowned. "You don't swear."

"I was quoting," he said, crossing sharply through an equation and scrawling something new in the tiny space above it, tilting his head to the side to inspect his work.

Melkor snorted. "Always with a work-around," he said.

"Don't I wish," Mairon muttered darkly.

Melkor watched him for a moment, almost in awe of Mairon's focus. He watched the way Mairon's eyes scanned the page, stopping occasionally to pin down a troublesome equation or sift through a section of the report. He would consider it, index finger tapping thoughtfully against the pen in his hand before making a decision, either crossing out the offending string of text, underlining something of interest, or making a note he would, no doubt, read again later a hundred times. He was the picture of absolute absorption.

"Can I help you with something?" Mairon asked, still writing neatly in the margin of an already-defaced page.

Melkor started; he had almost thought Mairon had forgotten him. "Probably," he said evasively. "But I want to talk to you."

"Is that right?" Mairon said, flipping the scrawled-on page neatly to the back of his stack and

considering the fresh sheet before him.

“Yes,” he said. “It is.” He watched Mairon cross through a section of text. “Can you stop for a minute?”

Mairon sighed and finished writing, letting his eyes scan the page one last time before he straightened up and looked across the table, tucking the pen absently into the knot of hair at the nape of his neck. “Sure,” he said as he stretched the stiffness out of his shoulders.

Melkor had a sudden flash of memory: many years ago, a room not unlike the one they were in now, a much younger Mairon, still obsessing over some problem or another, looking far too serious for someone with a pen stuck through his hair. Melkor shook his head, trying to dislodge the obtrusive recollections. There were other things to focus on now.

“Well?” Mairon asked, a trace of annoyance in his voice. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Tell me about Glaurung,” Melkor said.

Mairon blinked. “What do you want to know?”

“How is it going?”

Mairon’s eyes did a quick scan of the lab while his mind ran through the range of possible responses to such a loaded question. “It’s been better,” he said carefully, resting his forearms on the bench and trying to take some of the strain off his protesting back.

“What do you think the problem is?”

“If I knew,” said Mairon tiredly, rolling his head stiffly from side to side, “then I would fix it.”

Melkor nodded slowly. “The deadline’s coming up,” he said.

Mairon sighed. “I know.”

“When is it?”

“Three days.”

Melkor continued to nod, looking around at the wreckage, discarded bits of prototypes and circuits and scattered reports littering the typically pristine workspace. “Do you think it’ll be done?”

Mairon let his chin sink toward his chest. “The logical part of my brain says don’t be ridiculous.”

“But?” Melkor prompted.

Mairon sighed. “But the rest of me is apparently both stupid and stubborn, because I refuse to push back the deadline.”

Melkor laughed. “Alright, then.”

Mairon looked up sharply. “What?”

Melkor grinned. “You said it’ll be done. That’s good enough for me.”

“Don’t listen to me,” Mairon said gloomily. “I can’t even troubleshoot my own project.”

“Mairon, look at me.” Mairon reluctantly looked up into a face that was much graver than he had expected. “There has never been a time,” Melkor said solemnly, “when you promised something you couldn’t deliver—not once. I trust you, Mairon; I always have. If you say it’ll be done, then I know it will be.”

Mairon stared at him for a moment, mouth open in disbelief. He nodded quickly, trying to shake his shock. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

“Don’t thank me,” said Melkor dismissively, his usual grin returning. “You’ve still got a looming deadline, a problem you don’t know how to solve, and you’ve just volunteered yourself to keep trying to fix it on time.”

Mairon snorted. “You’re technically in charge in here,” he pointed out. “And besides, you told me to go for it, so if it doesn’t get done, then whose fault is it, really?”

“Still yours,” Melkor said decisively.

“How generous,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. He fought the urge to smile as an amicable silence descended between them. “Hey,” he said suddenly, brow furrowing, “how’s everything going with the whole Formenos thing?”

An angry glower curled over Melkor’s face. “It’s a bit of a sore subject, at the moment.”

Mairon nodded. “Anything I can do to help?”

Melkor considered him for a moment. “Probably,” he said. “But I’ll let you handle things on this end for now.” Mairon considered this for a moment, the fingers of his right hand tapping lightly against the crook of his elbow. Melkor grinned at him. “Just say it,” he said.

“What?” Mairon’s fingers stilled their thoughtful tattoo; he hadn’t been paying attention.

Melkor grinned all the wider. “I know that look. You’re debating whether or not to tell me something. Just say it.”

Mairon tapped his index finger thoughtfully on the benchtop. “This...thing with Formenos,” he said carefully. “Is there something...anything I should know?”

Melkor’s grin faded. “Like what?”

Mairon chewed the inside of his cheek. “I just want to know that you’ll tell me,” he said finally. “If there’s anything important.”

“Sure,” Melkor said, shrugging. “If there’s anything you should know.”

As he wandered back out into the hall, Melkor thought about Valinor, and Formenos, and the ghost of a plan beginning to form in his mind; he almost wondered, as he wound his way back up through the deserted building, if he should feel guilty for lying to Mairon.

There's a Way

Chapter Summary

Negotiations between Angband and Formenos come to a head. Mairon puts his foot down. Melkor decides to listen to some advice. Gothmog may regret giving it.

Chapter Notes

Featuring the return of a Mairon who takes no shit, even from Melkor. Also featuring what might just be called a slight uptick in the quality of communication. Still, in the end, some of us seem to have trouble with this concept.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Grey eyes glanced up from the screen, giving him a look of utter disregard. “Can I help you?”

“It’s possible,” Melkor said, leaning onto the desk and surveying the work scattered on the surface. “Although it’s hard to tell, since you don’t seem to want to discuss it.”

“I’m kind of busy here,” he said, indicating the three high schoolers clustered around him at the table. “Community service, in case you’d forgotten.”

“You’re making them fill out your financial reports for next quarter.”

“It’s educational,” Fëanor said defensively. “It’s a lesson in business practice.”

“Uh-huh,” said Melkor dubiously. Fëanor turned his eyes back to his phone, and Melkor frowned. He leaned forward, splaying his hands on the table for support and inching his face very close to the three uneasy students watching them. “Why don’t you kids take a break?” he suggested, leering at them.

He sat in one of the hastily abandoned chairs as Fëanor looked up at him, annoyed. “What do you want, Bauglir?” Fëanor asked testily.

“I want to talk to you,” Melkor said, dropping his voice and leaning across the table. “About Silmaril.”

Fëanor reached across the table and began to gather the scattered pages to himself. “I’m not entirely sure we have anything to discuss,” he said.

“But you won’t know for sure,” Melkor insisted, “unless we actually talk.”

Fëanor shuffled the papers into order and snorted lightly. “I’m afraid I disagree,” he said, tucking the stack into his bag.

“But—”

“I appreciate your interest,” said Fëanor, a hint of condescension in his voice that made Melkor’s hands curl involuntarily into fists. “However, I don’t think that what you’re envisioning is really going to be in either of our best interests.”

“You don’t even know what I’m proposing.”

Fëanor shrugged one shoulder languidly. “To tell you the truth, I’m not particularly interested.” He stood up from the table and hefted his bag onto his shoulder. “I’m content with the arrangement we have now.”

“We don’t have an arrangement.”

“Precisely.” A soft chime issued from his phone, and Fëanor glanced down at the screen. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he drawled unconcernedly. “I have business elsewhere, as I’m sure you can appreciate.”

He strolled toward the door, leaving Melkor alone at the table to fume in silence.

Mairon’s chin rested in his hand, his fingernails digging irritably into the flesh of his cheek, the tip of his little finger resting lightly between his teeth. His nose was an inch from the computer screen, his eyes beginning to water from the proximity. He heard the door to the lab open but ignored the approaching footsteps until a shadow fell over him, darkening the wall of text on the screen. Mairon blinked at last, dragging his eyes up and onto the harassed face of his employer. “You have dinner plans?” Melkor said. Mairon glanced once more at the impenetrable expanse of code on the screen and sighed.

“Let me get my coat.”

Ten minutes later, they were contemplating very full plates of dubiously edible food at a particularly shady Chinese buffet—one of Melkor’s favorite haunts. “So,” Melkor said around a mouthful of pepper steak, “how’s it going with the glitch?”

Mairon expertly selected a piece of sesame chicken with the chopsticks in his right hand but did not move to bring it to his mouth. Instead, he sighed, running his left hand lightly over his hair to smooth it back. “I feel like I’m right there,” he said, leaning his cheek into his fist and staring dolefully at the piece of chicken he was rotating gently between the chopsticks. “I swear the answer is right in front of my face. I just can’t see it.”

“You’ll get it,” Melkor said, shoveling food into his mouth unconcernedly.

“The deadline is tomorrow,” Mairon said quietly, still absently turning over his wrist and ignoring the food at the end of his chopsticks.

“That’s plenty of time.”

“Tomorrow,” he repeated dully. “As in, the day beginning at midnight.” He glanced at his watch. “Six hours from now.”

Melkor shrugged. “You’ll get it,” he said again.

A look of irritation flickered across Mairon’s face. “Why does everyone keep saying that to me?”

“Because we know you,” Melkor said, pointing at Mairon with his fork. “When you want something, you find a way to get it.”

If only, Mairon thought gloomily. “Can we change the subject?” he said, abandoning the piece of chicken he had selected in favor of pushing food around his plate with the ends of his chopsticks.

“Sure,” Melkor said. He put down his fork and pressed his elbows into the table, face darkening into a scowl. “How about we talk about what a dick Fëanor Finwion is?”

“You’re just realizing this?”

“Be sympathetic,” Melkor whined.

“Sorry,” Mairon said, swallowing a grin. “What’s he done now?”

“That asshole has had me on the hook about this Silmaril thing for a month. Do you know how insulting it’s been, having to flatter that pretentious idiot and watch every word out of my mouth to make sure I didn’t hit any of his ridiculously sensitive nerves? God, I wanted to strangle him at least once a day, but I thought I was actually getting somewhere, so I restrained myself.”

“Truly impressive,” Mairon said.

“And now,” said Melkor said, ignoring him, “he’s suddenly decided that he’s not interested in talking to me anymore? Who does he think he is?”

Mairon felt a treacherous stab of satisfaction at the news. “What happened?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral. He picked up his chopsticks again at last and began to eat.

“How should I know? I mean, one day we’re talking potential partnership and then *bam!* This afternoon he wouldn’t even give me the time of day.” He picked up his fork once more and stabbed at a piece of steak with misplaced wrath. “I mean, maybe I should have seen it coming, what with the whole private investigator thing, but honestly—”

“What?” Mairon looked up, alarmed.

Melkor waved his fork dismissively, scattering fried rice across the table. “Dickhead had someone following me, but joke’s on him. Gothmog knows too many people in that community. Like I wouldn’t find out about it.”

“Why was he having you followed?”

“Who knows?” Melkor shrugged. “He’s infuriating, do you know that? For all that he wants everyone to think he’s unquestionably brilliant, he’s too damn stupid to see this opportunity staring him in the face. Half of me wants to go down there and make him see, just force it through that thick skull what we could accomplish if he would just stop being such a—”

The chopsticks clattered out of Mairon’s hand, and his head jerked up. “What did you say?”

Melkor arched an eyebrow at him. “I said I want to force it through his stupid head, how good a deal this could be.”

Mairon was already up, fishing in his back pocket for his wallet. “I have to go back to the office,” he said, throwing his wallet on the table and grabbing for his coat. “Sorry! Dinner’s on me.”

Melkor watched him go with an air of bemusement. After a while, he too stood up from the table,

depositing a few bills on the table. Shrugging on his jacket, he turned and strode out the front door.

Outside, he held up his hand and waited as a car pulled up to the curb. He tucked himself into the backseat of the cab, brushing snow off his collar as the car pulled away. “Where to?” asked the man behind the wheel in a tone of infinite boredom.

“Formenos,” said Melkor darkly, watching the snow begin to fall in earnest. “And hurry up.”

“I’m sorry, sir, the office is closed.”

“Melkor Bauglir to see Fëanor,” said Melkor, grinning wolfishly.

“Mr. Finwion is not in,” the receptionist said firmly.

“Interesting,” said Melkor, leaning over the edge of the desk. “Whose Maserati is in the spot out front, then?”

“Sir, if you’d like to make an appointment—”

“Trust me,” Melkor said firmly. “Fëanor will want to hear what I have to say.”

“Is that so?”

Melkor turned, grinning as he watched Fëanor descend the rest of the way down the grandiose staircase that dominated the lobby. “Just the man I wanted to see,” said Melkor, smiling ingratiatingly.

Fëanor swept across the lobby looking less than pleased to see him. “Funny,” he said coldly. “I was thinking just the opposite.” The receptionist looked nervously between the two of them and slunk uneasily out of the lobby.

“Look, you and I need to talk.”

“I believe I’ve heard everything I wanted to hear from you.”

“You didn’t even give me a chance to say anything.”

“A rather clear message, I thought.”

Melkor took a deep breath to steady himself. “I know about Valinor,” he said.

Fëanor was unmoved. “What about them?”

“I know they’re interested in Silmaril.”

Fëanor shrugged. “A lot of people are interested in my work.”

“I also know they made you an offer,” Melkor said. “A really stupid one, on their part. One you were right to reject.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that just because someone else doesn’t value your work doesn’t mean that I can’t.”

Fëanor sneered. “Do you think I’m stupid? I know what this is really about. You found out Valinor

was interested in my project, so now you have to have it. Trust me, I know about your little grudge with the company.”

Melkor tried not to scowl. “It’s not exactly a secret,” he said impatiently.

“It’s not exactly common knowledge, either, but I found out about it. And I’ll tell you right now, I’m not particularly interested in helping you live out your revenge.”

“You don’t know anything about it,” Melkor said quietly.

“I know you wanted to work for them,” Fëanor said smugly. “Way back in the beginning, when Grond was just a prototype, you brought it up to them for review. You wanted to sell it and be brought on board with them, but they turned you down. It’s almost a decade later, you’re still not over it, and you’d like to use me to get back at them. But here’s the thing, Melkor: I’m not particularly interested in playing that game. Because at the end of the day, what does it matter if it’s Valinor or Angband? You’re both trying to take something I’ve made and use it for yourselves.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Melkor said vehemently. “Valinor wants what they don’t have so they can control it. They want to order things and bend everything around their own predetermined plans, because they do not tolerate dissent. I am not Valinor. I am not interested in order for its own sake. I am interested in creation, in ingenuity and originality—things I know you can appreciate. Valinor doesn’t understand the freedom that exists in creation, and so they fear it, and they suppress it. It’s the reason they hate me, and it’s the reason they’ll hate you too, before long.” Melkor had advanced slowly as he spoke, and he towered now over Fëanor, his enthusiasm getting the better of him. “This is why we should be working together. We could do great things, things Valinor can’t even fathom. Silmaril would only be the start.”

Fëanor looked up at him, impassive. “You make some interesting points,” he said musingly. Melkor grinned. “And yet I fail to see why any of this means I ought to align myself with you.”

Melkor’s grin faded. “I thought I had been fairly clear,” he said coldly.

“About how you differ from Valinor, yes,” Fëanor said. “But why should I tie myself to either of you?” He smiled as Melkor’s face darkened at last into a scowl. “Formenos may be small, but we are solid, and we have something that everyone wants. I daresay we’ll be alright on our own.”

Melkor was rapidly losing patience. “I really think you should reconsider.”

“What part of no are you having trouble with?” Fëanor asked. It almost seemed he was enjoying himself, a smirk curling his lip as he looked up at Melkor. “I’ve made my decision, and it is final. Now get out of my lobby, you convict, before I get you sent back to Mandos for the rest of your sentence—and don’t think I can’t.”

For a brief moment, Melkor was very, very still. Then, a dark smile split his face, and he slid his hands into the pockets of his coat. “Someday,” he said softly, “you are going to recognize that as a very grave mistake.”

“Out,” Fëanor said firmly.

Melkor snorted softly, a huff just short of laughter, and looked contemptuously around the lobby of the vast building. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said. He turned then, striding out of the Formenos office without a second glance.

Mairon looked up as the door opened, completely losing the words being said to the blare of the music in his ears. He pulled the headphones out and looped them around his neck, letting his fingers twitch over the keyboard. “What?”

“You’re a hard man to find,” said Melkor, tossing Mairon’s wallet across the space between them.

Mairon caught it one-handed and laid it on the bench. “Right,” he said dryly. “So many options. Am I in my office? Am I in the lab?”

“You ought to add home to the list.”

“Working on it,” Mairon said, tapping a few keys distractedly.

“You seem chipper. Good news?”

“We are officially debugged,” Mairon said, grinning.

Melkor sauntered over to the bench where he was working, leaning against the edge and glancing at the endless rows of figures on the screen. “I told you it would work itself out. Finally got some inspiration?”

“Yes, actually,” said Mairon, thoughtfully. “Something you said earlier.”

Melkor laughed. “Glad I could help.”

“There,” said Mairon, turning away from the computer with an air of satisfaction. “It’s finished.”

“I told you not to worry about the deadline,” Melkor said smugly.

Mairon rolled his eyes but smiled nonetheless. “Have I told you that I’m glad you’re back?”

Melkor grinned. “You’re just happy you can bury yourself down here in the basement again and dump the actual business things back on me.”

“Hah,” said Mairon, leaning back against the bench and supporting himself on his elbows.

“When’s the last time you dealt with an actual business thing?”

“I resent that,” Melkor sniffed. “It just so happens I was in a business meeting after you so rudely abandoned our dinner date.”

Mairon ignored the choice of words and snorted. “How long was this alleged meeting—ten minutes?” He glanced at his watch and started. “Good God. Has it really been two hours?”

Melkor shook his head. “Thuringwethil is right. We ought to keep a closer eye on you. You’re liable to die of exhaustion or starvation on us if we’re not careful.”

“Is there a weekly talk-about-Mairon meeting that I’m missing? Because this is getting ridiculous.”

“It’s Tuesdays,” Melkor said smoothly, “and of course you aren’t invited. That would defeat the purpose.”

“Seriously, though,” said Mairon, ignoring him, “what business meeting did you have at seven o’clock at night?”

“It was more of a...surprise offer,” Melkor said.

“This sounds promising,” said Mairon, resting his chin in his hand and frowning.

“At Formenos,” he continued.

“Ah,” said Mairon. “I take it that went well?”

“That asshole Finwion is making a big mistake in turning me down,” Melkor said darkly.

“Formenos is barely a blip in the market. Working with us could *make* them, but will he listen? No. He just wants to keep himself and that damn Silmaril locked up.”

“Hey,” said Mairon carefully, trying to be placating, “I know you had your mind set on trying to work out a deal, but it’s not like we need it. Glaurung is up and running. We don’t need their system.”

“That’s not the point,” Melkor snapped.

“What are you talking about? I thought the whole idea behind talking to Finwion was trying to find a way around the problems we were having with this system. You said it could help us bypass the GPS integration—”

“I don’t give a shit about our system,” Melkor said angrily, beginning to pace back and forth in front of the bench. “The idea behind talking to Finwion was to get him to give us the damn Silmaril project. That’s what I want.”

“First of all: ouch,” said Mairon reproachfully. “Second of all, why are you so set on this thing anyway?”

“Because I want it!” Melkor half-shouted, eyes blazing angrily. “And he has no right to keep it from me.”

Mairon narrowed his eyes and fought the urge to point out that Fëanor just might have exactly that right. “I have just about had it,” he said quietly, his voice no less perilous for its reticence, “with being snapped at while trying to help you. Either tell me what’s going on with you or get out of my lab.”

Melkor’s fury flashed brightly on his face for another moment before it broke suddenly, with a snort and roll of his eyes, into a grudging chuckle. “Buried in work up to your eyeballs, and I still can’t get anything past you.”

“Afraid not,” Mairon said impassively. “Now what’s going on?”

“Was Gothmog exaggerating about the nineteen hours a day? Because that’s a little extreme even for you, and—”

“Melkor.” He looked up at Mairon guiltily. “What’s going on?”

“You really want to know?”

“Jesus,” Mairon said, grinding the heel of his hand into his forehead. “How many times can I ask?”

Melkor turned and levered himself up onto the bench, making Mairon scramble to slide the keyboard out of the way. He settled himself atop a stack of papers, either ignoring or oblivious to the scowl of displeasure this elicited from Mairon. Finally comfortable, Melkor let out a heavy sigh. “Look, I know I’m really chasing this thing, but there is a reason.”

“Please tell me you’re planning to share it with me sometime in the next century, because I—”

“It’s Valinor.”

At the sound of the name, Mairon’s familiar look of longsuffering patience crumbled into something much more dangerous, something that might be mistaken for calm by someone who did not know him so well. “What did you say?” he demanded quietly.

“I found out that Valinor was courting Formenos for the Silmaril project,” Melkor said, swinging one leg idly into the space beneath the workbench. “Man, I like the idea of taking something that they want. There’s a nice cosmic justice to it.”

“It isn’t cosmic justice,” Mairon said tersely, “if you’re the one dealing it out.” He folded his arms over his chest. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t play dumb with me. I know you aren’t. How long were you going to sit on that information before you told me those bastards were involved, however tangentially?”

“Watch it,” Melkor said mildly. “And I was always going to tell you. Sometime. Definitely eventually. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

Melkor shrugged. “You’ve been killing yourself down here. Glaurung was important too, you know, and I didn’t want to distract you with any of—” He waved his hand vaguely in the air between them. “This.”

Mairon leveled an angry glare at him. “I am done,” he said, his words clipped, “with you thinking you get to be the arbiter of the information that reaches me. Everything I do is for this company, and you think you get to hold out on me just because whatever little scrap you managed to dredge up might make me angry?”

“Well,” Melkor said, “it did.”

“Of course it did,” Mairon snapped. “But it doesn’t make me nearly as angry as knowing that you’ve been trying to get back at them without me.”

Melkor grinned. “I knew there was a reason I corrupted you.”

“Oh, shut up,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. “You didn’t corrupt me. I’m here by choice. That’s your problem, Melkor. You think everything is about you.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” he grumbled irritably.

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Hey,” Melkor said, affronted. “I thought I was doing you a favor.”

“Yeah? Well, do me another, and let me decide how to handle information that concerns me from now on, alright?”

“Fine,” Melkor said grudgingly. He sighed and swung both legs in the air beneath the workbench. Mairon picked up a pen and began to tap it absently on the benchtop. “Were you serious about helping me?” he asked after a minute, watching the steady bounce of the ballpoint against the dull

black surface.

“Of course I was,” Mairon said, still tapping the pen and chewing absently on the end of one finger.

“What do you have in mind?”

The pen stilled in Mairon’s hand and he looked up at Melkor. “How bad was it at Formenos?” he asked hesitantly. Melkor considered the question for a moment, his face screwing up into a grimace as he recalled his conversation with Fëanor. “Never mind,” said Mairon, sighing. “That’s obviously out.” The pen resumed its tapping for another minute before Mairon pushed himself up abruptly from where he had been leaning on the edge of the bench, eyes looking unfocused into a remote corner of the lab as his lips moved soundlessly.

“What is it?” Melkor asked.

“What?” Mairon still stared distractedly into the distance, but he had flipped the pen on end, tapping the cap on the bench in a quick succession of animated beats as a tiny grin began to play upon his lips.

“What are you thinking?” Melkor asked warily. “I don’t like that look. It makes me nervous.”

Mairon grinned in a way that did nothing to set Melkor’s mind at ease. “I think,” he said slowly, “that I just might have an idea.”

Melkor waited for a few seconds, but Mairon said nothing else. “Would you like to share with the rest of the class?” he asked impatiently.

Mairon glanced over at him as though noticing him for the first time. “Hmm?” He shook his head as his mind caught up with his ears. “No,” he said decisively. “I don’t think I would.”

“Hey!” Melkor said irritably. “What—”

“Go home,” Mairon said firmly. “Celebrate making the Glaurung deadline, if you like. Plot some nasty things to say to Fëanor if it makes you feel better. Just don’t do anything for the next—” He glanced at his watch. “—twelve hours or so, okay?”

“What are you up to?” Melkor asked warily.

“Just promise me,” Mairon said, twirling the pen in his fingers, “that you won’t do anything until you talk to me tomorrow. Alright? Please?”

Melkor studied him for another moment before shaking his head and sighing. “Fine,” he said. “Have it your way. But you better have something good for me tomorrow, because I don’t think time is going to do much to lessen my desire to rip the smug grin off Fëanor Finwion’s face.”

“I guess you’ll just have to wait and see,” said Mairon, smirking in a way that only deepened Melkor’s misgivings. “Now go,” he said, shooing Melkor away from the computer. Melkor reluctantly pushed himself up and off the bench, letting Mairon settle himself at the keyboard, long fingers flying unnaturally fast over the keys as he began to work.

Melkor watched him for a moment more, wondering if he ought to interrogate his engineer further. Something in the unwavering glint of Mairon’s eyes as they scanned the screen before him, however, made Melkor reconsider. Instead, he stepped back from the bench, still watching Mairon work for a moment more.

“Tomorrow,” he said quietly, throwing a last glance at Mairon before turning and heading for the door. Mairon made no answer, barely registering Melkor’s departure. He merely leaned closer to the screen, rolling out his shoulders. He flexed his fingers, gathering his thoughts for a moment; then, in a flurry of tapping keys, Mairon began to dig.

“Here.”

Melkor looked up as a thick wad of clipped-together papers landed on his desk with a resounding thud. “What’s this?” he asked, picking up the stack with what could barely be called interest.

“You want Silmaril?” Mairon asked, folding his arms across his chest and raising his chin defiantly. “Here’s how you’re going to get it.”

Melkor began to flip through the neatly collated pages, eyes widening as he took in the surfeit of information contained inside. “What did you do?” he asked wonderingly.

“That’s all the information for their servers, their networks, security—everything we need to hack into Formenos and recover the program information for Silmaril.”

“This is beautiful,” said Melkor, a wicked smile curling upon his lips. He looked up from the pages in his hand. “But I see a few problems with your plan. First of all, there’s the question of how we’re going to get to their servers—I’m going to go ahead and assume they’re under lockdown. Second, there’s the question of transfer. They’re going to know that Silmaril is missing, and then they’re going to trace it back to us. So even if we get it, how the hell are we going to keep it?”

“Way ahead of you,” said Mairon, reaching over him to flip to the relevant page. “Any kind of remote access is going to be traceable, especially once they get the feds involved. We’re going to have to go onsite and break into the actual system to get to it.”

“Onsite,” Melkor repeated slowly.

Mairon shrugged. “What’s a little light breaking and entering when we’re already talking theft of intellectual property?”

“Fair point.”

“I’ve already created a virus designed to attack their security systems so we can put down all the cameras,” Mairon went on. “We’ll launch it from inside their building so it doesn’t come back to us, obviously. Then we go in, get the program—I’ve got everything already mapped out from their sales records and permit filings, so I have a pretty good idea of how to get at the thing already. Once we get it, all we have to do is bring it back and upload it to our system. I have a program waiting that will wipe all the previous source information from it. The code will all be the same, but it’ll look like we wrote it ourselves, in-house. There will be no indication that it came from anywhere except our own lab.”

Melkor looked slightly mystified. “But Fëanor will know,” he said. “Once it goes missing and it becomes a case, they’re going to be looking at me. I approached him for it, after all.”

“Not officially,” Mairon said quickly. “You never had a formal meeting or expressed professional interest in anything other than a casual setting. The only thing he has is your...outburst from yesterday, and once I get into their security system, that’ll be gone too.”

Melkor leaned back in his chair, interlacing his fingers behind his head and nodding at Mairon

approvingly as a smile spread slowly across his face. “I am so glad I used to hang around that lab trying to piss off Aulë.”

Mairon laughed. “Yeah, well,” he said. “I don’t think even he envisioned this when he used to dream up all the things that could possibly go wrong if any of us joined the dark side.”

“What, industry?”

“Well, yes, but particularly you.”

“Oh, please,” Melkor scoffed. “Like he’s any better. He’s just jealous of my creative freedom.”

“Right,” Mairon said, raising an eyebrow. “That’s it.”

Melkor flipped through the pages on his desk once more. “Do you ever regret it?” he asked suddenly.

Mairon’s forehead creased. “What?”

“Leaving academia,” he said. “Coming here and working for me.”

Mairon smiled, though there was a flicker, lightning-fast, of something inscrutable in his amused amber eyes. “Only when you ask me stupid questions,” he said, voice mock-serious.

Melkor half-smiled. “So never.”

Mairon snorted. “Pass,” he said. “Anyway, everything is all set on my end, so whenever you’re ready, we’re good to go.”

Melkor nodded. “You know, I don’t tell you enough how you’re my favorite employee.”

“No,” Mairon said. “You don’t. Can you say it again in front of Gothmog?”

“I’m serious.”

Mairon rolled his eyes. “Make me a plaque,” he said sarcastically. He stepped back from the desk and glanced down at his watch. “Need anything before I go?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You go. I’ll let you know about our next move.”

Mairon waved vaguely over his shoulder as he crossed the threshold and disappeared into the hall. Melkor got up and leaned out the doorway, watching as Mairon turned into his own office and closed the door. Satisfied he would not be seen, he closed the door to his office and set off down the opposite end of the hall.

“You know,” said Melkor, wandering through the open door and craning his head to look around the cluttered space within, “sometimes I forget you even *have* an office.”

Gothmog glanced up from the cluster of screens to his right. “Really? Because the box of wild raccoons I found in here three days ago seems to say otherwise.”

Melkor wrinkled his nose. “Is that what the smell is?”

Gothmog scowled at him. “What do you think?”

“I assumed it was you.”

Anyone else might have wilted under the force of Gothmog’s glare. “Do you need something?” he said. “Some of us have actual work to do, you know.”

Melkor snorted. “You, work? Good one, Gothmog.”

“You’re hilarious,” Gothmog said flatly. “I’ll just scale back on the whole security thing and let any idiot off the street walk in here and take whatever they want. How’s that sound?”

“Or,” said Melkor, tossing the thick wad of papers onto his desk and flopping into a chair, “you could try the opposite.”

“What does that even mean?” Gothmog grumbled. He picked up the packet and gave the first page a cursory glance. “What the hell is this?”

“Remember how you asked me to warn you before I did anything illegal?”

“Oh God,” Gothmog muttered, flipping through the pages with increasing concern.

Melkor grinned. “This is me warning you that I’m about to do something incredibly illegal.”

“What have you done?” Gothmog groaned, bringing the packet up to his face and squinting at a wall of text that, to him, may as well have been gibberish.

“I haven’t done anything yet,” Melkor said mildly. “And besides, you really ought to be blaming Mairon. These are his plans.” Gothmog shook his head, muttering under his breath. “Although,” Melkor continued musingly, “if we’re assigning blame—or thanks, as the case may be—I ought to go all the way back to you, my friend.”

“And what,” asked Gothmog, staring at a blueprint of a room marked *Formenos—server storage*, “could I have possibly done to deserve that?”

“I took your advice, for once,” Melkor said, grinning.

“What advice?” Gothmog asked warily.

“You told me to talk to Mairon.”

Gothmog abandoned the packet of papers and rubbed his eyes hard with his fingertips. “Only you,” he growled, “could make this kind of a mess out of a suggestion to apologize.”

“Apologize for what?” Melkor asked. “All I did was give him a little push in the right direction. And besides, you don’t even know what kind of mess we’re talking about yet, which is not to say I don’t resent the implication that this plan will be a mess.”

“I know you,” said Gothmog, jabbing a finger at him across the desk, “and I know the kind of shit you can convince that kid to do when you’re in the mood, so I’d say mess is a fair—”

“Convince, my ass,” Melkor interjected. “This was all Mairon. He came up with it on his own.”

“Really,” Gothmog muttered skeptically. “Mairon came up with a plan to—“He flipped a couple pages in the packet. “What the hell did you say this mess was again?”

“I didn’t,” Melkor said. “But since you asked, it’s a plan to hack into the Formenos server, bring Silmaril over to Angband, and make it look like it originated here.”

“Of course it is,” Gothmog said, shaking his head. “I don’t know what I expected.” He set the packet down on the desk with a sigh. “Mairon came up with this, huh?”

“That’s right,” Melkor said smugly.

“All on his own?” Gothmog said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “I mean, he’s got such a vested interest in tearing down Formenos…”

Melkor looked at the ceiling in his best imitation of innocence. “I may have given him a bit of a nudge in that direction,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Uh-huh.”

“Just a bit.”

“What did you do?”

“I only took your advice,” Melkor said defensively. “Again, I might add. I told him about Valinor.”

Gothmog ran a hand over his hair, the thick blond shock cropped so close that the lines of his skull were easily visible beneath his fingers. “Why,” Gothmog lamented, “can I not count on any of you to be reasonable, rational human beings for, like, three hours? Or just once, ever?”

“That’s what Thuringwethil is for,” Melkor said unconcernedly.

“Fair point,” Gothmog conceded. “Although I don’t think you’ve adequately considered just how swiftly she’s going to kill you for this.”

Melkor blanched slightly, but he quickly hid it under a purposeful scowl. “What could she possibly have to complain about?” Melkor demanded.

“I don’t have the legal background to even begin to list all the laws you might be breaking in doing this.”

“Yes,” Melkor said impatiently, “but you’re forgetting that this is Mairon’s plan.”

Gothmog sighed, shaking his head. “I’m not concerned about the quality of what’s coming out of Mairon’s brain. I’m more concerned with the subject matter.”

“Come on,” Melkor wheedled. “Give him some credit.”

“I do,” Gothmog said. “I generally give him credit for having a hell of a lot more sense than you do.”

“I think you may be underestimating just how angry he still is.” He tipped his chair back on two legs, grinning. “The vengeful rage of the average Mairon is not like that of you or me, Gothmog. It’s cunning. It’s patient. It bides its time.”

“Yeah,” Gothmog muttered darkly. “And it’s a hell of a lot scarier for how little we see it.” He sighed. “Shit,” he breathed, trying to gather his thoughts. “So there’s no chance of talking you out of this? You two are going through with this thing?”

“Well,” said Melkor, letting his chair fall back to the floor, “not exactly.” Gothmog began to rummage in his desk drawers. “What are you doing?” Melkor asked, a trace of annoyance in his voice.

“Looking for a notepad,” Gothmog said, extracting one from a drawer and looking for a pen. “You start talking like that, I figure I better start making a list of all the shit that’s likely to go wrong.”

“You’re lucky I like you,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “You haven’t even heard what I was going to say.”

“For the millionth time, Melkor: I know you. Whatever it is, it ain’t gonna end well.”

“You have no faith in me,” Melkor complained, contriving to look hurt.

Gothmog sighed. “I have plenty of faith in you. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t. Mostly, I have faith in your ability to surround yourself with people who can clean up your messes and make sure you don’t cause too much trouble.”

“You make me sound like an idiot.”

“You sold a patent to the federal government when you were twenty-one years old,” Gothmog said gravely. “That thing is still making you money eight years later. You built a company off the profits, and you filled it with smart people who know how to make groundbreaking tech that makes you even more money. Trust me, I know you’re smart. It’s just...” He sighed, casting about for the right thing to say. “Sometimes you don’t think about things before you do them. You egg your brother’s car in the middle of a crowded street. You commit insider trading because you don’t realize it’s illegal. You put a box of goddamn raccoons in my office because you think you’re the king of pranks.”

“I am the king of pranks,” Melkor said smugly. “And in my defense, you changed all the passwords on my computer.”

“See?” said Gothmog, pointing suddenly at him across the desk. “That’s it. That’s what I mean. You are incapable of seeing where the line of good sense is. That’s why it worries me when you say you’re going to deviate from Mairon’s plan.”

“You know,” Melkor said testily, “you don’t even know what I’m planning, or why. And don’t say you know me, Gothmog, or I swear—”

“Fine,” Gothmog said wearily. “I’m obviously an idiot, so I’ll bite. Why the hell do you feel the need to take what I’m sure is a perfectly good plan and do...something to it?”

“It’s because of him.”

Gothmog stared at him for a moment. “You lost me,” he said, nonplussed.

“You said it yourself,” Melkor said, leaning forward and plucking a miniature basketball out of the clutter on Gothmog’s desk, spinning it idly in his hands. “What we’re going to do is all kinds of illegal.”

“And?”

“So why should Mairon be involved?”

Gothmog watched him spin the ball between his palms for a moment. “It is his plan,” he said carefully.

“That doesn’t mean he has to be in on the actual execution.”

“Need I remind you,” Gothmog said, “what happened the last time you thought it was a good idea to leave him out of something like this?”

Melkor winced. “I was half-convinced he actually wasn’t going to speak to me before I went to Mandos.” He shook his head. “You know what, though? It’s a good thing I did leave him out. Someone needed to be running my company while I was, shall we say, indisposed?”

“Number one, no we shall not say indisposed. You were in fucking prison for doing something stupid and illegal, and it serves you right. Number two, don’t act like you planned it like that. Do I need to remind you what actually happened three years ago? You were insider trading for a good six months before you realized it was a crime. Then, you tried to cover it up for another month before you realized just how much shit you were in. You tried to get me to help you cover it up, and it took me another month to convince you to let me get Thuringwethil involved. The only reason you didn’t tell Mairon until after they served you a search warrant was because Thil had already torn you a new asshole so hard I don’t think you could stand the thought of the verbal obliteration you’d be facing if he found out about all the shit you’d been hiding from him. It just happened to work out for you in the end that Mairon wasn’t involved so he could keep running this place while you were gone.”

“Semantics,” Melkor said firmly, pointedly ignoring him. “The point is that this time, I can plan it. Look, it’s a good plan but if—God forbid—anything were to go wrong, both of us would be implicated. Where would that leave my company then?” He shook his head. “No, if I’m doing this—and I am—then I’m doing it with Mairon in the dark.”

Gothmog shook his head. “Look, I appreciate the sentiment, but how exactly are you going to manage it? I’m not going to pretend to understand Mairon’s plans, but I know enough to understand that they’re not usually accessible to the general public. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: the kid works on a fucking scary mental level.”

“That may be true,” Melkor said, “but the mental legwork is already done. We have the plan. All we need now is someone who can follow it. Which is, when you get down to it, the real reason I’m sitting in your office right now.”

“Figures,” Gothmog grumbled. He sighed resignedly. “What do you want from me?”

Melkor half-turned in his chair and sent the little ball sailing through the air, grinning as it cut a clean arc that ended with a satisfying swish straight through the little net on the far wall. He turned back to Gothmog, grin still fixed firmly in place, and leaned forward conspiratorially. “I want you,” he said, “to find me a hacker.”

Chapter End Notes

And behind the scenes, Mairon silently hopes his poker face is as good as he thinks it is.

Instant Karma!

Chapter Summary

Somewhere in this chapter, Melkor utters these words: what could possibly go wrong? That should tell you just about everything you need to know.

Chapter Notes

Melkor found himself a hacker. For better or worse, the Formenos heist is going down. Featuring Gothmog and Thuringwethil, whose overtime hours really ought to be paid in gold.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Melkor was the first to admit that he had been in his fair share of seedy establishments; in fact, he quite liked them, often spending business and leisure hours alike in dive bars, greasy spoons, and places of even less respectable character. Still, this was a stretch, even for him. The table was sticky under his fingers, and he could swear he had seen more than a few insects crawling over the dingy paint peeling off the yellowing walls. The woman sitting across from him didn't seem to mind, stirring a packet of sugar into her coffee with one hand as she held a cigarette to her lips with the other. "So," she said, blowing a stream of smoke out black-tinged lips as she surveyed her companion with interest. "You're Melkor Bauglir. I've heard a lot about you."

"And I've heard some things about you, ah...?"

She took another slow drag on her cigarette, sharp black eyes fixed on him. "You can call me Ungoliant," she said decisively.

"Ungoliant," he repeated. "Right. Isn't that your—"

"My call signal, if you will," she said lazily, taking a sip of coffee and leaving behind the impression of her black lipstick on the rim. "But it's the only name you need to know. The only name relevant to our mutual interest, that is. I hear you might have a job for me."

"I have a job," Melkor said carefully. "I hear you might be the one to do it."

"I have certain talents you might be able to borrow," said Ungoliant, baring her teeth in something resembling a smile. "For the right price, of course."

"I assume you've done your research," Melkor said evenly. "You should know that money will not be a problem."

"I have done my research. I've learned a thing or two about you Melkor Bauglir, and I have to say, this is a bold step, even for you."

"I don't think I've ever been accused of caution."

“No,” Ungoliant agreed, “although to your credit, you do seem to surround yourself with others who take rather more of an interest in protecting your investments than you do.” She raised an inquiring eyebrow at him.

Melkor parried her probing gaze with a look of disregard. “I’m not sure I follow you.”

Her black lips teased the end of the shrinking cigarette into a flare once more. “You seem to have a lot of smart people on your staff,” she said delicately. “One might wonder why you’d hire me to carry it out when you’ve got that kind of talent on the payroll.”

Melkor’s face was stony. “One might also wonder why you’re trying to talk yourself out of a job.”

Ungoliant laughed. “Fine,” she said. “I see we aren’t exchanging pleasantries. Do you have a plan, Bauglir?”

“The plan is to get in, and get out with Silmaril.” Melkor reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a rolled-up sheaf of papers, sliding it across the table to Ungoliant. “Here’s all you need to know about the how.”

Ungoliant picked up the pages and began to skim through the neatly prepared report, a smile slowly curling onto her face. “Something funny?” Melkor asked, watching the smile grow larger as she read.

Ungoliant rifled her fingers along the edge of the packet on the table. “I hear you have Mairon Smith working for you these days,” she said musingly. “Any chance this might be his work?”

“I thought,” Melkor said coldly, “that we had established a rule about my staff.”

“Of course,” said Ungoliant, still letting her fingertips play thoughtfully along the edge of the pages.

“But just out of curiosity,” Melkor said, unable to contain his interest, “why do you ask?”

Ungoliant ran a finger thoughtfully along the curve of her jaw. “It might be that a certain spate of scandals involving hacked emails, shredded security systems, and targeted information leaks was, at least in our small community, speculated to be the handiwork of one Mairon Smith, a student who may or may not have gone by the code name ‘the Admirable’. Then again, none of it was ever connected to him. He wasn’t even suspected. So who can say for sure?”

“I’m sorry,” Melkor said, unable to hold it in any longer, “are you suggesting that Mairon is a hacker?”

“Certainly not,” she said coolly. “Not now, at any rate. Though I don’t doubt he could pick it up again if he wanted. He certainly hasn’t lost any of his flair, from what I see here.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mairon always had a certain formidable style. It was some combination of absolutely insane attention to detail; a reach that is, frankly, disturbing in its audacity; and just a dash of ruthlessness to tie it all together.”

Melkor tried for a moment to reconcile this idea with the Mairon that he knew, but quickly shook his head, determined instead to steer the conversation back to safer territory. “Look,” he said warily, “my employees are not really relevant to the current discussion. Are you interested in the job or not?”

“Of course,” said Ungoliant, smirking. “I’m certainly not going to turn down a chance at this much money—especially not when it’s this easy to get.”

Melkor laughed. “You call breaking and entering, destroying a company’s record of an entire project, and theft of intellectual property easy? I like your attitude.”

She shrugged. “It’s not like I have much work to do. Everything’s already been laid out. I just have to follow the instructions.”

“True,” Melkor agreed.

“So,” Ungoliant said, stubbing out the quickly disappearing remains of her cigarette in the ashtray on the table. “Let’s talk details.”

“It’s simple,” Melkor said. “I pay you \$50,000 up front—call it risk investment. We go to Formenos, we do the job, and I pay you another \$50,000 upon completion. You get a hundred grand for a job you said yourself was easy money, plus the satisfaction of a job well done. Sound fair?”

“Not bad,” she said. “A hundred grand for an hour of work? I think I can live with that.”

“Good,” said Melkor. “Then you’re in? We have a deal?” He stretched out his hand across the table.

Ungoliant’s lips twitched into a predatory smile. “We have a deal,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand. “When do you see this heist going down?”

Melkor grinned, leaning back and putting his arms over the back of the booth. “What are you doing tonight?”

Mairon caught sight of the waiter out of the corner of his eye, his brow wrinkling as the man approached their table bearing a tray. “Your champagne, madam,” said the server, setting two tall flutes on the table.

“I don’t think we ordered—”Mairon began.

“Thank you,” Thuringwethil said smoothly, interrupting him.

Mairon watched the waiter uncork the bottle with an air of bemusement. “What’s this for?” he asked as the man filled the glasses.

“This,” said Thuringwethil, grasping her glass delicately by the stem, “is for you.” She raised the brimming flute carefully in a toast. “You may have run right up to the deadline, my friend, but you still completed the Glaurung project. That deserves some celebration.”

“Thil,” he said softly, a flush creeping up the pale skin of his neck. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“No,” she agreed. “But I wanted to. Now drink.”

Mairon dutifully picked up his own measure of champagne, tapped the rim of his glass lightly against hers, and took a sip, relishing the crisp course of the bubbles across his tongue. “Thank you,” he said, setting the glass back on the table.

“You’ve been working too hard,” she scolded gently. “I thought you needed to get out and enjoy

yourself a bit. Dinner's on me, by the way."

"Thil, no, you don't—"

"Don't argue with me."

He smiled. "You're too good to me, Thuringwethil. You really are. I know I've been a huge pain the last few weeks—I've been stressed out, and I snapped at you more than a few times. I just want you know how much I appreciate you checking up on me all the time, even if say exactly the opposite when I'm tired and frazzled and being a jerk. I'm sorry, Thil. For whatever I said to you over the past few weeks, I'm sorry."

She smiled, a genuine curve of her delicate lips untainted by the sneering or disdain that so often accompanied it. "I know you, Mairon," she said fondly. "I know the way you are when things are as tight as they've been the last few weeks. I know if I don't pick at you, you won't eat or sleep or take care of yourself at all. If I have to put up with a little whining or some mild kickback in the name of keeping you here with us and actually functioning, it's more than worth it."

"I don't care if you know me, or if you think you're used to it," Mairon said firmly. "It doesn't make it right, and I'm sorry."

She reached out her hand, laying it upon the table so that her fingertips just barely brushed against his. "I know you don't mean it," she said, smiling at him once more before withdrawing her hand. "At least you have the decency to experience contrition, unlike some people I might name."

"Where is he, anyway?" asked Mairon, reaching for his glass and taking another sip of champagne. "I haven't seen him all day."

"Gothmog either," Thuringwethil added.

"Should we assume they're together?"

"If we do, should that make me feel better or worse?"

"I honestly don't know how to answer that."

Thuringwethil took a sip from her own glass. "At the very least," she said, tapping her index finger thoughtfully against the side of her glass, "we haven't heard anything out of them. No news is good news, right?"

"That's more optimism than I'm used to from you."

"Maybe it's the champagne," she said, eyeing it skeptically.

"You're probably right," Mairon assured her. "About the news, I mean. If they had gotten themselves into anything serious, we would have heard about it."

"I don't doubt it," she said. "I swear, if I get one more phone call about him..." She tilted her chin, affecting an air of pomposity. "Pardon me, are you the legal counsel for Melkor Bauglir? We picked him up for pissing on his brother's lawn again..."

Mairon laughed. "How many times have you gotten that call?"

"Don't ask," she said darkly. She sighed. "If we assume that Gothmog is with him, then we can optimistically assume that he can also steer Melkor clear of his more ill-advised urges, right?"

Mairon considered this for a moment. “Well,” he said, “we can at least assume that Gothmog will be there to clean up the worst of the mess.” Thuringwethil sighed and kneaded her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Come on,” said Mairon, downing the last of his champagne. “Forget about those two. Let’s go do something else. You want to go out? Go see a movie?”

“I don’t know,” she said skeptically. “Now I sort of want to find out what they’re up to.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Mairon said dismissively. “You do that enough during business hours. Besides, now that I think about it, I know I saw Melkor this morning—maybe around nine? It’s not like he could have gotten into anything too terrible between then and now, right?”

“You know I don’t like this, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor, unconcernedly, peering out the window of the car. “So you’ve said.”

“I know I’ve said. You’re not listening.”

“I’m listening,” Melkor said, craning his neck and trying to get a look at the sidewalk behind them. “I hear your concern, and I continue to reject it.”

Gothmog sighed. “Why did you bring me if you aren’t interested in my help?”

“You’re here for backup,” Melkor said, waving a hand dismissively at his head of security. “In the unlikely event that anything goes wrong, you’re here to help me out.”

“Bail you out, more like,” Gothmog muttered.

“Whatever. Besides, what could possibly go wrong?”

“You’re joking, right? I’m fairly certain those were your exact words before the deal that landed you in jail.”

Melkor snorted. “Yeah, well, this time I have a plan from Mairon. Can’t argue with that logic.”

“Normally I’d agree, but you’ve got an unknown entity involved now.”

“Ungoliant? What’s the big deal, Gothmog? It’s just a little outside contracting.”

“On something that has the potential to land you in a hell of a lot more trouble than a little insider trading. Look, boss, have you really thought this through?”

“How long have you known me?”

“A long time,” Gothmog said. “That’s why—”

“That was rhetorical,” Melkor said reproachfully. “Will you calm down?”

“Look, all I’m saying is, wouldn’t it have been smarter if you’d just let Mairon—”

“We’ve been over this,” Melkor said sharply, turning from the window and fixing Gothmog with a glare. “Jesus, what does a guy have to do to get a little unconditional support around here? Just do the job I asked you to do, and shut up, alright?”

“Fine,” Gothmog said coolly, crossing thick arms over his massive chest and turning to face the

dashboard.

“There she is,” Melkor said, pressing his forehead eagerly against the glass he watched her walk toward the deserted building. He turned to Gothmog once more, oblivious to the chill that had descended between them. “Give us an hour, alright? Anything longer than that and you can assume you were right.”

“Fine,” Gothmog said again, settling back into the seat as Melkor opened the door and unfolded himself onto the sidewalk.

“Don’t look so grim,” Melkor said, leaning down and grinning at him. “I’m about to make us a lot of money.”

He shut the door, leaving Gothmog to track him up the sidewalk with a wary gaze. Gothmog checked the clock. Midnight. He shifted his shoulders into the leather of the car seat and settled in to wait.

“You made pretty quick work of the locks,” Ungoliant observed, already halfway through the web of defenses in the computer system.

“I know my way around a security system,” Melkor said, pacing interestedly around the lab.

“Why am I not particularly surprised?”

“I don’t know,” he said vaguely, running a hand over the bits of scrap that made up a pile labeled ‘crash test PTR-3’. “Maybe because you’ve known me more than five minutes?”

Ungoliant was silent, absorbed in the task of circumventing the security in the computer system. Occasionally, she glanced at the notes that Mairon had written. Melkor continued to pace the laboratory, taking in the unfamiliar technology and mentally filing anything useful until a noise from behind him brought him back to the present.

“Incredible,” Ungoliant said softly.

Melkor looked over to where she sat, perched on a stool in front of the array of computers on the bench, her face lit by the screens and a look of pure glee.

“What is?” Melkor asked. He sauntered over to the bench where she worked, stopping to inspect a charred piece of wing that lay discarded on the benchtop and glancing over at the computer screen with mild interest.

“I’m not an expert in the applications,” she said softly, “but the design is breathtaking.”

“Good,” Melkor said, leaning back on the workbench. He tossed the scorched wing back onto the bench and picked up a notebook, rifling through it absently. “It ought to work well for us.”

“Mmm,” Ungoliant hummed absently. “I suppose it would have.”

*...system continues to display error in long-range communication accuracy, particularly between 3+ nodes of the same interface and over distances exceeding 50 miles. Next test of communication capabilities of project **Palantir** scheduled for Monday—to include...*

Melkor’s mind finally registered the warnings coming from his ears. He glanced up from the book

and watched Ungoliant scanning a page of Mairon's plans, her eyes travelling along the printed text while one stubby finger lazily trailed along the information on the screen. "What," Melkor asked, still half-buried in the notes in his hand, "did you say?"

"I was simply agreeing," she said, setting the plans aside and typing a few quick commands into the computer, "that this program might do very well in your hands."

"Which is why," said Melkor, feeling an odd foreboding settle into the pit of his stomach, "it's just as well that I've come to retrieve it."

"Retrieve, yes," said Ungoliant, "but keep? I think not."

Melkor shut the notebook with a snap and narrowed his eyes at her. "I must have misheard you," he said slowly, his voice low and dangerous. "It sounded like you said—"

"That you're not getting this program," Ungoliant said, unconcerned. "You heard correctly."

Melkor turned slowly and tossed the notebook onto the cluttered benchtop. "You and I had a deal," he said, leaning back against the bench in a posture of nonchalance belied by the hard edge in his voice.

"You call it a deal," she said, turning at last to face him with a nasty grin, her beady black eyes glinting gleefully as she took in his confusion. "I call it an opportunity to get inside of one of the most reclusive companies on the market and access their newest product. You see, Melkor, I think you and I had very different goals for this little excursion."

"I am paying you," said Melkor, his voice rising angrily, "to hack into their system and get me that program."

"Oh, I did hack into the system," said Ungoliant, unperturbed. "And I got the program. It's just not for you, I'm afraid."

"I paid you fifty thousand dollars—"

"That was quite foolish of you," she said.

Melkor's fingers began to curl reflexively toward his palms. "I offered you another fifty to get me the program. What's your endgame here?"

She snorted. "Another fifty grand is pittance compared to what I can get in the open market. Trust me, all I'll need to do is hint at what I have, and I'll have more buyers than I know what to do with."

For a moment, Melkor was speechless, his brain unable to decide where to direct his fury. "You used me," he spat.

"Quite easily," she added. "You really ought to watch that greed, Melkor. It seems to get the better of you."

"Shut up," he said, pushing himself away from the bench at last. His hands were clenched at his sides, his breathing coming in quick, angry bursts. "If you think for one minute," he growled, trying to reign in the fury that was rising like a smothering haze in his periphery, "that there is any way I'm going to let you take my program out of this building, then—"

Ungoliant laughed, a deep, gurgling sound of pure contempt that only wrapped Melkor's fury more

tightly about him. “Oh, Bauglir,” she said mockingly. “Can you really be so slow?” She watched his fingers flex with only a gleam of amusement in her eyes. “Silmaril has already left the building,” she said contemptuously. “Right about now it’s sitting on my own personal server, where it can wait for me to find it a nice, well-paying home.”

“That program is going nowhere,” Melkor snarled, “but to Angband.”

Ungoliant let loose a laugh that was almost a purr. “Is that so? Then why don’t you come and take it?” she dared him, her eyes glinting dangerously.

The small, often-ignored part of Melkor’s brain that served both as voice of reason and clarion of caution began to whine warningly in the back of his head, but as had often preceded a great many pivotal moments in Melkor’s life, he simply ignored it and pushed forward. He advanced on Ungoliant, towering over her as she perched calmly on the stool in front of the computer, her mocking grin driving him forward even as that disused part of his mind screamed at him that something just wasn’t right.

He was nearly level with Ungoliant when she suddenly stood, feet tucked firmly onto the rungs of the stool upon which she had been sitting to give her an extra half-foot of height. With fluid ease, she reached up to the shelves that lined the wall above them and grasped the edge of the computer’s tower, letting gravity help her pull it down. Melkor’s momentum carried him forward even as he tried to stop, and the heavy piece of equipment-turned-projectile smashed into the side of his head with a sickening crack. He staggered backward against the bench, hands grasping for purchase as he fought the dizziness that swarmed around him with terrifying intensity. He could feel blood beginning to pour down the side of his face from the vicinity of his temple, and he turned confusedly so that he faced the bench, scrabbling along the surface in search of something, anything, with which to make a reprisal.

A blow to his ankle sent the ground rushing out from under his feet, and he hit the concrete with a sickening smack that jarred through his knees. He swayed on the spot, one hand still clutching desperately at the edge of workbench, now barely in reach. Fighting the stabbing pain in his skull he tilted his head back and looked up into Ungoliant’s jubilant face. “So sorry,” she said, beady eyes gleaming with delight, “that it couldn’t work out between us.” She jabbed a heavy hand forward and struck him hard in the chest. Already dazed, Melkor felt himself teeter backward and landed with a dull thud on the concrete, his legs crumpled beneath him. Ungoliant gave a soft, triumphant chuckle and turned away at last, waddling out of the lab with barely a backward glance.

Melkor lay on the floor for a moment, letting the coolness of the concrete seep through the fire in his skin, though it did precious little to soothe the stabbing in his skull that demanded to be felt. He took a few deep breaths and tried to take stock of the situation. Finally, heaving a sigh that sent little eddies of pain to wrack through his torso, he managed to shift himself onto his side. He reached a hand into his pocket and dragged out his phone. Balancing it on his chest with one shaking hand, he tried to look at the glaring screen without lifting his head. After what felt like an age, he lifted the phone to his ear, the dial tone a cacophony on his frazzled brain.

“Gothmog,” he groaned as soon as the line was picked up. “Thank Christ. Get in here, will you? I think I may have...miscalculated.”

Out on the street, Gothmog listened as the phone went dead, silently shaking his head. He glanced at the clock: twelve forty-three. He opened the door and unfolded himself onto the dark, deserted sidewalk before making for the disarmed entrance of Formenos. And he hadn’t even needed the full hour, he thought grimly, disappearing into the shadow-shrouded lobby.

“Damn it, Thuringwethil, that *hurts!*”

“It’s going to hurt, you idiot,” she said, the pressure of her hand unrelenting. “Blunt force trauma to the head typically does, not to mention the fact that you probably have a concussion. Have I mentioned you probably ought to be seen for that?”

“I’m not risking it,” Melkor said irritably, wincing as she pressed down harder against the gash on his head. “There would be a record.”

“Then you deserve whatever permanent scarring you get,” she said nastily.

“Remind me why you called her,” Melkor muttered angrily at Gothmog.

“Because she’s our lawyer,” Gothmog said, pacing a persistent path in front of the door. “And because I thought she might have a leveler head than I do right now.”

“Not likely—ouch!” Melkor hissed as Thuringwethil tore the soaked piece of gauze away from the wound on his temple and promptly applied a fresh square. “A little compassion, here!”

“Not likely,” she said icily. “There’s no compassion for stupidity.”

“Stupidity?” Melkor managed a look of affront. “What part of this was stupid?”

Thuringwethil’s eyes flashed. “It might be faster,” she said, using her free hand to rifle through her bag, “to list the parts that weren’t.”

“It was Mairon’s plan, you know,” he said sulkily.

“So I’ve heard,” she said, shooting a nasty look toward Gothmog, who was too engrossed in pacing to notice.

“So maybe,” said Melkor, emboldened by the absence of an immediate rebuke, “you ought to be telling *him*—”

“Don’t you worry about Mairon,” Thuringwethil interrupted him, pulling a small flashlight from her bag and rapping it hard across his knee. “He’ll have his turn, but right now, we’re on you. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I was going to make us a lot of money,” he said defensively. “Not to mention move the company forward by, I don’t know, five years? Ten?”

“I get,” she said angrily, “that you wanted that program. I get the actual business scheming. I get the revenge angle. I even get the spite, as idiotic as it is. But why,” she said, shining the flashlight’s tiny beam into his eyes, “did you have to do it like this?”

“Stop that,” he protested irritably, turning his face away from her. “All I did was change the plan a bit. Do a little outside—”

“If you say outside contracting, I swear to God I will—hold still!” She caught his chin in her other hand, letting the gauze fall to the floor, and shone the beam of the flashlight into first one eye and then the other. “I think we’re alright in terms of concussion,” she said tersely.

“Then why does my head still feel like it’s exploding?” he complained.

“Probably because that bitch hit it with a piece of machinery,” Thuringwethil said coldly. She picked up a piece of gauze from the table and soaked it in alcohol before pressing it to Melkor’s

temple.

Melkor let out a string of nonsensically-aggregated curses that fell flat in the face of Thuringwethil's indifference. "You realize," she said, flipping the gauze and dabbing roughly at the still-weeping wound, "that we are in a whole world of shit right now?"

"The only one who's in a world of shit is that Ungoliant," Melkor muttered darkly. "When I get my hands on her—"

"How do you see that scenario ending?" Thuringwethil demanded, viciously emptying alcohol onto another square of gauze. "I can guarantee you she's already looking for a buyer as we speak, and I promise you, from the bottom of my cold, dead heart, that no matter where she decides to sell, this mess is going to come back to us."

"But—"

"You made a goddamn witness, Melkor!" she snarled angrily, carefully picking detritus out of the wound with the edge of the gauze while still managing to treat him to a glare that made him flinch harder than the antiseptic ever had. "Look, I can argue her putting you at the scene as hearsay. I can make you a rock solid alibi. What I cannot do is erase any other evidence she might have that you were there together. She has it. I can't get it. I can't make that go away. Do you understand the shit that we are in right now?"

Melkor tipped his head back and groaned loudly. "Motherfucker," he swore quietly, as Thuringwethil placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him upright once more. "This is bad, isn't it?"

"Right," she muttered darkly. "Now you see it."

He kicked at the chair in which she sat petulantly, earning himself an extra hard swipe of the gauze into the quickly drying wound. He swore violently, but Thuringwethil ignored him, continuing her work. "Goddamn it," he said, running a hand distractedly through his disheveled hair. "Shit. What are we going to do? This is bad, Thil. I didn't think—"

"No," she said, picking up his hand and pressing it firmly to a fresh piece of gauze to hold it in place. "You didn't. And do you know what the worst part is? You can. You are perfectly capable of making a solid, worthwhile plan that will accomplish any goal you want without landing us in a massive cesspool of trouble. You just don't. You take whatever opportunity presents itself first. You do whatever is quickest and easiest, and then we end up in situations like this. And that would be fine," she said, scrubbing at the dried blood on the side of his face with far more vehemence than necessary, "if it was only yourself that you managed to get tangled up in this shit. And it would be fine if I could actually bring myself to stop caring whether or not your ass lands back in prison. But as it is, neither of those things is true. So here we are—again, I might add—trying to figure out what we can possibly do to keep your ass behind your ridiculously expensive desk and out of Mandos."

She dipped her bloodied towel back into the water on the table and reapplied herself to the task of scrubbing the side of Melkor's face. "What," she said, scowling in the face of Melkor's growing smirk, "could you possibly be smiling about?"

"You," he said, grinning as he reached out and not-quite-touched her chin. "You actually said you'd care if I end up back in prison."

She swatted his hand away. "Don't read into it," she snapped.

“That’s tantamount to caring about me,” he wheedled, still grinning.

She swiped at a particularly stubborn spot on his cheek and scowled still more deeply. “I have my eye on a new car,” she said flatly. “You go back to prison, and I ask you: where is my end-of-the-year bonus?”

“You can’t fool me,” he said, giving her a satisfied smirk.

She sighed and let her hands drop into her lap, inspecting him for a moment. “It never fails,” she said, shaking her head, “no matter how serious our problems might be, you can always find a way to make it about you.”

“That’s not true,” he protested blithely. His face went lax for a moment as he stared into her scowl of disapproval. “What were we talking about?” he asked at last.

She slapped him lightly with the wet towel. “How we’re going to dig ourselves out of the hole you just threw the company into,” she reminded him.

“Oh,” he said, deflating. “Right.”

She resumed her work and sighed once more. “You do realize,” she said, tilting her head slightly as she inspected the skin of his cheek, “that there is really only one solution here?”

Melkor’s eyes swiveled as far in her direction as possible. “Don’t even think about it,” he said.

“Look, I know you aren’t looking forward to that conversation, but—”

“Conversation?” Melkor interrupted. “He about took my head off for not telling him about Valinor in the first place. What do you think he’s going to do when he finds out about this?”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you went behind his back,” Thuringwethil pointed out.

“I did,” Melkor said sullenly. “But then I thought, how mad could he possibly be when I already have the program?”

“Except that you don’t,” Thuringwethil added.

“How was I supposed to know that?” he demanded irritably. He groaned loudly. “Look, I’ll tell him eventually, but I don’t think I can deal with that particular eruption tonight.”

“You’re going to have to,” Gothmog said, breaking his silence at last.

“No,” Melkor said, running his hand through his hair. “We’ll see if we can come up with something first. If not—”

“What I meant,” said Gothmog, interrupting him, “was that it’s too late. I already called him.”

“Why would you do that to me?” Melkor demanded, sinking low in his seat and ignoring Thuringwethil’s ire. “You could have just left me in Formenos to die, you know.”

“Stop being such a baby,” Gothmog growled. “We need to get a fucking handle on this situation before it gets any farther away from us than it already is. There’s only one person who has any kind of a chance at that now.” There was a soft chime, and Gothmog pulled his phone from his pocket. “Do whatever preparation you need to do,” he said, thumbs tapping rapidly across the screen. “Think of some kind of excuse. Maybe work on becoming invisible. If you’re the praying

type, an act of contrition might not be a bad idea right about now...”

“I’m going to kill you,” Melkor promised, trying desperately to sink lower in his chair.

“Whatever it is,” Gothmog continued, ignoring him, “you better do it quick. Ready or not, Mairon’s here.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm on [tumblr!](#)

(aka come hang out and talk about dork lords and dead elves with me :)

Fixing a Hole

Chapter Summary

The immediate aftermath of the ill-conceived raid of Formenos. Mairon isn't exactly pleased to have been left out of the heist, let alone have to try to figure out a way to fix it. Shockingly, Melkor fails to grasp the concept of an apology.

Chapter Notes

Previously unknown heights of anger are explored. Mairon has seriously had enough.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

At the knock on the door, Melkor sunk so low in his seat that his knees knocked against Thuringwethil's shins. Thuringwethil reached over and tugged on his hair, the only part of him still visible over the back of the chair, and clucked her tongue disapprovingly at him. "Grow up," she hissed, giving his ponytail another yank for good measure. He sullenly pushed himself upright once more.

"Easy for you to say," he hissed back, eyes shifting nervously toward the door as Gothmog pulled back the deadbolt and unlatched the chain. He barely had a chance to turn the handle before Mairon burst into the apartment, his eyes finding Melkor almost immediately and fixing him with an angry glare as he advanced through the living room like the very embodiment of vengeful rage. "What did you do?" he demanded, spitting out each word like venom. He paused for only the briefest of seconds beside the table where Melkor sat, pinned under Thuringwethil's brutal grip, and glowered malevolently at him before continuing.

"What do you mean—hey, where are you going?" Mairon had already disappeared down the hallway, leaving a chilly silence in his wake. "So that's how it's going to be, huh?" Melkor muttered sulkily.

Thuringwethil inspected the skin of his cheek, touching it lightly with her fingertips. "Remember the incident with the staff scientist Mairon hired a few years ago in programming? The guy who tried to bring him a coffee to get on his good side?"

The faintest inkling of memory stirred in Melkor's mind as Thuringwethil reached for the butterfly strips on the table.

"The one who spilled said coffee all over the prototype Mairon had stayed up the entire night finishing for the northeast regional tech conference," Gothmog added.

"Ah," said Melkor, a sinking feeling accompanying the memory in his mind. "Right. We had to find the kid a job overseas somewhere because Mairon was so hellbent on insisting he would never work again."

"That's the one," Gothmog said grimly.

Melkor grimaced. “Are we approaching that level of meltdown?”

Thuringwethil clucked her tongue. “Oh, you poor thing,” she said patronizingly. “That was about a six on the Mairon meltdown scale.”

Melkor swallowed nervously. “And what are we at now?”

Thuringwethil and Gothmog exchanged a look as, from down the hall, they heard a door slam. “Honestly?” said Thuringwethil, leaning in very close to Melkor’s face. “I’m not sure the scale goes this high.”

She leaned back as Mairon returned to the living room bearing a laptop. He kicked out a chair from the table and settled himself on the very edge of the seat, positioning the computer neatly in front of him before peeling the thin screen away from the keyboard and beginning to type furiously.

“The password is—”Gothmog trailed off at the irritable glare his words earned him. The room lapsed back into an uneasy silence that was punctuated only by the angry click of Mairon’s fingers on the keyboard and the soft rush of Gothmog’s feet over the carpet as he paced incessantly before the door.

After a few moments that seemed to stretch an eternity, Mairon let out an exasperated sigh, his fingers still flying furiously over the keys. “Are there even words,” he snarled, eyes glued unwaveringly to the screen in front of him, “for what you were thinking?”

Melkor steeled himself. “I—”

“All the hours, the days, the *weeks* that you’ve pissed and moaned about how you just had to get your hands on this goddamn program, and this is what you do? I practically handed the thing to you—it was everything short of a silver platter, for chrissakes! There was nothing, and I mean nothing, left to chance. You could have had that program sitting here right now, ready for us to start working on tomorrow morning—hell, we could have started working on it right now for all I care, but what did you do?”

Melkor stared at him for a moment. “You don’t swear,” he said, more fascinated by Mairon’s rage than affected by its rancor.

“I do,” Mairon said acidly, “when I’m this fucking livid.”

Melkor supposed it was as good a reason as any. “I just—”

“You took my beautiful, perfectly crafted plans, and you gave them to some two-bit contract hacker you found on the fucking internet? Jesus Christ, Melkor. And Ungoliant! Of all the people you could have found...I mean, I know you’ve worked with some shady individuals over the course of what I will condescend to call your career, but honest to God. She should have set off some alarms, even for you.”

“Yeah, well,” said Melkor, managing at last to squeeze in a retort. “You ought to know, right?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Mairon sharply, his eyes glinting in the glow of the backlighting as he glared at the screen in Melkor’s stead.

“She certainly seemed to know you, Mairon,” Melkor needled. “Or do you prefer ‘the Admirable’?”

“If you’ve got a point, then make it, because I don’t have time—”

“Are you some kind of hacker?”

Mairon shot him a look of pure irritation. “Of course I am,” he said shortly. “How the hell do you think I knew how to do all this?”

Melkor looked impressed. “So all that stuff Ungoliant said about—”

“Is irrelevant,” he said shortly. “We need to focus on the problem at hand, not some rumors that were never officially connected to me in any capacity whatsoever.” He sat back and watched something on the screen for a moment, running a hand over his hair, which was tied ever-so-slightly less neatly than usual at the nape of his neck. “You had to go for Ungoliant, didn’t you,” he muttered darkly, tugging absently at a strand of hair that had escaped.

“Well—”

“And you,” said Mairon, letting his anger shift to Gothmog for a moment. “What the hell is the matter with you? You’re supposed to know better.”

“I disagreed with this from the beginning,” Gothmog said defensively, turning his head to scowl at him but still pacing his persistent path before the door. “I said we should have just let you do it, so don’t take it out on me.”

“I don’t care what you said,” Mairon said dismissively. “You still let him do it.”

“No one lets me do anything,” Melkor interjected sullenly. “I’m in charge here, in case you forgot.”

“Let him, my ass,” said Gothmog simultaneously, annoyed. “I was just along for the ride. What else was I supposed to do?”

“You should have called me,” Mairon said.

“Some people still have loyalty,” Melkor sniffed.

“Fat lot of good that does us,” Mairon retorted. “This is the fall-on-your-sword kind of loyalty, except Gothmog’s not the only one who’s going to end up skewered. He’s going to go ahead drag the rest of us down with him.” He looked up and shot Gothmog a nasty scowl. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“How is this my fault?” Gothmog demanded.

“You’re supposed to watch him,” Mairon said, leaning forward and beginning to type furiously once more. “You’re supposed to stop him from doing stupid things that could get us in trouble. Here’s a hint for you, Gothmog: you missed your shot.”

“Excuse me,” Melkor said loudly, drowning out Gothmog’s angry protests. Gothmog stopped talking, though Mairon simply continued to work. “I don’t need looking after,” Melkor said testily. “I am not a child.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Mairon muttered.

“Watch it,” Melkor said.

“There are a lot of things I’d love to watch,” Mairon fumed, his anger building the longer he vented his frustration. “I’d love to watch this company succeed. I’d love to watch the four of us

communicate like reasonable, mentally-stable adults. I'd love to watch a plan that I made actually get accomplished for once without any catastrophic malfunctions, but apparently—”

“You're treading on thin ice here,” Melkor warned him.

“Oh, I'm treading on thin ice?” Mairon spat, too angry to recognize either the threat in Melkor's voice or the cautionary glance that Thuringwethil threw towards him. “Correct me if I'm wrong, but did you not involve an outside entity in a plan that was already perfectly fine the way it was? Did she not completely screw us over because you let her in? Could you not have just asked me—”

“I didn't fucking *want* you!” Melkor half-shouted, eyes flashing angrily. Gothmog stopped pacing. Thuringwethil leaned away, more from surprise than from fright, and regarded Melkor warily. Melkor and Mairon stared at one another across the table for a few tense, strained seconds. Melkor breathed heavily, trying to reign in his anger; Mairon simply stared in open-mouthed shock, his fingers stalling at last on the keys. Then, abruptly, Mairon focused his eyes once more on the screen and continued his work, carefully arranging his features into the look of impassive disregard that only he could manage. Melkor dropped his gaze sullenly into his lap, crossing his arms over his chest.

In the uncomfortable silence that stretched between them, Thuringwethil began to collect the bloody detritus from the table into a manageable pile. Gothmog paced over to the table and sunk at last into a chair, heaving an exhausted sigh. “What are we going to do, boss?” he asked quietly, breaking the silence at last as Thuringwethil gathered the garbage into her hands and disappeared into the kitchen.

Melkor ran his hands distractedly through his hair. “I don't know,” he said wearily.

Gothmog ran a heavy hand roughly over the stubble that shadowed his wide jaw. “We need to cover our tracks,” he said wearily. He moved his hand to the crown of his head and dug the heel of his hand into his scalp. “I don't even know where to start.”

“We probably need to start at Formenos,” Melkor said, tipping his head back and letting his long hair fall over the back of the chair. “I don't trust that bitch Ungoliant to have wiped us from the systems. We need to make sure that place is clean.”

“We need to go now, then,” Gothmog said, passing his hands at last over his bloodshot eyes. “We'll have to get back in before the morning crew comes in if we're going to take out security manually.”

“Won't work,” Mairon interjected softly.

“Why not?” Gothmog said, setting a heavy elbow on the table and leaning his temple into his palm.

“All their security data is downloaded to offsite servers,” he said.

“Great,” Gothmog muttered, closing his eyes for a minute. “What are we supposed to do about that?”

“Why are you asking me?”

Gothmog cracked an eye open to glare at Mairon. “Because you're the expert,” he said sourly.

“Really?” Mairon said acidly. “My expertise didn't seem to matter two hours ago.”

“Ignore him,” Melkor said, closing his eyes and letting his head settle tiredly against the back of the chair. “Let him sulk. We have bigger fish to fry. Like how to find that bitch Ungoliant. I swear to God, when I find her, I’m going to—”

“It won’t matter if you do find her,” Mairon interrupted savagely, “if traces of you are sitting all over the inside of Formenos.”

“If there’s any trace of you in Formenos,” Thuringwethil warned, coming back into the living room at last, “then we’re finished.”

“We’ve got to go back there,” Gothmog said. “We’re going to have to find some way to destroy whatever traces you left.”

“And what exactly do you intend to do, Gothmog?” Mairon said nastily. “Break a few cameras, smash some computers? The evidence is in the system, exactly where she left it. That’s what she does, you idiot. She sets people up. She’s a backstabber—that’s her thing. Which,” he said viciously, tracing a finger intently along the computer screen, “you might have known if you had bothered to ask me.”

“Ungoliant is our biggest concern,” Melkor insisted, ignoring him. “She’s got my damn program, and she wants to sell it. We need to track her down before she gets the chance.”

“You need to iron out your priorities,” Gothmog told him. “There’s no point in even trying to track down Ungoliant if we don’t get this Formenos thing under control. If she did leave evidence back there, then Finwion will know where to start looking when he figures out the program is gone, and then I guarantee you he’ll have the feds on us like flies on shit. So forget about your stupid program for a while, because it’s no good trying to find it unless we’re damn sure we can keep it.”

“Do you have any actual suggestions, or are you just going to sit around and shoot mine down all night?” Melkor demanded irritably, trying to shift away from Thuringwethil, who was inspecting the butterfly strips on his face with a critical eye.

“Don’t you think you two have done enough?” Mairon needed.

“Easy,” Gothmog said.

“Yeah,” said Melkor, twitching impatiently under Thuringwethil’s fingers. “Don’t you think you should—”

“No,” said Mairon, shutting the computer with a decisive snap. “I’ve had about enough of your plans for one night.” He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, arms folded across his chest as he leveled a glare at Melkor. “You listen to me, Melkor, because I’m only saying this once. You are going to go home, and you are going to go to bed. You are going to stay there all night. Maybe in the morning, you’ll go to work like a normal, responsible adult, but I won’t get my hopes up on that front. What you will not do is anything that involves the mess you made tonight. You will not set foot on Formenos property. You will not look for Ungoliant, either in person or online. You will go home and do absolutely nothing until you hear back from me. Do you understand?”

Melkor ignored the sting of being scolded in favor of appreciating Mairon’s audacity. “Why?” he asked, intrigued. “What are you going to do?”

“You weren’t interested in my help two hours ago,” said Mairon, walking around the table. “You don’t get to be interested in it now.” He leaned down next to Thuringwethil, his face close to hers,

and fixed a critical eye upon the wound at Melkor's temple. He reached out toward the bandages, but he pulled up just short, fingers curling back toward his palm. "Did you check for concussion?" he asked Thuringwethil softly, ignoring Melkor completely.

"Yes," she said, reaching out where he had stopped and pressing lightly once more along the edges of the butterfly strips. "He looks alright to me, but he really ought to see a doctor, which, of course, he refuses to do. I told him he deserves whatever brain damage he gets."

Mairon snorted softly. "Like you'll be able to tell a difference from what was there already," he muttered. He straightened up once more.

"I'm right here," Melkor complained, glaring at each of them in turn.

"I know," Mairon said dismissively, reaching up to drag the elastic out of his hair and shaking the strands out to fall around his face before gathering them deftly in his hands once more, sweeping them up and back into their usual place. Smoothing a few flyaway pieces away from his face, Mairon looked around once more at the room, mentally taking stock. His gaze settled on Gothmog. "Keep an eye on him," he said tersely, starting for the door. "For real, this time."

"Yeah, yeah," Gothmog grumbled. "I'll never hear the end of this one."

"And remember," said Mairon, frowning over his shoulder at them. "Don't do anything. Not a blessed thing. Do you hear me?"

"Hey," Melkor called after him. "Where are you going?"

Mairon stopped in the doorway, turning back slightly and shaking his head. "Someone has to clean up your mess," he said. He squared his shoulders and disappeared out into the hall, shutting the door behind him and leaving the others behind to wonder what, exactly, he meant.

"Are you sure the phone is working?" Melkor demanded.

"I'm sure sir."

Melkor leaned over to consider it, his skepticism written across his face. "How can you be sure?"

"Look," said Gelmir, pointing to the display. "It's on. All lines are free. If anyone calls us, it'll come through."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir." Melkor leaned a little further toward the phone, looking unconvinced. "Sir?" Gelmir ventured tentatively, leaning away.

"What?" Melkor snapped.

"Is there a particular reason I need to stay?" Melkor shifted his now incredulous gaze to the unfortunate receptionist. "It's just that I was supposed to meet my brother—"

"Your brother," Melkor said flatly.

"Yes, sir, and he was expecting me an hour and half ago."

"Yeah, well, we were expecting Mairon ten hours ago, kid," he said sourly.

“My name is Gelmir, sir,” he said reproachfully, “and—”

“What if the phone rings, kid?” Melkor said pointedly. “Who’s going to answer it?”

“Sir, I would be happy to show you—”

“Oh, I’m sure you would,” Melkor said dangerously. “But that’s your job, isn’t it? To answer the phone?”

Gelmir blinked at him. “Yes, sir,” he said carefully.

“Good,” said Melkor. “Now that’s been established, how about you just do your damn job until I tell you it’s time for you to leave?”

Gelmir bit back a sigh. “Yes, sir,” he said resignedly.

“Wonderful,” Melkor muttered. He leaned further toward Gelmir, making the unhappy receptionist lean so far to the side it was a wonder he didn’t fall from his chair.

“When are we supposed to start worrying?” Gothmog asked, leaning on the desk beside Melkor.

“Mairon said he’d take care of it,” said Thuringwethil, but she didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“Right,” said Gothmog, “but at what point do we assume something went wrong?”

“It’s Mairon,” Melkor said, though he too sounded worried.

“That’s my point,” said Gothmog. “It’s seven o’clock at night, and he hasn’t been in yet. Has he ever missed a day of work?”

“No,” Thuringwethil said. “Not once. Not even when he was so sick he was practically dying and so contagious I could have killed him.”

“Exactly,” Gothmog said. “But today’s the day?”

“He did go to...you know,” Melkor said, arching his eyebrows pointedly and turning slightly away from Gelmir, “at two in the morning. Maybe it’s just taking a while.”

“It shouldn’t take that long,” said Gothmog. “Should it?”

“How are we supposed to know?” Thuringwethil said, exasperated. “We don’t even know what the hell he’s doing.”

“Maybe you should call him again,” Gothmog suggested.

“I’ve called him twelve times,” Thuringwethil said, irritably scrolling through the call log on her phone. “Maybe one of you should try.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the only one he’s talking to,” Gothmog said gloomily.

“Fair point,” she said. She pressed the green button on her phone and held the console up to her ear, listening to the familiar ringing droning through the speaker until Mairon’s voicemail picked up, urging her to leave a message. She hung up once more, frowning. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin looking,” she said, sighing.

“What about—” Melkor began. Gothmog elbowed him into silence.

“That is the last place we need to be seen,” Thuringwethil added sharply.

“Look,” said Melkor, “if it’s between getting asked some weird questions by the cops and getting any kind of clue where he is, then I say we—”

A blast of icy wind rustled the papers on the desk at the front doors swung suddenly inward, and Mairon walked into the front lobby, carefully extricating his headphones from his ears as he warily met four sets of eyes that tracked his progress across the marbled floor. Taking a sip from the coffee in his hand, he approached the desk and stopped before Thuringwethil, turning his back to Gothmog and Melkor. “What are you still doing here?” he asked, taking another sip of his coffee.

“Where have you been?” Thuringwethil demanded.

He shrugged. “Working.”

“You didn’t come in today,” she reminded him.

He waved vaguely with his free hand. “Working from home,” he amended.

“You have never,” she said suspiciously, “in your life worked from home. Not during business hours, anyway. What were you up to?”

“Can we have this discussion elsewhere?” he asked, glancing toward Gelmir. “Or maybe never, if that’s an option?”

“Did you sleep last night?” Gothmog interjected, ignoring him. “You look awful.”

Thuringwethil shot him a look of irritation, but she had to admit that he was right. Mairon’s skin was paler than usual, worryingly ashen under the winter-faded splotches of freckles on his wind-reddened cheeks. The skin beneath his amber eyes was haunted by blue-black shadows, almost bruise-like in their persistent depth, and though he blinked under her scrutiny, she could see the bloodshot veins that ringed his irises. “He does have a point,” she ventured at last.

Mairon scowled at her. “Why do I bother,” he muttered, turning away from them and heading to the elevator. Almost as one, the three of them moved to follow him, crowding around him as he pressed the button to go up.

“Are you going to tell us where you’ve been?” Melkor demanded.

“No,” Mairon said flatly.

“But—”

Mairon turned suddenly and pushed between Gothmog and Thuringwethil, disappearing into the stairwell. The three of them exchanged glances that ranged from worry to affront and hurried after him. Melkor and Gothmog badgered him the whole way up the stairs as Mairon managed to stay half a flight ahead of them, slotting his headphones back into his ears and continuing as though they weren’t there. Thuringwethil simply trailed the three of them, shaking her head.

They reached the sixth floor at last, and Mairon made for his office, pausing only to unlock the door before sweeping inside. He set the coffee carefully on his desk before shrugging off his coat and hanging it on the rack in the corner, settling finally into his chair with a heavy sigh as his friends crowded around his desk. He pulled the headphones out of his ears at last and winced as the sound of Gothmog and Melkor simultaneously hounding him fell upon his sleep-deprived brain. He laid his forehead down on the desk with a loud, drawn-out groan.

The room fell silent. “Can I please,” said Mairon, his voice muffled by the wood pressing against his lips, “enjoy the first cup of coffee I’ve had in thirty-six hours in peace?”

“Can’t you drink coffee and tell us where the hell you’ve been at the same time?” Melkor complained.

Mairon dragged his head up from his desk and pinned them under a mutinous glare. He pulled his cup close and laid his palm across the lid, letting his chin rest on his fingers. “I want to talk to Thuringwethil,” he said flatly. “Alone.”

Melkor looked like he was going to argue, but Thuringwethil shot him a venomous look, so he shut his mouth. Instead, he rolled his eyes at Gothmog and begrudgingly trudged out into the hall, throwing a reproachful glance at the two of them as Gothmog shut the door. Thuringwethil crossed the office and perched on the edge of the desk. “Where the hell have you been?” she hissed, surveying him with concern.

“Working,” he said tiredly, lifting his head and rubbing his eyes.

“The last time I saw you,” she said reproachfully, “you said something along the lines of ‘someone needs to clean up this mess’ and then disappeared for seventeen hours. What the fuck, Mairon? I’ve been calling you all damn day.”

“Oh,” he said, trying to stifle a yawn. “About that. My phone is gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone?”

“Gone,” he repeated, laying his chin back on his fingers and half-closing his eyes. “I’ll have to get a new one.”

“Mairon, you had better tell me what’s going on, or so help me—”

“Thil,” he said, straightening up at last, and leaning back in his chair, “I need you to focus on Formenos. It’s clean, I can promise you that much, but I’ll guarantee you that they’re still going to come looking at us first. Probably just as soon as they can get a warrant.”

“What did you do?” she asked softly.

“I’m going to make sure everything’s up to speed here,” he continued, oblivious, “because when they come snooping around here—and they will—I’m certainly not going to give them any—”

“Mairon,” she said sharply. He looked up at her. “What did you do?”

He shifted in his seat, letting his head rest against the back of the chair. “I know Ungoliant,” he said quietly, his voice dull. “I know the way she works. I knew there was no chance she hadn’t left something incriminating behind at Formenos. She wanted us to get caught. I went back there last night and cleaned the place out. There’s absolutely no trace that we—or anyone else, for that matter—were ever there.”

“Right,” said Thuringwethil carefully. “And you still think someone is going to show up here?”

He shrugged. “I can’t imagine they wouldn’t. Fëanor might be a jerk, but he isn’t stupid. He’s going to notice that his best program is missing.”

“But,” said Thuringwethil, trying very quickly to form her question in her mind, “should anyone come looking around here, it’s not like there would be anything to find. Right?”

A slight grin twisted Mairon's lips. It was not particularly reassuring. "Well," he said delicately, "they certainly won't find anything called Silmaril."

Thuringwethil looked him over shrewdly. "You found her," she said quietly. Mairon simply reached for his coffee, lifting it to his lips with a smirk that made her shiver. She frowned. "I only have one question," she said. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Should I be preparing a defense for you, just in case?"

"Thil," he said reproachfully, cradling the warm cup against his chest. "I was cleaning up a mess, not adding to it."

She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder about you," she said, "and it isn't always positive."

He snorted. "Send Gothmog in, would you?"

Thuringwethil stood up. For a moment, she looked as though she wanted to say something more, but she simply sighed and headed for the door, casting a suspicious glance over her shoulder as she went. Mairon closed his eyes and took a sip of his coffee, ignoring the muffled interrogations from the hall as Thuringwethil slipped out and Gothmog shouldered his way into the office.

"You rang?" Gothmog drawled, grinning.

Mairon rested his cup against his sternum, leaning back in his chair and looking up at Gothmog, eyes clear and bright despite his obvious fatigue. "You're going to need to step up security around here," Mairon said, foregoing preamble, a grim look on his face.

"I take it," Gothmog said, lowering his voice as he strode further into the room, "that means a certain program now belongs to us?"

"We have no programs," Mairon said, pausing to take another sip of his rapidly-cooling coffee, "that didn't originate right here in Angband."

Gothmog winked. "How do you think it's going to go down?"

Mairon sighed, running his fingertips lightly through his hair to push back a few wayward strands, pulled loose by the wind. "I honestly don't know," he said softly. "In terms of tech, we're good to go. They won't be able to prove a thing. That says nothing, of course, for any physical notes Fëanor might have, not to mention meetings where they've discussed the thing, other people he might use as witnesses..." Mairon trailed off and rubbed at his temple with his fingertips.

"So where does that put us?"

Mairon sighed. "That's going to be Thuringwethil's game," he said.

Gothmog nodded. "We ought to be alright, then."

"We'll have as good a shot as we can," Mairon agreed. "What worries me isn't whatever legal carousel we're about to get on." He tapped his fingers on the paper cup. "No. What worries me is Fëanor Finwion."

"Why's that?"

"The guy's nuts, Gothmog." Mairon shook his head. "I once saw him try to make someone eat a laser pointer at a conference."

Gothmog almost laughed. “Wait, you’re serious? Why?”

“The guy suggested a method he thought might be better than the one Fëanor was giving a presentation about,” Mairon said, shrugging. “Look, Melkor met him at community service, Gothmog, and do you know why? He tried to stab his brother with a steak knife, all because of some ridiculous dispute over shares of their company. He’s not stable. I don’t want to know what he’s going to do if he thinks we have his program.”

“I will make sure,” Gothmog said firmly, “that this place is locked up tight. No Finwion assholes allowed.”

Mairon nodded tiredly. “I have a few suggestions for you on that front, but they can wait for tomorrow.”

“Alright,” said Gothmog. He hesitated. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Mairon, leaning his head back against the chair and looking up at Gothmog though half-closed eyes. “Last night was—”

“An absolute fucking disaster?” Gothmog supplied.

A tired smile crept onto Mairon’s lips, and he nodded. “I shouldn’t have said the things I did. I’m sorry.”

Gothmog waved the apology away. “Things were a little tense last night.”

“Still—”

“Kid,” said Gothmog, “you were the only one who had a goddamn clue how to dig us out of the mess he made. If not for you, we might be sitting in a much less comfortable office right about now.” Gothmog sighed. “Look, you did the right thing, and we owe you big time—don’t get me wrong. But if I can give you some advice?” Mairon shrugged. “Don’t hold onto it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Mai, I love you, but you have a tendency to hold onto slights in the worst way. You can nurse a grudge like no one else I know, and I’m counting Melkor. All I’m saying is let this one go.”

Mairon sat up at last, eyes narrowed in annoyance as he squared himself behind his desk. “I don’t know what you mean,” he sniffed, moving his coffee to one side and straightening a few papers that were already meticulously organized.

Gothmog sighed. “Of course not,” he muttered. “We done?”

“I’m done,” Mairon said pointedly.

Gothmog merely rolled his eyes. “You want me to send in Melkor?”

Despite Mairon’s insistent, iron grip on composure, Gothmog could see the slight flicker that eddied across his face at the inquiry. When he spoke, however, his voice was as steady as ever. “Yes,” he said, sitting perfectly straight in his chair. “Send him in.”

As Gothmog opened the door, Melkor pulled back so fast he nearly fell. Gothmog snorted and brushed past him, disappearing around the doorframe and down the hall. Melkor declined to look sheepish, instead striding into the room in more-or-less his usual brash manner. He pulled out a

chair and sprawled into it, as relaxed as Mairon was rigid. For a moment, the two of them simply regarded one another across the desk.

“Everything we discussed last night,” Mairon said carefully, “is taken care of.”

Melkor blinked. “Everything?”

Mairon raised his chin. “Everything,” he repeated. “Formenos is clean. They won’t find a trace of you or anyone else there.”

Melkor couldn’t help himself. “And Silmaril?”

A short sigh escaped through Mairon’s nose. “You really ought to think of a better name for it,” he said tiredly.

“So it’s here?” he pressed eagerly, sitting forward in his chair.

Mairon nodded. “It’s here.”

Melkor sat back, letting his astonishment sit plainly on his face. “What did you do?”

Mairon shook his head gently. “I did what needed to be done. I’ve already spoken to Gothmog about some security details, and Thuringwethil knows we’re going to need to be on the lookout for some legal pushback, although what that might look like, I can’t even begin to imagine.”

Melkor was watching him with narrowed eyes, a look of suspicion on his face. “Are you going to tell me,” he asked, “what happened last night?”

“Right now?” Melkor shrugged, and Mairon shook his head. “No,” Mairon said firmly.

“Why not?” Melkor demanded.

“Are you serious right now? Melkor, I woke up yesterday at five in the morning. I got here at six, and I worked until I went to dinner with Thil at seven. Then I went home, and if you want to know the truth, I had the sudden paranoid thought that I had done something terribly wrong in the Glaurung system. So I came back here to start checking all of my work for mistakes that I’m still not convinced don’t exist. I was still here when Gothmog called me at two. I’ve been awake all day today. I am so tired I honestly don’t know how I’m still holding up my end of this conversation, and I still have hours of work left to do today. So no, I’m not going to tell you what happened last night, at least not right now.”

Mairon’s face was still calm, but there was an air of desperation in his words that bothered Melkor. “Why don’t you take a break?” he suggested.

Mairon sighed. “They’re coming for us,” he said tiredly. “They’re coming to look for this thing, and we have no way of knowing exactly when. There can’t be a single shred of evidence that this program originated anywhere but my lab, and that’s just going to take some time to do.” He ran his palm lightly over his hair, absently smoothing it away from his face.

“Well,” said Melkor carefully, “time is something we should have, right? They’ll at least need a warrant to come snooping around private property, and besides, they’ll need some kind of case before they can get one.”

Mairon’s face was hard. “We had time,” he said, his voice quiet but sharp. “Or rather, we should have had time. I don’t know how much of it we lost in tracking this thing down again. There’s just

no way to know. All we can do now is our best and hope that's enough when they come looking."

Melkor sat quietly for a moment, wrestling with an alien feeling that rose within him. It was, he thought with no small amount of concern, as though he had done something wrong; worse yet, some hitherto unrecognized part of his mind was quietly insisting that he ought to react in some way to this information. His brain supplied a list of potential approaches—resistance? contrition? chagrin? some useless combination of the three?—but they all remained just beyond his grasp. Instead, Melkor shook them all away and frowned at Mairon. "Are you sure that's what you want to do right now?" he asked.

Mairon propped his cheek on his palm, his head tilted slightly to the side. Melkor almost winced as the light caught the veins blossoming beneath that pale skin, the angle of Mairon's face deepening the shadows beneath his tired eyes. It was the first sign of real exhaustion that had slipped through, and it was not a pleasant sight. "What I want," said Mairon wearily, "is to sit here for a few minutes and finish my coffee in peace before I have to pull another all-nighter. That's all."

Melkor grinned, trying to break the tension. "You could take the coffee with you, you know. Break the rules, just this once."

Mairon sighed. "I think we've broken all the rules we can afford to for now," he said. He straightened up and let his hand fall back to his desk, idly straightening a few impeccably organized papers. Melkor knew the meeting was over. He stood up from the chair.

"Don't work too hard," he said, only half-joking.

"I wish I didn't have to," Mairon said, curling his fingers around his cup.

Melkor paused on his way to the door, scowling at Mairon over his shoulder. He opened his mouth, a retort ready on his tongue, but he hesitated, thinking better of it. Shaking his head, he turned and strode from the office, shutting the door behind him with more force than necessary and rattling the frames of Mairon's diplomas on the walls.

Alone at last, Mairon carefully moved his coffee to the edge of the desk, clearing a space before gently laying his forehead against the smooth wood. He stayed like that for a few moments, reveling in the hush as he felt a leaden weight beginning to seep through his limbs. Warmth that had nothing to do with the coffee began to spread throughout his body, and Mairon pushed himself suddenly upright, rubbing irritably at his eyes as he banished thoughts of sleep from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

I hang out on [tumblr](#), like, a lot.

Enjoy the Silence

Chapter Summary

Mairon has perfected the art of holding a grudge. Melkor doesn't like to be ignored. Ready? Fight.

Chapter Notes

Melkor's antics are coming back to bite them. Fortunately, Mairon is prepared.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The knock on the glass startled Mairon out a deep, dreamless sleep and into a flailing consciousness that nearly carried him off the edge of the stool on which he had been sitting. He righted himself with an iron grip on the edge of the cluttered bench and looked up through the window before him with a glare of irritation, searching for the source of his unceremonious awakening. His gaze found Thuringwethil, who was holding a large paper cup in one hand and a white paper bag in the other, watching him with an air of skepticism. As his gaze focused on her, she raised her hands slightly, arching an eyebrow at him. Mairon turned and threw a glance over his shoulder at the chaotic spread of computers he had abandoned unwillingly just a few hours earlier, wondering if he ought not get back to work. Just then, his stomach growled, and he realized he hadn't eaten in at least a day. He looked back at Thuringwethil as his stomach gave another gurgle and then stood up, reluctantly heading out of the lab and into the hall.

Thuringwethil walked down the hall to meet him as he emerged through the door. She put the extra-large coffee into his hand, and he raised it automatically to his lips, shuddering as the warmth flooded through him. He watched as she extracted a foil-wrapped sandwich from the bag in her hand and peeled back a few layers of the wrapping before handing it to him. Mairon accepted it gratefully, biting reverently through layers of bagel, egg, cheese, and bacon as though they were ambrosia. "Thil," he said decisively, still chewing. "You are a lifesaver."

"Sometimes I worry that statement is going to be literal," she muttered, brushing past him.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not quite that bad," he said. He watched her approach the door to the lab. "What are you doing?" he asked as she pulled her key card from her pocket and ran it through the slider. The reader flashed green once before turning red. Mairon's brown furrowed in concern. "What did you do?"

"I locked the lab," she said calmly, returning her card to her pocket and reaching for the door handle.

"You did what?" He hurried over to join her, watching in horror as she tried the door handles, which remained stubbornly locked in place. "You can't do that!" he protested.

"I just did," she said, unconcerned, checking the handles once more.

“Thil—”

“Eat,” she admonished him.

He grudgingly took another bite of the sandwich in his hand, glancing nervously through the glass. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

“I had Gothmog change the security clearances,” she said calmly. “You’re locked out.”

“What? Why?”

“Mairon, you’ve been in that lab for two straight days. I’m not doing the Glaurung thing again. You’re going to eat something—”

“Almost done,” he insisted around as much sandwich as he could fit in his mouth.

“And,” she continued, ignoring him, “you’re going to go home and take a shower. I’d prefer if you’d take a nap, possibly in an actual bed, but one, I know you, and two, I have a grasp on reality, so—”

“Thuringwethil,” he complained, trying not to choke as he tried to eat and talk. “Do you know how much work I still need to do?”

“I’ll bet it’s not as much as you’ve already done.”

“But I still have to—”

“Ah,” she said sharply, holding up her index finger accusatorily. “Tell the truth. How close are you to being done?”

He chewed for a moment, considering her. “It’s basically finished,” he conceded grudgingly. “But I still need to check—”

“That’s what I thought,” she said decisively. “Whatever you need to check will still be here when you get back.”

“But—”

“That door isn’t opening until you at least go home, shower, and change your clothes.”

“I did change my clothes,” he said defensively.

“To something that hasn’t been sitting in your desk drawer for God knows how long,” she amended.

He scowled at her. “You know that if I don’t finish this we could all go to jail, right?”

“The sooner you go home, the sooner you can come back.”

He rolled his eyes. “Can I at least get my bag?”

“No.”

“But I need—”

“No.”

“Thil—”

“No.”

He took another, more reasonable bite, still scowling at her as he chewed. “You know,” he said, swallowing, “sometimes you’re the worst.”

She snorted. “Is that the best you can do?”

He shook his head resignedly and turned toward the elevator, Thuringwethil trailing him. “You know I love you, right Thil?” he asked as they stepped through the doors.

She rolled her eyes. “Then go home,” she said. Her tone was exasperated, but he could see a smile tugging at her lips. He nudged her gently with his shoulder, grinning as the elevator opened on the sixth floor. Thuringwethil departed toward her office; Mairon lingered only long enough to retrieve his coat from his own office before returning to the elevator and heading to the lobby.

Mairon trudged toward the front desk and deposited the remains of his breakfast in the garbage, pausing to take a long drink of the coffee in his hand. “Hey,” said a voice from behind him. “I wondered if I’d find you here.” Mairon turned slowly and regarded Melkor with a look of pure detachment. “Did you just get in?” Melkor asked, glancing at his watch. “It’s kind of early, isn’t it?” Mairon simply tapped one finger gently on the bottom of his coffee cup. “Right,” said Melkor slowly, trying to gauge the silence between them. “So, are you going out somewhere?” he asked, nodding at Mairon’s coat. “If you’re going out for more coffee, there’s a new place on third I heard is really good. I was going to—”

“I’m going home, actually,” Mairon said, speaking at last.

Melkor glanced at his watch once more. “It’s eight in the morning,” he said, nonplussed.

The tip of Mairon’s little finger continued its steady tattoo on the bottom of the cup. “And?” he inquired, arching an eyebrow.

“And nothing, I guess,” Melkor said, shrugging. “It’s just not your usual thing, is it?”

“And what is my usual thing?” Mairon asked, face and voice utterly devoid of emotion.

Melkor stared at him for a moment before deciding that whatever was happening in the conversation was well beyond his grasp. “Never mind,” he said, shrugging. He considered broaching a new topic, but Mairon did not seem particularly amenable. Still, he tried a friendly grin. “Maybe I’ll see you later?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Mairon icily. He turned and strode through the front door, leaving Melkor alone in the lobby. Melkor watched through the front window until he disappeared from view. Then, he turned and made for the elevator, stabbing the top arrow with misplaced irritation. He stepped through the doors as they opened and hoped that Gothmog had already arrived.

“How long,” Melkor demanded loudly, sprawling into the chair opposite Gothmog’s desk, “do we have to let him sulk?”

“Oh boy,” said Gothmog wearily, snatching his coffee out of the way of Melkor’s feet as they landed unceremoniously on his desk. “I don’t even know where to start.” He set the cup carefully out of Melkor’s reach and leaned back in his chair. “First of all, do you know what time it is? I

haven't seen you show up for work before ten o'clock in at least six years. Second, I'm not even technically on the clock yet, so—"

"Hey," Melkor interrupted, leaning forward and taking the coffee away from him. "If you're in the building, you're on the clock. And for the record, that's my policy on friendship, too, except you don't get to clock out on that honor until you die."

"You oughtta write greeting cards," Gothmog muttered incredulously, glaring at him as Melkor sipped his coffee.

"Damn that's good," Melkor said, shifting in his seat and settling the cup on the arm of the chair.

"I know," said Gothmog ruefully. He shook his head. "Anyway, why are you bothering Mairon?"

"I'd love to bother Mairon," Melkor said, "but I can't pin him down long enough to try. I think he's avoiding me, Gothmog, and even when I do manage to track him down for two minutes, he won't talk to me."

"You know, there is a reason for that," Gothmog reminded him.

Melkor felt Gothmog seemed rather too amused by the situation. "The rest of us are over it," he said sourly. "So what's his problem?"

"If by 'the rest of us', you mean me and Thil, then no we are most certainly not over it," Gothmog said. "She and I just aren't fighting you about it."

"Well, why didn't you give Mairon that memo?" he asked sulkily.

Gothmog snorted. "You know why you don't fight with me and Thil like this?"

"Because you two have some sense?"

"Because the three of us fight the same way," Gothmog corrected him. "You, me, and Thil—we all get mad, we blow up, and we're over it. Mairon is a different beast. He holds a grudge—and I don't mean the sulky, childish kinds of grudges you hold. When Mairon is pissed, he's cold, and he freezes you out. That's why you two don't fight well. He wants to drag it out until he's ready to deal with it, and you want to have it done and over with right this minute."

"Did I ask for a psychoanalysis?" Melkor demanded sullenly.

"You're just pissed because you know I'm right," Gothmog said smugly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, well, I'm not particularly interested in waiting for Mairon to decide he's done being mad."

"You never are."

"Why should I be?" Melkor demanded. "He should just quit sulking and talk to me about it like a normal—"

"Whoa," said Gothmog, kneading his temples with his fingertips. "It is eight o'clock in the morning, and I'm telling you right now, I have not had nearly enough caffeine to listen to that kind of crazy talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“You just suggested that you wanted to talk to someone,” Gothmog said. “About your problems, no less. I feel like I should be on the lookout for—what’s all that end times shit? Fire from the sky or something?”

“Shut up,” Melkor said irritably. “You know damn well that this Formenos thing is coming back to us sooner rather than later. I just need to know that Mairon has his shit together before that happens.”

“Do me a favor,” Gothmog said wearily. “Don’t say that to him, alright?”

“I’m not stupid,” Melkor said reproachfully.

“No, you’re not, but you have no tact.”

“I resent that implication.”

“It wasn’t an implication.”

“Whatever. Look, Gothmog, I think I know how to handle a hissy fits.”

“Really?” Gothmog asked skeptically. “And how’s that been going for you?”

“Fine,” Melkor said stubbornly.

“Right,” said Gothmog. “By which you mean that you badger him every time you manage to track him down, and he completely ignores you.”

“Well,” said Melkor mutinously, “you’re half right.”

“Oh, please,” said Gothmog. “I know the two of you, and I know you’re too impatient to deal with Mairon when he’s mad.”

“Well if you’re so damn smart, then what the hell am I supposed to do? I’m tired of walking on eggshells around him.”

“What did I say? Impatient.” Gothmog was so smug that Melkor could have throttled him.

“Gothmog, you might be the least helpful friend I have.”

“By default,” said Gothmog, trying and failing to swallow his grin. “I mean, right now I’m the only friend you—”

“Gothmog, I swear to God...”

“You want to know what you’re supposed to do?” Gothmog asked, sitting forward in his chair and resting both forearms on his desk. He peered intently at Melkor. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” Gothmog said firmly.

“What kind of advice is that?”

“That’s not advice, my friend. That is a strategy. Look, I know you want this fight to be over with, but it’s going to have to be on Mairon’s terms. If you try to push it, you’ll only make it worse.”

Melkor slid low in his chair, tilting his head back and groaning theatrically. “Why is everyone around me difficult?” he whined.

“Is this a bad time to remind you that this is a mess that you made?” Melkor lifted his head and glowered at Gothmog. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, stifling a grin. “Look, please just listen to me on this one. I know it feels like it’s been a million years to you, but Mai still needs some time to cool down. Don’t push him.”

“Fine,” Melkor sighed, setting the half-empty coffee cup on the desk as he stood up at last from the chair. “I’ll do it, but I won’t like it.”

“That’s your attitude toward most reasonable things.”

Melkor turned his back and walked to the door, raising each hand to shoulder height in a one-finger salute before disappearing into the hall. Gothmog rolled his eyes and reached for the newspaper on his desk, muttering as he began to read about the level of maturity in the office.

Melkor stuck his head out the doorway of his office and looked first up, then down the hall. There was no one in sight, and no sound but the quiet hum of technology from the closed office doors that lined the walls on either side of him. Walking as quickly and quietly as he could manage, he left his office and made for the far end of the hall. The building seemed almost abandoned, with no sound to be heard but the soft swish of his shoes against the carpet as he crept down the hall. He approached the door at the far end and tried to see into the frosted windows on either side, but he could make out nothing inside the office. He raised his hand and prepared to knock.

“What are you doing?”

Melkor nearly jumped out of his skin. He whirled about, his wrath dissipating into mere annoyance as he turned to find Thuringwethil leaning against a closed door, watching him. He could have sworn she was not there just a moment before. “Jesus, Thuringwethil,” he complained. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“What are you doing?” she repeated, unmoved. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Melkor glanced guiltily at the door behind him. “I...nothing. I was just going to—”

“See if you can annoy him until he breaks down?” she finished for him, arching an eyebrow at him.

“Ha, ha,” he said dryly. “I just want to talk to him, Thil.”

She scowled suspiciously at him. “You, talk? We really need to rethink that trip to the emergency room,” she said.

“Would you lay off me?” he said irritably. “You’re as bad as Gothmog. I just want to talk about what happened. This has gone on long enough.”

Thuringwethil shook her head. “I know it’s torturing you, but here’s the thing: you don’t get to decide when someone is done being mad at you.”

“But—”

“Nope.”

“Thil—”

“Ah,” she said sharply, holding up a hand in warning. “Drop it. You’re going to suffer through this one if it kills you. Do you hear me? It’s the least you can do.”

Melkor squared his shoulders and stared back into her unyielding scowl, shoring up his impressive store of belligerence. He opened his mouth, a retort ready on his lips, but he was interrupted by Gothmog, who barreled through the elevator doors and down the hall toward them, panting as he ran. “Whoa,” he said, pulling up short in front of them. “Hate to interrupt whatever delightful talk you two seem to be having, but I need you both downstairs.”

“Why?” Melkor snapped.

Thuringwethil had taken one look at Gothmog’s face and grown stern. “Where is he?” she called, already running down the hall toward her office.

“Main coding lab!” Gothmog called back.

“Who?” Melkor demanded. “What’s going on?”

Gothmog put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him toward the elevator. “Remember how you said this thing was coming back to us sooner rather than later?” he asked, hitting the down arrow and tapping his foot impatiently. “Well, you were right.”

“You might want to be careful with those,” said Mairon lazily, watching as federal agents crawled through every inch of his lab, rifling through notebooks and papers and gathering his equipment into boxes. He leaned back against the far wall, arms crossed, watching with apparent nonchalance as they none-too-gently packed his work into cardboard boxes.

“Worried about your stolen goods?” asked Oromë, picking up a notebook from the bench and rifling through it.

“My perfectly legal and above-board work will be just fine, thanks,” said Mairon unconcernedly. “But if you break anything from my lab, you will have to pay for it.” He smirked. “Laws can be so pesky sometimes, can’t they?”

“You would know,” Oromë muttered.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Mairon.

“Look, kid,” said Oromë, tossing the notebook haphazardly into a box and frowning at Mairon. “You can cut the crap. We’re onto your bullshit. You’re looking at a lot of heavy charges right about now, and with your record—”

“My record?” Mairon inquired, his smile overtly sweet but sharp around the edges, belying the danger just below the surface. “Forgive me, but do you know something I don’t? You threw a lot of accusations at me three years ago, but last time I checked, nothing stuck.”

“They sure as hell stuck to your boss,” Oromë said smugly.

“No one’s arguing that,” Mairon said indifferently. “But my God, the way you talk about it, you’d think it was the only conviction you’d ever gotten. I hate to tell you that sniffing around the same place doesn’t mean you’ll get lucky twice.”

“You won’t be so cocky when your ass is sitting behind bars for the next fifty years.”

“Ah, ambition,” said Mairon, laying a hand over his heart and tipping his head up theatrically. He looked back at Oromë, sneering. “It is nice to see you have some goals, ridiculous though they may be. I hate to be a killjoy, but aren’t you a little ahead of yourself? Right now you don’t even have a case.”

“Look around you, asshole,” said Oromë, gesturing at the flurry of activity behind them. “What do you think we’re doing here?”

Mairon glanced skeptically around the lab. “If I had to guess, I’d say it looks like you’re trying to execute a search warrant, although to return to my earlier point—”

“You listen to me, ginger,” said Oromë, leaving his place by the bench and advancing on Mairon. “You talk a big game, nice and safe in your little basement here, but I’m telling you right now that you’re finished.” His eyes narrowed dangerously as Mairon snorted. “Is something funny?”

“I’m sorry,” said Mairon, smirking. “I just can’t take you seriously when you get all *film noir* on me like this.”

“Maybe you’ll take it seriously when you land in court,” Oromë growled. “Because that’s where you’re heading, you little weasel. With all the crap we’re cleaning out of your lab and everything that’s coming out of Formenos—”

“Which is all hearsay, of course,” Mairon interjected.

“Which I’m sure will be corroborated,” Oromë retorted. “And let’s be honest here, twerp. When we get down to it, what’s going to look better in court? Something coming from Finwë and his lot, who are pillars of the community, or a bunch of crap coming from your convict boss?”

“And that’s what it comes down to, doesn’t it? Bias and prejudice? I’ve got news for you, Oromë: you can’t incarcerate people you don’t like, and trying to is not just vindictive, it’s illegal.”

“You know what? You’re right. I don’t like you assholes. And say whatever you like, but I’m not going to pretend this investigation isn’t just a little *schadenfreude*, watching that dick get exactly what’s coming to him.”

“Why you don’t look into the camera next time?” Mairon suggested, nodding at the security camera mounted in the corner. “It’ll make it easier when we move to get you removed from the case.”

Oromë was livid, and he advanced until he was within mere inches of Mairon, towering over him. “People like you and Melkor,” he growled, “think you can just go through life gaming the system. You are the dregs of society, and you just drag the rest of us down. You honestly think you’re better than someone like Finwion?” He scoffed. “You want to *be* him. You want what he has. And you can chase it all you want, but you’ll never have it. You are garbage human beings, and the best you’ll ever do is this shitty, cheap imitation.”

“You can come in my lab,” said Mairon quietly, “and destroy my equipment and my notes and my work. You can harass me and insult me all you like. But don’t you dare think that you can come in here and say those kinds of things about Melkor when you’re on Angband property. You think Melkor ought to be in awe of the likes of Finwë and Fëanor?” He snorted. “Utumno was a company before Formenos was even a thought in their minds, and Angband will be around long after Formenos crashes. Do you know why? Because Melkor has the brains and the originality and

the acumen to actually run a successful company. All the Finwions have are old money and bourgeois connections that help them push through a flimsy investigation any time things don't go their way. That might impress you, but I think it's weak, and I'm certainly not losing any sleep about which of us will make it, in the end."

Oromë shook his head, trying to maintain an air of nonchalance that was belied by the grit of his jaw. "What the hell happened to you, kid?" he asked. "I've seen your records. You're wicked smart. You could be anywhere in the world, so why are you holed up in this dump defending that dickhole?"

Mairon snorted. "Did you skip the day they covered interrogation techniques at whatever cut-rate police academy you attended?"

Oromë shrugged, unmoved. "I figure there's gotta be something wrong with you. I mean, we scoured that sad little hole you call an apartment three years ago, and I have never seen anyone live in anything so depressing. I mean honestly, kid, I wondered if it was even your real place. Nothing on the walls, no pictures...it didn't even look lived in. If you want to know the truth, I figured it must belong to the loneliest bastard I'd ever met."

Mairon's face was impassive. "You know," he said carefully, as though remarking on the weather. "That's an interesting observation, coming from you. I heard your wife travels ten months out of the year and, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't she retire three or four years back? You know what they say about people who live in glass houses—"

"You piece of shit," Oromë barked, reaching out and grabbing fistfuls of Mairon's shirt, lifting him bodily from the floor.

"Oh, please," said a voice from the vicinity of the door. "Give me a reason to sue you for assault."

Oromë turned to find Thuringwethil, Gothmog, and Melkor standing in the doorway, watching them. He lowered Mairon slowly to the ground and smoothed the cuffs of his sleeves. "No need to get worked up," he said. "Mairon and I were just talking."

"Oh, I heard plenty of your lovely conversation," Thuringwethil said. "Probably enough to get started on a motion to have you removed from the case."

"I'd like to see you try."

"You'll get your chance," she said sweetly.

Oromë looked slowly from Thuringwethil to Gothmog to Melkor, a frown deepening on his face. He turned away abruptly and surveyed his agents, who were mostly finished with their work. "Let's go," he barked, watching as they packed up the last few things and began to file out of the lab. When the last of the agents had passed through the doors, Oromë turned back to face the Angband executives, narrowing his eyes menacingly at them. "This isn't over," he said.

Thuringwethil snorted. "Oh, honey," she said scathingly. "Threats work best when you can back them up."

Oromë glared at her and followed his men out the door. Gothmog immediately crossed to where Mairon was standing, his chin tucked into his chest as he tried to look down at himself. "Are you alright?" he asked, laying a hand on Mairon's shoulder.

"This was a nice shirt," Mairon said ruefully, trying to smooth the wrinkles left by Oromë's hands.

“I’m going to follow them out,” Thuringwethil said, eyeing the group as they filed past the window. “I don’t trust those assholes to leave.”

“Yeah, well I don’t trust those assholes with you,” Gothmog said sharply. “Hey!” he called, but she had already disappeared out the lab door. “Damn it,” he muttered. “You alright?” he called at Mairon over his shoulder, already at the door.

“Go,” Mairon said, waving him away. He watched Gothmog hurry past the window and disappear from view. As though he was alone now in the lab, he turned and walked to his ruined bench. Melkor watched him work for a few moments, sorting out abandoned pieces of equipment and bits of scrap that had been indiscriminately scattered along the surface. “Man,” said Melkor at last, treading carefully toward the bench where Mairon worked. “This place looks bizarre without computers.” Mairon picked up a crumpled sheet of paper, carefully pulled the edges apart, and began to study the contents. Melkor reached the bench and stood a few feet from Mairon, watching him scan the battered paper in his hands before setting it carefully aside.

“Good thing we have backups,” Melkor said, leaning against the edge of the bench and grinning.

“They’re not quite that stupid,” said Mairon. “They’re heading for our servers now.”

Melkor straightened abruptly. “So what?” he demanded, a bit harsher than he intended. “We’re just supposed to sit on our asses while they take their time with this ridiculous investigation? They can’t take all of our work!”

“Relax,” Mairon said. “I have everything we own backed up in five places, and that’s not counting our official company servers. I’ll bring everything back online when they get out.”

“Jesus,” said Melkor dramatically, clapping a hand to his chest as he circled the bench and came to rest opposite Mairon. “Don’t scare me like that.”

Mairon selected a torn scrap of paper from the detritus before him and studied it carefully. “Maybe you wouldn’t be so scared,” he said coldly, tilting his head to read a note written in the margin, “if you had an ounce of faith in me.”

“Come on,” Melkor cajoled, leaning on the bench and grinning ingratiatingly at him. “You know I have every confidence in you.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Mairon said absently, setting the scrap atop the growing pile and reaching for a broken motherboard that Oromë had left behind. Melkor’s hand came down hard on the bench, and Mairon pulled back to avoid having his fingers crushed. “What is your problem?” he demanded, scowling.

“We need to talk,” Melkor said firmly.

“I’m not interested,” Mairon said.

“Oh, so you’ll talk about me, but not to me?” Mairon pointedly picked up another scrap of paper and began to study it, the slight flush creeping up his neck the only sign that he had heard. “Come on,” said Melkor mildly. “You had that asshole Oromë so riled up it was about to get ugly.”

“That was business,” Mairon said irritably.

“How do you figure?”

“I work for this company,” Mairon said. “If he insults Angband, he insults me.”

“But he wasn’t insulting Angband.”

“I’m angry with you, Melkor,” Mairon said wearily. “But I’m still your friend. I’m not going to let anyone talk about you like that—not here, and especially not him.”

Melkor nodded slowly. “So you’re still mad at me?”

Mairon sighed. “I’m not exactly thrilled with you,” he said.

“Any idea how long I can expect this to last?”

Mairon shook his head incredulously. “Oddly enough, there’s no hard and fast rule for how long you ought to be mad at someone in any given situation, and even if there were, I wouldn’t even know where to start with this one.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Are you serious?”

“I just don’t get what you’re so mad about.”

Mairon gaped at him for a moment. “Melkor, you dangled Silmaril over my head for weeks when you knew how stressed I was about Glaurung. You practically made it out to be the replacement for a system I’ve been working on for three years, and you wanted me to help you get it, even when you knew I was practically killing myself trying to rectify our problems with Glaurung to meet the deadline.”

“Did you really think I’d replace your work with theirs?” Melkor seemed amused.

Mairon was decidedly not. “You said as much, the first time you brought it up,” Mairon reminded him.

“I only meant it might have the capability,” Melkor said. “You were freaking out about the deadline. I just thought it might help you to have a fallback.”

“A fallback is a deadline extension,” Mairon said shortly. “This was competition.”

“But you’re the one that came up with the plan to get it,” Melkor said.

“Yes,” said Mairon, exasperated. “Because I knew you weren’t going to let it go, and honestly, I was worried what you might do to get it.”

“Come on,” Melkor said. “Once you found out about Valinor, you couldn’t wait to get started on a plan.”

Mairon glared at him. “That’s another thing,” he said sourly. “You should have told me about that from the beginning.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to distract you from Glaurung,” Melkor said defensively.

“I’d rather be distracted a thousand times than end up in a mess like this. This all could have been avoided if you’d just told me what was going on.”

“I’m not going to apologize.”

“You never do.”

“And why should I? What’s the point in being sorry for things you’ve done? They’re in the past. You might as well take responsibility for your actions and move on.”

“I would be thrilled,” Mairon said icily, “if you would do that. But you can’t even admit that you completely screwed us on the whole Ungoliant thing.”

“Look,” Melkor said, “I’ll admit that the other night *may* have gotten away from me a bit—”

“A bit?” Mairon demanded. “Melkor, I had to go in and wipe out everything she had touched on Formenos property. Then, I had to run around their labs and destroy any notes I could find on the project. When I finally got out of Formenos, I had to break into their off-site storage and get everything eliminated from there. It took hours.”

“Yeah, I know. You were gone—”

“I wasn’t finished,” Mairon said. “This was all notwithstanding the fact that I had placed a bid on the godforsaken Silmaril program from Gothmog’s laptop.”

“You did what?”

“So I had to set up a meeting in a neutral location.”

“You met her?” Melkor said, alarmed. “In public?”

“No, you idiot.” Mairon reached around him and picked up the motherboard, fiddling with it as he spoke. “She went to meet me, thinking I would buy Silmaril. I tracked down her apartment while she was gone, took Silmaril from her, and destroyed every shred of evidence that she had ever met you.”

“But I thought she was meeting you to—”

“She wasn’t going to sell it to me,” Mairon said flatly. “She was going to scam me out of a million dollars and then bolt. It’s what she does, you moron. I told you: I know Unogoliant.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said softly.

“And then, to top it all off,” Mairon continued, “I’ve had to sit down here for the last three days working the program into our systems and wondering when Oromë and his thugs were going to show up. I have to say it’s been a real treat.”

“Mairon, I—”

“And do you know what the worst part is?” Mairon looked up, meeting Melkor’s eyes across the bench. “I don’t mind the work. I don’t mind being up for thirty-six hours, or sleeping on a bench in the lab. I wouldn’t even mind running around breaking into other people’s companies. What gets me is that I was doing it to clean up a mess that could have been avoided if you had just trusted me.”

“You think I don’t trust you?”

“I know you don’t trust me.”

“Mairon, I give you more responsibility than I give anyone else here. You run three departments, not to mention the fact that you’re my COO, and you still do half the experimental grunt work yourself—which, to tell you the truth, I prefer, because I trust your work more than anyone else’s.

Hell, if you want proof that I trust you, look at the last three years. I gave you my company to run, for fuck's sake.”

Mairon held opposite corners of the motherboard in his index fingers and gently spun it. “Three years ago you trusted me to run this company. Last week, you didn't even trust me to execute a plan that I made for you.”

Melkor sighed. “Look, Mairon, none of this has anything to do with trust. I have more confidence in you than in anyone else here, and if we get past all the anger and resentment and whatever else is going on right now, I think you know that. Don't get me wrong—Gothmog and Thuringwethil are great at what they do, and I need them here. But I depend on you. You have talent and expertise and a seriously weird intuition that is honestly invaluable. That's the truth.”

“And yet...”Mairon let the implication hang in the air between them.

“You want to know why I didn't include you?” Melkor asked. “Why I found that heinous bitch Ungoliant instead?”

“I'm sure it's an excellent reason.”

“Look, I—I felt bad, okay?”

Mairon blinked once, nonplussed. “You're going to have to elaborate.”

“I found out about Silmaril, and I thought it was an interesting project, right? But when I heard Valinor was sniffing around...”He shook his head. “I had to have it. I had to take something from those bastards.”

“So you've said.”

“I didn't tell you about Valinor at first because you were working on Glaurung—that was the truth. I didn't want to distract you. And then when I did tell you—I don't know, man, you were so angry.”

“Of course I was angry. You should have told me.”

“I don't care that you were angry with me. I can handle that.”

“Current trends beg to differ,” Mairon muttered.

“I just kept thinking about all the shit they did,” Melkor said, ignoring him. “How they got away with it.”

Mairon narrowed his eyes. “I know that look,” he said. “Even if I don't ever see it on you. That's guilt. And you can knock it off right now.”

“It is not,” Melkor said defensively. “But even if it was, it wouldn't be entirely misplaced.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Valinor was my fight,” he said, shrugging. “I pulled you into it, and I really shouldn't have. I mean, look what they did to you. I shouldn't have let you—”

“Jesus,” said Mairon, grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes and sighing. “God help me, but I'm about to take a line from your playbook.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You didn’t let me do anything. Whatever I did was under my own power.”

“Come on,” said Melkor dubiously. “I was going after them, and you followed me.”

“Yes,” said Mairon. “I did, but that was a choice that I made. I would really appreciate if you would give me some credit for being able to think for myself.”

For a moment, they simply stood in silence. “Sometimes I wonder if I limited you,” Melkor said quietly. “After everything that went down, this was your only realistic option. I hate to think that you wasted your potential.”

Mairon snorted. “I’m not sure who you just insulted more,” he said. “Me or yourself.” He ran his hands lightly over his hair and sighed. “Look, I hadn’t accepted with Valinor when you offered me this job. I still had options. This is the one that I picked, and I did it because this is where I wanted to be. The fact that they tried to destroy my career is beside the point. If none of that insanity had ever happened, I still would’ve ended up at Utumno—and I’m happy I did. Please tell me you know that.”

“I do now.”

Mairon shook his head. “I can’t believe you ever doubted it,” he said quietly.

“Can you blame me? There were a lot of people who said it was me, not Valinor, that ruined your career.”

“Does my career look ruined to you? You let me run half of this place and design literally whatever I want. I have complete creative freedom, not to mention the power to fire anyone who screws anything up. I couldn’t get a better deal anywhere else if I tried. I have everything I could want.”

Melkor grinned. “Everything?”

Mairon ignored the drop of his heart and rolled his eyes. “I mean, I wish you would stop thinking you need to keep things like this from me, and I wish you would stop being such an uncommunicative twat, but other than that—”

“Hey,” Melkor growled. “Watch it.”

“You asked,” Mairon said, shrugging.

“I could fire you, you know,” Melkor said, glaring at him unconvincingly.

Mairon snorted. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

A slow grin broke over Melkor’s face. “Does this mean we’re cool?”

Mairon rolled his eyes. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “But—” He turned as the door to the lab opened. Gothmog leaned in through the open doorway, his face grave.

“There you are,” he said, panting slightly. “Have you seen—oh.” His gaze fell on Melkor. “Does this mean you two talking again?”

Mairon looked back at Melkor. “Provisionally,” said Mairon.

“Good,” Gothmog said. “Better to face this with a united front, at least.”

“What’s the matter?” Melkor asked, pushing himself up from the bench and starting for the door.

Gothmog shook his head. “Brace yourselves,” he said darkly. “I have a feeling the shit we’re already in is about to get a whole lot deeper.”

Chapter End Notes

I hang out on [tumblr](#) a lot!

Say It Ain't So

Chapter Summary

There's bad news out of Formenos, although the Angband crew is a little less than sympathetic. Mostly, they try to figure out how it's going to affect them.

Chapter Notes

Watch for mentions of (canonical) minor character death, referred to in a typically selfish and flippant manner. There will be bickering about how to proceed in the aftermath of the search warrant. Melkor might make a helpful suggestion, and he might be annoyed by how it's received. Mairon has several conversations, ranging from pleasant to surprising to annoying, and almost has a heart-attack at a poor choice of words.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thuringwethil was waiting for them in Gothmog's office, leaning close to the television screen with a forbidding frown. She gave them only a cursory glance as they came through the doorway, standing up from the chair and dragging the screen to the side. "Sit," she said tersely. Melkor crossed the room and dropped into her vacated seat. Mairon trailed behind him, as did Gothmog, who paused only to close the door to the office as they passed through. Thuringwethil leaned over them and picked up the remote, increasing the volume until the reporter's voice washed over them accusingly.

"...earlier reports that emergency crews had rushed to the scene, and that someone was indeed transported by ambulance to the hospital. Now, it is still unclear at this point whether Mr. Noldóran passed away here, at Formenos, or whether indeed he was taken for treatment and later died. What is clear at this time is that Finwë Noldóran, founder of Formenos Ltd., has died today. There has been, as yet, no word regarding succession in the company—of course, as we know, there was recently a rather public scuffle involving two of Noldóran's sons, Fëanor and Fingolfin, that seemed to involve exactly this matter. I think it will remain to be seen—"

The screen went blank as Thuringwethil jabbed the power button, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring down at Melkor. Mairon leaned back against the edge of the desk and gently buried his face into his palm. "Oh no," he said softly.

"Yes," said Thuringwethil grimly.

"This is not good," Mairon said.

"No," she said. "It isn't."

"Tell me about it," said Melkor. "I haven't worn a tie in three years, and that is definitely the kind of funeral you'd have to dress up for."

Thuringwethil scowled at him. “The man is dead, Melkor,” she said coldly.

“So?” He shrugged. “I didn’t know him, and I’m not going to waste time pretending to care. I’ll let you do that for the both of us.”

“You better care,” she threatened. “This whole Formenos situation is about to get a whole hell of a lot worse. Do you have any idea—”

“Relax, Thuringwethil,” he said irritably. “I get the implication here. Believe it or not, I’m not half the idiot you make me out to be.”

“Then why do you insist on acting like you are?”

He snorted. “Someone has to raise your blood pressure once in a while.”

“Look,” Gothmog said, coming up behind Melkor and leaning heavily on the back of his chair. “I’m sure we’re all sorry the old man is dead, but I can’t help but think that this is going to end up being a real pain in the ass for us.”

“Any chance someone other than Fëanor might take over?” Melkor asked.

“No such luck,” said Mairon. “The youngest brother isn’t really involved, and the middle brother’s way too noble. After the whole boardroom incident he made a big show of solidarity and unity and all that crap—made sure everyone knew he wasn’t interested in taking power from Fëanor or anything like that. He made some ridiculous statement about how competition belongs outside the company and family is more important than authority, blah blah blah. I remember reading it in the paper.”

“God, I hate self-sacrifice,” Melkor muttered.

“I have a feeling you’re going to hate it a lot more,” Gothmog said. “There is no scenario where Fëanor in charge of that company plays out well for us. He’s a lunatic, and he hates us. I mean, at least the old man had some restraint.”

“He could not have picked a worse time to kick it,” Melkor complained.

“Maybe you can mention that to him,” Thuringwethil said testily. “You know, when you see him.”

“Come on,” Melkor said defensively. “It’s not like it’s my fault the guy croaked.”

“No,” Thuringwethil said sourly, “but you haven’t exactly put us ahead in this already shitty situation.”

“Will you relax?” Melkor said irritably. “What’s done is done.”

“You might think that, but I promise you that the consequences of what you did are very much still in the present.”

“Can you just move on already?” Melkor grumbled. “Look, Mairon’s already over it, and he was way more pissed at me than you were.”

“Oh, no,” said Mairon, holding his hands up defensively. “Don’t drag me into this.”

“Oh, so you two are talking now?” Thuringwethil said, ignoring him.

“So what if we are?” Melkor retorted.

“That’s all well and good, but I think you’ll find I’m not the pushover that Mairon is. I can’t be won with half-assed apologies and heavy-handed flattery.”

“Hey,” Mairon said reproachfully. “Flag on the play, man. Need I remind you that I’m not the current subject of your ire? Jesus. Besides, what you said isn’t even true.”

“Oh, please,” she said. “You couldn’t be mad at this moron if you tried.”

“Shows what you know,” Mairon said, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning at her. “Despite your unwarranted insults, it just so happens I’m still mad at him right now.”

“Aw, come on!” Melkor complained.

“But unlike the two of you,” said Mairon, ignoring him, “I realize that we have more to gain from presenting a united front than by squabbling like a bunch of Finwion children.”

“Ha,” Melkor said. “Nice.”

“Fair point,” Thuringwethil conceded.

Gothmog removed himself from the back of Melkor’s chair and easily shouldered Mairon out of the way, taking his place against the desk. “Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Kid’s right; what else is new? You three can go back to picking at each other just as soon as we figure out what to do about Formenos.”

Melkor tipped his head back to look up at Thuringwethil. “Truce?” he offered.

He could read her answer in the narrowing of her eyes. “We need to consider our next move,” she said, turning her face away from him. “Is our best strategy offensive or defensive?”

“I don’t think it’s either one,” said Melkor.

“I’m looking for real, actual suggestions,” she said irritably, looking between Gothmog and Mairon accusingly.

“I’m serious,” Melkor insisted. He turned in his chair, looking up into Thuringwethil’s dagger gaze with uncharacteristic equanimity. “We have the advantage here, Thil, regardless of this bullshit investigation they’re trying to launch. They can take all the shit they want out of our labs, but honestly? I don’t think it’ll do them much good. Mairon said he cleaned everything up and worked the program into our systems, and if he said it’s done, then I highly doubt some moron working for the feds is going to be able to pick out anything different.”

“Suck up,” Thuringwethil muttered.

“Formenos is going to be in turmoil for a while,” Melkor continued, ignoring her. “Even if Fëanor takes over, and even if he is a lunatic, isn’t it better to wait and see what he does? Once he makes a move, we can know how to proceed, but until then, guessing has as good a chance of hurting us as it does them.”

All three heads of those listening swiveled to face him. Gothmog seemed to be weighing the suggestion, while Mairon looked rather suspicious. Thuringwethil looked downright incredulous, and she turned on her heel and went to the window, drawing up the blinds and peering out into the haze of snow the fell outside the glass.

“What are you doing?” Melkor asked impatiently.

“Checking to see if fire is raining down from the heavens,” she said flatly, still gazing out the window. “Or maybe the ground ought to be opening up? Forgive me; I’m not really up on the book of Revelations.”

Melkor glared at her and spared a withering look for Gothmog as well, who was sniggering. “Would you two stop predicting the apocalypse every time I make a valid suggestion? I have good ideas, you know.”

“Theoretically,” she said, drawing the blinds once more and turning around. “But it’s so rare that when it does happen, I get the urge to call the number for that doomsday cult I see plastered on billboards by the highway. You know—‘repent, the end is near’—”

“Alright,” said Mairon loudly, drowning out Melkor’s irate response and shooting a sidelong, disapproving glance at Thuringwethil’s vindictive glee. The two of them fell silent and looked over at him. “Look, Thil, as much as I hate to admit it right now, Melkor is right.”

“Yes!” he said triumphantly, pumping his fist in the air and dodging a kick aimed at him by Thuringwethil.

“There’s a benefit to prudence,” Mairon said, shaking his head at the two of them. “But there’s also a benefit to preparation. We need to be ready for whatever they’re going to throw at us.”

“Exactly,” said Melkor. “But first,” he said, heaving himself out of the chair with an exaggerated groan, “lunch. I’m starving.”

“Pass,” said Thuringwethil.

“Aw, come on,” he whined.

“You can go,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. She nodded at Mairon. “Take your new best friend with you.”

“What do you mean, new?” asked Mairon, affronted, at the precise moment those same words left Melkor’s lips. Melkor looked at him and grinned; Mairon, discomfited, looked away, scowling over at Thuringwethil, who was grinning like a skull. Gothmog was laughing so hard he was bent over with both hands gripping his knees for support, wheezing with the effort.

“You’re a child,” Melkor said, glaring at him. Gothmog merely wiped at his eyes and continued to chuckle. Melkor turned away from Gothmog and looked at Mairon. “How about it?” he asked.

“Lunch?” Mairon shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Someone has to do some work around here.”

“Come on,” Melkor said. “You have to eat.”

“I think Mairon is attempting to disprove that theory,” Thuringwethil interjected.

“No one asked you,” Mairon said smoothly. “Look,” he said, turning his attention back to Melkor. “They just destroyed my lab, so I really need to go and get that cleaned up. Plus someone ought to check on the server site to see that they haven’t wrecked it, and then I need to bring all of our files back from—”

“Please,” Melkor said, holding up his hand. “You’re giving me a headache just listening.”

“Sorry,” he said, shrugging. “Maybe next time.”

Melkor pointed menacingly at him. “I’m holding you to that.”

“Whatever,” said Mairon, unconcerned.

Melkor grinned before reaching past him to land a not-so-gentle punch on Gothmog’s shoulder. “Let’s go, asshole,” he said, dancing out of arm’s reach as Gothmog lunged at him. “You’re up!” he called, already halfway to the door.

“You better run!” Gothmog called after him, grabbing his coat roughly from the rack as he sprinted from the room and skidded out into the hall, disappearing from view. The teetering coat rack crashed to the ground in his wake.

Mairon shook his head at the sound of their retreating footsteps and receding curses. “Idiots,” he muttered. He glanced up at Thuringwethil. “Don’t you look at me like that,” he warned, scowling at her knowing smirk.

“Like what?” she asked innocently.

He glanced at the open door behind him and closed the distance between them, looking up into Thuringwethil’s face with a menacing glare. “Like you think you know that something’s going on, when there isn’t,” he hissed at her.

She snorted. “You got that from one look? My God, you’re paranoid. It’s almost as if…” She trailed off, tapping a finger thoughtfully on her chin.

He waited a moment, grinding his teeth as the silence stretched between them. “As if what?” he demanded irritably.

“As if there was something going on,” she concluded triumphantly, resuming her infuriating smirk.

He summoned his most intimidating glare, giving a mild huff of annoyance when Thuringwethil merely blinked. “Don’t start with me,” he said warningly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” he said. “I thought you let all this garbage go three years ago, and to tell you the truth, I haven’t missed it. Let’s not start it again.”

“Oh, honey,” she said. “I don’t let anything go. I was just waiting for the right time.” A slow, predatory grin spread across her narrow face. “Which, I might add, seems to be the strategy of a certain someone who—”

“Ah,” he said sharply, holding up one finger and shaking his head firmly. “We’re not even going there.”

“Fine,” she said, moving from her place by the window and beginning to stalk a close circle around him. “But I’ll tell you something I tell all the assholes I run across in court: denying something doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” She had come back to rest just in front of him, smirking as she crossed her arms before her.

Mairon was unimpressed. “You know,” he said coolly, “denial also works when there’s nothing to

be acknowledged.”

“And it’s the job of a good lawyer,” she said smoothly, “to know the difference.”

He glared at her. “How about you keep your party tricks in the courtroom, huh?”

She grinned. “Where’s the fun in that?”

He scowled and stepped away from her, starting toward the door. “Stay out of my life, Thuringwethil,” he called over his shoulder.

“Do we need to talk about realism?” she retorted. He waved a hand dismissively at her as he rounded the corner and started down the hall. She shook her head. “Idiots,” she murmured into the silence that remained.

“You know,” said Mairon, gently righting a chair with his foot, “you would think that with the amount of money these people have to throw around they could at least get someone competent on the job.”

“Hey,” said Gothmog, “don’t complain about idiocy that works in our favor.”

“I’m not complaining,” Mairon said. “I’m just amazed. It’s like they don’t even want a case.”

“You get what you get with federal investigators,” Gothmog said, grinning. “Somehow, I doubt we’ll be as lucky if this goes to trial.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mairon, crossing the room and opening the door on the far wall. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” He peeked into the room beyond, letting his gaze sweep critically from side to side for a moment before retreating back to where Gothmog stood. “Besides,” he said, “that’s why we have Thuringwethil.”

“Thank God for that,” Gothmog said. “I don’t know what the hell we’d do without her.”

Mairon snorted. “I have a feeling none of us would be here if not for Thil.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“Although as much as I love her,” Mairon said thoughtfully, “I can’t help but hope this doesn’t go to trial. She is miserable during proceedings.”

Gothmog winced. “Can’t argue with that either,” he said, shuddering. “Do you remember the last time?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Mairon said. “She put a lot of effort into prepping you two to testify. Who do you think she vented all her frustration to afterward?”

“You have always been a good sounding board,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“Glad to help,” Mairon said dryly. They stood in silence for a moment, listening to the quiet, background hum of machinery whirring around them.

“How do you think this is going to go down?” Gothmog asked after a moment, leaning back against the wall.

Mairon shook his head. “I honestly don’t know,” he said. “But I’ll tell you one thing for sure: we haven’t seen the last of Fëanor Finwion.”

Thuringwethil heard the approach of the car and pushed herself back from the table, standing up and heading for the door. She pulled the curtain to the side and watched as Mairon started down her driveway, a cab disappearing down the road behind him. She stepped away from the window and went to the door, pulling back the chain and the bolt before turning the deadbolt and opening the door. “Hurry up,” she said as Mairon climbed the stairs to the porch. “You’re letting all the cold air in.”

“Good morning to you, too,” he muttered, hurrying over the threshold and stepping to the side as she shut and locked the door behind him. “Never mind the fact that I’m frozen half to death here. God, you’d think it was extra to get them turn on the heat in their cars.”

She slid the chain home and ambled off toward the kitchen. “Coffee?” she called over her shoulder.

“Yes, please,” he called back, unwinding his scarf from around his neck and hanging it on a hook by the door. He shrugged out of his coat and slipped out of his wet shoes before wandering through the front room and into the living room. He dropped his bag on the floor and sank onto the couch, leaning back for a moment and letting out a contented sigh. He listened to the sound of Thuringwethil moving around the kitchen and smiled softly, letting the warmth of her house seep into the chill of his extremities. “What have you been up to this morning?” he called, leaning forward and craning his neck to peer through the doorway into the kitchen.

Thuringwethil appeared briefly in his line of sight, a carafe of water in her hand. “Not much,” she said. “Mostly caught up on some work while I waited for you.” He heard the water pour into the reservoir and listened to her footsteps move across the kitchen as she went to the cupboard to retrieve cups.

Mairon leaned down and reached for his bag, pausing as the clutter on the coffee table caught his attention. A large black binder was peeking out of the assorted paperwork, and he reached for its glossy edge, gingerly shifting the pages on top out of the way and settling its bulk onto his lap. There was a tiny label on the otherwise pristine cover, a little white sticker inscribed in Thuringwethil’s impeccable handwriting that simply said ‘*University/Valinor, 08*’. He lifted the cover and began to peruse the contents, a feeling of uneasy bemusement settling over him as he pored through the collected pages within.

It was, he supposed, a scrapbook of sorts, though as he turned the pages, he thought that it seemed more a painstaking chronicle than a mere collection of memories. There was an assortment of documents within, from press releases to published papers, pictures and newspaper clippings and even printed copies of emails. Each one bore a careful caption in Thuringwethil’s hand. As he read, Mairon could detect the thread of a narrative forming, as though Thuringwethil had created for herself a detailed account of the year, marking down seemingly random events and meticulously recording her thoughts for each one.

Unsurprisingly, many of the notes were about Mairon, but it was odd to read through her analysis of things that had happened to him before they had known each other. He could recognize her voice in the writing—the way she thought was familiar to him now, and he could distinguish it even in something so old—and yet the clinical tone with which she described him was altogether unfamiliar, and even a bit harsh. He ran his fingers over the laminating film that covered a picture of his former lab group, letting his fingertips trace the blurred edges of his own face, as he scanned Thuringwethil’s notes for the image.

“Did you want peppermint or gingerbread?” Thuringwethil asked, holding a bottle of coffee creamer in each hand as she wandered into the living room. Her gaze fell on Mairon. “Oh,” she said, frowning slightly.

“You know,” he said, craning his neck to give her a reproachful look, “you could just take a picture with me instead of trawling through the newspaper for them.”

“I don’t take pictures with people who are prettier than I am,” she said decisively.

“Thil what is this?” he asked, ignoring the deflection.

She sighed and headed for the couch, depositing the bottles on the coffee table before sitting carefully beside him, tucking one long leg up under herself and drawing the other close to her chest. “These are my records,” she said nodding at the binder in his hands.

“Records,” he repeated slowly, turning the page and running his fingertips over an article in which he had featured as a young, up-and-coming student at the university. He shook his head. “What is this a record of, exactly?”

“Of our dealings at the time,” she said. “I wanted to have everything we might need, just in case. I do it with everything we face, if you must know.”

“Right,” he said skeptically. “All these weird clippings of announcements and copies of old websites look like business dealings, not a starter kit for a serial killer.”

“Look,” she said, resting her chin on her knee and tilting her head to the side. “Back then, I’d known Melkor a lot longer than you had, and I knew him well enough to know that this particular mess wasn’t going away. I knew it was going to turn into something, and I was right.”

“Right?” mused Mairon, turning another few pages and skimming the contents. “About what? The only mess I remember back then was Valinor, so why am I the focus of all your notes?”

“I have always made a point of keeping an eye on the things that Melkor is interested in,” Thuringwethil said delicately. She reached out and brushed her index finger lightly along the edge of a newspaper clipping depicting a much younger Mairon standing beside a poster at an engineering conference. “As much as Valinor consumed him back then, I had a feeling retaliation wasn’t his only incentive for hanging around the university.”

“I think you’ve always looked for motives where they just don’t exist,” said Mairon dismissively, but Thuringwethil could see a flush beginning to creep up from under the hood of his sweatshirt.

She shrugged, pulling her hand back from the book. “I’m a lawyer,” she said. “It’s what I do.”

He sighed, half-wanting to throw the book across the room but finding himself instead turning another page. “It’s insane to me that all this Valinor crap is still coming up all these years later,” Mairon said quietly, squinting at a note in which Thuringwethil described his third-year grades.

“Rotten things always find their way to the surface,” she said darkly. “And there was nothing more putrid than this.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “One day I’m fielding offers from one of the most prestigious post-doc programs in the country, not to mention one of the biggest names in the industry, and the next they’re telling me I might not even graduate. It was beyond insane. It was surreal.”

“It was dirty,” she added.

He shook his head. "I don't know what I would have done without you guys," he said softly. "If you hadn't threatened the dean of the college, I don't think they would've given me the stupid diploma."

"Are you kidding? Utumno would've been finished if you hadn't helped us out. We owed you big time."

He snorted. "That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

"No," she said. "I don't. They were itching for a way to get back at Melkor, and they almost had it before you shut them down. The least we could do was return the favor."

"Turns out they don't much like being stymied," he said thoughtfully.

They sat in silence for a moment, mulling over their memories. "Well," said Thuringwethil, unfolding her legs, "it worked out well for all of us."

"You can say that again."

"I won't, but I appreciate the sentiment."

He laughed and nudged her gently with his shoulder. "Where's my coffee?" he demanded playfully.

Thuringwethil stood up and stretched her long arms toward the ceiling. "I suppose we should get to work," she said, ambling back into the kitchen. "What did you bring me, anyway?" she called from the next room. "You sounded excited on the phone."

"Something I need your help with," he called back, tossing the binder back on the coffee table and retrieving his bag. He rifled through his papers as she brought back two mugs and a full carafe of coffee, setting everything before them on the table.

"Alright," she said, settling herself once more on the couch and reaching for the peppermint creamer. "What's so important that it can't wait for Monday?"

Mairon pulled a stack of pages out of his bag and shuffled them gently. "You want us to keep Silmaril?"

"After all the trouble you went through to get it?" She rolled her eyes. "That thing's not going anywhere, if I can help it."

"Good," he said, grinning. "Then help me file a patent."

...sudden passing has sent waves of shock rippling through the usually cutthroat community.

"It's an absolute tragedy," noted a spokeswoman from Doriath. "Finwë was a great patron to the field long before he had a business himself, and his contributions will be sorely missed. Our thoughts are with the family at this difficult time."

Similar sentiments have been shared from other competitors, including Alqualondë and Belegost. Conspicuous by their silence are Valinor and Anband Enterprises, both of whom are rumored to have been in talks with Formenos regarding an upcoming project, though the source of these

rumors remains unknown, as does the validity of such claims.

What is known is that the engineering and defense communities have lost a great man, a titan of industry who...

“What are you reading?”

Mairon shook his head and glanced up at Melkor, who was leaning on the doorway to his office. “Just the latest smear against us,” he said, clicking to open a new tab and typing a search into the bar.

“Who’s slandering us now?” Melkor asked, pushing off the doorway and ambling into the office.

Mairon scanned the search results, groping along his desk for a pen. “The *Eä Times*,” he said absently, jotting down a number from his screen on a piece of paper. “And it’s technically libel.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Slander is spoken. Libel is written.”

Melkor slouched into a chair. “How do you know stuff like that?”

Mairon shrugged. “How does anyone know anything?”

Melkor snorted. “Fine, but you have an unrivaled collection of useless knowledge.”

“Useless? I’m telling Thuringwethil you said that.”

“That’s the kind of shit Thil needs to know. You, on the other hand—”

“You know, I never hear you complaining when my allegedly useless knowledge is bailing you out of whatever—”

“Hey,” he said, feigning affront, “I resent the implication that I’m ever in the kind of situation where I need bailing out.”

“Do you need a refresher on the difference between an implication and a declaration?”

Melkor snorted. “Maybe,” he conceded. He reached forward and plucked a sorely neglected stress ball bearing the logo for the Society for Computer Engineers from Mairon’s desk and began to pass it back and forth between his hands.

Mairon watched him fidget for a moment. “What’s bugging you?” he asked.

“Why would something be bugging me?” asked Melkor, squashing the ball in one hand before gently tossing it to the other.

“Because you’re sitting in my office instead of doing whatever it is you normally do at ten in the morning. Shouldn’t you be coming up with something to get back at Gothmog? I saw the cardboard castle he built over your desk; it was actually pretty good.”

“It’s in the works,” Melkor said darkly.

“Which means you have nothing.” Melkor made a face at him and resumed squashing the ball first in one hand, then the other. Mairon watched him for another minute and then sighed. “Come on,” he said briskly. “What’s up?”

“Nothing’s up,” Melkor said, a note of irritation creeping into his voice. “Can’t I just sit here for a few minutes? I don’t know why you’re being weird about it. I do it all the time.”

“Sure,” Mairon said carefully. “But you’re usually complaining, or asking me to fix something.”

“I’d like to argue,” Melkor said, “but you have a point.”

“I know,” said Mairon evenly. “So what’s up?”

Melkor bounced the stress ball on the flattened palm of one hand. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Never a good sign.”

Melkor curled his fingers into a fist around the little ball and glared at Mairon. “You’ve been spending too much time with Thuringwethil,” he accused sourly.

Mairon snorted. “I acquired the art of making fun of you all on my own, thanks. Now stop with the avoidance tactics already.”

“What avoidance tactics?”

“That,” said Mairon tapping his index finger on the desk. “That right there. Whenever there’s anything you don’t want to talk about, you dodge it. You bring up all kinds of inane garbage, you make jokes, you ask questions you already know the answer to—you do anything you can to try and avoid what’s really bothering you.”

“I’ve had it up to here,” said Melkor irritably, tossing the stress ball up to head height, “with you people and your bullshit psychoanalysis. I’m banning you all from watching any more Dr. Phil.”

“What a blow to my afternoon schedule,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. “Now come on. Spit it out.”

Melkor groaned loudly and sunk down in his chair, letting his head tip back so he could avoid Mairon’s gaze. “I just met with Thuringwethil to go over a few preliminary things about the Silmaril acquisition.”

“That definitely needs a new name,” Mairon muttered, frowning.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor, waving a hand dismissively. “Anyway, she was just briefing me on where we stand. I don’t know if Formenos is going to get enough evidence to make a case here, but if they do, she wants us to be ready.”

“As we should be.”

“I know,” said Melkor, blinking up at the ceiling. “But it’s been making me think about all the shit that’s been going down and all the scrambling we’ve been doing to keep it under control.” He sighed. “There’s just something that needs to be said, alright?”

Despite himself, Mairon tensed, but his voice betrayed nothing of his disquiet when he spoke. “Then say it,” he said evenly.

Melkor put both hands on the arms of the chair and levered himself upright, finally looking at Mairon. “All the running and the planning and just the *work* that you’ve done in the last few weeks—I want you know that I see it.”

Mairon stared at him, nonplussed. “I—what?”

“Look, when you’re down in your lab at three in the morning stressing about program integration, I think you sometimes wonder if I have any idea that you’re doing all this work. I just want you to know that I do, and I don’t forget it.”

Mairon frowned, perplexed. “Why are you telling me this right now?”

“Because it isn’t always clear, but it’s something you should know.”

Mairon nodded slowly. “Thanks,” he said softly.

“Don’t thank me,” Melkor said, shrugging. “It’s just the truth.”

“Still,” said Mairon. “I appreciate it.”

Melkor grinned. “Keep that in mind next time you’re pissed at me.”

Mairon rolled his eyes. “Shouldn’t take long.”

“That’s probably true, knowing you.”

“Excuse me? You’re the one who does all the dumb stuff I end up having to clean up.”

Melkor snorted. “Whine, whine, whine. Besides, methinks thou dost protest too much. I think you like it.”

“No,” said Mairon, the words leaving his lips before he had really thought them through. “I like you. There’s a difference.” He froze, feeling his pulse quicken against his skin as he tried to keep his face neutral.

To his relief, Melkor snorted and laughed. “Who doesn’t?”

Mairon glanced at his watch. “How much time do you have?”

“Watch it,” Melkor said affably. Mairon grinned, trying to will the beating of his heart into something resembling a normal pace. “I guess you do have a point, though.”

“Since when have you ever cared what anyone else thought?” Mairon said dismissively. “So some people don’t like you. Why worry about it now?”

“I don’t,” Melkor said. “Not usually. But I have a feeling the animosity from the Formenos crowd is about to get a little more intense than the usual dislike I seem to attract.”

“Let’s hope their hostility stays in the social spheres and out of the legal ones,” Mairon said.

“From your lips to—” Melkor waved a hand vaguely in the air. “I don’t know. Whoever might be listening. Anyway, at least we’ll be prepared if it doesn’t.” He reached forward and put the stress ball back in its place before sitting back and running a hand through his hair. “What were you saying about the *Times*?”

“Right,” Mairon said wearily. “They mentioned us in an article about Finwë’s passing.”

“Nothing good, I assume,” Melkor said gloomily.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Mairon, picking up his pen and tapping it pensively on the notepad in front of him.

“You always do,” said Melkor. He heaved a sigh and stood up from the chair at last. “You busy tonight?”

Mairon shrugged. “Just work,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“Gothmog and I are going to that new place over on Anfauglith—dollar shots ‘til ten. You want to come?”

Mairon glanced at his watch again, then at the incomprehensible number of emails waiting in the inbox he had emptied earlier that day and considered, for a moment, his growing list of things to do. “Alright,” he said reluctantly, narrowing his eyes as Melkor punched the air triumphantly. “But I’m not doing any shots, dollar or otherwise.”

Melkor rolled his eyes. “And we were so close to an appearance of fun Mairon,” he said, grinning.

“Hey,” Mairon offered with a shrug, “someone’s going to have to corral the two of you at the end of the night.”

“Always thinking, this one,” Melkor said, tapping the side of his head and pointing at Mairon. “We’ll come get you before we leave.”

“Not before five,” Mairon warned as Melkor walked toward the door. “Actually, make that six.”

“Good one,” Melkor said.

“An air horn!” Mairon called, just as Melkor passed the threshold.

Melkor stopped and turned on the spot, looking back at Mairon with a look of mild confusion and alarm. “Is this a sign of your inevitable breakdown that I should be noting?”

“No, sorry,” said Mairon, tapping his pen on his desk. “It just popped into my head—an idea for your prank. Put it right under the seat of Gothmog’s chair so that when he goes to sit down, the chair hits the trigger, and the thing goes off. He’ll never see it coming.”

Melkor stared at him for a moment before a slow grin blossomed over his lips. “Remember what I said a minute ago about fun Mairon? I think I spoke too soon.”

“Yeah, well, regular boring Mairon needs to get back to work if I’m going to supervise you two children all night.”

“And what a night it will be,” said Melkor, sighing theatrically and clapping a hand to his chest. “More debauchery than ought to be legal on a Tuesday, and all the better because Thuringwethil refuses to come.”

Mairon grimaced. “Wait, Thil’s not coming? Is it too late to back out?”

“Absolutely,” Melkor said cheerfully. “It’s going to be great. Hell, we might even get you to unclench for an hour or two—”

“Get out,” Mairon said firmly, standing up and stalking toward the door.

Melkor took a few steps back, grinning as he started off down the hall. “See you tonight!” he called back cheerfully as he headed toward the elevator.

Mairon closed the door and went back to his desk, drawing the notepad closer to him as he picked up the receiver and began to dial the number. Shaking his head, he forced himself to swallow his

grin as he listened to the dial tone and began to compose his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

I hang out on [tumblr](#) a lot.
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Blasphemous Rumors

Chapter Summary

Feanor's first shot at retaliation comes unlooked for, though he may regret employing this particular strategy. If anyone can play this game, it's Mairon. Meanwhile, Thuringwethil and Mairon have a long-overdue conversation, and Mairon finds that some things may not be as out of reach as he had feared.

Chapter Notes

Brace yourself. Thuringwethil makes a suggestion that Mairon actually takes. Sort of. A little. There may be flirting involved.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The newspaper slammed down on the desk between them with a juddering smack, and both Gothmog and Melkor winced at the brutal intrusion into their half-whispered conversation.

“What the fuck, Thuringwethil?” Melkor groaned, squeezing his head in his hands as he tried unsuccessfully to rid himself of the sharp stabs of pain that bled out from the center of his skull.

“Loud,” was all Gothmog said as he braced his hands on the edge of the reception desk and lowered his head between his arms, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

“You want loud?” Thuringwethil demanded, her eyes flashing angrily. “I’ll give you loud. I—”

“Thil,” Melkor said, an imploring whine in his voice as he held out a hand to stop her. “Honey. Babe. For the love of God, shut the fuck up—”

“Excuse me?” Thuringwethil’s words were quiet, but there was a challenge lurking below the treacherous surface of calm.

In spite of—or, perhaps, because of—his state of sloppy, hungover disarray, Melkor found himself irresistibly drawn to the challenge. He narrowed his bloodshot eyes, trying to focus on her, and attempted to arrange his face into a frown. “You heard me,” he said, wincing at the volume of his own words. Ears buried between his shoulders, Gothmog managed a groan.

Thuringwethil narrowed her eyes at him. Then she slammed her palm against the desk, sending Gothmog and Melkor reeling away from her.

“Jesus,” Melkor complained loudly, smashing his hands over his ears and glaring at her.

“Hrngf,” said Gothmog, letting his face fall hard against the surface of the desk.

“Why do I even bother?” Thuringwethil demanded icily. “Here I am, driving myself nuts trying to figure out how to clean up this mess, and you’re too busy nursing a goddamn hangover to even notice anything is wrong.”

“Oh my God,” Melkor complained dramatically. “What are you even talking about?”

“See for yourself,” she said, snatching up the newspaper from the desk and brandishing it roughly under his nose.

Melkor leaned his head back as he tried to force his eyes to find the source of her ire. After a moment, a grin spread across his face as he concentrated long enough to recognize the figures in the picture splashed across the page. “What’s that?” he asked hazily. “*Life and Style*?” With an impressive display of lightning-fast dexterity, Thuringwethil wound the newspaper into a tight roll and slapped it across the top of Melkor’s head. “Fuck,” Melkor said irritably, swiping belatedly at her as she withdrew. “What the—”

“Will you be serious?” she demanded. “That’s a half-page picture of you idiots on the fucking front page of the *Ēa Times*.”

“Come on, Thil,” he said, feigning sympathy as he rubbed the top of his head. “It’s ok. Someday you’ll be important enough to get a spot on the front page too.”

She made to thwack him again with the newspaper, but he deflected her hand, and so she reached out with her foot, hooking him behind the knee and sending him sprawling sideways into Gothmog, who whimpered. The desk groaned under their combined weight, and Thuringwethil slapped the newspaper down on the wood in front of them, eliciting another string of curses from them as they tried to straighten themselves out. “This is not a joke,” she growled, bringing her face down close to his and scowling formidably. “We have a real problem, and as usual, it was created by you.”

“Oh no,” Melkor said, still leaning gently against Gothmog and glaring back at her. “Not this time. Whatever it is, I know I didn’t do it. I may have been out all night, but we didn’t even get into any trouble. I can prove it. I have witnesses.” He nudged Gothmog, who simply turned his head and grunted.

“Idiots,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not what you did. It’s what they’ve turned it into.”

Melkor rubbed at his eyes. “Look, maybe it’s the hangover, but I don’t have a clue what you’re—”

She tapped the pad of her hand roughly against the newspaper three times in quick succession. “I told you this Formenos stuff was going to come back to us,” she said darkly.

Melkor’s brows furrowed suspiciously, and he lunged forward unsteadily to snatch the paper away from her. He held it close to his face, narrowing his eyes and trying to block out the spinning of the room as he scanned the lines of text. Thuringwethil watched the anger bloom across his face with very little satisfaction. “Motherfucker,” he breathed.

“Doubt it,” Thuringwethil said coldly. “She’s dead.”

Melkor ignored her. “Do you see what he’s saying?”

“Yes,” she said pointedly. “I can read.”

“This has *got* to be illegal,” he complained.

“Right,” she muttered. “Now you care about the law.”

“I do when some asshole is printing lies about me in the damn paper,” he said angrily.

“Technically,” she said, “he’s only speculating.”

“Speculating?” he repeated angrily. “Are you serious? Listen to this!” He cleared his throat and began to read. “Surprising, perhaps, only to those who have been living under a rock, Melkor Bauglir has once again managed to make the news for less-than-exemplary reasons. The ex-convict CEO of Angband Enterprises was spotted out at the newly-opened Ard-Galen bar last night in the company of two business subordinates (Angband COO Mairon Smith and Head of Security Gothmog Valaraukar; all three pictured above), and in many ways, his night was no different than that of the other patrons of the bar. There was copious drinking, loud laughter, and some truly reprehensible karaoke—but one must wonder if, for these patrons in particular, a night of carousing was really appropriate, given the circumstances.

“Devastating news that rocked the international engineering and defense communities yesterday, as Finwë Noldorán passed away unexpectedly from a heart attack in his office at Formenos. Though funerary arrangements are still pending, many prominent figures of an industry which both respected and revered him gathered for a night of remembrance, paying homage to a well-loved colleague as they sought to understand his untimely passing. Despite tensions on the commercial front, several of Formenos’ competitors came to pay their respects, including Elu Thingol of Doriath (brother to Finwë), Azaghâl of Belegost, and even a delegation from Valinor which included Aulë and Yavanna Mahal, Námo and Vairë Mandos, and even Melkor’s own brother, Manwë Ilmaren. Representatives from Angband Enterprises were conspicuously absent—no shock to those who noted their failure to release a statement in the initial wake of Finwë’s passing.

“There are some who may dismiss these actions as mere social ineptitude—there is, of course, no rule that requires words of sympathy or shows of solidarity, though readers may note that etiquette would seem to recommend it. Yet those who follow the news might see this as less a one-time misstep, and more a symptom of a larger, growing problem. Playing nicely in business has not historically been a strength for Angband’s leader, if his three-year stint in Mandos County Correctional Facility gives any basis by which to judge (for those who may not know, Bauglir served three years of a ten year sentence for insider trading and was released just six weeks ago). One might expect most men to come out of such an experience chastened, but then, of course, Melkor Bauglir is not most men. Which is why it comes as little surprise to learn that Bauglir has once again managed to find himself on the wrong side of the law.

“Several sources confirm that Bauglir and Angband Enterprises are currently being investigated, though sources were unable to reveal the nature of the current case against the troublesome company. A tip from a source inside Formenos, who wished to remain anonymous, confirmed that a program was stolen late last week from company property, and that employees are cooperating with law enforcement as the investigation begins. It had been speculated that the theft could be linked to a Formenos competitor, perhaps one which might benefit from the technology they were close to completing. In an interesting turn of events, eyewitnesses reported seeing federal investigators entering Angband property on Wednesday morning, later leaving with several cars filled with evidence boxes—though law enforcement declined to comment on whether this seizure was related to the ongoing investigation at Formenos.

“Whether or not the current investigation has ties to the Formenos case, it is certainly troubling to see Bauglir and Angband back under legal scrutiny so soon after leaving federal custody. Even taken alone, these events are troubling, but coupled with the flippancy and even disrespect with which he treats this business community, they seem less like isolated incidents, and more like symptoms—symptoms of a larger disease, one which has the potential to touch all those in the industry with whom Angband comes in contact. For now, it remains to be seen just how far this cancer has spread.”

He threw the paper down on the desk and glared at Thuringwethil. "This is fucking ridiculous," he growled.

"I know," she said.

"Tell me you have a plan."

She sighed. "The only thing we really have a shot at is libel," she said.

"Fine," Melkor said. "Do that."

"But," she continued, ignoring his outburst, "libel is hard to prove. Whatever was printed had to have damaged your reputation or livelihood in some appreciable way, and to get sufficient evidence for that could take months."

"But—"

"Morning!" said a voice from behind them as the front doors opened and ushered in the icy wind that blew snow relentlessly along the sidewalks outside. The three of them turned to see Mairon coming toward them, balancing a cardboard drink carrier in one hand and his phone in the other. He grinned at Melkor and Gothmog, brushing snow from his coat. "My guess wasn't far off, then."

"For what?" Melkor said irritably.

"For when you two would finally roll in here," Mairon said lightly, setting down everything in his hands and taking off his gloves. He carefully pulled two cups out of the carrier and set them down in front of Melkor and Gothmog.

"This better not be one of those sugary monstrosities you like," Melkor grumbled, gingerly picking up the cup and peeling back the tab to sniff at the contents.

"It's black coffee," Mairon told him. "You know, I read only psychopaths take their coffee black."

"Just what I need," Melkor muttered, taking a sip of the scalding coffee and giving a satisfied sigh as the heat flooded his mouth. "More accusations."

Mairon peeled back the tab on his own coffee. "Wow," he said. "You're even more pleasant than I expected. Any particular reason?"

"See for yourself," Melkor said darkly, shoving the newspaper across to him and nursing his coffee.

Mairon picked the paper up with his free hand and began to read, his brow furrowing as his eyes descended down the column. He slowly placed his coffee on the desk and grasped the other side of the newspaper, shaking it gently to straighten it. His face darkened as he read, his lips turning down into an angry glower as he consumed the piece before him. He finished reading and stared for a moment at the picture, grinding his teeth absently as his fingers curled into the pliant paper.

"We were just discussing," Thuringwethil said gently, "how hard it is to sue for libel. Thoughts?"

Mairon glanced up at her, a dangerous look in his eyes. Then, with a sharp snap, he folded the paper and tucked it under his arm. Turning on his heel, he made for the stairs, disappearing through the door without a word.

"What's that all about?" Melkor wondered.

“I don’t know,” Thuringwethil said, “but I’m not sure I liked that look.”

“Whatever,” Melkor said irritably. “Give him a few hours to fume—he was too chipper anyway. In the meantime, let’s consider our options.”

From the vicinity of the desk, Gothmog gave a tremendous groan. “How about I do that,” said Thuringwethil, shaking her head, “and you two focus on becoming functional human beings?”

“Good idea,” Melkor said. He pushed gently against Gothmog’s shoulder. “Come on, lightweight. Let’s go upstairs and order some lunch.”

Swearing loudly, Gothmog pushed himself up off the desk and attempted to stand up straight. “You alright?” Thuringwethil asked, eyeing him doubtfully. He had begun to look rather pale.

“Yeah,” said Gothmog gruffly. “But I think I’m gonna—” He stopped, eyes going slightly unfocused, and turned to the side just as a truly impressive stream of vomit erupted from his mouth.

“Right,” said Thuringwethil smartly, picking up her coffee and stepping away from the desk. “I’ve got a lot of work to do, so I’ll let you handle this one.” She patted Melkor gently on the shoulder as she headed for the stairs.

“Perfect,” he muttered mutinously, stepping back and raising his cup to his lips as Gothmog continued to heave. “Just fucking brilliant.”

“Morning,” said Mairon brightly, not bothering to knock as he strode through Melkor’s open office door.

Melkor made a face at him. “I’m going to make it company policy that you can’t be this energetic before noon,” he grouched.

“Yeah, well, you might want to hold off on that one,” said Mairon, failing to hold back a grin as he tossed a newspaper onto Melkor’s desk.

“What’s this?” Melkor asked, barely glancing at it.

“Just read it,” Mairon insisted.

Melkor sighed but did as he was asked, smoothing the front page of the *Times* with his hand as he settled into his chair.

It is never easy, began the piece, to begin to deal with the loss of a parent, particularly when death comes as unexpectedly as it did for Finwë Noldorán just two days ago. The industrial community of which he was both patron and member is still reeling from the news, struggling to understand the such an enormous loss. None, of course, are so highly affected as the family this beloved father and grandfather leaves behind.

It is never easy to contend with grief. Too often it manifests itself as something else, something easier to understand and manage. Perhaps this is the case for eldest son and likely Formenos heir Fëanor Finwion, who seems to have let anger take the place of what can only be assumed to be a grief too hard to bear. This publication ran an essay penned by Finwion yesterday in which he scathingly dismissed competitor and Angband CEO Melkor Bauglir. Finwion was quick to produce speculation—perhaps some might even call it accusation—regarding his competitor, particularly

in regards to what we've learned is now an ongoing investigation into a theft that occurred at Formenos shortly before his father's death. The vitriol, the incredible paranoia, the lashing out—perhaps all can be explained and even forgiven in the context of what we can only assume must be tremendous grief and shock. Yet it must be noted as well that while appalling, this style of angry, unwarranted attack is not altogether unfamiliar to Finwë's eldest son.

Fëanor Finwion is no stranger to sweeping accusations. It is no secret that a Formenos board meeting disintegrated late last year when it was even suggested that second Finwion son Fingolfin might begin to share administrative responsibilities of the burgeoning company. The elder Finwion was heard, according to sources, to accuse his brother of "currying favor", "trying to better his own position", and "disrupting the rightful family hierarchy." Sources close to the family say such outbursts are to be expected when working with Fëanor.

"He's not easy to work with," said one source, who wished to remain anonymous. "It's hard, you know, because he's smart, and he's got these ideas, but he won't let anyone help him. He can be closed off—secretive, you know? Even with family. All that stuff with Fingolfin was a rehash of things that have been said before behind closed doors, but of course it wasn't something the family wanted out there for public consumption. It's a shame, really, because it seems that the more success Formenos has had, the more unstable he's become. Shouting at people, making accusations, firing employees on the spot for the littlest things...these are daily occurrences. It really makes for a tense situation within the company, especially after the whole board room incident. No one feels safe around him anymore, to tell you the truth. And with this whole investigation thing, we're all a little afraid of what he might do next."

It's hard to say what any of the Finwions might do next. The succession of power at Formenos was not finalized prior to Finwë's passing, leaving the company's fate in legal limbo. Experts speculate that it could come down to a division of assets between the brothers, if they cannot agree on a direction for the company. Despite Fingolfin's very vocal, public insistence that he will not seek control of the company, sources close to Formenos worry it will not be enough. "It's really tense right now," said a company spokesman, who did not want his identity to be revealed. "It's not just waiting to see what's going to happen as far as administrative changes go. Honestly, we're all a little worried about what might happen in the interim. I mean, one near-stabbing with a letter opening is more than enough, you know?"

Another Formenos insider summed up the thoughts of all who are watching this drama unfold. "We just really want to move forward with as little mayhem as possible." Only time will tell how realistic this goal may be.

Melkor slowly lowered the paper back to the desk. "What is this?" he breathed, a grin splitting his face with glee.

"Hey," said Thuringwethil, poking her head into the office. "Did either of you happen to pick up the *Times* this morning?"

"We were just talking about it," said Melkor, smoothing the paper affectionately under his fingers.

"This is brilliant," said Thuringwethil, shaking out her own copy.

"Who did this?" demanded Melkor. "They're getting a raise." His eyes scanned up to the top of the page, and he frowned at the unfamiliar name. "Thomas Mirin," he read, shaking his head. "Should I know him?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mairon could see Thuringwethil working it out, counting under her breath. She looked up at him, a glimmer of appreciation in her eyes. "You sneaky bastard," she said

appreciatively.

Melkor looked up at them. “What?”

“Thomas Mirin,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s an anagram for Mairon’s name.”

“Wait,” said Melkor. “This was *you*?”

“Maybe,” said Mairon slyly, but he couldn’t stop a satisfied grin from crawling across his face.

“You are fucking brilliant,” Melkor said, still grinning happily. “Man, I wish I could see Finwion’s face when he picks this up. Jesus, where’d you find these sources?”

“Right here,” said Mairon, tapping the side of his head.

Melkor cackled. “Perfect,” he said. “That asshole is going to spend weeks trying to figure out who talked. Oh, man, I wish I could see his head exploding right now.”

“Vindication aside,” said Thuringwethil, “this is really, really good. This isn’t overt aggression, like Fëanor’s was. This is subtle, suggestive. And it looks like it’s coming from a third party, which makes it look less like an *ad hominem* attack and more like a declaration of fact.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with a good, old-fashioned *ad hominem* attack,” said Melkor, grinning.

“I’m serious,” said Thuringwethil. “Believe it or not, it matters what people think. This article is exactly what we needed to get public opinion—well, alright, if not exactly in our favor, at least not in Finwion’s either.”

Melkor punched the air excitedly. “Finally, something goes our way,” he said.

“Let’s not get too excited,” said Mairon. “It doesn’t change the fact that we just had half our stuff seized by federal agents. And if this goes to court—”

“We’ll deal with that when and if we have to,” said Melkor. “Right now the only court I’m worried about is the court of public opinion, and you just tipped the scales way in our favor.”

“That he did,” Thuringwethil agreed.

“Someone had to shut him up,” said Mairon, shrugging.

“I doubt it’ll be for long,” said Thuringwethil, folding the newspaper neatly. “But it’s satisfying nonetheless. God, he must be *pissed*.”

“With any luck he’ll stroke out and we can deal with the younger brother,” said Melkor callously. “You know, the wimp.”

“Come on,” said Thuringwethil lightly. “They’re still dealing with one dead family member. Have a little respect.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Melkor said dryly. “But seriously, Mairon, you are a lifesaver—again.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon, grinning.

“Has Gothmog heard yet?” Melkor asked.

“I didn’t tell him,” said Mairon, shrugging.

“Neither did I,” said Thuringwethil.

“Perfect,” said Melkor, pushing back his chair and standing up. He scooped up the paper and walking around the edge of the desk. He paused as he drew level with Mairon, putting a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said with uncharacteristic sincerity, smiling down at Mairon. “You couldn’t have done any better.”

“My pleasure,” said Mairon. “Really.”

Melkor patted him gently on the shoulder and headed for the door. “Gothmog’s gonna love this,” he said excitedly, scanning the paper again as he turned the corner into the hall. Mairon watched him go, smiling faintly until Thuringwethil cleared her throat. He jumped, startled, and looked over at her, frowning as she fixed him with a knowing grin. Before she could say a word, he turned and strode out into the hall, trying to summon as much dignity as he could muster. It didn’t help that he could still hear her snickering two doors down.

Mairon barely glanced up at the knock on his office door. “Busy?” Thuringwethil inquired, leaning into his office.

“Yes, actually,” said Mairon, the flow of typing unmoved by her interruption. Thuringwethil sauntered into his office, and Mairon leaned back in his chair, grinning. “Man, this office needs to work on social cues,” he said. Thuringwethil shut the door and strode purposefully toward his desk. “Uh oh,” he said, watching her sink into a chair opposite him. “I don’t like that look.”

“We need to talk,” she said.

“About what?”

“About you,” she said firmly. “Mairon, I’m tired of watching you torture yourself.”

He blinked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

He shook his head stubbornly. “No, really, I—”

“You like Melkor.”

His face went white, and he looked frantically around the office as though expecting to be overheard. “Keep your voice down,” he hissed.

“That’s not a response,” she said coolly.

He glared at her. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to say it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because,” she said, unable to stifle her grin, “admitting you have a problem is the first step.”

“To what?”

“To overcoming it, obviously.”

“I don’t have a problem,” he said firmly, frowning at her. “Certainly not the one you’re suggesting.”

“Be serious,” she said evenly. “You like Melkor, but you won’t do anything about it. I’m guessing it’s a combination of fear of rejection and anxiety about how it might affect us at work. Although I suspect it’s mostly the fear.”

“I’m not afraid,” he snapped.

“Oh, really? Then why don’t you tell him?” He glared at her and said nothing. “Look,” she said, her tone gentling at last. “I get it. It’s hard to take a leap like this, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.”

“There are a hundred reasons why I shouldn’t do it,” Mairon said irritably.

“And one very good reason why you should.”

“Yeah?” he said doubtfully. “And what’s that?”

“Happiness,” she said simply. “Look, whether you’ll admit or not, I know what you want. Why waste a shot like this when you have it?”

“Because,” he said stubbornly, “it has just as good a shot of making me very, very unhappy.”

“Oh, Mairon,” she said quietly, shaking her head. “I think we both know that isn’t true.”

He leaned forward, searching her face intently. “What makes you say that?” he asked softly.

“Because I know you—both of you—and I think I have the perspective to see a few things you either can’t or won’t.”

He scrutinized her carefully for a moment. “Really?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding slowly. “Really.” She smiled, and he leaned back once more, sighing. “At least promise me you’ll think about it,” she said, standing up at last.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, watching her walk toward the door.

“Finally,” she said, reverting at last to her usual, biting tone. “Progress.”

“Goodbye, Thuringwethil,” he said firmly. He turned his eyes back to his computer as she left, but he found it was now impossible to concentrate. He sighed resignedly and laid down his head, muttering mutinously into the desk and trying to squash the glimmer of hope she had created.

Mairon started violently as one earbud was unceremoniously tugged from his ear, and he turned furiously toward the source of his displeasure, his anger dissipating at the grin on Melkor’s face. “You know,” Melkor said, “besides the fact that listening to music that loud cannot be good for your hearing, I’m not sure it’s really safe. I feel like someone could sneak in here and kill you before you even noticed they were here.”

“Probably,” Mairon said absently, turning back to his computer. “And with how often any of you are down here, it would be weeks until you found me.”

“Not true,” Melkor protested. “I’d come looking for you before then.”

“Oh, really?”

“Sure,” said Melkor, grinning. “I’d get bored with bothering Gothmog in three days—four, tops.” Mairon rolled his eyes. “It’s the truth,” Melkor insisted with mock sincerity. “As much as I love to mess with Gothmog, he’s not the best target.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” said Melkor, shaking his head. “He pretty much just takes everything in stride.”

“And that’s bad?”

“It is,” said Melkor, grinning, “when you’re looking for a reaction. That’s why I mess with you.”

“I’m so glad you think it’s funny to get under my skin.”

Melkor snorted. “What are friends for?” he asked magnanimously.

“Hopefully something more than that,” Mairon muttered. “Anyway,” he said, taking a deep breath and shaking himself slightly. “You seem back to normal today.”

“Ugh,” Melkor groaned. “Talk about hangover—or better yet, don’t. Although I wasn’t nearly as bad as Gothmog. I swear I can still smell the puke.”

Mairon couldn’t hold in a laugh. “I heard,” he said. “Please tell me we’ll never let him live that down.”

Melkor looked affronted. “I’m offended you even need to ask. But seriously, though, how the hell were you so functional? Thil said you were here before her.”

“I told you,” Mairon said, shooting him a look that dripped superiority. “No shots.”

“Fuckin’ Fireball, man,” Melkor muttered darkly. “But unholy amounts of alcohol aside, you still took the two of us back to Gothmog’s before you went home. What time was that—three?”

“Four, by the time I got home.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said. “And you still came in at ten?”

Mairon snorted. “What time do you think regular people come to work? I was here at eight.”

“You know those studies where they deprive people of sleep and try to see how long they can go before they crack? Yeah, those are meant as a warning, not a challenge.”

“Don’t complain,” said Mairon. “It’s just more hours I’m here doing my job.”

“Right,” said Melkor. “Thing is, I’d really like you to keep doing this job for a long time. I’ll be pissed if the reason you drop dead one day out of the blue is lack of sleep.”

Mairon laid his hand over his heart and tipped his head to the side, fixing Melkor with a scowl. “A touching sentiment,” he said.

“Oh, come on,” Melkor said. “I was trying to be nice.”

“Oh,” said Mairon sarcastically. “That’s why I didn’t recognize it.”

“Shut up,” Melkor said airily. They lapsed, for a moment, into amicable silence, and Mairon nodded his head absently to the music in his ear. “What are you listening to, anyway?” asked Melkor, leaning over Mairon to pick up the iPod on the bench. Mairon stayed very still, his eyes focused on the screen as Melkor’s arm brushed over his. Melkor seemed not to notice, snorting as he laid the device back down on the bench. “Are you serious right now?” he asked, leaning back against the bench and crossing his arms.

“What?” asked Mairon defensively.

“You and the fucking eighties, man,” he said. “The whole decade, and you can’t pick anything good?”

“Have you ever even listened to Elvis Costello?”

“That would be a no,” Melkor said dismissively.

“Right,” said Mairon, “because you’ve had yourself boxed into the ‘hey, look how scary I am, I wear all black and only listen to punk’ thing since like, ’93.”

“It’s not a thing,” Melkor said, affronted. “It’s my aesthetic.”

Mairon couldn’t hold in a laugh. “Aesthetic,” he repeated. “Right. Is that what they call it?”

“Everyone has to have a look,” Melkor insisted. “Yours just happens to be ‘idiot who wears ties in an office with no dress code, and might have possibly slept in that shirt’.”

“It’s called professionalism,” Mairon sniffed, raising his chin.

“Fuck professionalism,” Melkor said. “It’s style that people respect.”

“Are you saying I have no style?”

“You have a style,” Melkor said. “I’m just saying people might not respect it.”

“You know,” said Mairon thoughtfully, “I’m not sure I’d like to live up to your standards of respectability.”

Melkor laughed. “You know, you hit a couple whether you mean to or not. I mean, the hair is the obvious one, but there’s also this.” He reached out and traced a finger gently over the line of studs that ran from cartilage to lobe in Mairon’s ear. “It’s a nice offset to the whole stupid business professional thing you’ve got going.”

Mairon barely held in a shiver and raised a hand to his ear, running his thumb self-consciously along the backs of his earrings. He kept his eyes focused on the computer screen and desperately hoped that the flush he could feel on his neck wasn’t spreading to his cheeks. “Might I remind you,” he said carefully, “that we are, in fact, professionals, and we do run a business?”

“Damn right we do,” said Melkor. “But that’s no reason to dress like the man.”

“Do you have, like, a book of clichés that you just pick from for all your conversations?” Melkor reached out and flicked him hard in the ear, sending the ends of several studs stabbing into Mairon’s skin. “Ouch!” he said, swatting Melkor’s hand away. “What is your problem?”

“I’m defending my honor.”

“What honor?” He ducked as Melkor tried to flick him again. “Come on,” he said, grinning. “I think that one was warranted—” He ducked again, barely avoiding Melkor’s fingers as they came toward his head. “Hey,” he said, trying to be as stern as he could with a grin plastered across his face. “Not the hair. That’s where I draw the line.”

“Oh, right,” Melkor said, laughing as he watched Mairon carefully run his hands over his hair, smoothing it in place. “God forbid anyone see you with your hair down for more than two seconds.”

Mairon shrugged. “It’s how I like it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s dumb.”

“Ever heard the phrase ‘to each his own’?”

“Now who’s pulling out the clichés?”

“I must be spending too much time with you.”

Melkor snorted. “Is there such a thing?”

“We’ll know for sure when I start wearing grungy Sex Pistols hoodies to work.”

“Come on,” said Melkor, holding out his sweatshirt for inspection. “Don’t you want to look this cool?”

“Pass,” said Mairon, reaching out to push him away. Faster than he expected, Melkor grabbed him by the wrist and leaned toward him, holding Mairon’s hand away.

“Watch it,” said Melkor, a slow grin spreading across his lips. “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

Mairon licked his lips nervously. “I’d like to think,” he said carefully, “that I know what I can handle.”

Melkor gently lowered Mairon’s hand to the bench, keeping his fingers fixed around Mairon’s wrist. “Is that so?” he asked softly, stepping closer. Mairon looked up into Melkor’s grinning face and hoped he couldn’t feel the racing of his pulse through his skin.

Melkor’s phone suddenly chimed, breaking the tension between them. Melkor released Mairon’s hand and stepped back, digging in his pocket for his phone. Mairon leaned into the bench and tried to remember how to breathe.

Melkor pulled out his phone and sniggered as he looked at the screen. “Shit. I have to go.”

“Let me guess,” said Mairon. “Gothmog finally sat down at the chair in his office.”

“In one,” said Melkor, grinning widely. “I can’t wait to see the look on his face when I tell him it was your idea.”

“Come on,” Mairon complained. “Leave me out of this.”

“Not a chance,” Melkor said happily. “Want to come?”

Mairon shook his head. “I better keep working,” he said.

Melkor gave him a lopsided grin. “You sure?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding slowly. “I have a lot to do today.”

“Suit yourself,” said Melkor, shrugging. He took a step back toward the door. “Hey,” he said, grinning. “Maybe I’ll come down to check on you later. Y’know, make sure you’re not dead.”

“Whatever,” Mairon called after him, rolling his eyes.

Melkor reached the door and threw an offhand wave toward Mairon before stepping out into the hall. Mairon watched him until he disappeared from view. Then, he let his head fall down onto the bench, resting his flushed cheek against the cool, dark surface. Feeling his heart still pounding in his chest, he wondered if Melkor’s suggestion might not be such a bad idea after all.

For perhaps the first time in recorded history, all activity had ceased in the hangar that held the Angband aircraft. The cacophony of engines and power tools, the harried shouts of busy employees had all dwindled to a nervous hush. A solitary voice filled the silence that remained, and all eyes were fixed on the source of their unease. He did not shout; in fact, he was almost frighteningly calm, his words flowing unhurried and smooth even as they electrified the crowd around him with worried fear.

Mairon, in turn, gloried in the rapt attention of the people gathered around him. There was, he had to admit, something incredibly satisfying in the act of eviscerating a subordinate’s failure. He relished the stammered apologies, the terrified widening of the eyes that accompanied his tirades, made all the more chilling by the softness of his voice. He stalked slowly toward his prey, savoring the delicate shifting of weight away from him as he approached. Yet something was not quite right. He had grown accustomed to undivided attention, and the subtle shifting of eyes away from him only fueled his irritation.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, now very close to the engineer who had drawn his ire. “Is there something you find more interesting than our current conversation?”

There was a snort from behind him. “Sorry,” said an unrepentant voice that echoed around the silent hangar. “That would be me.”

Mairon turned slowly and scowled at Melkor. “Can I help you?”

“Not right now. I was just enjoying the show.”

Mairon’s glare would have felled a lesser man. “This isn’t a show,” he said carefully. “This is discipline.”

“Really?” Melkor leaned around Mairon and looked at the engineer. “What did you do?”

“I—I forgot to program the landing sequence for the flight test,” she stammered, eyes now fixed on the floor.

“Oh yeah? Well, you’re fired.” There was a tense moment of silence in which all eyes swiveled to the CEO. “Did I stutter?” he demanded, staring her down.

“No, sir,” she muttered, shaking her head quickly.

“Then give your keys to Gothmog and get the hell out.” She nodded fervently and half-ran from

the hangar. Melkor turned his attention to the gathered crowd. “Am I paying you to stand around?” he demanded.

The crowd dissipated so quickly it may as well never have been, leaving Melkor and Mairon standing alone in the middle of the hangar. “And you say I’m no fun,” Mairon muttered.

“You call that fun? Jesus, you’re such a sadist.”

“No, go on,” said Mairon irritably. “I don’t have feelings or anything.”

“Oh come on,” Melkor said, grinning. “It was a compliment.”

“In what universe?”

“Hey,” said Melkor, “don’t be so offended. It’s one of the things that makes you so good at your job.”

“Really?” Mairon said dryly. “It’s not, you know, my expertise in the field?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor, waving a hand unconcernedly. “Sure. You’re fucking brilliant, your ideas are innovative, and you have a work ethic I’m pretty sure shouldn’t be humanly possible. But there are lots of smart people who couldn’t make this place run as smoothly as you do, and do you know why?” He grinned. “It’s that fear. It keeps people in line.”

“And you were so close to just saying something nice,” said Mairon, shaking his head.

Melkor rolled his eyes. “If it makes you feel better, I like it.”

“Right,” said Marion, forcing words from a mouth that was suddenly very dry. “Because your approval is all that matters.” He managed a grin.

Melkor laughed. “Glad you’ve finally seen the light.”

Mairon shook his head. “Why do I even bother?”

“I honestly don’t know,” said Melkor. “I mean, you know I’m always going to win.”

Mairon opened his mouth to protest but thought better of it. “You know what?” he said, shaking his head. “I’m not even going to start.”

“Good plan,” said Melkor, grinning.

They lapsed into silence, and Mairon glanced at his watch. “Hey,” he said suddenly, bouncing up on the balls of his feet. “You want to go grab dinner?”

Melkor considered him for a moment. “You want me to see if Thil and Gothmog are free?”

Mairon shrugged. “Only if you want to.”

Melkor grinned. “I think,” he said, nodding toward the door and starting to walk, “they can manage without us tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

Mairon wasn't kidding about the black coffee. [See for yourself.](#)

I hang out on [tumblr](#) a lot. Come visit!

Strange

Chapter Summary

There's strange things happening in the business world, and it might not be good news for Angband.

Melkor deals with waiting about as well as you'd expect.

Mairon isn't sure what to make of an offer, but he takes it anyway.

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys! I've been gone for far longer than usual, and for that, I'm sorry! This update ended up being a bit longer than usual--not on purpose, but maybe it'll make up for a bit of the waiting :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Don’t you have something you could be doing?” Gothmog asked sharply, eyeing Melkor irritably. Melkor, sprawled haphazardly in the chair on the opposite side of Gothmog’s desk, shrugged, and once more tossed the basketball from Gothmog’s desk against the wall. Gothmog ground his teeth. “Hello?”

“I heard you,” said Melkor unconcernedly, catching the ball on the rebound and bouncing it on his palm. He caught the ball at the top of its arc and threw it hard against the wall.

“And?”

Melkor caught the ball and turned to look at Gothmog, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

Gothmog tapped his pen on the desk. “What are you doing?”

Melkor twisted the ball in his fingers. “I’m sitting here. What’s it look like?” He sent the ball careening once more into the wall.

“Yes,” growled Gothmog. “But why?”

Melkor shifted slightly and gave Gothmog a look of disinterest. “Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Gothmog irritably. “Because I’m working? Because you should be working? Because you’re squatting in my office and you’re driving me fucking crazy?”

“You’re not doing anything important,” Melkor said unconcernedly.

“That’s not—”

“And,” continued Melkor as though he hadn’t heard, “I am working. If I’m in the building, I’m working.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“And another thing,” said Melkor, now blatantly ignoring any words coming from Gothmog. “I can squat in any office I damn well please. I own the building, asshole. It’s called executive privilege.”

“No,” said Gothmog, sighing resignedly. “It isn’t.”

“Well, then it’s called I’m in charge, and I can do whatever the hell I want, so just shut up.” He sent the ball careening against the wall with a loud smack.

“That sounds about right,” Gothmog muttered. He shook his head and watched Melkor snatch the ball out of the air with an expert hand. “Thuringwethil is going to kill you,” he said matter-of-factly, nodding at the wall.

“She’s probably not even in there,” said Melkor, throwing the ball again.

Gothmog tapped the end of his pen against the desk impatiently and watched him for a moment. “You’re moping,” he said decisively.

“Am not,” said Melkor sourly.

“Yes,” said Gothmog firmly. “You are. Look, I know you’re still pissed about the whole Formenos situation, but sulking isn’t going to do anything about it.”

“I’m not sulking,” said Melkor, an impressive pout blooming across his face.

“We’ve done everything we can do for the time being,” Gothmog continued, ignoring him. “Thil has all our legal angles covered, and as for the tech stuff, I don’t care what they try to throw at us. I guarantee you Mairon has this shit locked up so tight they’ll never find a damn thing. Other than that, there’s not much we can do until we see what their next move is. So quit worrying.”

Melkor tipped his head back, giving Gothmog a look he couldn’t quite place. “I am not,” he said, bouncing the little ball thoughtfully in his palm, “worrying.” He threw the ball viciously against the wall once more. From next door, there was a sharp smack, followed by the sound of footsteps.

“Told you,” said Gothmog, still watching the screen.

Thuringwethil appeared in the doorway. “Throw anything at my wall again,” she said darkly, “and I will rip your arm off.”

“It’s Gothmog’s wall,” said Melkor sourly.

“Don’t you play semantics with me,” she warned him, crossing her arms and leaning on the doorframe. “You’ll lose.”

“Want to bet?” he muttered.

“I’ll take your money any day of the week,” she levelly, crossing her arms across her chest. “What are you pouting about, anyway?”

“I asked him the same thing,” said Gothmog.

“I’m not pouting,” growled Melkor, slamming the ball into the wall with a glower. “Fuck.”

Thuringwethil picked her way across the carpet, intercepting the ball as Melkor threw it again. “Hey!” he said loudly, glaring at her.

“What did I tell you?” she asked, holding the ball just out of reach.

“You’re not even in your office anymore,” he complained.

“There were no conditions,” she said decisively. She skirted the back of the chair in which Melkor was sprawled and perched on the edge of the one next to it. “You want something to bitch about,” she said conversationally, “then listen up.”

“Who said I want—”

“Trust me,” she interrupted him. “This is something you’ll want to hear. I just got a call from one of my law school classmates. He works over at Tirion and Noldor.”

“That’s a law firm,” said Melkor, tipping his head to look over at Gothmog. “For those of us who don’t know.”

“I have a TV, you know,” said Gothmog. “I’ve seen the ads.”

“Anyway,” said Thuringwethil impatiently, “former classmate called to tell me that the firm is representing Fëanor and company in some upcoming legal action.”

“What kind of legal action?” asked Melkor.

“The kind,” said Thuringwethil, “that happens when you inherit a shit-ton of money.”

Melkor’s fingers gripped hard into the arms of the chair. “You have got to be fucking *kidding* me!”

“Afraid not,” said Thuringwethil evenly.

“Come on,” said Gothmog, trying to be placating. “We knew this was coming eventually.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “but I didn’t think it was coming this soon. Fuck, man. What happened? Everything I read said it wasn’t expected to come through for months.”

“Apparently there was significantly more internal cooperation than expected,” said Thuringwethil.

“What does that mean, exactly?” asked Gothmog.

“It means,” said Melkor sourly, “that Fëanor decided to get over his feud with his brothers at the worst possible time.” He aimed a savage kick at the front of Gothmog’s desk, sending a few papers fluttering to the floor.

“Don’t feel bad,” said Gothmog, unmoved by his toothless fury. “None of us could have seen that coming. I mean honestly, who ever saw Fëanor cooperating with anyone?”

“If you’re looking for a consolation prize,” said Melkor acidly, “then you haven’t fucking found it yet.”

“Jesus,” said Gothmog, wrinkling his nose in irritation. “Would you take a breath? It’s not the end of the world.”

“You mark my words,” said Melkor darkly. “Formenos getting that money changes the whole game. You just watch.”

“Even on the off chance that might be true,” said Thuringwethil, “it doesn’t mean a thing for us right now. We still have to wait and see what they do.”

“That might be the worst goddamn plan I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Fantastic,” said Thuringwethil, grinning. “You’re the one who came up with it.”

Melkor, caught in a rare moment of indecision—the desire for Thuringwethil to be wrong and the absolute need to never be wrong himself warring within him—chose to simply say nothing.

Thuringwethil sighed. “Jesus,” she said, her words a mere exhalation as she rubbed her fingertips into her temples. “Can you just tell me what’s bugging you so I can figure out how to make you stop sulking already?”

“I’m not sulking,” Melkor snapped. “Or moping, or pouting, or any other ridiculous thing you two are accusing me of. Fuck.”

“Listen up,” said Thuringwethil, her voice dangerously sweet. “I am absolutely not going to be snapped at by you right now, asshole. Do you know the number of overtime hours I’m working this week to make sure everything gets done while Mairon’s out of town? Wait—no, of course you don’t. You’re too busy throwing a Nerf basketball at my wall to go to a fucking Research and Development meeting. And you know, I’d bitch about the fact that I really shouldn’t be the one overseeing all the research operations for the company, except on the one hand, I know it’s pointless, and on the other, I actually want things to get done around here. So you know what? Either go find something productive to occupy yourself, or go take a goddamn nap and wake up in a better mood, because I am not dealing with you right now. Do you understand me?”

“Do I have to remind you,” he said testily, “that I am, in fact, your boss? Fuck. What’s it take to get some respect around here?”

“I do respect you,” said Thuringwethil unconcernedly. “I respect you enough to tell you you’re being an absolute twat, and you need to stop.”

“God,” he complained loudly, slouching low in his chair. “I bet other CEOs don’t have this problem.”

“Don’t work with your friends, then,” she said unsympathetically. “We’re here to tell you the truth, not what you’d like to hear.”

“Fuck that,” said Melkor decisively, crossing his arms.

Thuringwethil narrowed her eyes at him. Then, she turned away from him and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. She pressed her palms together in her lap and exhaled her breath in a quick, sharp burst through her nose. She opened her eyes at last, a look of dangerous serenity on her face.

“Come with me,” she said, standing abruptly. She paused where Melkor’s legs were stretched out under Gothmog’s desk, turning her head just slightly to fix him with a pointed stare.

He withdrew his legs and sat up. “Where?” he asked, watching warily as she passed him and walked toward the door.

“To my office.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, “there’s something I actually need you to help me with and—added bonus—it might even distract you from this pissy mood, which in turn means I won’t have to kill you today.”

Melkor tipped his head back to that it hung over the back of the chair, his dark hair swinging as he

sighed dramatically. “What is it?”

“Some science-y stuff Mairon sent me earlier today,” she said, shrugging. “He told me to find someone to review it as soon as possible, but how the hell should I know who’s qualified to look it over?”

“We have a whole department for that,” said Melkor. “If you can’t find someone down there who can do it, then you might as well fire them all.”

“For fuck’s sake,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose and reigning in her voice. “I’m asking you to do it.”

“Why me?”

“Because,” she said, with as much patience as she could muster, “you have a degree in aerospace engineering. You say every day that you’re better at it than everyone we’ve ever hired. And most importantly, you’ve already eaten up most of the Zen I allotted for today. You need a task to occupy you unless you want me to strangle you with your shoelaces later.”

“I’m wearing slides,” he said, picking up his knees and wiggling his feet.

“*Melkor.*”

“Fine,” he said, turning in his chair to look at her. “I’ll go on one condition.”

“Fine,” she said, sighing. “What is it?”

“You make a shot from right there in the doorway, and I’ll do whatever you want,” he said. He turned to shoot Gothmog a confident grin before turning back to Thuringwethil. Gothmog shook his head.

Thuringwethil eyed the little basket and tossed the ball up and down a few times. “Deal,” she said, squaring up to the hoop and bringing the ball up to shoulder height. She sent it flying in a perfect arc that ended in a satisfying swish through the center of the net, and she smirked at him as the ball rolled under the desk.

“What the fuck,” Melkor complained as Gothmog laughed.

“Pay up,” said Thuringwethil.

“Why are you so good at everything?” he demanded, pushing himself up from the chair.

She laid a hand over her heart and tipped her head back. “It’s the curse I must bear,” she intoned theatrically.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, turning and heading for the door. “Let’s get this over with.”

Thuringwethil gently slid the mug in her left hand onto her desk, the ceramic making the barest of sounds as it scraped against the shining wood. Even so, Melkor jumped, turning to look up at her reproachfully as she continued around the edge of the desk toward her own chair. “Give a man a heart attack,” Melkor griped, turning his attention back to his laptop as she arranged herself behind her desk.

“Don’t snap at me,” she said unconcernedly, setting down the mug in her right hand and coaxing her desktop out of sleep mode. “I brought you coffee.”

Melkor glanced over the mug as though he hadn’t seen it before. “Thanks,” he said, stretching one hand over the rim of the mug and hunching forward to stare at his computer screen.

Thuringwethil rested her elbow on her desk and leaned her chin onto her fingers, eyes scanning the screen of her computer. “Huh,” she said thoughtfully.

His eyes flickered up to her for a brief moment before returning to his work. “What?”

She shook her head. “There’s a story in the news about Alqualondë.”

“And?”

She narrowed her eyes at the screen. “According to the *Times*, they aren’t doing so hot. I guess they owe something like ten million dollars, and it’s due in two weeks. The deadline’s already been moved back twice.”

“Ten million dollars?” Melkor repeated, looking up at last from his computer and fixing her with a look of disbelief. “That’s a lot of money for such a pissant of a company.”

“Yeah,” she said nodding. “That’s what I thought. But apparently they had a seven million dollar contract with the federal government to develop technology over the last ten years. They never developed the technology, but they sure as hell spent the money. Feds are pissed—they want the seven million back plus three in penalties.”

Melkor crowed gleefully. “Man, they are so *fucked*. I heard a rumor last year that those morons were broke, but ten million in debt to the feds?” He cackled happily. “You know, it kind of serves those government assholes right when you think about it. I mean, if you give your money to someone like Alqualondë, then you deserve to lose it.”

“Alqualondë has historically been a leader in the industry,” said Thuringwethil judiciously.

“Alqualondë hasn’t had a decent product in any market in thirty years,” said Melkor decisively, eyes straying once more to his computer as he spoke. “They build ships, Thil—and they’re so fucking terrified of progress that they won’t touch military development with a ten foot pole.”

“So why would anyone give them a contract?”

Melkor snorted. “Do you remember who runs Alqualondë?”

“Not off the top of my head.”

“Guy by the name of Olwë. You probably saw him on the news coverage of Finwë’s funeral. He’s a super old hippie-looking dude with a white ponytail that needed to go, like, three decades ago.”

“Right,” said Thuringwethil, a look of recognition rapidly crossing her face. “Wears weird Hawaiian shirts everywhere, even to formal occasions.”

“That’s the one.”

Thuringwethil’s brow furrowed as she thought. “Isn’t he related to—what’s his name? The freakishly tall one who runs Doriath?”

Melkor looked up at her and rolled his eyes. “You want a short lesson in how fucking incestuous

the business scene is around here? Here we go, Thil. Olwë runs Alqualondë, right? And Olwë's brother Thingol runs Doriath. And both of them were big time friends with Finwë—I'm talking like, grew up together, went to the same prep school, pledged the same frat, the whole shebang. So they've been up each other's asses for half a century. But it gets a layer deeper than that, because if I remember correctly, one of Finwë's spawn married one of Olwë's. So not only do they have the pretentious old money, boys' club, skull and bones bullshit going on, but they're also all technically related."

"And how does this all relate back to the feds giving them a ten million dollar grant ten years ago?"

"Because," said Melkor impatiently, "old money has old connections, and who else works in government but people with old money? They all know each other Thil, and if you think that status didn't have something to do with Alqualondë getting that grant, then you're more naïve than Gothmog actually believing me when I told him I wanted a key to his apartment so I could crash there when I go out."

Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. "What are the odds of connections getting them out of the mess they're in now?"

Melkor snorted. "Why do you think their deadline has been pushed back twice? I mean Jesus, if that was us threatening to default on a loan like that they'd have shut us down so fast you wouldn't even have time to clean out your desk."

"But?"

"But," said Melkor, "the good old boys club will only get you so far. Eventually, even your friends want their money back." He shook his head. "No, I have a feeling Alqualondë is done."

"Well," said Thuringwethil blithely, "it's all good for us, I guess. One less player on the field."

"Damn straight," said Melkor. He sat forward in his chair, resting his elbow on his knee and his chin in his palm as he sought to get a closer look at the information on his computer screen.

Thuringwethil watched him for a moment, taking in the rare glimpse of his focus with interest. Melkor was still, unmoving but for the sporadic tap of his index finger on the keyboard as he coaxed the screen downward through the data.

"Huh," said Thuringwethil, still watching him with curiosity.

"What now?" he asked, not bothering to look at her.

"I don't know," she said, curling the fingers of one hand around her coffee much and cupping the palm of her opposite hand under her chin. "It's just a little odd to see you so engrossed in real work—you know, for our actual business."

"I resent that," he said vaguely, still focused on his screen. "I do plenty of work."

"Distracting Gothmog from finding the rotten food you put in his office doesn't count as work," said Thuringwethil.

He waved a hand unconcernedly at her. "Even still," he said stolidly, tapping the down arrow gently with his thumb.

"I suppose," she said skeptically. "Though usually it's limited to things you come up with on your

own. I don't know if I've ever seen you show this much interest in someone else's work."

Melkor shrugged. "So Mairon did something interesting for once," he said dismissively. "It was bound to happen eventually."

"I'm telling him you said that."

He looked up at last and frowned at her. "It was a compliment."

"In the loosest possible way."

"Aw, don't be jealous, Thil," he said, grinning. "Someday you'll do something interesting enough to catch my attention."

"What?" she said. "Like keep your ass out of jail?"

"Old trick," he said, waving her away. "Not impressed."

"Asshole," she said mildly. "Technically we're still up in the air on that one right now, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," he said unconcernedly. "You keep working on that."

"Watch your step, or I won't."

He snorted and dropped his eyes back to the screen. "This really is good," he said, leaning forward to get a better look.

"I knew you'd want to see it," said Thuringwethil smugly.

"Did not."

"And yet," she said, smirking, "here we are."

"Whatever," he said, leaning back and tapping his fingers on the edge of the laptop. "I wish he'd hurry up and get back already. I need to ask him about a few of these designs."

"He'll be back in a few days," said Thuringwethil. "And there's always email, you know. Or, you know, the phone."

"Meh," said Melkor noncommittally, tilting back his screen. "It's not the same."

He adjusted the notepad on his lap and scrawled a few notes as he thought, oblivious once more to anything but the information in front of him. Thuringwethil watched him work for a moment before settling back in her chair, scooping her mug into her hand and cradling it against her chest. A slow, scheming smile blossomed over her lips, and she took a satisfied sip of cooling coffee. This, she thought blithely, was beginning to get interesting.

"So how is it?" asked Thuringwethil, cradling her phone against her ear as she unwrapped the chopsticks from their plastic and slotted them between her fingers. She pushed her lo mein around the carton and listened to the sigh that rushed over the connection.

"It's hasn't stopped raining since I got here," said Mairon. "And I don't mean a mist or a drizzle—I'm talking torrential downpour, every day. I'm soaked every time I step outside."

“Yeah?” she said noncommittally, gathering noodles on her chopsticks and taking a bite.

“I’m serious, Thil. They’re talking flight delays if it doesn’t let up. Look, I’m not complaining about the warmth and you definitely won’t hear me complain about the lack of snow, but I don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to.”

“I thought you said the conference was going well,” she said around a mouthful of food. “Did something happen with your talk today?”

“No, the talk was great,” he said. “There was huge crowd interest in the project. I went twenty minutes over on questions from the crowd, and I got about three dozen business cards from people who either want to buy, talk or intern with us.”

“That’s great, Mai.”

“Yeah, and you want to know what else? I kept an eye on Fëanor throughout the whole thing, and I’m honestly shocked he didn’t have a stroke.”

Thuringwethil snorted. “Not that you’d try to push our dear competitor’s buttons or anything.”

“Me?” asked Mairon innocently. “Never.”

“Well, it sounds like everything is going exactly how you’d want it to go,” she said, picking at her food as she listened to the silence on the other end of the line. “So what’s up?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s nothing, I guess.” He sighed, and she winced at the rush of static in her ear. “I guess I just hate to be so far away when there’s so much going on where you guys are, you know?”

“Everything is fine here,” she said firmly. “Trust me. You’re doing us way more good out there than you would be here. Not that you wouldn’t be doing us good here, too—you know what I mean.”

He laughed. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, and she smiled at the grin she could hear at last in his voice. “You’re just happy to be rid of me for a while.”

“Believe me,” she said seriously, “if I had the chance to get rid of someone for a few days, you’d be the bottom of the list.”

“How sweet.”

“I know, right?”

“Well, at the very least, I know Fëanor can’t be up to anything while I’m gone.”

“You can honestly probably keep a closer eye on him there than you could here,” she pointed out.

“So I’ve realized,” he said.

“Please tell me you haven’t been weirdly following him around or anything. We don’t need a harassment lawsuit on top of everything else.”

Mairon snorted. “Do you remember who you’re talking to, Thil? I’m not Melkor.”

“Fair point.”

“Seriously, though, I have been keeping an eye on him, and I have to say he’s acting pretty weird. I mean, I realize he isn’t exactly the most low-key guy at the best of times, but there is definitely something off about him over the last week.”

“Yeah? What do you mean?”

“He’s just—I don’t know. Shady. He leaves presentations suddenly. He isn’t socializing with people. I haven’t heard him patronize a single competitor.”

“Maybe he’s just in a funk,” said Thuringwethil judiciously. “His dad did just die.”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon skeptically. “I read in the news about the ridiculous inheritance they’re getting from his dad’s estate—ten bucks says they put it straight back into the company.”

“That’s where the smart money’s at.”

“He’s on his phone every waking moment I see him,” Mairon continued. Thuringwethil could practically hear him shaking his head, could almost see the frown that tugged at his lips as he turned the puzzle over in his mind. “And not like, yelling at someone or doing regular business stuff. I mean like, tucked into a corner, whispering with your hand over your face, I’m making some kind of shady deal here stuff.”

“I think you might be reading into this just a little.”

“Maybe,” he conceded grudgingly. “But I’ve been running into Fëanor Finwion at these things for a long time now, and I’m telling you he isn’t acting like himself.”

“Speaking of acting weird, do you know what’s up with Melkor?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because, as I thought I had successfully implied, he’s being weird.”

There was a pause. “Weird how?” Mairon asked at last.

“Oh, right,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes. “My fault. That statement was way too broad.”

Mairon laughed. “Seriously, Thil. What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” she said nonchalantly. “He’s kind of moping.”

“Moping? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said, twirling noodles around her chopsticks as she focused on carefully keeping her voice dispassionate. “He’s just kind of a grouch. The other day he was just parked in Gothmog’s office throwing that damn nerf ball at my wall until I took it away from him.”

Mairon laughed. “I’d chalk it up to stress,” he said, sounding disinterested. “He dicks around a lot and everything, but you and I both know the whole Formenos thing really is bugging him. If it was anyone else, I might say he was worried about it.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, “on the plus side, at least he found something to occupy himself the past couple of days.”

“Hopefully nothing I have to clean up when I get back.”

“It’s actually those plans you sent over.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“The ideas I sent over for the Silmaril stuff?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You gave that to him?”

“I did.”

“Huh,” said Mairon, sounding rather incredulous. “And he actually looked at it?”

“Almost voluntarily,” she said. “I mean, I had to drag him into starting it, but once he saw what it was, I couldn’t get it him away from it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. He even said you’d managed to do something of interest, for once.”

“And here I was,” said Mairon, “almost thinking I’d manage to get a compliment.”

“Don’t feel bad,” she said. “He told me I’ve never done anything interesting.”

“Right,” said Mairon. “That whole reduced sentence thing you finagled with super boring, Thil.”

“That was pretty much my response,” she said.

“Well if it makes you feel any better, the compliment I got was kind of back-handed anyway, right?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure it’s the only kind he knows how to give.”

Mairon laughed. “Jesus,” he said, sighing again. “I feel like I’ve been gone for ages.”

“Eight days,” said Thuringwethil.

“Not that anyone’s counting,” said Mairon, sounding pleased.

“What can I say?” said Thuringwethil. “We miss you, Mai.”

“Yeah, well, it’s only two more days.”

“Two more days of having to reign in the freak show on my own.”

He laughed. “I have every confidence in you,” he said solemnly, grinning. “Listen, Thil, I have to go if I’m going to make the after lunch sessions.”

“I should get back to work anyway.”

“Hey, let me know if you hear anything else about Alqualondë, alright? I’ll be interested to see what happens to those old hippies.”

“I’ll poke around over at the courthouse and see if anyone knows anything.”

“Sounds good. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Thil.”

She laid the receiver gently down in its place and sighed, glancing quickly across the hall to the door of Mairon’s office, stubbornly closed as it had been all week. She sighed and went back to her solitary lunch.

Melkor’s laughter echoed around the tile-lined walls of the bathroom, ringing out over the sound of the running water as he watched Gothmog working at the sink. “Oh man,” said Melkor, unable to contain his glee as he watched his friend’s thick fingers deftly tie yet another knot. “It’s practically the whole damn department lined up out there. Those assholes won’t even know what hit ‘em.” He rubbed his hands together in excitement and looked over at Gothmog. “You’re sure we can get up there, right?”

Gothmog stretched the end of another balloon over the faucet and watched it begin to fill. “I make the security codes for every door you own,” he said reproachfully. “If you want me to get you onto the upper balcony of the hangar so you can throw projectiles at your entire aerospace department, then consider it done.” He removed the dangerously-full balloon from the faucet and began to tie it shut as Melkor cackled once more.

The door opened behind them, and Melkor turned to reprimand whoever dared interrupt his glee. He stared, momentarily nonplussed, as Thuringwethil strode purposefully into the bathroom, heels clicking on the powder blue tile as she approached the sink. “Hey,” said Melkor, his mouth catching up to the information from his eyes. “You can’t come in here.”

No one ever remembered how strong Thuringwethil was until it was too late. She shouldered Gothmog aside and turned off the tap before reaching forward with both hands, sinking her freshly-filed nails into the thinly-stretched surface of nearly a dozen balloons. The latex buckled under the assault, and water began to spout from the puncture marks left behind as she withdrew.

“Hey!” Melkor said again, anger descending into his voice. “What are you—”

“Why is it,” asked Thuringwethil, heels clicking smartly on the tile as she crossed to the paper towel dispenser and waved her hand impatiently back and forth before the sensor, “that I only see you in this office before the crack of noon when you’re planning some kind of stupidity that I will almost certainly have to deal with later?”

“Thil,” he said, cracking a grin and watching her dry her hands. “You’re a smart girl. You know the answer to that question.”

She narrowed her eyes into a glare, her gaze never leaving him as she stalked to the trash can. “I want to hear you say it,” she declared.

Melkor raised his eyebrows at her. “What, that I’m more motivated by the idea of getting to throw water balloons at a bunch of boring scientists than I am by the concept of sitting behind a desk and drawing wing designs?” He waved both hands in the air in a mocking caricature of defeat. “You caught me.”

“How about this concept, doofus: you sit down and make us some planes, and then we outcompete all our rival companies. What a hilarious prank. No one will ever see it coming.”

“I’m not three years old,” Melkor scoffed. “You can’t fool me with your silly tricks.” Gothmog

and Thuringwethil exchanged a look. “I saw that,” he said, glaring at them.

“What about the stuff Mairon sent over?” Thuringwethil asked. “You seemed really excited about it.” She considered him for a moment. “For, like, three hours,” she added under her breath.

“I heard that,” Melkor said. “And I’ll have you know I worked on that shit for a whole day, thank you very much. But I need some outside input on it.”

“You literally have an entire building full of scientists. You were just going to throw a bunch of water balloons at them.”

“This is beyond them,” said Melkor dismissively. “I need feedback from the king of the nerds. When’s he getting back, anyway?”

“The conference ended yesterday,” said Thuringwethil. “They had a banquet, and then Mairon was supposed to be on a redeye.”

“Nah, his flight got canceled,” said Gothmog. “Weather-related, I think.”

“Shit,” said Thuringwethil. “He did say it rained the whole time he was there.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just waiting to see when the fuck they reschedule him, because I was supposed to pick him up.”

“I don’t know what you’re whining about,” said Thuringwethil. “He didn’t call me, and I’m the one who’s stuck with his damn dog for another day.”

“Hang on,” said Melkor, interrupting them. “Back the fuck up for one minute here.”

“What?” demanded Thuringwethil impatiently.

“I don’t even know where to start. First of all, how often are you calling the poor guy? He’s only been gone a few days.”

“Ten days,” Thuringwethil corrected. “And I think I’ve talked to him every day.”

“I missed him Tuesday and Thursday,” said Gothmog. “Rec soccer league.” Melkor looked back and forth between them in disbelief. “What?” asked Gothmog, shrugging. “He’s our friend—and yours too, you know. Haven’t you talked to him at all?”

“Well, yeah,” said Melkor, “but not like, every day.”

“Let me guess,” said Thuringwethil, sizing him up. “You called him when you needed something.”

“So what?” Melkor demanded defensively. “It’s what he’s there for.”

Gothmog clucked his tongue reproachfully, and Thuringwethil made a noise of disgust. “Jesus,” she said reprovingly. “You are so goddamn thick sometimes.”

“Yeah, man,” said Gothmog. “You’re kind of an asshole.”

“What?” asked Melkor, shrugging unconcernedly. “It’s part of my charm.”

“It’s not, though,” said Thuringwethil.

“Whatever,” said Melkor. “You just don’t appreciate me.”

“You are one hundred percent correct,” said Thuringwethil, earning a glare from Melkor.

He pointedly turned away from her and looked at Gothmog. “What’s this about a ride from the airport?”

Gothmog shrugged. “He asked me to pick up him.”

“Why you?”

Gothmog grinned. “Because he likes me the best. Obviously.”

“Thil has a car,” he said mutinously. “Why not ask her? And she called him more often, apparently.”

“Yeah, well, he probably didn’t want to ask Thil because she was already keeping the dog.”

“And that’s another thing,” said Melkor, frowning. “Since when does he have a dog?”

Gothmog looked at Thuringwethil. “How old is that thing now, would you say?”

She exhaled loudly. “Maybe five or six?” she hazarded, biting her bottom lip.

“How the fuck did I not know?” Melkor demanded.

“Probably,” mused Thuringwethil, “because it’s almost impossible to get you take an interest in anything that isn’t about you.”

He made a face at her. “Fuck you,” he said, though there was no real venom in his tone.

She grinned. “You wish,” she retorted.

“Sorry, babe,” he said, grinning at her. “You’re just not my type.”

“Newsflash, asshole: you’re not exactly mine, either.”

“Oh, please, I’ve seen the type of guy you go for, and—”

“Shut up, both of you,” said Gothmog, fishing his phone out of his pocket and glancing at the screen. He thumbed the button to answer the call and raised the phone to his ear. “Hello?” He listened for a moment and grinned, turning to look at Thuringwethil. “Mairon wants to know why you aren’t answering your phone,” he told her.

She patted her pockets and frowned. “Damn it,” she muttered. “It must be in my office. Why? What’s up?”

Gothmog turned his attention back to the phone. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “Here you go.” He held the phone out to Thuringwethil, who took it with interest.

“Hey, Mai,” she said. “What’s up?” Melkor and Gothmog watched as a puzzled frown settled upon her lips. “No, I haven’t. Why, what—yeah, they’re both right here, but—” She rolled her eyes. “You know what? I’ll call you right back. Take a breath, you lunatic. I said I’d call you right back. Goodbye, Mairon,” she said forcefully, and she hung up the phone. “You two,” she said, waving a hand to encompass both Melkor and Gothmog within her reach. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Melkor, nevertheless following her out into the hall as she strode toward the closest office, which happened to be his. “What are we doing?”

“Will you shut up?” Thuringwethil snapped irritably, going around to the far side of the desk and arranging herself in his chair.

“I can dial a phone number,” he complained, sprawling into one of the overstuffed black leather chairs on the opposite side of the desk and watching as she punched Mairon’s number into the phone on his desk. “I don’t see why you need my chair.” Thuringwethil ignored him and pressed the button for speakerphone. The sound of the dial tone filled the silence that descended between them, though not for very long.

“Hello?” said Mairon as the line picked up, sounding harried.

“Hey, Mai,” said Thuringwethil. “So what did you—”

“Isn’t it like, five a.m. there right now?” Melkor interrupted.

There was a pause at the other end of the line. “It’s five twenty-one,” he said cautiously. “Why?”

“Who in their right mind is up at five in the morning?”

“First of all,” said Mairon, “me, on a regular day. Second of all, I’ve been in this godforsaken airport all night, so it’s not like I was going to sleep.”

“Why not?” asked Melkor, grinning. “There are chairs.”

Mairon made a noise of disgust. “Gross,” he said distastefully.

“Right,” said Melkor. “So you’re not sleeping. What else do you do at five o’clock in an airport?”

“I was working,” said Mairon.

“Could’ve fooled me,” said Melkor, trying to restrain his unrepentant glee.

“Well obviously,” said Mairon, patience quickly wearing thin, “I took a break.”

“Right,” said Melkor. “So you figured, hey, it’s ass o’clock in the morning. I’m going to call Thuringwethil.”

“Hey, assholes,” interrupted Thuringwethil. “Can we get to the actual story?”

“I’m trying,” Mairon protested.

“Don’t look at me,” said Melkor, fighting a grin as Thuringwethil shot him a glare. “So,” he said, turning his attention back to the phone, “you were working?”

“Yes,” said Mairon, “and I took a break to read the news—”

“Slacker,” interrupted Melkor.

“Are you serious right now?” demanded Mairon, exasperated.

“Am I ever?”

“Can I just tell the story, or are you going to interrupt me the whole time?”

“I don’t know,” said Melkor. “Sounds like me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Thuringwethil swore, picking up a handful of pens from the desk and throwing

them at Melkor. “Will you shut up and let him talk?”

“Fuck,” said Melkor, trying and failing to dodge the flying pens. “Why is your aim so damn good?” They started to argue, one on top of the other, a piercing cacophony that echoed around the room as traveled down the line as a loud, jumbled mess.

“Everyone shut up,” said Gothmog loudly. Thuringwethil and Melkor both turned to glare at him, but he merely nodded at the phone, relishing the sudden silence. “Go ahead, kid,” he said blithely.

“Anyway,” said Mairon, shaking his head, “I take it none of you picked up a paper yet this morning?” Gothmog, Melkor, and Thuringwethil looked at each other and shrugged. “I take your silence to mean you did not.” The three of them shook their heads in concert. “Guys,” said Mairon, sounding annoyed. “I can’t hear your heads shaking. Jesus.”

“Just tell us what you read in the damn paper,” said Thuringwethil.

“Formenos bought Alqualondë.”

“You’re kidding,” said Gothmog.

“What the fuck?” said Melkor.

Thuringwethil scowled and nudged Melkor’s computer into life.

“It’s true,” said Mairon. “It’s in this morning’s *Times*.”

“Weren’t they, what, ten million in debt?” asked Gothmog.

“Something like that,” murmured Thuringwethil, typing.

“Yeah,” said Mairon, “and who just got a ten million dollar windfall from his dead dad?”

“Ok,” said Melkor, holding up one hand as though trying to be reasonable. “I hate Fëanor’s guts so much I’d like to rip them out and watch them burn, but the guy’s not stupid. Why would he blow all that money on a sinking ship like Alqualondë?”

“That’s the thing,” said Mairon. “No one knows. He bought them out at the last minute, right before their bankruptcy deadline. He essentially saved them from either defaulting or facing a huge penalty and possibly some jail time. I don’t know about you, but Fëanor has never struck me as the charitable type. So what’s his angle?”

“Finwë was always kind of chummy with Olwë,” said Melkor musingly, leaning forward and leaning his chin into his palm.

“Maybe that money came with strings attached,” Gothmog suggested.

“Nah,” said Melkor. “The old man up and kicked it out of the blue. How would he have known to make that kind of provision?”

“Even if there was something like that,” said Mairon, “Fëanor would have gotten out of it.”

“Damn,” said Thuringwethil, leaning closer to the computer screen. “What does he think he’s doing?”

“Did you find it?” Mairon asked.

“Not like there’s much to see,” she said, turning the screen around so Melkor and Gothmog could see it.

“So what’s it mean?” asked Gothmog, skimming the lines of text with little interest.

“It means,” said Melkor, “that Fëanor is an idiot. Let him waste his money on imploding companies. That’s less time he’s spending trying to skewer us.”

“That’s the thing,” said Mairon. “You said it yourself. Hate him all you want, but the guy’s not dumb. What’s in it for him?”

“Maybe Melkor’s onto something,” said Thuringwethil musingly. “Maybe it’s just a helping-out-a-friend thing.” She looked over at Melkor. “Didn’t you say they’re related somehow?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. Fëanor’s brother married Olwë’s daughter.”

Thurinwethil shrugged. “Maybe that’s all it is.”

Mairon snorted. “Right,” he said skeptically. “Because we all know Fëanor Finwion cares *so much* about family.”

“He has a point,” said Gothmog.

“Then what do you think he’s up to?” asked Thuringwethil.

“I don’t know,” said Mairon, sounding troubled. “But I’ll tell you right now, I don’t like it. The whole thing has a weird feel to it.”

An odd silence descended between them, an air of uncomfortable speculation that set them all on edge. Suddenly, Melkor yawned, stretching his arms over his head and groaning loudly. “Jesus,” he said. “It’s still too early to be here. Why the hell am I awake again?”

“Because,” said Gothmog, “you convinced me it would be a good idea to go and pelt the flight test team with water balloons.”

“Please tell me,” said Mairon, an air of urgency about his words, “that you didn’t throw water-filled projectiles at aircraft that have taken many years and many more millions of dollars to prepare.”

“Oh, please,” said Melkor. “We know how to aim.”

Mairon groaned anxiously.

“Relax,” said Thuringwethil, taking pity on him. “I intercepted them before they even got the balloons filled.”

“I owe you one, Thil,” said Mairon.

“Then get back here soon, okay?”

“Trust me,” said Mairon. “I’d rather be there than here.” He sighed, a rush of static over the line. “Alright,” he said briskly, “I’ll let you get back to work—well, one of you, anyway.”

“Thanks,” said Melkor at once. “I’m very busy.”

“Definitely who I was talking about,” Mairon muttered.

Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. “Bye, Mai,” she said. She ended the call and sat back, tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair. “I’m going to go see what I can dig up on this acquisition,” she said, standing abruptly. “There has to be more to it than they’re letting on in the press.”

“Have at it,” said Melkor, turning to watch her stalk out into the hall.

Gothmog yawned and stretched. “I need caffeine,” he said, heaving himself up and out of the chair. “You want to do that place on fifth?”

“Sure,” said Melkor distractedly, tapping his thumb on the edge of the desk. He made no move to get up.

“Well?” prompted Gothmog. “Are you coming?”

“What?” said Melkor, looking around at him as though surprised he was still there. “Oh, right. Give me five minutes, will you? I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

“Don’t take too long,” said Gothmog, starting toward the door. “I will leave without you, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor, watching him disappear around the corner.

He listened as Gothmog’s footsteps retreated down the hall, sitting still in his chair until he heard the elevator doors open and close. Then, he stood up and went to the door, closing it with a soft click. He padded back to the desk and seated himself in the big chair on the far side, settling in before leaning forward to pick up the receiver of his office phone. Pressing a few quick buttons, he leaned back and listened to the dial tone.

“Still me, you know,” said Mairon as soon as the line picked up.

“I know,” said Melkor. “I called you on purpose.”

There was a rush of static over the line as Mairon sighed. “Listen, I’ve been sitting in this airport all night, and I’m really not in the mood to field a prank call, so can you just—”

“It’s not a prank call.”

There was a short pause between them, a moment of not-quite-silence filled by the quiet rush of the crowd behind Mairon. “Alright, then,” he said cautiously. “What is it?”

Melkor considered the question for a moment but found he had no suitable answer. “Do you know everyone but me has talked to you this week?” he asked instead.

“If by everyone, you mean Gothmog and Thuringwethil, then sure,” Mairon said. “But that’s not entirely true. I talked to you on, what, Monday?”

“About the flight test,” Melkor reminded him.

“Right,” said Mairon. “The one you tried pelt water balloons at today.”

“Yeah, I should really get back to that...”

“Please,” said Mairon, anxiety not entirely hidden by the lightness of his tone, “don’t.”

“I mean,” said Melkor, as though he hadn’t heard, “I did make Gothmog spend eight dollars on balloons.”

“Do you want to know if you can give a man a migraine over the phone?” Mairon demanded. “Because the answer is yes. So you can stop trying.”

Melkor laughed. “Man, it’s not the same around here when you’re gone.”

“You don’t say?”

“It’s too quiet,” said Melkor, “and too calm.”

“You know,” Mairon mused, “that was almost nice.”

“No one’s running around predicting an imminent disaster,” Melkor added.

“And there it is,” said Mairon, the roll of his eyes practically audible.

“Well, it’s true,” said Melkor blithely.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon testily. “I get it. I stress a little—big deal.”

“A little?” Melkor repeated incredulously. “Jesus. A little would be showing up an hour early for a meeting or a flight test to make sure everything is ready. What you do is in a league of its own. I’ve seen you stay in this place for four days straight when we’re testing things. I’m pretty sure there have been days when you’ve consumed nothing but sugar and coffee. And even when there’s literally nothing going on, you’ll turn down invitations in favor of just holing up alone in that lab of yours, staring at your computer for hours on end.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mairon, “is this just ‘be mean to Mairon hour’ or do you have a point?”

“My point,” said Melkor, “is that you ought to take a break every once in a while. That amount of work you do cannot be healthy.”

“I don’t hear you complaining when you’re looking at our financial reports.”

“All I’m saying is it wouldn’t kill you to take a break once in a while.”

Mairon snorted. “I distinctly remember taking a break,” he said. “Right before I left. With you, in fact.”

“I might remember something about that,” Melkor said thoughtfully.

“Yeah?”

“Then again, I might need a refresher.”

“Is that right?”

“You know my memory,” said Melkor airily, grinning.

“All too well,” said Mairon, his voice familiarly longsuffering.

“Good,” said Melkor. “Then it’s settled.”

“Hang on,” said Mairon, switching the phone to his other hand and frowning slightly. “What’s settled?”

“You. Me. Dinner. When you get back.”

“You know,” said Mairon, “I’m not sure I agreed to that.”

“I didn’t hear you say no.”

Mairon snorted. “Fine. Twist my arm.”

“Well,” said Melkor, “if you don’t want to…”

“I didn’t say that,” said Mairon quickly.

“Then like I said,” said Melkor smugly. “It’s settled.”

“Then I guess I’ll see you when I get back.”

“I guess you will.”

“See you then,” said Mairon. He listened for a few seconds, the bustle of the crowd vying for his attention as he continued to cradle the phone to his ear. A slow grin bloomed upon his lips. “You didn’t hang up,” he said, a gentle accusation in his tone.

“Yeah, well,” said Melkor. “Neither did you.”

“You called me,” Mairon countered. “You’re supposed to hang up first.”

“Says who?”

“Says etiquette.”

“Since when have I ever given a flying fuck about that?”

Mairon rolled his eyes, but he laughed in spite of himself. “Probably never,” he said. He sighed. “I really should go check the departures again, though.”

“Then go,” said Melkor.

“One thing before I do.”

“What’s that?”

“Dinner.”

“Yeah?”

“With you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“When I get back.”

“Did we not already establish this?”

Mairon took a deep breath. “What’s it mean?”

Melkor laughed. “Don’t overthink it.”

“Just tell me.”

“Go check your departure board.”

“But—”

“Goodbye, Mairon.” There was a distinct click, and the line went dead.

Mairon held the phone away from his face, watching as the call flashed once, ended, and returned to the home screen. He lowered his hand to his lap and sank low in the chair, tipping his head back. Heaving an almighty sigh, he closed his eyes and fervently hoped that the airline had sorted out the flights at last.

Chapter End Notes

I hang out on [tumblr](#) a lot. Come visit!

Hidden Charms

Chapter Summary

Mairon and Thuringwethil try to solve the merger mystery and dig up some interesting dirt. Mairon finally gets a clue to really understanding the Silmaril program. Melkor realizes dinner might be harder to come by than he thought.

Chapter Notes

GUYS. Can we talk about how I never intended for a 3+ month hiatus to happen just now? Seriously, I'm really, actually, very sorry about that. Life just wouldn't let up. Anyway, here's an extra-long update for your trouble. If you stick with it til the end, you just might catch a glimpse of a cute first date.

(sorry again, ok, i'm seriously the worst, and you guys are the very best.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hey.”

“Mmmph.” Mairon blinked tiredly and turned his head to find Gothmog smiling sympathetically at him. “What?” he asked, yawning.

“We’re here, doofus.”

Mairon groaned and turned his faced toward the window, wiping away the condensation with his sleeve. He could see the entrance to the building through the drizzle of rain that was falling beyond the fogging glass and he sighed, turning away again and closing his eyes. “Five more minutes,” he murmured, settling back against the seat and retreating within the warmth of his coat.

“You can have five hours if you just let me take you home,” said Gothmog.

Mairon opened one eye and scowled at him. “Are you kidding? I’ve been gone for ten days. I’m honestly surprised the place is still standing.”

“Oh, please,” said Gothmog, unimpressed. “I was here the whole time.”

“Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“Don’t be a dick.”

“Gothmog, I love you, but you are not my first pick for babysitting this place.”

“Why not?”

“Come on,” said Mairon, narrowing his eyes at Gothmog. “You were throwing water balloons at my test models like, two days ago.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, and? They’re test models, Gothmog. I put a year and a couple million dollars into them.”

“They’re drones, dude,” said Gothmog, grinning unrepentantly. “If they can’t stand a little water, then you’ve got bigger problems than one thwarted water balloon prank.”

“Do you really want me sit here and explain to you the difference between test models and finished products? Because I will.”

“And besides,” said Gothmog, ignoring him, “we never even got out of the building, let alone to the test site.”

“Thank God.”

“No, thank Thi. Honestly, if you’re not going to trust me, then at least have some faith in her. She was here the whole time, and believe me, she was doing a damn good job of following your own personal no-fun guidebook.”

“First of all,” said Mairon. “Rude. But I guess it’s nice to know there was at least one responsible person here last week.”

Gothmog flicked him in the side of the head. “I should’ve left your ungrateful ass at the airport.”

“Watch it,” said Mairon, glaring at him as he smoothed his hair back into place.

“Right,” said Gothmog, rolling his eyes. “Can’t mess up your perfect hair.”

“You know,” said Mairon, extracting his keys from his pocket and opening the car door at last. “Your tone says insult, but all I hear is a compliment.”

“Carly Simon could’ve written a song about you, you know,” said Gothmog, stepping out onto the sidewalk and slamming the door behind him.

“It’s not vanity if it’s the truth.”

“No, at this point, I think it’s just narcissism.”

“You’re such a jerk,” said Mairon, shoving him through the door. Gothmog caught himself midstep and turned to lunge at Mairon, catching him in between the shoulder blades and pushing him forward. Mairon reached for the edge of the desk to steady himself, his bag slipping from his shoulder as his fingers slipped over the polished edge.

“Easy,” said Melkor, reaching out and catching Mairon by the shoulder. He looked up at Gothmog. “Don’t break my best engineer.”

“Not my fault,” Gothmog protested, laughing. “It’s that giant head of his—he’s top-heavy.”

“I hate you,” said Mairon, scowling at him.

“Hey now,” said Melkor. “Do we need to have a seminar about hostile work environment or something?”

“If we did,” said Gothmog, “it would literally be a list of things you’re no longer allowed to say to your subordinates.”

“Things like...go fuck yourself?”

“Yeah, just like that.”

“No, but really.”

“Fine,” said Gothmog unconcernedly. “Find yourself another shmuck willing to pick you up from the bar at three a.m.”

“I have other friends, you know.”

Gothmog snorted. “Like who?”

“I don’t know. Thil.”

“Yeah,” said Gothmog, rolling his eyes. “Good one.”

“Fine,” said Melkor. “Mairon, then.”

“Try again,” said Mairon.

“Aw, come on,” said Melkor. “You’d be up anyway.”

“Fair point,” said Gothmog.

“You know,” said Mairon, stepping through the elevator doors as they opened, “you two really need to up your insult game. It’s pretty weak this morning.”

Gothmog grinned at him. “Careful what you wish for you—” His phone chimed, and he glanced at his watch. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered. “I gotta go. Just let me know what time you’ll be done, okay Mai?”

“I might be late,” Mairon warned him as Gothmog backpedaled toward his office door. “I’m crazy busy today.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Gothmog, stepping into his office and rolling his eyes. “What else is new?” He shut the door, disappearing from view.

Melkor turned to Mairon and raised an eyebrow. “Busy, huh?” he asked. “What do you have going on today?”

“Honestly?” said Mairon, starting to unbutton his coat. “There are about a hundred little things that all need my attention like, now.”

“Oh, really?” asked Melkor, rolling his eyes. “Only a hundred?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, grinning as he shrugged off his coat. “So, you know, about ninety-nine more than you.”

“Hey,” said Melkor, feigning offense. “Watch it, or I won’t buy you dinner.”

“Oh, right,” said Mairon. “About that.”

Melkor raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“You still want to go?”

“Unless you changed your mind.”

“No such luck.”

Melkor grinned. “Any idea what time?”

Mairon sighed. “Hard to tell,” he said, laying his coat over his arm. “Check back with me this afternoon, okay?”

“So I have permission to interrupt you later?”

“Since when have you ever needed permission?”

“Good point,” said Melkor, grinning. He turned and started toward his office. “See you later, then?”

Mairon waved as Melkor disappeared around the corner. He looked down the deserted hallway and sighed. Then, he paced down the hall and stopped in front of Thuringwethil’s closed door, knocking gently.

“I’m busy,” she snapped, the wood of the door doing little to soften the harsh tone of her voice.

“Fine,” said Mairon, pushing open the door and stepping inside. “I’ll just go and see my other best friend.”

“Like there’s any other option,” said Thuringwethil, standing and rounding her desk with a grin.

“There’s Gothmog,” Mairon reminded her.

“Oh, please,” she scoffed. “What’s he ever done to earn the best friend status?”

“He did pick me up from the airport this morning.”

“He lives closer. And anyway, I dropped you off—at ass o’clock in the morning, I might add.”

“Fair point,” said Mairon. “I guess it’s a tie, then.”

Thuringwethil laughed, crossing the distance between them in a few quick, short strides. “You don’t know how happy I am that you’re back. Do you have any idea how insane your workload is?”

He snorted. “You know, I think I might. Thanks for covering for me, by the way.”

She rolled her eyes. “Who else was going to do it?”

“True.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. “Did you come straight from the airport? You know you didn’t have to—”

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. “To tell you the truth, I really needed to see with my own two eyes that the place hadn’t burned down or anything.”

“I was here, you know,” she said reproachfully.

“Yeah well, it’s been two against one for almost two weeks. I figured you could use a hand.”

She reached out and gently straightened the knot of his tie, letting her hand rest for a fleeting moment on his shoulder before withdrawing. "I'm glad you're back," she said firmly.

"Me too," he said, shifting his coat farther up on his arm. "So, fill me in. What have I missed?"

"Since I talked to you yesterday? Very little."

"Thil."

"Oh, you know," she said, walking back toward her desk and perching on its edge. "Meetings with the research and development teams, test flights, paperwork...though, to tell you the truth, a lot of my attention has been focused on that Formenos-Alqualondë bullshit. Call me crazy, but something just feels off about it. I don't like it."

"I know what you mean," he said, walking over to survey the uncharacteristic mess of her desk. "It doesn't sit right with me, either."

She sighed and laid her palms flat on the desk, leaning into the solid weight as she thought. "So what is it?" she asked at last. "Are we just paranoid because of the whole debacle involving a certain program which shall remain nameless?"

"I don't think so," said Mairon, shaking his head. "Look, Thil, where there's smoke, there's fire. We just haven't seen the flames yet."

"That's what worries me," she said. "This buyout took us completely by surprise. I don't like it. If we don't know what they're doing, then we can't defend against it, you know?"

"I know," he said. He sighed, running a hand over his head to smooth his hair. "You know what?" he said suddenly. "Let me see what I can dig up."

"Have at it," she said, shrugging. "But don't expect much. I've been looking for days and haven't found a thing."

Mairon folded the paper and tucked it into his bag. "Then it won't hurt for you to take a break," he said, turning toward the door.

"I know that tone of voice. You're up to something."

"I'm always up to something," he said noncommittally.

"Fine. Be vague. Just don't do anything illegal, alright? I'm up to my eyeballs in legal bullshit, and I really don't feel like adding another case to my workload."

Mairon turned in the doorway and gave her a grin that was far from reassuring. "Come on, Thil. You know I don't like to make promises I can't keep. How about we settle for a promise not to get caught?" He turned and walked across the hall toward his own office.

"The last time I heard that," she called, glaring at his back, "we ended up with an audit and a court case."

"Yeah, well, last time I wasn't the one who said it. Relax, Thil. I know what I'm doing." He flashed her a shameless smile as he stepped into his office and closed the door. Thuringwethil sighed and turned back to her work, trying to push the worry from her mind.

It was getting dark when Gothmog shouldered his way into the office, stepping carefully to avoid spilling the hot coffee in his hand. He walked up to the desk and set the paper cup on the edge, watching as Mairon continued to type. A few seconds ticked by in silence until Gothmog cleared his throat.

Mairon jumped and looked up, noticing him at last. Gothmog looked pointedly at the coffee on his desk, and Mairon leaned forward eagerly to retrieve it. “Thanks,” he said, picking it up and taking a sip. “You’re a lifesaver, Gothmog.”

“You’re back one day and I’m already feeding your caffeine habit,” said Gothmog, frowning his disapproval.

“What are friends for?” asked Mairon, grinning.

“You know, I ask myself that all time,” said Gothmog. “About as often as I wonder if you clowns are even worth the trouble.”

“Liar,” said Mairon good-naturedly. “You love us.”

“Very conditionally, and on a rotating basis.”

“That’s such a load of crap,” said Mairon, laughing.

“Fine,” said Gothmog, grinning. “You caught me. Anyway, I thought I was giving you a ride home tonight.”

“I thought you were too,” said Mairon, raising an eyebrow. “Something come up?”

“No, but I’d like to go home sometime, you know, today.”

“I’m finishing up,” said Mairon. “Just give me an hour. Two at the most.”

“Mai, it’s seven-thirty.”

“No, it’s—” Mairon glanced at his watch, then his computer, and finally at his phone, before making a noise of disgust. “You’ve got to be kidding me. When did it get so late?”

“I’m going with progressively,” said Gothmog. “Y’know, throughout the day. Like it always does.”

“You are the opposite of helpful,” said Mairon.

“I do my best,” said Gothmog, preening. “Anyway, are you ready or what?”

“Are you kidding me? I didn’t even make a dent in the work I needed to do today.”

“So that’s a no.”

“You go ahead,” said Mairon. “I’ll be a while.”

“You just said an hour—maybe two. Define a while.”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon, shrugging. “Three hours? Maybe four? Five at the absolute most.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” said Gothmog. “I guarantee you there’s nothing going on here that’s so important it can’t wait until morning.”

“One thing?” asked Mairon, raising his eyebrows. “I can name six off the top of my head.”

“Listen, nutjob, don’t you dare sleep in your office on your first day back,” Gothmog warned. “You need to go home and get an actual night’s sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon unconcernedly.

“I’m serious,” said Gothmog.

“So am I,” said Mairon, wrapping his hands around the coffee and breathing in the heat. “Look, I’ll do my best, okay? Just let me get a little more done. I’ll find my own way home. I promise.”

Gothmog sighed, but relented. “At least come get dinner with me,” he said. “I’m reasonably sure you haven’t eaten all day, and—”

Mairon drew in a sharp breath, setting his coffee down hurriedly on his desk and sitting bolt upright.

“What?” asked Gothmog.

“I forgot about dinner,” said Mairon, pushing himself back from the desk and scrambling to his feet.

“I know,” said Gothmog, raising an eyebrow at him. “That’s what I just said. Well, implied, I guess, but—”

“No,” said Mairon, sweeping papers into haphazard piles and picking up his phone. “I meant with Melkor.”

“Oh, right,” said Gothmog rolling his eyes. “That’s still happening, huh?”

“Probably not now,” said Mairon anxiously, rounding the desk.

“I meant more generally,” Gothmog needed.

“I don’t know,” said Mairon, heading for the door. “Maybe. What do you care, either way?” He paused in the doorway and looked back at Gothmog. “Don’t wait up for me, okay? I’ll just see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Gothmog, trailing him out into the hall. Shaking his head, he headed toward the elevator.

Mairon walked into Melkor’s office to find him still at his desk, looking intently at the screen of his laptop. “Hey,” said Mairon, walking slowly toward the desk.

“Oh, hey,” said Melkor, flashing Mairon a grin.

“What are you working on so late?”

Melkor snorted and pushed the computer around so Mairon could see the screen. Mairon watched the opening sequence of *Top Gun* play silently across the screen and rolled his eyes. “Why are you watching *Top Gun* alone in your office with the subtitles on and no sound?”

“Well, Gothmog didn’t want to watch it with me,” said Melkor. “Clearly, I need to reconsider our friendship.”

“Clearly,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “But why is it muted?”

“Because I lost my headphones,” said Melkor, “and Thill yells at me when I watch movies with the sound turned up.”

“Thil left an hour ago, you know.”

“She did?” said Melkor. “Fantastic.” He reached out and turned the volume up to the max, grinning as *Danger Zone* roared out of the struggling speakers.

Mairon winced and shook his head. “You must be a delight to share walls with,” he said loudly.

“You have no idea,” said Melkor, grinning and nodding in time to the music. “Great song,” he added, turning down the volume to something approaching reasonable.

“And you criticize my taste in music,” said Mairon, shaking his head.

“Don’t you dare insult Loggins in my office,” said Melkor.

“Perish the thought,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I’m serious,” said Melkor, his grin belying his words. “Loggins haters buy their own dinner.”

“About that,” said Mairon.

“Oh, I was totally kidding.”

“Yeah, I know. I just—”

“Don’t tell me you’re canceling on me.”

“No, I’m not. I just—” Mairon sighed, running a hand distractedly through his hair. “Can we maybe reschedule? I know it’s super late notice—past late, really—but I’m totally swamped, and —”

“You’re not still working, are you?” asked Melkor. Mairon shrugged apologetically. “Come on,” Melkor wheedled. “You’ve been at it all day. You could use a break.”

“I’d love one,” said Mairon. “Really, I would. But I still have to go over the research summaries from every department, and review the flight test results from last week, and finish up my report from the conference for the Research and Development meeting. Oh, and there’s the—”

“I’ll take overscheduled for \$200, Alex.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I know. But if I don’t get some things done—”

“You won’t be able to relax,” Melkor finished for him. “Yeah, yeah. I know you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Mektor. “You are who you are.”

“Still.”

“Look, don’t apologize. I’ll pin you down sooner or later.”

“Is that so?” asked Mairon, a curious grin spreading over his face.

“With any luck,” said Melkor, returning the grin.

“Well then,” said Mairon, raising an eyebrow. “Good luck.”

Melkor laughed. “Now this is the Mairon I like to see,” he said, his tone approving.

“What do you mean?”

“This right here,” he said, waving a hand at Mairon. “The Mairon who makes jokes and laughs and isn’t so uptight all the time. You know. Fun Mairon.”

“As opposed to...?”

“As opposed to business Mairon, the one who’s so stressed he can’t breathe and so busy that he makes other people bring him coffee.”

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well, I think you like that Mairon just fine, actually.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, it is. I mean, business Mairon is the one who makes it so that you can sit in your office watching *Top Gun* without the business crashing into the ground.”

“Alright,” Melkor conceded. “You’re right. Business Mairon is pretty great. But you know what?”

“What?”

Melkor grinned, leaning forward. “I wouldn’t mind seeing a little less of Business Mairon—even if it means I’ll have to, you know, do something once in a while.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Mairon laughed. “Well, that’s very generous of you.”

“That’s me,” said Melkor. “Look up generous in the dictionary and you’ll see my face.” Mairon pulled his phone from his pocket, and Melkor frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Looking up generous in the dictionary.”

“You ass,” said Melkor. He laughed, throwing a pen at Mairon, who easily dodged it, grinning. “I thought you were totally swamped.”

“I am,” said Mairon, picking up the pen and tossing it back on the desk.

“Then get to it,” said Melkor. “Sooner than later, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon, heading for the door. “Good night, Melkor.”

“Night,” Melkor said, watching Mairon go with a satisfied grin.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” said a voice from overhead.

Mairon blinked his eyes open and slowly lifted his head off his numb arm, flexing his fingers as he looked blearily across the desk at Thuringwethil. “What time is it?” he asked thickly, grimacing.

“Seven,” she said. “Tell me you didn’t sleep here last night.”

“What’s it look like to you?” he asked irritably. He reached down and pulled out the bottom drawer of his desk, pulling out a fresh shirt.

“You know,” she said, eyeing him disapprovingly. “I should’ve tossed that stuff while you were gone.”

“My desk drawers lock, you know.”

She snorted. “Please.”

“What, you want me to sit around in yesterday’s clothes?”

“No,” she said. “I’d like you to go home once in a while.”

“In an ideal world, I would.”

“Mairon, half-living in your office is not an acceptable life decision,” she said firmly.

“My life,” Mairon countered, “my decisions.”

“Stubborn asshole,” she muttered. She sighed and opened her bag, pulling out a breakfast sandwich wrapped in foil. “I’m telling you, Mairon. This is not the way you live your life.” She tossed the sandwich across the desk to him.

“You know,” he said, “I’m pretty sure you can’t make that point and enable me at the same time.” He grinned and peeled back the foil, sighing contentedly as warmth flooded him.

“Yeah, well,” she said begrudgingly. “Someone has to make sure you don’t die.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, eyeing the coffee in her hand.

She rolled her eyes and handed him the cup. “Find anything new about Formenos?” she asked, leaning gently against the edge of his desk.

“I’m working on it,” he said through a mouthful of food. “Give me a couple more hours.”

“I don’t know,” she said, sighing. “Maybe we *are* being paranoid. Maybe there’s really nothing to find.”

He snorted. “Good one, Thil.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I just think we have enough to worry about without devoting resources to chasing ghosts. Might I remind you that we’re being investigated?”

“How could I forget?” he asked, rolling his eyes. “Look, just let me have a couple more hours, and then I’ll leave it alone. Okay?”

“Sure you will,” she said. She sighed, looking as though she wanted to say something more. Then she shook her head. “Don’t make me have to check on you again,” she said, stepping away from the desk.

“Thanks for breakfast,” he said, smiling brightly. She rolled her eyes but retreated, leaving him in peace.

Mairon sighed and nudged his mouse with the back of his hand. He glanced down at the paper that had spent the night crumpled under his arm and frowned, tracing one finger between the notes he had written and the ones Thuringwethil had made. There was something there; he could feel the shape of it lurking in the back of his mind, waiting for him to put the pieces together. Frowning in annoyance, he leaned into his keyboard and began once more to dig.

“Got a minute?” asked Mairon, pushing open the door of Thuringwethil’s office and striding quickly to her desk.

“For you?” said Thuringwethil, looking up. “Always. What’s up?”

Mairon tossed a stack of papers onto Thuringwethil’s desk and sat down on the edge of a chair, leaning forward and watching impatiently as she picked up the pages, skimming them quickly. “What am I looking at?” she asked.

“Emails, mostly,” he said. “Do me a favor and read the first, oh, five lines out loud, would you?”

Thuringwethil raised an eyebrow at him, but she cleared her throat and began to read anyway. “Recipient: Olwë. Sender: Fëanor. Subject: Potential Partnership Negotiation.” She shook her head, looking up at him again. “Mairon, what is this?”

“It’s not just the what,” he said. “Read the date.”

“Sent on...holy shit.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This was sent three months ago!”

“Uh-huh.”

“But,” said Thuringwethil, looking up sharply at him. “Hang on. So this wasn’t a spur of the moment thing?”

“I mean, it is if you discount the three months of conversations leading up to the acquisition.”

“I don’t want sarcasm. I want you to tell me what the hell is going on.”

“It’s complicated,” said Mairon. “I’m honestly not sure I even have it all figured out yet.”

“Well, walk me through what you know so far.”

“Okay,” he said, taking a breath. “Okay. So I pulled a crap ton of emails off the Formenos server, right? Most of them are just your regular, mundane business crap, but there are a few that really stand out. Like this, for instance.” He reached out and tapped the topmost paper in her hand. “Three months ago, Fëanor contacted Olwë to discuss a potential partnership.”

“Why would Formenos want to work with Alqualondë?”

“That’s a good question. Melkor wasn’t so far off the other day when he said that Alqualondë hasn’t made a decent product in ten years. I mean, they used to do a pretty good trade in private and commercial maritime vessels, but they haven’t had any new tech developments in more than a decade, and their stock has been steadily falling for years. Their money troubles aren’t new; I’ve been hearing rumors of plant closings the last couple of years or so. From what I understand, it was getting pretty serious. So I’m thinking that someone made them this grant offer, and they just couldn’t turn it down. The problem is, they needed that money just to stay afloat. I’m guessing that not a lot—if any—of it went toward actual useful development programs.”

“Okay, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“I know, I know,” said Mairon. “I’m getting there. So we know there was a grant, right, and we know Alqualondë took the money. Years pass. They’ve missed all the deadlines for development, and the feds have probably realized they aren’t getting any new tech out of the deal. So it moves into mediation for repayment, right? Except Alqualondë doesn’t have the money anymore. It’s gone, and they have no way of paying back what they took. But they still tried. They filed extensions. They got payment plans. There was mediation. But none of it changed the fact that Alqualondë had what amounted to no means to pay back the grant money. Which brings us to—”

“Bankruptcy,” said Thuringwethil.

“Exactly,” said Mairon. “Bankruptcy. So what’s the first step here, Thil? What would they do?”

“They would go to court,” she said, frowning slightly. “Try to figure out if there was any possible cash flow that could support a repayment plan.”

“Right—which is where Formenos came in. Fëanor stepped in and basically offered what amounted to an exit strategy. He wanted to partner Formenos with Alqualondë—make it a subsidiary. The company could’ve kept its name, and Olwë could’ve even still retained control, although he would’ve been reporting to Fëanor.”

“And Alqualondë could’ve had incoming cash flow to minimize the bankruptcy damage.”

“‘Could have’ being the operative phrase,” said Mairon. “Olwë wouldn’t take the deal.”

“What? Why not?”

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Now, I’m a little fuzzy on this part—the emails reference conversations that must’ve happened in person, so I’m not entirely sure what they discussed—but from what I can gather, Olwë didn’t like the direction Fëanor wanted to take the company. He wouldn’t take the deal.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Thuringwethil. “Alqualondë was sinking. I don’t care what stupid plans Formenos had for the company. Olwë had no choice.”

“Except, he did. He had one other option, and he took it.”

“What are you—oh.”

“Starting to make sense?”

“Olwë was going to let the company be liquidated rather than give control of it to Formenos.”

“Exactly.”

“Jesus,” she said. “That’s harsh. What the hell was Fëanor proposing?”

“I wish I knew. What could possibly be so heinous that Olwë would rather let the company be destroyed than give it to Fëanor?”

“Never mind the what,” said Thuringwethil. “We still haven’t even gotten to the how. If Olwë refused the deal, that should’ve been the end of it. What the hell happened?”

“Well, you know Fëanor. He didn’t like being defied, especially by someone he called—what was it?” He rifled through the papers on Thuringwethil’s desk and pulled out one near the bottom.

“Oh, right. A ‘useless old man destined to be ground into dust beneath the wheels of progress’. That’s a direct quote, by the way.”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes. “Melodramatic much?”

“You call it melodrama, I call it narcissism; either way, it’s the same result.”

“Which is?”

“Which is Fëanor pulling every string he can reach.”

“To what end?”

“Well, they had just started the proceedings for dissolution of Alqualondë. It hadn’t been made public yet, but they were in the process of valuation of Alqualondë’s assets. From the sound of things, it was coming in at way less than they hoped to recover. So Fëanor made the feds an offer they couldn’t refuse.”

“Which was?”

“Fëanor contacted the people handling the Alqualondë case and basically offered to buy the company for the cost of its outstanding debt. They put it through as a private auction, and voilà—Fëanor suddenly owns a shipbuilding company.”

“Oh my God,” said Thuringwethil. “I mean, now that you say it, I’m not surprised. But still. That’s about twelve kinds of illegal.”

“Ha,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “I’m going to say Fëanor doesn’t give much of a crap about legality when it’s him committing the crime.”

“Well,” said Thuringwethil mildly. “We really don’t have any room to talk on that front.”

“Our own alleged indiscretions aside, this is a seriously shady business deal.”

“Oh, for sure. There’s no two ways around it. This is shady as fuck.”

“Which, you know. Good news for us.”

Thuringwethil picked up the topmost paper on the stack and held it up, tapping the bottom edge on the desk. Then she sighed, laying the paper back on the stack and tapping her fingernails against the polished wood of her desk. “Okay,” she said slowly, “so we potentially have a bomb here. What are we going to do with it?”

“That’s the thing,” said Mairon. “I don’t know.”

Thuringwethil raised an eyebrow at him. “That might be a first.”

“Shut up.”

“How about the *Times*?” Thuringwethil suggested. “You’ve used them before.”

“That was my first instinct too,” said Mairon. He bit his lip gently, his uncertainty evident on his face.

“But?” Thuringwethil prompted him.

“But it...I don’t know, Thil. It just doesn’t feel right.”

“Hell of a time to have a sudden attack of conscience, Mai.”

He sorted. “Come on, Thil. I hope you know me better than that.”

“So what’s your hang up?”

He sighed and sat back in his chair, considering her thoughtfully. “Call me crazy, but it just doesn’t seem like this thing is done yet.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It just feels like there’s something more here. It’s like I can see the shape of it, but I can’t make out any of the details.”

“You know, I might take you up on the offer to call you crazy.”

“I wouldn’t blame you. I mean, I don’t have anything solid to go on. It’s just...”He shrugged. “I just feel it. I want to wait.”

“Okay, this is officially weird. Leaving this alone? Basing your decisions on a feeling? That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“Trust me—it’s no less weird to me. But the way I figure it, this thing isn’t going anywhere. I can sit on it for as long as I like. It’s not going to change. All I have to do is wait for the right opportunity, and believe me, when it comes, I won’t hesitate.”

“Now that sounds more like Mairon.”

He laughed. “Look, Thil. Will you do me a favor?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep this to myself.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Just promise me you’ll let me know when you plan to make a move.”

“I’ll do my best.” He glanced at his watch and sighed. “God. Is it me, or do the days just keep getting shorter?”

“The days are the same length they’ve always been. You just keep trying to cram more shit into them.”

He snorted. “I’d like to defend myself, but—”

“You can’t.”

“Well, when you’re right.”

“And I usually am.”

“That’s the Thil I love. Modest. Humble.”

“Hey,” she said, shrugging. “I’m good, and I know it. Why deny it?”

He laughed. “I swear to God this place attracts the worst kind of narcissist.”

“And there you are, up at the helm.”

“Touché.” He glanced at his watch again. “Alright, I need to go get some stuff done before I head to lunch.”

“Ha.”

“What?”

“Oh, I thought you were making a joke. I mean, you have to admit that the thought of you taking a break to do something as mundane as eating is pretty hilarious.”

“Yeah,” he said, rolling his eyes. “It’s a real riot. But seriously,

“We are such enablers.”

“And I love you for it.” He stood up and sighed, bending to sweep the papers from her desk into his arms. “Alright, Thil. I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Sounds good, Mai. And hey—I meant what I said. Keep me in the loop, okay?”

“Bye, Thil,” he said, heading for the door. He paused outside the door, shuffling the papers in his hand and sighing. The Formenos problem was weighing on his mind; it was the type of prickly, circuitous problem that would, unresolved, eat at him until he had no choice but to find its solution. Still, he knew it would have to wait. There were company issues that took precedent, and he had already neglected them too long since his return.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Mairon stepped into his office, glancing back down at the papers in his hands. He had spent enough time in the space to know it by heart, and so he easily navigated the length of the room without taking his eyes from the emails. His feet carried him across the plush expanse of carpet, gently circumventing the chairs in his path and leading him around the edge of the desk. He reached his office chair and glanced up at last, drawing in a startled breath as he realized the seat was already occupied.

“Jesus Christ,” he complained, raising a hand to his chest and feeling the frantic hammer of his heart. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Not this minute,” said Melkor, leaning back and shifting his weight. Papers crinkled under the heels of his shoes, which rested on Mairon’s desk.

Mairon winced, watching his freshly printed pages crumple. “What are you doing?”

“I was waiting for you to get back.”

“Uh-huh. And your shoes are on my desk because...”

He shrugged. “You were gone for a while. I figured I better get comfortable.” He shifted his weight, crumpling the topmost paper further under his heel. Mairon’s eye began to twitch, and Melkor grinned.

“Is it your life goal to drive me nuts?” asked Mairon, scowling.

“I mean, I think it’s more incidental effect than conscious effort.”

“Great. Well, I hate to interrupt your lurking, but I do have work to do.”

“You think you’re the only one around here who works?”

“Not if Thil’s in the building.”

“For your information, smartass, I just so happen to be working on a very important project as we speak.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What project is that?”

“The one where I figure out what it’s going to take to get you to have some fun, for once.”

Mairon rolled his eyes. “I have fun,” he said, setting his papers down on the desk and crossing his arms.

“Most people wouldn’t classify reading progress reports as fun.”

“I don’t know if I would, either, to tell you the truth.”

“Then how come you told me you read them on your ‘breaks’, huh?”

“Because when I’m stuck on a project, it’s nice to read through the staff scientists’ work and remind myself how much smarter than them I am.”

Mairon snorted. “Only you,” he said.

“Excuse me? The last time you went to a staff meeting, you fired the head of quality assurance for—and I quote—subjecting you to the most idiotic combination of words ever strung together by a human being.”

“That was work,” Melkor insisted. “I wasn’t doing it for fun.”

“Really? Because I seem to remember you making him stand out in front of the building for the rest of the day handing out photocopies of his staff picture with the words ‘king of the idiots’ written across the top.”

Melkor laughed. “That was hilarious,” he said. “But unfortunately for you, that was also business, not pleasure.”

“Not buying it.”

“Dude, that was a lesson for the staff. Say stupid shit, you get fired.”

“And humiliated,” Mairon added.

“Damn right. Anyway, I bet the quality of the staff meetings went up exponentially after that.”

“Not that you’d know,” said Mairon. “You haven’t been to one since.”

“I’m not exposing myself to that level of idiocy again. That shit’s contagious, you know.”

“Yeah, well, one of us has to risk it.”

“And while you do that, I get to do the real, important work.”

“You know, when I walked past your office earlier, you were making plans to hold a bracket-style tournament to decide who the best eighties action star is.”

“Like I said,” continued Melkor. “Someone has to do the important stuff.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “You’re doing a real service to mankind, there.”

“All in a day’s work,” said Melkor, his tone mock-serious. Despite himself, Mairon laughed.

“See?” said Melkor, grinning. “I knew I could do it.”

“Do what?”

“Make you have some fun.”

“Yeah, well. Everything in moderation, I guess.”

“Moderation,” Melkor scoffed. “Do you even know what that word means?”

Mairon raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you?”

Melkor laughed. “Fair enough,” he said. “But since we’re on the subject, I was thinking—”

“Hey, Melkor,” said Gothmog, coming into the doorway, “have you seen—Jesus, Mai! Where have you been?”

“Um,” said Mairon, twisting around to look at him. “Here?”

“Are you alright?”

“I think so. Why do you ask?”

“Because the R&D meeting started fifteen minutes ago.”

“No,” said Mairon, glancing at his watch. “It—oh, no.” He stood up so suddenly that he stumbled, lurching forward to grab a notepad from his desk before turning on his heel and sprinting from the room.

Gothmog leaned on the doorframe, surveying Melkor with his arms crossed. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I mean, probably.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Sitting here,” said Melkor, gesturing at the chair beneath him.

“Don’t be an ass. I meant with Mairon.”

“Nothing, yet,” said Melkor, grinning. “Give me time, though.”

“God, Melkor, can you be serious for one minute?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really tried.”

“You need to think about this—really think about what you’re doing.”

“Dude, what’s to think about? We’re all adults here, and last time I checked, I didn’t need your approval to do—well, anything, actually. So how about you kindly fuck off and leave me alone, okay?”

“Have you even considered—” There was a chime, and Gothmog glanced at his phone, his frown deepening. “Shit,” he said, scowling at the screen. He looked up at Melkor, his face stern. “Don’t think we’re done here,” he said, turning and heading back into the hall

“Don’t think I’m suddenly going to care,” Melkor called after him. “What a buzzkill,” he muttered, annoyed. He surveyed the office and wondered, vaguely, how long the meeting would last. Sighing, he put his feet back up onto the desk and settled in to wait.

Mairon was not, by nature, one for sloppiness. When he had started as COO at Melkor’s company, he had made a challenge to his staff that if anyone ever found an error in his work, he would personally pay them \$1000 dollars. It was, if he was being truthful, a two-sided strategy. He liked the reassurance that everything coming out of Utumno—and later, Angband—was double, triple, even quadruple checked before it ever left the lab. It gave him a sense of security, an extra assurance that everything they made was absolutely beyond reproach. The added bonus, of course, was that it conveyed to his subordinates exactly how confident he was in his own work.

He had been challenged on exactly seven occasions. He had yet to pay out a single cent.

Confidence, he knew, was contagious. Self-assurance went a long way toward fostering trust, but it was quality that bred respect. The scientists on his staff respected him because they knew, to put it simply, that he was the best.

Perhaps that was what irritated him about the Silmaril acquisition. Mairon spent practically every waking moment thinking about how to put Angband ahead. He had given up food and sleep and comfort in the pursuit of perfection, and yet Melkor had risked everything they had built to for someone else’s work. In the deepest, most guarded shadows of Mairon’s heart, it felt like a betrayal. He had given his life to this work, and Melkor seemed ready to abandon it all for a chance at Fëanor’s Silmaril system.

The part of it that really stung was how inarguably, maddeningly good the system was. Mairon had been over the thing inside and out, and though he hated to admit it, he hadn’t been able to find a flaw. Even worse, there were parts he still hadn’t managed to crack, aspects of the programming and the applications he still couldn’t make himself understand. He had taken to running through the code in all his spare time, trying to figure out what each little fragment did, and how it all fit together. At night, he found the lines of code running endlessly through his mind, his brain picking at every little piece until he could no longer stay awake. He slept less and less each night, and yet he was never any closer to cracking the horrible thing, no matter how many times he sifted

through it in his head.

He knew that he was missing something. He knew it as he trudged the familiar path back to his office, eyes scanning half-heartedly over his meeting notes. He reached for the handle and pushed open the door, stepping into his office. As he crossed the threshold, he realized the door had been unlocked, and he frowned, glancing up in time to see something rapidly approaching his face.

He ducked a miniature, household drone and watched it swoop past him as the papers tumbled from his hands. “What are you doing?” he demanded, scowling in the direction of his desk. Melkor cackled and flew the little drone in a rapid loop of the office.

“Cool, right?”

“Not from this angle.”

“Oh, please,” said Melkor, grinning widely as he flew another loop of the office. “I wasn’t going to hit you. As Dustin Hoffman once said, ‘I’m an excellent driver’.”

“You know Rain Man was only allowed to drive slow in the driveway, right?” said Mairon, picking up the last of his papers and standing. “Besides,” he said, walking toward his desk, “driving implies a car. You’re technically a pilot.”

“Am I?” asked Melkor, raising an eyebrow at him. He landed the drone neatly on the desk and picked up a second controller, toggling the switches. A miniature monster truck roared out from Mairon’s desk, its black paint shining under the office lights as it zoomed around the perimeter of the room. “Take that, pedant.”

“I must be hallucinating,” said Mairon, sitting down with a sigh. “I could swear you’ve got flame decals on that thing.”

“You’re damn right I do,” said Mairon, zooming the drone and the truck in circles around Mairon’s chair. “Fuckin’ sweet, right?”

“God, sometimes I swear you’re like, fourteen years old.” He leaned forward in his chair and rested his chin in his palm.

“Yeah, well,” said Melkor, landing the drone easily on Mairon’s desk and bringing the truck to a halt. “What’s that say about you, huh? You work for me.”

“Fair point,” said Mairon, stifling a yawn. “The real question,” he said, watching the little car race around the carpet, “is why do you need two toys?”

“First of all,” said Melkor, “they’re not toys. And second of all, are you joking? Why have one of anything when you can have two?”

“I guess it depends on the thing,” said Mairon, sinking low in his chair and sighing. “I mean, no one wants two, I don’t know, gunshot wounds.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “But seriously, though, I couldn’t pass these up—buy one, get one, you know? Buy a drone and get any other remote controlled vehicle from the same manufacturer for half-off. So obviously, I—”

“Wait a second,” said Mairon, sitting up in his chair. “What did you say?”

“BOGO, dude. You can’t pass up that kind of a deal.”

“It can’t be,” said Mairon. He jumped out of his chair, pushing Melkor out of the way as he rounded the desk and urgently shook the mouse to wake his computer.

“I know, right? They were practically giving the things away.” He watched as Mairon furiously typed his login credentials into the computer. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“No way,” Mairon muttered as his desktop came into view. His fingers pounded into the keys, typing a string of security codes before opening the file containing the Silmaril codes. “It can’t be.” He leaned closer to the screen and scrolled through the folder, clicking on file after file and shaking his head in disbelief. “I don’t believe it,” he said, eyes widening as he scrolled through the files.

“Are you having some kind of stroke?” asked Melkor, not sounding particularly concerned.

“I don’t believe it,” said Mairon again, shaking his head.

“Yeah,” said Melkor, slightly annoyed. “I got that. Are you going to explain, or...?”

Mairon turned to Melkor, a look of disbelief on his face. “It’s so simple,” said Mairon, still shaking his head. “I don’t know why I couldn’t see it before.”

“Dude, I swear to God—”

“The Silmaril program files,” said Mairon quickly, pointing at the folder on the screen. “I’ve been trying to understand why there are three separate, complete files here. At first, I thought the first two were prototypes—like, maybe the thing was still a work in progress or something. But it just didn’t make sense. They were all too fully formed, and they had these weird inconsistencies, like parameters and functions that didn’t make any sense. So I thought they were just bugs, or that Fëanor was just an idiot, but that didn’t make sense either. They were just written too well; those kinds of mistakes didn’t fit.”

“Okay, so...what? If they aren’t prototypes, then what are they?”

“I thought Silmaril was a drone program,” said Mairon. “And, well, it is—or, one part of it is, anyway. But it’s not just that. It’s a template, a kind of backbone program, and it’s adaptable.” He turned to look at Melkor, admiration and excitement plain on his face. “Program three is for drones. It’s the one that always made the most sense to me. It’s what I assumed the other ones were prototypes for. But they aren’t prototypes. They’re completely different programs.”

“Programs for what?”

“For new kinds of unmanned craft. One for air, one for land, and one for sea.”

“You’re joking.”

“It’s true,” Mairon insisted, jabbing a finger at the screen of his computer. “All those misplaced parameter and random functions? They only make sense if we aren’t talking about aircraft.”

“Different vehicles?” said Melkor. He frowned, as though turning the information over in his mind. “But that wouldn’t explain—why would Fëanor—” He looked over at Mairon. “What the fuck?”

“Melkor, what are you talking about? Wouldn’t explain what? What about Fëanor?”

Melkor considered him for a moment. “Look,” he said, growing serious. “I’m going to level with

you, okay? I didn't just randomly stumble upon this Silmaril stuff."

"Then how did you find it?"

"I heard Fëanor talking about it."

"You did? Where? When?"

"One thing at a time," said Melkor. "This was a while ago now—the week I got out of jail, I think. I was at the courthouse, and I saw him."

"Why were you at the courthouse?"

Melkor rolled his eyes. "So I could piss in a cup, if you must know. Jesus, you're nosey. So anyway, I go do my whole drug test, are-you-being-a-good-parolee bullshit, and I'm getting ready to head out when I see Fëanor heading inside. So obviously I had to know what he was up to."

"Oh, right," said Mairon, rolling his eyes. "Obviously."

Melkor ignored him. "Alright, so I follow him up to the fourth floor. You know what's on the fourth floor?"

"What?"

"The patent office."

"What was he doing at the patent office?"

"Honestly, I don't know for sure. I was kind of hiding around the corner waiting for him to go in. Except he didn't go in right away. He ran into someone and started talking."

"About what?"

"Nothing, really. 'I'm so glad we could work together, the initial tests are exceeding our expectations, you've been a real help to the program'—you know. That kind of shit. But it sounded like whoever he was talking to had done some collaboration with Formenos."

"Collaboration? That doesn't sound like Fëanor."

"I know, right?"

"So who was he talking to?"

"That's the weird thing." He hesitated, looking at Mairon as though sizing him up. "He was talking to Yavanna."

"Yavanna?" repeated Mairon, looking startled.

"That's right."

"Why would he be talking to Yavanna?"

Melkor shrugged. "I don't know. I was actually hoping you might have some ideas."

"Why would I have any idea what she was up to?"

"Because," said Melkor, as though explaining something incredibly obvious, "you know her."

“So do you,” said Mairon flatly.

“Not as well as you do.”

“Did,” Mairon corrected him. “I haven’t seen Yavanna in six years. I have no idea what she’s doing now.”

“But you know her work,” said Melkor, pressing him. “What could she have contributed to a project like this?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon frowning. “Are you sure it was Yavanna?”

“A hundred percent,” said Melkor. “I passed her on the stairs after they quit talking.”

“And you’re sure they were talking about Silmaril?”

“I mean, they didn’t mention it by name, but what else could it have been? I didn’t see any other giant, top-secret projects laying around Formenos.”

“Man,” said Mairon, shaking his head. “This just gets weirder and weirder.” He looked over at Melkor and frowned.

“Tell me about it.”

Mairon glanced once more at his computer screen and shook his head. “I feel like I just cracked the Rosetta stone,” he said, acknowledging, albeit grudgingly, his admiration. “I mean, there are so many possibilities for this.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “I know.”

“It’s like, where do we even start? Do we stay with the aircraft? Move to a new medium? Do both?”

“What I really want to know,” Melkor said, “is what the fuck did Fëanor think he was going to do with this thing? I mean, they do a decent trade in programming, but they do absolutely nothing on the production side. It’s a huge investment to get into, even for one kind of craft. He was looking at, what? At least three, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon absently. “Pretty stupid, if—” He stopped short as several things pieced themselves into an idea in his mind. “No,” he said softly, his eyes widening. “It can’t—could it? Oh my God.”

“Can we not start this again?”

“That son of a—” Mairon pushed himself away from the desk and stalked toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Melkor called after him.

“Don’t move,” said Mairon, picking up his pace. He jogged down the hall and knocked on Thuringwethil’s door before opening it. “My office,” he said tersely, already heading further down the hall. He made the same demand of Gothmog before turning on his heel and striding back up the hall to his office. He paced the length of the wall as he waited for them to come, impatiently glancing at the door every other second. “Shut the door,” he said to Gothmog as the big man cleared the threshold.

“What did you do to him?” Gothmog asked Melkor, nodding in Mairon’s direction.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Melkor, shrugging. “This is all him.”

“What’s going on, Mairon?” asked Thuringwethil.

“You might want to sit down,” Mairon advised.

“Maybe you ought to sit down,” said Thuringwethil, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Seriously,” said Gothmog. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Where do I start?” Mairon muttered to himself. He shook his head, composing himself. “Right. Let me bring you two up to speed first. So it turns out that Silmaril isn’t what I thought it was.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“I thought this was just a different version of the work we’ve been doing. It’s not. Look, what Fëanor was working on is basically a drone shell—something that takes the drone idea and applies it to other fields using the same basic programming idea.”

“Which means what?”

“Fëanor was trying to expand unmanned flight. He was looking into applying the principle to other vehicles, like unmanned cars or tanks or—”

“Ships,” said Thuringwethil abruptly. “Oh, no shit.”

“Why would you jump directly to ships?” asked Gothmog, looking at her curiously.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” said Melkor, hitting his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Alqualondë? Really?”

“Why else?” asked Mairon.

“Okay,” said Gothmog, “but that deal literally just went through. They lost Silmaril weeks ago. Why buy a company you can’t even use?”

“This isn’t a new deal,” said Thuringwethil shortly.

“How do you know?” asked Melkor.

“Because,” she said, “Mairon’s been digging around in the Formenos server.”

“Is that right?”

Mairon walked over to the desk and opened the top drawer, pulling a stack of papers out and plopping them onto the desk in front of Melkor. “I found a ton of emails,” he said, by way of explanation. “There’s talk between Fëanor and Olwë going back months.”

“No shit,” said Melkor, picking a few pages up off the stack.

“Yeah, but that’s not all,” said Thuringwethil. “Turns out Olwë wasn’t really interested in being brought into the Formenos fold.”

“You mean bought?” said Melkor.

“Look, all jokes aside, the old man was pretty adamant about telling Fëanor to go fuck himself.”

“Obviously not,” said Melkor. “I mean, last I heard, Formenos now owns Alqualdondë, so...”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “About that.”

“It wasn’t exactly what you might call above-board,” said Thuringwethil.

“Oh please,” said Melkor, grinning. “Tell me more.”

“Thil?” said Mairon.

“Look, it’s a little convoluted, but here’s the gist of it. Fëanor wanted Alqualondë as a subsidiary. He tried to use the company’s debt as leverage, but Olwë didn’t want anything to do with it. Apparently there was a bit of a back and forth that didn’t end well. Olwë was going to let the company go to bankruptcy—everything should have been up for forfeiture.”

“He was going to let the company be dissolved rather than let Fëanor have it?” said Melkor. “Man, I’m starting to like this guy.”

“Right,” said Gothmog, “but that’s not what happened.”

“No,” said Thuringwethil. “It’s not. See, Fëanor made a pretty shady deal with feds.”

“Let me guess,” said Melkor. “Ten million in exchange for the company?”

“Hang on,” said Gothmog. “Why would they make that deal?”

“Because bankruptcy sucks,” said Thuringwethil. “You sell off assets piece by piece and hope you make back everything you’re owed, but there’s no guarantee. Formenos offered them easy money, and they took it.”

“That sounds illegal.”

“Oh, it’s incredibly illegal, but they did it anyway.”

“How long have you been sitting on this?” Melkor demanded, looking at Mairon.

“Just a day,” he said quickly. “I wasn’t sure what to do with it.”

“What are you talking about? Put that shit in the paper! You’ve done it before.”

“I was waiting,” said Mairon. “I wanted to have a better grasp on what Fëanor is up to before we did anything.”

“Yeah, well, now we know.”

“Do we?” said Gothmog. “I mean, it’s like I already said. Formenos lost Silmaril weeks ago. Why would they still be trying to buy Alqualdonë now?”

“That’s what worries me,” said Mairon. “I wouldn’t spend ten million on anything I wasn’t a hundred percent sure about.”

“Which means Formenos must still have something,” said Thuringethil.

“Or,” said Melkor, “it means Fëanor has a damn good poker face.”

“That’s a hell of a bluff,” said Thuringwethil.

“True,” said Melkor. “But if anyone has the obnoxious amount of self-confidence you’d need to pull some shit like that, it’s Fëanor.”

“Or you,” muttered Gothmog.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, boss.”

“Which is exactly what Fëanor has. Look, he probably figures that if he built this thing once, he can build again. That’s what I’d bank on in his position.”

“Do you think he could?”

“Maybe,” said Melkor, shrugging. “I mean, like I said, he built it once before.”

“Thil,” said Mairon, turning suddenly toward her, “we’ve got to get that patent application in as soon as possible.”

“Oh, for sure,” she said.

“Then it won’t matter what Fëanor has to fall back on. We’ll have the license to use it.”

“Okay,” said Melkor. “Thil, make that your top priority.”

“Got it.”

“Gothmog, I want the security shit locked down, you got that?”

“I’m on it,” said Gothmog. “But I’m telling you right now, if I get another false alarm from one of the server sites I’m going to flip the fuck out.”

“Yeah, well, figure it out.”

“I’m working on it.”

“I can help you,” said Mairon.

“I need you on this Formenos shit,” said Melkor. “One way or another, I want it out to the public.”

“I’ll work on it,” he said, “but it might not be tonight. There’s a dusk landing test tonight.”

“I’ll do that. You do this, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Jesus. I think I can handle babysitting a flight test.”

“You’re right,” said Mairon. “Sorry.”

“But just in case…”

“It’s at six,” said Mairon. “I’ll call you at five-thirty.”

“Good.” He looked around at them and grinned. “Alright, then. Ready, team? Break.”

Mairon looked up at the knock on his door. “Hey,” said Melkor, leaning on the doorframe.

“Hey,” said Mairon, returning to his writing.

“Landing test is done,” said Melkor. “Everything went great.”

“Good,” said Mairon, chewing the end of his pen.

“You lost me twenty dollars, you know.”

“Yeah?” said Mairon absently, pen poised over the page.

“Yeah,” Melkor confirmed. “I bet Gothmog you’d breakdown and show up at the test. I thought for sure you wouldn’t be able to resist checking up on me.”

“I didn’t have to go to the site to do that,” said Mairon. He looked up at last, turning his monitor to face Melkor. “I just opened the feed from the security cameras and watched the whole thing from here.”

“Of course you did,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “I’m still keeping the twenty bucks, though.”

Mairon laughed. “Go ahead. I won’t tell Gothmog.”

“So,” said Melkor. “I’m going to be you haven’t eaten anything yet.”

As if on cue, Mairon’s stomach growled. “I’d say that’s a smart bet.”

“Good,” said Melkor. “Come on.” He turned and disappeared into the hall.

“Come on where?” Mairon called after him, but there was no answer. Mairon looked at the work on his desk and sighed. Resigned, he pushed his chair back from the desk and stood up, rolling out the stiffness in his neck before following Melkor out into the hall.

He walked through Melkor’s open office door and stopped abruptly, trying to process the sight that greeted his eyes. Melkor was standing behind his desk, which had been cleared of its usual clutter, only to be replaced with at least a dozen white cardboard takeout cartons. “I didn’t know what you’d want,” said Melkor, waving vaguely at the cartons. “So I got one of everything.”

Mairon looked at the display with disbelief. “What is this?”

“Dinner,” said Melkor simply. “You won’t stop working long enough to let me take you out, so I thought I’d bring it to you instead.”

Mairon wrestled with the completely unfamiliar feeling of speechlessness, a smile blooming upon his lips. “I don’t know what to say,” he said finally, still standing by the door.

“Don’t say anything,” said Melkor. “Just eat.” He seated himself behind the desk and fished a pair of chopsticks out of the array before him.

Mairon crossed the office and dropped into a chair, taking the chopsticks Melkor proffered to him. He let the smell of food wash over him, taking a deep breath and sighing in satisfaction. “Jesus,” he said, scanning his options. “I’m starving.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Melkor, digging into a carton of pepper steak. “You never eat.”

“I eat,” said Mairon defensively, pulling a container of broccoli chicken toward him.

“Rarely,” Melkor countered, “and usually only when someone makes you.”

“Not true,” said Mairon.

“What did you eat for breakfast?”

Mairon chewed on a piece of broccoli and considered the question. “Coffee?” he hazarded.

“Not a food,” said Melkor. “How about lunch?”

“Definitely coffee,” said Mairon, taking another bite.

“See what I mean?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon unconcernedly. “You know I’m busy.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t get much work done if you starve to death.”

“Alright, Thuringwethil,” said Mairon.

“Low blow,” said Melkor.

“I’m telling her you said that.”

“Please don’t,” said Melkor, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I think I’m still half-deaf from the last time she yelled at me.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” said Mairon. “It was probably, what? Three hours ago?”

“Not true,” said Melkor. “Three hours ago I was at the test site. No Thil around for miles.”

“Mmm,” said Mairon around a mouthful of food. “Fair point. Thanks again for handling that, by the way.”

“No problem,” said Melkor. “It was actually kind of nice being out in the field again.”

“Man,” said Mairon, wrapping lo main around his chopsticks with a practiced twirl of his wrist. “I wish I’d recorded that.”

“Why?”

“So I can play it back to you next time you’re complaining about having to do work.”

“I would never,” said Melkor, his feigned affront belied by his grin.

Mairon sighed and set down his carton of food, resting his elbow on the desk and his chin in his hand. “Jesus,” he complained. “I think this is the first time I’ve sat down without a pile of work in the last week.”

“Just one week?” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon. “I know. But things get done, don’t they?”

“You know,” said Melkor, “they’d still get done if you took a break.”

“That’s an untested hypothesis.”

“We’re testing it right now,” he said, grinning. “Look, you have no work in front of you, and I’m pretty sure the company hasn’t exploded yet.”

“Give it time,” Mairon muttered darkly. Then he sighed, rubbing his fingers into his eyes. “Look, I’m sorry. You did a really nice thing for me, and I’m ruining it.”

“You’re not ruining anything,” said Melkor. “Relax, Mairon. It’s fine.”

“You know, sometimes I wish I could just shut off my brain for a while. It’s like, every time I stop, I just see my to-do list growing.”

“You want to talk about the landing test, don’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

Two hours later, they had exhausted Mairon’s impressively extensive list of concerns regarding the test. Mairon had long since finished eating and had leaned forward against the desk, resting his chin on his crossed arms and listening to Melkor complain about his neighbors.

“I mean, honestly,” Melkor was saying. “I own the place. You’d think that would entitle me to a little privacy, but no. I get the cops called on me at two a.m. just because those numb-nuts can’t tell the difference between a home invasion and a first-person shooter.” He set down the last container of food and leaned back, heaving a satisfied sigh. “Man,” he said, laying a hand on his stomach. “For once, I don’t think I could eat anything else.”

Mairon did not reply. His head had fallen to the side, his cheek resting on his arm. His eyes were closed, and his chest rose and fell in shallow, steady breaths. Melkor shook his head and stood as quietly as he could, beginning to gather the dinner detritus into his arms. He gently deposited the empty containers into the trash, careful not to make any noise. He watched Mairon for a moment, taking in the smooth contours of a face that was rarely so peaceful awake. He smiled faintly and slid his coat from the back of his chair. Round the desk, he laid the heavy coat over Mairon’s shoulders, standing still as Mairon shifted slightly in his sleep. Mairon did not wake; he merely sighed and slept on, oblivious to the figure standing over him.

Melkor resisted the urge to run his fingers through Mairon’s hair and instead stepped back, forcing his feet to carry him to the door. He flipped off the lights and stepped out into the hall, gently closing the door behind him. As he walked toward the elevator, he could not stop the satisfied grin that spread over his face.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on [tumblr!](#) Come hang out :)

Bang and Blame

Chapter Summary

Another day, another crisis. Orome puts pressure on Angband, and Mairon worries about loose ends.

Chapter Notes

I'm pretending 15k worth of update is going to make up for my 3 month disappearance.

Anyway, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mairon awoke to the sound of his cell phone ringing in his pocket. He groaned and blinked open his eyes, taking in the walls of his office. No, he realized, lifting his head from the desk. Not his own office. Melkor's. He sat up and felt something slide off his back. He half-turned in his seat and reached for the coat that had fallen behind him, running his fingertips over the familiar leather. His phone stopped ringing at last, and he frowned as he stretched the kinks out of his neck, trying to force the groggy miasma of his thoughts into some semblance of order.

An insistent rapping on the door made him jump, and he turned irritably in his seat as the door swung inward. "I thought I heard your phone in here," said Thuringwethil, striding into the office.

Mairon held up the phone in question, using his free hand to rub the sleep from his eyes as he yawned. "What time is it?" he asked, laying his head down on the desk.

"Nine o'clock."

"No it's not." Mairon pushed himself up and scrambled to check the screen of his phone, letting out a strangled noise of distress as the time filtered into view. "I'm late," he said, heaving himself out of the chair.

"You know, I don't think you can be late if you're already in the building."

"Not helping," said Mairon sourly, heading for the door.

"Jesus," she said, rolling her eyes as she trailed him out into the hall. "You're crankier than usual this morning."

"Yeah, no kidding," he said shortly. "I just woke up, for God's sake."

"And at a different desk than usual," she said. "Trying something new?"

He ignored her, throwing her a look of annoyance over his shoulder as he pushed open the door to his office.

“Is that a yes or a no?” she called, following him to his office.

“Really?” he demanded.

“Yes, really,” she said, unperturbed.

“Come on, Thil,” he said reproachfully, rubbing his eyes. “Can I get five minutes here? I’m more caffeine withdrawal than human at this point.”

“The sooner you talk, the sooner I’ll leave.”

“Jesus,” he groaned. He plopped onto his chair with a sigh of resignation. “What?”

“Why were you sleeping in Melkor’s office? Wait,” she amended hurriedly, “remember the hour. Is this something I want to hear right after breakfast?”

“Jesus, Thuringwethil,” he said, scowling at her. “Can you grow up?”

“Wow,” she said. “I’m not usually on the receiving end of that one.”

“How’s it feel?”

“A little annoying, actually. Don’t repeat that to Melkor.” Mairon laughed. “Seriously, though,” she pressed. “What happened?”

“Not much, honestly. He bought me dinner, and—”

“Wait,” said Thuringwethil. “Hang on. He bought you dinner?” Mairon nodded. “I’m not seeing how this connects to sleeping in his office.”

“I was working late,” said Mairon.

“Shocking,” said Thuringwethil.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I don’t know, Thil. He’d already asked me a few times before, but work just kept piling up, and I was so busy—”

“Uh-huh.”

“I guess he just got tired of waiting.”

“Again,” she said. “Shocking. So, what?”

“So he brought dinner here.”

“Here,” she repeated. He nodded. “To you. Like, went out and bought food so he could eat with you here.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Really,” said Thuringwethil, crossing her arms and giving him a suspicious look.

“Yes, really,” he said.

“And?”

“And what?”

“What else?”

Mairon shrugged. “We were eating, and I remember talking about...” He crinkled his brow, thinking. “I can’t remember, actually. I think I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Mmhhh,” he said, rifling absently through the papers on his desk. “Believe it or not, I was exhausted.”

“From...” She let the question hang in the air, unasked.

“Thil, come on.”

“Alright,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But that’s it? I mean, like, really—that’s it?”

“That’s all she wrote.”

“Huh,” she said, giving him a skeptical look.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “That just sounds so...nice.”

“It was, actually.”

“No, but like, really nice. Too nice, I think. We are talking about Melkor, right?”

“Come on, Thil. Give the guy some credit.”

“Once again,” she said, her face mock-serious. “We’re talking about Melkor, right?”

“Don’t be a jerk,” he said, rolling his eyes at her.

“I’m not a jerk,” she said. “I just know Melkor, and that sounds distinctly unlike him.”

“Yeah, well unless he’s got like, a twin or a clone or something running around, it was definitely him.”

“I wouldn’t rule it out. Seriously, I’ve been trying to make him behave like an actual functioning adult for like, ten years. Now you show up and what? Just exist? Unfair.”

“Maybe it’s my irresistible charm,” said Mairon, resisting the grin that tugged at his lips.

“I don’t think it’s your charm he’s interested in.”

“Ew,” said Mairon, making a face at her.

“What?” she said, feigning innocence. “All I’m saying is—”

“I know what you’re saying,” he said, frowning at her. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my business, not yours.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Even when your business is going on in a room that shares a wall with one belonging to me?”

“I repeat: ew. And now we’re done talking about it.”

“Killjoy.”

“Takes one to know one. Ow!” he protested, rubbing his arm where she had smacked him.

“Whoops,” she said, looking only mildly apologetic. “I didn’t think I’d actually connect.”

“Go easy on my reflexes,” he said, still rubbing his arm. “I haven’t had any coffee yet.”

“Speaking of which, I just made a fresh pot.”

“And you’d like to go get me a cup?”

“Good one.”

“Eh,” he said, shrugging. “Worth a try.”

“Anyway,” she said, “I guess I’d better get to work. Unless you want to tell me some more about last night?”

“Good one,” he said, pitching his voice in a fair imitation of hers.

“Douche,” she said, though there was no venom in her words. “Hey, I’m probably going to do lunch at—” She glanced at the clock. “One-ish? If you have the time.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said.

“Uh huh,” she said, giving him a familiar, crooked grin. “I won’t hold my breath. See you later, Mai.” She swept past him and headed down the hall toward her office.

The computer chimed softly, and Mairon turned his attention to the data dump he’d been running overnight. He gently nudged the mouse and watched the screen as it filtered into view. He clicked the prompt and scanned the series of pilfered emails that opened on the screen. He skimmed through a few, quickly discarding the first batch as run of the mill office mundanity before opening the next series. He scrolled through several pages, sighing as he read. It was nearing nine-thirty, and he hadn’t even had a cup of coffee yet; caffeine withdrawal was beginning to nag at his brain, a sharp stab behind his eyes. One more, he thought, opening another page, and then I’ll go. His eyes scanned the heading and widened as his brain processed the information on the screen. He read the message three times through before sending it to the printer, still reading the document on the screen as it printed. Finally, he stood up and swiped the pages from the printer, grinning excitedly as he headed across the hall.

“I’m busy,” snapped Thuringwethil as he burst into the office. “Oh,” she said, her tone softening. “It’s you. What—”

“Read this,” said Mairon, thrusting the pages at her across the desk. He paced as she read, certain it had never taken anyone so long to read anything in the history of printed language. “Are you seeing this?” he demanded. She waved him away. “Seriously, Thil, read a little slower.” She flipped him off and kept reading, her eyes widening as she went.

“Jesus,” she breathed. “This is fucking brutal.”

“I know,” said Mairon, still pacing in front of her desk. “I mean, even for Fëanor, this is low.”

“What is this?” wondered Thuringwethil aloud. “Spite?”

“I don’t think so. Fëanor is underhanded, but he’s not stupid. He wouldn’t pull something like this unless it was going to benefit him.”

“How could this possibly benefit him? Alqualondë is a fully functioning company—well, in theory anyway. I mean, they haven’t actually turned a profit in like, three years or something, but —”

“I know what you mean,” said Mairon.

“There was a whole structure in place,” she said. “Why tear it down?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon, worrying his bottom lip as he paced. “I mean, it’s like I said to you guys yesterday. Either Fëanor is intending to rebuild from scratch, or he’s got a copy squirreled away somewhere that he’s planning to use.”

“How likely are either of those options?”

“I’d say the first is more likely than the second. I mean, he made the thing in the first place, so there’s no reason to think he wouldn’t be able to make a new one.”

“But then why do this? Why fire two hundred trained, experienced employees from the company he just bought? I mean, even assuming that he is able to make a new Silmaril program, that takes time. We already have the functioning program. If he even wanted to have a hope of getting it out before we do, then he’d need Alqualondë to be up and running, not stripped to the bones.”

“Okay, but think about it. Fëanor just had the biggest project Formenos will ever have ripped out of his hands. If that doesn’t make you crazy paranoid, then nothing will. I bet you he didn’t trust a single person at Alqualondë—he’s probably seeing IP theft everywhere he looks.”

“So, what? He fires every competent worker in the whole company?”

“That’s what the memo says.”

“But that’s insane,” she protested. “There are other ways to address security concerns. New contracts, nondisclosure agreements, anti-theft—literally anything but firing everyone who had any idea how to run the place.”

“I honestly don’t think the man’s in a particularly sane state of mind. I mean, we kind of stole his one shot, you know? I’m sure he doesn’t want to risk another security breach.”

“I refer you to my previous statement.”

“And I refer you to mine.”

“Okay,” she said, tapping her index finger distractedly on her desk. “So you’re banking on option one. What’s the likelihood of option two?”

“What, that Fëanor has some copy of the program stashed somewhere?” Mairon smoothed the hair back from his face, his eyes darting back and forth as he thought. “I mean, I got every last shred of the thing out of the Formenos servers when I was there.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“A hundred percent.”

“So we’re definitely working with option one?”

“It’s the most likely scenario,” he said.

“But not the only one?”

“I mean, I only got a look at the corporate servers.”

“That doesn’t sound promising.”

“It’s possible,” he said carefully, “that he had another copy stashed somewhere—some personal computer or server or something I couldn’t get to in time.”

“I knew I didn’t like the sound of this,” she said, grinding the heels of her hands into her eyes. She sighed. “Shit. So what are the odds he’s got something we don’t know about?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Shit,” she said again. “This isn’t good, Mai.”

“I know,” he said, pacing worriedly in front of her desk. “I know.”

“I mean, *really* not good.”

“Believe me,” he said. “I know. If Fëanor has anything—and I mean anything—left of that program, then we’re screwed. Formenos could scoop us before we scoop them.”

“Okay, but he can’t have much, right? I mean, if that asshole Oromë even had a whiff of proof, he’d be on us like flies on shit.”

“Nice metaphor.”

“Seriously, though.”

“I don’t know,” he said, chewing the inside of his cheek. “I mean, even if Fëanor had something to give them, they’d still have to prove it was IP theft and not just two similar projects. If nothing else, I’m confident in the doctoring I did to the lab records. Anyone who looks is going to see us working on this project for a solid two years already.”

“Well, thank God for your falsification skills.” She sighed. “Alright, so what do we do?”

“We have to find out what Fëanor has,” said Mairon wearily.

“Know your enemy,” said Thuringwethil resignedly.

“On the off-chance he does have something,” said Mairon, “then that really puts a whole new level of pressure on us to get this crap into production.”

“We’re not even near production yet, are we?”

“No,” he said, “but we might have to be.”

“None of this is good,” she said.

“No,” he replied. “No it isn’t.” He sighed.

“So I’ll ask you again: what do we do?”

“I’m going to have to find a way to dig through Fëanor’s personal stuff,” he said. “Computers, servers—everywhere he could’ve possibly squirreled an extra copy of Silmaril away.”

“And if you find it?”

“I don’t know, Thil. There’s a good chance that Fëanor has already shown it to Oromë. I might just have to leave it.”

“So what’s the point of looking, then?”

“To know,” he said, halting his pacing at last. “Either way, I need to know. I can’t make a plan of attack if we don’t know what we’re up against.”

“Alright,” she said, the weariness in his voice now creeping into hers. “But do me a favor—two, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“First of all, don’t tell Melkor. I don’t need to hear that tantrum until absolutely necessary.”

“Fine,” he said. “And the other favor?”

“Don’t get caught.”

Any response Mairon may have had was preempted by sharp rap on the door. “Hey, Thil,” said Gothmog, pushing open the door and leaning inside. “Got a sec?” His glance shifted to Mairon, and he grinned. “Hey, Mai. I didn’t think you were here yet.”

“Good one, Gothmog,” said Thuringwethil. “When’s the last time you saw him leave this building?”

“You guys must be desperate for material,” said Mairon. “That’s about the thousandth joke about my work hours you’ve made in the last couple weeks.”

“It’s not like it gets old.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Hey,” said Gothmog, shrugging. “All you have to do is go home like, once a week, and the jokes will stop.”

“I’ll go home,” said Mairon, “when being here stops being so ridiculously worth my while.” He looked at his watch. “I have to run,” he said, sighing. “I have a production meeting in five that literally won’t happen if I don’t run it.” He headed for the door, waving to them as he turned down the hall toward the elevator.

Gothmog watched him go, shaking his head. “Is it just me,” he asked, turning toward Thuringwethil, “or is he slightly more insufferable than usual?”

“Eh,” said Thuringwethil. “Maybe. But I’ll let it slide.”

“Of course you will.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, I don’t really have a coherent response to that question, but the word ‘favoritism’ definitely comes to mind.”

She snorted. “Honestly, Gothmog. What are you, eight years old?”

“That’s a more generous estimate than you usually give me.”

“And you say I play favorites.”

Gothmog laughed. “Touché.”

“So,” said Thuringwethil, “did you need something?”

“Oh, yeah. I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask away.”

“I’ve been thinking about what Mairon said the other day, about how Formenos is going to be out for blood over the whole Silmaril thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and I’m just thinking about how I can be prepared. This building has a lot of security, and so do the server sites. I want to make sure everyone’s on the same page on how to deal with anyone from Oromë’s office who might come sniffing around.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Something that’ll remind everyone in my department of what constitutes legal entry.”

Thuringwethil nodded. “I can send you a memo by the end of the day.”

“Perfect.”

“Good thinking, Gothmog—and good timing.”

He gave her a suspicious look. “What do you know that I don’t?”

She sighed, glancing at the door and lowering her voice. “Mairon thinks Formenos might still have a copy of Silmaril.”

“What?” said Gothmog, too loudly.

“Keep it down,” said Thuringwethil irritably. “I said ‘might’.”

“Yeah, but still.” He ran a broad hand over the short crop of hair on his head. “Jesus, that would be a fucking nightmare. Why does he think that?”

“He dug up some more information on Alqualondë.”

“Yeah?”

“And he says he only got his hands on the corporate stuff at Formenos, not anything personal of Fëanor’s, so there’s a chance he missed something.”

“Jesus, Mairon,” said Gothmog, rubbing his eyes. “Hell of a time to start being careless.”

“To be fair,” said Thuringwethil, “it was kind of a rush job.”

“Yeah, no kidding. That whole night was one big clusterfuck.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“So what do we do?”

She shrugged. “We wait. Mairon is doing some digging to see if he can find some evidence either way. I’m going to keep an ear out for any rumors in the legal department. You can focus on the security end of the things. But for God’s sake, don’t say anything to Melkor.”

“Right,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Like I have a death wish.” He sighed. “Man, I hope to God that Mairon is wrong for once. I don’t think I can handle the tantrum we’re looking at if he’s right.”

“We’ll deal with that when we get to it,” she said grimly.

“Anyway,” said Gothmog, “how’s things? I feel like I haven’t seen you in a thousand years.”

“God,” she said. “Sometimes I forget how fast you can change a subject. It’s like conversational whiplash.”

“One of my many talents,” he said grinning. “But seriously, though.”

“I don’t even know how to answer that question,” she said, resting her chin in her hand. “I mean, this business with Formenos is a fucking debacle. Like I don’t have enough shit to deal with in my regular workload—oh, no. Plus, there’s the whole issue of our two idiot friends trying to get together.”

“Aw, come on,” Gothmog complained. “I’d almost managed to forget that was a thing.”

“I wish I could,” said Thuringwethil. “Do you know Mai slept in Melkor’s office last night?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Apparently Melkor was tired of waiting for Mairon to, you know, leave the office like a normal person, so he ordered food in for dinner.”

“Sorry,” said Gothmog, tapping the heel of his hand against his forehead. “I think I blacked out there for a minute. I could’ve sworn you said that Melkor brought dinner here for Mairon.”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“You’re joking.”

“Afraid not.”

“Melkor,” said Gothmog, casting an incredulous glance toward the wall that separated them from Melkor’s office. “Like, *Melkor* Melkor?”

“I mean, I didn’t ask for clarification, but how many Melkors do you know?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Gothmog, frowning, “but that’s like, *nice*.”

“I know.”

“Nice is not typically Melkor’s MO.”

“No kidding.”

“What’s he up to?” demanded Gothmog suspiciously.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe he’s just being nice.”

“Come on, Thil. When have you ever known Melkor to be nice?”

“I mean, he’s generally nice to us.”

“Yeah, but I’m also relatively sure he doesn’t want to fuck either of us.”

“Can you not?” she said, giving him a look of disgust.

“Thil, please. You worked the bar where he hung out for what, four years? How many nights did he leave alone?”

“Not many,” she said grudgingly.

“And did you ever see him with a single one of those people again?”

“Okay,” said Thuringwethil doggedly. “But this isn’t some random person at the bar. This is Mairon.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, as though she was missing a fundamental point. “That’s what makes it a hundred times worse.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, this is kind of new territory, don’t you think? Maybe old rules don’t apply.”

Gothmog gave her a sideways look. “Are you having a stroke or something? Or are you just pretending you haven’t known Melkor for ten years?”

“I’m trying optimism for once.”

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“Yeah? Well then how about some realism? Mairon and Melkor are adults. They don’t care what we think, and nothing we say is going to stop this from happening. So we might as well just suck it up and hope for the best.”

“Pretty sure total annihilation is the best we’re going to do.”

“I think you’re overreacting.”

“You’re right,” he said. “Annihilation would be quick and painless. We’re not that lucky.”

“Honestly, Gothmog.”

“Fine, but you mark my words: there is going to be fallout, and we’re going to be the ones dealing with it.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it, okay?”

“Fine.” There was a chime, and Gothmog pulled his phone from his pocket, squinting suspiciously

at the screen. “Goddamn it,” he said, tilting his head back and unleashing an aggravated sigh of frustration at the ceiling.

“What’s up?”

“It’s this goddamn alarm Mairon made me install at all of our server sites. The stupid thing keeps malfunctioning. I’ve had to deal with false alarms every damn day since we put it in.”

“You poor thing.”

“It’s not a joke, Thil. Piece of shit woke me up at one in the morning yesterday and kept me out ‘til two a.m. the night before. It’s a serious problem. Sleep deprivation can kill you, y’know.”

“And the award for biggest overreaction goes to…”

“I’m going to call you,” he growled, “every time this fucking thing goes off. We’ll see how big of an overreaction it is at three in the morning.”

“I will literally kill you.”

“That’s what I thought.” He turned and headed toward the door. “Want to grab a drink later? I haven’t looked at my schedule yet, but I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

“I’m booked solid today,” she said, glancing irritably at her calendar. “How about tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me. See you later, Thil.”

“Hey,” said Thuringwethil, knocking gently on the doorframe. “You busy?”

“One second,” said Melkor, fixated on his computer screen.

“What are you working on?” she asked, meandering toward his desk.

“Shh.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you concentrate that hard on anything in my life.”

“Yeah, well—oh, motherfucker.”

“What?”

He turned the monitor toward her, scowling. “Goddamn it, Thil. See what you did?”

“You have got to be kidding,” she said, scowling at him.

Melkor pointed at the nearly-completed game of minesweeper on the screen. “I was so close to beating the expert level,” he complained. “Three mines left.”

“Not my fault you choke under pressure.”

“Do you actually want something, or did you just come in here to ruin my life?”

“And I accused Gothmog of overreacting,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Is he still bitching about that alarm system?”

“Of course he is.”

“He’s such a goddman whiner.”

She rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that just the pot calling the kettle black.”

“I’m not a kettle,” Melkor said.

“No shit, Sherlock. You’re the pot in that metaphor.”

“Am not.”

“You said Gothmog was whiny, which means—no, fuck it. I won’t even bother.”

“A wise decision,” he said, grinning.

“You’re an idiot.”

“And what does that say about you?” he needled, grinning. “You work for me—voluntarily, I might add.”

“A decision I regret more and more every day.”

“I have the firing power here, you know.”

“I’ll call that bluff any day of the week.”

“Fair enough. Did you just come in here to bullshit? Because that’s cool and all, but I have a daisy field to rid of mines, so—”

“Listen, smartass. I came to tell you the news about the firings at Alqualondë finally broke. It was just on the news.”

“Took them long enough.”

“Honestly.”

“So has Mairon given them the info on Fëanor’s back alley deal yet?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Huh. He’s usually Johnny on the spot with that shit.”

“Yeah, well, I think he was a little...distracted yesterday.”

Melkor grinned. “You think?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Aw, come on,” he complained.

“Can’t you let me have any fun?”

“Can we be serious for a minute?”

“I mean, I know *you* can.”

“Melkor.”

“Alright, alright. What?”

“I just—”She sighed. “Look, I’m not telling you what to do.”

“Good.”

“Because I know you wouldn’t listen.”

“Right.”

“But I just want to know that you’ve thought this through.”

“Good one. Oh, wait—you’re serious.”

“We’ve got a really great thing going here, Melkor. Do you know how rare it is to work with your friends without eventually wanting to kill them?”

“No,” he said. “I want to kill Gothmog at least twice a day.”

“We have a good thing here,” she said, ignoring him. “I like it. I don’t want anything to ruin it.”

“I’ll make sure Gothmog attends the next hostile work environment seminar.”

“Melkor, I’m serious.”

“So am I.” She glared at him, and he rolled his eyes. “Alright, God. Look, I’m not trying to fuck anything up, okay? Scout’s honor, or whatever.”

“Good. Because I swear to God—”

“I have been on the receiving end of your right hook, Thuringwethil. Trust me, I’m not looking to repeat the experience.”

“A wise decision,” she said solemnly. “Hey, you still down to grab a drink after work? I should be done by five.”

“Oh, so we’re done with the scary threatening bit?” She advanced toward him, and he raised his hands in capitulation. “Okay, okay. Jesus. Seriously though, I’m good after work. Did you check with Gothmog?”

“Yeah, he’s good too.”

“Good. How about Mai?”

She snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious,” said Melkor. “He hasn’t left the building in like, four days. He needs to get some air.”

“Good luck getting that through to him.”

“Oh, I’m sure I could convince him to take a break.” Melkor waggled his eyebrows at her and grinned.

“There are indecency laws, you know.”

“Just drop your complaints in my inbox,” he said, nudging the garbage can with his foot.

“You’re an asshole,” she said, fighting back a grin.

“And yet you’re my friend,” he said, grinning triumphantly.

“I really need to evaluate my life decisions.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “So five o’clock, right?”

“Five o’clock,” she said, heading for the door.

“This place is disgusting,” said Thuringwethil, pressing her fingertips to the sticky surface of the bar. “I honestly don’t think you could’ve found anywhere louder.”

“Oh, please,” he called back, grinning. “This is nothing compared to that shithole you used to work at.”

“That was ten years ago,” she snapped. “My tolerance is way down since then.”

“Yeah, well. Suck it up. Have a drink. Unclench your—”

“Don’t even.”

“Loosen up a little,” he amended, grinning at her.

“Keep buying me drinks and I just might.”

He grinned. “You, my friend, are shameless,” he said. The bartender set four drinks in front of them. Melkor picked up two of them and laid a tip on the bar.

“Do we need to review that pot/kettle metaphor again?” she asked, picking up the other two drinks and raising an eyebrow at him.

“Probably,” he said.

She laughed, nudging him gently with her shoulder. “Come on,” she said, turning back toward the crowd. “Let’s go find our spot.”

They headed back to the booth where Gothmog and Mairon were waiting and sat down. “Hey, thanks,” said Gothmog, grabbing a beer from Melkor and grinning. “Have I told you that you’re my favorite boss?”

“Suck up,” said Mairon, taking his black Russian from Thuringwethil.

“I don’t want to hear any jokes from someone so high on my shit list,” said Gothmog, scowling at Mairon.

“What did I do?”

“You won’t take care of that goddamn alarm system. It’s ruining my life, you know.”

“Oh,” said Mairon, sighing. “Right.”

“Hello,” said Gothmog, snapping his fingers in Mairon’s face. “Did you not hear me? Life ruining in progress here.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I know. It’s on my list.”

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “At the bottom, apparently.”

“Jesus, can you cut me some slack? I’m a little swamped right now.”

“You’re always a little swamped. All I’m saying is—”

“Gothmog?” said Melkor.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Shut up. We didn’t come here to talk about work, for fuck’s sake.”

“But—”

“Ah,” said Melkor, holding up his index finger in warning. “Nope. We’re here to relax, for once. The last thing I want to talk about is work.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil, sipping at her wine. “Melkor doesn’t even talk about work when we’re in the office. How dare you bring it up now.”

“Hey,” said Melkor, indignant. “Rude.”

“Truth hurts, buddy.”

“Aw, come on. I work.”

“When?”

“All the time,” he insisted.

“Uh-huh,” she said narrowing her eyes at him. “Like this afternoon? When you were watching a movie at a volume that honestly shouldn’t even be possible for computer speakers?”

“Number one,” said Melkor, “they’re custom, so raise your expectations. And number two, it wasn’t even that loud.”

“It literally sounded like Patrick Swayze was screaming at me through the wall.”

“Okay,” said Melkor, grinning, “but in my defense, it was fucking *Point Break*. You have to turn that shit up.”

“If you want to go deaf, that’s your business. Don’t drag me into it. Wear your damn headphones.”

“I lost them.”

“You’re going to lose your access to the internet, too.”

“That might be the worst threat I’ve even heard.”

“Oh, really?”

“Uh, yes. I mean, the internet keeps me in my office, relatively quiet, for like, eighty percent of the day. Think of the shit I could get into if you took away my primary mode of entertainment.”

“For once, I’ll concede the point. But if you—”

“Hold up,” said Melkor. “Wait a minute. Did you actually just concede a point? Jesus Christ—I feel like I need a fucking medal or something. At the very least, someone should at least buy me

some champagne.”

“Oh, go to hell,” she said, laughing.

“Hey guys,” said Mairon suddenly. “Look.” He pointed at the television above the bar, which was playing the six o’clock news.

“Two hundred jobs cut at Alqualondë,” said Gothmog, reading the captions. “So what? Nothing we don’t already know.”

“Not that,” he said impatiently. “The next piece. Look.”

“What are we looking at?”

“Shh,” Mairon scolded.

“You’re reading,” hissed Gothmog. “Not listening.”

“Both of you shut up,” said Thuringwethil, eyes glued to the screen.

“...regret to announce...blah, blah...completing a tenure with the company...yeah, yeah,” said Melkor. “Get to the point.”

“Oh my God,” said Thuringwethil. “Am I reading this right?”

“Finarfin’s leaving the company?” said Melkor, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Who’s Finarfin?” asked Gothmog.

“Finwë’s youngest kid,” said Melkor. “Ran some department or other at Formenos.”

“Public relations, I think,” said Thuringwethil absently.

“So why’s he leaving?” asked Gothmog.

“The statement said he was ‘at odds with the company’s trajectory’,” said Thuringwethil.

“Whatever that means.”

“I think it means Finarfin just publicly quit his job at Formenos because he doesn’t like the way Fëanor runs things,” said Melkor.

“And here I thought you had the monopoly on family drama,” said Gothmog. He laughed as Melkor lunged across the table, his punch landing on air as Gothmog dodged to the side.

“Watch it,” said Mairon reproachfully, holding his drink away from the scuffle.

“Oh, quit whining,” said Melkor, grinning. “I’ll buy you another one.”

“I don’t need another one,” said Mairon. “I just need this one to stay off my shirt.”

“Can we focus, please?” said Thuringwethil.

“On what?” asked Melkor.

“On what just happened, obviously.”

“So someone else thinks Fëanor’s an asshole. Who cares? That’s not news.”

“Yes, but a significant shareholder leaving the company is.”

“God, do you have to overanalyze everything, Thuringwethil?”

“I can’t overanalyze something we haven’t even discussed yet,” she snapped.

“You heard the news guy,” said Melkor. “Apparently Finarfin didn’t like what Fëanor was doing, so he jumped ship.”

“Okay, but—”

“Honestly, Thil, who cares why he did it? Whatever his reason, it’s good news for us. So, you know, don’t look a horse in the mouth, or whatever.”

“A gift horse,” Mairon corrected.

“What’s a gift horse?”

“That expression, it’s—oh, forget it.”

“Hey, look!” said Melkor. “There’s a pool table open. Hurry up before me miss it.”

“Mairon’s on my team,” said Gothmog, sliding out of the booth.

“Bad move,” said Melkor, shoving him playfully as they made their way toward the table. “Thil’s a pool shark.”

Thuringwethil watched them go, shaking her head. Then she turned back to Mairon, watching him intently as though appraising him. “I know that look,” she said.

“What look?” said Mairon absently.

“The one where you’re imagining all the work you could be doing if you weren’t here right now.”

“To be fair,” he said, grinning, “that’s my look like, ninety-eight percent of the time I’m not in my office.”

“Fair enough,” she said, laughing. She tapped her fingertips thoughtfully on the table. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“I’m listening.”

“Stay and have another drink,” she said, “and then I’ll take you home so you can work.”

Mairon looked at his watch and then at the half-full glass in front of him. “Just one more?”

“Just one more.”

From across the bar, Mairon could hear Gothmog calling his name. He raised a hand in acknowledgement and rolled his eyes at Thuringwethil. Then he picked up his glass and drained what remained in one go. “Alright,” he said, setting down the glass with a decisive clink. “Let’s get another round and show those clowns how to shoot pool.”

Mairon had mastered the art of distracted walking. The sidewalk beneath his feet was familiar,

and he barely gave the path ahead a second glance, instead scrolling through his email and drinking his coffee as he walked.

“Hey,” said a voice in his ear.

Mairon jumped; he had been too engrossed to hear the approaching footsteps. He turned and glared at Thuringwethil, who smiled sweetly back at him. “One of these days,” he said irritably, “you’re going to give me an actual heart attack.” He held the door open for her. “Then we’ll see how funny it is to sneak up on people.”

“Give me twenty minutes,” she said, “and twenty ounces of coffee, and I might have a comeback for that.” He handed her the cup in his hand, and she took a sip. “Holy shit,” she said, handing the cup back to him. “How much did you pay for all that extra whipped cream?”

“When you’ve given them as much money as I have over the years, you can get all the whipped cream you want.”

“Is it your loyal patronage,” she wondered aloud, “or is it the terror you instill in mere mortals before you’ve had your coffee in the morning?”

“Me, terrifying? Please.”

“You are distinctly unpleasant before you’ve had caffeine.”

“Well then,” he said as they stepped into the elevator, “it’s a good thing I keep myself pretty well stocked.”

“And they say altruism is dead.”

“Who says that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. People. Probably in reference to Formenos.”

“Hey-o.”

“Easy target.”

“True,” he said, “but still funny.”

“Speaking of which,” she said, “did you manage to dig anything else up last night?”

“Not much,” he said, shrugging. “I ran a search overnight, so I should have some stuff to dig through this morning.”

The elevator stopped, and the two of them stepped through the doors and into the sixth floor lobby.

“Hey, Mairon!” called Gothmog, walking toward them down the hall.

“Yeah?”

“Got a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“How can you tell if hell’s frozen over?”

Mairon raised an eyebrow at him. “Should I wait for a punchline, or...?”

“I’m serious,” said Gothmog earnestly. “I think I’ve seen an actual sign.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You actually went home last night.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“I know,” said Gothmog, grinning. “It’s a gift.”

“Not the word I’d use.”

“Keep working on that vocabulary, buddy. You’ll get better. Hey, seriously though. What’s your schedule look like today?”

“Um, I have meetings at ten, eleven, and twelve, then a conference call with a potential new hire, then I’m meeting with research and development, then—”

“Okay, okay. Wrong question. Let me try again. Do you have ten minutes to talk about the fucking alarm system at the server sites?”

Mairon snorted. “I can make time. Give me, like, twenty minutes, okay?”

“You got it. I’ll be in my office.”

“Alright,” said Thuringwethil as they proceeded down the hallway. “So you’ll let me know if you find anything, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “See you later, okay?”

Mairon unlocked the door to his office and stepped through, closing it behind him. He leaned on the door for a minute, sighing as he let his mind run through the myriad items on his ever-growing to-do list. He pushed himself away from the door and walked toward his desk, setting down his bag and his coffee before shrugging off his coat.

The phone began to ring, and he laid his coat across the desk, sitting down and reaching for the receiver. “This is Mairon,” he said, scooting his chair closer to the desk and reaching for his coffee.

“Sir, this is Gelmir at the front desk.”

“What is it?”

“There’s someone here to see you.”

“Tell ‘em to make an appointment,” said Mairon. “I have a schedule, Gelmir.”

“I know sir, but he’s from the police. He wants to ask you a couple of questions.”

Mairon froze, coffee half-raised to his lips. “Escort him up,” he said carefully. “I’m in my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mairon slammed the phone into the receiver and pushed himself back from the desk, running

toward the door. He ran out into the hall and headed for Thuringwethil's office, pushing the door open and leaning inside. "My office," he said, panting slightly. "Now."

"Mai, what—"

"Police," he said tersely, turning on his heel and running back to his own office. He ran inside and hurriedly straightened his desk, shoving stacks of paper into the drawers.

"What do you mean, police?" hissed Thuringwethil, coming into the office.

"Here," he said, tossing his coat to her. "I don't know, Thil. The idiot receptionist is bringing them up now. But—"

"That's the elevator," she hissed, hanging the coat on the hook before striding around to his side of the desk. "Get ready."

Mairon sat down and pulled a report out of his top drawer, flipping to a random page and beginning to read. After what seemed like a lifetime, he heard footsteps approaching. "Here you are, sir," said Gelmir as he appeared in the doorway.

"Thank you," said a familiar voice.

Mairon swallowed the scowl that began to surface at the sound, and he stood up, forcing himself to smile. "Please come in," he said, gesturing at the chairs in front of his desk.

"Thank you," said Oromë, grinning as he looked around the office. "You know, I hadn't really seen the new digs yet. I have to say, it's an upgrade from the old Utumno offices. Oh, hello Thuringwethil."

"Oromë."

"Mairon, I was hoping to speak with you in private."

Mairon gestured toward the closed door. "We are in private."

Oromë looked pointedly at Thuringwethil. "I meant alone."

"Oh," said Mairon. "I'm sure you did."

"Don't you think having your lawyer here might put a damper on the flow of conversation?"

"Don't worry about me," said Thuringwethil. "I'm an excellent conversationalist."

Oromë ignored her, instead focusing on Mairon. "You know, running for your lawyer when you hear me coming makes you seem a little...what's the word?"

"Prepared?" Mairon suggested.

"I was going to say nervous."

"I have a right to legal counsel."

"Sure," said Oromë. "But when you're the one suggesting you might need it..."

"Retaining a lawyer is not an admission of wrongdoing," said Thuringwethil.

“I suppose not,” said Oromë, though his tone made it clear he thought otherwise.

“Is there a point to this visit?” asked Mairon as Thuringwethil and Oromë sized each other up. “Because as fun as this is, I do have a full schedule today.”

“Then I’ll cut to the chase.”

“Please do.”

“Mr. Smith—”

“Doctor,” Thuringwethil corrected.

“Mairon,” said Oromë instead. “I’m here to discuss the computers that were seized from your labs.”

“What about them?”

“Our staff seems to be experiencing some, ah, technical difficulties in accessing the data stored in them.”

“Really?”

“You don’t sound particularly surprised.”

“I’m familiar with your IT department,” said Mairon. “So, you know.”

“No,” said Oromë coldly. “I’m not sure I do.”

“I only meant that the quality of their work doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.”

“Our scientists are at the top of the field,” said Oromë, an edge creeping into his voice.

“Speaking as someone who’s actually at the top of the field,” said Mairon, “I’m going to have to disagree.”

“Bit arrogant, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” said Mairon, shrugging. “But if your standard is being able to find a file in a desktop, then I think I’ve earned it.”

The corner of Oromë’s eye twitched, the only sign of his annoyance. “What did you do to those computers?” he asked, his voice calm despite the accusation.

Mairon’s face was impassive. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“They were functional when we confiscated them,” said Oromë. “I saw them in action myself. Then we take them bring them back to our office and, what? They all magically malfunction?”

“I wouldn’t say magically.”

“Then what would you say?”

“I’m thinking less magic, more incompetence.”

“Ridiculous,” Oromë scoffed.

“If you say so,” said Mairon, adopting a smirk as he watched the big man’s face grow red. “All I know is that the computers I gave you were fully functional—you just said so yourself. Whatever your people did to them isn’t really my problem.”

“Listen carefully,” said Oromë, every word spoken deliberately against the barely-audible undercurrent of anger in his voice, “because I’m only going to say this once. Tampering with evidence in an investigation is a crime, and refusal to cooperate constitutes obstruction.”

“As Mairon’s attorney,” said Thuringwethil, interrupting him, “I’m going to have to object. Mairon helped your officers execute that warrant. He provided access to our labs and detailed all the equipment for your records. He even offered advice on where to find the information you were looking for within our systems.”

“I’m not arguing those points,” said Oromë.

“Good,” said Thuringwethil. “Because pursuant to your warrant, our cooperation required only that we surrender any hardware and access credentials you required.”

“Oh, yes,” said Oromë, scowling at her. “You were the very model of cooperation that day. But obstruction doesn’t just cover your behavior during the execution of the warrant. It also covers any attempts you make to sabotage the evidence we gather against you. Like I said, you could be looking at tampering with evidence and obstruction.”

“You know,” said Thuringwethil, “I’m hearing a lot of accusations and not a lot of evidence. What you have right now is purely conjecture—which doesn’t hold up in court, by the way.”

“I’m not worried about convincing a judge,” said Oromë, smirking at her. “I know a few people on the bench.”

“Wow,” said Thuringwethil, giving him a contemptuous look. “I hadn’t realized just how much you rely on cronyism.”

“It’s called networking, sweetheart. Not that you’d know anything about it.”

She snorted. “Oh honey,” she said, her tone dripping with derision. “When you have enough talent, you don’t have to rely on favors to get what you want. Besides, all the connections in the world aren’t going to help you get out of the lawsuit you’re pushing yourself into.”

“You know, threats work best when you have something to back them up.”

Thuringwethil glanced at the corner of the room, where a small camera nestled in the juncture of the walls and the ceiling. “I’ve got a good ten minutes of security footage if it comes to that.”

His face turned stony, and there was an edge to his voice as he said, “You’re being investigated for a very serious crime. You can’t expect to avoid police questioning—which, I might remind you, is perfectly legal.”

“I have no objections to questioning,” she said. “But all those unfounded accusations you keep throwing around are getting dangerously close to slander—especially if you repeat them to other law enforcement or a judge or whatever. I mean, the potential damage to our professional reputation would be inestimable.”

He snorted. “I think I’ll take my chances on that one.”

Thuringwethil raised an eyebrow at him. “With your prosecutors? I wouldn’t.”

Oromë narrowed his eyes, levelling a formidable scowl at Thuringwethil, who returned his gaze with a smirk. A tense silence had fallen between the three of them, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Finally, Oromë let out a snort of laughter and shook his head. “You know,” he said, crossing his arms, “I had almost forgotten what it was like to deal with you people. I mean, Jesus Christ. It’s like you think you’re smarter than everyone else on the planet.”

Mairon shrugged. “You say that like it’s an unreasonable assumption.”

Oromë sighed, clucking his tongue. “All that arrogance is going to catch up with you some day.”

“Yeah?”

“For sure,” said Oromë. “I caught you once before, and believe me, it’s only a matter of time until I get you again.”

“I feel like I should remind you,” said Thuringwethil, “that Mairon has never been convicted of a crime. He’s never even been formally charged.”

“Cut the bullshit,” said Oromë, his patience momentarily slipping. He turned his glare on Mairon. “We know you’re good at weaseling out of trouble, you little worm, but it’s not happening this time. You stole intellectual property from Formenos. I don’t care how much you try to sabotage this investigation. You’re not getting out of this one.”

“Again with the slander,” said Thuringwethil, shaking her head. “And you’re moving right along into harassment territory, too.”

“Who’s harassing?” said Oromë, holding up his hands as though to indicate a lack of hostility. “We’re just having a friendly conversation.”

“Is that how you talk to your friends? No wonder you don’t have so many.”

“I don’t need a lot of friends. I just need the right ones in the right places.”

“Finally,” she said. “Something we can agree on.”

He looked her up and down, sizing her up. “Maybe it’s your arrogance rubbing off on me,” he said, “but I’m thinking my friends are going to be of more use than yours.”

She smiled in a way that was not entirely pleasant. “We’ll see,” she said, challenge evident despite the cordiality of her tone.

A series of three short beeps cut through the tense silence, and Mairon glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry,” he said, smiling innocently and tapping the face of his watch. “I have a meeting I really can’t miss. So unless you have something further to discuss...?” He stood up, and Oromë followed suit. “It’s been a pleasure,” said Mairon, holding out his hand.

Oromë merely frowned, ignoring the gesture. “This isn’t over,” he said, his voice low and warning. He turned on his heel and retreated down the hall. Thuringwethil followed him to the door, watching him until the elevator doors closed and he disappeared from view.

“Jesus,” she said, pacing toward the desk and crossing her arms. “What a way to start the day.”

“Real charmer, that one,” said Mairon.

Thuringwethil perched on the edge of his desk and reached for Mairon’s coffee, blanching as it

passed her lips. “Shit,” she said setting it down and glaring at it. “It’s cold.”

“Still good,” said Mairon, picking it up and taking a swig.

“Alright,” she said, watching him carefully. “I have to ask. What’s up with the computers?”

“Anti-theft,” said Mairon, tapping his fingertips on the cup in his hand. “There’s a sensor in every computer and one in every window and door in this building. If the computer sensor passes ten feet beyond any exit, every file gets destroyed.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “It’s clever. Normally I’d appreciate the ingenuity, but you’re really playing with fire if you didn’t tell Oromë about that feature when he served the warrant.”

“I read the warrant,” he said. “It specified for the computers and the access codes. There was nothing else required.”

“Okay,” she said, “but no judge is going to let something like this slide. He really could press for obstruction, and he honestly might have a case.”

“He can’t build a case without evidence.”

“He already suspects what you did. You don’t think he’s going to dig around and try to find out how you did it?”

“He can dig all he wants,” said Mairon. “The anti-theft has a self-destruct. Once it burns all the files, it’s gone. They won’t find a thing.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

“I usually am.”

“That makes one of us, then.”

“Come on, Thil,” he said. “When have I ever let you down before?”

“Still,” she said.

“Trust me, Thil. I’m not giving those dickheads any ammo.”

“Yeah,” she said, still frowning. “Alright. But if you pull this shit again without at least telling me, I swear to God I’ll—” She hesitated, her frown deepening.

“You’re kidding,” he said, looking impressed. “Thuringwethil, lost for a good threat? I must be dreaming.”

“Give me a break,” she said. “I haven’t had nearly enough coffee for the amount of shit I’ve already had to deal with today.

“Fair enough,” he said. He sighed. “Jesus,” he said, running his hands over his hair. “Just like you said—heck of a way to start the day.”

“No kidding, she said. “The last thing I want to do is have to file a complaint before ten a.m.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “A complaint?”

“We just got an unannounced visit from a federal agent who not only leveled offensive accusations

at us, but also threatened us. It needs to be documented.”

Mairon snorted. “I’m pretty sure the powers that be won’t be too concerned.”

“I don’t expect them to be,” she said. “But like I always say, there’s nothing more valuable than documentation. Things like that can be ammo, if you know how to use them, and there may come a time when we need all the shots we can get.”

“That’s why I love you, Thil,” he said. “You always think ahead.”

“Someone has to.”

He rested his chin in the palm of his hand, staring into the space beyond her as he ran through the morning’s events in his mind. Then his eyes flicked back to her, and he said, “Can that wait a bit?”

“Depends,” she said. “What do you need?”

“I don’t know,” he said, lowering his forehead to the desk and closing his eyes. “A new job, probably.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well,” he said dully, “maybe not. He might just kill me.”

“Who are we talking about?”

“Melkor.”

“Why would he kill you? This Oromë thing—it’s not exactly out of left field. We knew they’d be coming after us. Besides, as far as these things go, this little visit was honestly pretty tame.”

“Maybe,” said Mairon, “but Oromë’s only half the problem.”

“What’s the other half?”

“The Silmaril files.”

“What, the possibility of a stowaway copy? We’re not even sure it exists.”

“If Oromë’s going to get on our case like this, then Melkor at least needs to know it’s a possibility.”

“The keyword there,” she said, “is possibility. Can’t you wait until you have something more solid?”

“He deserves to know,” said Mairon.

“You know,” she said, “you pick the worst times to be conscientious.”

“Trust me,” he said. “I know.” He groaned, banging his head gently on the top of the desk.

“Come on,” he said wearily, pushing himself up and out of his chair. “Let’s get this over with.”

Perhaps it was the early hour, but Melkor listened to them talk without interruption. When they had finished, he merely snorted and rolled his eyes. “Is that it?” he asked them.

“Um,” said Mairon, looking at Thuringwethil. “Yes?”

“Okay,” said Melkor.

“Okay?” Thuringwethil repeated. “Is that it?”

“Were you looking for something else?”

“I mean, I was expecting yelling.”

“Do you want me to yell?”

“Not really.”

“So we’re good.”

“I mean, I guess,” she said. “I just expected more of a reaction, honestly. Actually, now I’m a little suspicious.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you.”

“Okay,” he conceded. “But you’re always telling me not to explode over every little thing.”

“Since when do you listen?”

“Almost never,” he said.

“Wow,” she said. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Seriously though,” he said. “Take your own advice, and chill. There’s no need to freak out.”

“Really?” asked Mairon skeptically.

“I mean, the unannounced part if less than ideal,” said Melkor. “But I’m honestly not surprised.” He glanced at Mairon, who looked unconvinced. “What?” Mairon hesitated, and Melkor frowned, growing suspicious. “What do you know that I don’t?” Mairon looked at Thuringwethil, still hesitant. “Don’t make me drag it out of you,” said Melkor, the usual flippancy gone from his tone.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Mairon carefully. “About Oromë’s visit.”

“What about it?”

“Maybe…” He licked his lips, turning over his words in his mind. “Maybe,” he began again, “there was another motive.”

“What motive?”

Mairon took a breath and braced himself. “What if,” he said carefully, “we missed something?”

“Missed what? What are you talking about?”

“The Silmaril program files,” said Mairon. “What if there’s something at Formenos—something we missed?”

“That’s not possible,” said Melkor.

“Anything is possible,” said Mairon grimly.

Melkor’s face grew dangerously still. “Mairon,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically quiet. “In all the years I’ve known you, I don’t think you ever lied to me. Not once.”

“I don’t think I have either,” said Mairon, uneasy.

“And yet,” said Melkor, his volume rising incrementally, “you stood right here, right in front of me and told me you got every last shred of Silmaril out of Formenos.”

“I got everything the company had,” said Mairon, a defensive edge creeping into his voice. “But I had no way of finding anything Fëanor might have had in personal storage.”

“Dude,” said Melkor, barely restraining himself. “What the fuck? How could you let this happen? You’re supposed to be mister thinks-of-everything.”

“I did think of everything,” said Mairon shortly, bristling at the accusation. “But I seem to remember you didn’t want my plan. You wanted to let Ungoliant pull one over on you.”

“Excuse me, but we’re focusing on your failures right now, thanks.”

“You left me six hours to get in and wipe everything from the Formenos servers,” Mairon said, glaring at him. “I barely got it done, and by the time I could have looked for any personal copies or backups, Formenos was onto us. Everything had been moved.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Melkor swore. “So Fëanor could knock down our whole operation?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “I have no way of knowing. That’s the problem.”

“Dude, aren’t you supposed to be some kind of computer whiz? Get in there and do your shit.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing for the past month?” said Mairon. “You know, when I’m not designing our own programs and overseeing every stage of research, development, and production on all our own models?”

“Then quit fucking micromanaging the whole goddamn company and just find out what they have!” Melkor was shouting now, but Mairon didn’t flinch. He stared down Melkor’s glare, his lips pursed in a look of intense displeasure. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out in a short huff through his nose. He opened his eyes and looked at Melkor with more calm than anyone should have been able to possess.

“Right now,” he said, his voice clipped and precise, “the only clues we have are the things Formenos has done since this whole debacle went down. So let’s look at what we know.”

“We know they fucking called the cops and got an investigation opened on us,” said Melkor, his rage still simmering beneath his words.

“Yes,” said Mairon, infuriatingly calm. “They did. We also know that Fëanor bought Alqualondë.”

“And fired all its employees,” added Thuringwethil, who was watching the exchange with detached fascination.

“Yes,” said Mairon. “And we know that Oromë came here to interrogate us unannounced this morning.”

“So what’s it all mean?”

Mairon sighed. “I think it means that Fëanor still has something.”

“Motherfucker,” said Melkor angrily, pounding his fist on his desk.

“What makes you say that?” asked Thuringwethil, ignoring Melkor.

“Well, the investigation doesn’t tell us much, because Fëanor would’ve called the cops regardless of what he had in reserve. But Alqualdondë might tell us something.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, why buy the company if you no longer have a use for it?”

“Maybe it was too late,” said Melkor. “Maybe his shady-ass deal had already gone so far he couldn’t weasel out.”

“Maybe,” said Mairon. “But maybe he went through with the deal because he still had something he thought he could use.”

“So why fire the employees?” Melkor demanded. “Why set yourself back even further?”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil. “Fucking déjà vu. Haven’t we had this conversation already?”

“Shut up, Thil,” said Melkor irritably.

“It’s like we said before,” said Mairon, holding out a hand to stop Thuringwethil’s grab for the stapler—likely intended as a projectile. “Fëanor is paranoid—probably even more so now that he’s had this crazy breach of security. He’s not going to let anyone he doesn’t completely trust near his project.”

“So he’s a paranoid piece of shit,” said Melkor. “Doesn’t mean he’s got anything left of the program.”

“But when you pair it with Oromë’s little visit—”

“What about it?”

“Look, I hate Oromë as much as the next guy—”

“Not if the next guy is me,” said Melkor mutinously.

“But,” said Mairon, ignoring him, “you have to give him credit. He’s thorough, and he’s careful. He doesn’t make a move if he isn’t relatively sure where it’s going to get him.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil, “and that really came back to bite us the last time around.”

“How is that relevant?” snapped Melkor.

“Because,” said Mairon, “this morning was messy, disorganized.” He shook his head. “It wasn’t like him at all.”

“Please,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

“I’m serious,” said Mairon. “Think about it. He barged in here demanding we help them unlock

the computers. That's not a great move, if you ask me. That's the kind of information you withhold. If I was him, I'd let us sweat it out—make us think he had something and hope we crack under the pressure.”

“But he didn't,” said Thuringwethil. “He basically ran in here and admitted he's got nothing against us.”

“Exactly,” said Melkor. “Because he's got nothing against us.”

“Or,” said Mairon, “because he's trying to verify something he thinks he has.”

“Jesus,” said Melkor. “If you have something to say, then fucking spit it out.”

“What if Fëanor does have a backup, or a prototype program? It's obviously not enough to just have the program. They need some kind of evidence that ours is a copy of theirs. So he needs our notes, our logs, our test results—anything that could possibly prove that the Silmaril program didn't originate in Angband. I bet they thought they had a foot in the door when they got the warrant for our computers. They thought they were going to catch us in the lie.”

“Which they obviously can't,” said Thuringwethil, “because you destroyed the data on the machines they confiscated.”

“Which made Fëanor freak,” concluded Mairon, “and put pressure on Oromë to confront us.”

“But why?” said Melkor. “Oromë came in here with jack shit and left with the same. What does that gain Fëanor?”

“Nothing,” said Mairon. “But I think he's desperate. I think Fëanor has some copy of the program that's less developed than the one we stole, something he's going to have to build back up. And he knows that the longer we have the program, the further we get ahead of him. Having Alqualondë isn't going to help him if we get it out to market first.”

“But even in that scenario,” said Melkor, “we're ahead. He doesn't have what he needs to prove we stole the program, and he doesn't have the means to get whatever he has left into production.”

“Yes, which is exactly why he's trying to prove that we stole it. I'd bet you any money he's looking for an injunction.”

“Buy time during the investigation so he can get his copy up and running,” said Thuringwethil.

Mairon nodded. “It's what I would do.”

“Fuck,” said Melkor, dragging the word into a drawn-out groan as he lowered his head and banged his forehead on the top of his desk. “Fuck,” he said again, sitting up and tilting his head back with a sigh. “So what the fuck do we do?”

“We really only have one option,” said Mairon.

Melkor groaned again, expressing his annoyance in a single, guttural sound. “We have to push this thing into production,” he said. “Fucking hell, man.”

“Not only that,” said Mairon, “but we have to make really, really sure that they aren't going to find a shred of evidence of what we did.”

“Alright,” said Melkor, dragging his hands through his hair and gathering it into a ponytail.

“Alright. So here’s what we do. Mai, you work on hiding the evidence, laundering our lab books—whatever you have to do. Move that program wherever you have to. I want it untouchable, you hear me?” Mairon nodded. “I’m going to make sure Gothmog’s got a handle on our current security situation to help you with that. Thuringwethil, you keep on top of legal stuff. Call whoever you know. I don’t want Oromë or Fëanor or anyone else so much as looking at the courthouse without us knowing about it.”

“Got it,” she said.

The three of them stood for a moment in silence. “Well?” demanded Melkor irritably, reaching for his phone. “What the fuck are you two waiting for?”

“Hey,” said Melkor, leaning into Mairon’s office. “Got a sec?”

“I’m a little busy,” said Mairon, eyes still fixed on his computer.

“Too busy for coffee?”

Mairon glanced at the cup in his hand. “I guess I can spare a minute,” he said, holding out his hand.

Melkor laughed. “That’s what I thought.” He set the cup down on the edge of the desk and slid it toward Mairon, who picked it up and immediately began to drink. “Easy,” said Melkor, sitting in the chair opposite the desk and giving him a look of concern. “That thing is like, the temperature of the sun.”

“Eh,” said Mairon, setting the cup down on the desk. “I’m pretty sure I burned all the feeling out of my tongue years ago anyway.”

“That sounds healthy,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

Mairon shrugged and focused once more on his computer screen, the click of the keys beneath his fingers the only sound in the room. “Did you need something?” he asked, still watching the screen as he typed.

“Yeah, actually,” said Melkor. “I want to pick your brain about moving forward on this Silmaril thing.”

“I don’t know how much brain I have left to pick right about now,” said Mairon, only half-joking.

“Eh,” said Melkor, unconcerned. “I’ll take what you’ve got.”

“What’s up?”

“I’m wondering how we should proceed with this thing,” said Melkor. “I mean, it’s got three potential applications, right?”

“As far as I can tell.”

“So where do we start?”

“Well, aviation is the obvious choice. We have the groundwork in place.”

“Exactly. So why is Fëanor going for the water option? Most of the work they’ve done at

Formenos has been in aviation.”

“We don’t know that they didn’t start work for the aviation option.”

“But they bought Alqualondë.”

“Okay, but think about it. It takes some period of time to get any new project off the ground, right? There’s going to be a similar lag time for any project, whether it’s terrestrial, maritime, aviation, whatever. Why not go through the down time all at once?”

“So you think he was working on multiple applications at once?”

“That would be the smart thing to do for a program like Silmaril.”

“So you think that’s what we should do?”

Mairon sighed. “It’s not a bad idea,” he said, trailing a finger down the document on his computer screen as he read. “Working on all the applications at once would probably get this thing out of our hands faster than tackling them one after the other.”

“Yeah, and if Fëanor does have some scrap of the program left, we can’t afford to waste any time.” He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the rim of his cup. “So now the question becomes: do we start building our own infrastructure, or do we go the Alqualondë route?”

“There are advantages to both,” said Mairon. “But the main advantage of the Alqualondë route is speed, and we need as much of that as we can get.”

“Good point,” said Melkor. “So I guess I ought to be on the lookout for failing but still salvageable businesses, huh?”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“And in the meantime, we should really start pushing the aviation option.”

“It’s my top priority,” said Mairon. “Well,” he amended, taking a sip of his coffee, “right after covering our tracks from the whole Silmaril debacle.”

Melkor shifted in his seat, waiting for Mairon to look at him. When Mairon’s eyes stayed stubbornly glued to the screen, Melkor sighed. “Listen,” he said. “About this morning.”

“Yeah?”

“I lost it a little about the whole Silmaril thing. I was angry about Oromë coming in here, and I was pretty pissed to think that we might not be as in the clear as I had thought.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What I’m saying,” said Melkor, “is that I didn’t mean to yell at you like I did. You didn’t deserve it.”

“Is this some kind of apology? Because I don’t think I’ve ever heard the word ‘sorry’ come out of your mouth.”

“And you never will,” said Melkor. “But I do, on occasion, own up to the shittier things I do.”

“Really?”

“I did say on occasion.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“So are we good?”

“We’re fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Please,” said Mairon dismissively, sitting back in his chair and looking at Melkor at last. “It’s not the first time I’ve gotten caught in the crossfire of someone else’s stress. I think I’ll survive.”

“Still,” said Melkor. “I feel like I should make it up to you.”

“Yeah?”

“How do you feel about a hamburger the size of your face?”

“Like, philosophically? Or....”

“No, smartass. As in, let me take you to dinner, and I’ll buy you one.”

“That sounds amazing, actually,” said Mairon. He glanced at his computer and sighed. “I don’t know,” he said, biting his bottom lip as he scanned his to-do list. “I have at least three things that need to be done by tomorrow morning, and I haven’t even started two of them.”

“Dude, come on. You have to eat.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just—” As if on cue, his stomach gave a loud, prolonged gurgle.

“That’s what I thought,” said Melkor, standing up. “Let’s go.” He tapped his foot impatiently as Mairon glanced nervously once again at his computer. “I promise I won’t keep you out past your bedtime,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll even let you talk about work. Just come on.”

“Man, you really must be desperate,” said Mairon, pushing back his chair.

“I’m starving,” said Melkor.

“Then let’s go,” said Mairon, standing up at last. “But just remember,” he said, walking around the desk and endeavoring to give Melkor a stern look. “You said I could talk about work.”

“I’m going to regret that, aren’t I?”

“Probably,” said Mairon, grinning. “Just let me run over to Thil’s office and we can go.”

“Hurry up,” said Melkor, sauntering down the hall.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon, watching him disappear toward the elevator before heading for Thuringwethil’s office. “Hey, Thil?” he said, knocking gently on the doorframe.

“Yeah?” she said, still typing.

“What are the odds you want to do me a huge favor?”

“Depends,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “What do you want?”

“Melkor wants to get dinner, but I have another round of searches going through the Formenos servers, and I really want to know what comes out.”

“Dinner, huh?”

“Yes,” he said. “Dinner.” He glared at her look of interest. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said, holding up her hands. “Jesus, you’re touchy.”

“Am not.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Are you going to help me or not?” he snapped.

“What did I say?” she said, rolling her eyes. “Touchy.” She shook her head. “When’ll it be done?”

“Seven,” he said. “Seven-thirty at the latest.”

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll catch it when it’s done. Want me to bring it to your place? Wait, better not. There are some things I never want to see.”

“*Thuringwethil.*”

“Alright, alright. Jesus, take a joke.”

“Just make sure it downloads, okay? And call me when it’s done.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now go have fun.”

“I owe you, Thil,” he said, turning and heading back down the hall.

“Mother of God,” said Mairon, staring at the plate that had been set before him.

“Told you,” said Melkor.

“This thing is bigger than my head.”

“Let that be the last time you accuse me of hyperbole.”

“How am I even supposed to eat this?”

“Not by sitting there and staring at it,” said Melkor. “That’s for damn sure.” He deftly cut his own burger down the middle and picked up a half, taking a huge bite. He closed his eyes, as though savoring the taste.

“Did you really need to get the fried egg?” asked Mairon, watching the yolk drip down onto the plate.

“What person in their right mind doesn’t get a fried egg on their burger when it’s an option?”

“Someone with at least a shred of dignity?” Mairon suggested.

“Someone with no taste,” said Melkor firmly.

“Honestly, though,” said Mairon, hefting a half of his own burger. “Did they kill a whole cow to make this thing?”

“Shut up and eat.”

Mairon dutifully took a bite. “Oh my God,” he said, staring at the half-burger in his hand as he chewed.

“Right?”

“That is the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten in my life.”

“Told you so.”

They enjoyed ninety seconds of silence—which may have been a record—before Mairon said, “So.”

“So,” said Melkor.

“Do you want to talk about drone designs or buying a company?”

“Neither.”

“You said,” Mairon said accusingly, “that if I let you take me to dinner, we could talk shop.”

“Did you really take me seriously? Jesus, I thought you knew me better than that by now.”

“Melkor.”

“Okay,” he said, heaving a theatrical sigh. “Okay. What were the options again?”

“Drones or companies.”

“Ugh.”

“Pick your poison,” said Mairon, grinning.

“Fuck,” said Melkor softly, sopping up egg yolk with the bottom half of his sandwich. “Better go with planes if you want me to contribute.”

“Fine by me,” said Mairon, eating a French fry. “You saw the preliminary designs I drew up?”

“From when you were at the conference? Yeah, I saw them.”

“And?”

“Eh,” said Melkor, shrugging one shoulder noncommittally. “They aren’t terrible, especially for a programmer.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Although,” said Melkor thoughtfully, “it’s a little hard to judge how well they’ll work, especially given that we don’t have an application nailed down for the final product.

“Fair point,” said Mairon. “So what were you thinking?”

“I don’t know about you, but I was thinking about weapons.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We’ve got a lot of surveillance stuff in production already, and we’ve been toying with the weapons idea for a while anyway.”

“We have.”

“And,” said Melkor, “the programming might not be bad for that angle either.”

“You think?”

“I mean, I’m not the expert, but, I’d say it looks alright.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “I think you might be right.” He chewed thoughtfully on a fry, tuning over ideas in his head. “We’ve got some basic stuff in production that hasn’t been assigned yet.”

“I know.”

“And modification would be faster than building from scratch.”

“I agree.”

“What do we have that might work?” Mairon muttered, half to himself.

“I have one or two designs in mind that might be adaptable for that kind of purpose, but—” He trailed off, looking suspiciously at Mairon’s obviously amused frown. “What?”

“I was just thinking,” said Mairon, “that familiarity with our in-production designs kind of implies that you read the reports I send over to you.”

“Eh,” said Melkor. “Maybe once in a while. You know, when there’s nothing good on TV and I’ve expended the capacity of the internet for entertainment.”

“Uh-huh,” said Mairon, grinning.

“Don’t get too excited,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “It’s not like I’m going to start going to the ten thousand meetings you have every week.”

“If you did,” said Mairon, “the shock of you doing some work might actually kill me.”

“You know,” said Melkor, “attendance at meetings isn’t a good indicator of the amount of work I do.”

“No,” said Mairon, “but I think the number of snapchats I get every day might be.”

“It’s called multitasking,” said Melkor. “You might want to try it sometime.”

Mairon snorted. “Yeah, okay,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Seriously though, about the drone designs. I—” A loud ring interrupted him, and Mairon pulled his phone out of his pocket. “It’s Gothmog,” he said, glancing at the screen.

“Ignore him.”

Mairon waved him away and answered the call. “Hello?”

“Look out the window.”

“Gothmog, what—”

“Look out the window.” Mairon turned and looked out toward the street. Gothmog’s car was parked within eyeshot, and he rolled down the window as Mairon watched, gesturing for him to come outside.

“What are you doing here?”

“Look dude, the system in the server sites is malfunctioning again.”

“Not again.”

“Yeah, and since you’ve literally been blowing me off for days, you’re going to come check it out with me.”

“Gothmog, can’t I just—”

“Nope.”

“Give me that goddamn phone,” said Melkor, snatching it out of Mairon’s hand. “Gothmog, I swear to God—” He paused, listening. “Handle it yourself, shithead. We’re kind of busy, so—” He paused again. “Why do I pay you, then? Oh,” he said, laughing dangerously. “Come in here and say that to my face, you—”

“You two are children,” said Mairon, pulling the phone out of Melkor’s hand. “Gothmog, I’ll be right out. Happy?” He hung up and sighed, trying to regain his calm. “I’m sorry,” he said, looking guiltily at Melkor.

“I’m trying to be mad,” said Melkor, “but it’s kind of hard when you’re being so damn responsible.”

“What can I say?” said Mairon, grinning apologetically. “I’m kind of a catch.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor, laughing. “Now get out of here before I change my mind.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” he said, grabbing his coat and sliding out of the booth.

“You better,” said Melkor. He turned toward the window and held up both middle fingers at Gothmog, who happily returned the gesture.

“Children,” Mairon muttered, shaking his head and making for the door.

“Jesus Christ,” Mairon complained as Gothmog unlocked the door to server site three. “This is the loudest alarm on the freaking planet.”

“Try hearing it twice a day for the last ten days,” said Gothmog sourly.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mairon, heading for the console and shutting off the alarm. “Aren’t we supposed to get a police response for this?”

“They don’t exactly appreciate getting called out to our sites every ten minutes,” said Gothmog. “I turned off the 5-0 alert until we get this shit figured out.”

“Fair enough. Let me take a look at this thing.”

“Be my guest.”

Twenty minutes later, Gothmog had made three vines of Mairon walking between the desk and the alarm, taken twelve Snapchats of his own face using increasingly ridiculous filters, and swapped his face with the windowsill, the doorknob, and the back of Mairon’s head. Mairon, for his part, was still no closer to figuring out the issue with the alarm.

“You have got to be kidding,” he muttered, lowering his head onto the desk and gently banging his forehead against the polished wood.

“Still no luck?” Gothmog asked, eyes glued to his Instagram feed.

“I knew I should’ve just built the stupid thing myself.”

“Yeah, well, you wanted something fast,” said Gothmog. “And you were going to that conference. So we ended up with this piece of shit.”

“That’s what I get for cutting corners,” he said mutinously.

“That’ll teach you. Look here.” Mairon looked up at him, scowling. “Perfect,” said Gothmog, grinning widely. “Look,” he turned his phone around and showed Mairon their swapped faces. “Come on,” he wheedled, laughing at Mairon’s scowl. “That shit’s hilarious.”

“It’s seven twenty-three, I’m at a server site, and I have no idea how to fix this stupid system,” said Mairon. “I’m not really seeing the humor here.”

“No wonder you’re so uptight,” said Gothmog. “That’s a crap worldview. Nothing positive.”

“What about this is positive?”

“You get to hang out with me. Duh.”

“God,” said Mairon, groaning in frustration. “Now I see why you and Melkor are such good friends.”

“Man, he’s going to kill me,” said Gothmog, not sounding particularly concerned.

“Not if I do first,” said Mairon darkly.

“Oh, please,” said Gothmog. “You two can canoodle any time. This system needs to be fixed now.”

“Right now? This minute?”

“Yes,” said Gothmog. “Before I break every last piece of it.”

“Yeah, sorry,” said Mairon, “but it’s just not going to happen tonight.”

“Ugh,” said Gothmog, sinking down in his chair. “Why not?”

“Because,” said Mairon, “I can’t fix this. Not tonight, anyway. I’m going to have to build a whole new system from scratch, and I just can’t do it this minute.”

“Can’t we just turn it off for a while?”

“Gothmog, all of our data is here. I need to know if it’s compromised.”

“Don’t you have the whatsit? The killswitch thing? Take out a computer and it gets fried?”

“Yes,” said Mairon. “But someone could still get in and copy our data straight off the server. Nothing gets tripped if the hardware doesn’t leave the building.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Sorry, Gothmog,” he said firmly, “but you’re just going to have to suck it up.”

“Aw, come on,” Gothmog whined.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” said Mairon. “You have no idea how completely swamped I am right now.”

“Okay, but—”

“Hang on,” said Mairon as his phone began to ring. He fished it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. “All finished?” he asked in lieu of greeting.

“I think so,” said Thuringwethil. “Screen says ‘search complete’ anyway.”

“Good,” said Mairon. “I’ll be back for them later.”

“You still at dinner?”

“I’m at server site three,” he said flatly.

“Hot new date spot, huh?”

“I’m with Gothmog,” he said.

“Interesting. Moving a little quickly, aren’t you?”

“Jesus, Thil. Too far.”

“What’s got your panties in a twist?”

“It’s late,” he said. “I didn’t get to finish my dinner, and after twenty minutes of screwing with this alarm system, I realize I have to build a new one. Oh, and I have to go back to the office to grab whatever that search is spitting out when we’re done here, so—”

“For God’s sake,” she said, interrupting him. “Relax. Look, tell Gothmog he’s just going to have to wait for the new system. He can suck it up in the meantime. Tell him to take you home. I’ll grab the Formenos stuff and meet you there in fifteen minutes.”

“But—”

“Non-negotiable,” she said. “See you in a few.”

Mairon heard the line disconnect, and he sighed.

“Well?” said Gothmog.

“Thil’s meeting me at my place in fifteen minutes,” he said, powering down the computer.

“For what?”

“She’s bringing some stuff from work.”

“What about the alarm system?”

“Look, I’ll do my best, okay? But for now, you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

“But it goes off every night,” he whined. “Seriously, the sleep deprivation is killing me.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mairon, gathering his things. “Thil says suck it up.”

Mairon had barely taken off his coat when he heard a knock at his front door. He reached out and turned the handle, pulling the door toward him.

“Hey,” said Thuringwethil, pushing past him into the apartment.

“Hey, Thil,” he said, trailing her into the living room.

“Where’s the mutt?” Mairon whistled softly, and a huge dog came trotting into the living room. “Hey there, mutt,” said Thuringwethil, sitting on the couch and letting the big dog put his head in her lap. “You miss me?” He whined appreciatively and lolled his head to the side so she could scratch behind his ears.

“Make yourself at home,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“Done,” she said, slipping out of her stilettos and taking off her jacket. “Now, come here and sit down.” Mairon settled himself on the opposite end of the couch and gave her a quizzical look. “Okay,” she said, turning to the side and rummaging in her bag. “Here are the results from that search you were running,” she said, pulling out a stack of pages neatly clipped together. “And here is some compensation for working late on a Wednesday.” She set a pint of ice cream and a bottle of wine on the table.

“Moose tracks?” he said, leaning over to read the label. “Sweet.”

She settled back into the couch and picked up a sheaf of papers from the couch. “Are you going to get spoons or what?”

“Spoons? Plural?”

She pulled away the binder clip and rifled through the papers. “Whatever you’re looking for in here, you’ll find it faster if I help.” She divided the pages in half, leaving one stack on her lap and setting the other back on the couch cushion beside her.

“Thil,” he said, smiling appreciatively. “You’re the absolute best, you know that?”

“Yeah,” she said, rummaging in her bag for a pen. “I do. Hey, bring me a glass too, will you?”

An hour passed in companionable near silence. Discarded pages were scattered over the coffee table, carefully strewn around bowls and spoons and an empty pint of ice cream. Thil had her legs curled beneath her, a glass of wine in one hand and a pen in the other, reading the pages balanced on the arm of the couch. Mairon was half-laying on the other side of the couch, his knees drawn up toward his chest to hold up the pages resting on his stomach. His feet were shoved under the dog, who was curled up between them on the couch.

Mairon glanced at his watch and yawned. “Man,” he said, settling his shoulders back against the

arm of the couch. "It's only nine o'clock. Why am I so tired?"

"Couldn't be the fact that you've been running on four hours of sleep a night for the last three years or so."

"Ha, ha."

"Although," she said, covering her own yawn with the back of her hand, "I bet the wine isn't helping."

"Speaking of which," he said, "hand me the bottle."

"It's empty," she said, holding it up as evidence.

"Aw, man."

"I know, right?" She yawned again and stretched. "Shit. Maybe we should call it quits for the night."

"You go ahead," said Mairon. "I want to keep at it for a while."

"Of course you do," she said, smiling. She shifted slightly so she could rest her cheek on the arm of the couch, letting her eyes slip closed for a moment.

"Want me to call you a cab?"

"Not yet," she said, shifting herself into a more comfortable position. She watched him work for a moment, a smile lingering on her lips. "And I used to think I was a hard worker," she said.

"Huh?" he said absently, underlining something on the page he was reading.

"You work too hard," she said.

"So I've been told."

"It's not healthy."

"Thil," he said, sweeping the top sheet of paper from his lap and onto the appropriate pile. "I am not a 'take a break' kind of guy. I like to be busy. I get antsy with nothing to do."

"There's a difference between busy and obsessed, you know."

"Yeah," he said, unconcerned. "Opinion."

She snorted and sat up once more, sighing. "God, you make me feel lazy," she said, shuffling the papers in her lap into order.

"Take a break, Thil," said Mairon. "I've got it covered here."

"If you're still working, then I might as well help. Besides, if I stand up, I'm going to feel way drunker than I already do."

"Kitchen garbage is closer than the bathroom," he said absently, still reading.

"Oh please," she said, rolling her eyes. "We're not anywhere near that point yet." She propped her chin in her hand and began to read once more. "Hey," she said after a moment. "Mai."

“Yeah.”

“Check this out, will you?” She held out a paper to him, and he took it, skimming it quickly.

“Hang on,” he said, going back and reading again. “Do you think—”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Is there more?” She skimmed the next few pages and handed them over to Mairon. “Okay,” he said, pushing himself into a sitting position. He laid the pages across the dog’s broad back and pointed at the first page. “Okay, so we’ve got emails between Fingolfin and Fëanor, right?”

“Yeah. Fingolfin sounds pissed.”

“No kidding. Is it just me, or does it sound like he had no idea about the Alqualondë stuff?”

“I mean, that’s what it sounds like. Look at that,” he said, pointing at a particular paragraph. “He said, ‘The firings are not only bad for business, but they’re morally unconscionable, particularly in today’s economic climate.’”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil. “Plus, he also talks about how stupid it is to fire everyone who had any idea how the Alqualondë manufacturing process works. See?” She pointed at another paragraph.

“He has a point,” said Mairon.

“I know. Especially if you’re trying to move something ahead as soon as possible, right? I mean, why not keep the techs and engineers and whoever else actually knows the day-to-day procedures? Isn’t that going to slow you down?”

“That was my thought,” said Mairon. “Listen to this, though. ‘Finarfin chalks it up to your usual paranoia about IP theft—which, make no mistake, I understand, especially given our recent troubles with the Silmaril programs. Still, any worries about new employees could easily have been laid to rest with an NDA. Instead, you fired every last employee, including Olwë. Given the recent reports regarding the Alqualondë acquisition, I must admit that it begins to look like spite, at the least. At the worst, it looks outright malicious, like payback for any opposition you might have faced. I certainly don’t mean to accuse, but you must admit that it doesn’t cast Formenos in the best light.’” Mairon looked up at Thuringwethil and raised an eyebrow.

“Sounds like the younger brother had no idea there was anything less-than-legitimate about the sale,” she said.

“And he doesn’t sound happy about it.”

“He sounds,” she said, “like us. I mean, we keep coming back to how dumb this is as a business move. What was Fëanor thinking?”

“I mean, if you really stretch, you could argue that they weren’t your hires. If you’re worried about theft, then you want people you’ve vetted yourself. But Alqualondë is a manufacturing site, right? At least for Formenos, anyway. I’m assuming all the development stuff is still going to happen at their headquarters. So no, firing all the engineers and techs and whatever doesn’t make sense at all.”

“So he’s just a nasty, vindictive little prick.”

“And we obviously aren’t the only ones who think so.”

“So the youngest brother already jumped ship, right?”

“Right.”

“Do you think the other one—Fingolfin, or whatever his name is—do you think he’s next?”

“I honestly don’t know,” said Mairon. “I don’t know Fingolfin, but from what I’ve heard, he can be a bit of a wild card. Remember the whole board room fight incident?”

“He got in some kind of argument with Fëanor, right?”

“Yeah, and Fëanor ended up throwing punches. It’s what landed him in community service with Melkor.”

“Right. I remember now. They made a big show of patching things up.”

“Which, now that you mention it, seems like a load of crap.”

“These are not exactly the email exchanges of two guys who are getting along, are they?”

“Yeah, not so much.” Mairon tapped his finger thoughtfully against his chin. “You think that’s an angle we can exploit?”

“What, their stupid infighting?”

“Think about it, Thil. Any time these idiots spend fighting each other is time they’re not focused on us.”

“It’s a good thought, Mai, but I don’t know how feasible it is.”

“You know what they say, Thil. Where’s there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“What are you, a motivational poster?” She laughed.

“Cut me some slack,” he said, grinning. “I’m tired and tipsy. You’re not getting my best work.”

“You can say that again.”

“I’m tired and—”

“Shut up,” she said, laughing as she threw her pen at him. “Oh, God,” she said, stretching her arms above her head. “I think my legs are asleep.” She uncurled herself from her spot on the couch and stood up, wobbling slightly on the spot as she tried to wiggle some feeling into her toes. “Shit,” she said, yawning and stretching her hands over her head. “I probably shouldn’t drive.” She reached for her phone. “You know the number for a cab?” she asked, swiping past the security screen.

“Why don’t you just stay?” asked Mairon. “Save the twenty bucks.”

“I don’t want to put you out,” she said.

“Thil, please,” he said, sitting up and beginning to gather the papers back into a stack. “Besides, I just cleaned the guest room.”

“Fine,” she said, grinning, “but only so I can hold the fact that I slept here over Melkor’s head.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he said, standing and stretching. “Come on,” he said, heading down the hall, “before we both fall asleep.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've ever been happier to get rid of a chapter.

Anyway, come hang with me on tumblr!

Burning Down the House

Chapter Summary

Mairon continues the assault against Formenos. Fëanor isn't going down without a fight. Things are about to heat up at Angband.

Chapter Notes

It didn't take me three months this time. Miracles do happen!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Where’d you disappear to this morning?” asked Thuringwethil, strolling through Mairon’s open office door.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he said. “Did you get my note?”

“I did,” she said, holding up a Valarin University travel mug she had swiped from his cupboard.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“No problem,” he said.

“Seriously though, where were you off to at the crack of dawn?”

“I had to make a phone call,” he said. “And it wasn’t the crack of dawn.”

“You were long gone when I got up at seven, so it must’ve been pretty early. And last time I checked, you can make phone calls in your apartment.”

“It was five-thirty, if you must know,” he said. “And this was definitely not the kind of call you make in your own home—or with your own phone, for that matter.”

“Alright,” she said, perching on the edge of his desk. “You’ve got my attention. What are you up to?”

“Forfeit that coffee and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

“You’re such a leech,” she said, but she handed him the mug.

He took a large gulp of coffee and sighed contentedly. “What would that make you?”

“A constant enabler. Now tell me who you were calling at seven a.m.”

“Fëanor.”

“No, really.”

“No,” he said. “Really.”

“You called Fëanor this morning?” she asked, alarm visible on her face.

“I did.”

“Jesus, Mairon! What did you say?”

“I said I was a reporter with the Times, and that I wanted to confirm the details of some information we had received.”

“Wait, what?”

“Basically,” he said, “I told him we had some emails alleging that the Alqualondë sale was done under the table and that some top company officials were kept in the dark about it. I also mentioned that some of the upper management at Formenos might share Finarfin’s sentiments about the direction the company is going.”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil, her mouth falling open in disbelief. “How’d that go over?”

“About how you’d expect. Lots of yelling, lots of demanding to know where I got my information.

I told him the Times is very serious about source anonymity, but that we believed the documents to be authentic. I asked him if he had a response to allegations claiming that certain Formenos shareholders were considering a lateral move.”

“A what now?”

“I may have insinuated that Fingolfin was planning to either stage a coup or start a competing company.”

“Oh my God,” she said, a smile curling her lips as the reality of what Mairon had done solidified in her mind. “Mairon, that’s brilliant.”

“Eh,” he said shrugging. “I’d hold off on brilliant until we see how it goes over.”

She shook her head, eyeing him appreciatively. “You know, I feel like I should be taking notes or something.”

“Why?”

“Because this is like a goddamn master class in manipulation.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Are you kidding? I would honestly pay money to see the shit storm going down at Formenos right now.”

“I’m more interested in the aftermath, to tell you the truth. With any luck, Fëanor is going straight off the deep end right about now.”

“Yeah, no kidding. I guarantee you just ramped up the paranoia by about a thousand percent. I mean, you basically told him he’s got another security leak, if someone’s selling company emails to the press. With any luck, he’ll take that paranoia and run with it.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Damn,” she said, shaking her head. “I am really fucking glad we’re on the same team here. I mean, if I’m being honest here, it’s a little scary how fucking brilliant you are.”

“I don’t know if it’s scary,” he said.

“Really? Because you’re working angles here that I didn’t even know existed. Formenos doesn’t have a chance. How could they? You can’t defend against something you can’t see coming.”

“It was a pretty good idea, wasn’t it?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Yeah, well, save the accolades for when we get some real results.”

“Fair enough,” she said. She tapped her fingertips on the edge of the desk and sighed. “So what other havoc are you planning on wreaking today?”

“Oh, just the havoc of a regular work day.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We’re getting new computers into the coding lab, since Oromë and his thugs still have our other ones. I have to oversee the installation and make sure IT gets everything connected right. That’s on top of the coding I need to start for the Silmaril integration, the alarm system I have to start building, the digging I need to do in Fëanor’s servers, the—”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes.

“What?”

“I was going to see if you wanted to do lunch, but I don’t think you’re going to have time to breathe, let alone eat.”

“I might,” he said, shrugging. “Check back with me after one o’clock.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “But I won’t hold my breath.”

Mairon stepped out of the elevator on the sixth floor and headed for his office, muttering irritably under his breath. “Idiots,” he muttered, shaking his head as he walked toward his office. “What kind of idiot doesn’t have a set of Allen wrenches in his toolbox? I swear to God,” he continued, shoving the key into the lock and turning it with entirely more force than was necessary. “The level of incompetence is absolutely—”

“Hey, Mai,” said Melkor, sauntering into the doorway. “You—Jesus, what did the desk do to you?”

Mairon slammed the desk drawer shut and pulled out the next one. “Nothing,” he said irritably, rifling through the contents.

“Wow. You’re a real delight today. Who pissed in your cheerios?”

“The whole IT department is on my last nerve,” said Mairon, slamming the drawer shut and pulling open the one on the bottom.

“So fire them,” Melkor suggested.

“How would that help?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “Might make you feel better.”

“Yeah, I doubt it.” He dug through the papers in the drawer. “I swear to God,” he muttered. “If I don’t find those stupid wrenches in the next thirty seconds I’m going to—oh.” He pulled the offending box from the back of the drawer and straightened up, pushing the drawer shut with his foot.

“Crisis averted,” said Melkor, grinning. “What are the Allen wrenches for, by the way?”

“Hey guys!” called Gothmog, preempting Mairon’s response. “Melkor! Thil! Get over here!”

“What do you want, Gothmog?” Melkor called back, sauntering into the doorway.

“Come and see this,” said Gothmog, beckoning him over. “Hey, you too Mai. Thil? You there?”

“What is it Gothmog?” said Thuringwethil, glaring at him as she stalked out into the hall.

“Look at this,” said Gothmog, sitting down and turning the computer screen to face them.

“What am I looking at?” asked Melkor, sitting in the open chair.

“Just read it,” Gothmog insisted.

“Read what?” asked Mairon, coming in at last.

“Shakeups continue at Formenos’,” Melkor said aloud, reading the headline. “What the…” He skimmed the article, frowning as he went. “Series of changes, blah blah blah, Finarfin’s resignation. Yeah, yeah, get to the point.”

“Here,” said Gothmog impatiently, jabbing his finger at the screen. “This part. ‘Company COO Fingolfin announced his termination today, in a statement received by the Times.’”

“Jesus,” said Melkor. “Listen to this. ‘I can confirm that I will no longer be serving my late father’s company in the role of COO. I have served Formenos in this and other roles for more than twenty years, and I would have happily served for many more. Although I am unable to discuss specific details at this time, I can say this was not a mutual decision. However, despite our imminent divergence, I certainly wish them the best and absolutely hope for their continued success in future endeavors.’ Holy shit,” he concluded, looking up in disbelief.

“I know,” said Gothmog.

“Nice find, Gothmog,” he said. “But seriously, what the hell is going on over there?”

“Right?” said Gothmog. “It’s kind of a shitshow.”

“I mean, not that I’m complaining,” said Melkor. “But come on. They’re a mess lately.”

“Oh, give them a break,” said Thuringwethil. “Smarter men than Fëanor have been out-maneuvered by Mairon.”

Melkor’s gaze shifted to Mairon, who was still standing in the doorway. “What did you do?” he asked.

“To be fair,” he said, “they did half the work themselves.” He explained, as succinctly as he could, about the emails he had found and the phone call he had made.

“Hot damn,” said Melkor. “You looked at a couple of emails and came up with a plan like that?”

“I was hoping I could get them off our backs for a week or two,” said Mairon, shrugging. “I didn’t know Fëanor would overreact like that. Although,” he said, as Melkor snickered, “in retrospect, maybe I should’ve seen it coming.”

“I mean, the guy does have a history of disproportionate responses,” said Thuringwethil.

“Yeah, no kidding,” said Gothmog. “Just ask his brother.”

“Brothers,” said Melkor. “Plural.”

“Or literally anyone at Alqualondë,” Thuringwethil added.

“Man, this looks good for us anyway you spin it,” said Melkor, grinning. “Not only do we have one less Finwion on our case, but I’m pretty sure Fëanor’s going to be too busy chasing his own tail

to worry about us for a good while.”

“That’s the idea,” said Mairon.

“Plus we’re still sitting on the info about the Alqualondë deal,” said Thuringwethil.

“Oh, shit,” said Melkor. “I forgot about that.”

“I haven’t,” said Mairon.

“I can’t believe you’re still holding onto it.”

He shrugged. “I was hoping for better impact if we waited.”

“You’re gonna get it now,” said Gothmog.

“Seriously,” said Thuringwethil. “Fëanor’s already looking at a shitload of public outcry. Leak that little secret, and he’ll be buried in it.”

“I cannot believe our luck right now,” said Gothmog. “Like, I honestly don’t think we could be doing much better.”

“Don’t jinx us,” Melkor warned.

“Yeah,” Thuringwethil agreed. “And besides, it’s not luck. This is our own patented brand of ingenuity, courtesy of Mairon.”

“Fair point,” said Gothmog. “Seriously, well done Mairon.”

Mairon shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

Melkor snorted. “Yeah, right. No big deal.”

“Like I said,” Mairon protested. “They did most of the work themselves. I’m just using their own stupidity against them.”

“But that’s just it,” said Melkor. “You figured out how to do that. That’s a gift. I mean, you’re basically the Picasso of fucking with people.”

Mairon laughed. “That’s a new one.”

“You like that?”

“I guess.”

“Good. I’m pretty proud of it.”

“I keep telling him,” said Thuringwethil. “I’m really glad he works for us.”

“Aren’t we all? And you’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?”

“I recruited this asshole,” said Mairon. “So really, I should get like, half the credit for this.”

“Honest to God,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes. “Your narcissism knows no bounds.”

“It’s not narcissism,” said Melkor. “It’s pride—which I’m pretty sure I deserve. Mairon is basically our best asset, and who discovered him? That’s right—me.”

“Discovered,” said Gothmog, snorting in amusement. “Right.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Melkor. “Discovered.”

“Bold word choice for someone who used to lurk on the Val U campus and creep on undergrads.”

“You make fun,” said Melkor, “but look what it got us.”

“I feel like I should point out that I was a PhD student,” said Mairon. “Not an undergrad.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog, “but you were like twelve or something.”

“Twenty-four,” said Mairon, scowling at him.

“Close enough.”

“The important thing,” said Melkor, “is that I’m the one who found him. Which, like I said, means half-credit to me.”

“You’re such a piece of shit,” said Gothmog, laughing. “Honestly, anytime I feel bad about the size of my ego, I just have to remember that you exist.”

Melkor stood up, glaring at Gothmog in mock-anger. “Say that again, punk.”

“The whole thing, or—” He broke off, laughing, as Melkor pushed him, the two of them sparring good-naturedly.

“Hey, shitheads,” said Thuringwethil. “Remember the rule. Next person to put a hole in the drywall pays to fix it.”

“Fine,” said Gothmog.

“Done,” said Melkor, shoving him back into the wall.

Thuringwethil shook her head. “Why do I associate with you guys?”

“Because,” said Melkor, pinning Gothmog against the wall. “You love us.”

“I tolerate you,” she said. “Sometimes.”

“Close enough,” said Melkor, “coming from you.” She advanced on him, and he stepped quickly to the side. “I take it back,” he said, trying to wedge himself behind Gothmog. “I take it back!”

“Don’t be such a coward,” said Gothmog, laughing and pressing himself firmly against the wall.

“So much for loyalty,” Melkor complained, wincing as Thuringwethil smacked him.

“There is no loyalty,” said Gothmog solemnly. “Not in the face of Thuringwethil’s backhand.”

There was a chime from the vicinity of Mairon’s pocket. He pulled out his phone, sighing as he glanced at the screen. “As fun as this is,” he said, “I have to go.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil. “Me too. I have a meeting in five minutes.”

“Thank Christ,” said Melkor, wiping a hand across his forehead in mock-relief.

“Smartass,” said Thuringwethil, giving him a playful shove. “Anyway, like I said, I have a meeting in five. Can you two behave for once? I don’t need to hear your shenanigans while I’m talking to the union rep.”

“Yeah, okay, mom,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

“Like we need to be told,” said Gothmog.

“Don’t make me come back in here,” she warned, pointing menacingly at them as she backed toward the door. “Come on, Mai,” she said as she reached the doorway. “Someone has to do some work around here.”

“Exactly,” said Melkor. “You two do that, and we’ll hold down the fort.”

Thuringwethil simply raised her middle finger to them and turned the corner into her office.

“I’ll catch you guys later,” said Mairon, raising a hand in farewell as he headed toward the elevator.

“So,” said Melkor, scuffing the sole of his shoe against the carpet as amicable silence descended on the office. “You wanna go shoot spitballs out my office window? There’s a construction site across the street. I bet you ten bucks I can hit it.”

“Make it the roof,” said Gothmog, already heading for the door. “That way Thil can’t yell at us.”

“I knew you were good for something,” said Melkor. He laughed, dodging the punch Gothmog aimed at him, and led the way to the stairwell.

The shrill sounding of the alarm cut through the contented midnight hush, and Gothmog let out a steady stream of half-coherent curses as he reached for his phone. He glanced at the screen, squinting at the oppressively bright backlighting that assaulted his eyes. He read the words that were flashing on the screen—alarm tripped—and sighed, jabbing a thumb into the notification and letting his phone fall to his chest as quiet descended once more around him. He lay there for a minute, wondering exactly how much trouble he’d be in if he just ignored it.

Sighing heavily, he pushed himself up and leaned over the side of the bed to retrieve the t-shirt he’d thrown there before he’d gone to sleep. He pulled the shirt over his head and stood up, hissing as his bare feet hit the cold wood of the floor. “God damn it,” he said, sitting down and pulling on a pair of socks. He stood up once more and picked up his phone, shuffling out into the hall and toward the front door. Barely awake, he slid on his shoes and pulled on his coat, snatching his keys from the coffee table before he headed out into the hall.

The building was quiet, and Gothmog thought enviously of all the people still blessedly asleep in their beds. Ignoring the urge to pull the fire alarm, he stepped into the waiting elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor. He tapped his foot impatiently as he waited, stepping at last into an empty lobby. His footsteps echoed in the deserted entryway as he made his way out onto the sidewalk. Muttering a litany of his own unrewarded virtues, he made his way to the parking lot and unlocked his car.

“I’m going to put this damn alarm on Mairon’s phone,” he grumbled as he slid into the driver’s seat. He slammed the door shut and turned the key in the ignition, glancing with disgust at the time displayed on the dashboard. “We’ll see how he likes getting hauled out of bed at two thirty in the fucking morning.” He pulled out of his spot and onto the street. “Not that it would matter,” he said,

speeding down the deserted road. “That asshole’s probably still awake anyway. I swear to God, he never sleeps.” He snorted and shook his head. “What the fuck is wrong with me? Really, Gothmog. Talking to yourself? You’re losing it.” He shook his head and switched on the radio. “Patsy Cline,” he said, rolling his eyes as ‘Walking After Midnight’ crackled over the speakers. “Someone’s got a sense of humor.”

He reached server site two in less than half the time it would’ve taken in the daylight, easily navigating the deserted streets. He pulled up to the curb and knocked the gearshift into park before killing the engine and flinging open the door.

“I deserve a fucking raise,” he said, slamming the car door and crossing the short stretch of pavement that led to the door. He rolled his eyes at the construction signs plastered on the walls that warned him to wear a hard hat before entering the building. “Falling debris,” he read as he pulled a ring of keys from his pocket. “Yeah, right. I’m not nearly that lucky.”

He found the right key and slid it into the lock. He turned the key, but there was no resistance, no telltale click of the mechanism. He frowned at the lock, turning the key back toward the other side. There was a click as the lock slid into place, and Gothmog sighed. “Goddamn construction workers,” he muttered, unlocking the door once more. “I swear to God, if I have to come check on this place every day after they leave I’m going to kill someone.” He closed the door behind him and flipped the light switch, frowning as the room stayed stubbornly dark. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he said. “You have got to be kidding me.”

He pulled out his phone and tapped the flashlight function, letting the tiny swatch of light cut a path through the murky lobby. Sighing his most long-suffering sigh, Gothmog started toward the hallway that led to the big storeroom where one set of the Angband servers were housed. His foot caught on something hard, and he stumbled, catching himself against the wall with his hand. Frowning, he reached down and picked up a crowbar from the floor. “What the fuck?” he said, turning it over in his hand.

“Did you hear that?” hissed a voice, echoing toward him from the depths of the storeroom.

Gothmog froze, staring into the darkness and listening intently.

“Hear what?” came the answer.

“That voice.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Check it out anyway,” said the first voice.

Gothmog saw a distant point of light flash around the room, and he darted into the storeroom, ducking behind a row of equipment. He dialed for the police and held the phone up to his ear, wincing at the ringing and turning the volume down as low as could.

“Emergency services,” said a voice. “How can I assist you?”

“I need police to 1497 Giliath Avenue,” Gothmog murmured as clearly as he could. “I work security for Angband Enterprises. Someone’s trespassing in our warehouse.”

“Hello?” whispered a voice that was much closer now. “Who’s there?”

“We’ll be right there,” said the dispatcher on the phone.

“Hurry,” said Gothmog.

“Just stay on the line, and—”

Gothmog ended the call and held his phone aloft, letting the beam from the flashlight guide him out from behind the servers. “Over here, asshole,” he said, stepping out of the storeroom.

A beam of light washed over Gothmog as his own flashlight revealed a young man nearly as tall as Gothmog himself, thick red hair pulled back away from his face in a ponytail. He was startled, but Gothmog could tell he was not frightened. “Dad!” called the man over his shoulder. “We have company!”

“You’re damn right you do,” growled Gothmog, springing forward. He gave chase as his quarry turned and darted through a row of equipment, skidding around the corner with Gothmog right behind him.

“Heads up!” called the man, casting a glance over his shoulder at Gothmog, who pulled up short at the scene before him, sketchily illuminated in the wavering light from his phone.

“What the fuck?” said Gothmog, staring at the figure still kneeling on the ground, holding an external hard drive in one hand and tapping commands into a laptop with the other. At the sound of Gothmog’s voice, the man stood up, gripping the hard drive tightly and turning to face him. “Jesus Christ,” said Gothmog, hardly believing his eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Do you have any idea the kind of shit you’re in right now?”

“Charming,” said Fëanor, unperturbed by Gothmog’s interruption. “Bauglir’s guard dog. Where is he, anyway? Stealing someone else’s software?”

“Dude, I know it’s a little early for irony, but you literally have a hard drive full of stolen programming in your hand.”

“I haven’t stolen anything,” Fëanor snapped.

“Uh,” said Gothmog, raising an eyebrow at him. “Dude. It’s in your left hand. I can see it.”

“I’m only taking what’s rightfully mine,” said Fëanor, tightening his grip. “If you think you can break into my offices and steal my life’s work with impunity, then you’re dumber than you look—which, I have to say, would truly be an accomplishment.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog, “I know I’m supposed to be insulted or whatever, but I just can’t deal with the irony right now. It’s killing me.”

“That’s not what irony means, you philistine.”

“Alright, Webster, calm down. Tell you what: let’s make this easy. You give me the hardware, and I won’t have to beat your ass. Sound fair?”

“You can have this back when you pry it from my cold, dead hands.”

“God, and you called me a philistine,” said Gothmog, rolling his eyes at the cliché. “Just hand the damn thing over so I can go the fuck to sleep, okay?”

“Never!”

“Jesus Christ,” said Gothmog. “Everything has to be a fucking ordeal with you. Just give me the stupid thing.” He stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

“Don’t move,” said Fëanor. He pulled a lighter from his pocket, brandishing it like a weapon.

“Dude, unless you have a pack of Luckies on you too, I literally don’t give a shit.”

“Shut up,” said Fëanor, his voice echoing off the bare walls. “Take one more step and I’ll light this place up.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be smart? A lighter’s not much good without something to burn, you dumb shit.”

“Oh,” said Fëanor, a terrifying grin creeping onto his face. “I’ve got something to burn.” He nudged something on the floor with his foot.

Gothmog heard the sloshing of liquid and turned his phone to illuminate a bright red gas canister on the ground next to Fëanor. He looked from the canister to Fëanor, a feeling of unease settling over him. “You wouldn’t,” he said, injecting far more confidence than he felt into the words.

“That,” said Fëanor, “is where you’re absolutely wrong.”

In what felt eerily like slow motion, Gothmog watched as Fëanor’s thumb descended on the ignitor, coaxing the flame into life. He watched as Fëanor tossed the little lighter over his shoulder, darting away as soon as it left his hand. Gothmog followed suit, barreling between rows of machinery as the gasoline ignited behind them. The explosion rattled the equipment, and Gothmog stumbled, catching himself on all fours and pushing himself forward as the fire roared into life behind him. He skidded out into the space between the rows and glanced anxiously toward the hallway. He was close enough to see the moonlight filtering through the front window. The sound of footsteps drew his attention back to the main room, and he watched as Fëanor sprinted for the stairs, his son hot on his heels.

“Finwion, you suicidal maniac! Gothmog shouted. “The exit’s over here!” Fëanor ignored him, ducking under the caution tape that covered the bottom of the stairs and beginning to climb.

Gothmog looked longingly toward the hall once more and ground his teeth. “Fuckin’ a, man,” he said as he started after them.

The fire had engulfed the back wall of servers and was spreading steadily forward, following the trail of accelerant that had been haphazardly doused on the floor, the flames licking up the sides of

the machinery as it passed. Smoke was rising toward the ceiling, and Gothmog squinted through the haze as he cleared the stairs and started along the suspended walkway that led to the offices. “Fucking hell, Finwion!” Gothmog called, looking both ways along the walkway. “Are you really willing to die for this thing?”

“Yes!” Fëanor called back, and Gothmog turned to the right, taking a few tentative steps as the walkway groaned beneath his feet.

“Are you sure?” Gothmog called back. “Because it’s a very real possibility right now.” He crept along the walkway, the sound of the flames his only answer. “Look, asshole,” he said, scanning left and right and seeing very little around him but the smoke that was growing thicker by the minute. “If you want to die, then fine. Just don’t drag your kid down with you.” He took a few more steps forward and stopped abruptly as a figure came into view, identifiable only by the shock of red hair still visible in the gloom. “Come on, kid,” Gothmog implored. “You don’t have to die with your old man. The stairs are right there.”

Maedhros simply shook his head. Gothmog took a step forward and felt something hard collide with the side of his head. Blood rushed down his temple, and he blinked it away, swinging around in time to parry a second blow to the head. Fëanor hefted the blood-spattered hard drive and bared his teeth at Gothmog, snarling.

“We have to get out of here!” said Gothmog, holding up his hands in what he hoped was a signal of truce. In answer, Fëanor lunged at him again. Gothmog swatted him away, backing up. He could hear the crackle of gasoline igniting beneath them, the heat rushing up toward them in waves.

“Come on, Finwion!”

“And let you have Silmaril?” Fëanor retorted, shouting over the roar of the flames. “Never!”

“You’re a fucking lunatic!” Gothmog shouted back at him. “You know what? You can keep the piece of shit—fat lot of good it’ll do you when you’re fried to goddamn crisp! I’m out!”

He turned on his heel and started for the stairs, making it only a few steps before a solid weight slammed into his back. Long arms wrapped around his neck, and he felt himself choke as he struggled to take a breath. He turned and threw all his weight against the wall, crushing Fëanor between himself and the drywall once, twice, three times until he heard a crack. The arms around his neck slackened, and he pushed himself away, staggering against the wall. He dragged in a few choking, shaking breaths through his bruised windpipe, turning to see Fëanor already launching himself forward again for another attack. Gothmog lowered his shoulder and bent his knees, bracing himself. Fëanor sprang forward, and Gothmog pushed himself up, his shoulder connecting with Fëanor’s chest. Gothmog twisted to the side, sending Fëanor sprawling backwards into the railing.

It was like slow motion. Gothmog heard the crack, felt it rumble through the floor beneath his feet. Fëanor’s back hit the bars of the railing, which buckled beneath him, the half-finished construction too shaky to hold him. The bars gave way, and Fëanor was falling toward the abyss, arms pinwheeling in the open air as his feet left the edge of the walkway. Then he was gone, his body lost in the smoke that billowed relentlessly toward the ceiling. A few seconds later, there was a sickening thud, quickly lost in the roar of the flames. Gothmog grimaced.

“No!” screamed Maedhros, darting past Gothmog and sprinting for the stairs.

Gothmog followed him, crashing down the groaning stairs and surveying the smoky hellscape before them with growing trepidation. Maedhros reached the bottom of the stairs and turned toward the storeroom, away from the hallway. “Leave him, kid!” yelled Gothmog, grabbing the back of his shirt. “He’s already gone!”

Maedhros turned back, his lips curled in a snarl as he clawed at Gothmog’s hand. Gothmog released him, watching him disappear into the haze before turning and running toward the hall. Smoke clogged every ragged breath he managed to pull into his burning lungs, and the heat seared his streaming eyes as he ran toward the exit. He groped for the door handle, finding it at last and bursting through the doors into a scene of organized chaos. Two crews of firemen had already arrived and begun to fight the flames, while police cordoned off the sidewalk and blocked the ends of the street.

“Someone’s coming out!” shouted a woman in a police uniform, running toward Gothmog and waving her partner over to help. “It’s alright,” she said, wedging herself under his arm as he began to sag.

“There’s someone still inside,” he rasped, pulling in lungfuls of clear, cool air that burned his throat as though he was still engulfed in smoke and flames.

“Everything’s going to be alright,” said the woman soothingly. “Just take it easy.”

Gothmog’s legs felt weak, and he felt himself stumble over his own feet as he let himself be led away from the building. “The kid,” he said thickly as the scene began to swim before his eyes. “He hasn’t come out.”

“Can I get some help here?” called the woman at his side.

Gothmog’s knees buckled, and he felt himself being maneuvered awkwardly onto his side. He was vaguely aware of questions being directed at him, but he could not find it in himself to answer.

Instead, he fumbled in his pocket for his phone, typing in the access code and pressing it into the woman’s hands. Darkness was pouring in from the edges of his vision, and he struggled to voice a coherent thought. “Thuringwethil,” he rasped. “Call her.” The face before him blurred, the sound of the sirens and the flames bled one into the other, and the world around Gothmog dissolved into nothing.

The ringing of his phone pulled Mairon from the depths of a deep sleep, and he whimpered pitifully as he groped on the bedside table for his phone. He pulled the phone toward him, squinting into the unwelcome brightness of the screen. He let out a groan of irritation as he read the name on the screen, jabbing a thumb at the screen to answer the call.

“For the love of God,” he whined, closing his eyes, “whatever it is, it can wait for—” He stopped, listening at last to the words being spoken to him. “He what?” His eyes snapped open and he pushed himself into a sitting position. “Where? When?” He cradled his phone against his shoulder and swung his legs out of bed, going to the dresser and pulling out a pair of pants. “Two minutes,” he said, hopping on one foot as he pulled on his pants. “I’ll be right there.”

He ended the call and threw his phone on the bed, pulling his pants up the rest of the way. He pulled a sweatshirt on and shoved his phone into the front pocket, running to the door. He pulled on his shoes, not bothering to tie them. Grabbing his keys, he dashed out the door and down the hall, bursting into the stairwell and running down the short flights, launching himself around the corners far faster than was safe. He reached the bottom of the stairs and ran into the lobby, ignoring the night man as he barreled through the double doors and out into the cold night air. He stood for a moment, scanning the street. A car to his left honked the horn, and Mairon hurried to the passenger side, pulling open the door and sliding into the warm leather seat of Melkor’s Aston Martin.

“That was fast,” said Mairon, pulling the seatbelt across his lap as Melkor pulled away from the curb.

“I was already here when I called,” said Melkor, speeding through a yellow light.

“How is he?”

“I don’t know,” said Melkor, glancing in his rearview mirror and swerving into the next lane. “Thil just said to come right away.”

“What happened?”

“She didn’t specify,” said Melkor, glancing left and right before speeding through a red light. “She just said it was an accident.”

“Yeah, well, let’s try not to have another,” said Mairon, gripping the side pocket of the door as Melkor swerved into the far lane.

There was little traffic to navigate, and Melkor quickly passed by any cars they encountered, driving as quickly as he could manage with no apparent regard for the speed limit. Still, it felt like an eternity had passed when they finally pulled into the parking lot of the hospital and found a spot. Mairon unbuckled his seat belt and swung open the door, hopping out onto the asphalt before the car had come to a stop.

“And you yell at me about accidents,” said Melkor, hauling himself out of the driver’s seat and slamming the door.

“Come on,” said Mairon, heading for the building. “Let’s go.”

“Easy there, chief,” said Melkor, his long legs easily keeping up with Mairon’s frantic pace. “We’ll find them.”

Mairon ran through the automatic door and toward the reception desk, hurrying toward the lone clerk in the room. “Excuse me,” he said urgently, stopping just short of the desk. “A friend of mine was brought in here not long ago. His name’s Gothmog Valarauka. Do you know where he is?”

“Valarauka?” said the nurse, turning to her computer.

“Yes,” said Mairon. “Gothmog.” Melkor watched Mairon’s hands anxiously curling and uncurling as he waited for the response.

“Gothmog Valarauka,” said the nurse, looking at the screen. “Here we go. He was admitted from the ER. He should be up on three now.”

“Thanks,” said Mairon, wheeling around and heading for the stairs.

“Jesus,” said Melkor, following him and starting up the stairs with a sigh of resignation. “What do you have against elevators?”

“Stairs are faster,” said Mairon, running up the flights two at a time.

“And deadlier,” said Melkor, wheezing slightly as he struggled to keep up.

“Well, if you’re going to have a heart attack, you’re in the right place.”

“Not funny.”

“I’m a bit distracted,” he said as he reached the top of the stairs. “Floor three,” he said, reading the label on the door. “Here we go.”

He pulled open the door and stepped into the hall, looking both ways before heading to the nurse’s station. “I’m looking for someone who was transferred up here from the ER.”

“Name?” said the nurse.

“Gothmog Valarauka.”

“Over here,” said a familiar voice. Mairon looked up to find Thuringwethil standing in the doorway of a room just down the hall.

“Hey,” said Mairon, hurrying over with Melkor on his heels. He brushed past Thuringwethil and headed into the room, looking around the curtain at the empty bed. “Where is he?” he asked, turning back to Thuringwethil.

“They took him for a scan,” said Thuringwethil. “They should be back soon, I think.”

“Thil, what the hell happened?” asked Melkor. “You wouldn’t tell me anything over the phone.”

“I’ll tell you on two conditions.”

“Let’s hear ‘em.”

“First of all, no matter what I tell you, I want you to keep your reaction under control. I’m not dealing with a bunch of nurses running in here because you can’t keep your voice down.”

“Fine,” said Melkor. “I’ll be good. Next?”

“I don’t want you to say anything about what happened to Gothmog when he gets back.”

“But—”

“No,” said Thuringwethil firmly. “He’s already upset, and you’ll just make it worse. So not a word. You hear me?”

“Fine,” said Melkor impatiently. “Now tell us what the hell happened.”

Thuringwethil sighed, trying to gather her thoughts. Her hair, always pulled back, was uncharacteristically loose around her, and she ran a hand through it distractedly. “I guess it started,” she said, her eyes darting from side to side as she thought, “when an alarm tripped at one of our server sites.”

“Again?” said Melkor.

“Yes,” she said. “And Gothmog went to turn it off.”

“We have got to get those false alarms under control.”

“It wasn’t a false alarm,” she said. “Not this time.”

“What?” said Melkor, going still.

“I guess Gothmog went to turn the thing off, and when he did, he heard voices. He called the police and then went to see who was there.”

“Of course he did,” said Mairon.

“Who was it?” Melkor demanded. “What were they doing?”

“Trying to get something off the servers, I think. They had some kind of hard drive, from what I gather.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “but who was it?”

“I want to remind you,” she said, “to watch your reaction. We don’t need any yelling.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said impatiently. “Now tell me who the fuck was in my servers.”

Thuringwethil looked torn, as though she didn’t want to answer. “It was Fëanor,” she said reluctantly.

“What?” demanded Melkor, his voice far too loud in the tiny hospital room.

Thuringwethil’s backhand caught him squarely in the chest. “What did I say?” she hissed, glowering at him.

“That bastard broke into our servers?” demanded Melkor, grudgingly lowering his voice.

“According to Gothmog, he was there with one of his kids.”

“Figures,” said Melkor. “Might as well make petty theft a family affair.”

“But what happened?” asked Mairon. “I mean, Gothmog’s a big guy. I don’t care if there were two of them—I doubt they could take him.”

“The details are still pretty fuzzy,” she said. “Gothmog was out when I got here. Between that and all the tests, I haven’t gotten a lot out of him.”

“Tell us what you know,” said Melkor.

“I know Fëanor had some sort of hard drive,” she said. “He was digging around in the server when Gothmog caught him. They had some words—I don’t know what they said, but it escalated pretty fast. Then…”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know,” she said, biting her lip. “I thought Gothmog said something about gasoline. Which I guess makes sense, but—”

“What do you mean?” Melkor demanded. “What makes sense?”

“The server site,” said Thuringwethil. “It—it burned down.”

“What?” Melkor’s voice echoed down the quiet hallway. Melkor could see the nurse at the desk give them a reproachful look.

“Will you shut up?” Thuringwethil hissed, shoving him farther into the room.

“It burned down?” asked Mairon, following them. “Like, all the way?”

“I haven’t seen it,” said Thuringwethil grimly, “but I talked to EMS when I got here. The guy who drove the ambulance said it was toast.”

“Fuck,” said Melkor, almost managing not to yell. “That fucking piece of shit. I swear to God I’m going to kill him.”

“You can’t,” said Thuringwethil shortly. “He’s dead.”

Melkor and Mairon stared at her, the revelation bringing an uneasy silence to the little room.

“Dead,” Mairon repeated, his mouth hanging open in disbelief. “Like, dead?”

“Tell me that fucker did not die at my server site,” Melkor growled.

“Have a little respect,” said Thuringwethil. “The man’s dead, for fuck’s sake.”

“At my server site,” Melkor said, looking disgusted. “Jesus fucking Christ. As if I needed another reason to hate him.”

“Will you stop? The man is dead, Melkor.”

“That’s the only good news I’ve heard all night.”

“Melkor.”

“What? I’m not going to pretend like I give a shit that he’s dead. He broke into my server site—my goddamn property—and fucking burned it to the ground. Not to mention he dragged Gothmog into this shit.”

“Gothmog didn’t,” Mairon began, shaking his head as he realized there was no good way to phrase

it.

“I don’t think so,” said Thuringwethil. “Like I said, I haven’t gotten a lot out of him yet. He’s been pretty out of it.”

“But he’s okay, right?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. There was definitely some smoke inhalation—his voice sounds like shit. I think they’re worried about a concussion right now. They were stitching him up when I got here.”

“He needed stitches?”

“Right here,” she said, tracing a line from her temple to her cheek. “It was a pretty big gash.”

“Jesus,” said Mairon, shaking his head.

“Nah,” said a raspy voice from behind them. “Just me.”

“Hey!” said Mairon, smiling as he stepped aside for the nurse pushing Gothmog’s wheelchair.

“There you are.”

“Here I am,” he said, his voice raw and muted. They reached the edge of the bed, and the nurse helped Gothmog to sit on the edge.

“The doctor will be in to discuss your results,” she said, settling him back onto the pillows. “Call if you need anything.” She retreated back into the hall.

“You guys didn’t have to come all the way out here,” said Gothmog, shifting to get comfortable.

“Oh, please,” said Mairon. “Of course we did.”

“Yeah, don’t feel bad,” said Melkor. “I bet Mairon wasn’t sleeping anyway.”

“Funny,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

Gothmog looked over at Melkor and grimaced. “I assume Thil already filled you in?”

“We don’t need to talk about it now,” said Thuringwethil.

“Yes,” said Gothmog, “we do.” He looked at Melkor and shook his head. “I’m sorry, boss.”

“Gothmog, don’t.”

“I screwed up,” said Gothmog, shaking his head. “I let that son-of-a-bitch get the better of me.”

“Gothmog—”

“I let him just walk right in there.”

“Gothmog—”

“I mean, Jesus. You ought to see the server building. It’s fucking destroyed, and—”

“Gothmog,” said Melkor loudly. Gothmog fell silent. “The servers are replaceable. So is the building, for that matter—the thing was under construction anyway.”

“But—”

“You did exactly what you should have done,” said Melkor. “You did your job.”

“Badly.”

“Shit happens.”

“No offense, Melkor, but you weren’t there. I just—” He sighed. “I was fucking lazy, man. We’ve had so many false alarms, and that’s what I figured this was too. I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t careful. I should’ve—”

“Gothmog,” said Melkor, interrupting him. “Shut up.”

“But—”

“Shut up,” said Melkor firmly. “You didn’t do anything that any one of us wouldn’t have done. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Yeah, but—”

“The only one at fault here is Fëanor, that piece of shit. And I’ll tell you right now—”

“Fëanor,” said Gothmog, his voice almost inaudible. He swallowed, hesitating. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Melkor, Thuringwethil, and Mairon exchanged a look, unwilling to answer. “Yes,” Thuringwethil said at last. “He is.”

Gothmog closed his eyes and sighed. “I told him not to go,” he murmured, opening his eyes and staring dully at the wall. “I told him that goddamn walkway was under construction. But he wouldn’t listen.”

“It’s alright,” said Thuringwethil, her tone soothing.

“He fell,” said Gothmog, shaking his head. “Right over the rail. Right onto the fire. And the kid…”

“The kid’s fine,” she said. “Treated and released.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.” He sighed. “Look, guys, I’m sorry, but I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, of course,” said Thuringwethil.

“We’ll let you sleep,” said Mairon.

“We’ll be right outside if you need anything,” said Thuringwethil. Gothmog nodded, his eyes already closed. Thuringwethil herded Melkor and Mairon out into the hall and gently closed the door behind them. “So,” she said quietly, looking up and down the length of the deserted corridor.

“We need to triage,” said Mairon.

“I talked to the police when I got here,” she said. “They’re filing a report. There’s going to be an investigation.”

“Good,” said Melkor.

“We need to call our insurance,” said Mairon. “God, this is a nightmare.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“Someone from the Times was already here too,” said Thuringwethil.

“Fucking vultures,” said Melkor.

“Did you talk to them?” Mairon asked.

“I told them we didn’t have a comment at this time.”

“Good. We’re going to need to make a statement before long, though.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil, digging in her purse for a moment before extracting a crumpled piece of paper. “Here,” she said, handing it to Mairon. “I had time while I waiting for Gothmog to get transferred.”

“We’ll have to thank the police and the fire crews,” he said, taking the paper. “Oh, and we’re going to need to say something nice about Fëanor.”

“Or not,” said Melkor.

“Got it covered,” said Thuringwethil. “Just don’t release it until after they break the news that he’s dead.”

“Perfect,” said Mairon. He folded the paper and shoved it into his pocket. “God,” he said, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. “This is a nightmare.”

“Tell me about it,” said Melkor. “Sounds like we’re going to have to rebuild that whole server site. Do you know what was stored there?”

“I have it on file.”

“Anything critical?”

“It’s all backed up elsewhere. We didn’t lose anything.”

“Well that’s good, at least.”

“But you don’t know what specifically we stored there?” asked Thuringwethil.

“Not off the top of my head,” said Mairon. “Why?”

“I want to know what the fuck Fëanor thought he was looking for.”

“Obviously something related to Silmaril,” said Melkor. “Which raises the obvious question: how the fuck did he get in?”

“It’s my fault,” said Mairon, sighing tiredly. “I went out and looked at the alarm system the other day. I knew it was garbage, but I haven’t had time to get a new one up and running yet.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Melkor.

“It is, though.”

“Look, the thing was a piece of shit when we got it. How were you supposed to know?”

“I should’ve checked,” he said, shaking his head. “Jesus, what was I thinking?”

“Look, I’m pretty sure I’ve expended my capacity for reassurance on Gothmog, so can you just quit, please?”

“Okay,” said Mairon. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” said Melkor wearily. “Let’s just move on, okay?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “Yeah, of course. Alright, so you’ve got the press covered, right Thil?”

"I'm on it," she said.

"Okay. I can handle the insurance stuff."

"You handle the alarm stuff," said Melkor. "I'll talk to the insurance."

"You sure?"

"I think I can handle a phone call," he said, rolling his eyes.

"If you're sure."

"I am."

"Good. Oh, we're also going to need to talk to the police."

"They got a statement from Gothmog already," said Thuringwethil. "I talked to them before they left. They're checking out the server site now. They're going to take some statements in the next couple days, I guess."

"We're going to need to follow up with them," said Mairon. "They're not exactly fond of us, so I'm guessing they're not particularly interested in moving this forward."

"We'll keep on top of it," she said.

"Alright," he said, half to himself. "What else?"

"Look," said Melkor, "I know there's a lot to do, but we're not going to get any of it done if we don't get some sleep."

"You go," said Mairon. "I'm going to get started."

"You're going to crash," said Melkor, "and that's not going to help anyone."

"I'm not going to crash."

"Dude, did you even sleep?"

"Yes."

"One hour doesn't count."

"It was two, actually."

"That's not any better."

"I'm fine."

"You look like hell."

"Wow," he said, rolling his eyes. "Thanks."

"You know what I mean."

"Why don't you two go?" said Thuringwethil, leaning back against the wall. "I've got Gothmog covered, and I fell asleep early tonight so I'm good to go. I'll get some things started, and we can meet up later."

"Thil, no."

"Good idea," said Melkor. "I need at least four more hours of sleep to have anywhere near the level of patience I'm going to need to deal with the cops later."

"But—"

"No buts," said Melkor firmly. "You're going to get some sleep so you can actually function. Trust me, Mai—you're going to need it. This is not going to be a pretty cleanup."

"He's right," said Thuringwethil. "Go get some sleep. The mess will wait."

"Alright," he said, though he didn't sound convinced. "But only if you're sure."

"I'm sure," she said. "Now go, and I'll see you later."

"Text me if you need me, Thil," said Melkor, waving lazily as he headed toward the elevator.

"I'll have my phone," said Mairon, reluctantly turning to follow him.

"I'll see you guys later," she said, watching them go.

Melkor reached the elevator and pressed the down arrow. "Maybe we should stay," said Mairon, biting his lip and glancing back at Thuringwethil.

"And do what?" asked Melkor as the elevator doors opened before them. "He needs to rest. What he doesn't need is us hovering."

"I guess," said Mairon, following Melkor into the elevator and pushing the button for the ground floor. He sighed, tapping his foot impatiently as he pulled out his phone and entered the security code.

"What are you doing?" asked Melkor, watching Mairon's fingers move faster than should have

been possible.

“Writing myself a note,” said Mairon vaguely. There was a chime, and the doors opened into the ground floor lobby. Without looking up, Mairon stepped through the open doors and into the lobby.

“You’re going to break your neck,” said Melkor, shaking his head.

“I’m fine,” said Mairon, still typing. “I have lots of practice.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. The front doors slid open before them, and they stepped out into the cool night air. “Jesus, is that a note or a novel?”

“I have a lot of stuff to do,” said Mairon, skimming what he had written. “I don’t want to forget.” Melkor snorted. “Like that would ever happen.”

“Better safe than sorry,” said Mairon, tucking his phone back into his pocket at last. “We don’t need any more screw ups from my end.” They reached the car, and Mairon stood beside the passenger door, waiting for Melkor to unlock it.

“Hey,” said Melkor, an uncharacteristically serious tone in his words. “I don’t want to hear any more about screw-ups, okay? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I should’ve checked that alarm system,” said Mairon, adamant. “I shouldn’t have rushed it. I was careless, and look what happened. Gothmog is in the hospital. That’s on me.”

“You are human, you know,” said Melkor. “You can’t know everything.”

“I can try,” said Mairon grimly.

Melkor sighed. “Sometimes I forget how much you love self-flagellation,” he said, unlocking the door at last.

“I went to Catholic school,” said Mairon, sliding into the passenger seat. “That kind of stuff sticks.”

Melkor revved the engine and pulled out of the parking lot, heading for the exit. The light turned red as they approached, and Melkor slowed to a halt, sighing and rubbing a hand across his eyes.

“Jesus,” he said, yawning. “It’s already getting light.”

“Not quite,” said Mairon, stifling a yawn of his own. “It’s not even five o’clock yet.”

“No one should have to see this hour,” said Melkor darkly.

Mairon snorted. “This is the time real adults get up, you know.”

“Yeah?” said Melkor, pulling out onto the highway as the light turned green. “Well, this real adult only likes to see a sunrise preceded by copious amounts of alcohol and poor decisions.”

Mairon laughed. “Fair enough, I guess.” He sighed, settling back against the seat. “Can you swing by the office?”

“For what?”

“To drop me off.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Come on,” Mairon whined. “It’s barely out of the way.”

“Mairon, you’re exhausted,” said Melkor. “You work an ungodly amount of hours every single day of the week, and I’m pretty sure you haven’t slept more than four consecutive hours in the last four weeks. It’s not sustainable, and it’s sure as shit not healthy.”

“I’m fine,” Mairon insisted. “I don’t need that much sleep.”

“Oh, right,” said Melkor. “You’re immune to the rules of biology.”

“I am above mere mortals,” he said, his tone mock-serious. Melkor laughed, and Mairon grinned.

“Seriously, though,” he said, yawning. “Even if I went home, I wouldn’t sleep. There’s too much going on. Too much to do.”

“You’re ridiculous,” said Melkor. Still, he merged into the right lane and took the exit for downtown, heading toward the office.

“Maybe,” said Mairon, leaning back into the seat and letting his eyes slip closed. “But at least I get things done.”

“Well,” said Melkor, “when you put it like that...”

Mairon didn’t respond. Melkor glanced over at him, taking in the steady rise and fall of Mairon’s chest. Melkor drove on in silence, checking every so often to see that Mairon was still asleep. He

needn't have worried. The gentle hum of the engine and the steady rhythm of the tires on the road had lulled him into the sleep that so often eluded him at night.

Melkor navigated the familiar city streets with an ease only possible in the early morning hours before the workday rush. Fifteen minutes later, he pulled up to the curb and killed the engine, savoring the sudden silence. Mairon slept on, his head resting against the seat. An errant strand of hair fell across his face, moving gently with the rhythm of his breath. Melkor felt a smile tugging at his lips. It was a rare privilege to see Mairon so at ease, the worry that constantly plagued him held at bay by the gentle unreality of sleep. Melkor hated to wake him. Still, he knew it was time. "Hey," he said, his tone gentle. "We're here."

Mairon stirred, blinking his eyes open and yawning. "That was fast," he said, the rasp of sleep still clinging to his words. He turned his head toward the window and looked out at the building that loomed beside him. He lifted his head, looking up and down the sidewalk for a moment before turning to look at Melkor. "I thought we were going to the office," he said, though there was no accusation in his words.

"Yeah," said Melkor, shrugging. "I never agreed to that." He nodded at Mairon's building, visible outside the window. "Look, I know there's a hundred things you think need to be done this minute, but I promise you they can wait. Take a break. Get some sleep. I guarantee you'll work better if you do. Plus, I won't have to keep wondering if you're going to have some kind of breakdown or aneurism of something." He paused, looking with suspicion at the grin that had crept onto Mairon's face. "What?" he demanded. "Why are you—"

Mairon leaned forward suddenly, one hand curling to cup Melkor's cheek as he pressed their lips together. The kiss was fleeting; Mairon's lips brushed gently against his own before he pulled back, looking up at Melkor, hesitating as he tried to read his face in the pre-dawn gloom. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I—"

It was Melkor's turn to interrupt. He leaned forward, one hand stroking Mairon's cheek as the other came to rest at his waist. He kissed Mairon then—firmly, insistently. He felt Mairon's hand in his hair, twisting the strands in his fingers and pulling him forward. Melkor shivered, surging forward until he leaned over Mairon, who sank back toward the window. Melkor's lips chased Mairon's as they shifted, and he felt the gentle thud of Mairon's head as he leaned back onto the glass. He pulled back, uncertain, but Mairon pulled him closer, one hand tugging at his shirt, the other still tangled in Melkor's hair.

Melkor kissed him hungrily, feeling Mairon's lips part beneath his own. He leaned forward, savoring the scent of Mairon's skin and the feeling of his lips against his own, his hand scrabbling for purchase against the door. Too late, he felt his fingers slide against the switch for the window. Mairon's head slid down with the movement of the glass, and Melkor pulled away, fumbling for the switch. The window slid closed, and Mairon pushed himself up into a more-or-less seated position once more. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair and began to laugh. Melkor couldn't stop the grin that tugged at his lips, and he cupped Mairon's chin in one hand, lifting his face toward his own and running his thumb over Mairon's cheekbone.

"So," said Mairon, looking up at Melkor, a smile still firmly fixed on his face.

"So," said Melkor. His eyes were firmly fixed on Mairon's lips, transfixed by their gentle motion. "Do you want to come inside?"

Melkor didn't answer. Instead, he slid back to his own seat and threw open the door, hauling himself out and around the front of the car faster than Mairon had ever seen him move. Mairon laughed and followed him, and two of them retreated into the quiet of the still-sleeping building.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the title. I couldn't resist.

I guess it's time to update the tags...
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All Day and All of the Night

Chapter Summary

Angband is in clean-up mode in the aftermath of the server site break-in. Mairon thinks he's discovered something that could help them.

Chapter Notes

Melkor succeeds in distracting Mairon from his work.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Wow,” said Thuringwethil, sauntering through the open door of Mairon’s office. “You’re here earlier than I expected.

Mairon glanced at her and shrugged. “You sound disappointed.”

“I kind of am,” she said, sliding into the empty chair across from him. “I bet Gothmog this morning that you’d be here before noon—not a bet I expected to lose, by the way.”

“What time did he bet?”

“Nine a.m.,” she said.

“So you were both wrong.”

“That’s my only consolation,” she said.

“I’d hold off on the gloating if I were you. I mean, the guy took a pretty nasty blow to the head.”

“No need to tell me. I was there when they stitched the thing up. It was disgusting.”

“You should tell him that. I bet it’d cheer him up.”

“You know, I think it actually would.”

“So did he get released yet?”

“Not until three. They wanted to watch him for a couple more hours just to be safe.”

“How was he when you left?”

“Asleep,” she said. “They ruled out a concussion, so he could finally get some rest.”

“Oh, good,” said Mairon. “He needed it.”

“So did you, by the look of it.”

“Wow,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Thanks.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “You looked like you hadn’t slept in days when you showed up this morning.”

“No, really, I don’t need that self-esteem. Just stomp all over it.”

She laughed. “Seriously, though,” she said, composing herself. “Did you get any sleep this morning?”

“Some,” he said. “A couple hours, which was not nearly enough.”

“Is it ever?”

“I mean, I guess it depends on your definition of enough.”

“Which, for you, is maybe a third of what’s considered healthy.”

“Everything in moderation,” he said, grinning.

She rolled her eyes. “So what were you doing, if not sleeping?”

“Trying to figure out how to start cleaning up this mess.” He sighed and sat back, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“And how’s that going?”

“Not great,” he said.

“That’s about how I feel. This whole thing’s been a fucking nightmare.”

“And it’s only twelve-thirty.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said darkly. “Seriously, though, have you made any progress?”

“A little,” he said. “I talked to the contractors to let them know we need to stop construction on that server site, and I spent some time locking up our data. Then I ordered parts for the new alarm system I have to build, but even with the rush order, I won’t get them until tomorrow morning. But in the meantime I called basically everyone who works for Gothmog. They’re going to have three people on security detail at every server site until further notice.”

“Good thinking,” said Thuringwethil. “I wouldn’t put it past those sneaky motherfuckers over at Formenos to try something else. They probably think we’re distracted.”

“We kind of are,” said Mairon.

“Sure,” she said, “but fortunately for us, I don’t think there’s anyone else in the world who works as well under pressure as you do. If anyone’s going to figure out how to clean up this mess, it’ll be you.”

“What about me?” said Melkor, who had been leaning in the doorway, listening.

Thuringwethil turned toward him, raising an eyebrow. “I took you into consideration when I made that statement.”

“Rude,” he said.

“Truth hurts.”

“Remind me why I put up with you.”

“Because I’m literally the best lawyer in the state.”

“Possibly the country,” said Mairon.

“Suck up,” said Melkor.

“It’s true,” said Mairon.

“You’re still a suck up.”

“You’re here earlier than I expected,” said Thuringwethil.

“And still earlier than I wanted to be,” said Melkor, pushing himself off the doorframe and sauntering into the office.

“Yeah, I bet. So what rolled your ass out of bed before noon?”

Melkor shrugged. “Shit to do,” he said. “I had to call the insurance people to start filing our claim.”

“Our policy covers arson, right?” asked Mairon, sighing. He put both elbows on his desk and rested his chin in his hands, the picture of resignation.

“Fortunately, yes,” said Melkor. “One less thing for Thil to deal with.”

“Thank God,” she said. “I think I’ve done more this morning than I did all of last week—and I was pretty fuckin’ busy last week.”

“Did the police get ahold of you yet?”

“I called them,” she said. “They want to get another statement from Gothmog before he leaves the hospital, so I have to go over and witness that. They’re probably going to stop here when they’re done.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Mairon, “we have a history of contention with Formenos. It doesn’t really look so good that Fëanor died on our property last night.”

“Especially when we’re being investigated for intellectual property theft from Formenos,” said Thuringwethil.

“Fëanor is such a piece of shit,” said Melkor.

“He’s dead,” said Thuringwethil. “Have a little respect.”

“Respect?” Melkor repeated, affronted. “Are you kidding? Not only did that piece of shit have the nerve to break into my server site, but he had the goddamn balls to fucking die there, too! Not to mention the fact that he tried to break Gothmog’s face. That asshole got exactly what was coming to him.”

“That might be true,” she said.

“It is,” he insisted.

“But,” she said, ignoring him, “you still need to act like a human being—shock, sadness, the whole deal.”

“Yeah, no. I don’t think so.”

“Would you grow up?” she said irritably. “We’re in a really shitty position here, Melkor. We’re being investigated for IP theft, and unless by some miracle we work out a settlement deal—”

“No fucking way,” growled Melkor.

“—then we’re looking at going to trial. For a criminal proceeding, that’s going to mean a jury. That’s a problem. I don’t care how extensive the screening process it—people will have heard about the case. Whether they admit it or not, they’re coming in with bias, and that’s bad news for us.”

“Thil, Fëanor literally broke into my server site, tried to steal my data, assaulted my employee, and then burned my building to the ground. I don’t think Formenos is looking great right now either.”

“Fëanor’s dead,” said Thuringwethil flatly. “Like it or not, that generates sympathy. Add that to the fact that he ran in some pretty powerful circles—”

“He was a well-connected, spoiled little rich kid,” said Melkor. “That doesn’t make him less of a criminal.”

“No,” said Thuringwethil, “but people liked him. He was respected.”

“So?”

“So people hate us,” said Mairon. “Like it or not, we are distinctly unpopular. Have been since way before the whole Silmaril debacle.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass whether or not people like us,” said Melkor defiantly.

“Neither do I,” said Thuringwethil. “But I do care what they think of us.”

“A little respect will go a long way when this fiasco goes to trial,” said Mairon.

“Which is why,” said Thuringwethil, “I already called the *Times* on your behalf to issue a statement of sympathy to Formenos.”

“You what?” Melkor demanded, outraged.

“You heard me,” she said. “And if anyone calls you or stops you in the street, you’re going to say exactly what I told the *Times*. You’re still working to understand what happened. It was a terrible tragedy. Your sympathy is with Formenos in this difficult time.”

“I understand exactly what happened. It was a crime, not a tragedy, and I don’t give a flying fuck that Fëanor got his stupid ass burned to a crisp. He got exactly what he deserved, and I’m not going to pretend that he didn’t.”

“Then just lie,” said Mairon. “Thil’s right, Melkor. We have a really good chance of getting dragged back to court over the whole Silmaril thing, and with our record, we need all the help we can get.”

Melkor sighed in frustration. “Fine,” he said, glaring at Mairon and Thuringwethil in turn. “But I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to like it,” said Thuringwethil. “Just do it.” She looked at her watch and sighed. “Shit,” she said, rubbing her eyes with her fingertips. “It’s only a quarter to one. Is this day ever going to end?”

“Give it about twelve hours,” said Melkor.

“Eat a dick,” she said, yawning. “Anyway, I have to get back to work. I’ll see you guys later.”

Melkor watched her walk out the door, his gaze following her until she disappeared into her office, closing the door behind her.

“Jesus Christ,” said Melkor, letting out the breath he’d been holding. “I don’t think I’ve ever exercised more self-control in my life. Do you know how bad I wanted to say ‘already did’ just then?”

“I can only imagine,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not too late, is it? I mean, it won’t have the impact it would’ve a minute ago, but--”

“Please don’t,” said Mairon. “I think Thil’s had enough stress for one day.”

“Fair point. I’ll save it for Gothmog. Maybe it’ll cheer him up.”

“Really?” Mairon raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, you’re right. He’s been pretty clear about what he thinks of this.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “Although, I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t at least part of what made last night so fun.”

“A rebel,” said Melkor, grinning appreciatively. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“And here I thought it was my stunning good looks,” Mairon deadpanned.

“And people call me arrogant.”

“You are.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not as showy about it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Uh-huh,” said Mairon, grinning. “It’s one of my many talents.”

“Speaking of talents—”

“Ah,” said Mairon, holding up a hand in warning. “The door’s open.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say,” Melkor protested, feigning affront.

“I have a pretty good idea.”

Melkor snorted. “So,” he said. “About last night.”

“Yeah?”

“We should do it again sometime—pun unintentional but definitely intended, now that I think about it.”

Mairon laughed. “Yeah,” he said. “We should.”

“How about tonight?”

“Let’s see how the next three hours goes.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Mairon, “I might end up with more work than anyone deserves on a Thursday.”

“So, like a regular Thursday for you.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, if you think you can spare a minute—”

“Just one?”

“Give me sixty seconds,” said Melkor, “and I’m pretty sure I can convince you to take a longer break.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I’m very good,” said Melkor, fighting a smile.

“For once,” said Mairon, “I have no argument.”

“Wow,” said Melkor. “That might be a record.”

“Shut up,” said Mairon, laughing. He looked up at Melkor, a grin lingering on his lips. “I had a really good time last night,” he added softly.

“Is that right?”

Mairon raised an eyebrow. “I thought I made it pretty clear.”

“Well, you know me,” said Melkor, grinning. “I might need a reminder.”

“I’m sure I could make that happen,” said Mairon.

“Like right now, or...?”

Mairon laughed. “Did we not just get done talking about the amount of crap we have to deal with today?”

“Come on,” Melkor wheedled. “We have time.”

“Not until we at least make a dent in all the cleanup we need to do.”

“Ugh,” said Melkor, feigning disgust. “And to think I was slightly turned on by your sense of

responsibility last night.”

“I’d say it was a little more than slightly.”

“Dude, if you want me to make it through today, you’re going to have to quit reminding me about last night.”

“Sorry,” said Mairon.

“No you’re not,” said Melkor.

“You’re right,” said Mairon, grinning.

“You are the absolute worst,” said Melkor.

“Pretty sure that’s not what you said last night.”

“Jesus,” said Melkor, glaring at him. “I gotta get out of here or I’m not going to make it. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Preferably after sevenish.”

“Don’t push it,” said Melkor, maintaining his glare as he backed out of the office. Mairon flashed him a winning smile, which Melkor answered with two middle fingers raised skyward before disappearing into his office. Mairon listened to the slam of Melkor’s office door with a satisfied smirk, allowing himself a moment of contentment before turning back to the many tasks at hand. Sighing in resignation, he began once more to work.

Mairon knocked gently before pushing into Thuringwethil’s office, closing the door gently behind him. She frowned at the notepad on her desk as she scribbled furiously with one hand, her other hand digging through the top drawer of her desk. She shifted slightly to reposition her phone, cradling it between her shoulder and her ear. “Uh-huh,” she said, pulling a scrap of paper out of her desk and smoothing it under her fingers. “I understand that. But—” Her frown deepened as she listened briefly. “First of all, don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking to you. And second, I have written documentation of the deal that got you the position you’re in, so if you want to keep your cushy job, I suggest you do what I asked you to and stop giving me excuses.” She listened. “Yes,” she said. “Uh-huh. And remember, call me back as soon as you know. Got it? Good.” She let the phone drop away from her shoulder, catching it easily in one hand and ending the call.

“Who was that?” asked Mairon, stepping forward and sliding into the chair opposite her desk.

“A huge pain in the ass,” said Thuringwethil, continuing to write. “But hopefully useful enough to justify the trouble.” She jotted down another note and laid down her pen, sighing as she leaned back in her chair. “I’m trying to weasel out information about the cases involving Angband,” she said by way of explanation. “I want everything active with our name on it—the Formenos stuff, the shit from last night, everything.”

“Sounds like you’ve got someone who can help.”

“I hope so,” she said. “Or else what’s the point of constantly looking for dirt to use in blackmail?”

“So besides bullying your many contacts, how’s it going?”

“Not great,” she said, sighing. “I mean, I’m getting things done, but I’m not going to lie. It’s a slog.”

“Tell me about it,” said Mairon. “Gelmir has called up here at least fifteen times today with requests for statements. Some stupid reporter even had the balls to walk up to the front desk and request a meeting.”

“Jesus,” she said tiredly.

“He was promptly removed from the building, but still.”

“We’re big news, I guess,” said Thuringwethil. “I mean, all the allegations coming out of Formenos were bad enough, but add our lead competitor and biggest accuser dying on one of our server sites?”

“You don’t have to tell me how bad it looks. We’re getting destroyed in the press right now. There’s already all kinds of conspiracy theories about how Gothmog murdered him and tried to cover it up.”

“Great,” said Thuringwethil. “That’s exactly the shit we need right now.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I mean, I want to hit back at them, but—well, you know.”

“It’s not going to make us look any better to try to vilify a dead guy,” she said tiredly. “No matter how big an asshole the fucker was.”

“Exactly,” said Mairon. “Although, to be fair, I don’t think he’s going to need much help looking like a jerk after you see this.” Mairon slid a piece of paper across the desk toward her.

Thuringwethil looked at the rows of numbers, nonplussed. “Is this supposed to mean something to me?” she asked.

“Oh,” said Mairon. “Right. Duh. So I obviously have a ton of security on all of our data, right?”

“Presumably.”

“Okay, so one of the things I track is invasion attempts—basically if someone’s trying to get into our files. Now, we get minor warnings all the time. I check the log about twice a month to follow up on them. For anything big, though, I get an alert.”

“And how often is that?”

“Never,” said Mairon. “Or, rarely enough that it’s practically never.”

“But not actually never.” He shook his head. “And the last one you got was when?”

“Two nights ago,” he said.

Thuringwethil frowned. “The night you were at the server site with Gothmog?”

“That’s the one,” he said.

“And what was it?”

“That’s the thing,” said Mairon. “I thought it was an error. I got an alert that we had a breach, but there was no information attached. I looked around a bit, but to tell you the truth, I was too busy to

bother with it at the time.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

“Because you grasp the concept of dramatic irony?”

“Shut up and tell me what you found.”

“That alert wasn’t a glitch in my system,” said Mairon. “It was a breach.”

“Okay,” said Thuringwethil slowly. “You’re saying breach, but you’re also smiling. You lost me.”

“Whoever breached the system did a pretty decent job of covering it up,” said Mairon. “But once I had the hunch to look, I found out someone had been digging around in all our servers, looking at a bunch of our files.”

“What files?”

“I’ll give you a hint. Only files relating to one program were touched.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope,” said Mairon. “Our mystery hacker—we’ll call him Fëanor, for absolutely no reason whatsoever—was digging around in anything seemingly related to Silmaril. Seems like he found some stuff that interested him, too, because he tried to steal it.”

“Tried?”

“And failed. He couldn’t get through the security to take it off the server, but he got in far enough to find out where the bulk of the data was being stored.”

“So Fëanor ended up at that server site because he hacked us?”

“More or less,” said Mairon. “Of course, the original program files are completely out of reach. All we have at site three are the doctored files showing the fabricated program development over the last three years. But still, it’s the intent.”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil. “Every time I think we’ve hit the maximum level of crazy, something else pops up.”

“Funny how that works, isn’t it?”

“So what do we do?”

“We’ve got to get the information out,” said Mairon. “Like you said, Formenos is generating huge public sympathy over the whole dead CEO thing. We have to hit back while we have their attention.”

“Any idea how?” she asked. “Because honestly, us releasing a bunch of information about how Fëanor was trying to steal a contested file from us seems a little too serves-you-right for my tastes. Sanctimonious isn’t the angle we need to work right now.”

“No,” said Mairon. “We need to get as close to ‘innocent bystander’ as humanly possible.”

She snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m going to need it.”

“Uh-oh,” she said, frowning once more. “I don’t like your tone right now.”

“Look, for all the public knows, we are the innocent bystander. We need to cultivate that image.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

“By acting the part, at least in all the ways that people can see. I know it’s our inclination to handle things ourselves, but let’s face it. Any move looks defensive at the least and downright guilty at the worst. So we need to do what an innocent party would do: let the police handle it.”

“Yeah,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Okay.”

“I’m serious, Thil. We need to be the model of cooperation. When we talk to the police this afternoon, I’m going to give them all the information we have—well, the relevant things, anyway.”

“The police are not exactly our friends, Mairon. Ten bucks says they just toss the evidence in the trash and move forward on trying to crucify us.”

“Thil, do you think I’m an idiot? I’m not going to hand them our best defense without any strings. I already started on an exposé for the *Times*.”

“About what?”

“How there’s new evidence the public needs to know about the break-in at Angband and the circumstances leading to Fëanor’s untimely demise. All I have to do is slap on the ‘unnamed source’ label and I’m free to tell the press everything the police know at this point. By tomorrow morning, every news outlet in the county is going to be running a piece on how Fëanor is a sneaky, backhanded wannabe thief.”

“Please explain to me,” said Thuringwethil, a slightly mystified expression on her face, “how you could possibly have the brain cells to come up with something like this. I mean, I can’t be the only one just running on fumes, here.”

Mairon laughed. “What can I say? I thrive on pressure.”

“You can say that again. Jesus, Mairon. Every time I think you can’t get any more brilliant, you pull something like this.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Melkor, who had just pushed the door to Thuringwethil’s office open. “Thil, you can’t just sit around inflating this kid’s ego. His head’ll explode.”

“Dude, Mairon is saving your ass in ways you didn’t even know you needed.”

“Oh, please,” he said. “Like I don’t know exactly how valuable Mairon is. But just so we’re on the same page, what did he do now?”

“Oh, you know,” said Thuringwethil. “Just figured out that Fëanor was trying to hack the Silmaril files the night before he died.”

“I here I thought that fucker couldn’t possibly look any guiltier,” said Melkor, frowning.

“And on top of that,” she said, “he already came up with a way to divulge said information that not only makes Fëanor look sleazy as hell, but also makes us look as close to innocent victims as we can possibly get right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Melkor, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean,” said Mairon, “Thil makes it sound a lot better than it is.”

“Well, I’m dying to hear your latest attempt at false modesty, but we really gotta go.”

“Shit,” said Thuringwethil, glancing at the clock before pushing herself up out of her chair. “We have to get Gothmog,”

“We do indeed,” said Melkor, pulling his keys from his pocket and rattling them gently. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, no,” said Thuringwethil firmly, grabbing her bag from the hook by the door and pushing past him. “One person in the hospital is enough. I’ll drive.”

“Aw, come on, Thil,” said Melkor, following her toward the elevator. “I’m a great driver.”

“Melkor,” said Mairon, “you don’t even have a backseat.”

“So what?” said Melkor, grinning. “Live a little, you two.”

“I intend to,” said Thuringwethil. “That’s why I’m driving.” She stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the first floor. “Hurry up,” she said impatiently. “It’s going to be a long afternoon.”

“And I thought they kept me a long time,” Gothmog rasped as Mairon finally returned to the office. “Jesus.”

“We had a lot to discuss,” said Mairon, closing the door behind him.

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “Melkor’s been filling me in.”

“How far did you get?” Mairon asked, looking at Melkor.

“He’s got the shape of it,” said Melkor, shrugging.

“Enough to know that Fëanor’s a fucking weasel,” said Gothmog. “And to reconfirm my suspicion that you’re some kind of genius.”

Mairon snorted. “As if you needed any more proof.”

“I didn’t think it was possible for your head to get any bigger.”

“My head’s the same size, thanks.”

“And apparently still not big enough to grasp metaphors.”

Mairon laughed. “Man, I’m glad you’re feeling better, Gothmog.”

“And looking better,” said Melkor. “You looked like shit this morning.”

“You mean right after I got clocked upside the head and half-roasted in a building fire?” said Gothmog, raising an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, no shit.”

“Touché,” said Melkor.

“You are feeling better though, right?” asked Mairon.

“I mean, my head feels like it got busted open by a sharp piece of plastic, and my lungs feel like I inhaled a lifetime’s worth of smoke, but other than that?” He shrugged. “Yeah, I’m great. Speaking of smoke, anyone got some?”

“What, you don’t?” said Melkor.

“Fresh out,” said Gothmog, patting his front pocket. Melkor strode around to the far side of the desk and yanked open the top drawer, pulling out a half-finished carton of cigarettes and tossing them onto the desk. “Hot damn,” said Gothmog. “How’d you know?”

“Gothmog, you smoke like a chimney. I’d have been more surprised if you didn’t have any squirreled away in your desk.”

“Got a light?” asked Gothmog, fishing a cigarette out of the packet and holding it to his lips. Melkor rummaged through the drawer again, pulling out a lighter. He bent forward, igniting it with a flick of his thumb and holding the flame to the end of the cigarette. Gothmog took a long drag as the end began to burn, closing his eyes and letting the smoke stream out his nostrils as he exhaled. “Shit,” he said, sighing. “Nicotine withdrawal’s a bitch.”

“No kidding,” said Melkor. “That’s why I quit.”

Gothmog snorted. “You quit because you couldn’t get your hands on a pack of smokes for the first two months you were in jail.”

“Yeah, well,” said Melkor, grinning.

The door swung open, and the three of them watched Thuringwethil enter at last. She closed the door behind her and glared across the office. “Really?” she said, making a noise of disgust. She strode forward toward the desk. “You were just treated for smoke inhalation, Gothmog. You really think that’s a good idea?” She reached forward and plucked the cigarette from his mouth.

“Hey!” said Gothmog, watching as she raised the stolen cigarette to her lips.

“Sorry, pal,” she said, striding around him and flicking ash out the open window. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Pretty sure the ‘no smoking’ mandate extends to second-hand smoke too,” he said sullenly.

“Pretty sure you’ll live,” she said, taking another drag. “Besides, I’m also reasonably sure I need it more than you do.”

“Doubt it,” he said.

“Really? Because you sat through one interview. I just did four, counting my own.”

“Fine,” he said grudgingly. “Take it. Take ‘em all, why don’t you. That’s the kind of day I’m having anyway.”

“Oh, relax, you drama queen,” said Melkor. “Things could be worse.”

Gothmog shook his head. “No concussion my ass,” he said. “I could’ve sworn you just said something vaguely positive.”

“Shut up,” said Melkor mildly. “It’s true.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because,” said Melkor. “Mairon is a fucking genius. Not even ten hours since he got wind of this shit, and he already has some ridiculous plan to get us out of trouble.”

“For once,” said Thuringwethil, flicking her spent cigarette out the window, “I have to agree.”

“Now I know I’m concussed,” said Gothmog.

“Maybe,” she said, “but I meant what I said.”

“Not that I mind the appreciation,” said Mairon, “but we need to focus. We’re not even close to out of the woods yet.”

“This is true,” said Thuringwethil, sliding the window shut and brushing off her hands. “So, what have we done, and what do we still need to do?”

“The insurance is taken care of,” said Melkor. “It’ll take a while for it to process and for the checks to go through, but they’re going to reimburse us.”

“Good,” said Thuringwethil. “What else?”

“I diverted a good chunk of the security staff over to the server sites,” said Mairon. “There’s a three-person detail at each site. Eight hour shifts, twenty-four hours a day.”

“Very good,” she said.

“I have an order in on the parts for a new security system, but even with rush it’s not coming until tomorrow morning, at the earliest. In the meantime, I did a review of all our data security. Everything looked alright, but I made a few tweaks to the protections. Obviously I need to do a more thorough review, but everything should hold until I can get to it.”

“Great. The police statements are taken care of for now, and so are the press releases. I gave the secretary a standard response to give to anyone who calls for the next few days, so that should buy us a few days of quiet on that end.”

“Good thinking, Thil,” said Mairon. “So what’s our game plan for the next day or two?”

She sighed. “Where do I even start?”

“At the beginning,” said Melkor. “I’m going to focus on pushing the Silmaril shit forward. I’m working on some vehicle designs for the air component, but they’re still in early stages. Once I make some progress, I’ll put a team together to keep it going. In the meantime, I’m also looking for Alqualondë-typed companies—you know, wrecked but still salvageable.”

“Good thinking,” said Thuringwethil.

“I’m going to start on the programming side of that tonight,” said Mairon. “The Silmaril files are good, but they need some modification if we’re going to integrate with any of our existing structures.”

“You two handle that,” said Thuringwethil. “I’ll handle our legal proceedings.”

“There’s going to be charges for this, right?” asked Gothmog.

“There have to be,” said Melkor.

“I’ll make damn sure there are,” said Thuringwethil. “For Fëanor and his dumbass kid.”

“Can we press charges against the kid, too?”

“Are you kidding? Fëanor may have hit Gothmog and started that fire, but his kid was right there with him. He’s an accessory to at least the trespassing charge, and you can bet your ass I’m not going to let him get out of accessory to the other charges without a fight.”

“Good,” said Mairon. “String this kid up and throw the book at him. Maybe that’ll teach the rest of Fëanor’s brats not to follow in their old man’s crooked footsteps.”

“The kid’s going down,” said Thuringwethil. “For sure.”

“This little strategy session is great and all,” said Gothmog, “but some of us are quietly starving to death over here.”

“Quietly?” said Melkor. “Since when?”

“Since shut the fuck up,” said Gothmog. “I need food, damn it.” As if on cue, his stomach let out a formidable gurgle. “See?” he said. “I’m wasting away.”

“God,” Melkor complained. “You’re such a monumental pain in the ass.”

“Takes one to know one,” Gothmog retorted.

“Watch it,” said Melkor, “or you’ll be feeding yourself. Come on,” he said, slipping an arm under Gothmog’s and hauling him out of his chair. “I’ll buy you dinner. Least I can do after you barbecued the most annoying son of a bitch in the world.”

“I better get one hell of a bonus this year, boss.”

“Talk to my accountant,” said Melkor, looking back at Thuringwethil and grinning. “You coming or what?”

“You buying?”

“Yes, you leech.”

“Then yes,” she said, grinning. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” said Melkor. “Mai? What do you want to eat?”

“Huh?” said Mairon, shaken out of his own thoughts.

“Pick a place to eat,” said Melkor. “We’re starving over here.”

“You guys go ahead,” said Mairon.

“Uh-uh,” said Melkor. “Don’t even think about it.”

“But—”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor. “You’re busy. So what? We’re all busy. We still need to eat.”

“I know, but—”

“Come on, Mairon,” said Gothmog. “While you two are arguing, I’m starving to death.”

“Oh, you are not,” said Thuringwethil.

“How do you know?” he demanded.

“Because you ate at the hospital. I saw you.”

“One sandwich,” said Gothmog. “That’s not food. That’s barely a snack.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You are such a little pissbaby.”

“Easy on the name-calling,” said Gothmog, gently tapping the skin just beside his stitches. “I’m infirm.”

“No, you’re a—”

“Come on,” said Melkor, looking imploringly at Mairon. “Are you really going to leave me alone with these two?”

“Alright,” said Mairon, sighing. “I’ll go. But we can’t stay out long.”

“I make no promises,” said Melkor, grinning.

“Yes,” said Mairon, “but—”

“Come on,” said Melkor, already halfway down the hall. “Before Thil kills one of us. You know how she is when she’s hangry.”

“I’ll show you hangry,” said Thuringwethil, stalking him down the hall. Melkor laughed and darted for the elevator, furiously pushing the down button as Thuringwethil advanced, Gothmog calling out his encouragement. Mairon rolled his eyes, smiling as he made his way toward his friends.

Mairon glanced up as the lab door opened, returning his attention to the screen as Melkor picked his way through the various computer detritus cluttering the floor. “Jesus,” Melkor complained, tripping on a monitor. “You’re usually mister anal retentive about organization. What gives?”

“We got the new computers delivered,” said Mairon absently.

“I see that,” said Melkor, carefully navigating his way to the bench. “Since when do we have workstations on the floor? New management technique?”

“I’ve been reorganizing some things,” said Mairon. “I just haven’t had time to finish.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll get to it,” said Mairon, unconcerned.

“What are you working on?”

“I’m double-checking the security on the new computers.”

“Didn’t I get a report that IT had already done that?”

“I did say double-checking, right?”

“Dude, you need to rethink your hiring strategy.”

“Why’s that?”

“The whole point of hiring people is so that you have less work to do—not more. That’s why you hire people you can trust, so you don’t have to double check them.”

“I do trust them,” said Mairon. “But even people I trust make mistakes.”

“And you’re supposed to catch them?”

“I mean, isn’t that the point of management?”

“Hell no,” said Melkor. “Look, the people at the top are the ones who have the ideas. Then you hire people to do all the shitty grunt work so you have time for more important things.”

“Clearly you and I have very different definitions of management.”

“Obviously,” said Melkor. “You spend all your free time triple-checking basic research, and I hire people like you.”

Mairon laughed. “Work smarter, huh?”

“Or not at all.”

“You’ve got that one down.”

“You need to work on your insults, pal. Not having to do any significant work is the hallmark of having actually achieved success.”

“You know, I don’t think that’s true.”

“Right now it’s not,” said Melkor. “I spent the last two hours digging through financial reports looking for businesses we can scavenge.”

“God forbid you have to work after dinner,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I know,” said Melkor. “It’s barbaric.”

“Then go home,” said Mairon. “It’s—” He glanced at his watch. “—eight o’clock. You’re usually long gone by now.”

“I can’t,” Melkor whined.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re still here.”

“If you’re waiting for me, you’re going to be here a while.”

“God,” Melkor complained. “You are so clueless sometimes.”

“What are you talking about?”

Melkor seized the back of Mairon’s chair and pushed, spinning Mairon around to face him before kissing him, holding Mairon’s face steady in his hands. Mairon smiled, pushing himself out of his chair and onto his feet, hands pulling Melkor’s face greedily toward his own. Melkor pushed

against him, and Mairon stepped back until he was flush against the edge of the bench. Melkor's hands travelled down Mairon's back, pulling him closer. Mairon bounced up on his toes, lips parting eagerly as he twisted his fingers around the collar of Melkor's shirt. Melkor lifted him then, setting him down on the edge of the bench. His hands ran up Mairon's chest, pulling at the knot of his tie and ducking his head to kiss the exposed skin of his neck. Mairon let his head fall back, gasping gently as he felt Melkor's teeth scrape against his skin.

"Why do you have to wear so many buttons?" Melkor demanded, scrabbling ineffectively at the buttons in question.

"To annoy you," said Mairon.

"It's working," Melkor muttered.

"Jesus," said Mairon, laughing. "What are we doing?"

"I think it's called foreplay."

Mairon rolled his eyes. "You remember we're at work, right?"

"Who's going to see?"

"Um, literally anyone who works here?"

Melkor raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"I mean, potentially."

"We can move to my office, if you want. Thil was leaving when I came down here, so the sixth floor's totally clear."

Mairon bit his lip. "I have work to do, you know."

"You always have work to do," said Melkor, trailing his fingers up Mairon's leg from knee to hip.

Mairon shivered. "Alright," he said. "But don't keep me out too late." He pressed a kiss to Melkor's lips and jumped down from the bench.

"Define late," said Melkor.

Mairon laughed. "Come on," said Mairon. "Before I change my mind."

Chapter End Notes

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How's It Going To Be

Chapter Summary

Formenos isn't going down without a fight.

Chapter Notes

A new character is introduced. It only took me like eighteen chapters.

(ps is the formatting weird for anyone else? it looks weird but ao3 won't let me fix it??

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thuringwethil opened the door and stepped in out of the blustering wind. The mild weather had given way at last to the chill of winter, and it was cold despite the bright sun overhead. Thuringwethil carefully rearranged the flyaways dragged out of place by the wind and took off her sunglasses, tucking them into her bag and squinting at the board behind the register.

“Hello, Thuringwethil,” said a voice to her right.

She gazed at the board a moment longer before turning to face the man that had spoken. He was young, handsome, and well-dressed, with a smile too bright for a corner coffee shop at eight in the morning.

“Can I help you?” asked Thuringwethil, looking him over.

“In theory,” he said. “And I think I can help you, too.” Thuringwethil stared at him, her expression blank. “Oh,” he said, his smile intensifying. “Where are my manners?” He extended his hand. “Fingon,” he said. “Fingon Finwion.”

Thuringwethil shook his hand, turning toward him. “Thuringwethil,” she said. “But you already knew that.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” said Fingon. “It’s nice to finally meet in person.” The pleasantries had the air of a threat, despite the presence of the unsettling grin firmly planted on his face.

Thuringwethil frowned, looking him over once more. Something about the man set her teeth on edge, though she couldn’t quite place what it was. After a moment, she shook herself, taking a breath. “I see,” she said, affecting an air of cool civility. “Well, it was nice to have met you, Mr. Finwion.”

“Fingon,” he said. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks for the offer,” she said, “but I really need to get to work.”

“To go, then,” he said. She hesitated, and his grin widened. “Come on,” he wheedled. “We’re already here.”

Thuringwethil swallowed the distaste rising in the back of her throat and forced a smile. “Saves me four dollars,” she said, with careful nonchalance.

“Excellent,” he said. “Shall we?”

He walked up to the register, turning his brilliant smile on the man behind the counter. “Good morning,” he said cheerfully. “Can I have a cup of the house blend, medium, with room for cream? And whatever the lady is having, too.” He stepped aside and looked back at Thuringwethil.

“Dark roast,” she said. “No cream. Double shot of espresso.”

“Busy day ahead, eh?” said Fingon, smiling at her as he slid his credit card across the counter to the cashier. Thuringwethil ignored him, moving down the line to collect her drink. She raised the cup to her lips and took a sip; it was practically boiling, but the warmth and the caffeine steadied her, and she sighed contentedly. She turned away from the counter and found Fingon in her path. “Heading to the office?” he asked her. She nodded. “Great,” he said, picking up his own cup from the counter. “I’ll walk with you.”

Thuringwethil said nothing; she simply pulled her sunglasses from her bag, slipped them over her eyes, and headed for the exit. Fingon opened the door for her and followed her out into the chilly morning.

“So,” said Fingon, after a moment had passed between them in silence. “You know who I am?”

“Vaguely,” said Thuringwethil, sipping her coffee. “You belong to Fingolfin—oldest kid, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And you work for the family business, if I remember correctly.”

“You do.”

“In the legal department, if memory serves.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “You’ve done your homework.”

“Graduated Valarin Law,” she continued.

“Same as you,” he said. “Go Eagles, huh?”

Thuringwethil frowned. “It must be nice to have this kind of free time,” she said. “I wish I did. Although, I don’t think I’d spend it tracking down my competitors to engage in inane small talk, but that’s just me.”

“Actually,” said Fingon, “I’m here on business. The small talk is just a bonus.”

“Is it?”

“Theoretically,” he said, and laughed. Thuringwethil hated him. “But since you’re busy, I’ll cut to the chase.”

“Please do,” she said.

“I’m here to offer you a settlement.”

For a moment, Thuringwethil experienced the unfamiliar sensation of speechlessness. “A settlement?” she repeated, annoyed at the dumbfounded tone of her voice.

“That’s right,” said Fingon. “Look, one litigator to another, we both know Formenos is going to pay for this. You’ve got security footage and an eyewitness to say my uncle set your building on fire. I can accept that we’re not getting out of that.”

“Good,” she said, still unsure where the conversation was headed.

“We’ll pay the damages,” Fingon continued. “We’ll cover the cost for your security guy’s medical expenses. We’ll settle everything out of court, nice and quick and easy.”

“What do you want?”

“All we want,” said Fingon, “is for the court to proceed against the individual who’s really responsible for these crimes—my uncle, Fëanor.”

“And the kid?” said Thuringwethil.

“My cousin Maedhros,” said Fingon, “was only doing what his father asked him to do.”

“Yes,” said Fingon, a small twitch of his lips the only sign of his displeasure.

“For which any reasonable jury will agree he ought to be punished.”

“He watched his father die,” said Fingon. “I think he’s been punished enough.”

“I would have to disagree.”

“Look,” said Fingon. “I’m offering you a deal. You overlook the case against Maedhros, and I’ll make sure you get everything you’re due. It’s more than fair.”

“Come on, kid,” she said. “You know damn well we don’t need that deal. We have video evidence and witness testimony to say Maedhros is just as guilty as his old man. We’ll get exactly what we’re due, and we’ll get it with your cousin’s conviction.”

“No,” said Fingon. “You won’t.”

“I think you’re underestimating the strength of our case.”

“And I think you’re underestimating my family’s reputation.”

“Jesus,” she said, laughing. “And I thought my people had the monopoly on untenable arrogance.”

“It’s not arrogance,” said Fingon. “It’s just the way things are.”

“Uh-huh,” said Thuringwethil. “And you’re willing to stake your cousin’s future on that belief?”

“Look,” said Fingon. “I get it. Angband is doing pretty well. It’s got a lot of potential. It’s run by some pretty smart people, yourself included, who know how to turn good ideas into products that actually make money.”

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes. “For the love of God, please tell me you’re not going to stand here and give me the speech about how we’re not so different and all that bullshit.”

Fingon laughed. “I’m not that big a cliché,” he said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong—I realize that our employers might have a little more in common than they’d like to admit. But I also know that there’s one big difference between Angband and Formenos.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Connections,” said Fingon.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “So the eyewitness accounts, the police reports, the security footage—none of that is going to matter in the face of your supposed connections?”

“Not in the way you want it to.”

“Whatever it is you want to say, just spit it out already.”

“I have enough experience with vindictiveness to know that your boss wants to take this as far as it can go—i.e., Maedhros going to jail for accessory to a bunch of crap, at the very least. What I’m telling you is that he’s never going to get what he wants. You can build the best case of our life. You can present every damning shred of evidence that you can get your hands on. But I’m telling you right now, it’s not going to matter.”

“And I’m telling you,” she said, “that with all the shit we have to throw at you, there’s no way we’re leaving that courtroom without a conviction.”

“Oh, sure,” said Fingon amiably. “You can get a conviction. In fact, I’m fairly certain you will, if this thing goes to trial. But it’s still not going to matter.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because,” said Fingon. “You’re not really interested in the conviction as much as you are the sentencing. Call me crazy, but I’d say you have a good bit of aggression stored up over the whole IP theft investigation. I’d be willing to bet you’d like to take some of that out on Maedhros—make him the target for what you think we all deserve. Am I right?”

“This isn’t some scheme for petty revenge,” she said. “We’re talking about criminal liability. Damages. Restitution, for chrissakes.”

“Look,” said Fingon. “There’s two ways this goes down. You can settle out of court and get everything you’re financially due, provided you leave Maedhros alone.”

“Or,” she said, “we can take you to court, get the money you owe us, and see that the kid gets his ass thrown in jail where he belongs.”

“Which won’t happen,” said Fingon.

“You sure about that?”

“Yes,” said Fingon, looking utterly unconcerned. “Last time I checked, you people aren’t particularly popular with the powers that be. We, on the other hand, are. Remember those connections I was talking about? Yeah, a lot of those are with judges and magistrates. You really think someone who played squash with my granddad three times a week for forty years is going to let Finwë’s oldest grandchild go to jail? Because I don’t.”

“The real question,” said Thuringwethil, “is how willing you are to take that bet.”

Fingon’s eyes were hard, despite the careful neutrality of his face. “I like my chances,” he said.

“Shame,” said Thuringwethil, uncowed. “Because so do I.”

They had reached the sidewalk in front of Angband, and Thuringwethil stopped, her back to the front door. She crossed her arms and turned a stony face to Fingon.

Fingon was indifferent. “So,” he said. “I guess we’ve arrived at what you might call an impasse.”

“Seems that way,” she said.

Fingon sighed. “Well, no one can say I didn’t try.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, rummaging in it for a moment before pulling out a business card. “Here,” he said, offering it to Thuringwethil. “In case you change your mind.”

Thuringwethil let the card slip through her fingers, and it fluttered onto the sidewalk, landing face-up. “You might want to keep moving, Finwion,” she said coldly. “This is private property, and unless you’d like to rack up some charges of your own—”

“Alright,” he said, his voice maddeningly conciliatory. “Alright. I’m going. If you want to talk, I’m sure you can find my number.” He turned to go.

“Oh, we’ll talk,” she said. “In court. Be on the lookout for a summons.”

Fingon raised a hand in acknowledgement and continued to walk, turning his collar up against the wind. Thuringwethil watched him until he had faded into the distance and the crowds making their way to work. Then, she turned and walked into the building, ignoring the half-hearted greeting offered by the receptionist. “Hold my calls,” she said curtly, breezing past him and heading for the elevator. The doors opened, and she entered, impatiently pressing the up button six or eight times before the doors closed. She tapped her foot on the tile, irritated, and willed the elevator to move faster.

She arrived at last on the sixth floor and stalked down the hall toward Melkor, who was coming out of the break room with a cup of coffee.

“Don’t even,” she said, scowling at him.

“Good morning to you too,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Fuck off.”

“Wow,” he said. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said dryly. “What’s your preferred attitude for someone who just had to endure running into Formenos’ fucking legal counsel at eight in the morning?”

“Hang on,” said Melkor. “Run that by me again.”

“You heard me,” she said. “Some asshole lawyer from Formenos tracked me down in a goddamn Starbucks this morning.”

“What lawyer?”

“His name’s Fingon; he belongs to Fingolfin, and he’s been working as legal counsel for Formenos

since he graduated Valarin Law a couple years back.”

“And?”

“And,” she said, “he wants to negotiate a plea deal for Maedhros.”

“Who?”

“Fëanor’s son.”

“What, the one that broke into the server site?” She nodded, and Melkor snorted. “Yeah, okay,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Someone really ought to teach these people about the concept of leverage.”

“Who needs leverage when you’ve got nepotism?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Apparently Formenos isn’t particularly worried about the kid’s case,” she said. “Because why worry when your sentencing is going to be up to your grandfather’s old country club buddies?”

“They’re posturing,” said Melkor. “It’s not actually going to get the kid out of a conviction.”

“It’s not the conviction I’m worried about,” said Thuringwethil. “It’s the sentence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, as much as I hate to admit it, the kid’s got a point. I can make those charges stick, but I can’t do jack shit about the punishment, especially if they get a sympathetic judge.”

“But that’s bullshit!” Melkor protested.

“That’s life,” said Thuringwethil. “Which sucks, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Melkor darkly.

Thuringwethil frowned. “Don’t,” she said.

“Don’t what?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, just don’t.”

“But—”

“For once in your life, would you listen to me? We’re on thin ice, here, and we really can’t afford any screw-ups. So please, just once, can you chill?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“*Melkor.*”

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t make me make promises you know I can’t keep.”

She sighed. “That’s the best I’m going to get, isn’t it?”

“I mean, you should probably be happy you got that much.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, scowling. “Let me take this opportunity to thank my lucky stars that I work for such a calm, reasonable maniac.”

“Right?”

She gave him a gentle slap, the back of her hand connecting lightly with his chest. “Just don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“Again with the promises,” he said. She slapped him again, and he laughed. “Okay, okay. I’ll try.”

“Please do,” she said. She glanced at her watch. “Shit,” she said, sighing and brushing hair back from her face. “I’m going to be late.”

“For what?”

“Meeting,” she said, retreating toward the door.

“With who?”

“The patent office.”

“About the Silmaril stuff?” She nodded. “How’s that going, by the way?”

She grimaced and shrugged. “Eh,” she said, non-committal.

“What do you mean, ‘eh’?”

“I mean, I’m working on it.”

“A little more vague, why don’t you?”

“I’m working on it,” she said, a flare of annoyance in her voice. “You need evidence for patent, especially when you have an IP theft lawsuit breathing down your neck.”

“Uh-huh,” said Melkor, unsatisfied. “Well, talk to Mairon. He’s the fabrication whiz.”

“Who’s the fabrication whiz?” asked Gothmog, slouching into the office.

“Mairon,” said Melkor.

“Oh,” said Gothmog. “For sure. Pretty sure that guy missed his calling as a forger.”

“Or as, like, a professional persuader,” said Melkor.

“A lobbyist,” said Thuringwethil.

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “That.”

“Or some kind of evil strategist,” said Gothmog.

“Come to think of it,” said Melkor, “is there actually anything he’s bad at?”

The three of them were quiet, thinking it over.

“Relaxation,” said Thuringwethil at length.

“Yeah,” Gothmog agreed. “Dude has zero chill.”

“Luckily for us,” said Melkor.

“What’s lucky?” asked Mairon, coming to stand in the doorway.

“That you never take a break,” said Melkor.

“You’re probably right,” said Mairon, nodding. “But hey, someone has to do some actual work around here.”

“Ouch,” said Melkor.

“Burn,” said Gothmog.

“For your information,” Thuringwethil began.

“Oh, relax,” said Melkor, grinning. “Take a joke, for once.”

“Melkor,” she said warningly.

“Buy her a couple drinks,” said Gothmog. “That usually does the trick.”

“Good idea,” said Melkor. He leaned down, opened the bottom drawer of his desk, and rummaged around. “Here,” he said, plopping down a half-empty bottle onto his cluttered desk with a *clink*. “Have a drink.”

“It’s eight thirty in the morning,” said Thuringwethil, “and you’re offering me whiskey?”

“Scotch, actually,” said Melkor, thumbing dust off the label. “But I think you’ve earned it.”

“For once,” said Thuringwethil, “I think you’re right.” She set her cup on the desk, removed the lid, and poured a generous shot into her coffee.

“Jesus,” said Mairon, raising an eyebrow. “What kind of morning have you had?”

“A very trying one,” said Thuringwethil. She replaced the lid of her cup and took a drink, closing her eyes and shivering as she swallowed. “Damn,” she said appreciatively. “That’s smooth.”

“No shit,” said Melkor. “It’s Glenlivet. Life’s too short for shitty alcohol, Thil.”

“Right now,” she said, taking another sip, “I’d have to agree.”

“Um,” said Mairon, “is anyone going to tell me why Thil needs an Irish coffee at nine in the morning?”

Melkor made a noise of disgust. “Glenlivet is Scottish, you cretin.”

“And besides,” said Thuringwethil, “there’s not even any cream.”

“Since when are you two so pedantic?”

“Six years of bartending,” said Thuringwethil. She glanced at her watch again. “Shit. Now I’m really going to be late.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, Mai,” she said, heading for the door. “I’ll fill you in later.”

“Okay, but—”

“Gotta go,” she said, brushing past him and heading for her office.

Mairon watched her go before turning back toward Melkor with a frown. “What’s going on?”

“Eh,” said Melkor. “Something about Formenos and a potential plea deal.”

“What?” Mairon said, startled.

“Never mind that,” said Melkor. “Thil’s on it. We have more important things to worry about.”

“I don’t know about more important,” said Mairon, “but—”

“Fine,” said Melkor. “Equally important. Whatever. We have other fish to fry.”

“Such as?” asked Gothmog.

“Where do I even start?” said Melkor. “The Glaurung sale has a couple kinks that need to be worked out before it goes through. Then there’s the design meetings for the Silmaril craft, the overhaul of the code structure, an R&D meeting for potential new projects...not to mention, of course, all the shit we’re still dealing with from the server site debacle.”

“Jesus,” said Gothmog. “You sound like Mairon.”

“I know,” said Melkor, making a face of disgust and miming vomiting into the trashcan by his desk.

“Hey,” said Mairon reproachfully. “Not cool.”

“Do you know,” said Melkor, ignoring him, “that I’ve been at work before nine every day this week?”

“Tragic,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“It is,” said Melkor. “Especially since I’ve also been here past five p.m. three out of four days this week, too.”

“Aw, look Gothmog,” said Mairon, giving him an exaggerated grin. “Our little Melkor is finally becoming an adult.”

“Shut up,” said Melkor, fishing a crumpled up scrap of paper out of the garbage and throwing it at him. “God damn,” said Melkor, running a hand through his hair. “I think I understand why you’re so cranky all the time.”

“Lack of sleep,” said Gothmog sagely.

“I’m not cranky,” said Mairon.

“And stress,” said Melkor, ignoring him.

“I am not cranky,” said Mairon, an edge in his voice.

“All evidence to the contrary,” said Melkor.

“Whatever,” said Mairon. “But seriously, though, what was Thil all bent out of shape about? It sounds kind of important.”

“It is,” said Melkor. “And I’d love to fill you in, but we really need to get to the R&D meeting.”

“Am I in the twilight zone?” asked Mairon, looking bewilderedly at Gothmog. “Or, like, being punk’d?”

“Is Punk’d even still a thing?” asked Gothmog.

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “I haven’t watched TV in at least eight months.”

“Seriously? Dude, what—”

“You can lament Mairon’s incredible lack of hobbies later,” said Melkor, standing up and heading for the door. “We have a meeting to get to.”

“Who are you?” Mairon demanded.

“Shut up,” said Melkor grinning as he shoved Mairon toward the door. “And better yet, enjoy it. Because let’s be honest—I’m going to lose this motivation eventually, and probably sooner rather than later.”

“Good point,” said Mairon. “Let’s see what we can do while it lasts.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Mairon, flopping into his chair and leaning back with an exaggerated sigh. “I officially hate every freaking person who works here.”

“Eh,” said Melkor, draping himself over both available chairs. “I don’t know. Thil and Gothmog have some redeeming qualities.”

“You know what I mean,” Mairon snapped. “There wasn’t a single decent idea from R&D today, despite the fact that they had an extra week to work on their proposals. Plus, that idiot—what’s-his-face, y’know, from out east—he screwed up the paperwork for filing our last patent, so that has to be fixed like, yesterday. Oh, and he’s fired, by the way; don’t let me forget his termination paperwork. And don’t even get me started on—”

“Breathe, dude,” said Melkor. “Last time I checked, rage wasn’t a suitable alternative to oxygen.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” muttered Mairon darkly.

“I don’t know,” said Melkor. “I mean, don’t get me wrong—you do an impressive furious rant, and it’s a huge part of what makes you so good at this job. But, not gonna lie, calm and relaxed Mairon is also pretty great.”

“With this way this week has been going,” said Mairon, “that’s not looking like a side of me you’re going to see very often.”

“Aw, come on,” said Melkor, sitting up straight.

“Sorry,” said Mairon, without much sincerity, “but even you’re feeling the stress, which means we’ve hit, like, uncharted levels of swamped.”

“True,” said Melkor, “but you know, there’s also something to be said for taking a break.”

“Sure,” said Mairon. “If you want to fall behind.”

“I’m serious,” said Melkor. “Taking a break lets you recharge, and recharging is good for our long-term productivity.”

“I feel like we’ve had this conversation before.”

“And yet,” said Melkor, “here we are.”

Mairon sighed. “I know,” he said. “I can’t help it. It’s just how I am.”

“Maybe,” said Melkor, “you just need something to help you relax.” He waggled his eyebrows and leered at Mairon.

“We’re at work,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“So?” demanded Melkor. “Wouldn’t be the first time. And besides, I own the place. What’s the point of owning a business if you can’t have a little fun at work?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” said Mairon. “Maybe, you know, dominating the field of your practice?”

“Wow,” said Melkor. “You and I have very different definitions of fun.”

“Pretty sure you were okay with my definition the other night.”

“No offense, dude, but those are some seriously mixed signals you’re giving out here.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I know.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “It’s just—”

“Stress,” said Melkor, standing up and nodding. “I know. Which brings us back to my original proposition.” He stalked around the desk and grinned.

“Melkor—”

“What?” asked Melkor, leaning forward and bracing his forearm on the back of the chair. “Need a little convincing?” His lips brushed against Mairon’s ear, and Mairon shivered, swallowing hard. “Because I think,” said Melkor, letting his fingers trail gently down Mairon’s chest, “that could be arranged.”

Mairon gasped softly as Melkor’s hand cupped the growing bulge in his pants.

“I don’t know,” Mairon murmured, brushing a kiss against the corner of Melkor’s mouth. “I’ve heard I’m a hard man to convince.”

“Is that so?” said Melkor, grinning. “Well then.” His thumb brushed roughly across Mairon’s bottom lip and he leaned down, crowding into Mairon’s space so that their noses touched, and his lips ghosted against Mairon’s own. “Let’s see if I’m up to the challenge, shall we?”

Melkor leaned forward, his lips seeking Melkor’s, but Melkor was already gone, sinking to his knees with a grin. He ran his hands up Mairon’s thighs, caressing the warmth of Mairon’s erection with one hand while the other reached up to expertly work the clasp of Mairon’s belt. Mairon squirmed, his hips pressing forward into the curve of Melkor’s palm.

Melkor clucked his tongue, a mild rebuke. “What happened to ‘hard to convince’, hmm?”

“I’m always open to a good argument,” said Mairon, drawing in a sharp breath as Melkor tugged

down the waist of his pants. “And this is a very, very good argument.” He let his head fall back, his eyes closing as Melkor’s palm stroked firmly down his length.

“Give me some credit,” said Melkor, pressing a kiss to Mairon’s navel. “I’m only getting started.”

He tugged at the waistband of Mairon’s boxers, trailing soft kisses down Mairon’s belly and up the length of his erection.

“I didn’t say,” said Mairon, biting his lip, “that I was convinced.”

“No?” murmured Melkor, his breath hot against Mairon’s skin. “How about now?” Melkor leaned forward, dragging his tongue through the dripping precum as he took Mairon’s cock into his mouth.

Mairon gasped, his fingers digging into the arms of his chair. Melkor wound his arm around Mairon’s waist, pulling him closer. Mairon threaded his fingers into Melkor’s hair, moaning softly as he Melkor’s tongue moved against his cock. “Come here,” said Mairon, tugging Melkor upwards and kissing him roughly.

Melkor pulled back slightly, still close enough that Mairon could feel the heat of his breath when he spoke. “I take it,” said Melkor, “that you’re convinced?”

Mairon laughed. “You’re obsessed with winning; you know that, right?”

“Uh, duh,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “But seriously, though—I did win.”

Mairon shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said, affecting an air of uncertainty. “I think I might need some more convincing.” He let his knees fall open, angling himself invitingly toward Melkor.

Melkor’s eyes gleamed hungrily as they raked over the freckled expanse of Mairon’s skin. Then he grinned, pressing a fleeting kiss to Mairon’s lips before settling once more between his knees. “Let me see what I can do.”

“Morning,” said Gothmog, pushing past Mairon and reaching for the coffee pot.

“Mmm,” said Mairon, proffering his own for refilling.

“Mooch,” said Gothmog good-naturedly, pouring steaming coffee into the cup.

“Enabler,” Mairon countered, holding the warm ceramic against his chest.

“Read the paper this morning?” asked Gothmog, sliding the pot back onto the warmer and leaning next to Mairon against the counter.

“Skimmed it,” said Mairon. “Why?”

“There’s an opinion piece,” said Gothmog, “about who’s going to take control of Formenos now that Fëanor’s dead.”

“Yeah?” asked Mairon, interested. “What are the options?”

“Barring a weird outside pick, it’s pretty much between Fëanor’s kid and his brother.”

“Maedhros versus Fingolfin, huh?”

“Yep,” said Gothmog. “And apparently the smart money’s on Maedhros.”

“You’re kidding,” said Mairon. “He’s a kid.”

“He’s twenty-two,” said Gothmog.

“Exactly.”

“Oh, please,” said Gothmog. “That’s older than Melkor was when he landed his first patent. It’s just a year younger than you were when you started here.”

“We may have been young,” said Mairon, “but we had experience. What could this kid possibly have to qualify him for the job of running Formenos?”

“A plurality of the company’s shares, for starters.”

“Excuse me?”

“Remember a while back when Fëanor pushed his brother out of the company?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, apparently he also bought out all the available company shares, including the youngest brother’s, and transferred them to Maedhros.”

“Jesus,” said Mairon. “It’s like a whole new level of paranoid.”

“Not to mention petty,” said Gothmog.

“And stupid,” said Mairon. “Apparently he would basically rather let an inexperienced kid run his company into the ground than let his brother get anywhere near it. I mean, can you believe that?”

“Eh,” said Gothmog, shrugging. “It’s not that far-fetched. Can you imagine Melkor letting Manwë anywhere near Angband?”

Mairon snorted. “Fair point.” He shook his head. “Oh well. Like you said, if it’s true, then it works out in our favor.”

“And if not,” said Gothmog, “then I’m sure we can handle the brother just as well.”

“Hey,” said Thuringwethil, striding into the break room. “We’ve got a date.”

“Sweet,” said Gothmog. “Where you takin’ me?”

“A court date, you ass,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes.

“Oh,” said Gothmog. “Right. That makes sense. When?”

“And for which case?” asked Mairon.

“Monday,” she said. “It’s a preliminary for the break-in charges.”

“Nice,” said Gothmog. “That was fast.”

“Too fast,” said Mairon, frowning.

“My thoughts exactly,” said Thuringwethil. “I don’t like it.”

“Why?” asked Gothmog. “I thought you’d want to get this shit rolling a.s.a.p.”

“I do,” said Thuringwethil. “But this shit, as you say, takes time. It’s usually weeks of run-around before you even get official charges.”

“Almost like someone’s trying to speed it up,” said Mairon.

“Is this about what Fingolfin’s kid said to you, Thil?” asked Gothmog. Thuringwethil shrugged. “Oh, come on,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You can’t really think Formenos is going to have that much influence on the courts.”

“I don’t have to think,” said Thuringwethil. “I know.”

“But—”

“Gothmog, I graduated first in my law school class, but do you know who got all the best clerkship positions? The assholes in the bottom third whose daddy’s are partners in the major firms.”

“And those same assholes,” said Melkor, who had been listening in the doorway, “go on to be the DAs and the prosecutors and the senators who make our lives so damn difficult.”

“Not to mention the judges,” said Gothmog.

“Yes,” said Melkor. “That too.”

“To be fair,” said Thuringwethil, “Manwë was in the top ten percent of his class. Which is not to say,” she said quickly as Melkor glared at her, “that he didn’t get a nice cushy seat at the bench right out of school because of your dad, but—”

“But nothing,” said Melkor darkly. “Manwë got that job because of whose Y chromosome he inherited, not because of any talent of his own.”

“Okay,” said Thuringwethil conciliatorily. “Okay.”

“You’re right, though,” said Melkor. “This court date came up way too fast. I don’t like it.”

“Guys,” said Mairon, “let’s not dwell on stuff we can’t control, okay? Forget the court dates and the judges. Focus on keeping the ground we’ve gained and pushing forward for more.”

“You sound like a fucking motivational poster,” said Gothmog.

“What did I tell you?” said Melkor. “Missed his calling.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Mairon.

“Just our weekly talk about Mairon session,” said Melkor, grinning. Mairon gave him a look, and Melkor laughed. “Aw, come on,” he said. “It’s all good stuff. Cross my heart.”

“Yeah, right,” said Mairon. He tilted his head back and drained the last of his coffee before reaching for the pot to refill his cup.

“You know,” said Melkor, “I’m pretty sure there is a lethal dose for caffeine.”

“Mmm,” said Mairon, taking a sip. “I’ll let you know if I ever find it. Got any time, Thil? I want to talk about the patent filings.”

“For you?” said Thuringwethil, refilling her own cup. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

“Perfect,” said Mairon. “There’s some stuff in my office I’d like you to look over.” The two of them departed, already deep in discussion.

“So,” said Gothmog. “Want to get lunch?”

“Only if it involves a stiff drink,” said Melkor.

“I think that can be arranged,” said Gothmog. “Come on. I’ll drive.”

“Even better,” said Melkor, grinning and following him out into the hall.

“Hey,” said Mairon, walking through Melkor’s open office door. “Check the *Times* lately?”

“Isn’t that kind of your thing?”

“Luckily for you,” said Mairon. He held out a piece of paper and shook it gently. “Check it out.”

“What?” said Melkor, taking it. “Did Formenos spontaneously combust this morning?”

“Next best thing,” said Mairon. “Read it.”

“‘Formenos names new CEO’,” Melkor read. He raised an eyebrow and looked up at Mairon. “The kid? Really?”

“Yep,” said Mairon. “Apparently he has a plurality of the company’s shares. They’re saying it’s what Fëanor intended. You know, in case anything happened to him.”

“What, like burning to death while breaking into your competitor’s data storage?”

“Sure,” said Mairon. “Although I doubt his notes were that specific.”

“So,” said Melkor. “The kid—Maedhros, is it? He’s our new arch-nemesis.”

“You could say that.”

“Could be worse,” said Melkor, shrugging.

“That was my thought,” said Mairon. “He’s young and inexperienced.”

“Probably easy to manipulate.”

“Or at least out-manuever.”

“Finally,” said Melkor, leaning back in his chair. “Some good news.”

“Speaking of good news,” said Mairon, “my recoding project finished up ahead of schedule.”

“Great,” said Melkor, unimpressed.

“It is great,” said Mairon. “I’ve got a free evening, which means I can crank out some more documentation for the patent case. Unless,” he said, affecting a nonchalant tone and inspecting his nails, “you can think of something else to occupy my time?”

Melkor grinned, eyeing Mairon appreciatively. “Oh, I’m sure I can think of something,” he said. He stood up, grabbing his coat from the back of his chair and throwing an arm around Mairon’s shoulders. “Come on,” he said, pressing a quick kiss to the top of Mairon’s head as he pulled him toward the door. “Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

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No Quarter

Chapter Summary

Feanor's dead, leaving Maedhros to answer for the destruction of server site three. Angband intends to make him pay.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Morning,” said Thuringwethil, walking through the open door of Mairon’s office and perching in one of his chairs.

“Morning,” said Mairon, sifting through the mail on his desk.

“You busy today?” Mairon snorted, and Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. “I’m serious.”

“Oh,” said Mairon. “Yes, actually. Why? Do you need something?”

“Supporting evidence,” said Thuringwethil.

“For the break-in case? Gothmog can help you with that.”

“I already talked to him. He’s pulling all the security footage. I want you to make sure it’s all backed up, though. And get the data from the alarm system, too.”

“Sure,” said Mairon, jotting it down on his notepad. “No problem.”

“I also want documentation on what was on the servers they destroyed.”

“Like an itemized list?”

“At least as far as it pertains to proving how much Formenos disrupted our business interests.”

“Got it,” said Mairon.

“You’re going to have to testify, too. All that crap about the hack attempts and whatever else.”

“Cleaned up, sanitized for court, and backed up with hard, documented evidence,” said Mairon, writing a few more notes. “Done. Anything else?”

“Probably,” said Thuringwethil, sighing. “I’ll have to let you know. My mind is like a goddamn sieve lately.”

“Tell me about it,” said Mairon, rubbing his eyes. “I mean, not like it’s ever calm or anything around here, but this last couple weeks have been insane.”

“No kidding.”

“I was just reading an article this morning that said high-stress careers can shorten your lifespan by, like, ten years.”

“Is that all? I’d have figured at least one of us is heading for a coronary in the next decade. If not sooner.”

“The things we do, huh?”

“Honestly,” said Thuringwethil sourly. “I’ve worked sixty hours a week for the last billion years, and what do I get? A goddamn court case, that’s what.”

“At least it’ll be over soon. I mean, the case is practically the definition of cut and dry.”

“Fat lot of good that does us.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“I guess,” she said. “But it would be a lot more useful with a good hard sentence attached to it.”

“What do you figure our odds are on that front?”

“If I’m being optimistic?” She scrunched up her face, thinking. “One to a hundred. If we’re lucky.”

“That bad?”

“The judge on our case was in Finwë’s fraternity at Valarin.”

“Oh, come on,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “Can we catch a break? Just once?”

“Nope,” she said glumly. “Apparently not.”

“Great,” said Mairon, sighing. “So what’s our best-case scenario?”

“A few weeks, if that.”

“Where does that leave Formenos in the meantime?”

Thuringwethil sighed. “Honestly? I don’t know. Now that Fëanor’s gone, his oldest kid has a controlling interest in the company. The way they have Formenos structured, that means all decisions have to have his approval.”

“And if he’s in jail?”

“It depends. If they leave things the way they are, then it could really tie their hands, so to speak.”

“You can’t participate in business from prison.”

“Exactly. Which is why Melkor signed everything over to you a couple years back. Things were starting to look dicey, and we wanted to make sure things could run basically without interruption if Melkor got convicted.”

“What are the odds Formenos has that kind of contingency plan in place?”

“I mean, I assume they have something,” Thuringwethil mused. “I doubt it’s anything substantial, especially given the ridiculous amount of upheaval they’ve gone through recently.”

“That might work to our advantage, especially since Formenos can’t seem to cut the infighting long enough to muster up a united front.”

“A week ago,” said Thuringwethil, “I’d have agreed with you.”

“But not now?”

She sighed. “I don’t know,” she said, running a hand through her ponytail distractedly. “It was different when Fëanor was around and in charge. He’d have rather watched Formenos burn to the ground than see it in his brothers’ hands—hell, he’d have lit the match himself before he let that happen. But Fëanor is dead, and these other Finwions are different. They’re a little less self-involved, a little more willing to collaborate. It worries me.”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “They’re just kids.”

“So were we, once. A lot of people underestimated us back then. I don’t want to make the same mistake.”

“You’re giving them too much credit.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not. I’d rather give too much than too little.”

“It’s always good to hedge your bets,” said Mairon. “No matter how confident you are when you make them.”

“Exactly.” She yawned, stretching in her chair. “Jesus,” she said, sighing. “What time is it?”

“Ten-thirty,” said Mairon, glancing at the clock on his computer screen.

“Is that all? Shit. I need coffee.”

“Same,” said Mairon.

“Want to go up the street for it? I could use the fresh air.”

“Sure,” he said, standing up. “Fresh air would be probably do us good.”

“When’s the last time you saw the light of day?”

“Last night, for your information.”

“No shit,” she said, looking impressed. “You actually slept at home last night.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what—oh, you didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” he asked, feigning innocence.

“I swear to God,” she said. “If you slept at Melkor’s last night, I’m going to—”

“Think carefully before you finish that thought.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” she said, grinning. She threaded her arm through his. “Come on,” she said. “Apparently, we have some catching up to do.”

Mid-afternoon found Mairon scurrying around the building, checking items off his ever-growing to-do list. He was going over and over the things they would need for court, making absolutely

certain nothing had been missed. He wandered into Melkor's office, not bothering to knock.

"Did you get—"he started, but Melkor interrupted him.

"What the fuck is in your hand? Is that a real, honest-to-God clipboard?" He laughed. "Jesus Christ, Mairon. You look like the summer camp counselors I tormented for three weeks of every summer between the ages of nine and fourteen."

"What's wrong with a clipboard?"

"Real people don't carry clipboards. They just don't."

"Guess I'm not a real person."

"I wonder sometimes."

"You're a such a jerk," said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

"Says the idiot holding a clipboard."

"I don't want to have to bend over a desk every time I need to write something down."

Melkor raised his eyebrows suggestively. "I could make it worth your while."

"Tempting," said Mairon. "But I'm busy."

"You're always busy," said Melkor.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Anyway, it kind of seemed like you were working when I came in."

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I wouldn't have to if you'd do it more often."

"That joke is getting old," said Melkor, sniffing in mock disdain. "And irrelevant."

"Is it?"

"For your information, I've worked every day this week."

"Prove it," said Mairon.

"See for yourself," said Melkor, nodding at his computer.

Mairon dragged his chair around to the other side of the desk and scanned the screen. "Huh," he said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"This isn't quite right," said Mairon, frowning.

"Pretty sure it is."

Mairon grabbed a pen from the cluttered surface of the desk, dragged the discarded envelope from the patent office, and scribbled a couple of equations. "See?"

Melkor leaned over Mairon's shoulder, looking at the hastily scrawled symbols carefully. He frowned. "Huh," he said, almost grudgingly. "You might be right." He took the pen from Mairon. "What about this?" he asked, scribbling a correction.

Mairon turned toward him, grinning. "You're cute when you work, you know that?"

"Yeah?" said Melkor, grinning back at him. "Shit. If I'd known that, I would've done it sooner."

Mairon laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "You're ridiculous," he said. "Now fix that, before you forget."

It was midnight when Mairon was finally satisfied with his work and turned off his computer. He leaned back and sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly, making stars explode under the pressure of his fingertips. He opened his eyes, dimly aware of how dark it was. He glanced at the stack of papers in his inbox, tipping precariously toward the garbage. A very uncharacteristic part of him wanted to push them in and forget about them. The more usual, practical part of him knew he should start working through them. Cut down on tomorrow's to-do list, he thought wearily. He considered gathering them into his bag and taking them home. He could get a few good hours in there if he left now. He knew, however, that it would never happen; if he went home, he'd be asleep before he read a single page.

He yawned and cast a surly glance at the clock, wondering idly where all the time had gone. Resignedly, he pushed himself back and headed for the door. Another long night called for a pot of strong coffee. He opened the door and looked, out of habit, and the office doors around him. He was surprised to find lights on in all three. Curiously, he went to Thuringwethil's door and knocked softly. After a moment, she opened it, looking as tired as he felt. "How's it going?"

"It's going," she said, her voice beginning to take on the rasp of having been worked with very little break for far too long. Mairon peered into her office. There were papers everywhere, laying haphazardly on every available surface. Mairon smiled, more a reflex of recognition than a sign of mirth. Only in preparation for a trial did Thuringwethil ever let her office descend into such chaos. It was vaguely comforting, this sure sign of activity. It felt like readiness. "Don't mind the mess," she said, misinterpreting his smile.

"I don't," he said. "I'm probably being selfish, but I kind of like not being the only idiot still working at midnight."

"A dubious honor," she said.

"Still an honor, though. Right?"

"I was kidding."

"Yeah," he said, too tired to manage a wittier reply. "Are you going to be ready?"

"I think," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "I should have everything we need, believe it or not."

"That's great, Thil. I know it was stupidly short notice."

"It's ridiculous," she said. "I don't think I've ever had a turnaround this quick in my entire career. I swear they're just trying to catch me unprepared."

“They don’t know who they’re dealing with,” he said, mustering an encouraging smile.

“Let’s hope you’re right,” she said.

“I usually am,” he said, and she snorted, shaking her head. “You should get some sleep.”

“You first.”

“On my way,” he said. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Cross my heart,” he said, illustrating the phrase with the corresponding gesture. “I’m just gathering up a couple things.”

“You’re a liar,” she said. “And a bad one, when you’re tired. You were on your way to find some liquid energy for another all-nighter.”

“Guilty,” he said. “You want to join me?”

“Why not?” she said, shrugging. She stepped out into the hallway, leaving her office door ajar. “I guess we’re not the only ones working late,” she said, nodding at the other doors.

“I think Gothmog’s been practicing,” said Mairon. “You know he gets nervous about public speaking.”

“I’m going to work with him on it tomorrow,” she said. “Or today. Whatever. Fuck, I’m tired.”

“So what’s Melkor’s excuse?”

She shrugged. “He’s probably asleep. He does that sometimes—falls asleep watching a movie or something. He’ll find his way home eventually.” Mairon nodded, though he did not seem convinced. Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you go find out?” she said. “I’ll go make the coffee. I’ll bring you some when it’s done.”

“Thanks, Thil,” he said.

“You two are gross,” she said. “You know that?” Still, she looked rather pleased. She headed down the hall toward the break room. Mairon tread quietly to Melkor’s door, turning the handle quietly so as not to wake him. He peeked around the door and found Melkor lying on the couch, surrounded by papers.

“You coming in or what?” Melkor demanded.

“You’re here late,” he said, stating the obvious.

“I’m trying out your method of madness,” said Melkor. “The whole ‘bury yourself in work until your eyes bleed’ shtick.”

“That’s not right,” said Mairon.

“Tell me about it.”

“No,” said Mairon. “Not that. The other thing. Something about method and madness.” He yawned convulsively, unable to stifle it.

“Jesus,” said Melkor. “You look exhausted. “Come sit down.”

“I can’t,” said Mairon. “Too much to do.”

“Just for a minute,” said Melkor, wheedling. He shifted some papers off the cushion beside him and onto the floor.

“One minute,” said Mairon, trying to sound stern. “Then I have to get back to work.” He sat on the couch and sank into the cool leather cushion, luxuriating in the softness that enveloped him. “Since when do you have a couch, by the way?”

“Since a couple days ago,” said Melkor. “Since I fell asleep at my desk and woke up feeling like I broke my fucking neck while napping.”

Mairon snorted. “Amateur,” he said. He closed his eyes for a moment, luxuriating in the temptation of sleep. Even talking about it was intoxicating.

“You’re exhausted,” said Melkor again, softly. “Stay here for a bit. Take a rest.”

“I can’t,” said Mairon. He willed himself to open his eyes, but he found them unwilling to respond. He felt Melkor’s arm go around him, pulling him gently over and down.

“There,” said Melkor, as Mairon laid the back of his head in Melkor’s lap. “Just for a minute.”

“A minute,” Mairon murmured. All the fight had left him, and he found himself drifting inexorably into sleep.

Thuringwethil pushed the door open with her shoulder a few minutes later and found Melkor on the couch, one hand holding a report, the other resting gently on Mairon’s chest, rising and falling with the cadence of his breath. She smiled, and Melkor rolled his eyes, a picture of quietly-borne grievance. Thuringwethil padded softly into the room and held out the cup she had intended for Mairon. Melkor took it, mouthing a silent word of thanks as he put it to his lips.

“G’night, Thil,” he murmured, smiling.

“Good night,” she whispered back. She left them there, and went back to her work.

Mairon opened his eyes to find an unfamiliar ceiling above him. He blinked and let his eyes travel down to a wood-paneled wall, where he found a coat rack. There was a familiar leather coat hanging from a hook, obsolete in the sudden spring warmth. Mairon recognized the coat as Melkor’s, and then his brain began to wake up, and he realized he was in Melkor’s office. He shifted slightly and looked up. He was lying on the couch in Melkor’s office, his head resting on Melkor’s legs. Melkor was still asleep, his head tipped back on the top of the cushions. His mouth was open slightly, and he snored gently on each inhale. The sight made Mairon smile. He was loath to disturb Melkor, but he knew from the light streaming into the windows that it was morning. It was time to get up.

Mairon sat up as gently as he could and winced as he felt Melkor stir. “Morning,” said Mairon.

“Fuck,” said Melkor, lifting his head with an exaggerated groan. “My neck hurts. What the hell?”

“That’s what happens when you’re old,” said Melkor.

“Haha, asshole,” said Melkor. He cocked his head from side to side, trying to stretch. “What time is it?”

“Time to get up,” said Mairon.

“With you,” said Melkor dryly, “that could literally be any time of day.”

“I’d like to argue,” said Mairon, “but I honestly can’t.”

“Is it wrong,” said Melkor, “that I really don’t want to do any of the work I’m supposed to do today?”

“No,” said Mairon. “I guess not. You should do it anyway, though.”

“You would say that,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “You’re such a fucking overachiever.”

“Luckily for you.”

“No argument here.” They were quiet for a moment, still adjusting to being awake. “Hey,” said Melkor, a glint of mischief in his eye. “How about a little incentive for doing my work?”

“You mean like the wealth and renown that come with success?”

“You’re such a pain in the ass,” said Melkor, but he laughed. “Come here.” He pulled Mairon over and kissed him.

Thuringwethil’s voice cut suddenly through the early-morning quiet in the office. “Hello? Anyone here yet? Mai?”

“Yeah,” he called back. Melkor slapped the back of his hand into Mairon’s chest. “Ow,” Mairon complained. “What?”

“You’re cockblocking yourself. You know that, right?”

“Good things come to those who wait.”

“Wait, really?”

Mairon opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the sound of Thuringwethil’s voice in the hallway. “Mai? Is that you?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon.

“Aw, come on,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

Thuringwethil pushed open his door. “Oh,” she said, looking at the two of them. “In early or here late?”

“Technically both,” said Melkor. “Why are you so chipper at this hour?”

“Good news,” she said.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You know the judge we were supposed to get on this case? The one that was butt-buddies with Finwë?” Melkor nodded. “He’s dead,” said Thuringwethil, grinning.

“No,” said Melkor.

“What happened?” Mairon asked.

“He had a massive coronary,” said Thuringwethil. “Keeled over halfway through a Kobe steak and

a bottle of thirty-year scotch.”

“Not so bad,” said Melkor, “as far as causes of death go.”

“I can think of worse, I guess,” said Mairon.

“Who cares?” said Thuringwethil impatiently. “He’s dead, which is good news for us. And there’s more.”

“Still good?”

“Very good,” said Thuringwethil. “For us, at least.”

“Well? Spit it out,” said Melkor.

“They already assigned a new judge,” said Thuringwethil. “And from what I heard from my people down at the courthouse, he’s not a fan of the Finwions.”

“Excellent,” said Melkor.

“What does that mean for us?” said Mairon. “Most realistically, anyway.”

“It means we have a real shot at getting that Maedhros kid some actual prison time.”

“Which he deserves,” said Melkor.

“Damn right,” said Thuringwethil.

“What’s with the eight-a.m. office party?” Gothmog asked, wandering through the open office door.

“The judge in your case got reassigned,” said Thuringwethil. “The old guy’s dead. I think the new guy’s going to be much more sympathetic.”

“Oh, thank God,” said Gothmog, putting a hand theatrically on his heart. “I was really starting to sweat the whole testimony thing.”

“Seriously?” said Thuringwethil.

“Um, yes?” said Gothmog. “Public speaking isn’t exactly my forte.”

“It will be when I’m done with you,” she said, grabbing him by the arm. “Let’s go,” she said, as she dragged him toward the door. “We’ve got a lot of rehearsing to do.”

“Oh, shit,” said Gothmog.

“Wrong move,” said Melkor, laughing.

“If you don’t see me in an hour, send a search party.” Thuringwethil dragged him through the door, and the two of them disappeared down the hall.

“Finally,” said Melkor, leaning back on the cushion. “Those two have awful timing.”

Mairon stretched, yawning expansively. “We should probably get up,” he said, but he didn’t move.

“There’s probably a lot of things we should do,” said Melkor. “Not sleep on a fucking couch at

our age, for one thing.”

“You should’ve woken me up,” said Mairon. “I wanted to get a few more things done last night.”

“You needed to sleep,” said Melkor. “Besides, I didn’t want you to move.”

Mairon leaned against Melkor’s chest and tilted his face up. Melkor leaned down and kissed him. “Seriously, though,” said Mairon. “We have work to do.” He pressed his cheek into the warmth of Melkor’s neck.

“We have time,” said Melkor, wrapping his arms around Mairon.

“Not much,” Mairon murmured. He pressed his lips to Melkor’s skin, three lingering kisses traveling down Melkor’s neck. He felt Melkor stiffen, heard him draw breath sharply through his nose.

“Keep that up,” Melkor said, “and you’re not going anywhere.”

Mairon ran his hand up Melkor’s chest and pressed a biting kiss to the skin of his neck. “Says who?” he breathed.

In one swift motion, Melkor had Mairon pinned beneath him. “You’re an instigator,” he said.

“You love it,” said Mairon, pulling him down.

It was seven o’clock in the morning, and Gothmog was in his office, dressed in a suit. He was sitting on the sill of the open window, blowing the smoke from his cigarette out the window.

“You look like a penguin,” said Melkor, sauntering in through the open office door.

“Asshole,” said Gothmog. Melkor held out his hand, and Gothmog grudgingly gave him the cigarette. “You better have a tie,” he said, as Melkor blew smoke out the window. “Thil’s going to kill you if you don’t.”

“Let her try,” said Melkor, surrendering the cigarette back to Gothmog.

“Try what?” said Thuringwethil, coming in from the hallway. “You better have a tie,” she said, glaring at Melkor. Gothmog laughed, and she glared at him too. “Last one,” she said, her tone a warning. “I don’t want you smelling like a fucking ashtray in front of the judge.”

“You don’t let us have any fun,” Gothmog whined.

“I’m the reason you assholes get to have any fun at all,” she said. “If it wasn’t for me, you dummies would be sharing a cell over at county.”

“That,” said Melkor, “might just be true.”

“Am I late to the party?” said Mairon, looping his tie around his neck as he traipsed into the office.

“Tie,” said Thuringwethil to Melkor. “Where is it?”

“Don’t tell me how to dress, woman,” said Melkor.

“Here,” said Mairon, hurrying between them. “I have an extra.” He stood on tiptoe to throw the

end around Melkor's neck, tying it with practiced ease.

"I feel like I'm suffocating," Melkor whined. "I can't even remember the last time I wore a tie."

"Probably the last time you were in court," said Gothmog.

"I didn't wear a tie."

"And look what happened to you," said Thuringwethil, sounding smug.

"Oh, yeah," said Melkor, rolling his eyes. "If only I'd worn a tie to bring out my eyes, my asshole brother would've been able to dredge up some leniency."

"It couldn't have hurt."

"As much as I love to hear you two hurl insults," said Gothmog, "we really need to go. We're going to be late."

"Nothing wrong with being late," said Melkor. "It just means everyone has to look at you when you come in."

"And that," said Thuringwethil, "is why you're not allowed to be in charge of anything important."

"Come on," said Mairon, hauling Melkor away by the arm. "Save it for later."

"Fine," said Melkor. "Let's get this over with."

The trial was a quiet, straight-forward affair. It lasted only two days. The defense spent a lot of time talking about what a good kid Maedhros had been. They showed his grades from high school and college, and gave the jury pictures of him at various ages. They showed his college graduation (*magna cum laude*, from Valarin). They showed pictures of him playing basketball in high school. Most of all, they showed pictures of him with his father, a lanky, freckle-faced kid staring adoring up at his hero. They talked about how much Maedhros loved Fëanor, how he was a young and impressionable man just eager to gain his father's approval. They talked a lot about remorse, and even more about amends.

The prosecution didn't argue that Maedhros was a bad guy. You don't have to be a bad guy, they said, to be responsible for your actions. They showed the jury the results of Maedhros' actions. There were dozens of pictures of the server site, burning and smoldering. There were pictures of Gothmog in the hospital, still covered in soot. They put Gothmog on the stand to testify, and he told the jury every detail from that night.

The jury listened to it all for two long days. When it was over, they deliberated for only an hour before returning a unanimous verdict: guilty.

"Did you see their faces?" said Melkor later, holding a glass and swaying where he sat on the arm of his couch. "The whole lot of them, all those brothers and cousins and whoever else. They looked like they were pissing glass." He cackled delightedly and poured what remained in his glass into his mouth.

"Serves them right," said Mairon. "Pass the whiskey."

"We should've tried for more," said Gothmog, slurring slightly. He passed the bottle to Mairon.

“Manslaughter or attempted murder. He nearly killed me, for Christ’s sake!”

“Not worth it,” said Thuringwethil. “There was no reasonable way for him to have known you’d be in there. We’d have no, whatsit, probable cause. Or something.” She drank from the open bottle of wine in her hand.

“We should’ve made some,” said Melkor. “Probable cause or whatever.”

“We perjure ourselves only as much as necessary,” said Thuringwethil primly.

“If you can still use words like perjure in a sentence, you’re not nearly drunk enough.”

Thuringwethil raised the bottle to her lips and began to chug. Melkor, not to be outdone, raised his bottle of bourbon and kept pace.

“You’re a bunch of drunks,” said Mairon. He stood up from the couch, swayed, and sat back down, hard. Melkor laughed uproariously, splattering Mairon with liquor and spittle. “Gross,” said Mairon reproachfully.

“Let’s drink,” said Gothmog. “A toast. To Thuringwethil, who never fails to save our asses when shit starts to hit the fan.”

“To Thil,” said Mairon.

“Amen,” said Melkor.

“Don’t toast me just yet,” said Thuringwethil. “We may have gotten a conviction, but the sentencing is a whole other hurdle.”

“Hurdle,” said Gothmog, with the sage gravity of the very drunk, “sounds way too much like hurl.” He grimaced. “I’ont feel so good,” he said. He staggered down the hall; they could hear him retching.

“Not on the floor, asshole!” said Melkor, and he stalked after him, glowering and swaying with each step.

Thuringwethil slid over on the couch to lean on Mairon. “I think,” she said, “I might be drunk.” Mairon hiccupped. “I think you might be too.”

“We deserve a night off,” said Mairon.

“Damn right we do,” she said. She held the neck of her wine bottle toward Mairon, her arm weaving slightly as she held it outstretched.

Mairon clinked the side of the whiskey bottle against the wine bottle in her hand. Liquid sloshed onto his hand, and he licked it off. “So,” he said, leaning back into the couch cushions. “One conviction down, one sentencing to go.”

“Indeed,” she said.

“What do you think our chances are?”

“Realistically?” she shrugged. “Even with the new judge, I’ll be surprised if we get more than thirty days. I’m putting in a recommendation for no clemency anyway.”

“Can’t hurt,” said Mairon.

“That piece of shit,” said Melkor, wandering back into the living room. “Puked all over the baseboards.”

“Did you clean it up?”

Melkor waved a hand dismissively.

“It’ll be worse in the morning,” said Thuringwethil.

“Sucks for Gothmog,” said Melkor. He sat down on the arm of the couch and let himself fall backwards. His head landed in Mairon’s lap. One arm curled against his chest while the other was sprawled over the edge, fingertips resting on the ground. His legs lay over the arm of the chair, tapping lazily in the air.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said Mairon.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Melkor. He closed his eyes, dug his shoulders into Mairon’s legs as he repositioned himself, and was asleep before Mairon could respond.

“To the victor,” said Thuringwethil, “go the spoils. I’d ask for an exchange if I were you.”

Mairon laughed. “I’m good,” he said, smoothing the hair away from Melkor’s face.

“Come a long way, haven’t we?”

“If you would’ve told me a year or two ago that we’d be here, I’d have called you a liar.”

“To us,” said Thuringwethil, holding out her wine bottle once more. Mairon grinned, raised the whiskey bottle in a silent salute, and drank.

Chapter End Notes

I have no good excuse for the long wait between updates ˘_(`´)_/

I’m on tumblr! Come visit.

Good Times, Bad Times

Chapter Summary

Maedhros' impending incarceration might pave the way for some real progress at Angband. Then again, it might not.

Chapter Notes

Spot the part where I've been rereading American Gods. Also, this might be a record for speed of updating?? I'm going to enjoy the rare combination of time and motivation while it lasts.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I brought donuts!” said Mairon cheerfully, pushing through the door of Melkor’s apartments. There were groans from the direction of the living room to tell him that he had at least been heard, if not appreciated. “And coffee,” he added, traipsing into the kitchen. He set down containers of both on the island and opened the box of donuts. He selected a blueberry cake donut for himself and picked up his coffee.

“I heard coffee,” said Thuringwethil. At some point during the night, she had raided Melkor’s dresser in hopes of something that could pass for pajamas. She had found only one t-shirt that seemed halfway clean. She examined it now, in the cold and sober light of day, and she laughed. “Nice,” she said, rolling her eyes. The shirt was a faded white, large enough to fall halfway to her knees. On it was a picture of two buzzards. There was a speech bubble coming from one, which read ‘Patience my ass! I’m gonna kill something’.

“Raiding Melkor’s closet?” said Mairon, handing her a coffee.

“You’ve seen this one before?”

“No,” said Mairon, “but I made the only logical conclusion.”

“What time is it?”

Mairon glanced over her shoulder at the clock on the oven. “Seven-oh-five,” he said.

“Jesus,” she said. “How the hell are you up and functioning so early?”

“I don’t need a lot of sleep.”

“Wrong,” said Melkor, stumbling in from the living room. “It’s because you weren’t drunk enough.”

“I drank at least as much as you did,” said Mairon, sliding a cup of coffee down the length of the kitchen island toward him.

“Couldn’t have,” said Melkor, picking up the coffee and taking a drink. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

“Maybe I’m not the lightweight you think I am.”

“I’m a very good judge of drunken character.”

“Or maybe,” said Mairon, “you’re just more of lightweight than you think you are.”

“Take that back,” said Melkor, looking legitimately offended.

“Make me,” said Mairon, calmly sipping his coffee.

“Maybe I will,” said Melkor, his tone shifting away from friendly banter and into the realm of flirtation.

“Keep it in your pants, you two,” said Thuringwethil.

“Is that my shirt?” Melkor asked her.

“You’re actually willing to claim ownership of this piece of shit?”

“I love that shirt,” said Melkor fondly. “I used to wear it to family functions to piss off my brother.”

“Did it work?” said Mairon.

“What do you think?” said Melkor.

“How is your dear old brother?” Thuringwethil asked. She picked a chocolate frosted donut out of the box.

“Fuck if I know,” said Melkor. “Haven’t heard from him since my mandatory community service. I think he’s given up on me. Give me one of those.” He nodded at the box at Thuringwethil’s elbow.

“About time,” she said. She picked up an apple fritter, placed it on a napkin, and slid it down the marble surface of the island to Melkor.

“Tell me about it,” said Melkor. He took two bites of the fritter and blanched. “You know, seven thousand grams of sugar might not be the best idea right now.”

“Another nail in the lightweight coffin,” said Mairon, picking up a vanilla frosted donut with rainbow sprinkles and taking a bite.

“I will literally kill you,” said Melkor. He laid his cheek against the cool marble and groaned.

Mairon snorted. “You ought to know better than to make threats you can’t back up.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Melkor. “It’s seven a.m., and I’m tired and hungover. I’m not in a rational state of mind.”

“Are you ever?” asked Thuringwethil.

Melkor tore off a piece of his donut and threw it at her. It landed harmlessly on the

counter five inches from her hand. “You’re asking for ants,” she said, picking up the chunk of fritter and eating it.

“Why are you yelling?” said Gothmog, coming in at last. “Why are all of you yelling?”

“No one’s yelling,” said Melkor, raising his voice.

“Christ,” said Gothmog, holding his hands over his ears. “Why are you such an asshole?”

“Donut?” said Mairon.

“Don’t even talk about food,” said Gothmog, stumbling into a chair at the kitchen table. He sat down, hard. “It makes me nauseous.”

“You already have one pile of puke to clean up,” said Melkor. “Don’t make another.”

“I puked?” said Gothmog. “Aw, man.”

“If you want to call someone a lightweight,” said Melkor, looking at Mairon, “here’s your chance.”

“Give him a break,” said Thuringwethil. “He was in the hospital a week ago.”

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “Be nice, assholes.”

“Well,” said Mairon, wiping his hands on a napkin. “I’d love to sit here and watch you tools sober up, but someone has to keep the company running.”

“I feel like that was meant to be an insult,” said Melkor, looking not-at-all offended.

“Something about your lack of work ethic,” said Mairon, shrugging. “I don’t know. I’m off my game a little.”

“Understandable,” said Thuringwethil. “It’s not even seven-thirty on a Saturday morning, and you spent last night trying to go drink-for-drink with the big kids.”

“It’s Saturday?” said Melkor. “Fuck, man. Why are you going to work?”

“Someone has to,” said Mairon, shrugging.

“That’s why we hire underlings,” said Melkor, but Mairon just laughed.

“Seriously, though,” said Gothmog. “You’re already as far on the boss’s good side as you’re ever going to get.”

“False,” said Melkor. “As the boss, I can say with confidence that you should never stop trying to weasel into my good graces.”

“Do you even have good graces?”

“Ask Mairon,” said Melkor, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“I legitimately have no idea what that means,” said Mairon. He looked at his watch. “Okay, for real this time, I’m going to work. Catch you kids on the flip side.” He headed into the living room to find his things.

“You sound like a bad 90’s after school special,” Melkor called after him.

“Thanks!” said Mairon, and walked out the door.

“That wasn’t a compliment!” Melkor called after him. He made a noise of disgust. “What a waste of an insult. He didn’t even get it.”

“He just does that ‘cause he knows it pisses you off,” said Thuringwethil. “It’s like, reverse psychology or something.”

“Asshole,” said Melkor mildly.

“Isn’t that why you like him?”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “That, and the fact that he has such a nice ass. I mean, have you seen that thing?”

“Jesus,” said Gothmog, wincing. “Like I needed any help feeling nauseous.”

“And that’s my cue,” said Thuringwethil. “I’m going home.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to work too,” said Melkor.

“No,” said Thuringwethil. “I just like to make sure I get adequate time away from you jerks.”

“Love you too, Thil,” said Melkor, blowing her a kiss.

“I’ll see you later,” she said, waving as she walked past them and out into the living room.

Melkor and Gothmog listened to the sounds of her departure, sitting in the kitchen for a few minutes in silence. Then, Melkor said, “I’m going back to bed.”

“Same,” said Gothmog, yawning.

“If you get in bed before you clean up that puke,” said Melkor, standing up and stretching, “I’ll suffocate you with a pillow. G’night!”

He sauntered out of the kitchen and headed for his bedroom.

“Fuck,” said Gothmog quietly. He sat for a moment more at the table, weighing his options. Then, sighing resignedly, he got up and went to look for cleaning supplies.

“Hey,” said Melkor, barging through the closed door of Mairon’s office without bothering to knock. “I have some ideas I want to run by you.”

Mairon looked up at him over the head of the young lady in the chair in front of his desk. She looked nervous, craning her head to look back at Melkor.

“I’m in the middle of an interview,” said Mairon.

“With who?” said Melkor. “I’m A Huge Nerd Weekly?”

“A *job* interview,” said Mairon, annoyed.

“Oh,” said Melkor. “Even worse.”

“This is Melkor Bauglir,” said Mairon to the interviewee. “CEO and founder of Angband.”

“Oh, gosh,” said the girl in the chair. “It’s an honor, sir.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Melkor. “Now get out.”

She looked confused. “But I just got here.”

“We have everything we need,” said Melkor firmly. “We’ll call you.”

She looked at Melkor for a moment in disbelief. Then she turned back to Mairon, unsure of what to do. He shrugged, looking defeated. Still looking lost, she gathered her things and left, closing the door behind her.

“We’re not going to call her,” said Melkor, winking conspiratorially at Mairon.

“I think you actually enjoy sabotaging everything I do,” said Mairon, still annoyed.

“Not everything,” said Melkor, sitting down in the recently vacated chair. “Never anything important.”

“We have very different definitions of important,” Mairon said sourly.

“Thank God,” said Melkor.

“What’s so important that I couldn’t finish my interview?”

“I’m thinking about logistics,” said Melkor. “Things are moving along on the Silmaril project, at least on the aircraft side of things. We’re getting to a point where we really need to think about production.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “It’s been on my list.”

“Of course it has,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “Any thoughts?”

“Nothing solid,” said Mairon. “I haven’t had much time to weigh the options yet.”

“Is there any conceivable way we can produce Silmaril stuff here?”

“We can do the programming here,” said Mairon. “I like to keep that stuff close by so I can supervise, and anyway, it won’t take up too much extra space. I can reassign some engineers from other projects, and if you ever let me finish an interview, I can hire a few more. But the structural stuff...” He trailed off, thinking. “It wouldn’t be ideal,” he said after a moment.

“That’s what I thought. I mean, we were running out of space during our round of production.”

“We’re expanding,” said Mairon. “Which is great, but it’s happening a little faster than I expected.”

“So we’re going to need new production sites, yes?”

“If we want to produce a new system for Silmaril, then yes. We just don’t have the

resources here.”

“Okay,” said Melkor. “So do we buy land and build a production site from scratch, or do we buy an existing site and convert it?”

“I think options for conversion are going to be limited,” said Mairon. “But we can’t know for sure until we figure out a structural design.”

“I have some preliminary stuff,” said Melkor. “I’m going to pull some people in the mechanical department from other projects so we can something a little more final.”

“We can do some hiring, if need be.”

“Let me see what the assignments are in mechanical right now,” said Melkor. “We may be able to get away with an internal restructure.”

“It’d probably be faster than hiring, anyway.”

“Oh, for sure.”

There was a knock on the door, and they both looked back to find Thuringwethil in the doorway. “The sentencing is at 10 o’clock tomorrow morning,” she said. “You two want to go?”

“Absolutely,” said Melkor. “No way I’m going to miss seeing that little shithead punished.”

“Mai?”

He hesitated, looking at his calendar.

“Come on,” Melkor cajoled. “It’ll be fun.”

“Alright,” said Mairon. “But I have to come straight back.”

“I’ll drive,” said Melkor. “We’ll be back in no time.”

“I might ride with Thil,” said Mairon.

“What? Why?”

“Because,” said Thuringwethil. “He likes being alive.”

“I’m a great driver,” said Melkor. Thuringwethil laughed. “What?” he demanded.

“The only reason you have a license is because I’ve been blackmailing some asshole at the county clerk’s office for the past six years.”

“That’s not true,” said Melkor.

“Yes,” she said. “It is. He really doesn’t want his wife to know about the ex-prostitute he’s been paying child support to. And anyway, this shouldn’t exactly come as a shock to you, seeing as how you get two speeding tickets a month.”

“The speed limit,” said Melkor, “is a just a guideline.”

“And you wonder why Mai wants to ride with me.”

“Because he’s a traitor,” said Melkor. “And henceforth, dead to me.”

“Better dead to you than actually dead,” said Thuringwethil.

“Eat me,” he said.

“Not my job,” she said. “You could ask Mairon, but I heard he’s dead to you.”

“Sucks for you,” said Mairon.

“Come on,” Melkor whined. “You can’t make these suggestions and then leave me hanging.”

“You made the suggestion,” said Mairon. “And anyway, I have another meeting in five minutes.”

“I’ll be fast,” said Melkor.

“And they say romance is dead,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I’m officially uncomfortable,” said Thuringwethil. “I’m sending you both back to the workplace harassment seminar.”

“The last time you made Melkor go,” said Mairon, “he turned everything the HR guy said into a sex joke for two hours.”

“He quit,” said Melkor proudly. “The same day. Work on your threats, Thil.”

“It’s hard to threaten people like you,” she complained. “You have no shame.”

“Nope,” he said, smiling smugly. “Now, about my earlier suggestion...”

“Sorry, buddy,” said Mairon. “I have a meeting. Maybe later.”

“No one lets me have any fun,” said Melkor.

Mairon patted his shoulder and kissed the top of his head. “Better luck next time,” he said. “Come on, Thil. Let’s go find my next victim.” Mairon and Thuringwethil headed out into the hall, leaving Melkor alone to sulk.

“Nice picture of you in the paper,” said Mairon, heading to the counter where the overworked coffee pot lived. He set the folded paper down in front of Thuringwethil, who eyed it critically.

“I look like shit,” she said, holding out her own coffee cup. “Look what working here does to me.”

“You look great,” he said, and he meant it. “You always do.”

She nudged him affectionately with her shoulder. “That article almost sounds sympathetic,” she said. “I’m not used to the press taking that tone with us.”

“Me either,” said Mairon. “It kinda freaks me out.”

“Same,” she said. “Although, I guess they didn’t really have a choice. The kid got six months in jail and a felony conviction for destruction of property.”

“He’s lucky that was all,” said Mairon.

“I’m not sure Formenos would see it that way.”

“Probably not,” said Mairon. “I don’t think they actually expected him to go to jail.”

“They didn’t,” said Thuringwethil. “Not if that punk-ass lawyer of theirs is to be believed.”

“That’s where cockiness gets you,” said Mairon.

“I don’t think we get to make judgements on anyone else’s level of arrogance.”

“The difference,” said Mairon, “is that we can back ours up. I mean, this situation the Finwions are in isn’t much different than the one we were in a couple years ago when Melkor got locked up. We were prepared though, so we made it through. I’m not sure Formenos will.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s hard to tell. Maedhros getting put away is definitely a blow to them, but I don’t think it’s fatal. The company is big, and it has a lot of resources. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of them.”

“They are persistent,” said Mairon. “I’ll give them that.”

“Still,” she said, “I think we probably put them out of commission for a little while. Everything happened so fast with the break-in and the trial and all. They didn’t have time to restructure anything internally. With Maedhros gone, they’re definitely hobbled.”

“Which means we need to get busy,” said Mairon. “We can’t get lazy. We need to capitalize on their mistakes.”

“Sometimes I regret getting into this business,” she said, shaking her head. “Other lawyers get like, two months of paid vacation. What do I get? Another ten hours tacked onto my overtime.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, “but at least you get to work with you best friends. You can’t beat that, right?”

“Put me on a beach,” said Thuringwethil, “and I’m not sure I’d agree.”

“It won’t always be like this,” said Mairon. “It’s just that establishing yourself is hard. It takes commitment, and it takes a butt-load of your time. It eats your personal life for a long time, and I know that sucks. But it pays off in the long run.”

“In theory,” she said. “It’s not like you’ve actually had that experience.”

“Not yet,” he said. “But I believe it.”

“For a scientist, you rely an awful lot on faith.”

“Just because something hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean that it won’t. Faith is just belief in the things to come.”

“I think you missed your calling as a televangelist. Or, no—a cult leader.” He snorted.

“I’m serious,” she insisted.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“For our purposes? Sure.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said. “Anyway, I have to run. I’m helping Melkor rearrange the staff assignments so we can start on preliminary Silmaril designs.”

“Have fun with that,” said Thuringwethil, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, I will,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “Melkor’s been making them compete for spots on the new team.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what that means.”

“Me either,” said Mairon, grimacing.

“My thoughts are with you in this difficult time.”

“If you don’t see me in two hours,” said Mairon, “send help.” He turned and walked out of the break room, dragging his feet resignedly as he made his way toward Melkor’s office.

Mairon walked to the couch and threw himself down, feeling drained. “Jesus,” he said, turning his head to look at the clock. “How long did that take?”

“A little over an hour,” said Melkor.

“Seriously?” Mairon raised his head up to look at Melkor. “That’s all?”

“Time flies, huh?”

“That saying is supposed to apply when you’re having fun.”

“What are you talking about? That’s the most fun I’ve had in weeks. Well, at work anyway.”

“Melkor, you turned a promotion into a reality show.”

“I know,” said Melkor, smiling fondly as he recalled the afternoon’s events. “Such a great idea.”

“Three people quit on the spot,” said Mairon, “and honestly, I’m surprised it wasn’t more.”

“It never hurts to weed out the weak.”

“You had them rattling out little mistakes people made like, three years ago.”

“It always pays to gauge an employee’s exact level of loyalty.”

“You sound like a weird capitalist fortune cookie generator.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Melkor.

Mairon yawned, laying his arm over his eyes to block out the light. “You had the team picked out beforehand, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. Like, a week ago.”

“So you were just messing with everyone.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I learned a lot about exactly how far I can push my lackeys, and what I can expect out of them.”

“There’s something wrong with you,” said Mairon.

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Because there’s something wrong with me, too.”

Melkor laughed, and Mairon heard him stand up, heard his footsteps on the carpet. He felt the couch shift as Melkor sat down on its arm, just above Mairon’s head. “I’d ask if you wanted to go grab dinner,” said Melkor, “but I’m getting a little tired of being turned down.”

“Oh, please,” said Mairon. “I don’t turn you down that often.”

“You’ve turned me down eight hundred and seventy-three times in the past three weeks,” said Melkor.

Mairon shifted his arm away from his face and looked up at Melkor. “You’re a liar.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “but it’s part of my charm.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” said Mairon.

“I will,” said Melkor. “So where have we landed on dinner?”

“Want to order in?” Mairon asked.

“If you want,” said Melkor.

“Good,” said Mairon, yawning again. “I can get some work done while we wait.”

“Sure,” said Melkor. “If by work, of course, you mean nap.”

He slid down onto the couch, prodding Mairon to make him move. Mairon grudgingly slid over to give Melkor room. “You’re a bad influence,” said Mairon. “You know that?”

“Yes,” said Melkor, sounding not at all contrite. “Now, what are we going to eat?”

“Is there some kind of cap on overtime hours?” said Melkor.

“Yes,” said Thuringwethil.

“Really?”

“Yes,” said Thuringwethil. “Do I want to know why you’re asking?”

“Because,” said Mairon, “he told the engineers he reassigned to Silmaril design that he’d

fire the first one who left the building.”

“Jesus,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes.

“Maybe I can reclassify them as interns,” said Melkor thoughtfully. “We work them ninety hours a week without pay.”

“Not officially,” said Thuringwethil. “Besides, your engineers are already on payroll.”

“Then I’ll fire them,” said Melkor. “And tell them I rehire whoever gets me the designs first.”

“I’m up to my ears in court dates already,” she said sourly. “Can you not add a labor law case to my workload? Pretty please?”

“I make no promises,” said Melkor.

“Why do I continue to work here?” she said, sighing and laying her head on the desk.

“Where would you even go?”

“Literally anywhere else.”

“Go ahead,” said Melkor. “You’ll be back in three days, tops.”

Thuringwethil flipped him off with both hands before folding her arms on the desk and laying her head on top of them. She had only just managed to get comfortable when the phone rang, echoing loud and shrill around the walls of the office. “Fuck,” she said, sighing resignedly. She pressed the button for speakerphone and said, “This is Thuringwethil.” She listened to the voice on the other end, grinding the heel of her hand into the bridge of her nose. “Yes,” she said. “I’ll be there.” She hung up the phone and sighed deeply.

“Who was that?” asked Melkor.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Um, no?”

“Must not be any of your business, then.”

“Hilarious,” said Melkor, glaring at her.

“What’s up, Thil?” asked Mairon.

“That was a contact of mine in the courthouse,” she said. “She calls me when anything comes in we might need to know.”

“That’s a useful trick,” said Gothmog.

“It is,” she said. “Except that she won’t say anything over the phone. They’re paranoid over there, the whole lot of them.”

“I don’t blame them,” said Mairon.

“So you’re going to the courthouse?” said Gothmog.

“For a bit,” she said.

“Want some company?”

“I’m alright,” she said. “Anyway, aren’t you hiring for security this afternoon.”

“Not until one,” he said.

Thuringwethil tapped her watch. “It’s one-oh-seven,” she said.

“Ah, shit,” said Gothmog. “Guess that leaves me out. See you guys later!” He sauntered out of Thuringwethil’s office and down the hall toward his own.

“I can go,” said Melkor. “If you want.”

“Thanks,” said Thuringwethil, “but no. I’ll attract less attention alone. Nothing weird about a lawyer at the courthouse, right?”

“Good point,” said Melkor. “Well, let me know if you get anything useful out of this chick.”

“Will do,” she said. “Lock the door when you leave, okay?” She stood up, slipped a few files into her bag, and started toward the door.

“Sure,” said Melkor.

“And don’t touch anything,” she said, shooting him a glare over her shoulder.

“Like you have anything worth touching,” Melkor retorted, rolling his eyes at her.

“Fuck you,” she said good-naturedly. “See you guys later.”

Her footsteps retreated toward the elevator and then, with a click of closing doors, disappeared. As soon as he heard the elevator doors close, Melkor reached out and touched everything on her desk—gently, though. Enough to be defiant, but not enough for her to notice when she returned.

Mairon laughed. “You have no shame,” he said.

“Nope,” said Melkor, unperturbed. He looked around, and then he grinned at Mairon. “So,” he said. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“Lab work,” said Mairon, sighing. “You?”

“Working on Silmaril designs, I guess.”

“Well, I’m going to the lab if you want to join me,” said Mairon. He stood up and stretched.

“Hell yeah,” said Melkor. He followed Mairon out of the office and down the hall.

Two hours later, Melkor was sprawled on the floor of the lab, idly tracing curse words in the dust that had accumulated under the nearest desk. “I can’t believe you dragged me down here for nothing,” he said, his tone accusing.

“What are you talking about?” said Mairon, focused on his computer screen.

“False pretenses,” said Mairon. “That’s what.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I literally told you I was coming down here to work. I asked if you wanted to join.”

“I didn’t think you actually meant for work.”

“That sounds like your problem, then.”

“Asshole,” said Melkor petulantly. He sighed dramatically. “Are you done yet?” he asked, rolling his eyes to the left to look at Mairon.

“Since you asked me five minutes ago?” said Mairon. “No.”

“I’m bored,” said Melkor.

“Work on the Silmaril design.”

“I did,” said Melkor. “It’s done.”

“Really?”

“No,” said Melkor. “But I’m getting there.” He lay on the floor and listened to the careful, irregular tapping of Mairon’s fingers against the computer keys. “You want to take a break?”

“No,” said Mairon. He was sitting on a stool, leaning forward onto the lab bench, his face illuminated by the glow of the screen. One index finger idly twirled a strand of hair around and around. Melkor watched the motion, steadily going mad. “Have you sent out memos for performance reviews?” asked Mairon.

“You’re hilarious,” said Melkor.

“You said you were bored.”

“I was hoping you’d come up with something interesting for me to do.”

“Like what?”

“I have a few ideas,” said Melkor. He pushed himself up off the floor and came to stand behind Mairon. He leaned forward, kissing gently along the line of Mairon’s jaw. “Wanna hear them?” he breathed. He felt Mairon shiver.

“Have I mentioned,” said Mairon, his voice admirably steady, “that you are a huge distraction?”

“I pride myself on it,” said Melkor. He wrapped one hand around Mairon’s waist, his fingers tracing idle patterns up the inside of Mairon’s thigh. He grinned as Mairon gasped, his breath pulled in sharply through his teeth. His free hand was splayed across Mairon’s chest, holding him in place. The hand on Mairon’s thigh moved steadily upward, fingers pressing into his flesh. “All that focus,” he whispered, his hand coming to rest on the growing bulge of Mairon’s arousal, “and I can still manage to pull your attention to me.” Mairon arched his back, pressing himself into Melkor and letting his head fall back on Melkor’s shoulder. His eyes were closed, and he bit his lip so hard that it hurt.

“But,” said Melkor, suddenly releasing Mairon and stepping back, “if you’d rather be working...”

“You’re the worst,” said Mairon, turning in his seat to face Melkor. He buried his hands in Melkor’s shirt and pulled him forward, kissing him hungrily.

“But your work,” said Melkor, grinning shamelessly.

“You win,” said Mairon. “Happy?”

“Very,” said Melkor. He kissed Mairon again, his hands on either side of Mairon’s face. Mairon stood, his feet on the rungs of the stool bringing their faces level. Melkor pulled him closer, his hands wandering shamelessly over Mairon’s body.

“We’re going to get caught,” said Mairon, tipping his head back to let Melkor nip at his neck.

“I don’t care,” said Melkor, pulling at the knot of Mairon’s tie and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. He kissed the exposed skin of Mairon’s collarbones, and Mairon groaned.

“Come on,” said Mairon. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Fuck yes,” said Melkor. He draped an arm over Mairon’s shoulders and pulled him toward the door. They walked together down the hall and to the elevator. The doors opened as they approached, and Thuringwethil stepped out, looking grim.

“We have a problem,” she said, walking toward them.

“What’s up?” said Mairon.

“Don’t encourage her,” said Melkor.

“It’s Formenos,” she said.

The mention of the Finwions was enough to catch even Melkor’s attention. “What are those shitheads up to now?” he said.

“They’ve filed an injunction,” she said. “Against Silmaril.”

“How the fuck can they do that?” Melkor demanded.

“I don’t have the specifics yet,” she said, looking harassed. “All I know is that it got filed early this morning and signed this afternoon.”

“They can’t do that,” said Melkor. He was fuming, his hands balled into fists at his side.

“They can,” said Thuringwethil, “and they did.”

“Well undo it,” he spat.

“I can’t,” she spat back. “The best I can do is file for a review, or a stay, or something, but I can’t do anything until I figure out on what fucking grounds they filed this shit in the first place.”

“Fuck,” said Melkor.

Mairon pressed the button for the elevator, which was already on their floor. The doors

opened, and he stepped inside.

“Where are you going?” Melkor demanded.

“To find out what Formenos is up to,” said Mairon. “You coming or not?”

Thuringwethil stepped into the elevator, folding her arms across her chest and tapping her foot impatiently. Mairon held his hand across the door of the elevator, holding it in place. “Well?” he said.

Melkor gave a wordless shout of frustration and kicked the wall. “Fuck,” he said, hopping on one foot. He hobbled into the elevator and looked first at Thuringwethil, then at Mairon. “Not a goddamn word,” he growled.

Chapter End Notes

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Play the Game

Chapter Summary

Angband looks for ammo to throw at that pesky injunction. Let's see what they come up with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey asshat,” said Gothmog.

Mairon woke with a start, pushing himself up from the desk with enough force that his chair rolled back into the wall behind him. “Jesus,” he said, blinking blearily at Gothmog. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Don’t sleep in your office,” said Gothmog, “and I won’t have to scare the piss out of you in the morning.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” said Mairon.

“Could’ve fooled me,” said Gothmog. He walked closer to the desk and tossed a bag at Mairon. “Here,” he said.

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Gothmog,” said Mairon.

“Eat fast,” said Gothmog. “Thil and Melkor are both looking for you.”

“Great,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. He unwrapped a warm egg and cheese sandwich and began to eat, leaning back in his chair and yawning.

“Cute,” said Gothmog, wrinkling his nose at the half-chewed food in Mairon’s mouth.

“Sorry,” said Mairon. “I was up all night trying to alter the already-fudged Silmaril documentation.”

“Bad luck, huh?” said Gothmog sympathetically. “I wouldn’t have pegged Fëanor as one to leave a paper trail.”

“It’s not uncommon,” said Mairon. “Lots of people carry notebooks to jot down their ideas. If you’re on the bus and you have an idea for a new plane, you don’t want to risk forgetting it before you get home, right?”

“Do you have one?”

“Absolutely not,” said Mairon. “And this is why.”

“God, you’re paranoid.”

“You say paranoid,” said Mairon, “I say prepared. You’re going to thank me for it someday.”

“Someday?” said Gothmog. “Shit. I can think of like, three examples off the top of my head where your borderline-obsessive planning has saved our asses. I might make fun of you, but I’m sure as hell not complaining.”

Mairon crumpled the empty paper in his hands and tossed it into the trash. Then he groaned, rolling his chair forward and pressing his face into the cool wood of the desk. “I should’ve seen this coming,” he said, banging his head lightly on the desk. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Actually,” he said, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets so hard that he saw stars, “I did. Back when the whole Silmaril thing went down, I thought, ‘You know, it’s really gonna suck if Formenos has paper notes stashed anywhere’.”

“What could you have done?” said Gothmog placatingly.

“Something,” said Mairon, folding his arms on the desk and laying his head down on them. “I don’t know. Everything just got so complicated.”

“You can’t expect to do everything, you know.”

“Why not?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” said Gothmog. “Because you’re just one guy? Because you’re human? You can’t see everything all the time.”

“Not with that attitude,” said Mairon darkly.

“Jesus,” said Gothmog. “Didn’t miss your insane fetish for self-flagellation. It’s kind of been M.I.A., what with you making out with Melkor like a couple of horny teenagers all over the building.”

“How would you know?”

Gothmog pointed at his ID badge, which was clipped to his beltloop. “Head of security,” he said, reading the title from the badge. “I have access to the security footage.”

“Didn’t know you got off on voyeurism,” said Mairon.

“It’s my job to watch security footage,” said Gothmog. “It’s not my fault you two have the discretion of, well, a couple of horny teenagers.”

“Why are teenagers the only ones who get to be horny?” Mairon complained.

“They’re not,” said Gothmog. “It’s just that, at a certain point, most of us learn how to sneak around a little better, I guess.”

“Who’s sneaking?”

“Not you two.”

“Not anymore,” said Mairon. “Which, I have to admit, is kind of nice.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Gothmog. He craned his neck to look out into the hall. “Better

get ready,” said Gothmog. “Here they come.”

Gothmog sauntered out into the hall. “Boss,” he said, nodding at Melkor. “Boss lady,” he said, nodding to Thuringwethil.

“What’s up, Gothmog?” said Melkor.

“Eh,” said Gothmog. “Not much. Just feeding our favorite little workaholic.”

“I’m glad someone remembers to,” said Thuringwethil.

“I can hear you,” said Mairon.

“So?” said Melkor. He walked the rest of the way into Mairon’s office. “For the love of God, please tell me you found some way for us to get around this injunction.”

“Thil and I talked about it last night,” said Mairon.

“We have two options,” said Thuringwethil, striding into Mairon’s office and setting a tall paper cup of coffee onto his desk.

“Hey,” said Melkor. “Where’s mine?”

Thuringwethil handed her cup to Melkor, frowning. “Option one,” she said, “is to challenge the validity of the papers the injunction is based on.”

“Pass,” said Melkor.

“Option two,” said Thuringwethil, ignoring him, “is to argue that Fëanor just happened to have an idea for a project we were already working on.”

“How likely is that?”

“It happens,” said Mairon. “People working on the same problem come up with similar solutions.”

“Option one sounds hard,” said Melkor, drinking his coffee. “I mean, we don’t even know what’s in those papers.”

“Yet,” said Mairon.

“Any chance we can find out?”

“I’m working on it,” said Mairon.

“Option two sounds doable,” said Melkor.

“Maybe,” said Thuringwethil, taking the coffee from his hand. “Maybe not. Unfortunately, option two also kind of hinges on what’s in those papers.”

“And the dates on them,” said Mairon. “If any.”

“Dates can be hard to prove,” said Thuringwethil. “Especially if it’s on paper. I mean, a digital file is going to have a time stamp on it. A scribble in a notebook probably doesn’t. Even if it does, it may not hold up in court. It’s very circumstantial.”

“We need those papers,” said Melkor.

“Working on it,” said Mairon again.

“How?” said Melkor. “It’s not like you can hack it the way you did with their other files. We’re talking about hard copies.”

“For the last time,” said Mairon. “I’m working on it.”

“Well, work faster,” said Melkor irritably. “We’ve shifted a lot of resources into the Silmaril project. I’m really not trying to waste all that effort.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I know.” He tipped his head back, letting the last few drops of coffee drip onto his tongue. “Any more coffee?” he asked, looking at Thuringwethil.

“Maybe wait for that one to kick in,” she said. “It’s only been like, four minutes.”

“Trust me,” said Mairon. “I know exactly how much coffee I need to function during the day. Thanks to your contribution, I’m about a third of the way to my mid-morning binge level.”

“That cannot be healthy,” she said.

“We all have our vices,” said Mairon.

“You should pick up a more interesting one,” said Melkor.

“Don’t listen to him,” said Thuringwethil.

“Do I ever?” asked Mairon.

“Hey,” said Melkor, scowling at him.

“And anyway, I don’t have to worry about myself,” said Mairon. “I have friends to do it for me.”

“A true group effort,” said Thuringwethil. She looked up at the clock and sighed. “Shit. I need more hours in a day.”

“Don’t we all,” said Melkor.

“I have to go make some calls,” she said. “Let me know if anything changes.”

“Will do,” said Mairon. He yawned again. “I really need more coffee,” he said. He pushed himself up from his chair and headed for the door. Melkor followed him.

“What we need,” said Melkor, “is a plan of attack.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I’m—”

“I swear to God, if you say you’re working on it, I’m gonna—”

“Sorry,” said Mairon. He leaned back against the counter in the break room and rubbed hard at his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I’ve just been going in a million directions lately. I’m going to fix this. I promise.”

“I know,” said Melkor. “I have absolute confidence in you.”

Mairon snorted. “That makes one of us,” he said. He yawned again and reached up to pull the elastic from his hair, which tumbled down in red-gold shambles around his face. Melkor grinned, and Mairon scowled suspiciously at him. “What?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” said Melkor. “You’re just cute, is all.”

“I’m a mess,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes and gathering his hair in his hands.

Melkor kissed him, and Mairon abandoned the effort to corral his hair. “We all are,” said Melkor. “It kind of goes with the territory around here.”

“You’re ruining me,” said Mairon, laying a hand on Melkor’s hip and pulling him closer.

“How’s that?” said Melkor, letting himself be pulled forward. He laid one hand on the counter and buried the other in Mairon’s hair, curling it gently around his fingers.

“I used to have focus,” said Mairon. Melkor kissed his neck, and he shivered. “Discipline,” said Mairon. Melkor took his hand from the counter and ran it up the smooth muscle of Mairon’s chest. “Self-control,” said Mairon, his grip tightening on Melkor’s waist.

“You still have all of those things,” said Melkor. “But you don’t need them all the time, you know.” He tugged, gently but insistently, at Mairon’s hair. Mairon let his head fall back, and Melkor nipped at the taut skin below Mairon’s jaw. Mairon gasped, pulling at Melkor’s hips to bring them flush.

“You’re an instigator,” said Mairon.

“I’ve been called worse,” said Melkor.

“Like an exhibitionist?” said Gothmog from behind them.

“Jesus,” said Mairon, jumping. He twisted out from under Melkor and shot Gothmog a look of annoyance. “Not cool, dude.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, turning and glaring at Gothmog. “You fucking creep.”

“Creep? Are you kidding me?”

“Call me old-fashioned, but I’d say watching us make out from the doorway falls smack dab in the middle of creep territory.”

“It’s the break room,” said Gothmog. “If you don’t want people to see you making out, try a room with a door.”

“I don’t give a shit if anyone sees,” said Melkor. “It’s the interruption that pisses me off.”

“Jesus,” said Mairon, gathering his hair into a ponytail. “Eighty million things on my to-do list, and I’m in here dicking around.” He looked longingly at the coffee pot, which was in the process of filling. “I have to get back to work,” he said. “Can one of you bring me a coffee when it’s done?” Without waiting for an answer, he strode away from them, down the hall toward his office.

Melkor groaned and shot Gothmog a look of disgust. “Blue balls,” he said, glaring at his friend. “They’re real.”

“Doors,” said Gothmog, without an ounce of remorse. “They’re real.”

“Fuck you,” said Melkor.

“I’m flattered,” said Gothmog, “but also not really into dicks. Thanks, though.”

“Is that a comment on my genitalia or my personality?”

“Both,” said Gothmog. “Look, I know you get some weird kick out of distracting Mairon, but you might want to leave him alone today. We’re in some deep shit if we don’t get this injunction thing figured out.”

“Objectively,” said Melkor, “I understand what you’re saying. In practice, though…”

“Save you from yourself,” said Gothmog. “Got it.”

Melkor grinned. “You know me so well.”

“I’ve been your best friend for, like, ten years. I know what to expect.”

“Alright then, best friend. Distract me.”

“Come on,” said Gothmog. “Let’s go grab something to eat.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Melkor. “Then what?”

“Who knows?” said Gothmog. “You never seem to have a problem finding something to get up to.”

“This is true,” said Melkor. “Come on,” he said, heading for the doorway. “Let’s go see what we can get into.”

“God,” said Thuringwethil, wiggling into a more comfortable position. “This was such a good idea.”

“I know, right?” said Mairon.

“I have to hand it to Melkor,” she said, running her hand along the smooth leather of the couch cushion. “This is genius.”

“Vultures,” said Melkor. “The lot of you.”

“It’s almost too comfortable,” said Mairon, ignoring him.

“I know,” she said. “It makes you want to take a nap.”

“It’s an exercise in self-control,” said Mairon.

“You’re a fucking weirdo,” said Melkor.

“If it is,” said Thuringwethil to Mairon, “then I’m failing miserably.”

“Hello,” said Melkor, annoyed. “Am I like, invisible or something?”

“I wish,” said Thuringwethil.

“You invade my office,” said Melkor, “sit on my goddamn couch, and this is how you

treat me?” He scoffed. “Ingrate.”

“Right back at ya, pal.”

“Get comfy, Thil,” he said. “Just know that we fucked on that couch. Right where you’re sitting.”

“Don’t care,” she said, tucking her feet up underneath her.

“We did not,” said Mairon, affronted.

“Fine,” said Melkor. “But we’re going to.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “Okay.”

“He’s probably right,” said Gothmog, who was sitting in the extra chair at Melkor’s desk. “You fuck everywhere else.”

“We do not,” said Mairon. “And anyway, can we not talk about my sex life?”

“Sure,” said Melkor. “Let’s talk about mine. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve gotten laid?”

“Twelve hours?” Thuringwethil guessed.

“Nah,” said Gothmog. “I’m going with eight.”

“Fourteen,” said Melkor.

“Keep it up,” said Mairon. “It’ll be a lot longer.”

“The thing with threats,” said Melkor, “is that you really need to be able to follow them through.”

“Dude,” said Gothmog, “you’re talking to Mairon.”

“Shit,” said Melkor. “You’re right. I take it back.”

“Too late,” said Mairon.

“Congratulations,” said Thuringwethil. “You played yourself.”

“This is not my fucking day,” said Melkor.

“It’s not over yet,” said Mairon. He shut his laptop with a click and gathered his papers from where he had scattered them on the couch cushions.

“Where are you going?”

“To see if I can’t get us some ammunition,” said Mairon.

“You’re not, like, an action hero movie,” said Melkor. “Just say what you mean, dammit.”

“I’ll be back in two hours,” he said, and then he was gone, disappearing around the corner and down the hall toward the elevator.

“For once,” Melkor said, “I’d like to know what the fuck he’s up to.”

“I don’t,” said Thuringwethil firmly.

“Really?”

“Not even a little.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she said, “I have a distinct feeling that it’s illegal.”

“Dude, if you have a problem with illegal, then you’re working at the wrong company.”

“It’s not the illegal I have a problem with, *per se*,” she said. “It’s the fact that I might have to come up with a way to defend said illegal shit that bothers me.”

“Lucky for you,” said Melkor, “if anything illegal does happen, it’s Mairon who’s doing it.”

“Does that make it better?”

“Hell yeah it does,” said Gothmog. “Mairon is way less likely to get caught than, say, Melkor.”

“I feel like I should be insulted,” said Melkor. “But, you know, it’s totally true.”

“On the plus side,” said Gothmog, “at least you’ll know either way in two hours.”

“You’re optimistic,” said Thuringwethil.

“No,” said Gothmog. “I just know Mairon. He can’t resist a good gloat when he does something clever. If you don’t hear anything, assume nothing illegal happened.”

“Or,” said Thuringwethil sourly, “that he failed.”

Gothmog laughed. “Good one, Thil.”

“It’s been known to happen,” she said.

“I can probably count Mairon’s failures on one hand,” said Gothmog.

“That’s the attitude that gets us in trouble,” said Thuringwethil. “We need a little less arrogance and a little more caution.”

“Caution is for losers,” said Melkor. “There’s no room for losers in Angband.”

“You are a monumental pain in my ass,” said Thuringwethil. “You know that?”

“Yes,” said Melkor. “But you love me.”

“I like you,” Thuringwethil corrected. “Most days.”

“And besides,” said Melkor, ignoring her, “what would you even do without all our messes to clean up?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Read? Go to the gym? Probably live ten years longer?”

“Die,” Melkor answered himself, disregarding her answer completely. “Of boredom.”

“Why do I even talk?”

“I wonder that sometimes.”

“Okay,” she said, rolling her eyes and standing up. “I’ve reached my morning quota for dealing with your bullshit.”

“Morning quota, huh? Does your tolerance, like, reset after lunch or something?”

“I don’t think you want to find out,” she said. “I’ve only had one cup of coffee today.”

“Better back off, man,” said Gothmog. “Under-caffeinated Thil is much scarier than under-caffeinated Mairon.”

“Good point,” said Melkor. “I’m not nearly drunk enough to poke that particular bear.”

“Drunk enough?” said Thuringwethil. “That implies you’re some level of drunk right now.”

“Yes,” said Melkor. “It does imply that.”

“Wait,” she said. “Are you—you know what? Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Good choice,” said Melkor.

“Okay, for real this time. I need a break from you two.”

“Rude,” said Gothmog. “Why do you have to lump me in with this jerk?”

“Habit,” she said. She looked at her watch. “I have to get back to work. Come get me if you hear from Mai. Not before, unless someone’s dying or something.”

“God,” Melkor complained, “she’s so—hang on, she’s gone, right?”

Gothmog craned his neck out the open office door. “All clear,” he said.

“God, she’s uptight,” said Melkor.

“You’re such a coward,” said Gothmog.

“You want to say that to her face?”

“Hell no. I still have a bruise from the last time she hit me.”

“I’m not surprised. She does like, krav maga or something.”

“Of course she does.”

“So,” said Melkor, “I guess we have two hours to kill.”

“Looks like it.”

“Got any plans?”

“I mean, I should probably go check in on our new security hires. They’re in the process of being trained.”

“Or,” said Melkor, “you could come down to the test hangar with me. They’re supposed to be destroying a couple old prototypes this afternoon.”

“Controlled demolition?” said Gothmog.

“Preferably without the control,” said Melkor.

“Sweet,” said Gothmog. “Let’s go.”

“Here,” said Mairon, throwing a paper-clipped stack of papers onto Melkor’s desk.

“What’s this?”

“Exactly what you asked for,” said Mairon, flopping down on the couch. “The papers mentioned in the injunction.”

“Fuck yes,” said Melkor, picking them up. He took off the paperclip and riffled through them. “You said two hours, you know.”

“I know,” said Mairon. He had stretched out on the couch, his eyes closed.

“It’s been four.”

“I know,” said Mairon again.

“I’m not used to you missing your deadlines,” said Melkor.

Mairon opened one eye and managed a glare. “One,” he said, “it was an estimate, not a deadline. And two, the ridiculous *quid pro quo* they insisted on took longer than I expected.”

“*Quid pro quo*, huh?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Do I even want to know what you were doing for the last four hours?”

“Probably,” said Mairon. “You’re like, the nosiest person alive.”

“Can’t really argue that point.”

“Not convincingly,” said Mairon.

“Seriously, though,” said Melkor. “How’d you get this stuff?”

Mairon yawned. “Networking,” he said.

“You’re being purposely cryptic, aren’t you?”

“No,” said Mairon, and he sighed. “I’m being involuntarily exhausted. Sorry. I was being serious, though. About the networking. Or a version of it, anyway.”

“Last I checked, networking is the boring chit-chat bullshit the geezers do at academic conferences and business meetings. I try to avoid it.”

“It can be boring,” said Mairon, “but it has its uses.”

“Such as?”

“Such as meeting people on the inside of Formenos,” he said. “People who happen to have enough of a beef with Fëanor and his spawn that they don’t mind slipping me copies of some important documents.”

“On the one hand,” said Melkor, “I like the way you think. On the other, that sounds a lot like leaving loose ends.”

“The trick,” said Mairon, “is to do your research. I don’t use an informant unless I have good enough dirt on them to guarantee they aren’t going to turn back.”

“I think you missed your calling,” said Melkor. “As a spy, maybe—or, no. Wait. A Bond villain.”

“Thil seems to think I should’ve been a cult leader.”

“I wouldn’t rule it out.”

Mairon laughed. “Fortunately for you jerks, I’m perfectly content to be an overworked, underpaid engineer.”

“I’ll give you overworked,” said Melkor. “But underpaid?”

“My salary was calculated for a forty-hour work week,” said Mairon. “I haven’t worked one of those since...I don’t know, ever? And I feel like it’s way past time to revisit my overtime compensation.”

“I direct all contract disputes to my lawyer.”

“Of course you do.”

“Seriously, though,” said Melkor. “Did you read this stuff?”

“Yes,” said Mairon. “Several times.”

“I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

“Me either.”

“So what’s the verdict?”

“I’m not sure,” said Mairon. “I need to talk to Thil.”

“She’s in her office, I think.”

Mairon shook his head. “I checked. I think she left for the day already.”

“Leavin’ early, huh?”

“It’s seven o’clock.”

“Oh, shit. Really?”

“Careful,” said Mairon, grinning. “We’re starting to rub off on you.”

“God, I hope not.”

“It might not be such a bad thing.”

Melkor shook his head violently. “Nope. Uh-uh. Incorrect.”

Mairon shrugged. “Whatever you say.” He leaned back into the couch, resting his head on the top of the cushion and yawning. “I need to call Thil.”

“You want to talk to her tonight?”

“Might as well. It’ll drive me crazy all night if I don’t.”

“I guarantee you she’s not coming back in.”

“I know,” said Mairon. “I’m going to go to her.” He looked at his watch and sighed. “I better go. Last bus runs in eight minutes.”

“Ew,” said Melkor, wrinkling his nose. “Who takes the bus?”

“Um,” said Mairon, raising an eyebrow. “Me? Every day?”

“Jesus,” said Melkor. “Really?”

“How do you think I get here?”

“In a car,” said Melkor. “Like a human being.”

“Cars are death traps,” said Mairon. “Besides, I like the bus. I get a ton of work done on the commute.”

“Yeah, and probably also like, herpes or something.”

Mairon snorted. “Have you ever even been on a bus?”

“No,” said Melkor. “I try to avoid contact with the plebian masses.”

“Alright, your highness,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes. “I have to go.”

“I’ll drive you,” said Melkor.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. I’m just really fuckin’ nice.”

Mairon snorted. “And humble. Anyway, are you sure about this? I really don’t mind to take the bus.”

“It’s fine,” said Melkor. “Anyway, I’m going to need to know what kind of scheme you two come up with. I might as well find out now.”

“Fair enough,” said Mairon.

“Did you eat yet?” Melkor asked, grabbing his keys from the desk. “Who am I kidding? Of course you didn’t.”

“I was getting to it,” said Mairon.

“Yeah,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “Right. Decide what you want, and we’ll pick it

up on the way.”

“It can wait.”

“No, it can’t. Besides, I’ve learned from experience that if you’re going to show up after hours on Thil’s doorstep with problems, you sure as hell better have food.”

“You know,” said Thuringwethil, “I ought to be mad at you.”

“But you can’t be,” said Melkor, grinning. “Not with tacos.”

“I hate that you’re right.”

“Told you,” said Melkor, winking at Mairon. “I’ve had a lot of time to figure Thuringwethil out. Hell of a learning curve with that one.”

“Right,” said Thuringwethil. “Like it’s a steep curve to figure out I don’t want you showing up here at three a.m. to tell me about the stupid shit you just did.”

“In my defense, you’re the one who’s always begging me to tell you asap when I do something questionable.”

“I guess the larger point is that I’d rather you didn’t do the stupid shit in the first place.”

“Reasonable goals, Thil.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Anyway, I assume since you brought me a peace offering of tacos that you have some problem you want me to weigh in on.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Mairon.

“It’s a little late for that. You’re already here.”

“Sorry, Thil.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve worked with you for six years,” she said. “With him,” she continued, nodding at Melkor, “for ten. I kind of expect it. What’s the crisis?”

“Mairon has spies,” said Melkor.

“He has what now?”

“They’re not spies,” said Mairon. “They’re strategically-placed contacts, some of whom happen to be in Formenos.”

“I don’t know, man,” said Melkor. “Sounds like spies to me.”

“I already don’t like the sound of this,” said Thuringwethil.

“Relax,” said Mairon. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You sound like Melkor,” she said. “Right before something goes really catastrophically wrong.”

“No offense,” said Mairon, “but I have way more foresight than Melkor does.”

“Hey,” said Melkor, registering his obligatory offense.

“It’s a fair point,” said Thuringwethil. “Mairon does tend to think things through.”

“And I don’t?”

“No,” said Thuringwethil and Mairon in unison.

“That might be fair,” Melkor conceded.

“Anyway,” said Thuringwethil, turning her attention back to Mairon, “what did you do?”

“I got a copy of the papers they based the injunction on,” he said.

“Give,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Where’s all that outrage now, huh?” said Melkor.

“I’m saving it,” she said, “for when the shit inevitably hits the fan.”

“Don’t worry,” said Mairon. “Like you said, I tend to plan things.”

“Don’t jinx us,” she said. She skimmed the pages in her hand. “Interesting,” she said. “They look like diary entries.”

“Something like that,” said Mairon. “He probably had a whole book of ideas, just jotted down as they came to him. Some he moved on, some he didn’t. Like I said before, it’s not uncommon.”

“I quit doing it,” said Melkor, “for exactly this reason.”

“I mean, on the one hand,” said Mairon, “it can be a good thing. It’s a good record for things like patents.”

“But on the other hand,” said Melkor, “it can also be a huge liability. Case in point.”

“Works out for us,” said Mairon. “Although, to be honest, I’m not a hundred percent sure what to do with it. I mean, our best option is probably to claim ‘same problem, same solution’, right?”

“What, that we just both happened to come up with the same fucking program?” said Melkor. Mairon shrugged. “It’s a stretch, and you know it.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“That’s usually your area, isn’t it?”

“Do I have to come up with a solution for everything?”

“Why do you think I hired you?”

“We might be able to argue the dates on these,” said Thuringwethil. “It’s handwritten, so it’s not airtight.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Mairon. “They can argue for the dates based on the other notes in this book. If they have lab notes or program files for the projects before and after this,

they can give a pretty good estimate of when Silmaril came into existence.”

“Alright,” said Thuringwethil, sighing and running a hand through her hair. “So: same problem, same solution.”

“It’s our best option,” said Mairon. “We have the best chance of proving it.”

“How good a chance is that?” Melkor asked.

“It could go either way, honestly.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“I guess,” said Melkor, though he didn’t sound particularly thrilled.

“Okay,” said Thuringwethil, gathering up the papers into a stack. “I’ll get started on the paperwork.”

“Let me know if you need documentation,” said Mairon.

“You know I will.”

Mairon looked at Melkor. “Can you give me a ride home?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Melkor. “But it’ll cost you.”

Mairon turned to Thuringwethil. “Thil, what are the odds you want to drive me home?”

“Slim to none,” she said.

“You’re stuck with me,” said Melkor. He grinned and threw an arm around Mairon’s shoulders. “This is going to be fun.” He pulled Mairon out the door and headed toward the car.

Thuringwethil watched them go, standing on her front porch. “Idiots,” she said, under her breath. Still, she smiled, and she waved as they drove past.

Chapter End Notes

Come visit me on tumblr! @swilmarillion

Catch Hell Blues

Chapter Summary

Turns out injunction is just another way of saying 'shit's about to hit the fan'.

Chapter Notes

FYI I posted some random FYD-verse stuff to a separate story called [Semi-Charmed Life](#). It's all been posted previously on tumblr, so nothing new (yet) if you follow me there. Check it out if you want some holiday shenanigans and (hopefully soon) also some origin stories for these jerks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was six o'clock in the morning, and Mairon was sitting on a bench at the bus stop, a stack of papers on his lap. He read through the reports, alternately making notes in the margins and tapping the end of his pen thoughtfully against his front teeth. There were several people waiting with him, most silently nursing large cups of coffee and looking at their phones. Mairon had taken over more than half the bench, his bag and papers spread out on every surface within reach. Several of the tired commuters shot him dirty looks, longing for the space he had commandeered for his work. Mairon, absorbed in his work, didn't notice.

Mairon heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. From the tone of the engine, he could tell it was not the bus, and so he ignored it. He was vaguely aware of people speaking, voices raised against the pervasive din of morning traffic. He frowned, hunching lower in his seat and trying to tune out the noise. Someone tapped his shoulder, and he turned to look at the woman standing to his left. "Yes?" he said, his tone clipped, irritated.

"I think this lady is trying to talk to you," said the stranger, pointing at the car pulled up at the curb.

Mairon followed her gaze to find Thuringwethil, sitting in her car. "Jesus," she said, rolling her eyes. "Finally."

"What are you doing here?" he said, looking around. "This is way out of your way."

"Looking for you," she said. "Get in."

Mairon opened his mouth to argue, saw her face, and reconsidered. He gathered up his papers, shoved them into his bag, and got up. There was a smattering of applause from the commuters, several of whom moved to take his seat. Mairon flipped them off over his shoulder and got into the car. Thuringwethil pulled away from the curb and accelerated through the intersection.

"What's up, Thil?" Mairon asked, buckling his seatbelt.

“I think we have a problem,” she said. She looked harried, eyes darting between her mirrors as she wove through the thick morning traffic.

“What is it?” he asked, wincing at the horn blast that answered Thuringwethil’s cut across traffic.

“I got a call this morning,” she said, swerving to avoid a turning car. “From someone at the courthouse. She wanted to give me a heads-up.”

“About what?”

“The patent,” she said. “It’s been put on hold.”

“What?” He turned to stare at her, as though hoping she was making a joke.

“You heard me,” she said, irritated.

“Why?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” she said. “My source didn’t have much information.”

“We got preliminary papers,” he said.

“It’s preliminary,” she said. “Which means still under review.”

“I know,” he said. “So why would they stop the review?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice rising. She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “I don’t know,” she said again, her voice much calmer. “But it can’t be good.”

“Jesus,” said Mairon, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I slept for like, three and half hours—if that. I don’t need this right now.”

“Neither do I,” she said sourly. “You didn’t hear anything, did you? From inside Formenos?”

“No,” he said. “Not yet, anyway. I can ask, but it’ll have to wait. I only speak to them in person.”

“Smart,” said Thuringwethil. “Less evidence that way.”

“Exactly.”

“In the meantime,” she said, “let’s hit the courthouse. I want to see if we can find out why the fuck they’re putting the brakes on that patent.”

“Maybe it’ll be something simple for once,” said Mairon, sighing tiredly and leaning his cheek against the cool glass of the window.

“It’s Angband,” said Thuringwethil, scowling at the traffic ahead of her. “Nothing is ever simple for us.”

“What the fuck do you mean ‘challenged’?” Melkor demanded, glaring up at Thuringwethil.

“What am I?” she retorted. “The fucking dictionary?”

“How the fuck can they challenge our patent? We have approval.”

“Preliminary approval,” said Mairon. “It wasn’t official yet.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” Melkor snapped.

“Apparently not too obvious,” said Thuringwethil, “since you asked the goddamn question.”

“Easy, you two,” said Gothmog.

“How the fuck are they doing this?” Melkor asked, ignoring him. “What are their grounds?”

“The hold on the patent is coming from the injunction,” said Thuringwethil. “Since they’re arguing we stole their intellectual property, it puts the validity of the patent filings in question.”

“I thought the whole point of the goddamn patent was to establish our claim on Silmaril.”

“It was,” said Mairon.

“Then why the fuck are we not looking at patent-backed ownership of the stupid thing?”

“Because,” said Thuringwethil, “we have a whole shit-ton of circumstantial evidence piled against us. They leveled the theft charges, which already put us under investigation. Add these papers and they get an injunction. Put that stuff together, and there’s enough grounds to put a hold on everything Silmaril-related.”

“That doesn’t tell me jack-shit about the patent.”

“We weren’t fast enough,” said Mairon.

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” said Thuringwethil. “Even if we had the patent in-hand, this injunction would’ve put it on hold.”

“You don’t know,” said Melkor. “Having the patent could’ve been our out.”

“It wouldn’t have been,” she said.

“You don’t know,” Melkor snapped.

“I do,” she said. “I’m the one with the law degree.”

Melkor glared at her and rounded on Mairon. “Whether it would’ve helped or not,” he said, “we should’ve had the patent by now.”

“I know,” said Mairon.

“So why don’t we?”

“We needed documentation,” said Mairon. “What we had, had to be altered. The rest, we had to make up. It just took too long.”

“That’s a shitty excuse,” said Melkor.

“I know,” said Mairon. He rubbed his temples with the tips of his fingers. He was nursing a nasty headache, born of sleep deprivation and caffeine withdrawal. The tone and volume of Melkor’s accusations grated on his already frayed nerves, and he closed his eyes.

“That was your job,” said Melkor. “I pulled resources from everywhere to get that shit done. It was our top priority.”

“Melkor,” said Thuringwethil reproachfully.

“I know,” said Mairon, still rubbing his temples.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you get it done?” Melkor spat

Mairon’s fingers stilled, and he opened his eyes. He looked up at Melkor, a mixture of affront and disbelief briefly flashing across his face. It was gone nearly as soon as it appeared, and he assumed a look of calm detachment. “You’re right,” he said, his voice flat. “It was my job, and I didn’t get it done. I’m sorry.” He stood up, turned away from them, and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Melkor demanded.

“It’s too late to stop it,” said Mairon, “but not too late to fix it.” Then he was gone, rounding the corner and disappearing into the hall.

“You’re a monumental asshole,” said Thuringwethil, glaring at Melkor. “You know that?”

“What?”

“You get mad about something out of our control, and you lash out,” she said. “And at Mairon, of all people!”

“I can’t yell at Mairon?”

“No,” she said. “You can’t. Not when he’s been running himself ragged trying to do what you asked him to do.”

“He’s always running himself ragged,” said Melkor. “And anyway, this is his job.”

“He’s an engineer,” said Thuringwethil. “His job is to write code for your fucking planes, not to clean up every stupid mess you make.”

“How is this a mess I made?” Melkor demanded.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” said Thuringwethil, pushing herself up out of her chair. “I need a break from you.”

“We’re in the middle of a conversation.”

“Not anymore,” she said. “You’re an asshole, Melkor. You do stupid shit and refuse to take responsibility for it—which, I know, is par for the dealing-with-Melkor course, but I draw the line at you taking out your self-inflicted frustrations on the one goddamn person trying to help you dig yourself out of the hole you crawled into.”

“Breathe, Thuringwethil,” said Melkor.

“Go fuck yourself,” said Thuringwethil, and she stalked out of the room, glaring over her shoulder at Melkor as she went.

“That’s the only fucking you’re going to get,” said Gothmog. “After the way you just talked to Mairon.” He laughed at his own joke, and Melkor punched him, scowling murderously.

“Hey,” said Melkor, ambling into Gothmog’s office, “you want to grab lunch?”

“Am I your first choice?” asked Gothmog. “Or are the other two still pissed at you?”

“Technically, only Thil was pissed at me,” said Melkor.

Gothmog snorted. “That’s what you think.”

“You think Mairon’s pissed at me?”

“I wish,” said Gothmog.

“Rude,” said Melkor.

“You’d deserve it,” said Gothmog.

“How so?”

“Because you’re an asshole,” said Gothmog. “Like Thil said, you got all pissy and screamed at Mairon for some shit that wasn’t even his fault.”

“First of all, I don’t get pissy. I was mad because, in case you missed it, we’re kind of getting stonewalled by those jackasses at Formenos. And anyway, give Mairon some credit. He doesn’t take that shit personally.”

“Do you even know Mairon?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He takes everything personally,” said Gothmog. “Literally everything. All that shit you said to him about not doing his job? Yeah, I guarantee you it’s been repeating on a loop in his head for the last four hours like some weird fuckin’ mantra while he passive-aggressively just, you know, does his actual job.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” said Melkor, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“Oh, it’s definitely ridiculous,” said Gothmog. “It’s also true.”

“You think Mairon is just sitting in his office thinking about me yelling at him?”

“Probably,” said Gothmog. “Although he might be in the lab by now.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I,” said Gothmog. “Look, for some unknown reason, Mairon really values what you say. He respects your opinion, especially about work stuff. If you tell him he’s doing a bad job, it just destroys his little perfectionist heart.”

“Shit,” said Melkor. “Really?”

“Yes, really. I mean, on the plus side, I bet he’s being stupidly over-productive right now. On the down side, it’s because he’s trying to prove he’s not a failure.”

“He’s not a failure,” said Melkor. “He knows that.”

“Yes,” said Gothmog. “But he also wants to know that you know it.”

“Shit,” said Melkor again. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I should talk to him, huh?”

“I’m not here to tell you what to do.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Shut up, dickhead. I’m trying to help you out.”

“I know,” said Melkor. “I know.” He groaned. “I don’t even know what the fuck to say.”

“You could apologize.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure that’s true.”

“You’re capable,” said Gothmog. “Just because you’ve never done it doesn’t mean you can’t.”

“You have no proof of that.”

“Fine,” said Gothmog. “Hope you enjoy not doing whatever the fuck it is I try to pretend I don’t know you two do in your spare time.”

Melkor gave a loud, exaggerated groan. “Fine,” he said, sighing as though the admission was an enormous imposition. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Now this,” said Gothmog, rubbing his hands together excitedly, “I have to see.”

Melkor punched him half-heartedly. “You’re an asshole, Gothmog.”

“Takes one to know one,” said Gothmog. He followed Melkor out into the hall, frowning as Melkor passed by the door of Mairon’s office and headed for the elevator. “I’m pretty sure he’s in his office,” said Gothmog.

“I know,” said Melkor. “I have an idea.”

Gothmog knew Melkor well enough to be wary of his ideas, but his curiosity was stronger. He shrugged and followed Melkor into the elevator.

Mairon typed a final command into his computer and sat back to survey his work. He worked his neck slowly around in a circle, wincing at the stretching of muscles that had been kept still too long. Someone knocked at his door, and he glanced up to see Melkor push it open. “Yes?” he said, watching Melkor make his way inside with Gothmog at his heels.

“What are you up to?” said Melkor, walking toward the desk.

“I’m working,” said Mairon. His words were carefully neutral, devoid of emotion. “You know,” he added, “doing my actual job.”

“Anything important?”

Mairon raised an eyebrow. “It’s all important,” he said. “Right, boss?” His face was utterly serious, and his words were ostensibly polite. Still, Melkor could sense the undercurrent of irritation, and he winced.

“About that,” he said, shifting his weight. “Look, you know this Formenos shit really grinds my gears. Every time we start to get something done, those dickhead Finwions try to fuck it up. It’s like, just drop it already, right?” Mairon said nothing, his face composed in a neutral expression that nonetheless managed to express how little patience he currently possessed. Melkor cleared his throat. “Anyway,” he said, “that shit I said to you about doing your job...I didn’t mean it. It’s just, you know, shit I say when I get pissed. I don’t mean it.”

“Is that right?”

“Come on, dude,” said Melkor. “You know you’re doing a great job.”

“Yes,” said Mairon. “I do.”

“Well, so do I,” said Melkor.

“Do you?” said Mairon. “Because at eight o’clock this morning, you didn’t seem so sure.”

“God,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “You live to make my life difficult, don’t you? Yes, Mairon, I know you’re doing your job, and I know you’re doing it really fucking well. Okay? Is that better?”

“I guess,” said Mairon, shrugging noncommittally.

“So we’re cool?”

Mairon frowned, tapping the side of his thumb against the edge of his desk. “Is that coffee for me?” he said.

“Yes,” said Melkor.

“Does it have cream and sugar?”

“Three of each.”

Mairon held out his hand, and Melkor handed the cup to him. “Alright,” said Mairon, taking off the lid and nodding in approval. “We’re cool.”

“Awesome,” said Melkor. He grinned, looking relieved. “I’m going to go get some work done,” he said, backpedaling toward the door. “I’ll catch you later, okay? We can grab dinner.”

“We’ll see,” said Mairon.

“Around six,” said Melkor, waving over his shoulder as he retreated back down the hall.

Mairon settled himself back into his chair, fitting the lid back on his cup before taking a sip. Gothmog eyed him disapprovingly. “Oh, relax,” said Mairon. “This is only my fourth one.”

“You shouldn’t let him get away with that,” said Gothmog.

“With what?”

“Those fake-ass apologies. He didn’t even say he was sorry.”

“No,” said Mairon, “but he obviously knows he was wrong.”

“There’s a big difference between knowing you’re wrong and actually apologizing for it.”

“I’m not sure that’s true when we’re talking about Melkor.”

“God,” said Gothmog, rolling his eyes. “You’re such an enabler.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog, “but my relationship with Melkor is a lot different than yours is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How do I say this politely?” Gothmog mused, tapping his index finger thoughtfully against the dip of his philtrum. “Oh, right. Melkor wants your dick; ergo, you have more leverage than I do.”

Mairon made a noise of disgust. “I regret asking.”

“You have the power,” said Gothmog, mock-serious. “And you know what they say comes with great power.”

“A bunch of jerks constantly asking you to do stuff?”

“Exactly. And this jerk is asking you to please, just once, make our boss act like a goddamn human being. If you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for the rest of us who suffer in silence.”

“God, I wish it was in silence.”

“Fine,” said Gothmog. “But don’t come crying to me when Melkor’s being a dickbag.”

“Done,” said Mairon. “Can I get the same promise out of you?”

“Sure,” said Gothmog. “As long as you don’t expect me to keep it.”

“Deal,” said Mairon. “Now if you’re done whining, I’d appreciate a little bit of that silence you were talking about. I have a lot to get done today.”

“I’ll take things Mairon says at least three times a day for four hundred, Alex.”

“And yet you’re still surprised.”

“I’m an optimist,” said Gothmog. “I like to think you’re going to take the stick out of your ass sometime.”

“I feel like there’s a dick joke in there somewhere.”

“And now I’m officially leaving,” said Gothmog.

“Mission accomplished,” said Mairon.

Gothmog flipped him off, and Mairon grinned, waving at Gothmog until he disappeared from view. Mairon looked around at the clutter of work on his desk and sighed. He picked up his coffee and took a sip, making a face. “Needs more sugar,” he muttered. He settled back in his chair, interlaced his fingers, and cracked his knuckles. Then, sighing resignedly, he began once more to type.

Melkor swiped his ID into the reader and pushed open the door to the lab, standing still in the doorway as a wall of sound rushed out to meet him. He stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind him, making his way toward the bench. “Finally,” said Melkor. “Some real music.”

Mairon jumped and turned to glare at Melkor. “Jesus,” he said reproachfully. “Sneak up on a guy.”

“I didn’t have to,” said Melkor. “Not with that shit turned up to nine billion.”

“Eighty-three,” said Mairon. “Which isn’t even that loud.”

“Loud enough,” said Melkor. “Is that *The Clash*?”

“*London Calling*,” said Mairon.

“Since when do you listen to actual music?”

“Since always,” said Mairon.

“Dude, last week you were listening to like, hair bands or some shit.”

“It was *Foreigner*,” said Mairon.

“Exactly.”

“Which is not a hair band.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“What, like it’s hard?”

“Dick,” said Melkor, punching him in the arm.

Mairon rubbed at the spot, wincing. “What are you doing here this early anyway?”

“Early?” said Melkor, raising an eyebrow. “It’s noon.”

“Yes,” said Mairon, “but it’s Saturday. I haven’t seen you here on a Saturday since...” He trailed off, thinking.

“Probably like, four years ago.”

“Right,” said Mairon. “When you came in here and started shredding a bunch of evidence in your insider trading case.”

“Man,” said Melkor, grinning nostalgically. “Thil was so pissed.”

“I wonder why?” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I was helping,” said Melkor.

“Helping the prosecution, maybe.”

“Whatever,” said Melkor. “It’s over.”

“Thank God,” said Mairon. “That was kind of a miserable three years.”

“Yeah, no shit. Prison sucks.”

“Oh, please,” said Mairon. “You were barely even in real prison.”

“I was so,” said Melkor indignantly.

“They have a travelling squash team,” said Mairon.

“Exactly,” said Melkor. “Do you know what it was like, living with all those fucking yuppies? Torture, I tell you.”

“Seriously, though,” said Mairon. “What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” said Melkor, shrugging. “I was kind of working at home, but I was bored.”

“So you came to work? Who are you?”

“I wonder that myself sometimes lately,” said Melkor. “I don’t know. I figured I’d come see what you were up to.”

Mairon sighed. “Trying to dig us out of this injunction mess,” he said.

“Making any headway?”

“I guess,” said Mairon, though he didn’t sound particularly enthusiastic. “I’m trying to pull some stuff together to counter their challenge.”

“Sounds promising.”

“In theory,” he said. “The problem is, I already pulled a lot of that stuff to get the preliminary acceptance.”

“I don’t follow.”

“They already have a lot of the documentation. They’ve seen our evidence, and they don’t think it’s enough.”

“So give them new information.”

“I don’t have any,” said Mairon. “Nothing meaningful, anyway. And normally I’d just doctor up some of the importance stuff, but—”

“They already have it,” said Melkor, nodding. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “We’re kind of stuck.”

“God, that sucks.”

“Tell me about it.”

Melkor rubbed the palms of his hands roughly over his face, and he sighed. “How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “A couple hours, maybe.”

“That means five or six,” said Melkor.

“What time is it again?”

“Time for you to take a break,” said Melkor firmly.

“Uh, hello? Did you not hear anything I said?”

“That’s kind of my point,” said Melkor. “You sound stressed out.”

“To be fair,” said Mairon, “that’s kind of my default state.”

“You should work on that.”

“I’ll put it on my list,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“Bump it to the top,” said Melkor. “Here, let me help.” He grabbed Mairon’s arm and pulled him away from the bench.

“But I’m in the middle of—”

“Don’t care,” said Melkor. “We’re taking a break.”

“What exactly are you taking a break from?”

“Your shitty taste in music,” said Melkor. He opened the lab door and pushed Mairon through.

“You’re a jerk,” said Mairon, grinning.

“And you like me,” said Melkor. “So what’s that say about you?”

“Nothing good,” said Mairon.

“Probably not,” said Melkor. He threw his arm around Mairon’s shoulder and pulled him toward the elevator. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go find something to eat.” Mairon put his arm around Melkor’s waist and let himself be pulled into the elevator.

“Alright,” he said. “But it has to be something quick. I wasn’t kidding about having stuff to do.”

Melkor laughed. “Oh, honey,” he said. “You really ought to know better by now.” Mairon sighed, dutiful and long-suffering. Melkor pulled him against his chest, and Mairon relented, leaning back against him. Melkor pushed the button for the lobby; the doors closed, and they disappeared.

“And now,” said Mairon, looking around sternly at the gathered employees, “on to item three on the agenda: company resource use policy. I thought this had been made perfectly clear at last quarter’s meeting, but apparently some of you are still struggling with this concept. Company resources are for business-use only. Repeat that to me.” He waited, listening as the thirty-odd scientists repeated his words back to him. “Company resources,” said Mairon, “can be defined as anything being provided, created, supplied, et cetera by the company, that is, Angband. These include, but are not limited to: computers, email servers, storage space, and yes, both wired and wireless internet access. I know you think no one sees your browsing history, but I am looking at a report,” he said, holding up the paper in front of him for emphasis, “logging visits to online gambling services, searches for DUI lawyers, a Google image search for ‘raccoon feet’ and seven separate porn sites. If all that wasn’t bad enough, one of you morons had the nerve to browse through paid upgrades for Farmville. Let that sink in for a minute. First of all, I had no idea that crap even still existed. Second of all, I am utterly amazed that anyone, let alone a group of people who seem to be trying for the world record in overtime payouts, would want to devote whatever little bit of free time they manage to scrape together in a day to playing a fake farming game. More than that, I can’t believe that anyone would pay real, actual money to get ahead in what I can only describe as world’s most annoying gaming fad. If you have enough money to buy virtual vegetable seeds, then you don’t need the raise you’ve been hounding me for all year. And besides, you—”

An urgent knocking interrupted his tirade, and he looked out over the heads of his research and development team toward the glass window panels by the door. Thuringwethil was standing there, beckoning him out into the hall. He waved a hand at the employees seated around the conference table, and she slashed her fingertips across her throat, signaling him to cut the meeting short. Mairon frowned, sighing in annoyance. “I’m giving you a pass this time,” he said, stepping away from the podium and striding toward the door. “Next time, I will personally go through the logs and find out who’s spending their workday on YouTube and internet trivia quizzes. So unless you want to have a lot more time for dicking around on the internet, I suggest you save it for your personal time.” He reached to conference room door and stepped out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind him.

“I’m in a meeting, Thil,” he said.

“It’s important,” she said. “Come on.”

“But—”

“Now,” she said, seizing his wrist and pulling him away. He left the gathered engineers sitting nervously in the conference room, wondering whether or not they were free to leave.

“Jesus, Thil,” he said, pulling his hand away from her and rubbing his wrist. “I’m coming. You don’t have to pull my hand off.”

“Hurry up,” she said darkly, holding open the door of the stairwell and ushering him inside.

“Where are we going?”

“To find Melkor.”

“Why?”

“Because I have news,” she said, “and it’s not good.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah. We’re gonna need your input. Also, I’m not really interested in being the sole target of Melkor’s ire.”

“Not cool, Thil. I already took my fair share of crap from Melkor this week.”

“True,” she said, “but that was a couple days ago. You’ve built your tolerance back up.”

“Says you,” he muttered. “Why don’t you get Gothmog? He hasn’t gotten yelled at in weeks.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil. “I think Melkor felt bad about him almost getting trapped in a burning building thing.”

“Which,” said Mairon, “I mean, is fair. But his turn should be coming back around. Besides, a three-way split in yelling is better than just you and me having to take it.”

“Way ahead of you,” said Thuringwethil. “Gothmog’s meeting us there.”

The elevator slowed and came to a stop. There was a chime, and the doors slid open onto the sixth-floor lobby.

“You want to give me a head’s up?” said Mairon. “What’s this about?”

“You’re going to find out in thirty seconds,” she said.

“At least tell me how mad Melkor’s going to be.”

“On a scale of one to ten?” she said. “Like, seven million.” They reached the door to Melkor’s office, and she knocked three times in quick succession. Then, without waiting for an answer, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

“There’s my favorite legal advocate,” said Melkor, grinning at her. He was sitting at his desk. Gothmog stood behind him, sitting on the wide windowsill.

“Do me a favor,” said Thuringwethil. “Remember what you just said in, oh, about thirty seconds.”

“Why?” said Melkor, narrowing his eyes at her suspiciously.

“Because,” she said, “I have some, uh, not-so-great news.”

“That’s my cue,” said Gothmog.

“Sit your ass down,” said Thuringwethil and Melkor in unison. They stared at each other warily, Mairon and Gothmog looking back and forth between the two of them. If the mood in the room had been less tense, they may have laughed. Instead, Melkor cleared his throat. “What is it, Thil?”

“Look, there’s no good way to say this. They’re shutting us down.”

“Who is?” Melkor demanded.

“Shutting what down?” asked Mairon.

“A judge,” she said to Melkor. “On Formenos’ behalf. And everything,” she said to Mairon. “They’ve extended the injunction to all Silmaril-related activity, indefinitely.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” said Melkor.

“That would literally be the worst joke of all time,” said Gothmog.

“One I would never make,” said Thuringwethil. “Not least of all because it isn’t fucking funny.”

“How bad is it, Thil?” Mairon asked, his fingers nervously picking at the end of his tie.

“Not good,” she said. “According to the motion, the court feels it’s unclear where and with whom the Silmaril files originated. They want to launch a full-scale investigation to find out.”

“Haven’t they already done that?” said Gothmog. “I mean, we are still being investigated for IP theft, right?”

“Yes,” said Thuringwethil. “Although the investigation has come to a standstill given the fact that they can’t find any of the evidence they think we have. Formenos knew that, which is why they filed the injunction. The problem, from their perspective, is that the injunction is very temporary. So I filed a motion to have it dismissed.”

“And?” said Melkor.

“And it was rejected.”

“Fuck,” said Melkor.

“So, what?” said Mairon. “They’ve extended the injunction?”

“Yes,” she said. “The first one they filed let them get a foothold in to challenge the patent, but it was temporary. Still, it gave them time to gather evidence to put before a judge, who decided that there needs to be an investigation into the Silmaril origins.”

“They’re coming at us from the civil angle,” said Mairon.

Thuringwethil nodded. “We stymied the initial criminal proceedings, so they’re moving on to civil.”

“What does that mean for us?” Gothmog asked.

“It means that everything related to Silmaril has to be put on hold.”

“Officially, anyway,” said Mairon.

“How much of our current production is Silmaril?” Gothmog asked.

“Too much,” said Thuringwethil grimly.

“We’ve shifted a huge chunk of our resources into Silmaril-based projects,” Mairon said. “We restructured the budget, shifted personnel assignments, started hiring—”

“Okay,” said Gothmog. “It’s bad. I get it. Can we fix it?”

“Ask me later,” said Mairon. He groaned and ran his hands roughly over his face.

“You’re awfully quiet over there,” said Thuringwethil, turning toward Melkor.

Melkor was sitting still at his desk, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. “It has recently been brought to my attention,” he said, his teeth gritted, “that screaming at my executives is...unproductive.”

Mairon, Thuringwethil, and Gothmog looked at each other, unsure what to say. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. Finally, Thuringwethil cleared her throat. “What do you want us to do?” she asked.

“Get out,” growled Melkor, his knuckles white, his fingernails digging divots into the worn leather of his chair. For a moment, no one moved. “Out,” Melkor barked, slamming his palm against the top of his desk.

This time, they didn’t hesitate. They filed out of Melkor’s office, and Gothmog shut the door behind him. “Well,” he said as the three of them wandered aimlessly down the hallway. “I guess that could’ve been worse.” From behind the door came the sound of objects hitting the walls, accompanied by a steady stream of shouted swearing. “There it is,” said Gothmog.

“This is a nightmare,” said Mairon, running his fingers roughly through his hair.

“No kidding,” said Thuringwethil.

“So what do we do?” Gothmog asked.

“What we always do,” said Thuringwethil grimly. “We get back to work.”

Chapter End Notes

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Time

Chapter Summary

siege /sēj/
noun

a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town or building, cutting off essential supplies, with the aim of compelling the surrender of those inside.

alternately, a prolonged period of misfortune.

Chapter Notes

subtlety /'sədl̩tē/
noun

the quality or state of being subtle.

alternately, a quality that tumblr user swilmarillion does not possess.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You know,” said Mairon, spreading cream cheese on a bagel, “this was a great idea.”

“What was?” Melkor asked, taking the last bite of his first bagel and starting on his second.

“This,” said Mairon, waving a hand at the coffee and bagels spread on the table before them.

“If you’re talking about bagels,” said Melkor, “you need to get out more.”

“Not so much the bagels,” said Mairon, “as...” He gestured vaguely once more at the table.

“Eating?”

“Yeah, but like,” Mairon took a sip of coffee, gathering his thoughts. “First thing in the morning.”

“That’s called breakfast, dude.”

“I think I’ve heard of that,” said Mairon.

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“I never have time to eat in the morning,” he said, glancing wistfully at the half of his

bagel that remained.

“You do, though,” said Melkor. “You just don’t prioritize it.”

“That might be true,” Mairon admitted. He shifted his breakfast farther back on the table and pulled his bag into his lap.

“No,” said Melkor. “Uh-uh. This is breakfast time, not work time.”

“I can do both.”

“According to the philosopher Swanson, you should never half-ass anything.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “You should whole-ass one thing at a time.”

“Maybe my ass just has more resources than average.”

“I mean, you do have a really great ass,” said Melkor.

Mairon laughed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s true, though,” said Melkor. “I should know.”

“Why do I put up with you?” Mairon said, shaking his head.

“I have an answer to that,” said Melkor, “but I don’t think you want me to say it in public.”

“That almost sounded like discretion.”

“I know,” said Melkor, giving an exaggerated shudder. “You must be rubbing off on me.”

“I hope so.”

“Was that a suggestion, or...?”

“Gross,” said Mairon, though he didn’t seem particularly bothered. “But seriously, though, we need to talk about the plan.”

Melkor groaned loudly. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“I figured,” said Mairon. “That’s why I did it for you.”

“Perfect,” said Melkor. “Whatcha got for me?”

“I think our best bet,” Mairon said, “is to shift our focus to other projects.” Melkor blew a raspberry and scowled. “Hear me out,” said Mairon, shooting him a look of annoyance. “This injunction has the potential to really back up our production. We can’t afford that.”

“No shit,” said Melkor. “It’s coming up on bonus time, and if we run short, you can bet your ass it’s not coming out of my cut.”

“I’d prefer if it didn’t come out of mine either,” said Mairon. “Which is exactly why I think we should look at other projects. We’ve got a couple things pretty far down the pipeline. It

wouldn't take much to get them into production.”

“We've already sunk a lot of resources into Silmaril,” said Melkor. “I don't want it to go to waste.”

“Neither do I,” said Mairon. “We're not going to shelve it. We're just going to shift it to the backburner. We'll keep essential staff on Silmaril and shift the rest to other projects. That'll let us bring some lesser projects out to keep us afloat. In the meantime, we can keep Silmaril moving along so that when this injunction crap blows over, it's ready to go.”

“Theoretically,” said Melkor, “I get it. But it still makes me nervous. I feel like we'll lose momentum.”

“I'll make sure the staff left on Silmaril keep pushing it forward,” said Mairon. “When the injunction is lifted, it'll be ready to go. You have my word on that.”

Melkor considered him for a moment. “You think this is our best bet?”

“Yes,” said Mairon. “I do.”

Melkor nodded. “Okay,” he said. “It pisses me off, but I trust your judgement.”

Mairon smiled at that. “Thanks,” he said.

“On the other hand,” Melkor said, “I'm probably going to whine about it at least once a day until we kick this injunction.”

“Great,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

One month

“Did I mention,” said Melkor, “how much I fucking hate this?”

“Every goddamn day,” said Gothmog, rolling his eyes.

“To be fair,” said Melkor, “I did warn you.”

“Did not,” said Gothmog.

“Did so,” said Melkor. He craned his neck, looking over his shoulder. “Mairon?”

“You warned me,” said Mairon. “Not Gothmog.”

“Ha,” said Gothmog.

“Ha, nothing,” said Melkor. “You've known me for ten years, Gothmog. You ought to expect this kind of shit.”

“After ten years,” said Gothmog, “I've earned the right to a break.”

“You can't ask me to just let these grievances build up, Gothmog,” said Melkor sagely. “It's bad for your health.”

“Let it out on Mairon, then,” said Gothmog. “He agreed to it.”

“Technically, I did not,” said Mairon. “He just warned me it would happen.”

“Pedant,” said Gothmog.

The door opened, and Thuringwethil came in. “There she is,” said Melkor.

“Any news?” Gothmog asked.

“Not really,” she said, letting her bag slide off her shoulder and onto the floor. She sat on the couch in Melkor’s office and sighed. “They’re still in the discovery phase of things.”

“Whatever that means,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

“For us, it means they’re dragging this out as much as they can.”

“That just sounds like such a stupid tactic,” said Gothmog. “I mean, dragging it out is hurting them, too.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “except they don’t have nearly as much to lose as we do. Formenos was a one trick pony. We took their trick. Ergo...”

“They either win big or keep the nothing they already have.”

“I wouldn’t put all your eggs in that basket just yet,” said Mairon.

“Why not?” asked Melkor.

“Because as much as I hated the guy, Fëanor wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t necessarily a one trick pony, either.”

“Look who’s jumping on the dead guy’s bandwagon,” said Melkor.

“Shut up,” said Mairon, though there was little venom in his words. “I’m just being realistic. Silmaril may have been his best and brightest achievement, but it wasn’t a one-off. Counting Formenos out would be a huge mistake.”

“I agree,” said Thuringwethil. “At the very least, this legal wrangling proves they’re not down just yet.”

“Let them wrangle,” said Melkor. “They can’t keep it up forever.”

Thuringwethil caught Mairon’s eye, frowning. Mairon shook his head, and returned to his work.

Two months

“Look at this shit,” said Melkor, tossing the newspaper in his hand down onto the table.

Thuringwethil picked the corner of the paper out of her coffee and glared at Melkor. “A little restraint, please,” she said. “For once.”

“But look,” he said insistently, jabbing his finger against the newsprint.

“I see it,” she said. “Now can I please just eat my food in peace?”

“I don’t know how you can eat with something this disgusting sitting in front of you,” he said.

“I’ve known you for ten years,” she said. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

Gothmog laughed, his guffaws drawing looks from the tables around them.

“Shut up,” said Melkor, shoving him. Gothmog slid sideways, his elbow knocking the dish of creamer onto the floor.

“Can we please,” said Mairon, sliding quickly out of the booth and picking up shards of ceramic from the floor, “try not to attract attention everywhere we go? That’d be great.”

“I honestly don’t know if it’s possible,” Melkor said.

“Not for you,” said Gothmog. “You’ve always been an attention whore.”

“You’re one to talk, mister ‘I got flames tattooed on my head on a drunken dare.’”

“Might I remind you,” said Gothmog, “which one of my drunken asshole friends suggested it?”

“I made the dare,” said Melkor, “but you followed through on it.”

Gothmog ran a hand over his close-shaved hair, the dark outlines of the flames visible under his fingers. “I guess I can’t complain too much,” he said. “It did end up looking pretty sick.”

“You’re welcome,” said Melkor.

“Anyway,” said Mairon, tipping the jagged pieces onto his empty plate and sliding back into his seat, “I don’t know why you’re so bent out of shape. It’s just a picture.”

“It’s a fucking family reunion,” said Melkor, slipping seamless back into righteous indignation. “A fucking Finwion family reunion.”

“Easy on the alliteration,” said Thuringwethil.

“A fucking family reunion,” he said, shooting her a look of annoyance, “is not news. Not my any goddamn stretch of the imagination.”

“It is when your family’s old money,” said Gothmog.

“I’m actually kind of glad they printed it,” said Mairon.

“Traitor,” said Melkor.

“We probably wouldn’t have known about it if they hadn’t.”

“And thank God for that knowledge,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “How could I have lived without it?”

“It’s not so much the reunion,” said Mairon, “as what it means.”

“A bunch of yuppie shitheads spent a couple hours eating catered food in an overpriced pavilion in some country club?”

“Eithil Irvin,” said Gothmog, reading from the caption. “Shit, that place costs a damn mint for dues. You think they’re members.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Mairon. “They’re a bunch of old-money douchebags. But more than that—”

“They have matching t-shirts,” said Melkor, looking disgusted.

“Can you stop complaining for one minute and listen?” said Mairon, sounding annoyed.

“I can try,” said Melkor. “No guarantees, though.”

“What this obnoxious family picture and accompanying fluff piece tell us,” said Mairon, ignoring him, “is actually kind of important.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon.

“You gonna tell us?” Gothmog asked. “Or are you just going to be smug.”

“I can do both,” said Mairon.

“It tells us,” said Thuringwethil, “that despite a bunch of infighting in the last few years, the Finwions seem to be getting along. Well, publicly, anyway.”

“Exactly,” said Mairon.

“And that’s bad news for us. Scattered Finwions who are at each other’s throats are easy to managed. United Finwions, though?”

“Are potentially a much bigger pain in the ass,” said Melkor. He sighed. “Shit.”

“Shit indeed,” she said.

“How big a pain in the ass are we talking?” Gothmog asked.

“Remains to be seen,” said Mairon. He fished his wallet out of his pocket and rifled through it, tossing a few bills onto the table. “This should cover mine,” he said. He slid to the edge of the booth and stood up.

“Where are you going?” Melkor asked.

“To see if I can figure out exactly how unified the FINwions are,” he said. With that, he turned on his heel and strode out the door, leaving the three of them to finish their lunch.

“Look at this,” said Mairon, tossing a print-out onto Thuringwethil’s desk.

She picked up the stapled pages and skimmed the text. “Sales agreement,” she said, her eyes scanning the first page. “For transfer of ownership of Hithlum International. What’s Hithlum International?”

“It’s an engineering development firm,” said Mairon. “Look at the buyer.”

She frowned, her eyes flitting to the relevant line of text. “Fingon,” she said, her frown deepening. She looked up at Mairon. “What does a lawyer want with an engineering firm?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “What does an engineer want with the mining rights to a bunch of mountains?”

“Um,” she said, giving him an odd look. “What now?”

“Next page,” he said.

She dutifully flipped the front page over, skimming the next. “Nargothrond, LLC,” she read. “Finrod Felagund. Why do I know that name?”

“Probably because, like me, you’ve been obsessively stalking all of Finwë’s descendants.”

“Felagund,” she said, half to herself. “What, he’s the youngest—what’s his name, Finarfin? His kid, right?”

“Right.”

“And he’s an engineer?”

“He’s an ethicist.”

“Employed by Formenos? Ironic.”

“Tell me about it. He mostly just argues with people about the philosophical and moral implications of AI engineering.”

“That’s a job?” said Gothmog.

“It is when your family has money,” said Mairon. “And, you know, when the general public is dumb enough to pay to read your stupid opinions.”

“So what’s he doing looking for mining rights?”

“I have no idea.”

“Weird,” said Thuringwethil. She flipped back and forth between the pages, shaking her head. “What the hell are these people doing?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon. “But I’m going to find out.”

Three months

“Okay,” said Thuringwethil, folding over a spent sheet of paper on her legal pad and smoothing the new sheet under her palm. “So tell me again what we’re looking at.”

“Hithlum,” said Mairon, watching her write. “That’s Fingon. Nargothrond is Finrod.

Then Dorthonion—that's Fingolfin. There's one called Himring, but I haven't figured out who it belongs to yet."

"Four companies," said Gothmog, looking at the list. "What are they up to?"

"I don't know," said Mairon.

"Nothing good," said Melkor darkly.

"How'd you even find out about this shit?" Gothmog asked.

"Serious occult magic," said Mairon.

Melkor snorted. "Right," he said, though his smile wavered as he looked at Mairon's face. "Wait, really?"

"No, dummy," said Thuringwethil. "You've got an evil computer-hacking genius working for you, remember?"

"Oh, right."

"Should we maybe cool it on the illegal computer shit?" said Gothmog. "I mean, we're theoretically being investigated, right?"

"Relax," said Mairon. "All this stuff is publicly available. You just have to know where to look."

"And have an in at the courthouse," said Thuringwethil.

"That too," said Mairon.

"Yeah, yeah," said Melkor. "You're both really fuckin' smart. Now how about one of you tell me what the fuck they're up to?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet."

"Fat lot of good it does us, then."

"Quit your bitching," said Thuringwethil. "If we've learned anything from dealing with these assholes, it's that we always want to know when they're up to something, even if we aren't exactly sure what it is."

"On the surface," said Gothmog, "it looks like Finwions are jumping ship. Don't you think?"

"Theoretically," said Mairon, though he didn't sound convinced.

"Realistically?"

"No way," said Melkor. "We're not anywhere near that lucky."

"Okay," said Gothmog. "So, what?"

"I don't know," said Mairon. He frowned, chewing gently on his bottom lip. "I wonder..."

His train of thought was interrupted by the shrill ringing of Thuringwethil's phone. "Hold that thought," she said. She picked up the receiver and cradled it between her shoulder and her ear, reaching reflexively for pen and paper as she did. "This is Thuringwethil." Her hands stilled as she listened, all thought of writing forced out by the voice on the other end of the line. "He what?" she demanded. "When?" She listened, a scowl of displeasure twisting her mouth. "No," she said. "No, I'll be right there."

She set the receiver down with a decisive click and pushed her chair back from her desk.

"What's up, Thil?" Mairon asked.

She was already halfway to the door. "Sneaky bastard," she said, as though she hadn't heard him.

"Earth to Thil," said Melkor, waving a hand at her.

She shook her head, focusing on him with an effort. "I have to go to the courthouse," she said.

"Uh-oh. What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said, laying her hand on the door handle. "But I don't like it." She pulled open the door and strode out into the hall, heading for the elevator.

"What was that all about?" Melkor asked.

"No idea," said Gothmog. "But I have a feeling we're gonna be hearing about it before too long."

Four months

"Son of a bitch," said Melkor. "We just can't catch a fuckin' break, can we?"

"Not lately," said Gothmog.

"It's not bad luck," said Thuringwethil. "It's a fucking lack of connections—which, by the way, is bullshit."

"Yeah," said Gothmog, "but that's kind of how the world works."

"If your granddaddy had money, anyway," said Melkor.

"Okay," said Gothmog, "but is he like, *out* out?"

"He's out," said Thuringwethil.

"For good?"

"Unless he wants to break into another server site," said Thuringwethil. "He got the sentence reduced to time served, the lucky bastard."

"You never know," said Melkor. "Fëanor's ilk don't seem like particularly fast

learners.”

“Maybe not,” said Thuringwethil. “But much like you, they seem to be protected by some seriously underhanded legal wrangling.”

“Don’t compare me to a Fëanorian,” said Melkor, making a face. “And don’t drag yourself down to that kid’s level, either. He pulled a pretty good trick this time. That’s all.”

“I don’t think so,” said Thuringwethil. “Whatever else they might be, these kids are smart.”

“There you guys are,” said Mairon, striding into the break room. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Not very hard, apparently,” said Gothmog.

“Hey Mairon,” said Melkor. “Did you hear? That little shit stain Maedhros managed to weasel his way out of prison.”

“And into an executive position,” said Mairon. “Look at this.” He thrust some papers at Melkor.

“Hithlum,” said Melkor, scanning the page. “Why is that name familiar?”

“It’s one of those Formenos-associated companies,” said Thuringwethil. “The one we couldn’t find an owner for.”

“Until now,” said Mairon.

“Jesus,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. “I wish I had a goddamn company waiting for me when I got out of prison.”

“You did,” said Gothmog.

“My company,” said Melkor. “One I already founded. Not one my family set up for me.”

“Do we know what Hithlum does?” asked Thuringwethil.

“They were a defense contractor,” Mairon said. “Some kind of survivalist something or other. They went belly-up a couple months ago.”

“And were promptly purchased by Formenos.”

“With what capital?” Melkor asked.

“I’m assuming with Finwë’s money,” Mairon said.

“I thought Fëanor poured that back into Formenos,” said Gothmog.

“That was my understanding.”

“And they’re using it to buy companies for all the grandkids?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“That’s good news, though. Right? I mean, we’ve got kids splintering off in every direction. A little disunity is exactly what we need.”

“I don’t think it’s disunity,” said Mairon.

“Then what is it?”

“Diversification,” said Thuringwethil.

“What now?”

“They’re diversifying,” said Mairon. “Buying up a bunch of companies and allocating their kids to run them. It’s a smart tactic, actually. Formenos was too specific, and it cost them. Losing Silmaril could have destroyed them.”

“Should have,” Melkor muttered sullenly.

“But it didn’t,” said Thuringwethil. “Like I said before, these kids aren’t dumb. They’re not making that mistake again.”

“And like I said, we just can’t catch a fucking break.”

“It’s a run of shit luck,” said Gothmog. “That’s for damn sure.”

“These fucking Finwions are like cockroaches. Crush one, and ten more pop up to take its place.”

“Not sure it’s cockroaches you mean, but we get the picture.”

“It’s cockroaches,” said Melkor. “That’s the saying.”

“Since when have you ever seen ten cockroaches pop out of one squished one?”

“It’s a, whatsit, a metaphor, you uncultured jackass.”

“Where you going, Mai?” Thuringwethil asked.

“To curb this diversification,” he said grimly. “Before it gets out of control.”

He stalked out of the break room and headed for his office.

“He’s just a barrel of laughs lately, isn’t he?” Melkor muttered.

“You’re his boyfriend,” said Gothmog. “Why don’t you cheer him up?”

“Language,” said Melkor making a face. “Though admittedly, not a bad idea.” He pushed himself up from the table where he’d been sitting and sauntered toward the door.

“It was a joke,” said Gothmog.

“Come on,” said Thuringwethil. “Can’t you just let him work?”

“Too late,” said Gothmog. “He’s already gone.”

“I should go too,” she said, standing up and stretching.

“Where?” Gothmog asked.

“Anywhere out of earshot of those two,” she said. She headed for the door.

Gothmog made a face. “Wait for me!” he called, and followed her toward the elevator.

Five months

“Sign this,” said Mairon, tossing a packet onto Melkor’s desk.

“What is it?” Melkor asked, already picking up a pen.

“A sales’ pitch,” said Mairon. “A couple of them, actually.” Melkor signed the top page, and Mairon neatly twitched it away, pointing to the signature line on the next page.

“What are we selling?”

“A little of this,” said Mairon, repeating the motion. “A little of that.”

“Which means?”

“I don’t think those company purchases were random,” Mairon said. “It’s too big a coincidence.”

“What is?”

“Formenos has six or eight companies under its umbrella now,” said Mairon. “That we know of, anyway. And they all seem to be pushing products we already sell.”

“Where’s Thuringwethil? That sounds like a fuckin’ lawsuit.”

“There’s no copyright infringement,” Mairon said. “Believe me—I checked.”

“Which brings me back to my original question,” said Melkor. “What are we selling?”

“Anything Formenos or any of its stupid subsidiaries is trying to sell. You like to make fun of all the networking I do, but it’s starting to pay off. I’ve gotten tips from all kinds of places that Formenos is making offers. They’re looking to get back in business. Or, you know, direct competition. Whatever you want to call it.”

“So you’re, what? Getting us into some kind of sales’ quota arms race?”

“No,” said Mairon. “I’m trying to underbid them.”

“As a business owner,” said Melkor, “I’m not particularly fond of the word ‘underbid’.”

“And I’m not particularly fond of the idea of our competitors pushing into our markets,” Mairon said. “Formenos is looking to build a customer base. It may be small, but it’s a platform. It paves the way for growth.”

“So you’re going to poach their buyer base,” said Melkor. “I like it.”

“We’ve got wiggle room in the budget,” Mairon said. “We can afford to underbid on some contracts. If we’re going to lose money, I’d rather it be to customers than to Formenos.”

Melkor shook his head. “I honestly don’t know how you come up with these ideas. I mean, when do you even have the time?”

“I have the same hours in the day that you do,” said Mairon. “I just use them more efficiently.”

“Efficient,” said Melkor, “Is not exactly how I’d describe last night.”

“Efficiency is what gives me time for things like last night,” said Mairon.

“Then thank God for your twisted, masochistic efficiency,” said Melkor. “Because last night was fuckin’—”

“Ack,” Gothmog said loudly from the doorway. “Uh-uh. Don’t want to hear it.”

“Then get out of my office,” said Melkor.

“I’d love to,” said Gothmog, “but we have a meeting.”

“We do?”

“I put it on your calendar.”

“I don’t have a calendar.”

“On your phone, dipshit.”

“Oh, right. I disabled that crap. It was annoying the shit out of me.”

Gothmog sighed. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “Just ask Mairon.”

Gothmog clapped his hands over his ears and hummed loudly. “Not listening,” he said, half-shouting.

“Relax, Gothmog,” said Mairon. “I’m leaving.”

“Thank God,” said Gothmog.

“Though for the record,” said Mairon, drawing level with him, “after last night, I feel compelled to confirm.”

Gothmog feigned vomiting, Melkor cackled, and Mairon breezed out of the room, sales’ pitch papers in tow.

Six months

“The bad news,” said Mairon, “is that our bid against Hithlum was rejected.”

“It was a long shot anyway,” said Thuringwethil. “They had an in with the buyer.”

“The good news,” said Mairon, “is that the other bids were accepted.”

“Even Ard-Galen?” said Melkor, looking up from his phone.

“Even Ard-Galen,” said Mairon.

“That’s awesome,” said Melkor. “I mean, that’s a good get even without the fucking-over-Formenos angle.”

“I know,” Mairon said. “Our Glaurung proposal torched Formenos’.”

“Good,” said Melkor. “We’ve had six months of shitty luck. It’s about damn time we turn it around.”

“Honestly,” said Gothmog. “I was starting to feel like we were cursed.”

“We had a bit of dry spell,” said Thuringwethil. “But it’s over now.”

“Thank God,” said Melkor.

“Angband is officially back in business,” said Mairon. “Starting in—“He glanced at his watch. “Eight hours.”

“What happens in eight hours?”

“I fly out to Ard-Galen,” he said. “Remember? I told them if they picked up a Glaurung contract that I’d personally oversee the installation.”

“I thought it was a remote thing,” Melkor said.

“Afraid not.”

“And you’re leaving in eight hours?”

“Uh-huh,” said Mairon. “On the redeye.”

“Shit,” Melkor said. “Then we’d better hurry.”

“And do what?”

“Celebrate.”

“Melkor—”

“Come on,” Melkor said. “We’ve been killing ourselves for seven months trying to get ahead of this Formenos trash fire, and we finally did it. We deserve a little celebration.”

“Yes,” said Mairon, “but I’m leaving in eight hours. I have a million things to get done before I go.”

“Please?” Melkor whined, making his best attempt at puppy eyes. “Pretty please? Since you’re leaving us for God knows how long?”

“A week,” said Mairon. “Which isn’t even that long.”

“Come on, Mai.”

Mairon grimaced. “If I say yes, will you quit making that face.”

“Only if you say yes.”

“Fine,” said Mairon. “But only for an hour, okay?”

“Deal’s already been made,” Melkor said, grinning. “No amendments after-the-fact.”

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Probably,” said Melkor. “But hey. There’s only one way to find out.”

Chapter End Notes

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Killin' Floor

Chapter Summary

A lot can happen in three days.

Mairon goes to Ard-Galen to work. Melkor does some work of his own.

Chapter Notes

Watch out for some things in this chapter. There's heavily implied phone sex (by which I mean, there's phone sex, you just hear about it after the fact), violence, blood, gore, and someone dies. Read on at your own risk to find out who.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Monday, 11am

“Hey, Thil,” said Melkor, opening the door of her office. “You got a minute?”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Why do you always assume I did something?”

“Because I’ve known you for the better part of a decade. I know when you’re up to something.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but then shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “Take a look at this, will you?” He tossed a packet onto her desk.

She opened it, and skimmed the first page. “Challenge of purchase,” she said. “What is this?”

“So, just FYI, I bought a company last night.”

“You did *what*?”

“You know we’ve been on the lookout for production avenues.”

“On the lookout is not the same as buying.”

“Well, I didn’t intend to buy,” he said. “But I was looking, and I came across this place called Tol-Sirion that was super cheap. Like, ridiculously cheap.”

“Is it falling apart?”

“That’s the thing. It’s perfectly fine. It was up for sheriff’s sale.”

“Someone didn’t pay their taxes?”

“Not just someone. Formenos.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. They owed, like ten grand in business tax. Apparently they didn’t get it taken care of in time, so the place went up.”

“Holy shit.”

“I know.”

“And you think we can shift production there?”

“I hope so,” said Melkor. “But this is a solid sale, right?”

She sighed. “I mean, they’re already challenging it,” she said. She tapped her fingers on the desktop. “Leave this with me,” she said, picking up the papers, “and let me make some calls.”

“You’re the best, Thil,” Melkor said, grinning.

8pm

“Tell me again,” said Melkor, “what you’re doing.”

“I’m helping Ard-Galen get the Glaurung stuff up and running,” Mairon said.

“Yeah,” Melkor said, “but why?”

“It was a condition of sale.”

“But why?”

“Because I wanted Ard-Galen to buy Glaurung.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I swear to God,” Mairon said, “if you ask me why one more time—”

“What?” Melkor asked. “What are you going to do?”

“Hang up,” Mairon said.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” Mairon said.

“I’ve told you this, dude,” said Melkor. “Like, a million times. Threats don’t work if you can’t follow through.”

“You think I won’t follow through?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Melkor said. “I think you’re probably just as bored as I am.”

“I might be,” Mairon said. “But you’re forgetting something. Two things actually.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “First, I have way more willpower than you do. And second, I’m way better at self-denial than you are.”

“Shit,” said Melkor. “You’re right.”

“As usual.”

“Smartass,” Melkor said, and Mairon laughed. “When are you coming back?”

“Saturday,” said Mairon. “You know that.”

“That’s so long,” Melkor whined. “What am I supposed to do between now and then?”

“You could try working,” Mairon said.

Melkor snorted. “Good one. A serious answer, please.”

“Why don’t you see what Gothmog’s doing?” Mairon suggested. “You two can usually find some kind of trouble to get into.”

“Good point,” said Melkor.

“Well, there you go.”

“You trying to get rid of me?”

“It’s just late, is all.”

“It’s eight o’clock.”

“Yes,” Mairon said, “and I have about four hours of work left to do.”

“Who works on a trip?”

“It’s a business trip.”

“Is that supposed to be an answer?”

Mairon laughed. “I miss you,” he said.

“I bet you do,” Melkor said. “Life’s way more exciting when I’m around.”

“Exciting is one word for it.”

“One of many.”

“No arguments here.” Mairon sighed. “Okay,” he said. “Seriously, though.”

“Alright,” Melkor said. “Fine. Leave me.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

“You love it,” Melkor said. Mairon could hear the grin behind the words.

“Lucky for you,” Mairon said.

“Well,” Melkor said. “I’ve bothered you long enough, I guess. Better let you get back to what you do best.”

“Staying up all night stressing about a proposal?”

“I was going to say making me money, but that works too.” Mairon laughed. “Good luck tomorrow, Mai.”

“Thanks, Melkor.”

Melkor ended the call and leaned back into his couch, staring up at the ceiling for a moment. Then he sighed, and thumbed through the numbers in his phone. He tapped one and held the phone back to his ear. “Hey, Gothmog,” he said. “You busy?” He waited a moment, listening. “Good,” he said, grinning. “Let’s get drunk.”

Tuesday, 12pm

“Jesus,” Thuringwethil said, by way of greeting. “It took you long enough.”

“You texted me in the middle of a meeting,” Mairon said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Answer,” she said, though she knew it was silly. “Hell of a time for you to be out of town, you know.”

“It always is,” he said.

“Enough chit chat,” she said. “Thoughts?”

“It’s a surprise,” Mairon said. “To say the least.”

“Yeah,” she said. “No kidding. I would’ve pegged this Maedhros kid to be more like his dad.”

“Me too,” Mairon said. “After the server site debacle.”

“Maybe that turned him off the family business,” she said.

“Doubt it,” said Mairon. “He may not be in charge, but he’s most certainly still involved.”

“It’s weird, though,” she said. “Don’t you think?”

He sighed. “Objectively, it’s smart. Formenos has been having setbacks all year. They want to get back on track. Having a convicted felon for a CEO isn’t going to get them where they want to be.”

“No shit,” she said. “I was talking about his choice of successor.”

“It’s smart,” said Mairon. “Fingolfin has more connections, and more experience. Like I said, if

they're trying to rebrand Formenos into an actual player in this economy, they need every advantage they can get. Having a super young, super inexperienced kid at the helm isn't going to do them any favors."

"Once again," she said, "no shit. My point is that it's a very un-Fëanor-like thing to do."

"Yes," he agreed. "It is. Unfortunately for us."

"We got lucky with Fëanor, I think. He was smart, but he was out of control. We're not going to get that lucky again."

"Eh," said Mairon. "You never know." He sighed. "So we're heading into the Fingolfin era," he said. "What do you think that means for us?"

"Honestly?" she said. "I have no idea. He's kind of an unknown entity. They all are, at this point."

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll do some digging. See what I can find."

"I'd ask you how you're possibly going to find the time, but I don't think I've ever gotten a good answer to that question out of you."

He laughed. "What can I say, Thil? I'm a man of many talents."

"If that's what you want to call running your life on a consistently dangerous lack sleep."

"What else would I call it?"

"I don't know," she said. "A death wish?"

"Please," he said. "You're not going to get rid of me that easily."

"God, I hope not. I don't know where we'd be without you."

"Bored, probably."

She laughed. "No argument here," she said. "Miss you, by the way."

"Miss you too, Thil. Hey, I gotta run. Talk to you later, okay?"

9pm

Melkor picked up his phone from couch, grinning as he looked at the screen. "Hey," he said. "I've been waiting."

"Sorry," Mairon said. "Long day. I just got back."

"It's nine o'clock at night."

"Tell me about it."

"Do I need to come down there and teach those assholes how to treat my top engineer?"

Mairon laughed. "I think I can manage on my own," he said. "Although, not gonna lie. It'd be really nice if you were here."

"Tell me about it. Do you know how fucking bored I am?"

"Yes. You've told me like, nine times a day in the last three days."

"Well, it's true."

"I thought I told you to hit up Gothmog."

"I did," he said. "We went out, but it was really fucking lame."

"That sucks."

"Yeah," Melkor said. "It was ladies' night at the bar, and since I'm not exactly looking to pick up randos at the moment, it was just me wingman-ing for Gothmog until he ditched me for some chick with a motorcycle."

"Sucks when your friends find cooler friends, huh?"

"Shut up, you unsympathetic twat."

"Takes one to know one."

"Asshole."

Mairon laughed. "God, I wish you were here."

"Pass," Melkor said. "You actually do work on business trips."

"True," Mairon said. "I'd make an exception for you, though."

"Oh yeah?" said Melkor. "What did you have in mind?"

"You gonna make me spell it out for you?"

"Maybe," said Melkor slyly.

"God, you're such a jerk."

"Funny," said Melkor. "That's not what you said the other night."

"Mmm," Mairon said. "Don't remind me."

"Remind you of what? That you woke me up in the middle of the night for sex?"

Mairon snorted. "Oh, is that what happened?"

"As I recall."

"You woke up," Mairon said, "because I was typing too loudly, apparently."

"Okay," said Melkor, "but you were smashing keys at two in the morning."

"I wasn't smashing anything."

“Except me,” said Melkor.

“Well, yes,” said Mairon. “But only because you asked so nicely.”

“It’s not my fault,” said Melkor. “No one has any business looking that good at two in the fucking morning. Especially not after you’d been up for twenty hours.”

“Twenty-three,” Mairon said. “And I was a mess.”

“Which apparently,” said Melkor, “is what I’m into.”

“Oh, yeah? You’d be real into me right now, then.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah,” said Mairon. “Sitting here on my bed, surrounded by papers, wearing nothing but boxers and a t-shirt I stole from you.”

“Mairon,” said Melkor. There was a rasp in Melkor’s voice, an edge of hunger that made Mairon shiver. “Don’t start something you aren’t prepared to finish.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mairon said, slipping a hand beneath his waistband. “I never do.”

Wednesday, 11:50am

Gothmog glanced up as Melkor came in and then returned his attention to the camera on his desk. “Won’t swivel,” he said, picking up a screwdriver and picking at the pivot.

“Question,” said Melkor, sprawling into one of Gothmog’s chairs, his legs up over the arm.

“Listening,” Gothmog said.

“What does it mean when you don’t want to have sex with someone?”

“You’re not into her,” Gothmog said. “Or, y’know, him. Or whatever. You get the picture.”

“Let me rephrase,” Melkor said. “What does it mean when you could have sex with someone but you don’t?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“Okay, hang on,” Melkor said. “What does it mean—”

“Oh my God,” Gothmog said, slamming the screwdriver down on the desk. “Stop with the hypotheticals. Tell me what the fuck happened, and I’ll tell you what the fuck it means.”

“I talked to Mairon last night.”

“Scandalous,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes and picking up an Allen wrench.

“And, like, full disclosure, we had phone sex.”

“Ack!” Gothmog yelled, though he was neither quick nor loud enough to drown out Melkor’s

words.

“And—not gonna lie dude—it was really fuckin’ hot.”

“Why?” Gothmog demanded. “Why do you torture me like this?”

“Gothmog,” said Melkor, endeavoring to look hurt, “you’re my best friend. You’re supposed to take an interest in my life.”

“My interest doesn’t extend to your sex life.”

“That has literally never been true.”

“It is now,” said Gothmog.

“But—”

“Look, it’s cool that you guys are dating or whatever, but when I think about two of my best friends, I don’t want to think about their dicks—separately *or* together.”

“But—”

“Melkor, ask me what you’re trying to ask me. Just please, for the love of God, spare me the details.”

“For the last couple weeks, I feel like I didn’t care if we had sex or not. Like, don’t get me wrong, I’m definitely DTF, but if it doesn’t happen?” He shrugged. “I’m fine. What does that mean?”

“Let me get this straight,” Gothmog said. “So you still want to have sex with Mairon.”

“Oh, for sure.”

“Uh-huh. But you also like spending time with him even if you’re not going to have sex.”

“Yes.”

“Uh-oh,” said Gothmog.

“What? Is that bad?”

“Very bad,” said Gothmog. “Dude, you like him.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

“No,” said Gothmog. “You *like* him, like him.” He waggled his eyebrows for emphasis.

Melkor made a face. “You take that back,” he said.

“Sorry,” said Gothmog. “I don’t make the rules.”

Whatever retort Melkor planned to make was cut short by a knock on the door. He turned to see Gelmir standing in the doorway, an envelope in his hand. “Sorry to interrupt,” said Gelmir. “There’s a message for you, Mr. Bauglir.”

“From who?”

“I don’t know, sir. It was on my desk when I came back from lunch.”

“Nice security you got here, Gothmog,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

“The lobby’s public,” Gothmog said, shrugging. “You want me to check the cameras?”

“Let’s see what I got first.” He held out his hand, and Gelmir brought him the envelope. “You can go now,” he said, and Gelmir did.

Melkor opened the envelope and slid out a single sheet of paper. The paper had just two lines of text, scrawled in a small, neat hand. There was a phone number that he didn’t recognize, and a time: 1pm. He looked at his watch. It was 12:58pm.

“I gotta go do something,” he said, standing up.

“What is it?” Gothmog asked.

“Nothing,” said Melkor. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch you later, okay?”

Not waiting for Gothmog’s reply, Melkor made his way back to his office. He went inside, shut the door, and pulled out his phone. He looked at the paper, hesitating for only a second before dialing the number. It was 12:59pm.

The phone rang just twice before the line picked up, though no one on the other end spoke.

“Uh,” Melkor said. “Hello?”

“Yes,” said a voice he didn’t recognize.

“Okay,” said Melkor. “Not gonna lie, I honestly didn’t expect anyone to answer.”

“I take it you received my note.”

“Who is this?”

“Someone with an interest in your business, Mr. Bauglir.”

“Yeah, I was thinking more along the lines of a name.”

“This is Fingolfin.” For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then he added, with a slight edge of annoyance in his voice, “I take it you know me.”

“Okay, but seriously. Who is this?”

“It’s Fingolfin,” he said, his annoyance more pronounced.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“What, Formenos can’t afford business cards?”

“I—what?”

“You have to write me a note with your number and stick it on my secretary’s desk?”

“It’s not my number,” Fingolfin said. “It’s a payphone. If I wanted you to have my number—“

“What? You’d direct me to your company website? Jesus, dude. You need to lay off the cheap

spy movies.”

“And here I thought you couldn’t possibly be as annoying as they say you are.”

“Think again, pal.”

He heard Fingolfin sigh. “You must be wondering why I called.”

“I called,” Melkor reminded him. “But, yeah. I am wondering what the hell you want from me.”

“I think we should talk.”

“Aren’t we doing that right now?”

“For the love of—” Fingolfin sighed again, struggling to marshal himself. “We need to talk,” he said carefully, “about the future.”

“What about it?”

“Look, we’re at a stalemate right now. Thuringwethil is an excellent litigator, I’ll admit.”

“She is.”

“But so is my son Fingon. We could spend years in court trying to parse this out. You and I both know that.”

“Make your point.”

“A wait that long could end us both.”

“You, maybe. Not us.”

“You don’t know that,” Fingolfin said. “You can’t. Do you want to take that risk?”

“You could concede,” Melkor said.

“I could,” he said. “I won’t though.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I take it you won’t either.”

“Fuck, no.”

“Which brings me back to my original point.”

“Which was...?”

“That you and I should talk. Look, I don’t like you. You don’t like me. But whether we like it or not, the fortunes of our companies are entwined.”

“Look, I don’t disagree,” Melkor said, “but can you try not to make it sound so weird?”

“Do you want to try to work this shit out or not?”

Melkor laughed. “Now you’re talking,” he said. “What did you have in mind?”

“Whatever our differences, we have this in common—we are not patient men. So I ask you, one impatient man to another: do you want to wait for a judge to decide what happens to us, or do you want to decide for ourselves?” For a moment, there was silence. Then Fingolfin said, “No lawyers. No cronies. Just you and me. Man to man.”

“You want me to meet you,” Melkor said. “Alone.”

“Yes,” Fingolfin said.

“Right,” Melkor said. “That doesn’t sound sketchy at all.”

“It’s a risk,” Fingolfin said. “One that I am willing to take. Are you?” Melkor hesitated.

“Funny,” Fingolfin said softly. “The one thing I hadn’t taken you for was a coward.”

Melkor felt a flare of anger, and his hesitation crumbled. “Name the time and the place,” he growled. “I’ll be there.”

6pm

“Gothmog,” Melkor said, “I need you to do me a favor, and I need you to not ask any questions.”

“Dude, I can’t get arrested. Thuringwethil will kill me.”

“It’s nothing illegal. I promise.”

“You wouldn’t tell me if it was.”

“Gothmog, I’m serious.”

“Fine,” Gothmog said, sighing. “But I still feel like I’m going to regret this.”

“Let’s hope not.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Melkor handed him a plain, white envelope. There was no writing on it, and it was sealed tight.

“Take this,” he said. “Open it at nine o’clock tonight—not before, not after.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog, giving him an odd look. “What is it?”

“No questions, dude,” Melkor said. “Just do it.”

“Okay,” Gothmog said again. “Open this at nine o’clock, and then what?”

“You’ll know.”

“Melkor, I’ve done a lot of bizarre shit in the course of this friendship, but this is really fuckin’ weird.”

“I know, Gothmog, just—” He sighed. “Just do it. Please?”

“Alright,” Gothmog said. “Fine.”

“Thanks,” said Melkor. “I have to go. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Melkor turned and went back out into the hall, heading toward the elevator. Gothmog watched him go, shaking his head as Melkor disappeared from view. He picked up the envelope and looked at it, front and back. It was light; it could well have been empty. He put it down on the desk and looked at his watch. It was six o’clock.

Only three hours to wait.

8:50pm

“Did you hear anything more about that sale?” Mairon asked.

“No,” Melkor said. “Not yet. Thil thinks it’ll go through, though.”

“That’s good.”

“Hopefully it doesn’t take a thousand years.”

“The way our luck’s been going, we deserve to catch a break.”

“With the way our luck’s been going, I’m expecting some unforeseen catastrophe.”

Mairon laughed. “We got Ard-Galen,” he said. “It’s not all bad.”

“True,” he said. “But then again, you left me for a week to seal that deal, so not that great, either.”

“On the plus side,” Mairon said, “I’m only here three more days.”

“Ugh,” Melkor said. “Don’t remind me.” For a moment, he heard Gothmog’s voice very clearly in his head. *You like him.* He cleared his throat.

“So,” Mairon said, “what else is new?”

“Huh?” said Melkor, lost in thought. “Oh, um...nothing, really. Just...” *Just a chance to meet with the head of Formenos,* he thought. It was on the tip of his tongue, and he nearly let it fall, but something held him back. Mairon would almost certainly disapprove of the whole thing, not least of all because Melkor was planning to meet Fingolfin alone. And he wouldn’t have been wrong—Melkor knew that. It was dangerous, and in all likelihood, it was pointless. Melkor didn’t know much about Fingolfin, but if the man was anything like his brother, then there was very little chance of them coming to an agreement. Still, Melkor felt compelled to go. It couldn’t hurt, he reasoned, to what the man had to say. The last six months had been a hellish exercise in waiting, and Melkor felt at least partly responsible. His theft of Silmaril hadn’t been clean, and he couldn’t help but feel that Angband was reaping the rewards of his actions. If there was a chance to fix that, any chance at all, he would take it. He had to. The future of Angband could depend on it.

“Just what?” Mairon prompted, breaking through Melkor’s thoughts.

“Huh?” said Melkor again. “You know, I lost my train of thought.”

“Typical,” said Mairon.

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “Sure. Hey, I gotta go, okay?”

“Oh,” Mairon said. “Okay. That’s fine. You have plans?”

“Something like that,” Melkor said. “Hey, Mai?”

“Yeah?”

He sighed. “Good night,” he said. He hung up the phone. He looked at the clock on the dashboard—five minutes to spare. He pocketed his car keys and his phone, and got out of the car. It was dark; the hangar was set back from the road, far enough that the streetlights didn’t reach.

The parking lot was deserted, and the lights in the hangar were out. Melkor looked at the hangar and shivered, despite the warm evening air. He gritted his teeth. “Don’t be a pussy, Bauglir,” he muttered under his breath. Slowly, deliberately, he began to walk.

8:55pm

Gothmog sat alone at his kitchen table. The house was uncharacteristically quiet; there was no absentminded play of music, no mindless drone of TV shows. The only sound he could hear was the muffled pattern of traffic from the street below, and even that sounded oddly muted. He held the envelope Melkor had given him in his hands, turning it over and over as he waited for the minutes to pass.

At five ‘til, he couldn’t stand it anymore. “Close enough,” he muttered. “Not like that asshole’s ever gonna know.” He slid his index finger under the seal and pulled, tearing the corner. He worked the envelope open and pulled out the paper within. He unfolded it and smoothed it on the table.

There was a note scrawled on the page, just four short lines. Gothmog recognized Melkor’s handwriting.

Gothmog,

I got a call this afternoon from Fingolfin. He wants to meet me—says he wants to talk about the future, whatever that means. He seems like a shady motherfucker, and I doubt he has anything useful to say, but what the hell. It can’t hurt, right? We’ll be at Hangar 2 at 9:00. Call me at ten after. If I don’t answer, you know what to do. M.

“Shit,” Gothmog said, reading the note again. “Shit, shit, shit.”

He pulled out his phone and dialed Melkor’s number. “Pick up,” he said. “Pick up, pick up, pick up, pick—goddamn it.” It went to voicemail and he punched the redial button. He went through the same fruitless cycle five times before he gave up, leaving a terse voicemail to vent his frustration. “Call me back, asshole—now. I don’t know what the fuck you were thinking but I swear to God if you—Jesus, Melkor, just call me back.”

He hung up and grabbed his keys, swiping down his contacts list and selecting another number. He shut and locked the door, trotting down the stairs toward his car. “Thil,” he said, “I’m going to pick you up in five. We have a huge problem.”

9pm

Melkor walked through the service door of the hangar and flipped the light switch. Nothing happened. “Perfect,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. The emergency lights were on, but they were few and far between. He walked toward the center of the hangar, his footsteps echoing on the concrete. He stopped at a prototype, left over from the Glaurung test flights. He laid his hand on the cool polymer and smiled.

He stood for a moment, admiring the result of their work, until footsteps broke the silence ringing in his ears. He looked around, but the light from the emergency lights was limited, and he couldn’t see anyone. Still, he could hear the footsteps getting closer.

“So,” said a voice he recognized as Fingolfin. “You actually came.”

Melkor shrugged. “I said I would.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d follow through.”

“I’m here,” Melkor said. “Are we going to talk or what?”

Melkor heard the sound of footsteps resume, and he scanned the shadows once more, looking for the source. “So,” said Fingolfin, “you want to talk. Let’s talk.”

He came at last out of the shadows and into the spill of fluorescent lighting to Melkor’s left. Fingolfin was tall, almost as tall as Melkor, and he was well-built. He wore jeans and a black t-shirt that showed the swell of muscle in his chest and arms. “Nice shirt,” Melkor muttered, rolling his eyes. “Where’d you get it? Baby Gap?”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Melkor said. “Look, honestly, I was a little skeptical about coming here. I still am, to tell you the truth. But I figured—“

“You figured you would humor me?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You think I have nothing to say to you,” Fingolfin said. “Nothing to offer. You think I’m beneath you, that Formenos is beneath you, now that you’ve sucked it dry.”

“I mean,” said Melkor, at a loss, “that’s a weird thing to say.”

“Shut up,” Fingolfin said. “I didn’t come here to listen to your bullshit. I’ve heard enough of it already, sitting in courtrooms and listening to you rationalize all the shit you’ve done.”

“Then why did you drag me out here?” Melkor asked. “I mean, you already said you didn’t think I’d show, and you apparently don’t want to talk, so—“

“I came to settle things,” Fingolfin said.

“Dude, I don’t—oh.”

There was a gun in Fingolfin’s hand. Melkor didn’t know where it had come from--where it could possibly have come from, a traitorous part of his mind added, given the comical smallness of his

shirt. He fought the insane urge to laugh. “Okay, dude,” he said, his voice steady despite the pounding of his heart. “Let’s just take a step back and think this through.”

Fingolfin was walking closer, his steps slow and measured. “My brother worked his whole life to make Formenos what it is. His Silmaril suite is a masterpiece—“

“I don’t know about that,” Melkor said, and hated himself.

“Then why’d you steal it?” Fingolfin demanded.

“I—uh,” he said, struggling to marshal his thoughts, “actually, it’s never been established where Silmaril originated.” There was a soft click, and Melkor knew the safety had been switched off. “Okay,” he said, raising his hands in a gesture of conciliation. “Okay. Let’s just think about this for a minute.”

“Believe me,” said Fingolfin. “I have. Many times.”

“Have you, though? I mean, let’s say I stole your program, which I don’t admit to.” Fingolfin raised his hand. “Jesus, dude! Even if I did, you already have us pinned down in court. If it’s really yours, don’t you think they can figure it out?”

“Silmaril is ours,” Fingolfin said. “It was always ours. If there was any justice in the world, it would already be back in our hands, and your sorry ass would be back in jail.”

“I’d rather die than go back to jail,” Melkor said, and immediately regretted it. “Scratch that,” he said hurriedly. “Bad choice of—“There was a loud, echoing pop, and Melkor felt pain explode in his right arm. “Jesus fuck!” he yelled, stumbling backward. His hand went instinctively to the wound, and he felt blood pouring over his fingers. “You shot me!”

“Surprised?” Fingolfin asked, stalking closer. “Good. You’re not calling the shots anymore—no pun intended.”

“I thought your brother was the lunatic of the family,” Melkor said. He pressed his palm hard to the hole in his arm, trying not to think about the blood pouring out.

“My brother is dead,” Fingolfin said. “You killed him, just like you killed our father.”

“Your dad had a heart attack,” Melkor said. “So unless you think I’m the magical fuckin’ massive coronary fairy—“

Another shot echoed out in the hangar, and Melkor stumbled back, falling awkwardly to one knee. “Fuck!” he yelled, dropping his uninjured hand to his calf.

“My dad died because he watched his life’s work fall into the hands of a moron too unoriginal to invent anything worthwhile.”

“Did you forget the part where I had a whole company before I ever heard of Formenos?”

A bullet skidded across the concrete to Melkor’s left, and he flinched violently, sending shocks of pain through his arm and leg. “That was a warning,” Fingolfin said. “You won’t get another.”

“Aren’t you supposed to hand those out, like, before you start shooting me?” Fingolfin closed one eye, sighting down the barrel of the gun. “Okay,” Melkor said hurriedly. “Okay. Jesus. What do you want?”

“I want you to pay,” Fingolfin said. “I want you to pay for what you’ve done to my family.”

“Alright,” Melkor said. “Sure. Whatever dude. Just—“

“In kind,” Fingolfin said, interrupting him.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“An eye for an eye,” Fingolfin said. “Your life isn’t worth half what theirs were, but it’ll do, all the same.” He was close now, ten feet from where Melkor stood. “Any last words, Bauglir?”

“Yeah,” Melkor said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “If you’re going to try to murder someone, you should probably make sure they didn’t bring backup.” He looked over Fingolfin’s shoulder and nodded. “Now!” he shouted.

Fingolfin whirled around, and Melkor took his chance, sprinting across the hangar floor as fast as his wounded leg would allow. He heard Fingolfin swear, and turn back in pursuit.

Fingolfin stood between Melkor and the door, and so Melkor ran to the far side of the hangar to the stairs. A shot whizzed past his ear and lodged itself in the railing. Melkor dove for the top of the stairs and pulled himself up onto the floor, crawling behind the railing. He pulled himself half-up, keeping his head below the railing, and made a mad, shuffling dash for the other end of the gangway. He ducked behind the bulk of a metal cabinet and stood, hand over his mouth, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. His heart was hammering in his chest, his breaths so loud he was sure Fingolfin could hear them.

Fingolfin made a *tsk* sound with his tongue as he started up the stairs. His footsteps were slow and heavy, ringing out in the heavy silence. “Melkor,” he said, his voice singsong. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

“Creepy fucker,” Melkor muttered. He stooped to the ground, eyes straining in the meager light for anything he could use as a weapon. His hand closed on smooth, polished wood, and he grappled the thing closer in the dark, hefting its weight

“You think you can destroy our company,” Fingolfin said. “You think you can destroy our lives. You think you can do anything you want with impunity.”

“I think you’re an asshole,” Melkor called back, slowly getting back to his feet. “I think you’re a twat. I think you need to shut your goddamn mouth.

“A dead man’s thoughts are irrelevant,” Fingolfin said.

“Not dead yet,” Melkor growled. He swung his uninjured arm out from behind the cabinet and launched the hammer he had found. It flew end over end and found its mark, the claw-end smashing into Fingolfin’s nose. Melkor saw it crumple, saw the blood pour from the shattered mess of bone. Fingolfin dropped his gun and pressed his hand to his face, swearing violently.

Melkor looked past him toward the stairs. The only way out was back down those stairs and through the door where he’d entered, but Fingolfin stood in his way. He would never make it, not fast enough to avoid another shot. So Melkor turned and ran further along the gangway, deeper into the shadows.

“Run, you bastard,” Fingolfin shouted after him. “It won’t do you any good.”

“We’ll see about that,” Melkor said. He knocked down every moveable object in his way,

throwing toolsets and computers and bits of aircraft in every direction and praying that the noise and the confusion would obscure his path through the hangar. He could hear Fingolfin picking his way through the twists and turns of storage and machinery that littered the floor, closing in with every passing second. Melkor looked around; he was hemmed in by walls on two sides; before him lay the path back to the stairs, blocked by Fingolfin, or the railing, and a twenty foot drop onto the concrete. The only other way that remained was up.

There was a thin, rickety ladder going up the back wall, leading up through a square hole in the ceiling. He put his hand to the one of the rungs, and it creaked at his touch, swaying. Grimacing, Melkor started up the rungs, moving fast to avoid being seen. He pulled himself up, cursing soundlessly as his wounded arm collapsed under him. Adrenaline pumped through him, and he forced his arm to straighten, holding his weight. He pulled his torso over the threshold and hauled his legs up behind him.

Melkor lay on the second floor, panting. Then he pushed himself up, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and looked around. He was on a storage platform, the debris of years of flight tests scattered around him. He was safe, but only for the moment. Fingolfin was below and getting closer, by the sound of it. He would reach the back wall and know there was only one way Melkor could have gone.

Melkor had bought himself a moment to think, and yet he could find no other solution. There was still only one way out, and now he was another eight feet further away. He crawled to the railing and looked down. Fingolfin was nowhere in sight. Melkor listened, straining his ears against the ringing silence. It was quiet down below. Melkor crawled on hands and knees to the far edge, closest to the stairs. He could make the jump easy enough—land on his feet, make a run for the stairs. Best case scenario was that Fingolfin was far back toward the wall, far enough for Melkor to get a running start. But even so...Melkor shook his head.

He sat up against the wall for a moment, catching his breath. He pressed his fingers into the holes in his arms and legs, wincing. “Shit,” he said softly. He would have killed to know what time it was, but it was too dark to see his watch, and he couldn’t risk the light from his phone. “Shit,” he said again. He sighed. “Come on, Gothmog,” he whispered.

He pushed himself up to his knees and grasped the railing with both hands. He took a deep breath and swung himself down over the ledge. He craned his neck around and saw Fingolfin behind him, close to the ladder. Fingolfin grinned. “Finally,” he said, and raised his weapon. Melkor dove for cover behind the big metal cabinet that had shielded him just a few moments before, but he was not fast enough. He felt a stab of hot, searing pain in his side, and he stumbled, falling to one knee before hastily dragging himself around the back of the cabinet. He raised a shaking hand to his side and pulled it away bloody. He had lost a lot of blood; he could feel the sticky mess of it on his skin. He was beginning to feel woozy, light-headed, and he knew adrenaline wouldn’t be able to carry him much longer.

He looked longingly at the stairs, knowing they weren’t an option—not yet, not really. He would be an easy target, running through the open. So instead he sat, dragging in breath after painful breath, and listened to the slow, measured tap of Fingolfin’s shoes on the floor, drawing closer. “I wonder how it feels,” Fingolfin said, and Melkor latched onto the sound, trying desperately to pin down its direction. “Trapped in your own workspace, hunted by a man you think so utterly beneath you.” The footsteps stopped, and Melkor knew Fingolfin was behind him. He looked to both sides and saw, against all odds, the hazy fall of a shadow on his left. He pushed himself from his knees to his feet, crouching behind the tenuous safety of the cabinet, waiting. “I wonder how it will feel,” Fingolfin said, “to be killed by him.”

Fingolfin whirled around the edge of the cabinet, and Melkor sprang away, launching himself around the corner just a moment too slow. The shot caught him in the foot, ripping through the sole of his shoe and flying out the top to lodge in a broken piece of wing. Melkor didn't stop. He pushed himself around to the other side of the cabinet. A wild, desperate idea had come to his mind, and though he doubted it could work, he knew his only remaining option was to try. He came around the back of the cabinet, his place and Fingolfin's reversed from the moment before. He took a step back and then ran forward, ramming his shoulder against the metal. It slid forward a foot, and he felt the thud as it hit Fingolfin. Melkor heard him swear, heard him stumble. He didn't wait for Fingolfin to recover. Melkor rammed the cabinet again and again until he felt it stop, and he knew it was flush with the railing. He could hear Fingolfin shouting and knew he was trapped, caught between the railing and the bulk of the cabinet. Melkor threw his weight against the doors again and again, the metal buckling beneath his assault.

There was a groan, and a creak. Melkor threw himself against the cabinet. The sound of protesting metal rent the air. Melkor rammed his shoulder against the door. A scream of protest tore through the hangar, and the railing gave way. Melkor stumbled forward, losing his balance as the cabinet fell into the abyss. It fell fast, pulling the railing with it as it went. Melkor teetered on the edge, struggling to keep himself from falling. The last of the railing ripped from its mooring and swung around, and the sharp, severed edge caught Melkor in the face. It was, though he didn't know it, his saving grace. The metal tore into Melkor's cheek, and he screamed and fell back, away from the gaping void below.

Melkor collapsed to the floor. There was a roaring in his ears, and his vision swam. He threw out his uninjured arm and pulled himself forward, just a few meager inches. His uninjured foot scrabbled at the floor, and he tried to crawl forward, heading for the stairs, but he was so tired, so very tired. He fell forward once more, his fingers pulling useless at the floor. He felt heavy, and yet strangely drained. He knew he was bleeding, maybe bleeding to death, but he couldn't summon the will to care. He laid his cheek against the cool of the floor. Already the pain was ebbing, flowing away into a beautiful nothingness. His eyes slid closed, and Melkor was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Come yell at me on [tumblr](#) if you want.

You Don't Know What Love Is (You Just Do As You're Told)

Chapter Summary

If you thought Melkor couldn't do anything dumber than meet Fingolfin alone in an empty warehouse at night, then buddy, you don't know Melkor.

Chapter Notes

This is your official warning for angst, relationship drama, and drinking as a bad coping method.

Check out this [amazing art](#) from tumblr user [gooooothmooog!](#) More FYD art [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Mairon's phone rang. He'd been expecting it—he'd expected it sooner, truth be told. He put a hand on his computer, holding it in place on his lap as he rolled to the side, reaching for his phone. He picked it up, frowning at the name on the screen, and accepted the call.

"Hey, Thil. What's—"

"Mai," she said, her voice shaking. "You need to come home. Right now." Mairon listened to her talk, though he heard very little of what she said. There was a roaring in his ears that grew as she spoke, drowning out all but a few words: Melkor, accident, hospital, critical.

Mairon was up, slamming his computer shut and scrabbling at the papers on the bed. He shoved everything into his bag and grabbed his wallet. "I'm on the next flight," Mairon said, shoving his wallet into his pocket and heading for door. "Call me with any news."

"I spoke to them already," Thuringwethil said, her voice a low whisper. "Gave them the details I had."

"And?" Gothmog whispered.

"They want to talk to him."

"Are we looking at charges?"

"Not now," she said. "But in the future?" She shook her head. "I don't know how he got there. I don't know what the circumstances are. Formenos is going to lose their shit, Gothmog. They're going to be looking for any tiny little thing to latch onto, anything that could even suggest some kind of premeditation."

"Melkor was unarmed," he said. "That's all the evidence you need."

“Maybe,” she said. “But that kid Fingon—“

“If you’re going to talk about me,” rasped a voice from behind them, “then at least do it so I can hear you.”

“Melkor,” said Thuringwethil, whirling around. “You’re awake.”

“Unfortunately,” he said. He glanced around the room. “Where’s Mairon?”

“On his way,” Thuringwethil said. “He was at Ard-Galen, remember?” Melkor grunted, noncommittal. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“Like a pile of shit.”

“You look like one, too,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“What do I have to do for a little sympathy around here?”

“Nothing,” Gothmog said, laughing. “You’ve actually earned some, for once.”

Melkor shifted, trying to sit up a little, and he groaned. “I feel like shit,” he said again.

“Don’t move too much,” Thuringwethil said. She pressed the control on the bedside table, and the bed tilted to let Melkor sit up a little.

“How bad is it?” She grimaced, looking at Gothmog. “Don’t lie to me,” Melkor said.

“It’s not great,” said Gothmog. “You got shot through the arm. That one went out clean. So did the one through your foot. The one in your side managed not to hit anything important, which is damn lucky for you, but it did a number on your skin when it went through. They had to dig it out of your back.”

“Nice,” Melkor said.

“The bullet in your calf is the only one that didn’t go clean through. It’s stuck in your tibia.”

“Whatever that is.”

“Here,” Thuringwethil said, running her finger lightly down the bone at the front of his lower leg. Melkor yelped theatrically, but she rolled her eyes. “Wrong leg, dumbass.”

He grinned. “Worth a try.”

“Wasn’t even a good try.”

“Jesus, Thil. Lighten up. I could’ve died.”

“You’re right,” she said. “You could have. And I’m happy you didn’t—really, I am. You scared the shit out of me, Melkor.”

“Yeah?” He grinned.

“It’s not funny,” she said. “I’m the one that got to you first, you know.”

“Thanks for coming, by the way. I’d have been shit out of luck without you.”

“You’re damn lucky Gothmog opened that stupid note of yours early,” she said. “You might not

be here if he'd waited the extra five minutes.”

“Then thank God for Gothmog’s impatience,” he said, and he grinned.

“Melkor, what were you thinking? I mean, why in God’s name were you even at that hangar? And with Fingolfin, of all fucking people?”

Melkor shifted uncomfortably. “I—“

“Melkor,” said a voice from behind them.

The three of them turned to find Mairon, rather disheveled, coming into the room. He was wearing faded black sweat pants and an oversize t-shirt with the words ‘Don’t hate me ‘cuz I’m better than you’ emblazoned on the front in peeling white letters. Melkor took one look at him and started to laugh.

Mairon walked toward him, frowning. “What are you laughing at?”

“You,” Melkor said, still laughing. “You look ridiculous.”

“Laugh it up,” said Mairon. “This is your shirt.”

“Is that why it looks familiar?”

Mairon reached his bedside. He reached out and gently brushed the hair back from Melkor’s face with his fingertips, smiling. Melkor felt a strange sense of relief at the touch of Mairon’s hand, and he frowned, unable to place it—a feeling of calm, a surety that now, everything would be alright. It was ridiculous, he knew, but it was true nonetheless. It unsettled him, and he shifted uncomfortably away from Mairon’s touch.

“Hey Gothmog,” Thuringwethil said, breaking through Melkor’s thoughts. “Let’s go get some coffee.”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m okay.”

“Gothmog,” she said, looking pointedly between Melkor and Mairon.

“Oh, right,” said Gothmog. “Leave the kids alone. Got it.”

Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. “Would it kill you to have a little tact?” she asked, as he led the way out of the room.

“Dunno,” Gothmog said. “Don’t want to risk it.”

Melkor watched the two of them go, his sense of unease growing. Mairon shook his head, watching them go. He turned back to Melkor and frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” Melkor made an effort to focus.

“You’re giving me a weird look, is all,” Mairon said. “You okay?”

“What do you think?” Melkor snapped, sounding more irritated than he meant to. “I got shot four times, for fuck’s sake.”

Mairon blinked, taken aback. “Right,” he said. “Of course. Sorry.”

“Whatever,” Melkor said. “It’s fine.”

“Four times, huh?” Mairon said. Melkor nodded, and Mairon shook his head. “Jesus, Melkor,” he said. “What happened? I mean, I know what happened, but—why were you even there? Why was Fingolfin? What did—“

“Jesus Christ,” Melkor snapped, more forcefully than he should have. “It’s bad enough I have to listen to your interrogations on a normal day, but when I’m lying in a fucking hospital bed?”

“Melkor—“Mairon began reproachfully. Then he stopped and shook his head. “You’re right,” he said, making an effort to be calm. “I’m sorry.”

“We have more important things to talk about anyway,” Melkor said, ignoring the urge to feel guilty.

Mairon raised an eyebrow. “More important than you getting shot?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Such as?”

“Tol-Sirion,” Melkor said. “The sale went through.”

“It did?” Mairon said. “That’s fantastic!”

“I know,” Melkor said.

“Formenos is really going to be reeling after last night,” Mairon said. “They lost a branch company and a CEO.” He rubbed his hands together excitedly. “This is good,” he said. “This is really good.”

“Yeah, I know,” Melkor said. “Listen, we really need to capitalize on this.”

“Oh, for sure,” Mairon said, starting to pace. “I have a list of projects we can move out there. I can start going through it and compare with the setup at Tol-Sirion.”

“Good,” said Melkor. “So how fast can we get it set up?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said. “I mean, we don’t even know what project we’re going to base there. Depending on what we pick, and what stage it’s in, if any equipment or space needs to be built or renovated, personnel—especially finding someone to run it...”

“We have someone to run it.”

“Who?”

“You.”

Mairon stopped pacing. “Me?”

“Why not?”

“I’m an engineer,” Mairon said. “Not an administrator.”

“You can be both,” Melkor said.

“I don’t know, Melkor.”

“You said yourself that Formenos is reeling, and it’s true. We need to take advantage of their confusion and get out ahead. If we’re going to do that, I need someone out there I can trust.”

“And you’re sure you want it to be me?”

“Absolutely.”

Mairon sighed. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll do it. But—“

“Great,” said Melkor. “How soon can you get out there?”

“Like I said, there’s a thousand things to do. We’ll need to shift resources out there—transfer some employees, hire new ones, check out the equipment and setup—“

“How soon?”

“I honestly can’t give you a timeframe right now.”

“Can you be out there by Monday?”

“Monday,” Mairon repeated, raising an eyebrow. “As in, today is Thursday, and four days from now is Monday.”

“I know how the days of the week work, thanks. Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s possible,” said Mairon. “If we do absolutely nothing else, we could probably get barebones operations started up.”

“Good.”

“Uh, you know that was hypothetical, right?”

“You can make it happen. I know you can.”

“Yeah, but—“

“Make it happen.”

“Melkor,” he said, “you just got attacked by one of our competitors and ended up in the hospital. I’m not going anywhere until—“

“Will you listen to me?” Melkor interrupted him, perhaps more forcefully than he had meant to. “I want you to go—now.”

Mairon frowned. “Why are you pushing this?”

“I’m not pushing.”

“Yes, you are. What’s going on?”

“I just—“Melkor ran a hand through his hair, gathering his thoughts. “I just think it would be good for us to spend a little time apart. Don’t you?”

“What? No. What are you talking about?”

“I think we should take a break,” said Melkor.

“A break,” Mairon repeated, momentarily nonplussed. “What are you—oh my God.” His mouth fell open in shock as he realized what Melkor had said. “You’re breaking up with me,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“No,” said Melkor, casting about for the right words. His head was swimming; he felt panicked, disconnected from the conversation. “I mean, breaking up would imply we were dating.” He winced at his own words, and at the look of anger on Mairon’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Mairon said, his voice deadly calm, “but what exactly would you imply we’ve been doing, if not dating?”

“I thought we were just f—“

“Don’t say it.”

Melkor sighed. “Look, the last eight months or whatever have been fun—a lot of fun, actually. But with all the shit that’s going on with Formenos, and the court cases, all the projects we’re juggling...I just can’t afford to be distracted.”

“Is that what I am to you?” Mairon demanded. “A distraction?”

“Well, yeah,” Melkor said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. It’s been really fucking awesome and all, but—“

“Unbelievable,” Mairon said, shaking his head. “You’re unbelievable, you know that? Jesus. Every time I think there’s no possible way for you to sink any lower, you go ahead and find some way to lower the fucking bar.”

“Can we try to be adults about this, please?”

“Apparently not.”

“Look, are you going to Tol-Sirion or not? Because if you don’t want to do your job—“

“How dare you,” Mairon said, his anger palpable. “I have given everything to this company—literal years of my life, practically killing myself, just to move your agenda forward. I have done whatever you asked me, no matter how impractical or insane, and I’ve done it better than anyone else could. And you have the goddamn nerve to accuse me of being unwilling to do my job.”

“Are you going or not?” Melkor’s head was pounding, his heart racing, but he did his best to be calm.

Mairon, as usual, was better. He stared for a moment at Melkor in disbelief, and then his face rearranged into an expression Melkor hadn’t seen in months—a face of utter calm, of total neutrality. It was a face that betrayed absolutely no emotion. Melkor felt something break between them, and his stomach roiled uncomfortably. “Yes,” Mairon said, his voice flat. “I’m going. I’ll be there by Monday.” Melkor’s mouth felt dry, and he wasn’t sure he could speak. Instead, he simply nodded. “Is there anything else?” Mairon asked, and Melkor shook his head. “Then I better get started,” Mairon said.

He turned and walked across the room toward the door. When he reached the doorway, he paused. He turned slowly around and looked at Melkor. For a moment, the carefully-constructed mask of stoicism slipped, and Melkor could see the anger, the hurt, and the confusion written

plainly on Mairon's features. "I'm really happy you're okay," said Mairon, his voice a hoarse whisper. Then he turned on his heel and disappeared into the hall. On his bed, Melkor covered his face with his hands and groaned.

Mairon walked briskly through the hall, nearly running into Gothmog and Thuringwethil at the elevator.

"Mairon," said Thuringwethil. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "Sorry. Um, can one of you give me a ride?"

"Mai—"

"Thil, please. Not now. I just...can you give me a ride?"

"The police are coming to interview Melkor," she said. "I have to be here."

"Oh, right. Sorry. It's fine, I can—"

"I'll take you," Gothmog said.

"Are you sure?"

"I've been here all night," Gothmog said. "I could use a break. Come on." He pushed Mairon toward the open elevator door, looking over his shoulder as he stepped inside. Thuringwethil held her hand to her ear, pantomiming a phone. Gothmog nodded and stepped back to let the doors close.

"Okay," Gothmog said. "You want to tell me what—"

"Melkor broke up with me."

"He what?"

"Well, not exactly," said Mairon, a bitter edge in his voice. "You can't break up if you weren't dating in the first place."

"Jesus," Gothmog. "Look, let's not overreact, okay? He's on a shit ton of painkillers, and—"

"No," Mairon said, shaking his head. "Don't make excuses for him, Gothmog. He meant what he said."

Gothmog didn't have the heart to argue. Mairon looked awful—drained, exhausted, and utterly despondent. Gothmog wished he would do something—yell, cry, make a scene—anything but this unbearable resignation. He sighed and pulled Mairon into a bear hug. "Come on," he said as the elevator doors opened into the lobby. "Let's go home."

"I don't want to go home," Mairon said.

"What do you want to do?"

"Drink," said Mairon firmly.

Gothmog knew better than to try to talk him out of it. He sighed, and threw an arm around Mairon's shoulders. "You got it," he said, and led Mairon out to the car.

It took Mairon about an hour to cycle through the stages of grief.

First, there was denial (*He didn't mean it, right? I mean, like you said, he's on a bunch of painkillers—he's probably high.*). Then there was anger (*Can you believe that asshole? Saying we weren't even dating...Jesus, did we live through the same eight months?*). Next came bargaining (*I'll refuse to go. He can't ignore me forever. I can change his mind.*). That one finished quickly and gave way to depression (*What am I gonna do, Gothmog? I was happy—I thought we both were. How could I have been so wrong?*). Finally, there was acceptance (*I'm just gonna throw myself into my work—go out to Tol-Sirion and start fresh. I mean, at least I still have a job, right?*). Acceptance didn't last long; sooner than later, the whole thing began again.

By four o'clock, Gothmog had run out of ways to respond. By six o'clock, he realized it didn't matter. Whatever he said, be it something incredibly thoughtful and sympathetic or nothing at all, Mairon responded the same way: a combination of resignation, fury, and distress. So he said nothing, and Mairon continued, oblivious. By nine o'clock, Mairon had forgone the structure of the stages altogether, opting for an odd mix of anger, depression, and acceptance (*I guess I'll just go do my fucking job, like a goddamn adult. Maybe I'll get hit by a bus—I bet he'd be sorry then.*) that got darker and more morose as time went on, helped in no small part by his dogged determination to drink himself into oblivion.

It was midnight when he finally talked himself out. Gothmog sat on one side of a booth, both arms outspread over the back of the bench. His head was spinning vaguely, and he looked over at Mairon, wondering in earnest how his friend was still upright. Mairon had been drinking steadily throughout the day and into the night, though he had slowed now, nursing a quarter-full glass of vodka mixed with soda.

Gothmog pushed himself away from the bench and leaned his arms on the table. "You about ready?" he asked.

"No," Mairon said.

"You're going to have to be," Gothmog said. "Thil's here."

"Just a little longer," Mairon said. He wouldn't look at Gothmog, but Gothmog could see his face. He looked utterly lost, and Gothmog felt a stab of sympathy for his friend. It was strange to see Mairon so directionless, so at a loss for what to do.

"Come on," Gothmog said, sliding himself carefully out of the booth. He leaned on the table and offered Mairon his hand. Mairon sighed and reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled up.

Thuringwethil was waiting at the curb, her car idling. To her credit, she said nothing as the two of them got in, stinking of stale cigarette smoke and liquor.

She drove Gothmog home first, letting him out on the street outside his building. Mairon climbed into the front seat where Gothmog had been, and Thuringwethil pulled away again.

They drove a few minutes in silence. Mairon sat with his cheek pressed up against the cool glass of the window, watching the streets melt by them in the dark.

"You missed the turn," he said, watching the exit drift back into the gloom.

"No I didn't," she said.

“I live that way,” Mairon said, pushing himself up and pointing vaguely behind them.

“I know where you live,” she said. “I’m not taking you home.”

“But—“

“Mai, if you think I’m letting you stay by yourself tonight, you don’t know me at all.”

Mairon opened his mouth to argue, and realized he wasn’t quite drunk enough to attempt that particular stupidity. Instead, he leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes as the city shrunk away behind them.

Thuringwethil pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. “We’re here,” she said.

“I know,” he said. He sighed and opened the car door, swaying as he stood. “Oh, God,” he said, blanching.

“Come on,” she said, hurrying up the steps to the porch and unlocking the front door. Mairon pushed past her and ran up the stairs into the bathroom. Thuringwethil shut the door and locked it. She took off her jacket, hung it on the hook by the door, and set her bag on the table. She took off her shoes and stood in the living room, listening. It was quiet in the house, and so she headed for the stairs, making her way to the bathroom.

She found Mairon sitting on the floor, his back to the wall. She stood in the doorway for a moment, sizing him up. “The good news,” she said, hazarding a joke, “is that I think you just puked up at least half the vodka you drank.”

He groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. “Don’t say that word.”

“What, puke?”

He grimaced, shaking his head. “Uh-oh,” he said, and leaned over the toilet.

“Shit,” she said, hurrying inside. She made it to him just in time, pulling his hair back hastily from his face as he retched. “You’re okay,” she said, settling herself on the floor beside him.

“Thanks,” he said hoarsely, leaning back again. His head hit the wall with a soft thump, and she winced.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I owe you anyway. Remember New Years’?”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, making a face.

“Sorry,” she said. “But hey, on the plus side, I just cleaned this bathroom last night. So…”

He smiled. “Lucky me,” he said. His smile faded, and he groaned. “Fuck, Thil.”

“I know,” she said.

“Why?” He opened his eyes, fixing her with a pained, bloodshot gaze. “Why did he do it, Thil?”

“I don’t know, Mai,” she said, wishing she had a better answer.

“What did I do wrong?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” she said. “Sometimes…well, sometimes shit just happens.” She

knew her answer was neither satisfying nor helpful, and she sighed. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go to bed. I just put fresh sheets in the guest bedroom, so you’re in luck.”

“You go ahead,” he said. “I want to sit here a little longer.”

She hesitated for a moment but decided it wasn’t worth arguing. “Good night, Mai,” she said, and trudged down the hall to her room.

Thuringwethil woke from a restless sleep at eight-thirty on the dot. She grabbed her phone from the bedside table and looked at the screen, wondering if some notification had woken her, but the screen was blank. She lay still for a moment, trying to identify the source of her uneasiness. Then she remembered, and she sat up, running a hand through her hair and sighing.

She got up and got dressed, making an effort to be quiet. Then she went out into the hall and went to the guestroom. She knocked softly, but there was no answer. She turned the handle and pushed open the door. “Mairon?” she said, poking her head inside.

The room was empty; the bed was neatly made, as she had left it. Thuringwethil frowned and continued down the hall. The bathroom door was open, and the light was on. She padded quietly up to the threshold and looked inside. Mairon was where she had left him the night before, his back against the wall, knees drawn up to his chest. Both arms were folded over his knees, his forehead resting against his arms. He was snoring softly, and Thuringwethil smiled fondly at him. She half-closed the door and continued down the stairs.

She set a pot of coffee to brew. While it was percolating, she pulled a notepad from the drawer by the sink, opened it to a fresh page, and wrote Mairon a note.

Have to run a few errands. Be back in an hour-ish. Have some coffee, and lock up if you leave.

She set an empty coffee mug on top of the note and laid her spare keys on the counter beside it. She filled her travel mug with coffee, grabbed a banana from the table, and headed out the door.

It was a short drive to the hospital. It was Friday morning, barely nine o’clock, and there was, oddly enough, very little traffic. She parked in a mostly-empty lot and made her way inside, heading up to Melkor’s room on the fourth floor. He was asleep, his mouth half-open, looking far more peaceful than Thuringwethil thought he had any right to be. She walked over to the bed and slapped him hard, the back of her hand stinging as it connected with his shoulder.

Melkor woke with a yelp, his hand flying to his arm. “Mother fucker!” he swore, pushing himself up in bed and glaring at her. “Jesus goddamn Christ, Thil! Do the words ‘gunshot wound’ mean nothing to you?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she demanded.

“You punch a dude in the hospital and still have the nerve to ask that question?” She raised her hand again, and he flinched. “Jesus, Thil! What’s your problem?”

“Do you know where I was at one o’clock this morning?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“I was sitting on my bathroom floor,” she said, “holding Mairon’s hair while he puked up about half a bottle of vodka.”

“About time that jerk gets a hangover. He’s always way too perky after a bender.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she demanded again.

“Nothing,” he said defensively. “Jesus.”

“Melkor,” she said, her tone a warning.

“We broke up,” he said. “It happens.”

“You didn’t break up,” she said. “You fucking blindsided him. Jesus, Melkor. I cannot believe you. After I asked you—begged you, for fuck’s sake—not to fuck this up.”

“Believe it or not, I don’t make decisions in life based on what you’re going to think.”

“Maybe you should. Maybe—“

“Maybe you should butt the fuck out of my business,” he retorted, interrupting her. “This has nothing to do with you, Thuringwethil. You’re not my mother. You’re not my boss. And you sure as hell don’t get a say in how I live my goddamn life. So get out of my fucking face about this, do you hear me?”

She stared at him for a moment, angry disbelief written on her face. “Fine,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

He frowned, nonplussed. “What?”

“I’ll get out of your fucking face. Oh, by the way, congrats again on the Tol-Sirion sale. That’s a big get for Angband.”

“Um,” he said, thoroughly confused by the non-sequitur. “Yeah, I guess.”

“It’s gonna need a good staffing in the legal department, what with permits and contracts and all.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of someone to send.”

“Already did.”

“What are you—wait. No. Nope. Uh-uh.”

“It’s the smart thing to do,” she said. “We need to make sure Tol-Sirion gets a smooth launch. Mairon’s going to need me.”

“I need you,” Melkor said. “In case you forgot, we’re getting our asses dragged to court once a week.”

“You don’t need me,” she said sweetly. “I’m not your mother. I’m not your boss. And I sure as hell don’t get a say in how you live your life.”

“Thil, I—“

“You want me out of your fucking face? I’m gone. I don’t need to be told twice.”

“Thil, wait. I—“

“I’m going to Tol-Sirion,” she said. “You can call me if you need anything work-related. If you

need anything not work-related, well..." She shrugged. "I guess you can go fuck yourself." She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

"Come on," Melkor pleaded. "Thil, wait!"

She flipped him off over her shoulder and kept walking. Melkor listened to the sound of her footsteps retreating down the hall and knew she wasn't going back. "Fuck," he said, laying back down in bed. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

Gothmog knocked on the door to Melkor's room early Tuesday morning. "Hey," he said. "Get ready. We gotta go."

"What are you doing here?" Melkor asked, rolling over in bed. "And what time is it?"

"Seven," Gothmog said. "They discharged you."

"Three more hours," Melkor said, closing his eyes. "At least."

"Uh-uh," said Gothmog, walking over and pulling the blankets off of him. "We're going to be late."

"Late for what?" Melkor said, glaring at him.

"Thil and Mairon," Gothmog said. "Their flight leaves at nine."

"Forget it," Melkor said.

"But—"

"Gothmog, they don't want to see me."

"They're your friends," Gothmog said. "They're pissed at you—for good reason, if you want my opinion."

"I don't."

"You're going," said Gothmog. "Whatever else went down, they're your friends. This is what friends do."

"This is a terrible idea, you know."

"Not worse than any of yours, dumbass."

"Fair enough," said Melkor, though he didn't move.

"Come on," Gothmog said. He held out his hand, and Melkor took it, wincing as Gothmog helped him to his feet.

"Let's get this over with," Melkor said, sighing.

They made it to the airport just as Mairon and Thuringwethil got out of their cab. Gothmog pulled his car up behind the cab and killed the engine. "Hey!" he said, maneuvering himself out of the

car and waving.

“Good timing,” Mairon said.

“What’s he doing here?” Thuringwethil demanded, glaring at Melkor as he got out of the car.

“I picked him up from the hospital,” Gothmog said.

“Not what I asked you.”

“Thil, I know you’re mad, but you guys are leaving. I don’t know when you’re coming back, but I know the four of us haven’t been apart like this since…”

“Since Melkor came back from prison,” Mairon said.

“Exactly,” Gothmog said.

“Need I remind you,” Thuringwethil snapped, “that he’s the whole reason we’re splitting up?”

“Thil, I—“

“It’s okay,” Mairon said. “I get it, Gothmog. You’re trying to be a good friend.”

“Thanks, Mai,” he said, grateful for the deflection of Thuringwethil’s irritation. He hugged Mairon, squeezing hard enough that the air rushed out of Mairon’s lungs in half-choked wheeze. “I’m gonna miss you, buddy.”

“I’ll miss you too, Gothmog,” Mairon said. “Now please stop crushing me to death.”

“Sorry,” Gothmog said, grinning unrepentantly. He turned to Thuringwethil. “Take care of yourself, Thil,” he said, hugging her far more gently than he had Mairon. “And take care of this asshole. I’m afraid he’ll starve to death if I’m not there to buy him breakfast.”

“Please,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I got him,” Thuringwethil said, ignoring him. “Don’t worry.”

Gothmog stepped back and looked at Melkor expectantly. Melkor sighed. “Thil,” he began.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “I’ve had enough out of you for a while.”

“But—“

“Fuck you, Melkor,” she said. She pulled up the handle of her suitcase, turned around, and marched off toward the entrance.

Melkor frowned, watching her retreat inside. Then he turned to Mairon. “Look,” he said. “I—“

Mairon shook his head. “What Thil said,” he said. He grabbed his bags and turned around, following Thuringwethil without so much as a backward glance.

“Great idea, Gothmog,” said Melkor sourly, watching them go.

“Watch it, asshole,” Gothmog growled, walking around the front of the car and opening the door. “I’m the only friend you’ve got left.”

“Back to square one,” Melkor said. He looked tired, and suddenly frail, as though the tumult of the

last few days had finally caught up with him.

Gothmog relented, and he sighed. “Come on, dumbass,” he said, getting into the car. “If we’re going to be miserable, we might as well do it on a full stomach.”

Chapter End Notes

Come visit me on [tumblr](#)

Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now

Chapter Summary

Melkor and Mairon broke up. They deal with it about as well as you'd expect.

Chapter Notes

aka let's have a contest to see who can find the most childish, unsustainable coping mechanisms.

Gothmog and Thuringwethil seriously reconsider their choice in friends.

Check out [this art](#) that I forgot to mention last chapter because I'm a bad person but was 10000% the inspiration for the stolen shirt Mairon was wearing. tumblr user [admirable-mairon](#) is a frickin' gift, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thuringwethil pushed open the door and stepped inside, letting her bags fall to the ground as she crossed the threshold. “What a goddamn day,” she said, pulling the elastic from her hair and letting it fall loose. Mairon followed her inside and looked around. It wasn’t a bad place, he had to admit, and he supposed they were lucky to have gotten it. They’d had three days’ notice for moving cross-country, after all. God bless Thuringwethil, he thought, and he almost smiled. Then he remembered why they had come all this way, and he felt a bitter burn in the back of his throat.

“Is it wrong that I don’t even feel like unpacking?” Thuringwethil said.

“Huh?” He looked around for her and found she’d gone into the kitchen.

“Sitting on a plane for four hours will do that, I guess.”

“I guess,” he said.

She leaned on the island in the center of the kitchen, studying his face. “I figure,” she said carefully, “that we can take tomorrow off—do the unpacking, shopping, whatever needs done. Then—“

“Thil, I’m sorry,” he said, “but I have to go to work.”

“Mai, they don’t need you right away. Just take a day to—“

“I can’t, Thil,” he said. “I can’t take a day. I can’t take an hour, or a minute, or a second..”

“Why not?”

“Because if I stop moving...” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m afraid I’ll never start again.”

“Mai—“

“I’m sorry,” he said. He sighed and looked around the apartment. “I have to go,” he said.

“Mairon, wait. Come on.”

He shook his head. “Don’t wait up,” he said.

He walked out the door and down the stairs, heading down the sidewalk. It was early afternoon—warm, but not overbearing. Tol-Sirion wasn’t far, and though he didn’t exactly know the way, he knew at least the general direction. Hefting his bag higher on his shoulder, he set off toward the new office.

Ten o’clock found Mairon laying on the floor of the new coding lab, untangling lengths of cord coming from the computers above him and separating them into neat little bundles. He zip-tied each set together and laid back, surveying his handiwork. The building was quiet and empty; it would have been peaceful if not for the angry swirl of Mairon’s thoughts. He had ignored them all day, keeping them buried beneath a constant, methodical stream of inane, menial tasks. Now he had run out of tasks, and his thoughts came roaring to the surface, spilling over him in suffocating waves.

He lay still for a moment, wallowing in anger and self-pity. Then he sighed, and he sat up, looking around at the beginnings of a proper lab. His stomach growled, and he grimaced; he hadn’t eaten since Thuringwethil had practically forced a donut down his throat at the airport, and he was starving. He got slowly to his feet and looked around, feeling a familiar stab of dissatisfaction at how little he had accomplished. He wanted to keep working, and yet he knew, unwilling as he was to admit it, that he needed to eat.

He picked up his bag from the floor and headed out into the dark hallway, making his way through the unfamiliar space until he reached the lobby. It was a dark night, the moon and stars veiled by a gathering of clouds. He walked between the pools of light thrown by the streetlamps that lined the sidewalk, enjoying the quiet, unbothered peace.

Down the street he found a bar, suitably empty that he could work in peace, and suitably grungy that no one was likely to bother him. He sat down at a booth and spread his work over the table in front of him. With the mindless drone of the television in the background and the unobtrusive company of drunk, uninterested strangers, Mairon relaxed into his work.

Two hours ticked by with very little change. Mairon drained the last of his beer and moved his glass aside to reach a scrap of paper he’d scribbled on during the flight. “Wrong equation,” he muttered scratching out some numbers. “Idiot.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you,” said a voice from somewhere near his elbow. “I have never seen anyone concentrate that hard for that long. It’s impressive.”

“Please,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. “I’m just warming up.” His tone was harsher than he had meant it to be, and he winced. “Sorry,” he said, turning at last to find it was the bartender who had spoken. “Long day.”

“You and me both, buddy. I’ve been here ten hours—not that the overtime isn’t nice, but, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mairon said. “I flew across the country this morning and went straight to work.”

“Shit, man. You win.”

Mairon laughed. “I didn’t mean to make it a competition.”

“That’s alright,” said the bartender. “I don’t mind losing to a cute guy.” Mairon stared for a moment, his brain momentarily refusing to process the compliment. The bartender didn’t seem to mind, because he smiled and said, “Mind if I sit?” He didn’t wait for an answer; instead, he slid into the booth beside Mairon.

Mairon had no time to move; the other man was very close to him, their thighs touching as they sat side-by-side, and Mairon was suddenly and uncharacteristically nervous. “Aren’t you working?” he asked, trying to cover his uneasiness.

“Aren’t you?” the bartender retorted, grinning.

He was cute, Mairon decided—tall and lanky, with messy blonde curls he kept pushing away from his face. He felt a stab of guilt, followed by a rush of anger at himself, and he smiled, trusting his face to belie none of it. “Yes,” Mairon said, answering him at last, “but I’m not exactly on the clock.”

“Neither am I,” said the bartender. “We closed twenty minutes ago.”

“Jesus,” Mairon said. “Really? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “I was hoping for an excuse to talk to you, anyway.”

“You didn’t need an excuse,” Mairon said.

The bartender said nothing; he tilted his head, considering Mairon. Then he leaned in and kissed him, a soft, tentative press of the lips. Mairon didn’t move; he could hear the pounding of his own heart, feel the jittering of his pulse. The bartender turned his head, nuzzling against Mairon’s cheek. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he whispered.

Mairon let himself fall back against the wall, pulling the bartender back on top of himself. He kissed Mairon eagerly, gracelessly, an unfamiliar crush of lips, the slide of his tongue into Mairon’s mouth. Part of Mairon desperately craved the attention, and another part hated that need; he ignored the latter and gave into the former, his hands tangling in thick, blonde curls as he pulled the other man closer.

Mairon’s phone rang, and he jumped. “Leave it,” said the bartender, but Mairon sat up, leaning into him to grab his phone from the table.

“Sorry,” Mairon said, glancing at the screen. He answered the call, holding the phone to his ear. “Yeah,” he said.

“Where are you?” Thuringwethil demanded.

“Hello to you, too.”

“You’ve been gone for like, twelve hours.”

“I know. I was at work.”

“Past tense.”

“I went to get dinner.”

“Now I know you’re lying,” she said. He laughed, and tried to ignore the teasing trace of the

bartender's fingers on his chest. "You coming home soon?"

He sighed and closed his eyes, his grip on his phone tightening as the bartender kissed down his neck. "I don't know, Thil," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"That's a no," she said.

"Look," he said, biting his lip at the press of lips to the hollow of his throat, "I have a lot to do, okay?"

"Get a new excuse," she said. "That one's getting old."

"I have to go," Mairon said. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Mai—"

"Bye, Thil," he said, and hung up. He tossed the phone back onto the table.

"Am I keeping you from someone?" he asked, one hand splayed against the muscle of Mairon's chest. "Girlfriend?" He kissed the left corner of Mairon's mouth. "Boyfriend, maybe?" He kissed the right corner of Mairon's mouth.

"No one," Mairon said, ignoring the stab of loss that came with the words. "You?"

The bartender shook his head. "You want to get out of here?"

Mairon hesitated only for a second. Then he gathered up his things and let himself be led away, out into the darkness of the unfamiliar city.

Gothmog walked through a dark, unkempt apartment, wrinkling his nose at the detritus littered haphazardly around the kitchen and living room. There were clothes thrown over the backs of the couch and the chairs, and takeout containers spilling old grease onto the coffee table. Dishes leaned precariously in a stack in the sink. All the lights were off, the curtains drawn against the afternoon sunlight. Gothmog ignored the mess, walking through the living room and into the hall. He could hear the loud blaring of a television, muffled only slightly by distance, and he followed it to the backmost bedroom. He stepped through the open door and crossed his arms, frowning at Melkor.

"I thought you might have died in here," Gothmog said.

"Give it time," Melkor said.

"What are you doing?"

Melkor spread his hands, indicating the general mess of his room. "What does it look like?"

"You're wallowing," Gothmog said.

"Convalescing," Melkor corrected.

"A twenty dollar word doesn't change the facts."

"I thought that was the point of twenty dollar words."

Gothmog scowled at him for a moment. Then he strode into the room and pulled the blankets back from the bed, ignoring Melkor's protests. "Let's go," he said. "You're getting up."

"No," Melkor said. "I'm not."

"Yes, you are," Gothmog said. "You've been moping for a week."

"Gothmog, I'm a grown-ass adult. I don't mope."

Gothmog waved a hand at him. "Exhibit A," he said. In answer, Melkor tossed a handful of popcorn at him. Gothmog rolled his eyes. "Look," he said, gentling his tone, "you need to get out of the house. It's not healthy, sitting around like this—especially when you just got out of the hospital."

"Don't make me say the word convalescing again."

"Melkor, you've missed two physical therapy appointments. They've called, like, eight times."

"Don't care."

"You're gonna," Gothmog said, "when you walk with a goddamn limp." Melkor shrugged. "I mean, shit," said Gothmog, making a last-ditch effort to rouse his friend. "Halloween's less than two months away. You keep this up, and you're gonna be stuck with, like, Igor as your only costume option."

"Don't care," Melkor said again.

Gothmog was now thoroughly annoyed by Melkor's defiant, determined apathy. "You're pathetic," he said.

Melkor scowled at him. "Would it kill you to have a little sympathy?"

"Probably not," Gothmog said. "But honestly, it's a little hard to muster any. I mean, you brought this on yourself."

"You think I don't know that?" Melkor demanded. "You think that makes it any better? Any easier to deal with?"

"I guess not," Gothmog said.

"No," said Melkor. "It fucking doesn't."

Gothmog sighed. "Come on," he said. "Get up, and get a shower. Change your clothes. Eat something that doesn't come from a can."

"I don't want to," Melkor said.

"Well, too bad," said Gothmog. "You're going to do it."

"But—"

"Uh-uh," said Gothmog, his tone leaving no room for further disagreement. "You didn't just fuck up your life this time, asshole. You fucked up mine, too. Thil and Mai are a solid two-thirds of my friends, and now I don't get to see them for God knows how long. You did that, and if you're not going to fix it, then at least have the decency to try to be my friend."

Gothmog glared at Melkor, and Melkor glared back, though the contest was short-lived. Melkor just didn't have the willpower to summon any of his usual belligerence. He looked away, pulling a sour face. "Fine," he said grudgingly. "I'll do it. But only if you find me some lunch. I'm starving."

"Deal," said Gothmog. "And while you're getting ready, think about where you want to go."

"Go?"

"Yes, go. I've been sitting at home alone all week. I'm going out of my fucking mind."

"You are the literal worst," Melkor said.

Gothmog flipped him off on his way back out to the kitchen. He heard the shower start to run; satisfied, he opened the freezer and rummaged through what looked like the kind of food a four-year-old would buy with fifty dollars and access to the freezer aisle. He pushed aside a half-empty bag of chicken nuggets and a half-dozen popsicles, stacking them atop a pint of birthday cake ice cream. Buried beneath some frozen breakfast sandwiches and pre-cooked burritos, Gothmog found a pizza that didn't look entirely disgusting. He tossed it on the counter and preheated the oven.

Melkor slouched into the kitchen as Gothmog was cutting the pizza. "Well," said Gothmog, leveling the pizza cutter at him, "you almost look like a human being again."

"Fuck you," said Melkor amiably. He pulled his wet hair back from his face, tying it into a knot before reaching for a piece of pizza.

"Did you decide where we're going?"

"Work," said Melkor, around a mouthful of food.

"It's Saturday," said Gothmog.

"And?"

"Um," said Gothmog. "Did you have a stroke or something? You've never worked a Saturday in your life."

"Not true," said Melkor. "Although, to be fair, it has been a while."

"You know, you might've laid in bed all goddamn week, but I didn't. I was at work, and I really, *really* don't want to go in on my day off." Melkor said nothing; he ate pizza and stared at Gothmog. "God, that's an annoying look," said Gothmog. Melkor said nothing. "I'm not gonna cave," Gothmog said, though he didn't sound sure. Melkor said nothing. "It's Saturday," Gothmog whined. "Three o'clock, no less. I want to do something fun."

"We can hit happy hour before we go," said Melkor.

Gothmog heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Fine," he said. "But you're paying."

"Hey," said Thuringwethil, answering the call with a grin. "I was going to call you later."

"Sooner ok?"

“Sooner’s great.”

“God, it’s good to hear your voice,” said Gothmog, and Thuringwethil laughed.

“I talked to you three days ago,” she reminded him. “And texted you every day in between.”

“I know, but when your only social interaction is with a walking goddamn disaster zone, you get a little desperate for normal.”

“I’m with you there, pal.”

“I mean, to be fair, there’s really no ‘normal’ where the four of us are involved.”

“Touché,” said Thuringwethil.

“But this is excessive,” Gothmog said.

“Tell me about it.”

“The first week,” said Gothmog, “he didn’t leave his apartment at all. Not once. He ordered in two hundred dollars of shitty takeout and binged a bunch of shitty reality TV.”

“If this is supposed to inspire sympathy, then you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“I thought getting him up and out of the house would help,” Gothmog said, ignoring her. “But he’s still being weird—just in a different location.”

“I’m sorry he’s annoying you,” said Thuringwethil, “but I’m also not sorry he’s unhappy. If anyone deserves a little misery, it’s him.”

“He’s moping,” said Gothmog.

“Good,” said Thuringwethil.

“He’s slept at his desk, like, three nights this week.”

“That’s very unlike him.”

“Tell me about it. It’s like, dude, imitating Mairon isn’t gonna bring him back.”

“Please,” said Thuringwethil, rolling her eyes. “Mairon has graduated to much more destructive behavior than that.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I am honestly concerned he’s attempting death by overworking.”

“I mean, to be fair, Mairon lives to be overworked. It’s kind of his thing.”

“Yes,” she said, “but the shit he’s pulling now makes his Angband work habits look sane.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“You know how at home, he would work, I don’t know, twelve hours or something? And you’d catch him throughout the day taking a break, reading the news, writing some obnoxious, insulting comment on the *Times*’ latest article?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, well now he works eighteen hours and does none of that. I can’t get him to eat anything. Most of his calories are from coffee. And he’s never home. We have this beautiful apartment and he has literally never slept there. Not once.”

“How do these idiots sleep in their offices?” Gothmog said, sounding incredulous. “I mean, it has to be terrible for your back.”

“Oh, he’s not sleeping at his desk. Well, I mean, he is, but only about half the time.”

“Where’s he sleeping?”

“Some dude’s house, I assume. “

“Some dude?” said Gothmog.

“Yep,” said Thuringwethil grimly. “It’s getting out of hand.”

“To be fair,” Gothmog said, “that’s not, like, new. Mai likes to get it on the regular; he always has, even before he and Melkor—well, you know.”

“I know,” she said. “But before, it was, I don’t know, a couple times a month. Now it’s a couple times a week.”

“Good for him,” Gothmog said. “He deserves to have a little fun.”

“Theoretically, I’m all for it. If I thought his headspace was somewhere in the range of ‘you know what, fuck you, Melkor, I’m gonna win the rebound’, then I’d say go for it. But it’s...well, desperate isn’t the right word, but—“She shook her head, unsure how to finish that thought.

A thousand miles away, Gothmog sighed. Thuringwethil had never felt more comforted by a rush of static.

“This whole thing is a fucking mess,” Gothmog said.

“No kidding.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Gothmog said, “You know what the worst part is?”

“I honestly don’t.”

“The fact that I’d really, really like them to get back together.”

Thuringwethil made a noise of disgust. “Can you not?”

“I know,” he said. “I know. It’s just...shit, Thil. I miss you guys. I miss the four of us hanging out.”

“I know,” she said. “I do too. But it’s for the best, I think.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. He didn’t sound convinced.

“You could always come out and visit us,” she said. “Or, you know, move here.”

Gothmog laughed. “And leave Melkor to his own devices?”

“Fuck him,” Thuringwethil said.

“You don’t mean that,” Gothmog said. “Not really.”

“Okay,” she said grudgingly, “but I’m super pissed at him.”

“Honestly? So am I.” He sighed. “But on the bright side, this shit always works itself out in the end, right?”

Thuringwethil smiled; despite the pervasive gloom of the three weeks since they’d left Angband, Gothmog’s insistent natural optimism still managed to cheer her up. “I hope so,” she said, hoping Gothmog couldn’t hear how little she believed it.

Melkor stepped off the elevator and headed for the breakroom, looking for coffee. He had no idea what time it was, though it seemed somewhere in the vicinity of mid-afternoon. It was quiet on the sixth floor—too quiet, Melkor thought uneasily. It had been since Mairon had left, though Melkor was loathe to admit it.

“I need coffee,” he muttered. “Caffeine will help.”

He made it to the breakroom and stopped dead in the doorway, staring at the counter by the sink. “Mairon,” he said, staring at the familiar figure leaning against the sink. Mairon glanced at him only briefly before returning to his phone. “What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?” said Mairon. Melkor winced. Mairon’s tone was cool, polite—detached, that was the word. Melkor would’ve preferred anger. He grimaced.

“When did you get here?”

Mairon frowned. “I’ve always been here.”

“You left,” Melkor reminded him.

“You asked me to,” Mairon retorted.

Something was off about the conversation—hell, about the whole situation—though Melkor couldn’t quite pick up what it was. “I miss you,” he said, and winced. It was true; of course it was true. Still, he hadn’t meant to say it. He couldn’t believe he had.

Strangely enough, Mairon didn’t look surprised. “You should,” was all he said.

“I know,” Melkor said, looking at the floor. He sighed. “Mai, I—“

“Odd choice of clothes,” Mairon said, apropos of nothing.

“I—huh?”

“Not what I’d chose to address the whole staff, but hey,” Mairon said, shrugging in a way that managed to convey his complete dismissal of Melkor’s choices, “I guess I really shouldn’t be surprised, at this point.”

Melkor stared at him for a moment, and then looked down at himself. He was wearing nothing but boxers and socks. He turned to see the staff gathered behind him, and as he turned they started to laugh. “What the fuck?” Melkor said. He looked back at Mairon, who was not laughing, but

rather shaking his head.

“Asshole,” Mairon said.

“Asshole,” said Gothmog. “Hey, asshole.”

Melkor woke with a start and looked blearily around the room, focusing at last on Gothmog, who stood in the doorway.

“Havin’ a good sleep?” Gothmog asked, grinning.

“No,” said Melkor sourly.

“Sucks,” said Gothmog, his tone entirely unsympathetic. “Anyway, answer your phone. Thil’s been trying to call you.”

“Good call?” Melkor asked, pushing himself up off the couch. “Or bad call?”

“No idea.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, did she sound mad?”

“Honestly, Melkor, she sounds mad anytime your name is involved.”

“Fuck,” said Melkor, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes until bright light popped behind his eyelids.

“Better call her back,” said Gothmog. “The longer you wait, the angrier she gets.” He turned and ambled back out into the hall.

Melkor leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the cool leather arm of the couch. “Fuck,” he said. He reached for his phone and, hesitating only a moment, called her back.

It rang twice before the line picked up. Somehow, Melkor was sure he could hear the irritation radiating from Thuringwethil before she spoke a word. “About goddamn time,” she said.

“I was sleeping,” he said.

“It’s noon,” she said. “Or rather, three o’clock where you are.”

“And?”

“I need you to approve some hiring stuff. I just sent it to your email.”

“Goddamn it,” said Melkor. He pushed himself up off the couch and trudged over to the computer. “So,” he asked, repeatedly tapping the space bar in an effort to wake up his computer. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going,” said Thuringwethil. “Mairon approved, like, forty people’s applications over the last week or so. We’re almost done with hiring, and the barebones staff we brought out with us are already making headway on test flights for Draugluin.”

“Yeah, I got that report,” said Melkor, unearthing it from the detritus on his desk. “That’s a lot of work for three weeks.”

“Three and a half,” she corrected. “And you know Mairon. He runs a tight ship.”

“Speaking of Mairon, he was supposed to send me résumés for some of the more senior staff candidates in mechanical. Do you know if he did?”

“Are they in your inbox?”

“I don’t see them.”

“Then probably not.”

“I’ll call him.”

“Email him,” she said.

“It’ll be faster to call.”

“Email him,” she said again.

“But—“

“Melkor,” said Thuringwethil, her tone clipped, scolding. “He doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Did he say that?”

“He didn’t have to.”

“Thil, I—“

“Melkor,” she said, a note of warning in her voice, “don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“But—“

“Did you get my email or not?”

“I got it,” he said. “But—“

“I told you,” she said, sounding annoyed. “You can talk to me about work stuff all you want, but that’s it.”

“That’s not how being friends works.”

“You don’t have a goddamn clue how being friends works.” To his credit, Melkor said nothing. “Open the email,” she said, “and shut your goddamn mouth about everything else.” She sounded tired. For once, Melkor didn’t push.

“Morning,” said Thuringwethil.

“Mmhmm,” said Mairon, not looking up.

Thuringwethil walked over to the desk, looking over the work spread before him. “What’s this?”

“Equipment installation reports,” he said. “We ought to be ready to start on some prototype test builds within the week.”

“Really? That’s great, Mai.”

“Not bad for three weeks of work.”

She flipped through the pages, idly reading over the results. “Who’s Dungalef?” she asked. She held the page down so he could see the name scrawled on the top.

“One of the engineers we kept on from Tol-Sirion,” he said. “We kept a couple who were familiar with the mechanics of the place so we didn’t have to start completely from scratch.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “That worked out well, huh?”

“Not bad,” he said. “I mean, it’s been nice not having to figure a lot of the logistics out myself.”

“But?” she prompted.

“I don’t know,” he said. “He’s kind of pissing me off. I mean, don’t get me wrong. He does his job and everything.”

“But?” she prompted again.

“He argues with me,” Mairon said. “All the time. About everything.”

She laughed. “That would piss you off,” she said.

“I know he’s been here for a couple years or whatever,” Mairon said. “That’s why I kept him. But he doesn’t know shit about the Draugluin project—not really. So—“He stopped, catching Thuringwethil’s look. “What?”

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just kind of funny hearing you swear.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, shrugging. “What has professionalism ever gotten me?”

“Promotions?” she suggested. “A ton of respect in the industry?”

“Nothing,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “God, you’re so dramatic.”

“I’m dramatic?” he said, raising an eyebrow at her. “Yesterday you gave me a three minute spiel on how ungrateful I am for not eating all the food you bring me and how I’m going to starve to death alone in my office.”

“I brought you three delicious, nutritious breakfasts this week,” she said. “They all ended up in the trash.”

“And?”

“I don’t know if you know this,” she said, “but you cannot survive on spite alone. You need to pair it with some actual calories every once in a while.”

“I do.”

“Coffee doesn’t count as food.”

“It’s working for me.”

“Is it, though?”

“Thil, you’ve known me for seven years. Do you really want to try a rehash of the ‘Mairon, your lifestyle is unhealthy and unsustainable’ argument?”

Thuringwethil considered him for a moment. He was right; it was an old argument, one they had about once a year. It never ended in Thuringwethil’s favor. She shook her head. “God forbid I take an interest in you not dying,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Take an interest,” he said. “Just don’t get mad when I don’t share it.”

She scowled. “Would it kill you to show some appreciation?”

He sighed, relenting. “I’m sorry, Thil,” he said. “I do appreciate it. You know I do. It’s just—“

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You’re just a contrary piece of shit, is all.”

He laughed. “I am what I am.”

“An underfed, sleep-deprived workaholic?”

“You forgot caffeine addict.”

She crossed her arms and fought the urge to smile, unwilling to give any positive reinforcement to his habits. “What’s on your agenda today?”

“I need to go over the reports from the Carcharoth tests they’re doing at Angband,” he said. “Melkor’s last email said they might have some interest in it.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“And I need to figure out some logistics for getting the Drauglin prototypes in production.”

“Sounds like a full day.”

“Every day’s a full day.”

“Got time in your full day for lunch?”

“Probably not.”

“Dinner, then.”

He sighed. “Thuringwethil.”

“What? Do you have plans? Or do you not make them until you see who’s at the bar?”

“Depends on the day,” he shot back, scowling.

“Mai—“

“God,” he said. “How many times do we have to have this conversation? I’m a goddamn adult, Thuringwethil. I can make my own life decisions, thanks.”

“And how has that been working out for you?” she snapped.

For a moment, they glared at each other. Then Mairon sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, groaning. “Please,” he said. “Just drop it, will you? I’ve got more projects running than I can count. I’m overseeing two design teams on opposite sides of the country. I’m barely keeping my head above water right now.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” she said. “I’ve been trying to warn you about burnout for years.”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Burnout is for sissies.”

“Your words,” she said.

Despite himself, Mairon laughed. “God, I need more hours in a day.”

“You need a fucking nap,” she said.

“Finally,” he said. “Something we can agree on.” She laughed, and he gave her a tired smile.

“Thanks, Thil,” he said quietly. “For—well, everything. You know I appreciate it.”

“Of course you do,” she said. “I’m a goddamn enabler.”

“And I love you for it.”

“Look,” she said. “I don’t want to nag you. I don’t want to be in here every day bitching at you about your personal life.”

“But?”

“But I love you,” she said. “And I want you to take care of yourself.”

“I know,” he said. “Believe it or not, I do try.”

“Must be the only thing you’re not very good at.”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m also pretty terrible at small talk and most team sports.”

She laughed. “You know I’m here for you, right? If you want to grab dinner, or talk about work, or just sit around and drink and bitch about world’s worst boss, I’m your girl.”

He leaned his head against her arm, just for a moment. “Thanks, Thil. You’re the best.”

“No shit,” she said.

He laughed, leaning back in his chair and stretching. “All this heart-to-heart crap is making me hungry.”

“I’m surprised you recognize the feeling.”

“Me too.”

“Come on,” she said, holding out her hand. “Let’s go get something before you find an excuse to continue your hunger strike.”

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Yooo check out [these amazing FYD character sketches](#) by [gooooothmooooog](#). They're amazing; you'll love them.

I Me Mine

Chapter Summary

The wallowing continues until Gothmog and Thuringwethil can't take it anymore. They team up for some good old-fashioned tough love. Oh, yeah. And that Dungalef guy might be up to something...

Chapter Notes

I don't want to jinx it, but Melkor might have developed a conscience.

UPDATE

[Holy breakup hair, batman!](#) Mega thanks to [fingersnapchaos](#) on tumblr!

Also check out [this hella cute Mairon](#) from [probs-crying](#) on tumblr! I love him I want 10.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A soft *thunk* woke Mairon from the depths of a long-overdue nap, and he jerked upright, looking around the room.

“Shit,” Thuringwethil said. “Sorry. I was really trying not to wake you.”

“What time is it?” Mairon asked, yawning.

“Eight,” she said, closing the other side of the cupboard.

“A.M. or P.M.?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Would I be here at eight p.m.?”

He shrugged. “Depends on the day.”

“I guess,” she said. She turned her back to him, filling the mug she had taken from the cupboard with fresh coffee. “Seriously though,” she said, looking back over her shoulder at him. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“No big deal,” he said. “I needed to get up anyway.”

“Worried about violating your ‘no more than three hours of sleep’ mandate?”

“What time is it again?”

“Mairon.”

“Oh, right. Eight. I think I feel asleep at five-ish, so—what is that? Two hours?”

“Mairon,” she said again, looking slightly alarmed.

“Three,” he corrected quickly. “Three. Duh.” Thuringwethil eyed him suspiciously. “Cut me some slack,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I’m operating on three-ish hours of sleep.”

“Yeah,” she said. “For, like, the last two months.”

“And?”

“Mai, I’m worried about you.”

“Jesus,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “Here we go again.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Yes,” she said. “Again. Because apparently I have to say this ten thousand times for you to get it through your thick skull.”

“Don’t bother. I’m fine, Thil. Stop worrying about me.”

“Mai, our offices are literally across the hall, and I haven’t seen you in three days. You practically live in the coding lab. I’m not a hundred percent sure you actually eat real food any more, and to top it off, I’m pretty sure you’ve managed to exceed the capacity of this shithole town for random one night stands.”

“Hey, now,” Mairon said, “I think you’re underestimating this shithole town’s capacity for random one night stands.”

“Nice deflection,” she said.

“I thought so.”

“I’m serious, Mairon.”

“Thil, I’m fine.”

“You’re killing yourself,” she said. “And honestly, it’s killing me to watch you.”

His face went sour, and for a moment, he looked as though he would argue. Then he sighed, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. “I’m sorry, Thil. I know you’re worried about me, and honestly, I appreciate your concern. It’s just—“He shook his head. “I don’t know. The last couple weeks have just been such a frickin’ wringer, and maybe I’m not dealing with it in the best possible way —“

“Understatement of the century,” she muttered.

“But,” he said, making a face at her, “I’m dealing with it the best I can.”

“Mai, as your best friend, I want you to know that I support you, a hundred percent. I mean, unless you’re doing something completely stupid and/or shitty, in which case I’ll still support you, but like, also call you out on being an idiot. And right now, you’re being an idiot.” She laid a hand on his arm. “I know your best,” she said. “This isn’t it.” She patted him gently, picked up her coffee, and walked away.

Mairon’s phone rang, and he glanced at the clock, wondering who was calling him at eleven-thirty at night. He frowned at the name on the screen, debating answering the call. Then he sighed and

pulled his thumb across the slider, holding the phone to his ear. “Hello,” he said.

“Hey,” said Melkor. “Are you at a computer?”

“Um,” said Mairon, momentarily nonplussed. “Yeah. Why?”

“I’m sending you a thing.”

“Okay,” said Mairon, a little wary. There was a faint chime, and an email appeared in his inbox. “What am I looking at?”

“Did you open it?”

“Hang on.” He clicked the email, which was blank, and opened the attachment, skimming it. “Is that Carcharoth?”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “So they did some modeling projections downstairs, and they were good.”

“They look good,” said Mairon, eyes roving the screen.

“But I thought if we tweaked it just a little—scroll down—we could—“

“This is mechanical stuff,” Mairon said.

“Yeah, I know. So I—“

“Mechanical isn’t really my thing.”

“I mean, you’re not an expert or anything, but—“

“Melkor,” said Mairon, “why did you call me?”

“I wanted to bounce some ideas off you,” Melkor said, as though it should have been obvious.

“It’s eleven-thirty,” Mairon said.

“Oh, shit,” Melkor said. “Time difference.”

“Look,” said Mairon, “not be rude or anything, but I don’t think this counts as work stuff. I mean, obviously yes, it’s technically work, but it’s not something I can really give a meaningful contribution to. So.”

“Since when have you—oh.” The rest of Melkor’s sarcastic retort froze on his tongue as he realized what he had done. Calling Mairon had been an automatic response, something he had done entirely without thinking. He had grown so used to Mairon being his sounding board that he had, impossible as it sounded now, forgotten what had passed between them.

Mairon sighed, rubbing his temples with one hand. “You’ve got a whole lab full of mechanical engineers you can run this stuff by. Call one of them, if it’s urgent.”

“It’s not,” Melkor said.

“Good. Is there anything else? I’m kind of busy here.”

“No,” Melkor said. “That was it.”

“Alright. I’m gonna go, then.”

“Mairon,” he said.

“Yeah?”

Melkor had no idea what he wanted to say, only that he was loath to end the call. He wrestled with himself, trying to think of something reasonable, something to engage Mairon, if only for a few minutes. “Nothing,” he said at last, wincing at his own impotence.

Mairon sighed. “Goodbye, Melkor,” he said, and ended the call.

Melkor tossed his phone onto the couch beside him and thumped the heel of his hand repeatedly against his forehead. “Idiot,” he said. “You’re an idiot, Bauglir.” He groaned and sunk down into the cushions, as though he could make himself smaller, or get away from the embarrassment. Still, he thought, it had been nice to hear Mairon’s voice. “Idiot,” he said again, and pushed the thought from his mind.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Gothmog said, resting his chin in his hand.

“Fine,” said Thuringwethil. “Just don’t tell anyone else, or it’ll count as premeditation.”

“Good,” Gothmog said. “I might prefer prison at this point.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Thuringwethil said. “Not with our shitty luck lately.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “He’s driving me nuts, though.”

“Join the goddamn club,” she said.

“He lays around his office all damn day throwing that stupid tennis ball against the wall.”

“Ha,” she said. “Now you know how I felt.”

“If I yell at him,” Gothmog said, “he follows me to my office and lays on the floor whining about some stupid, petty bullshit that we both know damn well is just a stand-in for whining about the breakup, since I won’t listen to him talk about that.”

“He’s always been good at finding a way around the rules.”

“Do you know he was in my house this morning? I woke up, and he was just there.”

“What, in your bed?”

“No,” said Gothmog. “Thank God. At the kitchen table.”

“Doing what?”

“Drinking,” said Gothmog sourly. “Heavily.”

“Why?”

“He said he ran out at his place.”

“That’s the kind of Melkor logic I haven’t missed at all.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah, right,” she said. “I’ve been dealing with Mairon, remember?”

“I take it he’s not any better either?”

“Let’s see,” said Thuringwethil. “Yesterday, I legitimately almost called the cops because I hadn’t seen him in three days. His office was completely deserted, and I couldn’t find him in any of the usual spots. I had to track down some fucking staff engineer, who pointed me to this shitty little corner of a half-finished lab, where Mai had been holed up in a weird little nest for at least three days, but probably way more.”

“Um,” said Gothmog. “Hang on. Nest?”

“Think fort,” she said, “but made out of empty coffee cups and crumpled up notebook paper.”

“Jesus.”

“Uh-huh. No evidence of food, though, which is probably why he was passed out on a desk.”

“That,” said Gothmog, “or the lack of sleep.”

“Probably both. And he had this godawful playlist going at full fucking blast. Or—I don’t know. Playlist is really the only word for it, but it’s got to be the loosest possible interpretation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know that bit where those assholes go into a diner and play ‘What’s New Pussycat’ like, nineteen times in a row?”

“And then ‘It’s Not Unusual’,” Gothmog said, “but just once.”

“Uh-huh. Well, it’s like that, only you have to substitute one or two Smiths songs for ‘What’s New Pussycat’.”

“Which Smiths songs?”

“A weird, uneven rotation of ‘Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now’ and ‘I Know It’s Over’.”

“Oof.”

“Somehow, that’s not even the worst part.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah. See, the stand-in for ‘It’s Not Unusual’ changes. He’s got some ridiculous algorithm or whatever that plays that Morrissey bullshit and then throws in something random and terrible.”

“Such as?”

“The worst one I’ve heard so far was ‘Wrecking Ball’.”

“Jesus, Mairon. Even allowing for post-breakup wallowing, that’s a low point.”

“I manage to avoid the worst of it,” she said, “since he mostly does it in the lab. But his engineers are getting fed up. He blasts it in every room he’s in. It’s driving them crazy.”

“This is getting ridiculous,” Gothmog said. “It’s been almost two months. Isn’t that about the time

you start getting your shit together and moving on?”

“I’m not sure there’s a set timeline for that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, well I’m making one. Starting tomorrow, Melkor’s getting his ass in gear.”

She snorted. “Good luck with that.”

“It’s better than sitting around contemplating murder.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure that’s true. You’ll probably still want to kill him.”

“Maybe,” Gothmog said, “but at least I’ll have exhausted all my options first.”

She groaned. “God,” she said, laying her head down on the arm of her couch. “Not to steal your line, Gothmog, but this is a fucking mess.”

“I know,” he said. “I got used to letting Mairon sort this kind of shit out.”

“Yeah,” she said, “we all did. But right now, he’s not even interested in sorting out his own shit.”

“Neither is Melkor.”

“Nothing new there.”

“No,” he said. “As usual, someone’s going to have to kick his ass into gear.”

“Good luck with that.”

“You might want to think about doing the same, you know.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

“Mairon isn’t going to move on voluntarily,” he said. “Wallowing is comfortable and easy. Moving on is hard. And after the shitstorm Melkor put him through, which do you think he’s going to want to do?”

“Fair point.”

“All I’m saying is that if you ever want things to even out into some semblance of normal life, then you’re going to have to give him a push.”

“I’m not sure there’s every going to be any semblance of normal for us,” she said. “Not now.”

“Maybe not,” he said, and she smiled, knowing with certainty that he had shrugged. “But it’s worth a try, and it can’t get any worse than this weird fucking limbo we’ve been living in for two months.”

“Let’s not jinx ourselves.”

“Promise you’ll talk to him?”

“I’ll try,” she said.

“Good enough,” he said. “But to be clear, I have a good chance of getting out of murder charges if I avoid premeditation, right?”

She laughed, and the conversation turned to lighter, sillier things. For a few moments, they talked as though nothing had happened, as though they weren't on opposite sides of the country. For a few moments, the two of them relaxed.

Mairon was in the coding lab, debugging the work of an unfortunate junior engineer who was standing to the side, sweating nervously. His apprehension was not helped by the steady stream of criticism coming almost absently from Mairon, who kept saying things like, "I really should have checked your transcripts more closely", and "Jesus, I remember my first time writing code". His face was far too close to the computer screen to be healthy or comfortable, and he frowned, his finger following the string of text. "I don't even know what this is," he said. "Are you trying to invent your own commands, here? Because if so, you're doing it like a goddamn idiot." He tapped his finger on the screen to the beat of the music coming loudly over the speakers, the tenth repeat of The Smiths "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" in the last hour.

"No, sir," said the junior engineer. "I—"

Morrissey's voice cut off abruptly, switching to something upbeat that Mairon couldn't immediately identify. He whirled around, standing up out of his chair. "Who did that?" he demanded, looking around the room. There was silence, but for the sound of what Mairon mentally noted as Coldplay. Then he heard a voice from the back of the room say, "I did."

He stalked across the room and up to the desk belonging to Dungalef. "Who gave you permission?"

"No one," said Dungalef, "but—"

"Then why did you think you had the authority to—"

"Sir," said Dungalef, "we all talked about it, and we just can't take it anymore. The same couple of songs on repeat, day after day. It's—"

"I am not paying you," Mairon snapped, as irritated by the defiance as by the interruption, "to listen to music. And judging by the quality of your work, Dungalef, you ought to spend less time criticizing my choice of music and more time focusing on—"

"Sir, with respect, that's really not fair."

"No?" said Mairon. A flare of anger pulsed through him at being interrupted, and at the insolence in Dungalef's tone, but he did not show it. Instead, he smiled, and Dungalef took an involuntary step back, struck by the incongruity of a smile that nevertheless managed to convey a clear threat. "Well, then. If you're so confident in the quality of your work, how about we play a little game?"

"Sir," said Dungalef, suddenly nervous, "I—"

"It's a game I like to call surprise performance review," Mairon said. "Here's how it works. I'm going to go review all the work you've done in the last two months, and you're going to sit here panicking until I inevitably find something stupid you've done. Then I get to decide whether the offence is fireable or not. Sound good?"

"No," he said. "Wait, I—"

"And, go," said Mairon. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the coding lab.

In the quiet hush that followed his departure, the man at the desk next to Dungalef came up behind him and elbowed him in the ribs. “Nice going, idiot,” said the man, who was called Beren. “So much for flying under the radar.”

“This is bad,” Dungalef hissed. “We’re going to have to push this way ahead of schedule.”

He looked around at the gathered engineers, who were staring at him. “What are you looking at?” he snapped, stalking back to his desk. “Get back to work, or ten bucks says you’ll be next.”

Mairon walked up the stairs and barged into Thuringwethil’s office. “If I have to deal with one more case of incompetence versus actual stupidity, I’m going to quit.”

“No you won’t,” she said, not looking up.

“Bet me,” he said sourly.

“Name your price,” she said. “I’ll take your money any day of the week.”

“Fine,” he said. “But this place is driving me nuts.”

“You’re driving yourself nuts,” she said.

“Why are you being such a pain in the ass?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, looking up at last to scowl at him. “Did you want me to be caring and concerned? Because the best that’s gotten me in the last two months is the cold shoulder and a bunch of ungrateful whining.”

He rubbed his hands over his eyes. “Jesus,” he said. “Am I that bad?”

“You’re off the scale I’d previously established for wallowing.”

“I’m a mess, huh?” he said, giving her a tired smile.

“Your words,” she said.

He laughed. “God, two months,” he said. “I can’t decide if I feel like it’s gone fast or been an eternity.”

“A little of both,” she said.

“That sounds about right.” He sighed. “God, Thil. What am I doing?”

“Do you want an honest answer to that question?”

“Probably not.”

It was Thuringwethil’s turn to smile. “It’s been a rough couple of months, huh?”

“Understatement of the century,” he said.

“That’s my line.”

He laughed. “It’s time, isn’t it?”

“Time for what?”

He waved a hand vaguely in the air. “To quit wallowing. To make a stab at some new kind of normal. You know; to get my shit together.”

“Oh, thank God. I was starting to worry you were never going to come around.”

He laughed again. “You’re a trooper, Thil. You’ve been amazing. I’m sorry I’ve been such a pain in the ass.”

“Eh,” she said, waving him away. “You’ve earned it, a little. You went through a really shitty breakup.”

“Yeah,” he said, a flash of pain crossing his face. “But I’m not accomplishing anything by dwelling on it, right? It’s done.”

“I think so,” she said gently.

He sighed and leaned back against the wall. “Easier said than done,” he said. “Moving on, that is. I mean, Jesus. Where do I even start?”

“I’d probably start at the STD clinic.”

“You’re an ass,” he said, but he grinned. “Thanks, Thil.”

“Anytime,” she said. Her computer chimed, and she glanced at it, rolling her eyes.

“What’s up?”

“Fuckin’ lawsuit bullshit,” she said. “I’m trying to finagle a way that I don’t have to go back there just yet.”

“If you’re finagling on my behalf,” he said, “then don’t. I’m alright. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Prove it,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. He turned and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

He shrugged. “To prove it.”

“Check it out,” Mairon said, walking into Thuringwethil’s office and tossing a piece of paper onto Thuringwethil’s desk.

“What—holy shit.”

“Good or bad?”

“Different,” she said, standing up and looking him over. “Good, though. I think. Can I?”

“Go for it.”

Thuringwethil reached out and ran her fingers along the side of his head. His hair was still long on

top, gathered into a knot on top of his head, but the sides were shaved short. Only a little red-gold fuzz remained, light against his skin. “You’ve had the same hair as long as I’ve known you,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “Time for a change.”

“Break-up hair,” she said. “Nice.”

“I thought so. Now would you please look?”

She turned and picked it up from the desk. “Is this for Carcharoth?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Jesus,” she said. “You’re already getting ready for flight tests?”

“Should be up and running next week.”

“That’s three months ahead of schedule.”

“I know.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “That’s great and all, but was it really worth killing yourself over?”

“Do I look dead to you?” She looked at him for a moment, tilting her head from side to side.

“Wait, I’m not really dead, right? Why are you looking at me like that?”

She laughed. “No, you ass. You’re not. I’m just trying to get used to your hair.”

“It’s not that different.”

“Yeah, right.” He shrugged. “Mind if I take a picture? Gothmog’s not going to believe me.”

“If you must.”

She picked up her phone and swiped over to the camera. “Smile,” she said.

Mairon scowled and raised his middle finger at her. “Asshole,” she said. He grinned, and she snapped another picture. “Ha!” she said triumphantly, turning the screen around to face him.

“I look like an idiot.”

“You look cute,” she said. “I’m sending it.”

“Jerk,” he said mildly. She ignored him, tapping out a quick text message to Gothmog. “So, any news on the legal front?”

“Still in limbo,” she said, putting her phone down. “I made one last request for a push-back, but I’m not holding my breath.”

“When are you going to have to go back?”

“If this falls through, like I think it will, then maybe a week. I’ll have to go early to get my shit together back at the home office.”

“That sucks.”

“I know.”

“Leaving me all alone,” Mairon said, sighing theatrically.

“Don’t make me feel guiltier than I already do.”

“I’m kidding, Thil. I’ll survive. I mean, it’s not like you’re going forever.”

“With any luck, I won’t have to go at all.”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You know we don’t have that kind of luck.” His phone chimed and he glanced at the screen. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What’s up?”

“I don’t think I could find a good engineer if my life depended on it.”

“Yourself excluded.”

“Obviously. I mean, some of them have been in the game ten years longer than I have and I don’t even trust them to type up a memo.”

“So fire them.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Manpower,” he said. “Combined with my own obsessive need for over-achievement.”

“That was almost self-aware.”

“Please,” he said. “I’m not Melkor. I have some capacity for self-awareness.”

“Congratulations—you’re better than the bare minimum.”

“Seriously, though. I need all hands on deck to push Draugluin forward, even if those hands belong to idiots.”

“You can spare a couple hands, I think,” she said. “You’re way ahead of schedule.”

“All the more reason to keep pushing it,” he said.

“I’m going to tack on a martyr complex to that admission of obsessive over-achievement.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure that’s an insult.”

“It’s the lack of sleep,” she said. “Impairs your brain function.”

“Jesus,” he said. “Imagine what I could do with a solid eight hours.”

She laughed. “I don’t know if the world is ready for a fully-rested Mairon.”

“Better not risk it,” he said. “Could be dangerous.” His phone chimed again, and he sighed. “I better go sort this out before it gets any worse.”

“Use that firing power,” she said as he headed for the door.

A thousand miles away, Gothmog's phone buzzed. He picked it up and slid open the text message from Thuringwethil. "Holy shit," he said, zooming in on the picture.

"What?" Melkor asked, sprawled on the couch in his office.

"Just this picture Thil sent me."

"Of what?"

"Mairon."

"Oh," Melkor said. "Can I see?" Gothmog hesitated. "Give it," Melkor said, snatching it away from him. He looked at the picture, his mouth falling open. "Holy shit," he said, echoing Gothmog.

"I know."

"Damn, he looks good."

"I mean, yeah," said Gothmog. "But he always does."

"Yeah, but now," Melkor said, looking at the picture again, "he looks—" "He broke off and shook his head.

"Having some regrets?"

"Every goddamn day," Melkor said.

"Good," Gothmog said. "You should. You're an idiot."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious."

"Can I have my phone back?" Gothmog said. "You're kind of creeping me out."

Melkor surreptitiously forwarded the picture to himself and handed the phone back to Gothmog.

"So theoretically," said Melkor.

"Uh-uh." Gothmog said.

"I didn't even say anything yet."

"I can already tell I don't like it."

"Come on, Gothmog," Melkor whined. "You're my best friend. I'm asking you for help."

"You don't want help," Gothmog said.

"That's funny," Melkor said, "because I'm pretty sure I just asked for it."

"You really want my help?"

"How many times do I have to ask?"

"Then listen up, asshole. You've treated this whole shitty situation like some unfortunate turn of events that just fell on you, no warning. But it's not some random thing that happened. It's something you did."

“Why do you keep reminding me?”

“Because,” said Gothmog, “you keep acting like the breakup is the problem.”

“It is the problem.”

“No, it’s not. You are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a selfish, self-centered piece of shit. You ruined all of our lives, and now you have the fucking gall to act like we should feel bad for you. News flash pal: I don’t. I’m just mad.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Melkor muttered.

“This is just another stupid, self-destructive stunt in a long line of stupid, destructive stunts you’ve pulled over the years,” Gothmog said, ignoring him. “And to tell you the truth, Melkor, I’m really fucking sick of it. I’m tired of you doing dumb shit and expecting someone else to clean it up. I’m tired of you refusing to admit when you’ve done something stupid or wrong. If you want to fix this fucking mess, then you need to admit that you created it. Take responsibility, asshole. Own up to what you did. Then do me a fucking favor and think about why the hell you did it. Because honestly, I still don’t know.”

“Neither do I,” Melkor said.

“Well, you need to figure it out,” Gothmog said. “Figure out why you’re such a goddamn douche all the time, and maybe you can work on not being such a goddamn douche in the future.”

“People don’t change, Gothmog. We are the way we are.”

“That’s a cop-out,” said Gothmog, folding his arms across his chest. “People can change. It just sucks, and it takes a lot of work, so people like you don’t do it, because you’re a pile of selfish assholes.”

“Is it too late to take back asking for your help?”

“Look, dude,” Gothmog said. “I’m not saying you can’t be angry or selfish or reactionary. We all are, and that’s fine. We all have different instincts. We all react to the shitty situations life throws at us differently. But your first instinct doesn’t have to be your immediate reaction.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Gothmog sighed. “You know how Thuringwethil taps her pen when she works?”

“Jesus,” Melkor said. “It’s like a fucking Gatling gun. Drives me up the goddamn wall.”

“Me too,” Gothmog said. “But I don’t say anything about it, because honestly, what’s the point? She’s not doing it to annoy me. It’s not really bothering me, and anyway, she says it helps her think. So I just ignore it. Whereas you make some asshole comment or yell about it, which turns into a stupidly unproductive screaming match and ends with the two of you butthurt, not speaking.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “but it’s like, really annoying.”

Gothmog took a deep breath and released it slowly. “I don’t think I have the energy or the patience to explain the concept of self-centeredness to you right now.”

“We’re all self-centered, Gothmog. It’s part of the self-preservation instinct.”

“Did you not listen to anything I just said?”

“You lost me partway through.”

“I didn’t,” Gothmog said. “You just don’t want to deal with it, because it sucks, and it’s hard, and it requires work.”

“That does sound like me.”

“At the end of the day,” Gothmog said, “it comes down to priorities, plain and simple. You have to decide what’s really important to you—getting your way, or having any kind of meaningful relationship with your friends—or, you know, having friends at all. Because up to now, you’ve made it pretty goddamn clear where you stand. The only question is how long the rest of us are going to stand with you. Believe it or not, we do have our limits.”

Gothmog’s phone buzzed, and he looked down to see a reminder flashing on his screen. “Shit,” he said. “I’m late for a meeting. Just promise me you’ll at least think about what I said.”

“Yeah, fine,” said Melkor. “Whatever.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Go,” Melkor said, waving him away. Gothmog did, trudging out of the office and down the hall. Alone in his office, Melkor thumbed open his phone and pulled up the picture he’d stolen from Gothmog. Mairon was smiling in it, the way Melkor knew he did when he thought no one was looking. It was refreshingly candid compared with the careful neutrality he stubbornly gave Melkor now. Melkor traced lightly over the familiar lines of Mairon’s face with his fingertips, smiling wistfully and trying to ignore the ache in his chest. He sighed and pressed the lock button on his phone, making the picture disappear. He slouched down on the couch and groaned, Gothmog’s words playing over in his head. “Well, this sucks,” he said, speaking to no one but himself. Then he pushed himself up, grabbed his phone and headed out the door, hoping a walk would help him clear his head.

When Gothmog got home, Melkor was waiting for him, sitting on the stairs outside his apartment. “Tired of breaking and entering?” he asked, stopping on the sidewalk in front of him.

“It’s not breaking and entering if you have a key,” Melkor said. “Which I do, but I left it at home.”

“What do you want, Melkor?”

“A lot of things,” he said. “But right now I’ll settle for what I can get.”

“The Melkor Bauglir story,” Gothmog said.

Melkor laughed and patted the cement beside him. “Can we talk?”

“Now you want to talk, huh?” Gothmog said, but he sat down, the two of them squeezed onto the stairs of the narrow stoop. “Alright. I’m listening.”

“You were right, Gothmog,” he said.

“Jesus,” said Gothmog, laying his hand on his chest. “I might have a heart attack.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “Would you just listen?”

“Sorry,” Gothmog said, grinning. “Go ahead.”

“Look, you were right. The breakup isn’t the problem. I want it to be. I’ve spent two months trying to convince myself that it is, because wallowing in self-pity is way easier than facing the fact that I am the root of all my own problems. But it’s true. I am the problem. I did this. I fucked up—with Mairon, with all of you guys. And the worst part is, I honestly don’t know if I can fix it.”

“Why?” Gothmog asked, looking curiously at him. “That’s what I just can’t figure out. Why’d you do it?”

“Because I’m a self-sabotaging piece of shit,” Melkor said.

“Uh-uh,” said Gothmog. “Self-deprecation is a cop-out, and you know it.”

Melkor sighed. “I don’t know, Gothmog. I just—” He grimaced, a bitter twist of his lips. “I was so happy,” he said, looking out ahead as though seeing something more than the sidewalk, dimly lit by streetlights. “He made me so happy, and I don’t know why, but that freaked me the fuck out.”

“Jesus, Melkor. Are you serious?” Melkor nodded, and Gothmog shook his head. “Scale of one to ten: how big of a cliché are you right now?”

“Off the fucking scale,” Melkor said.

“Finally,” said Gothmog. “Something we can agree on.”

Melkor looked at him, and he looked so miserable that whatever remained of Gothmog’s anger dissipated. “What do I do, Gothmog?”

Gothmog considered him for a moment. “What do you want?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Forget the whys and the hows,” Gothmog said. “If you could have anything in the world right now, what would it be?”

“Mairon,” he said. “Here, with me. The way it used to be. And, you know, you and Thil too.”

“I’m not gonna lie, dude,” said Gothmog. “That’s a pretty tall order. I mean, you dug yourself a hell of a hole this time.”

“I know.”

Gothmog sighed. “Jesus,” he said tiredly. “We need Thuringwethil. She’s good at people.”

“She hates people,” Melkor said.

“Yeah,” Gothmog said, “but she also understands them. Half the time I think she understands my thought process better than I do.” Melkor nodded in agreement. “And anyway,” Gothmog continued, “she’s seen the most of Mairon in the last two months. If you want to know whether or not you even have a chance, you ought to talk to her.”

“She won’t talk to me,” Melkor said. “Believe me. I’ve tried.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Gothmog said.

“Really?”

“Dude, I’m done with this splitting-up-the-gang bullshit. If there’s any way I can help us fast forward to the part where we’re all friends again, then I’m doing it.”

“You’re the best, Gothmog.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Save the sucking up for Thuringwethil.” He stood up, stretching. “Come on,” he said. “I’ve got a six pack and an ass-kicking with your name on it.”

“*Mortal Kombat?*” Melkor asked, pushing himself to his feet.

“*Tekken,*” Gothmog said, grinning.

He unlocked the door, and Melkor followed him inside, thinking for the first time in months that maybe things weren’t completely terrible.

Chapter End Notes

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Accidents Will Happen

Chapter Summary

Thuringwethil goes back to Angband and finally talks to Melkor, but it's not the conversation she expected. Back at Tol-in-Gaurhoth, Mairon realizes Dungalef isn't who he says he is, and things begin to unravel.

Chapter Notes

There's some heavy stuff in this one, guys. Watch out for some fairly graphic depictions of violence, plus blood/gore.

As the [silmarillion generator](#) says on tumblr: hello naughty children, it's luthien time.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mairon sat in his office, surrounded by papers that littered his usually organized desk in a jumbled mess. There was a notebook on his lap, on which was written a comprehensive list of each of the projects and assignments Dungalef had worked on in the last two months. He was about halfway through the projects, the pages of which were scattered piecemeal on his desk, and he had a running list in the margins of the notebook detailing the various mistakes he had found. He grinned, going through a particularly error-riddled section, and jotted another note. While he was not unmatched in vindictiveness, there was no one like Mairon for dedication.

He finished the project he was on and sat back, closing his eyes for a minute to relieve the strain of staring at small text for hours on end. Then he opened them again, skimming over his notes.

“That’s weird,” he murmured, frowning at a few of the notes. He pulled the offending reports toward himself and flipped through them, making some new notes and highlighting whole sections of interest. “What the…”

He pushed a mountain of papers aside and pulled his keyboard closer, typing furiously. He stared at the screen, confused. He pulled a dwindling stack of post-its from under his mouse and wrote himself a note, sticking it to the screen. Then he got up and stalked across the hall to Thuringwethil’s office, not bothering to knock.

“Can I borrow your computer?” he asked. He didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, he leaned over her, reaching past her to type.

“Make yourself at home,” she said, rolling her eyes. He didn’t answer, and she frowned. “Everything okay?”

“I don’t know,” he said, leaning so close to her that she rolled her chair away with a huff of annoyance.

“What’s up?”

“There’s some files moved around,” he said. “And I think some things might be missing, although with how things are moved around by these idiots we employ, they may just be misplaced. They’re probably misplaced. But how the hell—” He shook his head.

“What do you mean, misplaced? What’s missing?”

“Data,” he said. “Some simulator files, some coding tests, some other stuff. I just wanted to make sure it was everywhere and not just something weird on my computer.” He shook his head. “I have to doublecheck to be sure, but this all looks like stuff that was assigned to Dungalef’s team.”

“Dungalef?” she repeated. “That asshole you’ve been investigating?”

He snorted. “If you want to call it that.”

“What I’d like to call it is a witch hunt.”

“Thil, he challenged my authority,” he said. “In front of the whole team.”

“You’re just mad he changed your station.”

“It was the last straw,” he said, utterly serious.

“No offence, Mai,” she said, “but I think you need to take a break.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not to be a jerk, but you sound a little crazy.”

“That’s nice.”

“Dude, you’re being paranoid and obsessive,” she said. “I mean, digging through all his work for the last two months? Threatening to fire him over changing the music in the lab?”

“Do you have a point?”

“I’m just saying, you’ve been under a lot of stress lately. The new job, the move, the breakup—”

“Don’t,” he said, a warning in his voice. “Don’t you dare suggest that I would let any of that personal stuff affect my work.”

“Mai, I just want to be sure—I want *you* to be sure—that you’re doing this for the right reasons.”

“I am,” he said angrily. “And I’m going to prove it.”

He turned and stalked out of the office. She watched him go, sighing as she heard his door slam behind him. She picked up her phone and typed out a text message, sending it to Gothmog.

T: remember how I said I thought Mairon was getting better?

G: yeah?

T: I take it back

G: uh-oh

G: what happened

T: nothing yet, but I'm going to start on a wrongful termination settlement just in case

G: yikes

G: speaking of getting better though

T: still not ready to talk

Thuringwethil flipped her phone facedown and put her head in her hands, groaning softly. She and Gothmog had spoken the night before. It hadn't been a pleasant conversation.

"Just talk to him," Gothmog had pleaded. "Just for a minute."

"No," she had said, adamant.

"Thil, I'm telling you. He's—"

"Yeah, yeah. He feels bad, he's sorry, he had some kind of fucking revelation. I'm not buying it, Gothmog, and neither should you."

"But if you just talk to him—"

"Jesus, Gothmog. How long are you going to let him snow you like this?"

"If you think I'm not smart enough to tell when Melkor is trying to manipulate me, then—"

"It has nothing to do with intelligence and everything to do with how fucking soft you are, especially when it comes to Melkor. How many times does he have to shit on you before you stop making excuses for him?"

"I'm not making excuses for him. Do you even know how much shit I've given him in the last two months for the way he acted? I mean, Jesus! What do you think prompted this whole turnaround?"

"Nothing. There is no turnaround. He's just—"

"How would you know? You haven't spoken to him in two months."

"I know Melkor's bullshit, Gothmog."

"So do I. And I'm telling you, this isn't it." Gothmog had sighed, then, exhausted from arguing. "I'm not making excuses for him, Thuringwethil. I'm not even asking you to forgive him. I'm just asking you to talk to him." She had said nothing, and he had sighed again. "People are capable of change. It's hard, and it takes time, and it requires a lot of work, but it's possible. And I really think Melkor wants to change. Just...please. Talk to him. I'm only asking you for five minutes."

She had agreed to nothing, and she knew Gothmog had left the call as unhappy as she was. She had lain in bed for an hour that night, typing and deleting a hundred text messages, never finding the right words to say to Melkor. She had given up and gone to bed, but the morning had

brought her no more inspiration. She picked up her phone and opened the long-dead thread she had with Melkor, staring at the blank space and the blinking cursor.

Her computer chimed, saving her from the prospect of writing something she might regret. She looked up at her screen and opened the email that had appeared. “Jesus, fuck,” she said, closing it angrily. She laid her head down on the desk for a moment, letting herself wallow. Then she stood up, smoothed the wrinkles out of her skirt, and went across the hall to break the bad news to Mairon. She was going back to Angband—tomorrow.

Thuringwethil came into work at eight, two coffees in her hands. She took the elevator up to the top floor and went straight to Mairon’s office. While she didn’t feel bad about their argument—why would she, when she had been right?—she did feel bad that she was leaving, especially when Mairon seemed so dangerously close to diving off the deep end at last. She shook her head as she walked down the hallway. She could’ve sworn he was getting better; she’d said as much to Gothmog the night before. *One step forward, two steps back*, was all he had said. She had been inclined to agree.

“Hey,” she said, knocking on the door and stepping inside. “I brought—holy shit.”

Mairon’s usually pristine office was wrecked. There were papers littered all over the floor, the chairs and the desk. There was a folding table set up along the back wall that had a computer set up on it, whirring angrily. She could see little post-it notes stuck to the sides of the desk, scribbled with hasty notes. In the middle of it all sat Mairon, hunched unmoving over his laptop, which was nestled in the hollow of his crossed legs.

“Jesus Christ, Mai,” she said, picking her way to a clean spot of carpet. “What are you doing?” He looked up, startled; he hadn’t heard her come in. “What’s wrong?” she asked seeing the look on his face.

“We have a huge problem, Thil.” She walked gingerly across a sea of scattered papers and knelt beside him, handing him the cup in her right hand.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “but it’s not good. We lost some data.”

“Lost,” she said, nonplussed. “What, misplaced? Like you said yesterday?”

“No,” he said. “Lost. Missing. Gone from the system.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We got hacked, Thil,” he snapped, and then he groaned. “Sorry,” he said. “Sorry. I’m just —“

“Forget it,” she said, waving him away. “What can I do?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“Hey,” she said. “Look at me.” He did, his gaze bleary and bloodshot. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “We’re going to figure this out. Now drink.”

Mairon raised the cup to his lips, testing the temperature. Then he tilted his head back and

chugged the hot coffee so efficiently that Thuringwethil imagined it wasn't his first time.

"Better?" Thuringwethil asked.

In answer, Mairon launched the cup end over end, watching with satisfaction as it fell neatly into the garbage.

"Show off," Thuringwethil muttered, by she smiled.

"Alright," he said. "Let's start with what we know." He pulled a few sticky notes off the side of the desk and looked at them. "We lost a good chunk of data before I picked it up. I broke the connection last night and pulled a few of them back, but honestly, I'm not sure exactly how much we lost. I don't know how long it's been going on."

"What did we lose?"

"A lot," he said. "All different things. At first glance, it looks random. But it's not."

"What does that mean?"

"What I said yesterday? Yeah—I was right. Everything that's missing was assigned to Dungalef's team."

"Jesus," Thuringwethil said. "Mai, I'm sorry. I should've listened to you."

"Doesn't matter now," he said, waving her away. "We need to get on top of this."

"How bad is it?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I have a feeling that this has been going on longer than my dumb ass picked up on. Probably one or two things at a time, to test the waters."

"Why? What were they getting at?"

"No idea," he said. "It's not like they were grabbing big chunks of one thing. It's scattered around."

"So Dungalef is involved," she said. "But where's he sending it?"

"I don't know," Mairon said. "I couldn't trace it. It broke too quickly."

"Alright," she said, taking a drink. "So what do we do now?"

"We gather up Dungalef's team," Mairon said, "and make them sweat."

"How can I help?"

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "When is your flight leaving?"

"One," she said.

"I assume you're here this early because you have stuff to do before you go."

"Priorities," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "What can I do?"

"Can you pull their personnel files? Help me look for anything to use against them, or any clue what the hell they're up to."

“I’m on it,” she said. She stood up and hurried to her own office. Mairon grabbed a blank post-it note and scribbled down the names of the engineers on Dungalef’s team. Then he got up and reached for his phone, dialing for the front desk. “Yeah,” he said, when the secretary picked up. “It’s Mairon. I’m going to read you a list of names. Write them down, find them, and bring them to the second floor conference room.” He rattled off the names, instructed the secretary to have them there in five minutes, and hung up.

Mairon sat on the edge of his desk, picking up his cell phone. He ran through his contacts, pulling up Melkor’s entry. His finger hovered over Melkor’s number, hesitating. Then he locked the phone, shoving it into his pocket. He stood up, grabbed a stack of papers, and stalked out into the hall.

He walked down the two flights of stairs to the second floor and made his way to the conference room. The gathered engineers were huddled around the table, speaking in hushed whispers. They fell silent as Mairon entered, looking up at him in nervous expectation. “Dungalef,” Mairon said, his tone clipped and formal.

“Yes, sir?”

“Outside, please,” he said. He held open the door, standing back so Dungalef could pass. He shut the door behind him and turned to face Dungalef in the hall.

“Sir, what—“

“I know, Dungalef.”

“Know what, sir?”

“Everything,” Mairon said. They looked at each other for a moment.

“I’m afraid,” Dungalef said carefully, “that I don’t know what you mean.”

“We’ve been losing data,” Mairon said. “Little by little, here and there. I thought it was bad organization—the kind of thing you run into with new operations and incompetent subordinates. But it’s not, is it?”

“Still don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dungalef said, adding, “Sir.”

“I know you’re funneling information out of Tol-in-Gaurhoth,” Mairon said. “I found your connection. I broke it, by the way. And it’s not the only thing I’m going to break.”

“What do you want?” Dungalef asked, his decorum slipping.

“Tell me who your connection is. Tell me what you were planning. Tell me everything, and I—“

“With respect, sir,” said Dungalef, an edge of mockery in his voice, “I thought you already knew everything.”

He looked at Mairon, defiant and pleased, and Mairon stared back at him, his face closed, neutral. Then Mairon smiled, and Dungalef took a step back. While Mairon’s demeanor was ostensibly pleasant, there was something altogether wrong about it. It set Dungalef’s teeth on edge.

“Not yet,” Mairon said, his voice calm and menacing. “But I will.” Dungalef swallowed

nervously. “How many people are on your team, Dungalef?”

“Twelve,” he said, though he knew Mairon already knew that.

“I will fire someone every half hour until I get the truth,” Mairon said. “I will be filing a complaint for every fired engineer for breach of contract, specifically breach of non-disclosure agreement. And, less formally, I will make absolutely sure anyone fired is blackballed in the industry.”

“To be fair, sir, it’s not like you have a lot of friends in the industry. Who’s going to listen?”

“I’m not in the business of making friends,” Mairon said. “I’m in the business of making technology that people will pay a lot of money to make sure no one else has. So are my competitors. And if you think for one second that other outfits in this business won’t be interested to know whether or not they can trust a new hire to keep a secret, then you don’t know the first thing about this business, kid.”

“Sir,” said a voice from behind him, and Mairon turned to find a pair of security guards standing there, waiting for instructions.

“Escort Dungalef back to the conference room,” Mairon said, stepping away from the door.

“Yes, sir,” said one of the guards, taking Dungalef by the arm.

“You know what I think?” Dungalef asked, gripping the door frame and turning back to look at Mairon. “I think you’re bluffing. I don’t think you have the guts or the authority to carry out random firing, especially not when the issue you’re trying to resolve is how a bunch of data leaked out of this place on your watch.”

Mairon walked toward him, and Dungalef shrunk back, close to the guard. Mairon stood in the doorway of the conference room and pointed to the nearest engineer. “You,” he said. “You’re fired. Go wait for your exit processing in the first floor conference room.” He turned to the other security guard. “Escort him there. Both of you, make sure those conference rooms are secure. No one goes in or out unless I give the word.”

“Yes, sir,” they said.

Mairon turned to Dungalef, who looked rather taken aback. “You want to play this game, Dungalef? We’ll play. But you’re going to find out exactly how much I’m capable of, and honestly, I don’t think you’re going to like it.” Dungalef said nothing, though Mairon was pleased to see he looked nervous. “Half an hour,” Mairon said, tapping the face of his watch. “Clock’s ticking.”

He nodded to the security guard, who dragged Dungalef inside and shut the door. Mairon turned and headed for the stairs, making for Thuringwethil’s office.

An hour and a half ticked by with very little progress. Three more engineers were fired, awaiting exit processing in the first floor conference room. Mairon and Thuringwethil sat in his office, poring over personnel files and background checks, scouring resources in search of anything that might give them a clue to what was going on.

“There’s someone bigger behind this,” Mairon kept saying. “Dungalef isn’t that smart, and he’s too cocky to not have someone bigger at his back.”

“What’s weird,” she kept answering, “is that he just, like, came from nowhere. There’s no

goddamn trace of him before six months ago.”

“He’s somewhere,” Mairon would say. “We just have to find him.”

Another half hour dragged by, and it was getting late. “You’re gonna have to go,” Mairon said.

“I know,” said Thuringwethil, looking at her watch.

“Look,” he said, dragging a hand through his hair and gathering it up again on top of his head. “Not to be needy, but is there any way you can push this back? Even, like, a day?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she looked genuinely upset. “There’s a set date, and we’ve already pushed a couple times on the ‘hey, our CEO got shot’ excuse. I mean, maybe I can do one day? I’ll have to call and see if they get me the files I need to prepare...shit, a lot of them are not digitized. Maybe—“

“Forget it, Thil. It was silly. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“But—“

“It’s fine,” he said. “Of course you have to go.”

“Mai, you know I’d stay if I could.”

“Of course I do. But you’ve already helped more than you needed to. Don’t worry about it, Thil. I’ll take care of it.”

“Are you sure? Are you gonna be okay?”

“Please,” he said, waving a hand dismissively at her. “These guys are amateur hour. Either they’ll crack, or I’ll figure out what they’re up to. Either way, it’s time to fire another engineer.”

“I made up some form letters for termination,” she said. “We’re going to have to deal with severance. I’ll have someone make up some packets for that. They’re not getting any cash, obviously.”

“Not for breach of contract.”

“Which we’ll have to prove.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I can handle a couple incompetent thieves.”

“Alright,” she said, though she didn’t sound entirely convinced. She stood up and picked up her things. “I should go, then.”

“Do me a favor, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t say anything to Melkor,” he said. “Or to Gothmog.”

“But—“

“Look,” he said, an edge of urgency in his tone. “I’m going to tell him. Of course I am. I just want to have it figured out before I do, okay?”

“You know he wouldn’t care, right? Actually, I’m pretty sure he’d be thrilled to help you kick some ass.”

“Thil, please,” he said.

She sighed. “Alright,” she said. “I won’t say anything. But you have to keep me posted, okay?”

“Deal.”

“Good.” She looked around, but she seemed to have everything she needed. “Be careful, okay?”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Don’t jinx yourself,” she said, and he laughed.

“Call me,” she said, now entirely serious. “Anything you need, just call. Or text. Or email. I’m paying for wifi on the plane, so if you need me—“

“Relax,” he said. “I’ll be fine. And if I’m not, I’ll let you know.”

“I don’t like leaving you like this,” she said. “You know that, right?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “I promise.”

She laid a hand on top of his head, scratching her fingernails gently against his scalp. “I’ll see you in a few days, okay?”

“Safe travels, Thil.”

She looked at him for a moment, as though she still wasn’t ready to leave, and then she turned on her heel and disappeared out into the hall.

Mairon sat at his desk for a few minutes after she had gone, just looking out into the hall. Despite his assurances, he wasn’t particularly thrilled that she had had to leave. They were in a very delicate situation, one that could prove disastrous if not handled quickly and carefully. The fact that the answer still eluded him only added to his anxiety, making him more nervous as the day drew on.

Mairon shook himself. There was work to do, and self-pity wasn’t going to get it done. He stood up from the desk and grabbed the post-it containing the names of Dungalef’s team. Four of the names were crossed out, and he scanned the list as he walked out into the hall, wondering if there was any point in being strategic about firing them.

Something caught his eye, and he looked to his right on the ground. Frowning, he bent down and picked up a white plastic card from the ground, turning it over in his hand. “Uh-oh,” he said, recognizing Thuringwethil’s Angband ID card. He pulled out his phone and called her, but it went to voicemail. “Oh, well,” he said, shoving his phone back in his pocket, along with the ID. “She’ll make it.”

He started down the hall again and dropped the post-it in his hand. Swearing, he bent down to retrieve it from the floor. As his hand touched the paper, he looked at the upside-down names and stopped dead. “No,” he whispered, snatching the paper up off the floor and straightening up. “Oh, no.” He stared at the very first name, the one on top, desperately wanting himself to be wrong but knowing he wasn’t. “Felagund,” he said darkly. “God, am I that stupid?” He crumpled the paper in his hand before shoving it into his pocket. Then he took off down the hall, sprinting down the stairs to the basement coding lab.

Thuringwethil arrived at Angband exhausted. It had already been a long day, now made longer by her travel back through the time zones. She hadn’t heard from Mairon since she had left, though she had texted him before takeoff and again when she had landed. She had known him long enough to know that it was probably nothing, that he had probably left his phone in his office or was too focused on destroying his underlings to reply, and yet she worried. The situation at Tol-in-Gaurhoth was sensitive, to say the least. She didn’t like being left out of the loop.

She got to the elevator at Angband only to find she had misplaced her ID. She dug through her bag and her pockets, swearing under her breath.

“Hey!” said Melkor, coming up behind her.

“Fuck off,” she said.

“Nice to see you too,” he said, unruffled. “Lose something?”

“My ID.”

“Lucky for you,” he said, tapping his to the sensor on the elevator, “I have mine.”

“I don’t know where it went,” she said.

“It’ll turn up,” he said, as the doors closed. They went up three floors in silence before Melkor said, “Actually, I’m glad I ran into you.”

“That makes one of us,” she said, watching the floor number change from four to five, counting the seconds until they reached six.

“Look, I know you just got in, but do you have a minute?”

“No.”

“Thil, we really need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“But—“

“No,” she said. The doors opened, and she stalked out into the familiar lobby of the sixth floor.

“Wait, Thil,” he said, following her. “I—“

“Jesus,” she snapped, whirling around and glaring at him. “Will you drop it? I don’t want to talk to you, Melkor. I know that’s hard for you to believe. It probably bugs the shit out of you. And honestly, it should. You fucked up, Melkor. You fucked up my whole life, and—“

“I know,” he said. “I know. That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“Melkor, just—“

“I owe you an apology.”

“I—what?” She stared at him, legitimately dumbfounded.

“You heard me,” he said.

She considered him for a moment, annoyed at her own sudden interest. Then she sighed. “Two minutes,” she said. “Make it worth my while.”

“Look, back when Mai and I got together, you and I talked. You asked me—begged me, even—to be careful. You warned me that any decisions I made weren’t just going to affect me. They’d affect all of us. But I didn’t listen. I should have—Jesus, I should have. Because you were right. I fucked up, Thil, and that’s not anything new, but this time—“He rubbed a hand over his face. “This time, I didn’t just fuck things up for myself. I fucked things up for everyone, and I’m sorry.”

Of all the things Melkor might have said, this was the last she would have expected. She was taken aback and, though she wouldn’t have admitted it, pleasantly surprised. Still, her anger hadn’t disappeared, and she scowled at him. “You’re right,” she said. “You fucked up hard this time. Like, I honestly didn’t think it was possible to fuck up this spectacularly.”

“I know,” he said. “Even accounting for how often and how bad I’ve fucked up in the past, this is—“He shook his head.

“Why?” she demanded.

He sighed. “Gothmog asked me the same thing.”

“And?” He rubbed a hand over his eyes, a gesture of tired frustration. “I just don’t get it,” she said. “You seemed happy.”

“I was,” he said. “God, was I happy.”

“Then why?”

“Because,” he said, pacing in agitation across the width of the hall, “I never wanted a relationship. I never looked for one. And then I met Mairon, and—God, Thil. It just fell into my lap, and it was so easy, and so good, and *fuck*.” He dragged a hand through his hair, searching for the words he wanted. “Just hearing him say my name, or how it felt to make him laugh, or getting him to quit working for five minutes...“He shook his head, a look of pain flashing across his face. “Sometimes I’d wake up in the morning and he’d be there, sleeping, looking so peaceful and content, and I’d just think—God, how did I get this lucky?”

“Oh my God,” she said, suddenly realizing the truth. “You’re in love with him.” He said nothing, standing there looking helpless and lost. She felt a stab of pity for him, and she shook her head. “Oh, Melkor,” she said. “You idiot. You massive, fucking idiot.”

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

“Jesus,” she said, rubbing tiredly at her eyes. “What a fucking mess.”

“I know,” he said again.

“Why do you have to make everything so difficult? Do you know how much easier this would be if you were just an asshole? Then I could hate you. I could just write you off as a malicious piece of shit. But now? Now I have to feel bad for you.”

“I mean, you don’t have to,” he said. “Although, not gonna lie, it’s nice that you do.”

“Shut up,” she said, though there was no malice in her voice.

“What do I do, Thil?”

“How should I know?” she snapped, immediately regretting it. She was tired and worried, and she hadn’t planned on dealing with this particular scenario the minute her plane landed.

“Because,” he said, with more patience than she would’ve expected from him, “you’ve been with him for two months. If anyone knows his headspace right now, it’s you.”

“His headspace,” she repeated. “Jesus, Melkor. How do you think his headspace has been?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “He’s been so productive, I thought—“

“Productive?” she said, laughing. “Yeah, he’s been productive, alright. At the expense of his sanity and his goddamn health—mental and physical. I mean, Jesus. I told Gothmog the other day that Mairon’s work habits at Tol-in-Gaurhoth make his work here look sensible.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. We share an apartment, but he’s literally never slept there. He lives in the office, or sometimes in the coding lab. I’m lucky if I can get him to eat one solid meal a day, and he’s been drinking so much caffeine that I’m honestly worried about his heart. I broke three coffee pots before he wised up and put one in his office.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said, for lack of anything better to say.

“You really fucked him up, Melkor.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said, and he looked so genuinely hurt that she sighed, feeling an unwanted stab of sympathy for him.

“I know,” she said. “But you did.”

“Look, Thuringwethil. Just tell it to me straight. Do I have any chance of salvaging this mess?”

“I don’t know,” she said, taking up the pacing he had finally stopped. “Maybe, but it’s a long shot. Mairon is cautious. He doesn’t like to fail or get burned or be rejected. I mean, no one does, but he takes it as a personal affront. Convincing him to give you another chance would be an uphill battle.”

“I know it’s a long shot,” he said. “But I have to try, Thil. Even if he says no. Even if he never wants to see me again. I have to know for sure.”

“You’re just a glutton for punishment, aren’t you?”

“Probably,” he said, and he laughed. “How do I do it, Thil? What do I say?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but you have to be sincere. Mai’s even better than I am at reading people. He’ll know if you’re lying.”

“Okay.”

“And you should do it in person.”

“You think?”

“Trust me,” she said. “This is not the kind of conversation you have over the phone. You need to get him to see you.”

He laughed again, though there was no joy in the sound. “God, I’ve wanted to see him again since the minute you guys left. But now...now, I’m dreading it.”

“Good,” she said. “That’s how you know it means something to you.”

“I should call him, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said. She turned and made to walk away, but he grabbed her hand.

“Stay,” he said. “Please? Call me a chicken if you want, but I need some serious moral support here.”

She rolled her eyes, but she laid a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “Call him,” she said.

Melkor dialed Mairon’s number and held the phone to his ear, pacing nervously. It rang seven times, and then it went to voicemail. “Well, shit,” he said.

Thuringwethil snorted. “That was anti-climactic.”

“Should I call him again?”

“Give him some time,” she said. “He’s pretty swamped right now.”

“But—“

“Give him twenty-four hours,” she said. “That’s usually my rule these days for callbacks.”

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m gonna whine about it the whole time.”

“Not to me, you’re not.”

He laughed and pulled her spontaneously into a hug. “I missed you, Thil.”

“Good,” she said, letting him hug her for a moment before pushing him away. “Okay, that’s enough. Some of us have work to do.”

He let her go, and they walked down the hall together to her office.

Mairon stood at his computer in the coding lab, trying to do a hundred things at once. One quick search had turned up all the evidence he needed to realize that Dungalef was a rather silly turnaround of Felagund, a pseudonym not infrequently used by Finrod, eldest son of Finwë’s third

son, Finarfin. A little additional searching had turned up search results for Beren Erchamion, although the name hadn't initially meant anything to Mairon.

A few minutes of internet sleuthing had turned up a disturbing trail of clues, which, as Mairon put them together piece by piece, filled him with a sense of mingled dread and fury. Finrod and Beren were friends; Facebook and Instagram were littered with pictures of them from college. Who Beren was, though...that was a little trickier. He seemed to have known Finrod and his particular branch of the Finwion family tree for most of his life, though beyond that, there seemed to be little to find. Mairon had dug through ten pages of internet search records of Beren and still hadn't figured out exactly what he did. His background check had come up clean, but his personnel file seemed to be almost totally fabricated.

A little digging had revealed almost all of his references to be fake. There was no Barahir Security, for instance, though Barahir did seem to be the name of Beren's dead father. There was no record of an Outlaw Jewelers, either—why, Mairon had thought, annoyed, would you even list that kind of thing as a reference for an engineering job? The same number was listed for both Barahir Security and Outlaw Jewelers, however, and it was, oddly enough, a real number. A search for it pulled up a webpage for Doriath, which made very little sense. They were an old firm, but they were small. They had always largely focused on the relatively niche field of environmental engineering—hippies that took calculus, Melkor had always called them. Why would Beren list a phone number for them, of all people on his professional references?

It took Mairon a good fifteen minutes to parse out the connection, digging through old social media posts and vague blog posts on outdated platforms. Beren seemed to be dating Luthien Tinuviel, the heiress of Doriath—though why they were so secretive about it remained a mystery. There were pictures of them, deliberately untagged, at various events, and Mairon had found at least one old WordPress blog that almost certainly belonged to Luthien, full of youthful fury at her parents and references to running away with a man she was careful never to name.

The connection to Doriath bothered Mairon. Doriath was, ostensibly, an ally to Formenos, though how seriously the current generation of leaders took those old bonds was questionable. Still, he didn't like it. A Finwion and his Doriath-connected friend poking around in Tol-in-Gaurhoth was bad news any way you looked at it. And so many questions still remained—what were they doing? What were they looking for? Who were they trying to funnel information to, and why?

The door to the coding lab opened, but Mairon didn't look up. "This lab is on lockdown," he said. "Use the first floor space."

"Lockdown," said a voice he didn't recognize. "I like that." He looked up to find Beren walking toward him, with a woman he recognized as Luthien and a man he didn't know. Mairon reached for his phone, but the man he didn't recognize knocked it out of his reach. He grabbed Mairon's arms and pinned them behind his back, turning the swiveling chair he sat in to face Luthien. She leaned down to look Mairon in the face, grinning at him. "Lockdown is good," she said. "It means there won't be any witnesses."

She nodded at the man who held Mairon's arms, and Mairon felt something strike the back of his head. He fell forward, his vision swimming, and passed quickly into unconsciousness.

Mairon awoke with a crick in his neck and the taste of blood in his mouth. He had bitten his tongue; he could feel the sore spot along the right side, grating against his teeth. He shifted slightly, wincing at the stiffness in his neck, and he groaned.

“Well, well,” said Luthien, somewhere to his right. “It’s alive.”

Mairon blinked his eyes open and looked around the room. He was still in the coding lab, which was in a further state of disarray than he remembered. Luthien and Beren stood behind his computer; Mairon couldn’t see the other man. He shifted forward and found, to his dismay, that he couldn’t move very far; looking down, he could see that his wrists were zip-tied to the arms of his chair. He could feel similar restraints on his ankles.

“Just a little precaution,” Luthien said, grinning at him. “I heard you’re a little unstable these days.”

“Believe me,” Mairon said, his voice rasping in his throat. “You haven’t seen unstable yet.”

Mairon felt a hand slide against his head, take a handful of hair, and yank backward hard enough that the back of his head hit the top of the desk chair. He looked up into the face of the man he didn’t know, the one who had hit him. “You’re not in much of a position for threats,” said the man.

“Good position for you to suck my dick, though,” Mairon said. The man twisted his fingers in Mairon’s hair and pulled again, hard, making Mairon yelp.

“That’s enough, Huan,” Luthien said, and Huan released his hold on Mairon’s hair. She turned to face him, looking curiously at him. “I hear you’re pretty good at getting under people’s skin,” she said, her tone oddly conversational. Mairon shrugged, noncommittal. “I am too,” she said. She stood up and walked over to Mairon, leaning down and placing her hands on his arms, her face very close to his. “Let’s see who’s better, hm?”

“Sorry,” Mairon said, “but I’m not much in the mood for competition. I’m a little tied up at the moment.”

Huan hit him, hard, an open-handed smack across the face, and Mairon’s head lolled forward for a moment. Then he laughed, a disquieting sound that echoed in the empty space of the lab, and he looked up at Luthien. There was a defiant glint in his eyes, a look that made Beren step back. Luthien, however, merely leaned closer, until her face was nearly touching Mairon’s. “If you’re laughing,” she said, her voice quiet, “then I haven’t been nearly clear enough about the position you’re in.”

She stood up and went back to the computer, leaning on the desk to look at the screen. “Where are the Silmaril files?”

Mairon affected a look of exaggerated consideration. “Silmaril,” he said, as though the word were unfamiliar. “Don’t know a Silmaril.”

“Hit him,” Luthien said, her tone clinical, detached.

Huan came around to the front of the chair and slammed his fist into Mairon’s chest. Mairon felt something crack, and he gasped, a wheezing, stabbing breath that wracked his chest with pain.

“We know Silmaril exists,” she said. “Finrod was good enough to tell us all about it.”

“Right,” Mairon said, still wheezing. “Finrod Felagund. I’ve read his work. Not sure I’d base a kidnapping attempt on it.”

Luthien nodded, and Huan hit him again, the heel of his hand slamming up into Mairon’s nose. Blood poured down Mairon’s face into his mouth, and he spit it over his shoulder,

grimacing.

“Ouch,” Luthien said. “That looks broken.”

“Fuck you,” Mairon said. Huan dug his elbow into Mairon’s chest, and Mairon yelped.

“Shame,” Luthien said. “You had such a pretty face, too.”

“Still prettier than yours,” Mairon said, feeling the blood trailing down his chin.

Beren lunged, but Huan was closer. He brought his elbow down into Mairon’s cheek, and Mairon gave a shout of pain, feeling the bones slide unnaturally beneath his skin. He let his head rest back against the top of the chair, trying to catch his breath.

“Silmaril,” Luthien said, her voice cutting across the haze of pain. “We were talking about where you keep the files.”

“You were talking,” Mairon said.

“Yes,” she said, with a persistence he almost admired. “And soon, you will too.”

Time passed slowly, though it was hard to tell how long it had been. The interrogation, such that it was, soon became repetitive, a reiterative call and response punctuated only by the slam of Huan’s fists into various parts of Mairon’s body. Mairon, for his part, was awash in a sea of pain. His nose throbbed, though the rivers of blood had ceased, drying and cracking down his face and over his chin. His ribs ached where Huan had driven his elbow in, two brutal hits to each side. He was fairly sure the bone below his left eye was broken; his eye was swollen almost shut.

Still, Mairon gave away nothing. Luthien, to her credit, did not react. She merely repeated her questions, calm and smooth and disarming, in a careful repetition that might have driven a lesser opponent to a rash revelation. But Mairon was not a lesser opponent, and so he said nothing, or, when he found himself between waves of pain, gave a sarcastic response. More often than not, he said nothing—either response earned him a blow from Huan, but the comebacks required mental effort, and so he used them sparingly, when he needed a pick-me-up.

“What’s your password for the backup server access?” Luthien asked him.

Mairon shifted gently, his head resting on the back of the chair, so he could look at her with his unharmed eye. “Capital f,” he said, watching as she typed. “Lower case u, lower case c, lower case—“

Huan hit him hard in the gut, and Mairon was wrenched forward, his body screaming at the sudden movement.

“Oh,” Luthien said. “Never mind. You’re logged in.” She clicked through a couple things. “Interesting,” she said.

“What is?” Beren asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Silmaril isn’t here,” she said. “Not at Tol-in-Guarhoth. But I can’t find it at Angband, either. It’s not on the regular servers, and I can’t find it in the backups.” She tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the desk. Then she stood up and walked over to Mairon, looking thoughtful. She stood in front of him, looking down at him as though considering him. Then she smiled, and there was something knowing in the gesture, something piercing that, for the first time, made Mairon feel a little nervous. “Oh,” she said, leaning down close to him. “Oh, you are clever, aren’t you?”

“So they tell me,” Mairon said, his voice hoarse, stumbling over the dryness in his mouth.

“Maybe paranoid is a better word,” she said, tilting her head thoughtfully. “You got Silmaril by hacking,” she said. “You know how easy it is, if you know what you’re doing. You don’t trust your own security, so you don’t put it online. You keep hard copies—which, I assume, are in Angband.”

“It’s an interesting theory,” he said, hoping his swollen face and fraying nerves wouldn’t give him away. “Hard to test, though, since you don’t know anyone who can get you into Angband.”

“You hope not.”

“Hope has nothing to do with it,” Mairon said. “If you had an in at Angband, you wouldn’t have wasted your time here. Your friends worked here long enough to know we didn’t have any Silmaril files in our inventory.”

“You know,” she said, “I can’t decide whether or not I like playing this game with someone almost as smart as I am. I mean, on the one hand, it’s nice to have a little competition for once. But on the other, I’m not much for delayed gratification.”

“Keep playing,” Mairon said. “Maybe it’ll help you decide.”

“Wish I could,” she said, “but we’re in a hurry.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Huan raised his hand, but Luthien shook her head, staying him. “We’re going to Angband,” she said. “We’re going to get Silmaril. The only question is whether you help us or not.”

He snorted, and winced at the pain. “You and I both know the answer to that question.”

“If you don’t help us,” she said, “then I’ll kill you.” He rolled his eyes. “You don’t think I’ll do it?”

“Oh, I have no doubt you’ll do it,” Mairon said. “I’m just not a huge fan of clichés, to be honest.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” she said, and she almost sounded sincere.

“Yes,” he said. “It does. It doesn’t matter if I help you or not. I can identify you. I can implicate you in what you’ve already done, and whatever you manage to accomplish when you leave. You’re not going to leave that kind of witness.”

She grinned then, a vicious twist of her lips that gave a haunting look to her pretty face. “It’s a shame,” she said. “I kind of like you, Mairon.”

“Can’t say the same about you,” he said.

She laughed, shaking her head. “No,” she said. “I guess not. No one likes to lose.”

“Who said anything about losing?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “And here I thought you were smart.”

“You can go to Angband,” he said, “but it won’t do you any good. That place is locked down twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You won’t make it past the front door—not

without credentials.”

“Will this work?” She held up Thuringwethil’s ID card, and Mairon realized with a jolt that they must’ve searched his pockets when he’d passed out. He felt sick, then, but it was quickly overtaken by anger.

“You’re an asshole,” he said. “All this ‘help us or you’ll die’ bullshit was just—what? Playing with me?”

“A little,” she said, admitted. “Honestly, I was just curious how far your stupid sense of loyalty would go.”

“Too far,” Beren said.

“Mmm,” she agreed, nodding. “Especially for a place—and a CEO—that doesn’t give a shit about you, from what I hear.”

“Would you just kill me already?” he said, ignoring the sting of her words. “I honestly can’t listen to any more of your bragging.”

“How’s it feel to lose?” she asked, and she sounded genuinely curious. “I imagine it’s a new feeling for you.”

Mairon summoned up the last of his strength, lifted his head, and spit in her face. A glob of bloody saliva landed on her cheek, and both Beren and Huan came at Mairon, one hitting him in the face, the other in the chest. He coughed, watching blood splatter onto his legs, and gasped for air, his lungs burning.

To her credit, Luthien didn’t even flinch. She leaned forward, took hold of Mairon’s tie, and wiped the spittle from her face.

“You enjoy that,” she said, patting him on the cheek. “It’s the last good feeling you’re ever gonna have.”

She went to the desk and gathered up some papers, shoving them into her bag. “Finrod’s got the cameras,” Luthien said to Beren. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said. “There’ll be no evidence we were ever here.”

“Not now,” she said, typing a string of commands into Mairon’s computer. She looked around and decided she had everything she needed. She turned to Huan, not bothering to look at Mairon. “Make sure no one finds the body,” she said. Then she turned on her heel and strode from the lab, Beren following close behind.

Alone with Huan, Mairon began, for the first time, to feel nervous. Huan walked over to the desk and rummaged around, sifting through the debris.

“You know,” Huan said, “I don’t really like you.”

“You don’t say,” Mairon murmured, pulling experimentally at the zip ties that held him. They didn’t budge.

“Still,” Huan said, ignoring him, “I don’t like killing people. It’s a hassle.”

“Interesting word choice,” said Mairon, still trying to fiddle with the zip ties.

“And I have to say,” Huan said, picking something up from a desk drawer and coming back toward Mairon, “I do have some respect for your dedication, and your loyalty. It’s refreshing.”

He stood in front of Mairon, and Mairon could see at last what Huan had in his hand. It was a box cutter, the slanted blade glinting in the fluorescent lighting of the lab. Mairon felt fear well up in his chest, perhaps belatedly. Huan circled around to the back of the chair, and Mairon began to panic in earnest. “No,” he said, pulling desperately against the zip ties that held him. Adrenaline forced the pain from his mind, and he pulled with every ounce of strength that remained to him, feeling the sharp plastic digging into this skin.

“Easy,” Huan said, holding the chair in place. “I promise it’ll be quick.”

“No,” Mairon said, flinching away from him. “Please, no.”

“Hold still,” said Huan, pressing his palm against Mairon’s forehead and dragging his head back as far as it would go. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Mairon gave one last, desperate struggle, but there was nowhere to go. Huan’s hand on his forehead pulled Mairon’s head back to an uncomfortable angle. His other hand, the one that held the box cutter, came up to Mairon’s neck. In a quick, practiced motion, Huan dragged the blade through the skin of Mairon’s throat, slashing it wide open.

Mairon tried to scream, but nothing happened. Pain exploded at his throat, and he was gasping, trying to draw in air that he couldn’t quite seem to find. His vision was swimming; he felt weak, disjointed. He started to see black at the edge of his vision, rippling inward, and he felt the pull of unconsciousness calling to him. Huan cut the zip ties that held him, and Mairon slumped forward.

“I’m going to do you a favor,” Huan said conversationally, though he was fairly sure Mairon had already passed out. “Not that it’ll do you much good, but it’s the principle of it, right?”

He picked Mairon up, throwing the limp, unresisting body over his shoulder. Then he turned and went out the back door, through the alley and to the sidewalk around the back of the building. He laid Mairon down gently on the concrete and crossed the street. There was a payphone there, and he picked up the receiver, dialing quickly.

“What’s your emergency?” asked a friendly voice on the other line.

“There’s a man bleeding on the sidewalk,” he said, giving her the address. “You better hurry. I think he’s dying.”

She tried to ask him for details, but Huan hung up the phone. He looked at Mairon for a moment, but Mairon didn’t move. He sighed, turned away, and walked quickly down the sidewalk, disappearing down the alley.

Chapter End Notes

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Crossroads

Chapter Summary

Things fall apart at Angband, but with Mairon missing, business problems take a back seat.

Chapter Notes

Also, in which Mairon and Melkor have a very serious talk.

Watch out for mentions of violence (recap of what happened last chapter) as well as some descriptions of Mairon's injuries (so blood/gore).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Okay,” said Melkor. “But—“

“Melkor,” Thuringwethil snapped. “Will you give it a rest? God, I haven’t even been here twenty-four hours and you’re already driving me up the goddamn wall.”

It was eight-thirty in the morning, and they were sitting in her office. She had been surprised to find Melkor at work so early, but there he was, waiting for her when she got off the elevator. He had followed her to her office and had been sitting there for half an hour while she worked, nagging her about calling Mairon back.

“All I’m saying,” he said, “is that it’s weird. I mean, Mairon’s been pissed at me for two months, but he still answers my calls, every time. Something doesn’t feel right.”

Thuringwethil didn’t want to admit it, but she had been thinking the same thing. She had called Mairon twice the previous day and texted him six times, but it had all gone unanswered. She was beginning to worry, but she wasn’t ready to let Melkor know it yet. She scowled at him. “Will you relax? In case you forgot, we have bigger things to worry about than how long Mairon can put off calling you back.”

“Yeah, but—“

There was a knock on the door, and they both looked up to see a very nervous engineer standing in the doorway. “Sir,” she said, looking at Melkor, “we have a problem.”

“What is it?”

“Sir, it’s Carcharoth.”

“What about it?”

“It’s, uh—“

“Spit it out.”

“It, uh, might have crashed.”

“I thought the test flight wasn’t until two.”

“No, sir. I don’t mean physically. I mean the software integration. Everything’s gone haywire.”

“What’s the issue?”

“Still working on it, sir, but the prognosis is very bad. We might have to do a rebuild on it—start the installation from scratch.”

“Jesus Christ,” Melkor said, annoyed. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, sir. All logged tests from yesterday were good.”

“I want the name of everyone who worked on the system yesterday,” Melkor said. “Someone’s fired, you mark my words.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get that to you.”

“And call Mairon. Fuck the time difference. If you want to diagnose the problem and figure out whether it’s worth reinstalling the package, he’s the one to talk to you.”

“I called him, sir. He didn’t answer.”

“Try his cell,” Thuringwethil said.

“I did,” said the engineer. “I tried his office at Tol-in-Gaurhoth, too, and the main coding labs.”

“Huh,” said Thuringwethil, frowning. “That’s weird. He’s been busy, though. Keep trying him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the engineer, and she ducked back out into the hall.

“Have you talked to him today?” Melkor asked.

“No,” she said. “I texted him, but—“

The phone on Thuringwethil’s desk rang, and they both stopped dead, looking at it. Thuringwethil picked it up and held it to her ear. “Yes?” She listened for a moment, and she looked at Melkor. “Yes, he’s here.” She held out the phone, and Melkor took it.

“Yeah,” he said, holding the phone to his ear.

“Sir,” said a voice on the other line. “This is Boldog, down in R&D.”

“What do you want?”

“Sir we—“He hesitated, and Melkor rolled his eyes.

“What is it?”

“Sir, there might be a slight problem with Silmaril.”

“How slight?”

“We, ah, we can’t seem to access the files, sir.”

“Boldog if you don’t tell me what the fuck is going on right now, I swear to God—“

“The common Silmaril files are gone,” he said bluntly. “Or else, we can’t access them. I’ve got a team looking into the exact cause, but—“

“Jesus,” Melkor said, more to himself than to Boldog. “Where the fuck is Mairon?”

“I don’t know, sir. I called every number I have for him, but he’s not answering.”

Melkor swallowed, his mouth suddenly going dry. “Search all the in-house databases,” he said.

“Look in every server. Check the backups to everything. I want everything related to Silmaril dug up and reported on right now—as soon as you possibly can. Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Yes, sir.”

Melkor hung up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Thuringwethil asked.

“Silmaril,” he said. “The files are missing.”

“What do you mean, missing?”

“I mean either these morons forgot how to access some basic programming files,” Melkor said, “or we have a serious breach.”

“Oh, shit,” Thuringwethil said, paling. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“Mairon,” she said, digging through her bag in search of her phone. “Before I left, he was dealing with some misplaced files at Tol-in-Gaurhoth, trying to figure out if it was just some basic incompetence, or if there was an actual hack.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“He was investigating one of the engineering teams,” she said. “He was really suspicious about the lead project engineer—this guy Dungalef. Which might be a fake name.”

“Jesus, Thil. Why did you tell me? Why didn’t either of you?”

“Mairon wanted to figure out what was going on first,” she said, a little defensive. “He didn’t want to bring it to you unless it was an actual problem.”

“I’d say it’s an actual problem now,” he said, getting up and pacing between her desk and the door. “Shit,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “We need to talk to him.”

“On it,” she said, holding her phone to her ear.

Melkor went to the door and leaned out into the hall, shouting for Gothmog. Gothmog jogged over to the office, looking concerned. “What’s up?” he asked.

“We have a potential security breach,” Melkor said. “I want you to pull all the surveillance for the coding labs and anywhere with access to Carcharoth.”

“On it, boss,” he said, and headed for the elevator.

“He’s not answering,” Thuringwethil said. She dialed his office number while Melkor picked up the phone on her desk, dialing down to cybersecurity. He gave directions for them to check for leaks and to secure all the files in the system before hanging up and looking back at Thuringwethil. “He’s not answering anywhere,” she said, starting to panic. “Nothing from his cell, his office, or any of the labs. I even called the landline at the apartment. Nothing.”

“Fuck,” Melkor said, pulling out his phone. He called Gothmog, who answered on the first ring.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Gothmog, I want this place locked down. No one leaves, and no one comes in. Get me that surveillance now.”

“Right away,” Gothmog said, and hung up.

“What the fuck is going on?” Melkor said, picking up Thuringwethil’s phone and dialing back to cybersecurity. “Take all our servers offline,” he said. “I want everything disconnected. Start digging for evidence of a breach.”

“Yes, sir,” came the answer.

“I texted our secretary,” Thuringwethil said. “He’s going to look for Mairon at the office.”

“Good.”

“Melkor, I don’t like this,” she said, looking more nervous than he’d seen her in a long time, possibly ever.

“I don’t either, Thil,” he said. “Keep calling him.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Thuringwethil obsessively called every number she could think of looking for Mairon. She left voicemails on his cellphone, his office line, and at the apartment, at least four at each number. Melkor fielded calls from departments all over the building, all confirming what they were afraid of.

“Carcharoth is down,” he said tersely, pacing. “Looks like a virus, but they haven’t figured out exactly what it is or where it came from. Everything relating to the Silmaril flight files is missing, which means there’s no option for reinstallation.”

“Jesus,” she said, laying her head on her desk. “This is bad.”

“You think?” he snapped.

“Don’t take it out on me. I didn’t do it.”

“Where the fuck is Mairon?” he asked again.

“I don’t know,” she said. She looked at the screen of her phone for the millionth time, but it was still blank. “I don’t like this,” she said again.

“Neither do I.”

“Melkor, I’m afraid,” she said, looking up at him.

He laid a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. “Me too, Thil,” he said. “Let’s figure out what the fuck happened, and we’ll go from there.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog, striding in the door. “I’ve started downloading security footage, but it’s going to take a while to transfer. In the meantime,” he said, leaning over Thuringwethil and tapping on her keyboard, “we can look at access codes to the coding lab door. Every card swipe should be listed.”

He opened a long spreadsheet, detailing hundreds of card-swipe access attempts to the coding lab door. Each entry contained a name, an ID number, a timestamp, and department affiliation for the card used. “Most of these look like regular engineers,” he said, skimming the list. “It’s gonna blow if we have to sit them all down and interrogate them.” He scanned the list, looking for anything out of the ordinary. “What’s this?” he muttered, pointing at an entry in the department affiliation column. “Legal,” he read. “What the—” He trailed his finger back to the name. “Thuringwethil?” He looked at her, confused. “What were you doing in the coding lab at eleven thirteen last night?”

“I was at home at eleven thirteen last night,” she said, staring at the timestamp. “And anyway, my Angband ID—” She stopped, her eyes widening in horrified realization. “Oh, shit,” she said. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit.”

“What?” Gothmog demanded.

“Thil,” said Melkor, “where’d you leave your ID?”

“Tol-in-Gaurhoth,” she said. “That’s the only place it could’ve been.”

“So how’d your ID get out here?” Gothmog asked.

Melkor looked at Thuringwethil, who looked horrified. “Get everything you can on that engineer,” he said, feeling panic beginning to seep through him.

“What’s going on?” Gothmog asked, as Thuringwethil snatched up her phone.

“Something was going on at Tol-in-Gaurhoth,” Melkor said. “Mai was investigating some engineer over some files that went missing, and—”

Thuringwethil’s phone rang, and all three of them jumped. “It’s our secretary,” she said. “Hang on.” She answered the call and put it on speaker. “Gorgol,” she said. “What did you find?”

“Miss,” said Gorgol, “we have a problem. I already called the police, but—”

“What did you find?” she asked again.

“It’s the coding lab, miss,” he said. “It’s wrecked. The desks are upended. The computers are smashed. There’s papers and equipment everywhere, and there’s—”

“What?” Melkor demanded. “Spit it out, damn it.”

“There’s blood,” said Gorgol. “A lot of blood.” Melkor swore loudly, and Thuringwethil gripped her phone hard in her hand.

“What do you mean, blood?” she asked.

“It’s everywhere. All over the floor, on one of the chairs—”

“Mairon,” she said, desperate. “Is he—“

“He’s not here,” said Gorgol. “Not in the coding lab, not anywhere in the building. But—“

“What, Gorgol?”

“There’s a trail,” he said. “Blood, from the middle of the room out to the back door. Looks like someone could’ve been dragged. I checked the alley and everything, but there’s nothing there. No sign of him.”

“Stay there, Gorgol,” she said. “Wait for the police. Don’t let anyone in that room until they get there.”

“Yes, miss.”

“Call me the minute they get there,” she said. “I want to talk to them.” She ended the call and sat back in her chair, breathing hard.

“It’s ok, Thil,” Gothmog said, laying a hand on her shoulder and hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. “We’re gonna find him.”

“Gothmog,” said Melkor. “I want every employee you have on duty until further notice. I want this building covered, and I want double patrols at every server site. I want your people going through every aspect of surveillance—every camera, every card access, everything. Find out who used Thuringwethil’s ID.”

“On it,” said Gothmog.

“Thil, do you know who Mairon was investigating?”

“Yes.”

“Get their personnel files. Get their background checks. Get everything we have on them. I want them found.”

“Done,” she said.

“And do it on the way,” he said, grabbing his coat from where he’d thrown it.

“On the way where?” asked Gothmog.

“I’ll be damned if we’re going to sit around here waiting for bad news. We’re going to Tol-in-Gaurhoth—now.”

They bribed their way onto the next available flight and made it to Tol-in-Gaurhoth by late afternoon. The coding lab was a crime scene, swarming with police who had done little to clean it up. Gorgol hadn’t been exaggerating. The contents of the desks, papers and machinery and notebooks, were strewn haphazardly around the room, coating overturned chairs and benches. At the far end of the room was a splatter of dried blood, ominous and huge, with a drag trail leading to the back door.

For a moment, Thuringwethil faltered, staring at it all in horror. Then her face turned grim, and she went inside to speak to the police. They knew little more than she did about what had happened. Gothmog went with a deputy to review security, but there wasn’t much to find. All the video

footage had been deleted, the backups along with it. They accessed the card swipes and found the last known punches for the lab—Mairon, followed by Beren. Thuringwethil retrieved the personnel files, and handed copies over to the police, who promised to investigate. She had little hope; no one had seen Dungalef or his team since the day before.

The three of them were at Tol-in-Gaurhoth late into the evening, until there was nothing more they could do, and the police told them to go home and wait for news.

“What now?” Gothmog asked, walking beside Thuringwethil on the sidewalk.

“Go home,” said Melkor. He sounded exhausted. “Or, you know. Thil’s place.”

“Not yet,” she said. “I can’t.”

“Then where?”

She said nothing, but walked on, and the two of them had little choice but to follow. She did, after all, have the keys.

She led them around the city to spots she knew Mairon liked, or at least had gone. She knew it was silly, knew in her heart that the explanation for Mairon’s disappearance was far more sinister than losing track of time in a diner or a bar. Still, it made her feel better to do something, and so they trudged down the dimming sidewalks, talking to owners and servers and bartenders, few of whom even recognized the picture she showed them. There was one, though, at the last place they went, a young bartender who looked at Mairon’s picture and frowned. “Oh,” he said, brushing blonde curls away from his face. “That asshole. He never called me back.”

Melkor lunged at him, but Gothmog intercepted him and dragged him away. Thuringwethil left the man her phone number and decided it was time to go home.

The next two days dragged by, with very little for them to do. Gothmog spoke with security, trying to piece together what had happened and finding very little. Melkor fielded the more important crisis phone calls from Angband, mostly assigning extra duties to those he knew he could trust. Thuringwethil called every hospital in the city, giving descriptions of Mairon and begging them to call her back if they found him. In the meantime, Thuringwethil told them what she knew about Dungalef, and Mairon’s hunch about the missing files.

“Where is he?” Melkor demanded, sitting outside on the stoop with Thuringwethil while Gothmog napped on the couch. It was the evening of the third day they had been there, and their nerves and patience were wearing thin.

“I don’t know,” she said, wringing her hands. “Jesus, Melkor. I’m scared.”

“Me too, Thil,” Melkor said. They had made this exchange a hundred times in the past few days, though it was no less true for its frequency.

“I should’ve been here,” she said, her head in her hands. “I shouldn’t have left him. I should’ve—“

“Hey,” Melkor said. “Don’t do that. You couldn’t have known. And anyway, what could you have done? Chances are, you’d be missing too if you’d stayed.”

“At least I wouldn’t have left him,” she said, and burst into tears. Melkor put his arm around her, and she cried into his shoulder.

None of them had slept much in the three days they’d been in town. At times, each of them would

collapse on the couch, grabbing a quick power nap before waking, guilty and unrefreshed. They stayed up long into the night, talking and worrying until they were hoarse. They would doze then, in the early morning hours, leaning on each other for a comfort that did little to soothe their nerves.

“We’re out of coffee,” Melkor said, walking through the kitchen on the fourth day.

“I’ll go get some,” Gothmog said. “I need to get out of here anyway.”

“Pick up some food, too,” Melkor said, peering at the dwindling supplies in the fridge.

“Anything specific?”

“Something fast,” he said. “Maybe just—“

A phone rang, and the three of them froze, momentarily too startled to move. Then Thuringwethil sprinted to the counter where her phone was plugged in and picked it up, noting the unfamiliar number on the screen. “Yes,” she said, breathless.

“I’m looking for Thuringwethil,” said a voice she didn’t know.

“That’s me,” she said.

“Hi, Thuringwethil,” he said. “This is Dr. Balmeg down at Sirion General. I have a note here with your number regarding a missing person?”

“Hang on,” she said, her heart pounding. She switched to the speaker function and set her phone down on the counter, her hands shaking. “Go ahead,” she said, as Melkor and Gothmog crowded around her.

“We have someone here that might match the description you gave us.”

“What do you mean, might?” Gothmog demanded.

“He came in without ID,” said the doctor, “and he’s been unconscious since he came in.”

“I sent a picture,” Thuringwethil said.

“I know,” he said. “I’m looking at it now. But I—how do I put this? He’s had quite a few injuries to his face, so I’m not a hundred percent sure if it’s a match.”

“Jesus,” said Gothmog, stalking away.

“Look, I don’t want you to waste time coming down here if it’s not him,” said the doctor. “Does your friend—“

“Mairon,” she said.

“Mairon,” the doctor repeated. “Does he have any distinguishing features?”

“Features?”

“Uh, moles, scars, anything like that? Anything that might identify him.”

“He has a scar,” she said, “on his legs.”

“He does?” said Gothmog.

“Yeah,” she said. “Remember a couple years ago, when he was trying to pry the back off that circuit board with a pair of scissors?”

“Oh, right,” said Gothmog. “Stabbed himself in the leg.”

“I can’t remember which one, though.”

“Left inner thigh,” Melkor said. “High up. But it’s small and faded. It would be easy to miss.”

“I didn’t notice a scar,” said the doctor. “I can look again, though.”

“He has a tattoo,” said Melkor, and both Gothmog and Thuringwethil stared at him. “Right bicep, up close to the shoulder. It’s an eye, done in bright red ink.”

There was a pause that seemed to last an eternity. “That’s him,” said the doctor. Gothmog stopped his pacing. Thuringwethil gripped the edge of the counter, leaning on it for support. Melkor let his head fall back, gathering his hair in his hand.

“How soon can you get to Sirion General?” asked Dr. Balcmege.

“Ten minutes,” said Melkor, already crossing to the table and scooping up the keys to the rental car.

“Fourth floor,” said the doctor. “I’ll meet you at the nurses’ station.”

“Since when does Mairon have a tattoo?” Gothmog demanded, following Melkor out the door.

“I don’t know,” Melkor said, waiting for Thuringwethil to lock the door. “At least as long as I—as we—he—“

“Since you’ve seen him naked,” Gothmog said. “Jesus, I get it.”

“Come on,” said Melkor, turning away to hide the flush in his cheeks. “Let’s get to the hospital.”

It should’ve been a fifteen minute drive. Melkor made it in eight, peeling into a spot in the parking lot, barely getting the car in park before killing the engine. They made their way inside and up to the fourth floor, congregating at the nurses’ station.

“Dr. Balcmege?” Gothmog asked, approaching a man in a white coat. He turned around.

“Gothmog,” he said, holding out his hand. “This is Melkor and Thuringwethil. We’re friends of Mairon’s.”

“Nice to meet you,” said the doctor.

“Can we see him?” Thuringwethil asked, breathless.

“Ordinarily, it would be family only,” he said. “But yours was the only number I had.”

“His parents are dead,” Melkor said. “He doesn’t have any siblings.”

“We’re his family,” Thuringwethil said fiercely. “I’m his emergency contact, for God’s sake. I can get you his personnel file, if you want.”

“No,” said the doctor, holding up a conciliatory hand. “It’s alright. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“Can we see him?” Thuringwethil asked again.

“Yes,” the doctor said. “But I want you to understand that he’s in very rough shape.”

“How rough?” Gothmog asked.

“Pardon my bluntness,” the doctor said, “but someone beat the shit out of him. He’s covered in bruises and scrapes. He’s got a few broken bones. And—“He shook his head. “Come in,” he said, “and I’ll explain. Just please, don’t shout or make a scene. He’s resting, and he shouldn’t be disturbed.”

“We’ll be good,” Melkor said.

The doctor turned and led them down the hall to the room on the end. He stepped aside and let them come in, shutting the door behind them.

“Oh, God,” Thuringwethil whispered, her hand flying to her mouth.

The three of them stopped dead and stared at the figure lying in the bed, just recognizable as Mairon. The doctor went to the bed, and they followed, almost afraid to move.

“Ambulance got a call about someone bleeding on the sidewalk out behind Tol Sirion.”

“Tol-in-Gaurhoth,” said Gothmog. “That’s where he was working.”

“He’s lucky the ambulance was right around the corner,” said the doctor. “He wouldn’t have made it otherwise.”

“What happened?” Melkor asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” said Balmeg. “He’s got a broken orbital, and someone smashed in his nose. They reset it in the emergency room.” He waved a hand over Mairon’s face. “Like I said, lots of cuts and bruises. I can’t say for sure, but in my experience, it looks like the kind of damage you get when someone punches you repeatedly in the face.”

He moved his hand lower, hovering over Mairon’s chest. “He’s got four broken ribs and some really colorful bruising.” He pulled up the blanket and gently shifted Mairon’s arm. “I would bet on him having been restrained,” he said, running a thumb gently over Mairon’s wrists, which were encircled with a ring of angry bruises. “Those are ligature marks. Looks like he fought, though. Whatever they used really cut into him.” Indeed, there were cuts dug into the bruises, scabbed over and healing.

“And this?” asked Melkor, afraid to know the answer. He pointed at the heavy bandaging at Mairon’s throat.

“That,” said the doctor, shaking his head, “is the reason he was so close to death when we got him. Someone slit his throat.”

Thuringwethil gave a cry, muffled into her hand, and burst into tears. Gothmog put his arms around her.

“Slit his throat?” Melkor repeated, feeling numb, disjointed.

“Yes,” said the doctor, “with some kind of very sharp blade, though I couldn’t tell you for sure what it was. It was pretty deep, though—he lost a lot of blood, and he’s had several transfusions since he came to us.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Gothmog asked. The three of them looked expectantly at the doctor, who sighed.

“I think so,” he said. “We almost lost him a couple times, but he seems to have stabilized now.”

“Can we stay with him?” asked Thuringwethil.

“Yes, of course. It would do him good to have company.” Thuringwethil went to his bedside and hesitated, unsure of what to do. “You can touch him,” the doctor said gently. “Hold his hand. Talk to him. Let him know you’re here.”

She sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed and picked up his hand, holding it gently in hers. “it’s okay, Mai,” she said, her voice breaking. “We’re here. It’s okay.”

“I’ll leave you alone,” the doctor said, and he retreated, shutting the door behind him.

Thuringwethil sat on the edge of the bed and cried, turning her face away. Gothmog came and stood in front of her, putting his arms around her. She laid her head against his chest, and he rested his cheek against her hair, passing a hand across his eyes.

Melkor pulled a chair over to the opposite side of the bed and sat down. Mairon’s hair was in disarray, and he smoothed it back, careful not to pull or to touch his face. He slid his hand under Mairon’s and held it, squeezing gently. He lowered his head and laid his cheek against the back of Mairon’s hand. “Come on, Mai,” he whispered. “Wake up. Please wake up.”

But Mairon didn’t. For hours, the three of them sat and stood and paced, waiting for some sign of life that wasn’t the steady beep of a heart monitor or the gentle rise and fall of his breath. They spoke little, in hushed whispers too loud in the stillness of the room. Visiting hours ended at seven, but no one asked them to leave, and so they didn’t. They passed the night in Mairon’s little room, sometimes sleeping fitfully in the chair or slumped against the wall. Mostly, they watched Mairon, eyes tracing the ruin of his face, lingering on the little spots of blood that seeped through the bandages at his throat.

The hospital got busy about eight a.m., with nurses making rounds and orderlies bringing breakfast trays. Thuringwethil stood up and stretched, listening to the bustle outside the door. “I need coffee,” she said.

“And food,” Gothmog added.

“Want to find a cafeteria?”

“You guys go ahead,” Melkor said. “I don’t want to leave him alone just yet.”

Thuringwethil laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, a gentle reassurance. Then she and Gothmog left, and for the first time in months, Melkor and Mairon were alone.

Melkor was sitting in the chair at Melkor’s bedside, and he stretched, yawning. He slid his hand under Mairon’s, holding it gently, and leaned forward, laying his arm on the bed and burying his face in the crook of his arm. He closed his eyes, exhausted, and wondered if he had time to nap before Thuringwethil and Gothmog came back.

“Melkor.”

Melkor jumped at the sound of his name, sitting bolt upright. The voices broken, rasping and hoarse, but there was no mistaking it. Melkor looked up at Mairon, who looked back with

painfully bloodshot eyes. “Oh, God,” Melkor said, squeezing Mairon’s fingers gently. “Oh, Mairon. Thank God.”

“You know,” said Mairon, a little bemused, “this isn’t exactly the afterlife I was picturing.”

Melkor laughed; he couldn’t help it. Relief was buoying inside him, making him giddy. “I guess your sense of humor’s intact.”

“Might be the only thing.” He shifted slightly, wincing. “Jesus, I feel like shit.”

“The doctor was just here a minute ago,” said Melkor. “I can go get him, and—“

“No,” Mairon said, so forcefully that Melkor started, surprised. “Stay,” Mairon said. His fingers were tight on Melkor’s wrist, squeezing so hard it hurt.

“Okay,” Melkor said. “Okay.” He prized Mairon’s fingers off his wrist and held his hand in his. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Mairon nodded, shaking, breathing hard. “I want to sit up,” he said, shifting again and grimacing.

“Hang on,” Melkor said. He reached for the bedside control, pressing the button to raise the bed until Mairon was in a half-sitting position. “Better?”

Mairon nodded, a wry smile stealing across his lips. “How am I not dead?” he wondered aloud. “Fucker slashed my throat with a box cutter. You’d think—“

“Jesus,” said Melkor, his vision blurring. He gripped the sheets of Mairon’s bed so hard his fingernails cut into his skin, the thin fabric doing nothing to stop the pressure.

“It’s okay,” Mairon said, laying his other hand on top of Melkor’s. “I’m okay.”

“I know,” Melkor said, his voice shaking. “I know.” He laid his cheek against the back of Mairon’s hand, taking a deep breath.

Mairon slid his hand out from under Melkor, laying it in his hair. “Melkor,” he said.

Melkor pushed himself up, taking a deep, steady breath. “Yeah?”

“Silmaril,” he said, his voice quiet, as though he was afraid to ask.

Melkor grimaced and shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

Mairon raised his hands to his face and groaned. “Oh, God,” he said. He let his hands fall down from his face, and he looked at Melkor, utterly forlorn. “I tried,” he said, his voice breaking. “You have to believe me, Melkor. I tried.”

“Hey,” Melkor said, taking his hand again. “Mai, I know. Of course I know. Jesus, you almost died trying.”

“Almost,” Mairon whispered.

Melkor looked at him, taken aback. “Isn’t that enough?” he asked, half-afraid of the answer.

“Is it?” Mairon asked, and Melkor stared at him, too stunned and hurt to answer.

“Oh, my God,” said Thuringwethil, walking through the door and stopping dead. She dropped the

coffee in her hand and ran to Mairon's bedside, sitting gently on the edge of the bed and taking hold of his hand. "You're awake. Thank God you're awake."

"I'll get the doctor," Gothmog said, ducking back out into the hall.

"Hey, Thil," said Mairon, making an effort to smile at her.

"You're okay," she said, as though she couldn't believe it. She brushed the tousled hair back from his face as though to reassure herself he was there.

"Can't get rid of me that easily."

"Thank God for that," she said.

Gothmog returned, with the doctor trailing at his heels. "Hello," he said. "I'm Dr. Balcmege. Good to see you awake." He went to Mairon's bedside and looked him over, nodding approvingly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Mairon said, and Gothmog laughed.

"That might've been a dumb question," said Balcmege, smiling. "How's your pain level? I can up your dosage if you want."

"I'm alright," Mairon said.

"Any dizziness? Shortness of breath?"

"No."

"How's your vision?"

"Okay, I think."

"How many fingers?" asked the doctor, holding up his hand.

"Three," said Mairon.

"Close that right eye," he said, and Mairon did. "Now how many?"

"One," he said.

"Good," said the doctor. "Can you wiggle your fingers for me?" Mairon had to extricate both hands from Thuringwethil and Melkor, but he wiggled his fingers with no problem. "Move your wrists?" That movement was a little harder, and he winced, slowly moving his hands at the wrists. "Not broken, at least," said Balcmege.

"Small miracles," said Mairon.

"Do you know how you got here?"

"I assume by ambulance."

"Do you remember what happened?"

Mairon sighed. "You can check with my lawyer," he said, nodding at Thuringwethil, "but I think the technical term is attempted murder." He slowly raised his hand, wincing, and let his fingers

brush the edge of the bandages at his throat.

“You don’t have to give me details,” said Balmeg, “but do you remember how it happened?”

“Box cutter,” Mairon said. Thuringwethil drew in a sharp hiss of breath, and Gothmog swore softly. Melkor felt his hands ball into fists, his anger undiminished by the fact that he already knew. “Mine, actually,” Mairon added. “The nerve of some people.”

“Did you know the person who did this?”

Mairon grimaced. “Actually, Doc, I don’t know if I want to talk about it right now.”

“Of course,” he said. “Let me just do a couple things.” He lifted his stethoscope, putting the tips in his ears and the chestpiece on the fabric of the hospital gown covering Mairon’s chest.

“Breath,” he instructed, three times, moving the little circle of metal around. “Can you sit up?” He did, Melkor and Thuringwethil holding his arms. The doctor listened to him breath again, and he let Mairon lay back down against the incline of the bed. “Sounds good,” he said. “You had four broken ribs. I’m surprised you didn’t have a lung puncture.”

“Lucky me,” Mairon said. “Hey, Doc. Was this broken?” he tapped his finger lightly against his swollen cheek.

“Very,” said the doctor.

“Thought so. It felt like it broke.”

“Fist?” the doctor asked.

“Elbow,” Mairon said.

“Ah. That makes sense.” He looked at Mairon for a moment and then shook himself. “Well, everything looks relatively alright. I’ll give you guys some time to yourselves. You call us if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Doc,” said Gothmog. He walked over to the bed and looked down at Mairon, grinning. “Good to see you looking a little less dead,” he said.

“Gothmog,” said Thuringwethil, glaring at him.

Mairon laughed, the sound rasping in his throat. “Still look better than you,” he said.

“Damn straight, buddy,” said Gothmog. He laid a hand on top of Mairon’s head. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “Sorry about that. I would’ve called but they took my phone.”

“Dungalef?” Thuringwethil asked.

“Felagund, rather,” said Mairon. “Finrod Felagund.”

“Finrod—Jesus Christ. A Finwion?”

“That’s the one.”

“He did this?” she demanded.

“Not directly,” he said. “But his friend—Beren. He was there, with his little Doriath-heiress girlfriend,” Mairon said. “And some dude called Huan who’s got a mean right hook.”

“Doriath?” Melkor said. “What the fuck does Doriath have to do with Formenos?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said, “but I can tell you what I do.” And he did, starting with the moment he had realized who Finrod was and ending with the altercation in the lab, right up until the moment Luthien had left. Then he faltered, his mouth going dry, his heart pounding in his chest.

“It’s okay,” Thuringwethil said, holding his hand. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“I’ll kill him,” Gothmog said. “I’ll find him, and I’ll kill him.”

“You’ll have to fight me for it,” Melkor growled.

“Easy there, edgelords,” Mairon said, hiding his discomfiture with sarcasm. “If anyone’s gonna kill them, it’s me. But first, tell me what happened with Silmaril.” Melkor and Thuringwethil exchanged a look. “Come on,” he said. “I have to know.”

“Mai,” she said, “we don’t have to talk about this right now.”

“She used our ID,” he said quietly. “Didn’t she?”

There was silence for a moment until Gothmog relented and said, “Yeah. She swiped through to the coding lab.”

“How bad is it?”

Gothmog and Thuringwethil looked at Melkor, Thuringwethil shaking her head slightly. Melkor looked at Mairon, knowing the questions wouldn’t stop until he knew for sure. “All the flight files are gone,” he said, as gently as he could. “They destroyed the programming for Carcharoth, too.”

“Oh, God,” Mairon said, burying his face in his hands. “I should’ve seen this,” he said miserably. “I should’ve stopped it.” He let his hands fall away from his face. “I’m gonna fix this,” he said, dogged. “I swear, I’m—“

“You’re not doing anything,” Thuringwethil said, shooting a venomous look at Melkor. “Not anytime soon.”

“But—“

“Mai, you almost died. No exaggeration; no hyperbole. The only thing you’re going to do right now is recover.”

“Thil, I’m fine.“

“You’re not fine,” she said. “You’re beat to hell, and you barely survived a throat-slashing, for fuck’s sake. You need to rest.”

“You can’t get back at these assholes if you’re dead,” Gothmog said gently. “Get better first. Then get even.”

“But—“

“We’ve got it covered,” Melkor said. “Let us handle it, at least for a few days. I promise there’ll still be mess for you to clean up when you get out.”

Mairon wanted to argue; he was miserable and ashamed of what had happened, but he was also aching and tired and sore. Despite his best efforts to stifle it, he yawned, wincing at the pressure on his bruised face.

“See?” Thuringwethil demanded, as though this proved her point. “You’re exhausted. You need to rest.”

“I’ll concede that point,” he said, feeling his eyes grow heavy. “But nothing else.”

“Good enough,” she said. Mairon’s eyes closed, and his breathing evened out to a slow, steady pace. She sighed and leaned back against Gothmog, watching Mairon sleep as though afraid to let him out of her sight.

“What now?” Gothmog asked, resting his arms on Thuringwethil’s shoulders.

“Like I said,” Melkor murmured, afraid to wake him. “We handle it.”

Three days passed, and despite Mairon’s constant insistence that the three of them were attempting to kill him via unrequited boredom, Mairon was getting better. The bruises on his face, dark, angry purple splotches when they had found him, were starting to lighten to various clashing shades of yellow and green. The swelling was almost completely gone, and his eye was looking clearer every day. His ribs were still sore, but they were healing, and he could get up and walk a little on his own with little difficulty.

The rift between Melkor and Mairon, however, showed no signs of healing. With Gothmog and Thuringwethil, Mairon was his usual self—laughing, talking, hounding them for information. With Melkor, he was—not cold, or hostile, but—cordial, was the word. He was polite, friendly even, but it was cool and distant. Melkor would’ve preferred anger. He would have preferred fury or bitterness or hatred. He would have preferred anything to this stubborn apathy, a lack of feeling that tore at him, wearing him down.

“Have you talked to him?” Thuringwethil asked, late on the third day since Mairon had woken up.

“Not yet,” Melkor said, feeling guilty and uneasy.

“You need to,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I just...” He shook his head, unwilling or unable to finish the thought.

She laid a hand on his shoulder. “You’re afraid,” she said. “That’s good. You should be. But you still need to talk to him. You need to put this to rest, so you can move on. So you both can.”

He sighed, laying his hand over hers. “I’ll talk to him,” he said.

“Do it soon,” she said, squeezing his shoulder. “Before I kill you.”

The four of them ate breakfast the next morning as they had done the last three days, Mairon eating what the nurses brought him, and the other three scavenging from the cafeteria, complaining about the quality of the coffee.

“Don’t forget,” said Gothmog, speaking into the post-meal lull. “Doc says you should get up and walk.”

Mairon groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Do you want to get better or not?" Thuringwethil asked.

"Does getting better involve walking?"

"Don't be a baby," she said. "Go take a walk."

"Come on," Melkor said, standing up. "I'll go with you."

For a moment, he thought Mairon was going to refuse. Then he sighed and swung his legs over the end of the bed, letting Gothmog help him up.

"Don't go far," Thuringwethil said.

"Oh, now you're worried," said Mairon.

"Ass," she said. "Be careful."

"Don't worry," Melkor said. "I'll bring him back in one piece." He let Mairon go ahead of him, and they walked out into the hall. "Where to?" he asked, looking down toward the nurses' station.

"Can we go outside?" Mairon asked, heading for the elevator without waiting for a response. "I'm dying in here. I need some fresh air."

"Mai, I don't—"

"Come on," Mairon said, pressing the button for the elevator.

"Thil's right," Melkor said. "You shouldn't go too far."

"I'm going outside," said Mairon, as the doors opened. He stepped inside and turned back to look at Melkor. "If you want to talk to me, you can come too."

Melkor sighed and followed him into the elevator. The doors closed, and they began to move, saying nothing. Melkor looked over at him, but Mairon looked stubbornly straight ahead. Melkor knew he should say something, searched for the right words, but he found nothing. They reached the ground floor, and the doors opened. "Mai," he said. "I—"

"Come on," Mairon said, heading for the door. He was walking fast, far faster than Melkor thought he ought to, and Melkor jogged to catch up.

"Slow down," he said, but Mairon ignored him, pushing through the doors and stepping out onto the sun-drenched sidewalk. He headed down the path, and Melkor followed him anxiously.

"Mairon, wait. Slow down." He put a hand on Mairon's arm, but Mairon shrugged him off. He stepped off the path into the grass, stumbling on the uneven earth. Melkor was right behind him, putting a hand out to steady him. "Jesus, Mairon. Will you stop for a second?"

"No," Mairon said, pulling away from him. There was a bench a few feet away, and he made for it. He was nearly there when he stumbled again; Melkor caught him, darting forward to steady him.

"Will you stop?" he said, holding onto Mairon. "You're gonna hurt yourself."

"Don't," Mairon said, pulling away from him and leaning on the back of the bench, both hands gripping hard at the wood. His breathing was heavy and ragged, and he looked up at Melkor

angrily. “Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Pretend like you give a damn about me,” Mairon said, turning and glaring at him. “You’ve made it pretty clear that you don’t.” He made his way around the bench, one hand on the back to guide him, and sat down heavily. Melkor followed him, sitting down next to him. Mairon moved pointedly away, as far as he could get.

Melkor sighed. “You’re wrong, you know,” he said. “I do care about you.”

“Liar,” said Mairon.

“Mai, please. Can we just talk? I—“

“No,” Mairon said. “I’m done with your bullshit, Melkor. I’m done with your excuses. I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

“I’m not here to give you excuses,” Melkor said. “What I did to you, the way I treated you—it was inexcusable. There’s nothing I could say to justify it, so I’m not going to try.”

“Then what do you want?”

“To explain,” Melkor said. “Because as stupid and ridiculous and indefensible as it is, there *is* a reason for what I did, and I think you should hear what it is.”

Mairon glared at him, but he relented at last, saying, “Two minutes. Make it worth my while.”

Melkor took a deep breath, letting it out as a sigh. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Better figure it out,” Mairon said, unsympathetic. “Clock’s ticking.”

Melkor grimaced and ran a hand through his hair, collecting his thoughts. If he was going to do this, he would have to start at the beginning. He took a deep breath and began. “When I was in that hangar,” he said, watching Mairon’s face, “I thought I was going to die. I don’t have to tell you what that’s like—how your brain goes a million miles an hour in a hundred different directions. How you keep thinking there has to be a way out, and keep realizing there isn’t. How angry you are; how scared, how desperate. All this stuff was running through my head, driving me crazy. I could barely think, and yet there was this one thought, more than any of the others, that kept coming up, breaking through all the other noise, and it was you, Mairon.” Melkor looked over at him, but Mairon stared pointedly at the ground, looking at the grass beneath his slippers.

Melkor sighed. “I know it sounds ridiculous,” he said. “It was. I mean, there’s a fucking lunatic waving a gun in my face, and the only thing I could think was how much I wanted to see you. I thought the same thing when I woke up in the hospital. You can ask Thil; the first thing I said when I woke up was, “Where’s Mairon?”. I just kept thinking that if I could see you, just for a minute, that everything would be okay. And it was.” He shook his head. “You walked in that door, and it didn’t matter that we were being investigated, or that we had projects rotting on the shelves, or that we were now involved in the deaths of two different Formenos CEOs. You were there, and everything was okay. And honestly, that scared the shit out of me.”

Mairon’s hands balled into fists, but he didn’t look up. Melkor steeled himself and went on. “I know it sounds crazy, but I—I don’t know. It just freaked me the fuck out. I didn’t want to deal with how I felt or what it meant, so I just...didn’t. I panicked, and I lashed out, and I asked you to go. It was stupid and immature and cruel, and I know that, but I just thought if I could get some

time, and some distance, everything would be okay. Everything would go back to normal.”

He shook his head, giving a hollow, joyless laugh. “It didn’t, obviously. There was no normal to go back to. How could there be? Normal was being with you, and I fucking ruined that, so.” He sighed. “Then you were here, and you were so far away, and I wanted to call you—knew I should call you.”

“You didn’t,” Mairon said. It was the first thing he’d said since Melkor had started to speak. It was the truth, and it stung.

“I know,” Melkor said, knowing there was nothing else to say. “I should have, and I didn’t. And then all this…” He waved a hand vaguely, as though to encompass everything that had happened. “We knew something was up with Carcharoth, and when we went back to the files, all the Silmaril stuff was gone. We called you and called you, but you were just gone. Vanished. And the coding lab—Jesus, Mai. I saw that room and I swear to God, I have never been more afraid in my life. There were three days when we had no idea where you were, and I was fucking terrified. I was so damn scared that something had happened to you, that you were hurt or—or worse, and I was never gonna see you again, never get to tell you—“

“Tell me what?” Mairon demanded. His head jerked up, and he looked up at Melkor, meeting his eyes for the first time since they had sat down. “I’m here,” he said, his voice angry, demanding. “What do you want to tell me?”

“That I’m an idiot,” Melkor said, “and a fucking coward. That in a lifetime of poor choices and bad decision, sending you away was the worst mistake I have ever made. And most importantly, that I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” Mairon repeated, half-disbelieving.

“Yes,” Melkor said. “God, Mai. I’m so sorry.”

“Huh,” Mairon said, crossing his arms. “I wasn’t sure you were actually capable of saying those words.”

“Neither was I, to be honest. I mean it, though. I’m sorry, Mai.”

Mairon sighed, passing a hand tiredly over his face. “Why are you doing this to me?” he asked, and Melkor stared at him, nonplussed. “Why are you telling me this? What do you want?”

“I’m telling you because it’s the truth,” Melkor said, “and after everything that happened, you deserve the truth.”

“Great,” Mairon said. “What do you want?”

“Honestly?” Melkor said, giving him a tired smile. “I want a second chance.”

Mairon laughed, a bitter, joyless sound that made Melkor flinch. “God,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re unbelievable. You know that? I mean, you have some goddamn nerve, saying that to me.”

“I know,” Melkor said.

“No,” Mairon said, glaring at him. “You don’t. You don’t have a goddamn clue what a nightmare the last two months have been. I mean, Jesus, Melkor. I cared about you, and I thought—God, I thought you felt the same way. Do you know how much I wanted that? How *long* I wanted that?”

But it was a lie. You didn't care about me. You didn't give a shit about me. You threw me away like I was garbage—no, less than that. Like I was nothing. Do you know how that felt? Do you know what that did to me? It destroyed me, Melkor—you destroyed me. And now you think you can just sit here and tell me you're sorry, and everything will be okay?" He shook his head. "God, you must think I'm an idiot."

"No," Melkor said. "Of course not."

"I do," Mairon. "I must be."

"What do you mean?"

Mairon looked at him, his rage simmering low but not disappearing. "You treated me like shit, Melkor. You ruined my goddamn life. I should be furious with you. I should hate your fucking guts. And part of me does. Part of me never wants to see you again." Melkor shivered and, for the first time, began to fear the worst. "But the other part of me," said Mairon, oblivious or unconcerned with Melkor's trepidation, "the part that must be a fucking idiot, has only wanted to kiss you since we sat down on this bench."

Whatever Melkor had been expecting, this wasn't it. For a moment, he gaped at Mairon in disbelief. Then he smiled, hesitant and hopeful, and he said, "You can, you know."

Mairon said nothing. His hands were clasped in his lap, and he stared at them stubbornly, unwilling to meet Melkor's gaze. Melkor's pulse was a nervous jitter, his heart pounding in his chest, but he knew this might be his only chance. He slid closer to Mairon and cupped his chin, gently tilting his face up. Then he leaned down and kissed him, a tentative press of his lips against Mairon. For a moment, Mairon was absolutely still, and Melkor wondered if he had misjudged the moment. He half-expected a rebuke, for Mairon to push him away and tell him it was over. But then Mairon leaned into him, deepening the kiss, his hands coming up to rest against Melkor's chest, a brutally familiar touch that made Melkor shiver. He pulled back just as suddenly, resting his head on Melkor's shoulder and drawing in a shaking breath.

"God, I missed you," Melkor said, resting his cheek against the top of Mairon's head.

"I missed you too," Mairon said, his fingers trailing a gentle circle on Melkor's chest.

"Look," said Melkor, shifting back to look at Mairon. "I know I don't deserve another chance. Hell, after the way I treated you, I probably don't even have the right to ask. But I have to, Mai. I can't help it. I want to be with you, and I am asking you—begging you, even—please take me back."

Mairon sighed, rubbing at his eyes with his fingertips. "I don't know, Melkor," he said. He sounded exhausted, and his face was pale and drawn. Melkor felt a stab of guilt cut through his unease, waiting for what Mairon would say. "When you left me, I was broken. I was a mess—just completely fucked up. You're asking me for the chance to let you do it again, and I honestly don't know if I can give it to you. I mean, why should I? Why should I risk getting hurt again?"

"Because," Melkor said, before he could second-guess himself, "I love you."

Mairon shifted away from him so suddenly that Melkor flinched, startled. "Don't," Mairon said, glaring at him with surprising vehemence. "Don't you dare say that to me."

"Mairon, I—"

"That isn't something you say to win an argument," Mairon snapped. "Or to get your way. It's

something you say when you mean it—really mean it, and I—“

Melkor leaned forward, then, all nervousness and insecurity evaporating in the face of his surety. He held Mairon's face in his hands, holding his gaze. “I mean it,” he said. “I mean it more than I've ever meant anything in my life.” His thumbs stroked gently over Mairon's cheeks, barely grazing against the bruised skin. “I love you, Mairon, and I want to be with you—forever, if you'll have me. Just please, I'm begging you, give me a chance.”

Mairon looked at him for a long time, so long that Melkor's pulse quickened nervously, his hands shaking against Mairon's skin. Then Mairon turned his head and kissed Melkor's palm. “Alright,” he said, leaning into the press of Melkor's hand.

“Really?” Melkor asked, too stunned for a moment to believe it.

“Yes, really,” said Mairon, smiling. “Don't make me regret it.”

“Oh, thank God,” Melkor said, laying a hand on his chest, feeling the pounding of his heart. “I thought you were going to say no.”

“So did I,” Mairon said.

Melkor looked at him so earnestly, then, that Mairon relented, laying his hand over Melkor's and stroking the back of it gently. “I'm gonna make this up to you,” Melkor said. “Everything I did, everything I put you through, I'm gonna make it right. I don't know how—I don't even know if I can, but I swear I—“

“I know where you can start,” Mairon said, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

“Anything,” Melkor said.

“Kiss me again,” said Mairon, biting his lower lip.

Melkor laughed, happy and relieved. “I can do that,” he said. He shifted forward and cupped Mairon's chin, tilting his face up and kissing him softly, sweetly. Mairon's hands went to Melkor's chest, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt and pulling him down to kiss him hard, hungrily. Any shred of restraint Melkor had was gone, lost in the feel of Mairon's lips parting beneath his own, the slide of Mairon's tongue into his mouth. He let Mairon kiss him, one hand at the small of his back, the other at the back of his head, pressing him closer, savoring the taste and the feel of him, familiar and yet new. He turned his head to the side, kissing the sharp jut of Mairon's chin, and Mairon moaned, letting his head tip back.

Mairon hissed sharply, and Melkor pulled back, concerned. Mairon's hand went to his throat, and he winced. “That was dumb,” he said. His tone was light, but Melkor knew that it hurt. There were little pinpricks of blood dotting the white expanse of the bandages at his throat, and Melkor brushed his knuckles gently over Mairon's cheek.

“You okay?” he asked.

Mairon smiled. “I am now,” he said, taking Melkor's hand and kissing his knuckles.

Melkor stood up and held out his hand. “Come on,” he said. “Let's get you inside and hope to God Thuringwethil doesn't notice I made you bleed.”

Chapter End Notes

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Turn You Inside Out

Chapter Summary

Physically, Mairon is getting better. Mentally? It's gonna take some time. In the meantime, he and Melkor still have some things to work out.

Chapter Notes

Raise your hand if you think Mairon hasn't emotionally dealt with almost dying (you can't see me, but I'm raising my hand)

A couple warnings: Mairon has a flashback, so blanket warning for blood, gore, violence, etc. If you made it through the last two chapters, you're probably fine. Also NSFW by way of gratuitous makeup sex.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Well, Dr. Smith,” said Dr. Balcmege, coming into Mairon’s room. “Looks like you’re about ready to leave us.”

“Thank God,” Mairon said. “No offense.”

“None taken,” said Balcmege. “No one likes to be in the hospital.”

“Especially when you have work to get back to.”

“The only thing you’re getting back to,” said Thuringwethil, “is your own bed.”

“Yeah, right,” said Mairon, rolling his eyes.

“I’d have to agree with Miss Thuringwethil,” said Balcmege. “You don’t need to be hospitalized anymore, but you really shouldn’t be exerting yourself.”

“Fortunately for worriers like Thuringwethil,” Mairon said, “I sit at a desk all day. No exertion required.”

“I heard you stabbed yourself with—what was it? Scissors?”

“Trying to pry open a circuit board,” Gothmog said.

“It was a motherboard,” Mairon said, “and that was one time.”

“Mental exertion is still exertion,” Balcmege said. “Which, to reiterate, is something you should be avoiding.”

“Are you accounting for, like, increased capacity for mental exertion, though?”

Gothmog shoved him gently. “Don’t be an ass,” he said.

“Watch it, Gothmog,” Melkor said, putting his hand on Mairon’s shoulder.

“Easy, killer,” said Mairon, patting his hand.

“Okay, but seriously,” said Thuringwethil. “What should he not do?”

“Honestly,” said Balcmege, “I’d just take some time off and recuperate. You need to rest, eat well, stay hydrated, that kind of thing. Avoid anything that might pull at your stitches, keep it clean.”

“Yes, but in terms of work,” said Mairon. “Realistically, what can I—“

“You’re not going to listen to me,” Balcmege said. “Are you?”

“Smart man, Doc.”

“Don’t worry,” Thuringwethil said. “He’s got three friends with a vested interest in making sure he gets better.”

“Good luck with that,” Mairon said, half under his breath.

“We’re bigger than you are, dude,” Gothmog said. “And, you know. Not afraid to hold you down.”

Mairon raised his eyebrows. “Not in front of the doctor, Gothmog.”

“Ass,” Gothmog said.

Balcmege laughed. “Looks like I’m leaving you in good hands.”

“The best,” Mairon said.

“Glad to hear it. Give me an hour, and you’ll be good to go.” He held out his hand, and Mairon shook it. “Best of luck to you, Dr. Smith.”

“Thanks,” Mairon said. “For everything.”

“Take care,” said Balcmege, turning to leave.

Mairon watched him go and then turned back to Thuringwethil. “Alright,” he said. “So where do things stand with Tol-in-Gaurhoth?”

“The ‘no comprehensive updates while in the hospital’ rule still stands,” she said.

“Come on, Thil. I’m cleared for release.”

“Are you still in the hospital?”

“But—“

“Nope,” she said. “You can get an update when we go home.”

He let out an exaggerated sigh. “You’re killing me, Thil.”

“Please don’t joke about that.”

“Sorry.”

“Way to kill the mood, Mai,” Gothmog said.

“One of my many talents,” he said.

“Just ask Melkor.”

“Absolutely cannot confirm,” Melkor said.

Mairon laughed. “God, I’m ready to go home.”

“Me too,” Thuringwethil said.

“I’m ready to have you guys home,” Gothmog.

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said. “Mushy mushy. We’re all best friends and the gang’s all back together again. Don’t overdo it.”

“And to think,” Thuringwethil said. “I almost missed you.”

“There’s no almost about it,” Melkor said, grinning.

“Scratch the almost,” she said. “Definitely did not miss you.”

“Liar,” he said.

“Stop deflecting,” Mairon said. “Just tell me—“

“Nope,” she said loudly.

“But—“

“Drop it,” Melkor said, as Thuringwethil glared at Mairon. “This is a losing battle, my friend.”

Mairon did, though he complained loudly and at length. He had managed to get snippets of information here and there from Gothmog and Melkor, but for the most part, Thuringwethil had successfully enforced a moratorium on discussion about work. Still, from what he had gathered, they were close to wrapping up; or, rather, they had done about as much as they absolutely had to do in person at Tol-in-Gaurhoth. Mairon wouldn’t have admitted it, but he was relieved; the longer they stayed in Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the more anxious he felt. It was time to go, and he was ready.

They left the hospital in the afternoon, with a flight scheduled for the next day. They spent a few hours going through things at Mairon and Thuringwethil’s apartment, sorting through papers from Tol-in-Gaurhoth they’d gotten back from the police and packing up things they were planning to ship back.

They had booked a hotel for the night. Thuringwethil insisted she couldn’t stand to look at the apartment anymore, and no one was inclined to argue. “Not enough beds, anyway,” Gothmog said. “And what good’s a company credit card if you can’t use it for a fancy suite?”

Much to his chagrin, Melkor spent the evening working from the couch in his room. There were still a few loose ends to take care of from Tol-in-Gaurhoth, and his absence from Angband had been an exercise in crisis mitigation. He was ready to get back, despite the fact that he knew his workload was only going to increase. If he was going to have to work after hours, he reasoned, he might as well do it from the comfort of his own living room.

Midnight found Melkor dozing on the couch in his room, the TV droning in the background. He’d

been sleeping on and off for half an hour or more, the report in his hand getting more crumpled by the minute. The couch was small and slightly uncomfortable, but Melkor was the right combination of tired and lazy that he couldn't bring himself to move, instead shifting every few minutes into a new and untenable position.

He woke with a start a few minutes after midnight, eyes darting around the room, unsure what had woken him. It was quiet, but for blaring of the TV and the faint droning of the elevator. He rolled onto his side and yawned, already feeling himself drifting back to sleep. There was a knock on the door, then, almost too soft to be heard, and Melkor knew this was what had woken him. He pushed himself up, still yawning, and trudged to the door. He looked out the peephole, seeing nothing but the strange checkered pattern of the carpet. Frowning, he drew back the lock and opened the door, leaning out of the doorway to look up and down the hall.

"Hey," he said to the back of the figure retreating down the hall.

Mairon stopped and turned back, and Melkor stepped out into the hall, a little concerned. Mairon was paler than usual, his face drawn. He looked exhausted and unsteady, as though unsure of himself.

"Did you knock?" Melkor asked him.

"Yeah," Melkor said, crossing his arms. "Sorry. I know it's late."

"It's cool," Melkor said. "What's up?"

"Did I wake you up?" he asked. He looked stricken. "I did, didn't I? Jesus, I'm sorry."

"Mai, are you okay?"

Mairon smiled, though it looked forced and quickly faded to a grimace. Then he shook his head, and Melkor walked over to him, staring to worry. "You want to come in?" Melkor asked, and Mairon nodded. Melkor held out his hand, and Mairon took it, letting himself be led into the room.

Melkor shut and locked the door behind them, watching Mairon walk a few steps to stand in the middle of the room. "Mai," said Melkor. "What's wrong?"

For a long moment, Mairon said nothing. When he spoke at last, his voice was quiet and uncharacteristically timid. "I just didn't want to be alone," he said.

He looked small and forlorn, and Melkor felt a stab of pity. He realized, then, that Mairon hadn't been alone since he'd woken up; someone had been with him from the moment he'd woken up until the moment he was discharged. Melkor felt suddenly guilty. He crossed the distance between them in two long strides, putting his arms around Mairon and pulling him close. Mairon wound his arms around Melkor's waist and squeezed gently, laying his cheek against Melkor's chest. "You're not alone," Melkor said, resting his chin on top of Mairon's head. "I'm here." Mairon clung to him, and Melkor held him tightly, kissing the top of his head. "Why don't you sleep here tonight?"

Mairon pulled back, not enough to break free of the circle of Melkor's arms, but enough that he could look up at Melkor's face. "Are you sure?" he asked. "I already woke you up. I don't want to, I don't know, invade your space."

"Mai, if you think I wasn't sitting here for the last four hours hoping you'd come over, then you don't know me at all." Mairon laughed, and though it was quiet and short-lived, Melkor counted it

as a victory. “Come lay down with me,” Melkor said, cajoling. “There’s a MythBusters marathon on TV. We can make fun of their bad science and their stupid hats.” Mairon hugged Melkor tightly, pressing his cheek to Melkor’s chest. He nodded, and Melkor kissed the top of his head. “Come on,” he said, draping his arm around Mairon’s shoulders.

He pulled Mairon toward the bedroom, and Mairon let himself be led. Melkor flopped down on the bed, patting the blankets beside him. Mairon curled up beside him, his back to Melkor’s chest. He laid his head on Melkor’s outstretched arm, and Melkor shifted closer to him, letting his free hand rest against Mairon’s chest. Mairon laid his hand over Melkor’s, twining their fingers together, and Melkor kissed the back of his head.

Melkor was warm and solid at his back, a familiar, comforting presence. It was quiet and warm, the TV a comforting drone in the background. Despite his unease, Mairon began to relax, and before long, he was asleep. Melkor’s hand rose and fell with the gentle ebb and flow of Mairon’s breath, and he smiled, feeling happier than he had in months. It was only a few moments before he, too, was asleep.

Melkor slept soundly, but Mairon was restless, caught in a dream that had become familiar in its persistence. His dreams had been the same since he’d woken in the hospital, disjointed and distorted, and no less terrifying for their frequency. This night was no different. He was walking, in the dream, footfalls silent on a polished tile floor. There were doors on either side of the hallway, marching on interminably in either direction at regular intervals. There were no windows; the only light came from the fluorescent bulbs overhead, spaced far enough apart to allow pools of darkness to overwhelm the path ahead.

Mairon walked down the hall, though he didn’t want to. Cold dread crept through his chest and into his limbs, growing with each step he took along the path. He wanted to stop, to turn back, to run the other way, but he went on anyway, pulled by some inexorable need to go on.

He walked for what felt like hours, past hundreds of identical doors, fear growing in him with each step he took. He walked until his skin crawled, until his heart hammered painfully in his chest, his pulse racing higher, his blood rushing in his ears. Then, all at once, he stopped. He was standing before a door on the right side of the hall. It was absolutely identical to every other door he had passed, and yet—

He shivered. The sight of this door, this terribly unremarkable door, same as it was to all the others, filled him with painful, terrible dread. The sight of it made him feel sick, sent waves of hot and cold shuddering over his skin. He felt the urge to run more desperately than ever, yet the need to go on was stronger still, pulling him forward.

Fear curled cold and aching in his gut, and he reached for the door handle, though he didn’t want to. His brain was screaming at him not to open the door, not to go inside, and yet he did, stepping over the threshold into the dark room beyond. As he did, he heard the door slam shut behind him, the lock clicking into place.

He recognized the room as the coding lab—though, like the hall, it wasn’t exactly right. It was much too dark and far too large, rows of desks and computers stretching as far as he could see in any direction. The fear in the pit of his stomach was spreading, chilling him, weighing down his limbs. He turned around, looking for the door, but it was gone. There was nothing in its place but the endless expanse of lab space, continuing out into nothing but the loss of sight.

“It’s time,” said a voice from behind him. It was a voice he knew, a voice that made his skin crawl. He turned around to see Huan standing there, looking at him with cool disinterest.

“No,” Mairon said. “Don’t.” He tried to back away, but he found couldn’t move. Of course he couldn’t move; he was tied to a chair, zip ties cutting into his wrists. Huan was walking toward him. Mairon struggled, feeling the plastic bite against his skin so hard it drew blood.

“Sorry,” Huan said, though he didn’t seem to mean it. “This is the way it has to be.” He loomed over Mairon, blade in hand.

“Please,” Mairon moaned, his voice shaking. “Please, no.”

“It’ll be over soon,” Huan said. “It’ll all be over soon.” He put one hand on Mairon’s forehead, pushing his head back. The other went to Mairon’s neck. Mairon could feel the box cutter dig into his flesh, pulling across his throat far slower than he remembered it. He could feel every slow, agonizing inch it carved through him, the way it split his skin and sent blood pouring hot and thick down his throat. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. He was choking, drowning, and everything started to go black, and—

Mairon jerked awake, sitting bolt upright in bed and gasping for breath. The force of his motion woke Melkor, who pushed himself up and stared at Mairon in alarm. Mairon had one hand at his throat, fingering the edges of the gauze that bound the healing slashes. The other hand fisted in the blankets, the knuckles white, nails digging into the cloth. His breaths were heavy, ragged, his shoulders heaving, a look of panic on his face.

“Hey,” Melkor said, reaching for him. “What—” Mairon flinched away, hands scrabbling against the blankets as he pushed himself away, his eyes wild and unfocused.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, his voice shaking.

Melkor held his hands up, apologetic and conciliatory. “Mairon,” he said, his voice level and soothing. “It’s me. It’s just me.”

Mairon looked at him, focusing at last on Melkor’s face. “Melkor,” he said, still dragging in ragged, heaving breaths.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do it,” Mairon said, drawing his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs. “I can’t, not again. Oh, God, I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” Melkor asked gently. He wanted to reach out, to comfort Mairon, but he stayed still, unwilling to startle him again.

“Can’t sleep,” he murmured, his voice rasping and painful to hear. “Jesus, I can’t. Every time I close my eyes, every goddamn time, I’m there. I’m back at Tol-in-Gaurhoth. In that coding lab. I’m there and he—” Mairon shuddered, and Melkor felt a stab of anger, uttering a silent oath—nether for the first or last time—to strangle Huan if they ever met. “Every night,” Mairon whispered, “I’m reliving it. Except it’s worse, in a dream. I know it’s coming. I know what it feels like. It hurts, Melkor—God, it hurts. I can feel my skin coming apart. I can feel all the blood—I can *taste* it, down in the back of my throat. I keep trying to scream, but I can’t. I can’t breathe. It’s choking me, and I’m drowning, and I know I’m going to die, and—”

Melkor reached the end of his patience, and he scooted closer, wrapping his arms around Mairon and holding him close. This time Mairon did not flinch away; instead, he buried his face in Melkor’s neck and began to cry, great heaving sobs that wracked through his body, shaking against Melkor’s chest. “It’s okay,” Melkor whispered, knowing it was inadequate but having nothing else

to say. "It's okay, Mai. You're okay; I promise." He held Mairon tightly, one hand rubbing slow, comforting circles into his back while the other stroked gently through his hair, brushing it back from his face. "You're okay," Melkor whispered, again and again. "You're okay, Mai. You're okay."

It didn't last long. The sobs died out as quickly as they had started, and Mairon collapsed against Melkor, utterly exhausted. "I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice muffled against Melkor's skin.

"Hey," Melkor said, gently lifting Mairon's chin so he could see his eyes. "It's okay. Don't be sorry."

Mairon wouldn't look at him. "I'm just the literal worst tonight, huh? Not only did I wake you up twice, but now I'm crying on your shoulder like an idiot."

"You are a lot of things," Melkor said, "but you're not an idiot."

"A wuss, then."

"Mairon," he said, shifting back so that Mairon had to sit up and look at him. "For God's sake. Someone tried to kill you."

"Someone tried to kill you, too."

"Yeah, and look how I reacted," he said. "You're a thousand miles ahead of me on the 'normal emotional response' scale."

Mairon laughed then, and shifted closer, leaning against Melkor again. Melkor pulled him closer, hugging him tightly.

"We never got to talk about it, you know," Mairon said, his voice quiet, his cheek pressed against Melkor's shoulder.

"About what?"

"About how you almost died."

"I was nowhere near as close to dying as you were. Believe me."

"But I didn't know that." His breath was warm against Melkor's skin, his fingers tracing the knot of scar tissue where a bullet had passed through Melkor's arm. "God, do you know how scared I was? How absolutely terrified?"

"Yes," Melkor whispered.

"I guess you do," Mairon said, nuzzling his cheek against Melkor's shoulder.

Melkor laid his cheek against the top of Mairon's head. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Mairon said.

"Really?"

Mairon sighed. "No," he said. "But I will be." He wound his arms around Melkor's chest and hugged him, burying his face in the crook of Melkor's neck. "Can we sit like this?" he murmured. "Just for a little while."

“We can sit here as long as you want,” Melkor said.

Mairon drew up his knees and let them fall against Melkor’s lap. He nestled himself into the curve of Melkor’s shoulder and laid his head down, pressing soft, gentle kisses to Melkor’s neck. Melkor held him, fingers carding gently through Mairon’s hair. It was a soothing motion, and it comforted him; Mairon began to relax at last, feeling the tension draining from his limbs. His breaths lengthened and grew deeper, and his head rested heavily on Melkor’s shoulder. Melkor kissed the top of his head and shifted back to lean on the headboard. Mairon shifted against him but slept on, curled against Melkor’s chest, peaceful at last.

The four of them went home to Angband, and things slowly, painfully, started to edge back toward normal. Mairon took three full days off of work, which, in the grand scheme of things, Melkor chose to count as a victory. Thuringwethil had not been so understanding, complaining loudly and at length about his belligerence. She was vindicated, at least in her own mind, when Mairon’s first day back ended at noon, with Mairon asleep at his desk. Gothmog had taken him home and stayed there with him, not-so-subtly making sure Mairon did nothing for the rest of the day. Mairon worked from home the next day, which he insisted was an acceptable middle ground, despite Thuringwethil’s continued complaints.

He soon found that Carcharoth was a total loss. The system had been designed with Silmaril in mind; without the flight files, and barring a reworking of the entire project, it would have to be discarded. He went through an extensive list of workarounds and found, to his annoyance, that none of them could be applied. After a few hours of work, he gave up, wondering angrily if he’d lost his ability to problem-solve along with several pints of blood back at Tol-in-Gaurhoth.

He sent his findings and recommendations in a report to Melkor, which Melkor skimmed. He had figured Carcharoth to be a total loss, though he had held onto a tiny spark of hope that Mairon might, as impossible as it seemed, be able to fix it. The fact that he couldn’t was hardly a surprise, and Melkor didn’t waste time worrying about it. He had more immediate concerns, such as the fact that since coming home, he hadn’t seen Mairon once—or rather, not in any meaningful way. The four of them had eaten dinner at Mairon’s their first night back, celebrating his return, but outside the normal flow of conversation, they hadn’t really talked. He hadn’t seen Mairon at all on the days he was out of the office, and though he’d called, Mairon hadn’t answered. By the sixth day, Melkor was starting to worry, and he said as much to Thuringwethil.

“Give him time,” she said. “He just got back.”

“But what if he’s having second thoughts?” Melkor asked, pacing in her kitchen.

“If he is,” she said, “then he’ll tell you, when he’s ready. And you can talk about it with him. But —“

“What if he changed his mind?” Melkor asked, pacing doggedly around the island in her kitchen. “What if he doesn’t want me back after all?”

“Then you’ll deal with it,” she said. “In the meantime, hounding him isn’t going to help.”

Melkor didn’t want to admit it, but he knew that she was right. So he waited, and he worried, and though it drove him up the wall, he didn’t try to push the issue.

It was Saturday, and it had been a week since they had come home. Melkor had spent the day with Gothmog, desperately trying to distract himself from the agony of waiting for Mairon to call, but

Gothmog had gone home half an hour ago, and Melkor was alone with his impatience. The TV was on, though he couldn't bring himself to focus on even the inane of reality programming. He scrolled through every app on his phone, finding nothing to distract him, and constantly trying to maintain the willpower to avoid texting Mairon again.

At five minutes to midnight, there was a knock at the door, and Melkor looked up, startled. He switched off the TV and stood up, scrolling through his phone as he walked to the door. No one had texted him, and no one had called, and he tried not to get his hopes up. "Probably the stupid downstairs neighbor," he muttered, recalling the last installment of their argument over the volume of Melkor's TV.

He peered through the peephole, and his heart skipped a beat. He slid back the deadbolt and the chain and pulled open the door. "Mairon," he said.

"Hey," Mairon said, and he smiled. "Can we talk? I know it's late."

"You've got to stop calling midnight late," Melkor said, stepping back to let him in.

Mairon smiled as he passed, walking into the familiar space of Melkor's living room. "It feels late these days," he said. "How sad is that?"

"You probably get a pass for near death experience," Melkor said, looking him over. "How do you feel?"

"Better," Mairon said, turning back to face him.

"You look better," Melkor said. It was true. There was color in Mairon's cheeks again, and he looked at ease. The bruises on his face had faded to nothing, the bandages at his throat only a remnant of what they had been before.

"I'm sorry I haven't been around much," Mairon said. "I know you tried to call."

"It's okay," Melkor said.

"Liar," said Mairon. "It's been driving you nuts, hasn't it?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," Melkor said.

"Sorry," he said, smiling. He looked at Melkor for a moment, as though considering him, and then he shook his head. "Look," he said. "There's something I need to say, and I'm just gonna say it, okay?"

"I'm listening," Melkor said, wondering if he should worry.

"I want to be with you," Mairon said. "I do. But if this is going to work—and God, I want this to work—then things can't be like they were before."

"What do you mean?"

"We've been through a lot of shit in the last couple years," Mairon said, "and the more I think about it, the more I realize how much of it we could've avoided if you'd just told me the truth. I mean, if you'd told me your plan to get Silmaril, or if you'd talked to me about how you felt before you broke up with me. Hell, even with Utumno—"

"Utumno was a done deal," Melkor said, defensive. "We were losing that one no matter what."

There was no reason for you to go down too.”

“Maybe that’s true,” Mairon said, “but that’s not the point. You made those decisions without me, and I don’t care whether you thought you were helping me or protecting me or whatever else. You made decisions about me, choices that affected my entire life, and you didn’t even consult me. Do you know how that feels, for you not to trust me?”

“I trust you,” Melkor said, earnest.

“Not enough to let me disagree,” Mairon said. “Not enough to tell me how you feel.”

“In my defense,” said Melkor, “I think I covered that last one pretty well last week.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, grinning despite himself. “I’d say so.”

“Look,” Melkor said, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’re right. I’ve gotten us into a lot of shit over the years without consulting you. Most of the time, I did it because I wanted to get my own way and avoid an argument. Sometimes, like with Utumno, I did it to protect you. But it doesn’t matter, does it? Either way, I was leaving you out of things that affected you. And you’re right. That’s not fair. The decisions I make affect you, whether I like it or not, or however I try to avoid it—especially now. I can’t leave you out of them. You deserve a say in what happens to you, and I have to trust you and respect you enough to give it to you.”

For a moment, Mairon stared at him, mouth open, saying nothing. “Jesus,” he said at length. “That was almost—”

“Responsible,” Melkor said, shuddering. “Ugh, I know. Don’t make me do it again.”

“You mean it, though?” Mairon asked. “Really?”

“I mean, my old method of ‘dick around first, ask Mairon later’ wasn’t exactly producing great results.” Mairon laughed, and Melkor grinned. “Look, Mai. I’m not perfect. I can’t promise that I won’t fuck things up again. God knows I have a knack for it. But at least this time around, you’ll know about it. No more secrets. No more lies.”

“You promise?” Mairon demanded.

“Yes,” Melkor said.

Mairon nodded. Then he crossed the distance between them and threw himself at Melkor, knocking the air from Melkor’s lungs. Melkor stumbled back a few steps, wrapping his arms around Mairon and hugging him tightly. Mairon kissed him hard, hungrily, and Melkor kissed him back, reveling in the feeling of Mairon’s hand on his neck, pulling him down to kiss him harder. Melkor slid his hand up under Mairon’s shirt, splaying his fingers against the muscle of Mairon’s chest. Mairon hissed softly, his head falling back. Melkor pulled back, looking at Mairon with concern. “Are you okay?”

“God, yes,” Mairon said, kissing him again. “Do you know how much I’ve missed this?”

Melkor pressed his forehead against Mairon’s, trying to steady himself. “God, you make it hard to show restraint.”

“I don’t want restraint,” Mairon said, his fingers dipping below the waistband of Melkor’s pants.

“Jesus,” Melkor said, leaning back against the wall. “Easy, Mai. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” Mairon said, pressing himself against Melkor and kissing his neck.

“I have, though,” Melkor said, though he let his head fall back, and he shuddered, his eyes falling shut.

“Yeah,” said Mairon, trailing kisses down the curve of Melkor’s jaw. “By being an emotionally unavailable twat. Not by fucking me.” He palmed the obvious bulge of Melkor’s arousal, and Melkor groaned, biting his lip. “Which is to say,” Mairon continued, his voice low, enticing, “no need to be gentle.”

Mairon’s hands were under Melkor’s shirt, sliding over his skin, teasing at the waistband of his pants. Through some unnatural force of will, Melkor took hold of Mairon’s wrists, steadying him, holding him back. “Are you sure?” he asked, breathing hard.

“Yes,” Mairon said.

“But—“

“Stop it,” Mairon said, pulling away from him and glaring. “Stop treating me like I’m fragile. I know what I can handle. I know what I want, and what I want is for you to fuck me, hard. Right now.”

There was a moment of silence marked only by Mairon’s exhale and Melkor’s sharp intake of breath. Then Melkor wrapped his arms around Mairon and pushed him back against the wall with enough force to make an audible *thunk*. He kissed Mairon, one hand flush against the back of Mairon’s head, the other sliding up under his shirt to wander the warm skin of his chest. “God, that was hot,” Melkor said, burying his face in Mairon’s shoulder, breathing heavily.

“Yeah?” said Mairon, grinning.

Melkor slid his hands down Mairon’s back, cupping his ass. “You always did know how to get me going.”

“One of my many talents,” Mairon said, winding his arms around Melkor’s neck and kissing him again. Melkor lifted him up, and Mairon wrapped his legs around Melkor’s waist, laughing. Melkor carried him to the couch and sat down. Mairon settled himself on Melkor’s lap, his knees on either side of Melkor’s hips. He kissed Melkor gently, teasingly, and drew back, biting at his lip. The fingers of his left hand brushed against Melkor’s chest; his right hand wandered down to palm the bulge of Melkor’s erection.

“God, I missed you,” Melkor said.

“I missed you too,” Mairon said, rocking his hips and grinding against Melkor.

“Fuck,” Melkor said, his hand sliding down the back of Mairon’s pants, pulling him closer. “God, you’re good.”

“Oh, honey,” Mairon said, his tone gently patronizing. “I’m just getting started.” He slid down to the floor, kneeling at Melkor’s feet, and pulled down the waistband of Melkor’s pants. He took Melkor in hand, stroking him roughly from base to tip. Then he bent his head, taking Melkor into his mouth and running his tongue up the underside of Melkor’s cock. He dragged his tongue through the precum gathered at the slit and took Melkor’s cock down to the back of his throat. His hands were on Melkor’s hips, fingernails digging into the skin, and he moaned, an unmistakable sound of pleasure that made Melkor gasp and roll his hips forward. He worried for a moment that he had pushed uncomfortably far, but Mairon moaned again, running his hands up Melkor’s

thighs.

Mairon started to move, setting a quick rhythm that had Melkor gasping in seconds. He buried his hand in Mairon's hair and guided him, bucking his hips forward as Mairon took him down. "Oh, God," he moaned, as Mairon hollowed his cheeks, running his tongue up Melkor's length and circling its head. "Fuck, Mai." With an enormous effort of will, he took Mairon's shoulders and pushed him back, panting. "Stop," he said.

Mairon tilted his head to the side, looking up at Melkor. "Don't you like it?"

"Jesus, fuck," Melkor said, still breathing heavily. "You know I do. But I just had the longest dry spell of my life, and to be honest with you, I'm already getting close. So if you want me to fuck you—"

"Oh, I do," Mairon said, climbing up onto the couch again. He took Melkor's face in his hands and kissed him. "God, I want it so bad."

Melkor undid the button on Mairon's pants and pulled down his zipper, sliding a hand into Mairon's briefs and taking hold of his cock. "I love hearing you say that," Melkor said, stroking along Mairon's length.

Mairon bit his lip, his eyes half-closed as he rolled his hips gently into Melkor's touch. "Oh, God," he murmured. "You know it's true. I want you so bad—oh, God, I missed you. Oh, fuck." Melkor stroked him hard, fast, and then slid out from under him, letting him go. Mairon fell forward against the couch cushions with a whine of disappointment that became a gasp as Melkor ran both hands over the skin of Mairon's ass. He let one hand wind its way around Mairon's waist, fingers tracing teasingly along Mairon's inner thigh. His other hand trailed down the small of Mairon's back and wandered lower, one finger slipping inside him.

Mairon gave a cry, his fingers tightening on the back of the couch. Melkor trailed his fingers against the sensitive skin of Mairon's thigh, and Mairon shivered. Melkor crooked his finger, working further inside him with a steady, gentle rhythm. Mairon shifted back, but Melkor held him in place, taking his time. An even mix of praise and curses poured from Mairon's lips as Melkor stretched him. He took Mairon in hand, stroking his cock in time with the stroke of his fingers inside him. Mairon's hands were on the back of the couch, his knuckles whitening as he pressed himself back, seeking more.

Melkor leaned forward and slid his tongue between his fingers, pressing inside. Mairon cried out, his hips jerking back. Melkor ran his thumb through the wet slick at Mairon's tip, still stroking him hard as he worked him open with tongue and fingers. "Oh, God," Mairon moaned, his voices growing ragged. "Melkor, please."

Melkor withdrew then, and Mairon whimpered. He kept his hand on Mairon's cock, setting a languid, teasing rhythm, and pressed himself to Mairon's back, nuzzling at the back of Mairon's neck. "Tell me what you want," he whispered, kissing along Mairon's jaw.

Mairon's head fell back against Melkor's shoulder, and he rolled his hips into the stroke of Melkor's palm. "I want you to fuck me," he said. "Oh, God, I want you to fuck me so hard I won't be able to move for a week without remembering the feeling of you inside me."

Melkor groaned and pulled back, taking himself in hand. He pressed the tip of his cock to Mairon and took a breath, steadying himself. Mairon ground his hips backward, taking Melkor halfway in with a cry of pleasure.

Any restraint Melkor might have had was gone, destroyed by how much Mairon wanted him. He took hold of Mairon's hips and thrust roughly inside him, fucking him hard and fast. Mairon threw one hand back to cup Melkor's ass, urging him on. Mairon's cock was heavy, dripping, and Melkor curled his fingers around it, stroking him to the brutal rhythm of his thrusts. Melkor was already close; it had been so long, and Mairon was so desperate, moaning out a litany of entreaties and curses that goaded Melkor on. "Yes," Mairon breathed. "God, yes. Oh, fuck, Melkor. Yes!" Melkor angled his hips, thrusting deep and rough and just right.

Mairon half-screamed, his head lolling back, his mouth open. "Do that again," he begged, and Melkor did, again and again, feeling himself teetering on the edge of pleasure, barely holding on. "Oh, God," Mairon moaned, snapping his hips back to meet Melkor's thrusts with a satisfying smack of skin on skin. "Just like that. Oh, God, please. Oh, fuck! Melkor!" Mairon came with Melkor's name breaking on his lips, spilling himself into Melkor's hand. Melkor followed with a last deep, brutal thrust, feeling Mairon tighten around him.

For a moment, there was silence, broken only by the two of them panting. Melkor pulled out, groaning softly, and Mairon let himself fall back, stretching against the cushions. Melkor stretched out beside him, sliding his arm under Mairon's shoulders. Mairon snuggled closer, pressing himself against Melkor's side. Melkor kissed his lips and his forehead and the top of his head, wrapping his arms around Mairon and holding him tightly.

"Okay," Mairon said, laughing. "You're crushing me a little."

"Sorry," Melkor said, grinning and loosening his grip. "I'm just happy you're back."

"Me too," Mairon said. "God, we should break up more often if this is what I get for taking you back."

"Don't even joke about it," Melkor said.

"Sorry," said Mairon, grinning. "But it was really good. Like, *really* good."

"Do you have to sound so surprised?" Melkor asked, endeavoring to look put out.

"Sorry," Mairon said again, kissing him. "It's just been a while, is all."

"Tell me about it," Melkor said.

Mairon propped himself up on his elbow, his cheek resting against his palm. "In the interest of full disclosure," he said carefully, looking at Melkor, "I, uh, kind of got around while I was gone. Like, a lot."

"Lucky you," said Melkor, rolling his eyes.

"That's it?" Mairon asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Were you expecting something else?"

Mairon shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Look," Melkor said. "Am I a little jealous of whoever got to fuck you in the two months you were gone? Yes. But we broke up, and it's not really my business what you did in the meantime. Or who, I guess."

"To be honest," Mairon said, "I spent most of my time wishing they were you."

“Most?”

“Well,” said Mairon, grinning, “a couple of them were okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Not bad,” he said.

“Fortunately for you,” Melkor said, “I can do much better than okay.”

“Prove it,” Mairon said, his grin a challenge.

And Melkor did.

Chapter End Notes

Come yell at me on [tumblr!](#)

Get Back

Chapter Summary

Mairon's back to work, but things aren't moving along as fast or as smoothly as he would like. Melkor is surprisingly helpful. The investigation into the break-in at Angband continues.

Chapter Notes

How many times can you kiss your bf in a five minute span? Melkor endeavors to find out.

Mairon gets a visit from someone he hasn't seen in a long time.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mairon sat at his desk, holding a report in one hand and picking absently at his shirt collar with the other. He frowned, eyes darting back up the page to reread, for what he could have sworn was the sixth time, the sentence in the middle of the page. After a moment, he tossed the page onto his desk and sat back, rubbing his eyes. He let his hands fall to his lap and jumped, startled, as Melkor appeared in his field of vision, leaning in the doorway.

“Jesus,” he complained, shifting in his chair. “Trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry,” Melkor said, though he didn’t particularly look it. “I was just watching you work.”

“Creep,” Mairon said.

Melkor made a face at him. “I just meant it’s nice to see you here again, dickhead” he said. “I missed you.”

“Aw,” Mairon said, softening. “That’s actually really sweet.”

“I know,” said Melkor. “Bet you feel like a dick now.”

“Not after that remark,” Mairon said, and Melkor laughed.

“What are you working on?” Melkor asked, pushing himself off the doorframe and ambling into the room.

“Still playing catch-up,” Mairon said, grimacing. “I am buried in work that piled up while I was out.”

“Pretty sure I reassigned a bunch of people to help you with that,” Melkor said, coming around to Mairon’s side of the desk and sitting down on it.

“Which I appreciate,” said Mairon, “but—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “You’re a type-A perfectionist with a death-by-unnecessary-stress wish.”

“I’m particular,” Mairon said, raising his chin in an effort to adopt an air of superiority. He winced and ducked his head, pulling at the collar of his shirt.

“What’s wrong?” Melkor asked.

“Nothing,” Mairon said. Melkor raised an eyebrow at him, and Mairon sighed. “It’s this—” He inhaled sharply as the fabric of his collar pulled at the edge of the bandage at his throat.

“Careful,” Melkor said, chiding gently.

“Stupid collar,” Mairon said irritably. “Stupid tie.”

“For once, we agree,” Melkor said, grinning as Mairon snorted. “Take it off—the tie, I mean. Although if you want to lose the shirt, too—”

“You have no shame, do you?” Mairon said, though he grinned.

“None,” Melkor said. He leaned forward and took hold of Mairon’s tie, deftly loosening the knot before picking open the top button of his shirt. “There,” he said, gently pulling the collar away from Mairon’s skin. “I think that’s what we call a compromise.”

“Learned a new word, huh?”

“Dickhole,” Melkor said mildly. “Better?”

“Yeah, actually,” said Mairon, gingerly running his fingers along the length of the bandage, letting the shirt fall farther away from his skin. “Thanks.”

Melkor took hold of Mairon’s loosened tie and pulled him gently forward, leaning down to kiss him.

Mairon slid his hand up Melkor’s chest and around to the back of his neck. “Mmm,” he hummed appreciatively. “That’s nice.” Melkor grinned and kissed him again. “You know,” said Mairon, pressing his forehead against Melkor’s, “I have to say, even accounting for the catch-up work stress, this is about a thousand times more pleasant a work environment than Tol-in-Gaurhoth was.”

“To be fair,” said Melkor, “any work environment is more pleasant with me in it.”

Mairon laughed and sat back in his chair. “You’re ridiculous,” he said.

“Yeah,” Melkor agreed. “You like me, though.”

“Got me there,” Mairon said.

“Small victories,” Melkor said, and Mairon laughed again. “So,” Melkor said, grinning, “what are you working on?”

“Ostensibly, I’m reading progress reports,” Mairon said. “In reality, I’m trying to figure out why I ever thought hiring these morons was a good idea.”

“That bad, huh?”

Mairon scowled at the papers on his desk. “No,” he said after a moment, grudgingly, “but not good, either.”

“You need to learn to manage your expectations,” Melkor said.

“Or,” Mairon said, “my employees need to be prepared to meet my expectations, wherever I decide to set them.”

“God, you must be a nightmare to work for,” said Melkor.

“So I’ve heard,” said Mairon, and Melkor laughed.

“Come here,” he said, and pulled Mairon in to kiss him again.

“You must really be glad to have me back,” Mairon said, grinning at him.

“What gave it away?”

Mairon snorted. Then he leaned back in his chair, rubbing tiredly at his eyes.

“What?” Melkor asked.

“Nothing,” Mairon said.

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “You’ve got the ‘I feel obligated to do something but I’d rather be doing something else’ look going on. Something’s up.”

“That’s an oddly specific look,” said Mairon.

“It is,” said Melkor, “but I’ve seen it enough times to recognize it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “I’m usually the something else you’d rather be doing.”

Mairon laughed. “That might just be true.”

“No shit,” said Melkor, grinning. “But not this time, huh?”

“I mean,” said Mairon, “I don’t *not* want to.”

“That’s almost a compliment.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late,” said Melkor, grinning. “But seriously, though. What’s up?”

Mairon sighed and laid his head on the edge of the desk, closing his eyes. “I have so much work to do,” he said, “and I don’t even know where to start. There’s still loose ends from Tol-in-Gaurhoth, there’s cleanup from the Carcharoth disaster, I’m trying to track down any trace of the Silmaril files, and none of that takes into account the regular day-to-day management crap I have to handle.” He sighed again, opening his eyes and looking up at Melkor. He looked exhausted, and Melkor felt suddenly guilty. “And that’s not to mention any of the Luthien stuff,” he added, spitting out the name like a curse.

“Bet you’re regretting turning down those reassignments right about now,” Melkor said.

“No,” said Mairon.

Melkor rolled his eyes. “I’d accuse you of being stubborn, but—”

“The weight of that particular hypocrisy might just crush you to death,” Mairon finished for him.

“Ass,” said Melkor. “But seriously, you need help.”

“Do not,” said Mairon, petulant.

“Which of the things on that big-ass list you just rattled off is the most important?”

“Are you seriously asking me to choose?”

“If you had no other obligations,” Melkor amended, “which would you do?”

Mairon considered it for a moment. “The Luthien thing,” he decided, making a face as the name passed his lips.

“That’s what I thought,” said Melkor.

“And your point is?”

“If you want to work on that,” Melkor said, “and I know you do, then you need someone to cover the rest of the bullshit.”

“I can handle it,” Mairon said.

“Sure you can,” Melkor said. “I mean, it might actually kill you, or put you back in the hospital, or —”

“You have, like, zero faith in me.”

“I have total faith in you. I just like my boyfriends, you know, alive. Call me crazy.”

Mairon snorted. “Boyfriends,” he scoffed. “How many have you had exactly?”

“Just the one,” Melkor said, “and I’d like him not to die, please.”

“I don’t think we’re at that point just yet,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “and I don’t want to get there any time soon.” He reached out and brushed away an errant strand of hair from Mairon’s face, tucking it behind his ear. Mairon smiled at him and sighed.

“You’re cute,” he said fondly.

“I know,” said Melkor, grinning.

Mairon laughed and pushed himself up. “Alright,” he said, making an effort to sound begrudging. “You can reassign some lackeys to help me, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“It will,” Melkor said.

Mairon nodded and looked tiredly at the mess on his desk. “I should get back to work,” he said.

“Sure,” Melkor said. “After lunch.”

“It’s only one o’clock.”

“Is that not lunchtime in Mairon-land? Or, wait. Lunchtime probably doesn’t exist in your world. Silly me.”

“Ass,” said Mairon. As if on cue, his stomach growled.

“Come on,” Melkor wheedled. “I’ll get you anything you want.”

Mairon thought about it for a moment. “Fine,” he said, pushing himself up from his desk. “But you have to let me work for the rest of the day.”

“Fine,” Melkor said, draping his arm over Mairon’s shoulders. “Oh,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “Right. Define ‘day’.”

Mairon laughed and let Melkor lead him out into the hall.

“Hey, Thil,” Melkor said, not looking up from his phone as he rounded the corner into her office. “Did you—oh.”

She glanced up, frowning, the receiver of her office phone held to her ear. She held up one finger and looked back down at her desk, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Yes,” she said, in the tone of voice which Melkor knew meant she was very carefully counting to ten. “I heard you the first seven times you said it. I—“She stopped, listening, and Melkor felt a pang of secondhand fear, born of the distinct twitch of her lips that indicated silent rage.

“First,” she said, when the person on the other line had finished speaking, “don’t ever interrupt me again. Second, I don’t care about your problems. I don’t give a shit about your obstacles, and I don’t want to hear another word about delays. Those are just synonyms for excuses, and I am sure as hell not interested in those. I—“A flash of anger passed over her face, and Melkor winced.

“I’m not asking you for anything special,” she said. “I’m not asking for a favor. I’m asking you to do your damn job. It’s not a difficult concept.” She listened for a moment and then let out a bark of laughter. “Oh, honey. Don’t make me teach you what a real threat sounds like. No, you listen to me. You’re going to do your goddamn job, or this conversation is going public.” She laughed again. “Off-the-record,” she scoffed. “I’m not a journalist, you moron. And before you try the my-word-against-yours angle, I’ve got a witness for this whole stupid thing. Say hello, Melkor,” she said, holding the receiver out toward him.

“Uh,” said Melkor, taken aback. “Hi.”

“Hear that?” Thuringwethil demanded, speaking into the receiver again. “That’s my CEO. He’s been sitting in on this call from the get-go. Oh, don’t you dare talk to me about fair. What’s not fair is a fucking police force that refuses to do its job. I want an update on your investigation at this time tomorrow, and I want good news. Do you know what happens when I don’t get what I want? This conversation goes public in every venue I can use, and while I’m at it, I’ll tell them about that thing you’ve got going on the side.” She paused, letting her words sink in.

“Tomorrow,” she said again. “Same time. I’ll be expecting your call.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said, impressed. “That guy ought to be pissing himself right about now.”

“Good,” she said. “He’s a pain in the ass.”

“Police?”

“Lead detective on our break-in case,” she said. “Stalling, like the worthless piece of shit he is.”

“What do you mean, stalling?”

“The usual shit,” she said. “You know, when they don’t want to find things—particularly things that would benefit us.”

“Typical,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “Bunch of biased assholes.”

“And it’s worse,” she said, “with all this old money bullshit involved. Doriath is swearing up and down that Luthien was there all damn day. They’re claiming they have the documentation to prove it.”

“Liars,” Melkor said. “Filthy, goddamn, document-forging liars.”

“I mean,” she said, trying to be reasonable, “we don’t have much room to talk in that regard, but still.”

“There’s gotta be some evidence from Tol-in-Gaurhoth.”

“Footage was wiped,” she said bitterly. “And the only card swiped in the coding lab there was that Felagund asshole.”

“He didn’t have anything to do with what happened to Mai. Or, not directly, anyway.”

“I know,” she said. “And besides, he’s got a room full of people swearing up and down they were with him the whole time.”

“So Beren stole his ID card and let his little girlfriend into the lab.”

“Yeah, but good luck proving it. Same room full of assholes swears up and down they never saw Beren leave.”

“We have Mairon,” Melkor said. “He can testify, or whatever. He saw who attacked him.”

“I know,” she said. “But that boils down to ‘he said, they said’, and you ought to know by now who they’re going to believe.”

“This is bullshit,” Melkor said angrily. “They could’ve killed him. They really, seriously almost did. You’re telling me no one’s going down for it?”

“Like hell they’re not,” she said, a dark look passing over her face. “Not if I have anything to do with it.”

“I assume you’re going to tell me it’s not worth it to kill ‘em, huh?”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure who you mean,” she said, “but no. Definitely not.”

“Bummer,” Melkor said, and he sighed. “Well, I guess if you can’t murder them, you settle for blackmail, right?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it settling, but sure.”

“What kind of dirt do you have on that cop anyway?”

“Huh?”

“On the phone,” Melkor said. “You said you’d tell people about that ‘thing on the side.’”

“Oh, right,” Thuringwethil said. “I was bluffing.”

“That’s a little bold.”

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes. “There’s always a thing on the side. I’ll find something.”

Melkor laughed. “God, I’m glad we’re friends again.”

“Me too,” she said. “It’s surprisingly hard to be mad at you.”

“I know,” Melkor said. “I’m like, super charming.”

“Not by any stretch of the imagination.” Her phone rang, and she rolled her eyes. She reached for the receiver, laying her hand on it but not picking it up. “Oh, right,” she said, looking at Melkor. “Did you need something?”

“You know,” said Melkor thoughtfully, “I forgot. I’ll probably think of it later.” He stood up from the chair. “I’ll let you get that,” he said, heading for the door. “See you later, Thil.”

Mairon drank greedily from the paper cup in his hand, letting the warmth of the coffee seep through the chill that clung to him. The air was cool, with just an edge of the bite of the coming winter—Mairon’s least favorite time of year. He tightened his grip on the cup and shoved his free hand deeper into his pocket, grimacing in distaste. In fairness, it was his own fault he was being exposed to the late autumn elements—there was coffee in the office, and *technically*, he needn’t have gone down the street to get it. But he had been in his office for two days, stubbornly chipping away at the mystery of what had happened at Tol-in-Gaurhoth, and he had needed a walk and some fresh air to clear his mind.

It’s clear now, he thought irritably, narrowing his eyes against the wind. Completely clear. Blank. Wiped clean and—

“Mairon.”

The sound of his name jolted him from his ill-tempered train of thought, and he stopped, looking for the source of the interruption. He caught sight of someone over his shoulder and turned, nearly dropping his coffee in shock.

“Yavanna,” he said, the long-disused name feeling foreign on his tongue.

“Hi, honey,” she said, and she smiled.

It was that word, that easy term of endearment that did it. He hadn’t seen Yavanna in seven years, not since he had left for Utumno, and though his life was vastly, incomprehensibly different from how it had been when they parted, this was so painfully, achingly familiar that it made his head spin. For all the time that had separated them, Yavanna was strangely, stubbornly the same. Her voice was warm and just a little too loud, exactly as he remembered it. She smiled at him, the skin around her dark eyes wrinkling as genuine delight spread over her face. He could see her fingers twitch gently at her sides, and he knew beyond a doubt that she was itching to hug him, to pull him close as she had done a thousand times before. She didn’t, though, and Mairon felt a strange

longing stab through his chest.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, keeping his voice steady.

“I wanted to see you,” she said.

Mairon tried and failed to keep the surprise from his face. “Really?” he asked, though he knew it was true. She had never been one to mince words, or to mask her intentions. She simply said what she felt, and he could hear the familiar sincerity in her voice.

“I heard what happened,” she softly. “At Sirion. I wanted to see—” She trailed off, and he watched her eyes drift down to the bandages at his throat.

“I’m alright,” he said gently, and her gaze shifted up once more to his face.

“Are you?” she asked, watching him carefully.

He smiled, and walked a little closer. “Yeah,” he said. “I mean, I hear it was a little touch and go there for a while, but I made it.”

“You always do, don’t you?” she said, smiling. Then the smile faded, and she said, “I wanted to go and see you, you know. I almost did. But Aulë—” There was an uncomfortable beat of silence, and then she said, very quietly, “He wasn’t sure if we’d have been welcome.”

There was an unspoken question there, a query as to whether or not they would’ve been welcome, had they come. Mairon wasn’t sure he knew the answer—or perhaps he didn’t want to acknowledge it, if he did. Instead, he smiled, and said, “It’s okay.”

“It is,” she said, and Mairon knew that she wasn’t agreeing, so much as she was acknowledging the state of things between them.

Mairon shifted his weight, glancing down the street to where Angband stood. “I should get back to work,” he said, regretting it even as the words passed his lips.

She nodded. Then she stepped forward and hugged him, pulling him close to her chest and laying her cheek against the top of his head. For a moment, Mairon stood still, too surprised to respond. Then he leaned into the embrace, wrapping his arms around her, breathing in the familiar, earthy scent that clung to her.

She let go of him and stepped back, looking him up and down, appraising him. “Take care, honey,” she said, and Mairon nodded. She turned and walked away down the sidewalk and was quickly gone.

Mairon stood on the sidewalk for a moment, watching her until she disappeared. Then he turned and walked back to Angband, lost in thought. He walked through the lobby, ignoring Gelmir’s reminder about his messages, and took the elevator up to the sixth floor. He walked down the hall toward his office. He stood at his closed door, fumbling his keys out of his pocket. He jumped, startled, as something touched his arm, and he turned to find Melkor standing behind him.

“Jesus,” Melkor said. “I’ve been calling you.”

“Oh,” Mairon said, reaching for his phone. “I didn’t—”

“No,” Melkor said. “Like, by name. From across the hall.”

“I didn’t hear you,” Mairon said.

Melkor frowned, looking Mairon over. “You okay?” he asked. “No offense, but you look weird.”

Melkor expected him to laugh, or to roll his eyes, or to ready a sarcastic response. Instead Mairon grimaced, and he said, “I just saw Yavanna.”

“Yavanna?” Melkor said, slightly alarmed. “Jesus Christ. Here?”

“Outside,” Mairon said. “On the sidewalk.”

“What was she doing down here?”

Mairon shrugged. “She wanted to see if I was okay.”

“Are you?” Melkor asked, watching Mairon’s face with concern.

Mairon frowned, as though considering it. “I don’t know,” he said at last.

“Come here,” Melkor said, and pulled him close, hugging Mairon to his chest.

Mairon rested his cheek against Melkor’s chest and sighed, grateful for the comfort of Melkor’s arms around him. He took a deep breath and let it out as a heavy sigh. “It’s weird,” he said, closing his eyes and letting Melkor hold him. “I haven’t seen her since—well, since I came to work here. For her to just be here, out of the blue…” He trailed off, and Melkor could feel him shaking his head.

“Hey,” Melkor said gently. “Let’s get out of here, okay? We can get dinner. Thil was just telling me about this new place, like, five minutes away, and—”

Mairon stood on tiptoe and kissed Melkor’s cheek. “That’s really sweet,” he said. “Honestly, it is. But I’m not in the headspace to go out right now. I think I just need to stay here and bury myself in mundane busywork until I pass out.”

Melkor leaned back, giving him a skeptical look. “Is that a real thing? Likes a thing people actually do?”

Mairon shrugged. “It’s a thing I do,” he said.

“So, no.”

Mairon grinned and pushed him gently back. “Jerk,” he said.

“You like it,” Melkor said, grinning back.

Mairon stretched up to kiss him again. “Don’t wait up for me, okay?”

“Fine,” said Melkor, sighing theatrically. “But you owe me a date.”

“You gonna hold me to that?”

“Oh, I’m gonna hold you to something,” Melkor said. “Preferably from behind.”

Mairon laughed and ran his hand through his hair. “Jesus,” he said, grinning up at Melkor. “That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard.”

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “I can do way worse.”

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” said Melkor, mock-serious.

“I should get back to work,” Mairon said, glancing toward his closed office door.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Melkor grudgingly.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Mairon said, unlocking the door. He pushed it open and stepped inside. He turned back, almost as an afterthought, looking at Melkor over his shoulder. “Come see me in the morning, okay? Catch me in the right mood, and I might let you collect on that date.”

He shut the door, and Melkor ran a hand distractedly through his hair. He groaned, both enticed by the prospect and frustrated by having to wait for it. Then he turned and sauntered across the hall, pushing open the door to Gothmog’s office. “Hey,” he said, knocking on the doorframe. “You busy?”

“Just finishing up,” said Gothmog, scribbling himself a note. He ripped off the top post-it on the stack and stuck it to his computer screen. “What’s up?” he asked, looking up at Melkor.

“You want to hang out? It’s been a while since we got into any trouble.”

“Mairon’s busy, huh?”

“Can’t a guy hang out with his best friend without an ulterior motive?”

“Not if the guy is you.”

“Dickhole.”

“Sorry,” said Gothmog. “You’re right.”

“Yeah, well. So are you.”

“No shit,” said Gothmog. “So where are we going?”

“I thought you weren’t interested in my ulterior motives.”

“Well, when your ulterior motive is gonna give me free food…”

“Mooch,” said Melkor, grinning.

“Damn right,” said Gothmog, grinning in return. “So where are we going?”

“Anywhere you want,” Melkor said.

“Wait,” said Gothmog. “Really?”

Melkor shrugged. “I’ve been kind of a pain in the ass the last couple of—”

“Years,” Gothmog supplied.

“Weeks,” Melkor finished, shooting him a glare. “And for the most part, rude-ass comments aside, you’ve been a really good friend, despite my general shittiness. If anyone deserves free food and booze, it’s you.”

“No arguments here,” Gothmog said. “Wait, did you say booze? Because, hell yeah.”

Melkor laughed. “Come on, you mooch,” he said, sauntering back out the door. “Before I change my mind.”

It was a few minutes past midnight when Melkor walked in the front door, flipping on the lights and tossing his keys onto the hall table. He shrugged out of his coat and wandered into the kitchen, idly looking into the fridge despite the fact that he and Gothmog had eaten what seemed like one of everything on the dive bar’s menu. He closed the fridge and went instead to the cupboard, pulling down a glass and filling it at the tap. His phone rang as he began to drink, and he pulled it from his pocket, grinning at the screen before answering.

“Hey,” he said. “Little late to change your mind about dinner.”

“I know,” said Mairon. There was an odd edge in his voice, and Melkor frowned.

“What’s up?” he asked, leaning back against the counter. Mairon was silent, and Melkor’s frown deepened. “Mai?” he prompted.

“I—” he began, and Melkor could picture him shaking his head. “Can you do me a really weird favor?”

“Probably,” Melkor said. “What do you need?”

“Can you come back in?”

“To work?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean,” Melkor began, unsure why he was waffling other than the fact that his bed was so close, and the lab so far away.

“I have coding work to do,” Mairon said, the words coming out in a rush. “In the lab. And I’m the only one here, and I—”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Melkor said, and hung up. He set his glass in the sink and headed for the door, grabbing his coat on the way out.

It was an easy drive that late at night, with traffic nearly non-existent. He pulled up to the curb of the deserted street in front of Angband and got out of the car, pulling out his keys to unlock the front door. It was dark, but Melkor knew the place by heart, and he easily made his way to the elevator and down to the basement.

Mairon was sitting cross-legged on the floor by the coding lab door, his back to the wall, staring intently down at the screen of his laptop. He looked up as the elevator doors opened, relief clear on his face as he saw Melkor. He closed his computer and stood up. “I’m sorry,” he said, as Melkor walked toward him. “I just—” Melkor reached him, and pulled him into his arms. Mairon buried his face against Melkor’s chest and sighed. “I’m sorry I called you so late.”

“Dude,” Melkor said, “you really need to quit calling midnight late.”

Mairon laughed and stepped back. “Still,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Melkor said. “It’s not like I was doing anything else.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, “but—”

“Hey,” said Melkor. “I wanted to spend the night with you anyway.”

“Not here,” Mairon pointed out.

“I’m not too picky about the ‘where’,” Melkor said.

Mairon kissed him gently, just once. “Thanks,” he said, gratitude clear in his voice. “I owe you.”

“Oh, I know,” said Melkor, grinning. “And you can bet your ass I’m gonna collect.”

Mairon laughed and tucked his computer under his arm. “Come on,” he said, turning and swiping his ID into the reader beside the door. “I’ll show you what I’ve been working on.”

“Oh, good,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

“Ten bucks if you can stay awake for more than fifteen minutes worth of explanation.” He pushed open the door, looking over his shoulder at Melkor.

“Hope you have cash,” Melkor said, and followed him inside.

Mairon woke with a start, jumping at the sound of the knock on his door. “Not even a week,” Melkor said, shaking his head.

“Huh?” Mairon said, voice rasping. He yawned, stretching his arms over his head, and blinked, focusing on Melkor with an effort.

“I mean, I guess I should be impressed you lasted this long,” Melkor said. “Even if it was only a couple days.”

“What are you talking about?” Mairon asked, frowning.

“Sleeping at your desk,” Melkor said. He sauntered into the room, shaking his head.

“To be fair,” Mairon said, “you slept on the couch in your office last night, so.”

“Just like old times, huh?” Melkor said, grinning.

“For me, maybe,” Mairon said. “Except before, I could usually count on someone to bring me food. Or at least coffee.”

“How about both?” Melkor said, and set a white paper bag and cup on the desk in front of Mairon. Mairon picked up the cup first, shuddering as warmth flooded through his hands. He took a drink, set the cup aside, and tore open the bag, rubbing his hands excitedly at the sight of the breakfast sandwich within.

“What’s nice about this,” Mairon said, peeling back the foil on the sandwich and taking a bite, “is that six months ago, you never would’ve thought to bring me breakfast. Heck, I’m not a hundred percent sure you’d have noticed if I starved to death right here in my office.”

“I would too,” Melkor said, affronted. “The minute the paperwork started to pile up.”

Mairon laughed, holding the coffee in one hand and the sandwich in the other. “Thanks,” he said.

“Anytime,” said Melkor, leaning down to kiss him. “So,” he said, sitting on the edge of Mairon’s desk. “Get any work done after I passed out?”

“Some,” said Mairon, glancing at the dormant screen of his computer. “But not enough.” He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. “I feel like it’s right there,” he said, frowning. “Like it’s right in front of me, and I just can’t see it.”

“You sound like you need a break,” Melkor said.

“What I need,” said Mairon, “is a win.”

“Well, if anyone deserves one right now, it’s you.”

“Which obviously means I’m not gonna get it.”

There was a knock on the door, and they both looked up to find Thuringwethil standing there. “Oh, good,” she said. “You’re both here. Come on.” She took a step back, beckoning them out into the hall.

“What’s up?” Melkor asked, standing up from his perch on the desk.

“I just got off the phone with the police,” she said, walking backward toward her office, excitement on her face. “They found something.”

She turned and walked into her office. Mairon stood up hurriedly from his chair, and together he and Melkor followed her across the hall.

Chapter End Notes

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Talk About the Passion

Chapter Summary

The investigation into what happened at Angband and Tol-in-Gaurhoth continues, painfully slowly. The gang schemes about how to speed things up to a more satisfying conclusion. Meanwhile, Melkor worries that Mairon is pushing himself too hard.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taken me a million years to update! Hopefully it's worth it :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Good news,” said Thuringwethil, setting her bag down in the unoccupied chair in Mairon’s office and perching on the edge of his desk. “They just served the arrest warrant for our friend Beren.”

“Good,” said Melkor, slouching low in the other chair and putting his feet up on the edge of Mairon’s desk. “That asshole should’ve been in jail weeks ago.”

“Better late than never,” said Gothmog, who had followed Thuringwethil inside.

“So Doriath isn’t protecting him?” Melkor asked.

“I get the feeling Doriath was barely tolerating him before any of this happened,” Mairon said, swatting ineffectually at Melkor’s feet.

“They’re definitely not going out of their way to protect him now,” Thuringwethil said. “He’s sitting in jail as we speak, still waiting to see a public defender.”

“Ouch,” said Gothmog. “Bet his lady-friend doesn’t like that.”

“I hear she’s throwing a fit,” said Thuringwethil with a satisfied smile.

“So what does this mean?” Melkor asked, pushing down through the balls of his feet to rock his chair back on two legs. “Like, practically or whatever. For us.”

“Stop it,” Mairon said, glaring at Melkor. Melkor waved him away.

“Are you asking me to explain the concept of jail to you?” Thuringwethil said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“No need,” said Gothmog. “Dickhead’s got firsthand experience.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Melkor, flipping him off.

“If you’re referring to any of the nights I’ve spent in the drunk tank,” said Gothmog

blithely, “then they don’t count. That’s not real jail. And anyway, in case you forgot, I spent half those nights with your dumb ass snoring beside me.”

“Can we focus?” Mairon asked pointedly, an edge of irritation in his voice.

“Jury’s still out on that one,” Gothmog said, grinning. Melkor laughed, rocking up onto the back legs of the chair again, pushing himself back and forth with his feet.

“Can you please not?” Mairon said, waving at Melkor to put the chair legs back on the floor. He looked over at Thuringwethil. “So what are they charging him with?”

“Breaking and entering,” she said.

“That’s it?”

“For now,” she said. “It’s the only thing we have definitive proof of.”

“And we got lucky on that one,” Gothmog said. “I mean, how many times were those morons in the coding lab before they managed to find his fingerprints?”

“More than enough,” Melkor said. “I mean, it was on one of the Carcharoth prototypes, for fuck’s sake.”

“What was left of one, anyway,” Gothmog added.

“My point,” said Melkor, “is that it’s kind of a big target. Hard to miss. Did they just, like, not look? Like, at all?”

“They looked,” Mairon said. “A lot. I mean, they kicked us out of that lab for a week. You’d think that would be enough time.”

“Maybe,” Melkor said, eyeing Thuringwethil sidelong, “they needed a little motivation. Huh, Thil?”

“It’s possible,” she said, examining her fingernails carefully. “Although, to be clear, I would certainly never consider threatening to destroy the lead investigator on the case to get those kinds of results. That would be wrong.”

“Also probably illegal.”

“Probably,” she said. “And, by the way, the fact that that possibility even crossed your mind is a little off-putting.”

“Our boy’s not dumb,” Gothmog said, laying his hands on Melkor’s shoulders. “Just selective.”

Melkor reached back to swat at Gothmog, who easily dodged out of the way. Melkor’s chair teetered dangerously on its back legs. He pinwheeled his arms, trying to correct the angle, but he was already too far gone. The chair fell back, and Melkor landed with a crash, swearing loudly.

“You were saying?” Thuringwethil said, raising an eyebrow pointedly at Gothmog.

“For fuck’s sake,” said Mairon, watching Melkor pick himself up from the wreckage of the broken chair. “Did I not tell you to stop?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” said Melkor sourly, sitting up.

“The chair’s not.”

“Relax, chief,” said Melkor, tossing bits of broken chair out of the way so he could sit on the ground. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

“You okay?” Gothmog said.

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “I just—”

“Wasn’t asking you.”

“I’m fine,” Mairon said, though Gothmog noted he was tapping his fingertips irritably on the desktop. “Can we get back to business, please?”

“There’s not much to get back to,” Thuringwethil said. “We got an arrest. We have a breaking and entering charge. That’s about it.”

“So far,” Mairon said.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning those dickholes have a lot more to answer for than breaking and entering,” Melkor said.

“Exactly,” Mairon said.

“I know,” she said, “but if we’re talking about charges—real, actual charges brought against them in a court of law, then we have to stick to things we can prove.”

“And if we want to prove the heinous shit we know they did,” Mairon said, “then we have to work harder.”

“Yeah,” said Thuringwethil, frowning. “That’s not what I said, and definitely not what I meant.”

“Hey, Thil?” Melkor said. “Do me a favor, and go make sure that dickhead Beren isn’t getting out on bail anytime soon. Ideally, his ass sits in jail until this goes to trial, or whatever.”

“Yeah,” she said, looking at Mairon for a moment, her frown deepening. “Sure. I’m on it. Gothmog, can you come with me? I want to go over the records we have from the last time the police were here—see if there’s anything else they might have missed.”

“Sure, Thil,” said Gothmog. “Catch you guys later, okay?”

“Later, Gothmog,” Melkor said, watching them retreat toward Thuringwethil’s office. He pushed himself up from his spot on the floor and walked over to Mairon’s desk. “You okay?” he asked, looking concerned.

“Fine,” Mairon said.

“Really?” Melkor said, raising an eyebrow. “Because you seem—”

“What?” Mairon snapped. “Busy? Stressed? Newsflash, Melkor. I am. I *always* am, and even more so now that I have to worry about making sure this investigation actually gets

done.”

“Mai, you need to relax.”

“Relax?” Mairon demanded. “I can’t relax. There’s too much to do, if we want to keep pushing Angband forward, and clean up the Tol-in-Gaurhoth mess, and make sure Doriath gets what’s coming to them, and—”

“Mairon,” Melkor. “Can you—”

“I mean,” Mairon said, ignoring him, “Thil’s not wrong. We have to stick to things we can prove. We just have to do more than she thinks we can. We have to prove Doriath is lying about where Luthien was. We have to prove she was there, that she stole Thil’s ID, that she and her shithead boyfriend stole our program and took it God knows where, probably back to Doriath—which, I still don’t get why they would even want it. I mean, it originated at Formenos, and since they were working with that Felagund dickhead, I’m assuming they weren’t trying to steal it for themselves. Or—hang on, maybe—”

“Mairon,” said Melkor, leaning down and taking him by the shoulders. “Breathe.”

Mairon dragged in a handful of shaking, ragged breaths. Melkor sat on the edge of the desk, shuffling closer to Mairon. “You okay?” Melkor asked.

“Yeah,” Mairon said, rubbing at his eyes and sighing. “I’m just tired, is all. I’ve been really busy here lately. Haven’t gotten much sleep.”

“You need to take a break,” Melkor said.

“Sure,” said Mairon. “Just as soon as I get this whole Luthien-Silmaril mess figured out.”

“Mai—”

“I’m fine” Mairon said, cutting him off.

“Are you?”

Mairon stood up from his chair. With Melkor sitting on the desk, they were roughly face to face, and Mairon took advantage of this fact, leaning forward to kiss him. “I’m fine,” he said again, much more convincingly, pressing his forehead against Melkor’s. Melkor took Mairon’s face in his hands, looking at him carefully. Mairon was much calmer now, and his smile seemed genuine, but Melkor was not entirely convinced.

“You’d tell me if you weren’t,” he said, watching Mairon’s face. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would,” Mairon said, kissing him again. Then he stepped back, stretching his arms above his head. “God, I’m tired,” he said, stifling a yawn.

“You want coffee?” Melkor asked, pushing himself up off the desk.

“Yes, please,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Come on,” Melkor said, throwing an arm around his shoulders and pulling him toward the door. “Before you go into withdrawal or something.”

“Let’s go over it again.” Thuringwethil sighed, a sound of equal parts frustration and irritation. “What?” Mairon demanded.

“We’ve been over it,” Thuringwethil said. “All of it—like, a thousand times. We don’t have any new information, Mai. We’re not going to learn anything we don’t already know.”

“The information may not be new, but we have a lot of it, and if we just look at it again, maybe a little differently—”

“Mai, there is no other way to look at it. We’ve looked at it every possible way.”

“No, we haven’t,” he said doggedly. “If we had, then we’d have an answer.”

“We got robbed,” she said. “You got attacked. What more do you want?”

“Just let him go,” Melkor said, from his place on the couch. “He’s not going to stop.”

“I want to know why,” Mairon said, ignoring Melkor and pacing distractedly across the carpet in front of Melkor’s desk. “Four people worked together to steal Silmaril back from us. But why?”

“Why did Melkor steal it in the first place? It’s obviously worth the risk.”

“Debatable,” Gothmog muttered, swearing as Melkor kicked him.

“To us, maybe,” Mairon said, “but to them? Doriath has no need for that kind of programming, not unless they’re planning some kind of major reboot of their entire brand. Which Formenos would never let happen. I guarantee you, if Formenos even got a whiff of Doriath trying to start something with that program, they’d be in court so fast it would make Thingol’s goddamn head spin.”

“Which is another thing I don’t understand,” she said, drawn back into the never-ending discussion despite herself. “What was Finrod’s angle?”

“As far as I can tell, he and Beren are friends. They moved in the same circles in college, and Beren did some unpaid internship work at a Formenos holding that Felagund is involved with.”

“Yeah, but this is Silmaril we’re talking about,” she said. “As in, Formenos’ crown jewel. The Finwions may not always get along with each other, but I’ve never known one of them to try to sabotage the family legacy.”

“It’s weird,” Mairon agreed. “I mean, if you’re going to try to take Silmaril back by force, why wouldn’t you give it back to your family?”

“Falling out, maybe?”

“I’ve got contacts in all the major Formenos holdings, and as far as I can tell, the Finwion kids are all playing nice. I have no idea why he’d suddenly jump ship, or switch teams, or whatever he’s up to.”

“Is backstabbing an option?” Gothmog asked, looking up from his phone.

“Backstabbing is always an option,” Melkor said. He was sprawled on the couch in his office, eyes closed, drifting in and out of sleep as the monotonous, circular discussion dragged on

around him.

“Thank you, peanut gallery,” Thuringwethil said, rolling her eyes.

“I’m serious,” Gothmog said. “Finrod and Beren are friends. Maybe they get it into their heads that they can use our takeover of Tol-in-Gaurhoth to make a pass at getting Silmaril back. So Beren mentions it to his girlfriend—”

“Again,” Thuringwethil said. “Why does she care? Doriath—”

“Alqualondë,” Mairon said suddenly.

“That company Fëanor torched?” Gothmog said. “What—”

“Oh, fuck,” Melkor said. “Doriath had holdings there, didn’t they?”

“Did they?” Thuringwethil asked.

“Yes,” Mairon said, stopping his pacing at last, looking thoughtful. “God, I forgot. Thingol and Finwe were friends. Doriath had some stock in Alqualondë, way back from when it started.”

“Which,” said Melkor, “rumor has it, they never got paid for when Fëanor gutted the place.”

“So, what?” Thuringwethil said. “Luthién’s pissed about some deal her dad got stiffed on and thinks she’s gonna score one for Doriath?”

“Maybe it’s not Luthién who was looking to score,” Mairon said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?”

“I did some digging, back when I realized something wasn’t quite right at Tol-in-Guarhoth,” Mairon said. “From what I can tell, Beren and Luthién have been trying to keep their little fling on the down-low. Apparently Thingol’s not thrilled about the idea of his daughter dating some low-class riff raff.”

“Jesus,” Gothmog said. “This is not *Romeo and Juliet*. And even if it is, who gives a shit? Knowing little details about their personal lives doesn’t get us any closer to nailing them for what they did.”

“Party pooper,” Melkor said.

“He’s right,” Thuringwethil said. “We’re getting sidetracked. If we want real, concrete results, we need to stick to things we can prove. Which brings us back to Beren. We know he had access to Tol-in-Guarhoth. We know he was here, in our coding lab, the day Silmaril went missing. We can reasonably argue that he stole my ID to do it. But other than that?”

“Luthién—”

“Has a timesheet proving she was at work, in the Doriath office, the day our shit got stolen.”

“It’s forged,” Mairon said. “You know damn well it is. That timesheet—oh.” He stopped in his tracks, frozen in thought.

“What—“Gothmog started, but Melkor frantically waved a hand at him, watching Mairon closely.

“Timesheets,” Mairon said. “Documents. Finrod *and* Beren.” He strode to Melkor’s computer, shooing Thuringwethil out of the way and leaning down to type a rapid string of commands.

Thuringwethil leaned down to look over his shoulder. “What are you—”

“Just a sec,” he said, scrolling through an unlabeled folder of identical files. “Here,” he said, tapping the screen. “You want something to link the Silmaril theft to Doriath? Here you go.”

“Income tax,” Thuringwethil said, nonplussed. “Most recent year for Beren.”

“So he pays his taxes like a good boy,” Melkor said. “What does that—”

“He’s a Doriath employee,” Mairon said, pulling the screen back around so he could see it. “Look.” He turned the screen around so Gothmog and Melkor could see it from the couch.

“Part-time security contractor,” Gothmog read, shaking his head. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“He’s on the Doriath payroll,” Mairon said. “Officially, up to and including the time he was here, stealing Silmaril.”

“What are you getting at?” Thuringwethil asked him, crossing her arms and frowning at him.

“Oh, not much,” Mairon said. “Just a little corporate espionage.”

“That’s a very serious claim,” she said, “and one that—”

“Will get peoples’ attention,” he said. “For the last couple of weeks, Doriath has been hiding behind the old money shield, the same way Formenos tried to. Their connections can get them out of some things, but not this. This is a big deal.”

“It’s also hard to prove,” Thuringwethil said.

“Yes,” Mairon said, “but the accusation holds enough weight that it’ll force the feds to take it seriously.”

“Doriath has already tried to distance itself from Beren,” she said. “They’re gonna go further if we leverage this kind of claim.”

“They can disavow him all they want,” Mairon said. “It’s still going to warrant an investigation, especially after we turn over the evidence we have.”

“This is good,” Melkor said, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “This is progress.”

“You want progress?” Mairon said, typing quickly. “Here’s progress.” He turned the monitor around again.

“Great,” Melkor said, looking down at the screen. “Another tax form.”

“Not just any tax form,” Mairon said, tapping the box marked ‘name’.

“Dungalef,” Gothmog said, reading the form. “I mean, he was technically employed at Tol-in-Gaurhoth. He had to fill this shit out, right?”

“Yes,” Mairon said, “but—”

“His name isn’t Dungalef,” Thuringwethil said.

“No,” said Mairon, with a self-satisfied grin. “It isn’t.”

“And that’s bad?” Melkor hazarded.

“Thil?” said Mairon, looking over at her.

“This is an official government document,” she said. “Knowingly lying when you fill it out is perjury.”

“Which is a felony, right?”

“Should be.”

“Good,” Mairon said. “I’ve got one for Beren, too.”

“This is good,” Thuringwethil said. “This is intent. This is getting close to pre-meditation.”

“This is some serious shit,” Melkor said, looking excitedly at the two of them. “This is Doriath and Formenos, accused of conspiring against us. This could bring them both down.”

“Mutually assured destruction,” Melkor said. “I like it.”

“I like it best when it doesn’t involve us,” she said.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to,” Mairon said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“The only thing Fomenos wants,” Mairon said, “is Silmaril. All of our problems with the FInwions—they server site debacle, the IP theft case, the thing with Fingolfin—it’s all because we have Silmaril. So if we don’t have Silmaril—”

“Which we don’t,” Melkor pointed out, a little shortly.

“Then we don’t have Formenos breathing down our necks,” Thuringwethil said, finishing Mairon’s thought.

“Could that actually work?” Gothmog asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, tapping her fingers thoughtfully on her desk. “They still haven’t let the IP theft thing go.”

“But it’s going nowhere,” Mairon reminded her. “They can’t prove we stole the thing. I did too good a job covering it up. That’s why, so far, they’ve only been able to bully the judge into extending the injunction. They can’t proceed with a theft case because, well, they don’t have one.”

“So, what?” she asked. “We claim Silmaril is ours, and Doriath stole it?”

“Yes,” he said. “We pursue them for theft of the files. We’ve got Beren on perjury, which, like you said, amounts to premeditation. We know your ID was with me at Tol-in-Gaurhoth. We know Beren had access to the lab where I had it. We know his fingerprints are here, at Angband, which proves he trespassed. We also know your ID was used to access the lab at the time with Silmaril was taken. We’ve got a good case that Beren, who was still on Doriath’s payroll, stole the damn thing right out from under us.”

“So we hit them for industrial espionage,” she said. “I’m with you there. But what about Formenos? We know the Felagund asshole perjured himself too. Where does Formenos tie in?”

“They don’t,” Mairon said. “Not at first.”

“But—“Melkor started.

“I did some digging,” Mairon said. “Back at Tol-in-Gaurhoth, when I first realized something fishy was going on with those two. Finrod is technically only tangentially attached to Formenos.”

“What do you mean?” asked Thuringwethil.

“A while back,” Mairon said, “I noticed some weird financial finagling in the Formenos reports. Money and resources were moving around at the time of Finwë’s death, and I couldn’t quite figure out where it was all going. I thought it was some kind of off-shore accounting or something, trying to rearrange things for extra protection, given the tumult of the succession crisis.”

“Was it not?”

“It was...something different,” he said. “You know there’s always been some bad blood between Finwë’s kids.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Gothmog said.

“When he died,” Mairon said, “there was a little bit of a standoff. Fëanor was going to be in charge, obviously, but there was some dispute about the direction Formenos was going to go.”

“Hence the youngest brother cutting ties completely,” Thuringwethil said.

“Yes,” said Mairon. “And as bitter and spiteful as Fëanor was, he wasn’t stupid. He knew better than to underestimate his brothers and their kids. If he had cut ties with all of them, they would’ve created competition. He wanted them in the fold. The only problem was that a handful of them weren’t thrilled about how things were going at Formenos. So in order to keep them, Formenos ended up handing over a little bit of autonomy.”

“The shell companies,” Melkor said. “So that’s why they were buying up those shitty little outfits. God, I thought they were trying to diversify.”

“So did I,” said Mairon. “But it was less investment in diversified programs, more—”

“Hush money.”

“Exactly.”

“But what does that have to do with—oh. Oh, I see. The Felagund dick has his own little outfit, doesn’t he?”

“It’s called Nargothrond,” said Mairon. “It’s an ethics thinktank that does a lot of consulting for AI-related companies. Guess who their top client is?”

“Which explains why he was at Tol-Sirion,” Melkor said. “But I still don’t understand their ties to Doriath.”

“I don’t either,” Mairon said. “Not entirely. But it doesn’t matter. We can link them. There’s at least a couple Tol-in-Gaurhoth employees I can bully into testifying that Finrod and Beren were friends, and we have the records to prove that Finrod’s ID was used to get into the coding lab where I—well, you know.”

“So you’re saying Doriath and Formenos are in it together?”

“I’m saying Doriath and *Nargothrond* are in it together.”

“But Nargothrond is associated with Formenos, yeah?”

“Oh, Mai,” said Thuringwethil. “That’s risky. Clever, but risky.”

“What is?” Gothmog asked. “What are you thinking?”

“Claiming Doriath stole Silmaril from us should set Formenos on them,” Thuringwethil said.

“Hopefully,” Mairon added.

“But claiming Nargothrond was involved might create some internal bickering.”

“If we’re lucky,” Mairon said.

“Oh, that could be good,” said Melkor. “Divide those fuckers on the home front.”

“That’s the idea,” said Mairon. “Divide and conquer.”

“Have I told you,” Melkor said, grinning at Mairon ingratiatingly, “how smart you are?”

“Not lately,” Mairon said. “But maybe save your accolades until this actually works.”

“That’s unlike you,” Gothmog said. “Postponing praise.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mairon, shrugging. “Nothing like a good old-fashioned heist being pulled off right under your nose to knock you down a peg.”

“For the last time,” Melkor said, reaching out for Mairon’s hand. “Not your fault.”

Mairon gave him a half-hearted smile, stroking the back of Melkor’s hand.

“It’s a good plan,” Thuringwethil said. “Bold, but thorough.”

“What are the odds it could work?” Melkor asked.

“Not terrible,” she said. “And certainly better than nothing.”

“Then let’s go with it,” Melkor said. “Make it happen, you two. Use whatever resources you need. Just get it done.”

“Yes, sir,” Thuringwethil said, pouring more sarcasm into the acquiescence than should

have been humanly possible.

“Fuck you, Thil,” Melkor said mildly.

“Well,” said Gothmog, pushing himself up off the couch, “that’s all of our problems wrapped up neatly, right in time for lunch.”

“Not quite,” Mairon said, pulling his hand gently out of Melkor’s grasp.

“Aw, come on,” Gothmog said. “I’m starving.”

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “We’ve done enough work for one morning, haven’t we? Whatever’s on your mind can wait until after lunch.”

“It’s about Silmaril,” Mairon said.

“The whole damn morning has been about Silmaril,” Gothmog said. “One way or another.”

“What about it?” Melkor asked.

“We need to have a serious talk about the viability of continuing the development program.”

“Jesus,” Gothmog said. “This isn’t going to be a short discussion.”

“What’s to discuss?” Melkor said.

“Well,” Mairon said, “to recap, we lost basically everything attached to the flight files, along with all of our in-development prototypes for the associated Carcharoth system.”

“Okay,” Melkor said, “but I know for a fact you had backups of that shit on your own personal servers. You know, the ones not associated with our network. The ones those pricks who broke in here couldn’t possibly have accessed.”

“I do,” Mairon said, “but that’s not the point.”

“The prototype thing sucks,” Melkor said. “I’m not going to pretend it’s not a setback. But those things can be rebuilt, and—”

“The hardware isn’t the problem,” Mairon said.

“Neither is the software,” Melkor said. “You have it. We can reintegrate it. What’s the problem?”

“The problem,” Mairon said, “is that we’re not the only ones who have the files.”

“Doriath is a nonentity,” Melkor said. “Jesus, I thought we’d been over this.”

“It doesn’t matter how useless they’ve been in the past,” Mairon said. “They’ve got Silmaril now, and—”

“They’re not going to do anything with it,” Melkor said, cutting him off. “They can’t. They don’t have the infrastructure, and even if they could somehow raise it in a decent amount of time, we’d slap them with a lawsuit. I mean, fuck. Did we not just spend three hours discussing how we’re going to fuck them up with a corporate espionage charge?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mairon insisted. “Look, we have a good case for espionage. We can probably even come out of it with a win, if we’re careful and we play our cards right. But winning it is going to be a long, uphill battle—it’ll be months, maybe even years before they reach a decision. And even if a judge comes down on our side and orders Doriath to give us back the files, where does that leave us?”

“Uh, with my goddamn program?”

“A program,” Mairon said, “that has not only been examined by anyone Doriath wants to let see it, but which is also still being contested by Formenos. Look, I know you want Silmaril. It was a pain in the ass to get and to keep, and I know giving up on it seems like losing, but—”

“It doesn’t just seem like losing,” Melkor said. “It *is* losing. Or, no—worse, actually. It’s giving up.”

“Melkor, will you just—”

“No, actually. I won’t. I get that this sucks. I get that it’s hard. But that’s no reason to quit, or to give up. We still might be able to salvage this.”

“We can’t,” Mairon said.

“Prove it,” Melkor said.

“I—“He stopped, looking conflicted.

“Go ahead,” Melkor said. “I’m listening.”

Mairon stared at him for a moment, holding Melkor’s gaze with an intensity that made Melkor nervous. Then Mairon shook his head, turned on his heel, and stalked out of Melkor’s office, heading across the hall.

“Wait!” Melkor called after him, craning his neck to see as far into the hall as he could. “Where are you—oh, for fuck’s sake.” He sighed, looking up at Thuringwethil and over at Gothmog. “He took that as a challenge, didn’t he?”

“You think?” said Thuringwethil.

“Fuck,” said Melkor, pushing himself up and following Mairon out into the hall.

“Someone really ought to save them from themselves,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t bother,” Thuringwethil said. “They deserve each other.”

“True that, Thil. Lunch?”

“You buying?”

“Yes, you mooch. C’mon,” he said, holding out his arm. She took it, and the two of them headed out into the hall.

Across the hall, Melkor stood in Mairon’s office, staring bemusedly around at the stacks of papers that seemed to have materialized from nowhere. “Jesus,” he said, walking a careful path to Mairon’s desk. “I swear this place was clean this morning.”

“You’re not funny,” Mairon said, voice muffled into the confines of the filing cabinet,

from which he was unearthing stacks of papers and notebooks.

“Debatable,” Melkor said, more reflexively than seriously. “Can you stop for a minute?”

“No,” said Mairon, carrying a stack of reports to his desk and dropping them onto the floor with a heavy thud. He sat down.

“Mai—”

“Look,” Mairon said, picking up the stack of files and levering them onto his desk. “You asked me to do something. If you want me to do it, then—”

“But I don’t,” Melkor said. “Or—okay, what I said—” He sighed, frustrated, and ran a hand through his hair. “I just wanted to talk,” he said, willing Mairon to understand. “About our options.”

“We did talk,” Mairon said. “For like, two hours. And if you don’t believe me—”

“Mai,” said Melkor, crossing the distance between them and putting his hands on Mairon’s shoulders, steadying him. “Breathe, will you?”

“Stop saying that to me,” Mairon said irritably.

“Then do it,” Melkor, crossing his arms.

Mairon scowled at him for a moment, and Melkor scowled back. Then Mairon relented, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a loud sigh, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. “Okay,” he said, half to himself, eyes closed. “I’m okay.”

“Are you, though?” Melkor tried to keep his tone light, inquisitive, belying his concern.

“Yeah,” Mairon said, making his best attempt at nonchalant. “It’s just—”

“Stress,” Melkor said. “Full schedule. Lack of sleep. I know. You’ve been saying that a lot lately.”

“It’s been true a lot lately,” Mairon said.

“I know,” Melkor said again. “You could use a break.”

“We could all use a break,” Mairon said, deflecting. “It’s just not in the cards right now.”

“It could be,” Melkor said.

Mairon sighed. “I know what you’re trying to do,” he said, “and I appreciate it. I really do. I just—” He sighed again. “I’m not gonna lie, Melkor. Things are a little weird since—well, you know. I’m still getting my footing, trying to figure things out. I just think work is the best way to do that—be busy, be productive. Try to be normal. You know?”

“I get it,” Melkor said. “I’m trying to, anyway. Just take it easy on yourself, okay? You need a break once in a while. You *deserve* one.”

Mairon stepped close to him, laid his hands lightly on Melkor’s chest, and kissed him, bouncing up on tip-toe in what had become a familiar routine, though certainly no less enjoyable for its familiarity.

“And if that break involves me,” Melkor said, letting the implication remain unspoken, grinning suggestively.

Mairon laughed, and reached up to kiss him again. “Thanks,” he said softly, looking up at Melkor with a smile.

Melkor took Mairon’s face in his hands, leaning down to kiss him. “I love you,” he said, stroking Mairon’s cheek.

“I know,” said Mairon.

“Alright, Han Solo,” said Melkor, rolling his eyes. Mairon laughed again, and Melkor was almost convinced. “Let’s get lunch,” Melkor said, cajoling, pushing his luck. “Anything you want, and then I’ll let you get back to work.”

Mairon considered him for a moment, lips pursed. Then he sighed and shook his head. “Alright,” he said, relenting. “But then you leave me alone so I can work, okay?”

“I’ll leave you alone until dinnertime,” Melkor said. “But no promises after that.”

“Come on, you walking distraction,” Mairon said, shaking his head. “There’s a new Thai place up the street I’ve been dying to try.”

Melkor grinned, satisfied, and followed Mairon out into the hall.

Chapter End Notes

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Imitation of Life

Chapter Summary

Just as things are settling into a new normal, Mairon is faced with the prospect of having to testify...which means going back to Tol-in-Gaurhoth.

Chapter Notes

Melkor is surprisingly good at being a boyfriend, when he makes an effort. No, really.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“God, I’m tired,” said Thuringwethil, walking through the open door of Mairon’s office. She shifted a stack of papers from the chair to his desk and sat down, setting her bag on the floor.

“Jet-lagged, more like,” said Mairon, typing for a moment before looking up at her. “You got in this morning?”

“After a six-hour delay,” she said, a flicker of annoyance crossing her face. “I was in the airport all goddamn night, and let me tell you, there is nothing grosser than an airport at one a.m. I mean, people have no fucking sense of propriety anymore.”

“Manners are dead,” Mairon said. “Right along with chivalry.”

“I mean, I get it. You’re tired. We’re all tired. But that’s not an excuse to put on your pajamas and nap on three chairs.”

“Unfortunately,” said Mairon, “airports are open to the general public, which means you have to interact with, well, the general public.”

“Plebeians,” said Thuringwethil darkly.

“Probably wouldn’t know business casual if it bit them in the ass,” Mairon concurred. “But, you’re back, and in one piece, I think.”

“No thanks to the legal system.”

“Can’t help you on that one.”

“No one can.”

He snorted. “So how’d it go?”

“Good,” she said. “We got through the preliminary bullshit and we’re moving on to real trial stuff.”

“So why the break?”

“They asked for a recess,” she said, “and got it. Surprise, surprise.” She rolled her eyes. “They’re stalling. They know they’re stuck on this one.”

“Wait ‘til they see what else we’ve got coming down the line.”

“One thing at a time,” she said. “Speaking of which, you might need to testify.”

“I—”

“There you are,” said Melkor, coming into the office and bypassing Thuringwethil entirely on his way to Mairon’s desk.

“Here I am,” said Mairon. “Were you looking for me?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Melkor, as though it should have been obvious. “I thought you were going to come over after work.”

“I did,” Mairon said, “but I was later than I thought. I think you were already asleep.”

“What time?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said, shrugging. “Twelve-thirty?”

“Damn,” Melkor said. “I passed out at, like, twelve.”

“I figured,” Mairon said. “You didn’t answer when I knocked.”

“You should’ve called me,” Melkor said. “I’d have let you in.”

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Mairon said. “It was my fault I was late.”

“I wouldn’t have cared.”

Mairon looked up at him, appraising. “Were you worried about me?”

“A little,” said Melkor, looking a little sheepish. “I mean, not to be a creep or whatever, but after, you know, the past couple months, I kind of like to know where you are.”

Mairon stood up from his chair and wrapped his arms around Melkor. “That’s really sweet, actually,” he said, laying his cheek against Melkor’s chest.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Melkor said, kissing the top of his head.

“Ugh,” said Thuringwethil. “You two are gross. I’m gonna puke.”

“Not on the carpet,” said Mairon absently.

“Ignore her,” said Melkor. “She’s jealous.”

She snorted. “Of you? Please.”

“It’s okay,” Melkor said. “You can admit it. You’re not the only one.”

“God, I’d kill for some of your ego.”

“It’s pretty great, huh?”

“Not secondhand, no.”

“Thil said things are going well in court,” Mairon said, sitting down again at his desk.

“Yeah?” said Melkor.

“So far,” she said. “I was just telling Mai before you came in that he might have to testify.”

Melkor frowned, leaning over the back of Mairon’s chair. “Testify? And like, go the whole way out there?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know yet.”

“Can’t you get around it?”

“I don’t know. Mairon is the one who interviewed those two. He’s the one who signed off on their work. He has the most firsthand knowledge of their fraud. We’re probably going to need him to testify.”

“I know,” Melkor said. “But—”

“Look,” she said, “let’s not worry about it just yet, okay? We have enough to do without worrying about things we don’t even know are going to happen.”

“Fine,” said Melkor, though he didn’t look particularly happy.

“How’ve things been here?” Thuringwethil said, turning to Mairon.

“Complicated,” he said.

“Typical,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“To be fair,” said Melkor, “that’s not exactly new.”

“No,” Mairon said, “but this is a whole new level of crazy, even for us.”

“No arguments here,” said Thuringwethil.

“Speaking of which,” he said, glancing at his watch. “I hate to be rude, but I have to get going.”

“Kick us out, why don’t you,” said Melkor theatrically.

“You can stay,” Mairon said, gathering up some papers from his desk, “but I have to go.” He stood up, glancing around to make sure he had everything he needed. “I’ll see you guys later, okay?” He left them in his office and headed for the elevator, quickly disappearing from sight.

“He never stops, does he?” said Thuringwethil, shaking her head.

“If he does,” said Melkor, “I haven’t figured out how to make it happen.”

“How’s he been?”

Melkor sighed. “Not great, to tell you the truth. He’s tense as fuck, and he won’t let himself relax. It’s like he thinks that if he keeps working, he won’t have to think about what happened.”

“He can’t work forever.”

“No,” Melkor said. “Just until he crashes. And then he has nightmares.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. He’s so on edge all the time. He’s afraid to be alone in the coding lab. I mean, I rearranged schedules so that we have engineers working night shift in there. The place is never empty.”

“He let you do that?”

“I told him it was so we could get more work done. It’s costing me a shitload in overtime, but it’s worth it so I know there’s someone with him.”

“That’s really thoughtful, actually.”

“Why do you have to sound so surprised?” he said, sounding aggrieved. “It’s like you forget I can be nice.”

“It’s because you’re an asshole eighty-five percent of the time.”

“Yeah, but that still leaves like, fifteen percent.”

“Fourteen of which is you being a sarcastic pain in the ass.”

“Which still leaves one percent for being your best friend.”

“You’re pretty nice when you want to be,” she said. “I’ll give you that.”

“Can’t be nice all the time,” he said. “I don’t want to give people expectations or anything.”

“God forbid,” she said, shaking her head. Then she looked up at him, her face growing sober. “You’re worried about him, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?” he shot back. She nodded, and he sighed. “I don’t know what to do, Thil. I don’t know how to help him.”

“Neither do I,” she said, “but we’ll figure it out.”

Melkor nodded and hoped she was right.

“You know,” said Gothmog conversationally, “I really don’t think it’s healthy to sit that close to a computer screen.”

“Hasn’t hurt me yet,” said Mairon, still squinting at the tiny print of the wall of text on the screen.

“You wouldn’t admit it if it had.”

“Did you want something other than to speculate on the state of my visual acuity?”

“Got a minute to talk?”

Mairon scribbled a note onto the notepad in his lap and then sat back, looking up at Gothmog.

“Sure,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I heard some rumors I thought you might be interested in.”

“Yeah? What kind of rumors?”

“About Huan,” said Gothmog, speaking the name gingerly.

Something flickered across Mairon’s face, a little spasm of pain or disgust that quickly disappeared, replaced by a familiar, practiced placidity that Gothmog knew was meant to mask whatever Mairon felt. Still, when Mairon spoke, his voice was perfectly level. “What about him?” Mairon said, almost offhand.

“I was thinking about what you told us,” Gothmog said, treading carefully. “About how he seemed to be some kind of muscle that Luthien brought along to force her way through.”

“And?”

“Well, private protection isn’t exactly a common business. It’s a small community. People tend to know each other. So I asked around to a couple people I know who still work enforcer or bodyguard kind of jobs, just to see if anyone knew who this guy was.”

“Huh,” said Mairon thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t figure the kind of people working those jobs would be big talkers.”

“They’re not,” said Gothmog. “But word does get around. You hear rumors. You get to know people’s reputations.”

“I take it Huan has a reputation?”

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “Not a good one, either.”

“Shocking,” said Mairon, deadpan. “I can’t imagine how slashing people’s throats and dumping them in alleys could earn you a bad reputation.”

“That’s not what I mean. All that shit he did to you—yeah, it was rough. Yeah, it sucked. But for that line of work, it’s not exactly out of the ordinary.”

“That makes me feel so much better.”

“I’m sorry,” Gothmog said, and he meant it. “I didn’t mean to make light of it.”

“I know,” said Mairon, sighing. “It’s just—”

“Kind of a sore subject. I get it.”

“So what kind of reputation does Huan have?”

“He has a reputation for being a rat.”

For a moment, Mairon was silent. Then he said, “Really? That’s it? I was expecting something serious.”

“That is serious,” Gothmog said. “Trust is a major concern in that line of work. You get a reputation for fucking over your employer, and you better have a damn good backup plan, because you are shit out of luck for jobs.”

“So who’d he fuck over?”

“That’s the part I really wanted to talk to you about,” said Gothmog. “Apparently Huan reneged

on a job when he joined Luthien—just like, flat out disobeyed orders and switched sides in the middle of a fight.”

“Hang on,” Mairon said. “Switched sides? He was working for someone who was trying to fuck with Luthien?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Who was it?”

“The names Celegorm and Curufin mean anything to you?”

“Finwions,” Mairon breathed, feeling a shiver of anticipation run up his spine.

“Finwions,” Gothmog repeated, nodding.

“Wait, Huan was working for them? Doing what?”

“I don’t know,” Gothmog said. “Asking questions is always a little sketchy with that crowd, and even more so when you’re asking for details.”

“But he left them to work for Luthien.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Huh.”

“What?” Gothmog asked, noting the strange, pensive look on Mairon’s face.

Mairon shook his head. “It’s just something Huan said to me. Something about my loyalty being refreshing.”

“He’s one to talk,” said Gothmog.

“Apparently.” Mairon shook his head again. “Any chance you can get some more info out of whoever you’ve been talking to?”

“Doubt it,” Gothmog said. “I had to call in a couple favors to get that much.”

“Fair enough.”

“If you’re going to look into on your own,” Gothmog said, “then be careful. We’ve got enough trouble on our hands lately. We really don’t need to go out of our way to piss off anyone else.”

“Have a little faith in my discretion,” Mairon said.

Gothmog opened his mouth to respond, but was preempted by a loud, resounding *clang* from the back of the room. Mairon jumped, his chair skittering back from the bench where he sat, and Gothmog put out a hand to stop the chair from rolling back further. Mairon was on his feet, looking around for the source of the sound.

“Sorry!” called a sheepish voice from the vicinity of the commotion.

“That,” said Mairon, his voice cutting cold and sharp across the sudden silence, “is a three-thousand-dollar custom-designed fuselage panel. Not a goddamn frisbee!”

“Sorry, sir, I didn’t—”

“Get out,” Mairon said.

“But—”

“You’re on probation for the rest of the week. And if you say another goddamn word, you might as well just hand me your resignation now.”

The cowed engineer turned and headed for the door, breaking into a half-run as she cleared the door. For a moment, there was silence in the lab. “Get back to work,” Mairon snapped into the silence.

The quiet hum of work resumed around them, and Mairon turned back to Gothmog. “What?” he snapped, catching the dubious look on Gothmog’s face.

“You feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mairon said, sitting back down.

“Sure you are,” Gothmog said. “But, you know, for the sake of argument—”

“Gothmog,” Mairon warned.

“I’m just saying,” Gothmog said, ignoring him, “if you weren’t, you know that would be okay, right?”

“Dude, if I wanted a shrink, I’d get one, okay?”

“Would you?”

“Jesus,” Mairon said irritably. “You’re as bad as Melkor.”

“God forbid your friends care about you,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes. “What a sad, painful life you lead.”

“Don’t you have some security to oversee, or you know, literally anything else to be doing?”

“Probably,” Gothmog said, though he didn’t move.

Mairon glared at him for a moment, and then he sighed, his irritation and defensiveness dissolving in the face of Gothmog’s placidity. “Sorry, Gothmog,” he said. “It’s been a little—”

“I know,” Gothmog said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Mairon smiled at him, managing to convey a degree of exhaustion Gothmog hadn’t known was possible for such a simple gesture. “I need a break,” Mairon said, standing up and stretching. “I’ve been sitting here too long. My head is killing me.”

“Told you not to look at the screen that closely, dummy.”

Mairon shoved him gently, a good-natured push that did nothing to shift Gothmog’s considerable bulk. “I’m going up to get some coffee,” he said.

“Cool,” Gothmog said, following him towards the door. “I’m going up to get my shit so I can leave.”

“Already?”

“It’s ten after five.”

“Already?” Mairon said again.

“Dude, you’re pushing thirty. How have you not learned to tell time yet?”

“I can tell time,” said Mairon as they stepped into the elevator. “I just can’t figure out how it passes so damn quickly all day. And anyway, I’m not pushing thirty.”

“You’re getting close.”

“Don’t remind me.”

They reached the sixth floor and stepped into the lobby to find Melkor waiting in front of the door. “Hey,” he said, grinning at them. “I was looking for you. Well, not you,” he said, nodding at Gothmog.

“Rude,” said Gothmog, feigning offense.

“Sorry,” Melkor said, though he didn’t sound as though he meant it.

“Sure you are,” Gothmog said. “I’m heading out anyway. Catch you guys tomorrow.”

“Bye, Gothmog,” Mairon said, waving. Gothmog waved back and headed to his office. “So,” Mairon said, turning back to Melkor. “You were looking for me.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “I have something for you.” He put his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled something out, holding his closed fist out to Mairon.

Mairon held out his hand and felt something cold and metallic hit his palm. He looked at it a moment, nonplussed. “A key,” he said, looking up at Melkor.

“Uh-huh,” said Melkor. “It’s for my apartment. I figured it would eliminate the whole ‘help I was later than I thought and I can’t get in because you fell asleep’ problem.”

Affection welled in Mairon’s chest, and he turned the key over in his hand. “You really want me to have this?”

“If by this, you mean basically unfettered access to my place at all hours of the day and also a complete lack of excuses for not coming over when you’re working late, then yes, I want you to have it.”

Mairon laughed and closed his fingers around the key. Then he took a step forward, closing the distance between them, and buried his free hand in Melkor’s shirt, pulling him down to kiss him. Melkor made a little noise of surprise and then wrapped his arms around Mairon, pulling him closer.

“Let’s go home,” Mairon whispered, pressing a trail of kisses to Melkor’s neck.

“Home?” Melkor said. “It’s like, five o’clock.”

“I know,” Mairon said. “I don’t care. I’ve been a little overkill on work lately—”

“You? Never.”

“And,” Mairon continued, ignoring him, “I think I could stand to take a night off.”

“You sure?” Melkor asked him, mock-serious.

“I mean,” Mairon said, letting one hand slide to the small of Melkor’s back as the other wandered up to cup the back of his neck, “I might need a little convincing.”

“I think I could help you with that,” Melkor said, letting Mairon pull him down to kiss him again.

“Come on,” he said, draping an arm over Mairon’s shoulders and kissing the top of his head.

“Let’s go home before you change your mind.”

Melkor woke suddenly, startled awake by a loud, gasping cry and the feeling of the bed shifting beneath him. He opened his eyes in the darkness, pushing himself halfway up and reaching a hand across the bed. The spot where Mairon should’ve been was empty, and Melkor sat up, eyes adjusting to the darkness enough to see Mairon, sitting up in bed, head in his hands, breathing hard.

“Hey,” Melkor said softly, knowing by now not to touch him. The sound of his speech, gentle as it was, startled Mairon, who jumped and looked around wildly. “It’s okay,” Melkor said, soothing. “You’re okay.”

Mairon’s eyes met his in the darkness, and he shuddered. Then, with a visible effort, he took a deep breath, trying to calm the rapid irregularity of his breathing. After a moment, he reached out for Melkor, who gladly shifted closer and wrapped his arms around Mairon, pulling him to his chest.

“Nightmare?” Melkor asked, feeling Mairon shiver against him. Mairon nodded, his cheek pressed to Melkor’s shoulder. Melkor held him close, rubbing his palm against Mairon’s back in slow, soothing circles.

“I don’t know why you want me here,” Mairon whispered, his voice hoarse.

“What are you talking about?”

“Half the time I’m here, I have insomnia, and the other half, I wake you up because I’m having the same damn nightmare again.”

“And?”

“And,” said Mairon, pushing himself up and away from Melkor, “I don’t know why you want me here. Why do you want to deal with that?”

“Because I love you,” Melkor said.

“Why?” Mairon demanded, hands balling into fists in his lap.

“Because I have really good taste.” Mairon snorted, despite himself, and Melkor reached for his hand, running his thumb lightly over Mairon’s knuckles. “I don’t care if you have insomnia or nightmares or anything else. I love you, and I want you here.” He shifted closer, but Mairon shifted away, his head bowed.

“You say that a lot,” Mairon said, and Melkor knew him well enough to know that there was something else, something he was afraid to say.

“It’s true a lot,” Melkor said, by way of deflection.

Mairon was silent a moment. “Does it bother you?” he asked at last. “That you say it, and I...”

“No,” Melkor said firmly.

“Because I do,” Mairon said, the earnestness in his voice tugging at Melkor. “I just—I’ve never said it. Not to anyone. And I’m not saying I don’t want to, because I do, but it’s just—”

“Mairon,” said Melkor, gently cupping Mairon’s face in his hands and raising it to look him in the eye. “I don’t care if you never say it. You don’t need to. I mean, you’ve been dealing with my bullshit for six goddamn years, and if that’s not love, then I don’t know what the fuck is.”

Mairon looked at him for a moment and then began to laugh, the tension finally draining out of him as he let himself relax. “God, you’re ridiculous,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Yeah,” Melkor said, “but surprisingly effective.”

Mairon leaned forward and kissed him, a soft and tender press of the lips that made Melkor ache with affection for him. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he said.

“Probably be a hell of a lot more productive,” Melkor said.

“And a hell of a lot more miserable,” Mairon added. He kissed Melkor again, feeling a thrill of pleasure as Melkor’s lips parted beneath his own, as Melkor’s hands cupped his face, as Melkor kissed him back, soft and eager. He kissed Melkor once more and then sat back, covering his mouth with the back of his hand as he yawned.

“You want to go back to sleep?” Melkor asked him.

“Yes, please,” Mairon said.

“Come on,” Melkor said, laying down and patting the bed beside him. Mairon lay down beside him, his back to Melkor’s chest. Melkor slid his arm around Mairon, and Mairon held Melkor’s hand to his chest, shifting back against him and closing his eyes. Melkor kissed the top of his head, his cheek, the sharp jut of his jaw. He kissed a slow, gentle trail down Mairon’s neck, following the curve of his shoulder, all the while whispering soft, soothing nonsense that quickly lulled Mairon to sleep. Melkor watched the slow rise and fall of Mairon’s chest, listening to the even hush of Mairon’s breath as he slept. He smiled, contented, and laid down at last, burying his face in the crook of Mairon’s neck. Soon enough, he too was asleep.

“So the good news,” said Thuringwethil, “is that the trial is moving forward.”

“That is good news,” said Gothmog.

“Yeah,” said Melkor, “but the way you said it implies there’s bad news.”

“Not...necessarily.”

“Spit it out, Thil.”

“They want Mairon to testify.”

“Why?” Melkor demanded.

“It’s okay,” Mairon said.

“He’s the best witness we have,” Thuringwethil said.

“I said it’s okay,” Mairon said.

“You want him to go back there,” Melkor snapped, “back to where he—”

“Are you two deaf?” Mairon said, raising his voice. “I said it’s fine.”

“But—”

“Let him talk,” Gothmog said. “He’s a big boy.”

“Yeah he is,” Melkor said, unable to resist.

Mairon laughed, and the tension in the room broke.

“I’m sorry,” Thuringwethil said, smiling apologetically at Mairon. “I wouldn’t ask you to go if I didn’t need you.”

“It’s okay, Thil,” Mairon said. “Really.”

“Mai—”

“Look,” he said. “Am I thrilled about going back there? No. But if it means sticking it to those goddamn Finwions, then I’ll do it.”

“Good old-fashioned spite,” Gothmog said, grinning. “I like it.”

“I mean, it’s kind of our thing.”

“Unfortunately,” Mairon said, “spite doesn’t win trials.”

“No,” Thuringwethil said, “but good legal practice does.”

“Well, thank God we have you,” Melkor said.

“Can I get that in writing?”

“Win the trial,” Melkor said, “and we’ll talk.”

It was ten fifty-seven p.m. when Mairon slid the key into the lock in Melkor’s front door, smiling at the novelty of it as the bolt slid back at the turn of his wrist. He let himself in, closing the door behind him and turning the deadbolt. He put his keys back in his pocket, laying a hand fondly against the door and grinning. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it by the door, letting his bag fall to the floor. He turned and wandered down the hall, looking for Melkor.

“Is that you, Mai?” Mairon followed the sound of Melkor’s voice to the living room and found him sprawled on the couch, the TV on mute. “Hey,” Melkor said, grinning at him. “I thought I heard someone come in.”

“And you were just going to sit here and hope it was me?”

“You’re the only one with a key,” Melkor said. “I figure a murderer wasn’t going to bother

unlocking the door.”

“You’re an idiot,” Mairon said, sitting down next to him.

Melkor put an arm around Mairon, pulling him close and kissing the top of his head. “Done a little early tonight?”

Mairon snorted. “You’ve been hanging out with me too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“You just called ten p.m. ‘a little early’.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said, shuddering. “You’re right.”

Mairon laughed, laying his head on Melkor’s shoulder. “God, I’m glad you gave me that key.”

“You and me both,” Melkor said.

Mairon sighed, snuggling close to Melkor, laying a hand on Melkor’s chest. “Thil said I have to go,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Melkor said, kissing Mairon’s forehead. Mairon said nothing, turning to bury his face in Melkor’s neck. “Hey,” Melkor said soothingly, shifting so he could take Mairon’s face in his hands. “Don’t worry, okay? I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“How’re you going to—“He pushed himself up so he could look Melkor in the eye. “Are you going?”

“To Tol-Sirion? Yeah, of course.”

“Really?”

“After what happened last time? Not to be a dick, but there’s no way you’re going back without me.” Mairon felt a wave of relief at Melkor’s words, and he leaned forward to kiss him, one hand tangling gently in Melkor’s hair. “I take it that makes you happy?” Melkor said, raising an eyebrow and grinning.

“Very,” Mairon said. “I mean, not that I think anything will happen, but—I don’t know. I’ll feel better if you’re there, I think.”

“Me too,” Melkor said.

Mairon kissed him again and then settled back against his, his head on Melkor’s shoulder. “Anything good on?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Melkor said, picking up the remote and clicking over to shows he had recorded. He chose the first show on the list, and the *Jeopardy!* theme began to play over the speakers.

“Is this today’s episode?”

“Yep,” said Melkor. “I recorded it on the off-chance you came over.” He put his arm around Mairon and pulled him close.

Mairon kissed his neck, running a hand up Melkor’s chest. “I could get used to this,” he said, sighing contentedly.

“Please do,” said Melkor, stroking his cheek. “Now let’s see if you can beat my ass at *Jeopardy!* for the eight hundredth time in a row.”

“Get ready to lose, babe,” Mairon said, listening as Trebek began to list the categories.

Melkor smiled, and relished the strange thought that there was little else in the world he would like to do more.

Chapter End Notes

Come yell at me on [tumblr!](#)

Walking on Broken Glass

Chapter Summary

Melkor, Mairon, and Thuringwethil head out to testify in the forgery trial

Chapter Notes

Not gonna lie, the boys have a big fight. Mai's not in great headspace. But on the plus side, they mostly get this leg of the trial stuff done, so. *shrug emoji*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“That,” said Melkor, eyeing Mairon dubiously, “is a lot of paperwork.”

Mairon looked up from the desk in their hotel room, where he was neatly stacking the work he had brought with him. “This is a week’s worth,” he said, carefully collating a handful of file folders. “For a light week,” he added.

“You’re insane,” Melkor said.

“Probably,” Mairon said.

“You know you don’t have to work while we’re here,” Melkor said. “I mean, you’re testifying at a trial. That’s enough work for a couple of days on its own.”

“Work doesn’t stop because I’m out of town,” Mairon said.

“Offload it,” Melkor said. “That’s why I gave you unilateral hiring power—to make an army of underlings.”

“You gave me unilateral hiring power,” Mairon said, carefully arranging his laptop in the middle of the sea of work on the desk, “because you didn’t want to have to deal with the hiring process.”

“Two birds,” Melkor said, “one stone.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Take a break,” Melkor said.

“I can’t,” Mairon said.

“Sure you can,” Melkor said, pulling on the arm of the swiveling chair so that Mairon was facing him. “I’m your boss, and I say it’s okay.”

“Right now, you’re my boyfriend, and you want me to hang out with you.”

“Yes,” Melkor said, “I do. Is that such a bad thing?”

No,” Mairon said. “It isn’t. And I’d like to, it’s just—”

“You’re busy,” Melkor said. “I know.”

Mairon sighed, looking around at the paperwork on the desk. “I’m not trying to annoy you,” he said. “I just—I’m not you. I can’t leave things sit when I know they need to get done. It makes me itch.”

“Literally cannot relate,” Melkor said, deadpan. Mairon snorted and shook his head. “Seriously, though,” Melkor said, watching Mairon gently swivel himself side to side with his foot. “Are you sure that’s what it is? Just your regular type-A insanity?”

“What else would it be?”

“I don’t know,” Melkor said, not looking at him.

“Yes, you do,” Mairon said, crossing his arms.

“I just—” Melkor sighed, running a hand through the messy fall of his hair. “I’m worried about you, Mai. You’re working so hard, and I—”

“I swear we’ve had this conversation already,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes.

“Then quit making me have it again.” Mairon scowled, but Melkor ignored him. “I feel like you’re trying to...I don’t know. Punish yourself. Make up for something you think you did wrong.”

“And what,” said Mairon, his voice dangerously calm, “do you think I did wrong?”

“Nothing,” Melkor said quickly. “That’s not what I meant. I just—”

“Then what did you mean?”

Melkor looked at the angry set of Mairon’s face and decided to let it go. “Nothing,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice neutral. “Forget it.”

Mairon stared at him for a moment, and then he sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said, a little grudgingly. “I know I’m being a little pissy.”

“You kind of have a right to be,” Melkor said. “I mean, this shit sucks.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, “but still.” He reached for Melkor’s hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing Melkor’s knuckles. “Thanks for putting up with me.”

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “After all the shit you’ve dealt with from me in the last seven years, it’s the absolute least I can do.”

“That’s probably true.”

“Don’t push it,” Melkor said, mock-offended.

“You know what?” Mairon said, sitting forward and stretching. “I could use a break.”

“You want to get dinner?”

“I could eat,” Mairon said.

“Come on,” Melkor said, taking his hand and pulling him up. “Let’s get out of here before you change your mind.”

Thuringwethil sat on the floor of her hotel room, her back to the couch, the floor and coffee table around her littered with papers. There was a legal pad on her lap and a pen in her hand, which she was currently using to pin back her hair. She tapped a finger against her lips, thinking. Then she reached for a paper, plucking it from the detritus and draping it over her knees, scanning it for the information she wanted.

There was a knock at the door, and she frowned, considering the precariousness of her position. She laid the paper and the notepad on the couch behind her and gingerly stood up, careful not to disturb the controlled chaos around her as she made for the door. She glanced out the peephole and jumped, startled by the single dark eye taking up the entire viewing field. She kicked the door, hard, and snorted at the cursing from the other side. Then she slid back the locks and opened the door, grinning in satisfaction at Melkor’s murderous scowl.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” Melkor said, keeping his scowl fixed on her as he passed by.

“Says the jerk with his eyeball pressed up against my door,” she said, closing it and locking it once more.

“Fair enough,” he said, grinning.

“What’s up, Melkor?”

“I just want to see how things are going,” he said, shrugging. “Maybe go over the timeline again.”

“Run that by me again.”

“I said—oh, fuck you.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t resist. Things are fine, by the way.”

“Looks fine,” he said, eyeing the scattered paper dubiously.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve mocking anyone else’s work process, mister ‘the fire marshal has my office number on speed dial’.”

“Please,” he said, waving a hand dismissively. “I haven’t set anything on fire in at least three weeks.”

“A new world record,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Seriously, though,” Melkor said.

“It’s fine, Melkor. Honestly.”

“Okay,” he said, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“You’re antsy,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Why are you antsy?”

“I’m not.” She gave him a look, and he sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Probably because Mairon is.”

“How’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Melkor said, leaning back against the wall with a sigh. “Sometimes he’s fine—I mean, he works like a maniac, and he’s always doing a hundred thousand things, but that’s fine. That’s normal.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“He’s anxious,” Melkor said, “and he’s upset that he’s anxious. He feels like he needs to work harder, or like he’s not working hard enough. He’s restless, and he guilts himself over the shortest breaks. Between that and the fact that he’s not sleeping—”

“Like, at all?”

“Hardly. He has insomnia most nights, and when he does fall asleep, he has nightmares.” He shook his head. “I’m worried about him, Thil.”

“Me too,” she said.

“And every time I try to tell him—”

“He gets all defensive and tells you to fuck off?”

“Pretty much.”

“Huh,” she said, deadpan, “wonder what that’s like?”

“Fuck off, Thil,” he said, though there was no venom in his words. He let his head fall back against the wall with a gentle thud and sighed.

“It makes you feel helpless, doesn’t it?” she said, leaning against the wall next to him. “Like he’s heading for a cliff and just won’t stop, no matter loud or how often you warn him.”

“It really does.”

A sarcastic response readied itself on her tongue, but she bit it back. “It’s going to be okay,” she said instead, looking up at him and noting the worry in his face.

“I hope so, Thil,” he said quietly. “I really, *really* do.”

“Hey,” said Mairon, tucking his feet up under himself on the couch and settling back. “How’s my best friend?”

“Good,” Gothmog said. “Bored as shit without you guys, but—fuck, you meant the dog didn’t you?”

“I mean, yeah, but I’m glad you’re good too.”

“Dickhead.”

“Context clues, my friend.”

“Not helpful when you’re a million miles away.”

“It’s not quite that far.”

“Might as well be,” Gothmog said. “I’ve actually had to do work at work this week.”

“That sucks,” said Mairon.

“Tell me about it. So how’s it going out there?”

“Fine, I guess. I’m not thrilled about being here, but.” He shrugged, though Gothmog couldn’t see it.

“It’s not for long,” Gothmog said.

“It’s long enough.”

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “I bet it is.”

Mairon sighed, laying his face into the palm of his free hand. “God,” he said, voice muffled a little against his skin. “I just want this to be over.”

“It will be,” said Gothmog. “Soon. And in the meantime, try not to think about it.”

“Good one.”

“I’m serious,” Gothmog said. “Get out of your hotel room. Go for a walk. Make Melkor take you to dinner. Anything to get your mind off the trial for a while.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mairon said, sighing again. “Maybe I just need to distract myself.”

“Hang on,” Gothmog said. “Are you actually going to take my advice? Because I legitimately might die of shock.”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

“Sorry, can’t hear you. Too busy dying.”

“Dick.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gothmog said. “Made you laugh, though, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, well,” Mairon said grudgingly. “You’re always good for that.”

“Feel better?”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, forcing some jollity into his voice. “I do. Thanks, Gothmog.”

“Anytime, dude.”

“I’m gonna go now, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Hug the beast for me.”

“Will do.”

“Bye, Gothmog.”

“Bye, Mai.”

Mairon hung up the phone and laid it on the arm of the couch. He looked around the room, listening to the muffled sound of the television coming from the bedroom. For a moment, he looked at closed door, picturing the scene within: Melkor sprawled on the bed, one arm thrown back behind his head, the other holding his phone on his chest, eyes shifting lazily from screen to screen. There was a part of Mairon that wanted to join him, to curl up next to him on the bed and let Melkor hold him, kiss him, tell him it would be okay. But there was another, larger part of Mairon that clamored loudly against this desire, calling him weak and needy, calling him a failure. And so Mairon sighed, and rubbed tiredly at his eyes, and went back to the desk to work.

Melkor woke to an empty bed. It was a familiar experience; sleeping with Mairon carried a solid eighty percent chance of waking up alone, particularly for Melkor, who was a late and heavy sleeper by nature. Still, though he was used to it, he was a little disappointed. If you'd have told him, a year ago, that he would like nothing more than to wake up with Mairon close beside him, content to slip an arm around him and bury his face in crook of Mairon's shoulder, Melkor would have laughed—and yet, he thought, laying a hand on the cool sheets where Mairon had been, here he was.

He sighed and pushed himself up and out of bed. There was noise coming from the living room area of their suite, and he followed it, yawning as he pushed open the door. “Morning,” he said, stopping in the doorway to take in the scene.

Mairon, it seemed, had been up for some time. There were papers scattered everywhere, all over the floor and desk, and Mairon sat sifting through them, a frown on his lips. He looked up as Melkor entered but didn't respond. “Working already?” Melkor said.

“Mmhmm,” Mairon said absently.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No,” said Mairon, picking up a stack of papers and rifling through them.

“Do you want to?”

“Not just yet,” he said. “I want to get a little more done.”

“What are you working on?”

“Simulations,” Mairon said.

“For?” Melkor prompted.

“Silmaril-based projects,” Mairon said. “I'm still trying to figure out if there's any possible way we can still support them if Silmaril is compromised.”

“You know I said you could drop that,” Melkor said, a little annoyed. “Like, a hundred times.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, “but you don’t mean it.”

“Pretty sure I do,” Melkor said.

“Then why do you keep bringing it up?”

“I brought it up once,” Melkor said, “and you apparently took it as a goddamn personal affront.”

“I—“Mairon took a breath, and let it out as a sigh. “Can I just get some work done in peace? Please?”

“Fine,” Melkor said. He walked around the back of the couch and sat down, grabbing the remote and powering on the TV.

“Seriously?” Mairon snapped.

“Fine,” Melkor said, switching off the set and standing up. “I’ll watch in the bedroom.”

“Right,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. “Like I won’t still be able to hear you.”

“What is your problem?” Melkor demanded, beginning to lose his hold on his patience.

“You want to know what my problem is?” said Mairon. He spread his arms wide, as though to indicate everything around him. “This,” he said. “All of this—this bullshit extra work I have to do trying to fix a problem you created.”

“How is this my fault?”

“You found Silmaril,” Mairon snapped. “You didn’t listen to me when I told you I could get it for you. Instead, you hired a moron to steal it for you and left a trail of clues leading straight back to us that I had to clean up on the fly. Then you demanded we switch all our projects over to it, which was literally weeks of work I shouldn’t have had to do.”

“It’s a good program,” Melkor said. “It was better than what we had, and—”

“How the fuck would you know? You don’t know the first goddamn thing about software.”

“Glaurung sold faster than any project we had in the last ten years,” Melkor said.

“And a fat lot of good it did us,” Mairon said, “because, in case you forgot, we don’t have Silmaril anymore. Doriath does—well, presumably, anyway. We don’t actually know where the fuck it is, or who’s seen it, but it doesn’t matter. The coding is compromised. We can’t guarantee security on a vessel with what amounts to open-source coding. But you don’t care about that. You don’t care that you’re asking me to do the impossible. You just—”

“All I said,” said Melkor, trying in vain to temper his anger, “is that we should look into trying to salvage it. Silmaril is the software basis to pretty much all our projects now, and—”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“You didn’t—are you fucking deaf?”

“Well, it’s not like we can change it now.”

“We literally can. I can rip out that coding and rebuild with in-house stuff. But you won’t let me. You won’t let Silmaril go—not even when it gets us investigated and hauled to court and attacked.”

“Will you listen? Jesus. All I said,” Melkor began, voice rising despite his best efforts, but Mairon cut him off.

“What’s it going to take?” Mairon demanded. “Huh? Losing our clients? Our business? I mean, clearly someone trying to kill me wasn’t enough, so—”

“Fuck you,” Melkor said, the fury in his voice putting a premature end to Mairon’s sentence. He stood by the bedroom door, hands balled into fists at his side. For a moment, he and Mairon stared at each other, Mairon’s face hard and unreadable, Melkor’s jaw working silently as he bit back the stream of angry retorts that swirled in his mind.

Finally, Melkor shook his head and turned away, heading for the door. He half-hoped, angry as he was, that Mairon would call him back, but Mairon was stubbornly silent. Melkor opened the door and stepped out into the hall, slamming it shut behind him. He stomped the few steps to Thuringwethil’s room across the hall and pounded on the door with his fist. After a moment, Thuringwethil appeared, looking disgruntled at the disturbance.

“Breakfast,” Melkor growled, tone brooking no argument. “Now.” He turned and headed for the elevator, not waiting for a response.

For once, Thuringwethil made no comment. She simply took her bag from the hook by the door, stepped out into the hall, paused only a moment to lock the door behind her, and followed him.

“Wow,” Thuringwethil said, sitting back in her seat and looking across the table at Melkor. “That’s a hell of a fight.”

“Yeah,” he said. He sighed and laid his head down on the cheap Formica table. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

“You know,” she said thoughtfully, spearing a piece of cantaloupe from his plate, “for once, I think you might be overreacting.”

“That’s a first.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s weirding me out.”

“You and me both, sister.”

“Seriously, though,” she said. “It might not be as bad as you think.”

“Were you listening? Did you hear the shit he said?”

“He’s stressed,” Thuringwethil said. “Like, out the wazoo. And he’s not handling it well.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“It’s a new experience for him, I think. He’s a control freak. He’s used to being able to get a handle on anything, no matter how sudden or weird or out-of-left-field. But he’s having a hard time with this.”

“I don’t blame him,” Melkor said. “I mean, he’s back here, of all places, and he’s looking at having to face the people who tried to kill him. No wonder he’s freaking out.”

“Yeah,” Thuringwethil said. “It’s a whole new, very weird ballgame.”

“And then there’s the Silmaril stuff,” Melkor said, pushing himself up and looking forlornly at his half-eaten breakfast. “Which is basically the opposite of what he needs right now. I shouldn’t even have brought it up, but I just thought—” He broke off, shaking his head.

“Bringing it up was fair,” said Thuringwethil. “We switched over to majority Silmaril-based products last year. If there’s any way to salvage it, we need to know. And if there’s not, we need to be coming up with a plan to support the merchandise that’s still using it.”

“I know that,” Melkor said, “but I don’t think Mairon needs to be the one doing all of it.”

“Neither do I.”

“So how do we stop him?”

“We don’t,” she said.

“But—”

“I don’t think this is something we can tell him,” she said. “I don’t think it’s something we can fix. I think this is a learn-it-on-your-own kind of thing.”

“I think, in this context, learning on your own means working ‘til your exhausted and having some kind of breakdown.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But you know Mairon. He’s stubborn and strong-willed, and I sometimes I think he legitimately believes that he can do anything he puts his mind to. I think this whole mess has really shaken him, and I don’t think he wants to admit it. So he keeps working, pushing himself harder than ever, like he thinks he can prove he’s alright.”

“But he’s not alright.”

“No, he’s not. But he won’t admit it.”

“No,” Melkor said. “He won’t. He keeps saying he’s fine.”

“I think we just have to let him do this,” Thuringwethil said. “Let him go until he can’t go anymore. That’s the only way he’ll learn.”

“He’s going to hurt himself,” Melkor said.

“Some lessons have to be learned the hard way,” she said. “You ought to know.”

“Yeah, but when I’m being a dumbass, you at least still try to stop me. Shouldn’t you do the same for him?”

“How many times have you told him? How many times have you asked him to go home, to eat, to take a nap, to take a break?”

“I guess,” he said grudgingly.

“I’m not asking you to throw him to wolves,” she said, her tone gentling. “I’m just saying that you need to wait. There’s going to come a time, like it or not, where he reaches a breaking point, and when he does, he’s going to need you to be there for him.”

“Better hope it doesn’t come anytime soon,” he said dejectedly, crossing his arms on the table and resting his chin atop them. “He doesn’t want anything to do with me right now.”

“Give him some time,” she said, “and some space. I think he’ll come around sooner than you think.”

“Space, huh?” he said. “Kind of hard since we’re sharing a room. Unless you want to let me share yours.”

“Mairon already called dibs,” she said.

“Of course he did,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

They were silent a moment, Melkor pushing the remnants of bacon and eggs around his plate, not looking at her. “You okay?” she asked gently.

“Yeah,” he said, sighing. “I just—shit, Thil. I’m like, *way* out of my element here, and I —“

“Hey,” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “Don’t be too down on yourself. We’re in a shitty situation here, and you’re handling it—well, to be honest with you, way better than I’d have expected you to. I mean, not to be a dick or anything, but a year ago, I’d have bet money that you would’ve already bailed.”

“I want to be mad about that statement,” he said, “but it’s probably true.”

“It’s going to be okay,” she said.

“But what if it’s not?” he demanded, looking up at her at last. “What if I can’t do this, Thil? What if I fuck it up?”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I believe it, though.”

“Why? I mean, what do I tell him? What can I possibly say?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, shaking her head. “Mairon doesn’t need you to be a therapist or a, fuck, a Hallmark card. He just needs you to be there for him. If you can do that, everything else will work itself out.”

“How do you know?” he demanded.

“Because,” she said quietly, “I’ve been where Mairon is. Or, okay, no one tried to murder me or anything, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I remember.”

“You were there for me,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. “When I needed you, you were there. And it didn’t matter that you made a shit-ton of terrible jokes and asked me to rank Patrick Swayze movies until I wanted to strangle you. You were there, and you made me laugh, and you took my mind off all the shit that was happening.”

“Shit, Thil,” he said, looking away. “Don’t get all soft on me.”

“My point is, if you can do it for me, you can do it for Mai. I know you can. I mean, you love that boy.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I do.” He sighed and sat back against the cushion of the booth. “Thanks, Thil.”

“Anytime.”

“We picked a really shitty time to do this,” he said, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. “Trial’s in two days.”

“He’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ll make sure he is. That’s why you pay me.”

“Remind me to give you a raise.”

“You know I will.”

“I’m going to regret that one, aren’t I?”

“You most certainly will,” she said, grinning.

“Wonderful,” he said, grimacing. He picked up the check from the edge of the table, barely glancing at it before sliding out of the booth and stretching. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here before you try to weasel any more money out of me.”

The day of the trial came far too quickly, and the three of them walked in bright, sweltering sunlight down the long sidewalk to the courthouse. Melkor could feel himself beginning to sweat, despite the fact that he was the only one of them in short sleeves. He looked at the neat, tidy jackets Mairon and Thuringwethil wore, and wondered vaguely how they managed to look so cool and collected. His eyes lingered a moment too long on Mairon, and he forced himself to look away. Don’t push it, he told himself sternly. Not today.

They walked up the stairs and into the lobby, their footsteps echoing in the hush. Thuringwethil had been here before, and she lead them through the quiet crowds to the room they had been assigned. She stopped short at the door, turning back to look at them. “Ready?” she asked, looking at Mairon.

Mairon took a deep breath, steeling himself. Unthinking, Melkor put a hand on Mairon’s shoulder. The hint of a frown stole over Mairon’s lips, and he shrugged out of Melkor’s grasp. “Let’s go,” he said, pushing past Thuringwethil and heading inside.

Melkor had been through his fair share of court proceedings over the years—more than his share, he thought sheepishly. He had learned, through experience, that they were largely boring, tedious things, full of excessively detailed questions and careful, well-rehearsed answers. This one was no exception. Lawyers asked questions, and Mairon gave answers. Through it all, despite everything Melkor knew must be eating away at him, Mairon was cool and collected. He

never wavered, never once faltered, even when pressed. He was calm and resolute and professional, and Melkor couldn't help but feel a swell of pride, watching him on the stand.

"You did great," Thuringwethil told him later, the three of them piling into their rental car, Melkor at the wheel. "Absolutely perfect. It couldn't have gone better."

"Yeah, seriously," Melkor said, glancing at him in the rearview. "You were great."

"Thanks, Thil," said Mairon, pointedly ignoring Melkor.

Melkor couldn't quite bring himself to feel more than mild annoyance. It was over, the testimony was done, and it seemed impossible that they should get anything but the guilty verdict they wanted. Things were finally looking up again. About time, Melkor thought, navigating out of the parking garage and starting back toward the hotel. Now, if I can just figure out how to get Mairon to talk to me...

But Mairon wouldn't budge. It had been two days, and despite Melkor's best efforts at placating and cajoling him, Mairon hadn't said a word.

"Why is he the only one who gets to be mad?" Melkor had demanded that morning, standing in the hall with Thuringwethil while Mairon was in the shower. "I mean, okay. I was kind of a dick, but so was he."

"It's the near-death trump card," she had said matter-of-factly. "Deal with it."

"I almost died a couple months ago too, in case you forgot."

"Yeah, but that one was entirely your fault, so you don't get as much leeway."

"Your rules are bullshit," Melkor had said petulantly.

"Maybe," she had said, "but on the other hand, you're not going to get past this if both of you keep stubbornly being mad. I know you're in unfamiliar territory here, being the one who actually has to be the adult and be reasonable, but suck it up. It's your turn."

Melkor had grumbled some more, for the principle of it rather than any real anger, and then he had dropped it. She was right, much as he hated to admit it, and so he had spent the whole day looking for opportunities to worm his way back into Mairon's good graces. It was not an easy task; he knew from experience. Still, he felt Mairon was being exceptionally belligerent. Melkor had tried to strike up a conversation all day, and Mairon hadn't said a single word in return.

In the end, he had decided to give up for the day. It had been a long day, and he was tired. He went to bed, turning over ideas in his head until he fell asleep, arm thrown forlornly across the spot where Mairon should have been.

Melkor woke with a start, sitting half-up in bed and looking blearily at the clock on the bedside table. It was three in the morning, and he groaned, vaguely aware that a noise had awoken him. He listened for a moment, yawning, and heard the sound of footsteps coming from the living room, punctuated by a rustling sound he couldn't place and a thudding of wood on wood. Frowning, he pushed himself up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, standing up and stretching. He grabbed his phone, slid it into his pocket, and headed for the bedroom door.

It was dark in the living room. The only source of light was a tiny beam from a cellphone flashlight, sweeping erratically over the desk and floor. Melkor reached over and switched on the lights, frowning as Mairon came into view. "What are you doing?" Melkor asked,

frowning. He stood in the doorway, arms crossed, watching Mairon rifle through the desk.

“Looking for something,” Mairon said, not looking at him.

“It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Yeah, I know.” He pulled open the top drawer of the desk, tossing the contents onto the floor and sitting down heavily amidst them. He began to pick through the papers, stacking them on his lap as he did.

Melkor watched him for a moment, silent. Mairon’s hands moved almost erratically, snatching papers from the ground and piling them haphazardly on his legs. He was shaking a little, and Melkor frowned, worried. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” he asked, trying to shift Mairon’s focus away from mess before him.

“Shouldn’t you?” Mairon shot back, still working.

“I was,” Melkor said, unable to keep a hint of accusation from his voice.

“Yeah, well,” said Mairon, scowling. “So was I, until I wasn’t.” He reached for a page to his left, and the papers went sliding off his lap, falling to the floor in a heap. Mairon let out a sigh of disgust and sat back, putting his face in his hands.

“Mai,” said Melkor gently, unable to help himself. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do it,” Mairon whispered. “I can’t.”

“What can’t you do?”

“This,” Mairon said, sweeping an arm wide as though to encompass everything at once. “The programming, salvaging the Silmaril projects—any of it. I’ve tried everything, and I just—I can’t.”

“Then don’t,” Melkor said, crossing the distance between them and sinking to his knees.

“But the projects,” Mairon said, looking up at him forlornly, frustration and exhaustion written in the lines of his face. “Everything we have in production—”

“Fuck it,” Melkor said. “Fuck all of it. It’s not worth it. If you say it can’t be done, then I believe you. I should’ve believed you from the beginning. I shouldn’t have asked you to try and fix it. I’m sorry.”

Mairon looked at Melkor for another moment, and then he sighed, rubbing his palms roughly up and down his face. “No,” Mairon said, running a hand through the loose fall of his hair. “You were right. So much of our product is invested in Silmaril. We needed to know if there was any chance of salvaging it.”

“Still,” Melkor said, shrugging. “I shouldn’t have pushed it. If it won’t work, then it won’t work. We’ll figure a way around it. We always do.”

Mairon looked down at the ground, picking at a half-dislodged staple in the papers nearest him. “I’m sorry I was such an asshole,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” Melkor said.

“I said a lot of stuff,” Mairon said, shaking his head. Melkor could see the color rising in

Mairon's face, bleeding across his cheeks.

"So did I," Melkor said.

"I didn't mean it."

"I know." He reached out and laid his hand over Mairon's, brushing his thumb over Mairon's knuckles. "You look exhausted," Melkor said.

"I *am* exhausted," Mairon said.

"You want to go to bed?" Mairon nodded. "Come on," Melkor said, pushing himself up. He held out a hand to Mairon, who took it and let Melkor pull him up. Mairon swayed where he stood, momentarily lightheaded from the change in position. Melkor steadied him, laying his hand gently on Mairon's shoulder. Mairon leaned into him, winding his arms loosely around Melkor's waist and laying his cheek to Melkor's chest.

"You okay?" Melkor said, gently lifting Mairon's chin to see his face.

"I am now," Mairon said, smiling.

Melkor leaned down and kissed him, holding Mairon's face in his hands, a thrill of happiness rushing through him as Mairon leaned into him, kissing him back.

"Come on," Melkor said, putting an arm around Mairon's shoulders and leading him toward the door. "Let's go to bed."

Chapter End Notes

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We Can Work It Out

Chapter Summary

The boys have a good talk about how things have been. The judge hands down the verdict in the fraud case, and the three of them have a little run-in with the opposition.

Chapter Notes

We're picking up right where we left off, tbh.

Potential warning for Mairon talking about feeling as though he should've died back at Tol-in-Gaurhoth.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was barely seven o'clock when Melkor woke, roused by the light coming through a gap in the curtains. He yawned and shifted a little, feeling something warm and heavy against him. He looked down to find Mairon lying flush against him, his head nestled on Melkor's shoulder, one hand resting lightly on Melkor's chest. Mairon looked up as Melkor stirred, and he smiled a familiar, contented, half-awake smile that sent a flood of warm affection through Melkor's chest.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" Mairon asked, sliding his hand across Melkor's chest and up the curve of his neck, his thumb gently stroking Melkor's cheek.

Melkor shook his head. "What time is it?" he asked, shifting onto his side, pressing a kiss to Mairon's cheek.

"Seven," Mairon said, his fingers smoothing hair away from Melkor's face.

"Too early," Melkor complained, yawning again.

"Go back to sleep," Mairon said, letting his hand fall back to Melkor's chest.

Melkor tucked the fingers of his free hand under Mairon's chin, lifting Mairon's face so he could kiss him, relishing the way Mairon snuggled closer, the way his lips parted to let Melkor kiss him deeply. "I missed you," Mairon said, murmuring the words warm and soft against Melkor's lips. Melkor kissed him again, one hand sliding slowly down Mairon's bare torso and around to the small of his back, wandering lower to pull Mairon closer.

"I take it you missed me too," Mairon said, as Melkor turned away and buried his face against Mairon's neck, breathing deeply and heaving a contented sigh.

"What gave it away?" said Melkor, pressing slow, gentle kisses to the soft skin of Mairon's neck.

Mairon let his cheek rest against Melkor's forehead, running his fingers through

Melkor's hair. Melkor lay there a moment, his head cradled in the crook of Mairon's shoulder, his hand splayed over Mairon's heart, feeling the steady pulse of it against his palm.

"God, I love you being here when I wake up," Melkor said, wrapping his arms around Mairon.

Mairon kissed his forehead, turned his cheek to rest it there again. "I'm sorry about the other day," he said quietly.

"Forget it," Melkor said.

"No," Mairon said, pushing himself up on his elbow so he could see Melkor's face. "I said a lot of really shitty things, and I just—"

"We had a shitty fight," Melkor said, stroking Mairon's cheek gently. "It happens."

"It was so stupid, though," Mairon said, shaking his head. "I mean, I wasn't even mad at you. I was just picking a fight."

"Mairon," said Melkor, pushing himself up so he could look Mairon in the eye. "Do you really think you need to tell me about misplaced anger? I mean, *me*? Really?"

Mairon snorted. "Don't make me laugh," he said. "I'm trying to apologize."

"And I'm trying to tell you it's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I mean, if we're going to start holding grudges over shitty things we've said when we're pissed, then it's probably your turn for like, at least six months."

"You're exaggerating."

"You're being way too forgiving." Mairon's lips twitched, not quite a frown, but a subtle sign of annoyance that Melkor knew meant he wasn't entirely satisfied. Melkor leaned forward and kissed him again, gently, letting his lips linger against Mairon's. "It's okay," he murmured, cupping Mairon's face with one hand.

Mairon kissed him back, and then he let himself fall back against the pillows. Melkor followed him, and Mairon snuggled close to him, his face tucked into the crook of Melkor's neck. They lay there for a moment, Melkor lazily running his fingers through Mairon's hair, silent and content. Then Melkor said, "Hey, Mai?"

"Yeah?" said Mairon, eyes closed, feeling the beat of Melkor's heart with the palm of his hand.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Go for it," said Mairon.

For a moment, Melkor was silent, turning over his thoughts and trying to piece together what he wanted to say. "Are you okay?" he asked at length, unsure it was what he really wanted to ask.

Mairon opened his eyes and pushed himself up, looking at Melkor incredulously. "I'm lying in bed," he said, an edge of disbelief in his voice, "with a gorgeous half-naked man, I have

nowhere else to be today, and you want to know if I'm okay?"

"Gorgeous, huh?" said Melkor, grinning, unable to resist.

"Don't act surprised, you unrepentant narcissist."

"Me knowing it," said Melkor, "and you saying it are two different things."

"You're insufferable," Mairon said, kissing him.

"Not the vibe I'm getting from you," Melkor said.

Mairon's hands were on Melkor's chest, at his throat, in his hair, skating low across the point of his hip, and Melkor wanted to forget that he had said anything, let Mairon kiss him, wanted to pin him down and kiss him back. He couldn't, though—not with the question still nagging at the back of his mind, refusing to be ignored. With an effort, he pushed himself up onto his elbow and looked at Mairon, who shot back a look of confusion. "I didn't mean right now, this minute," Melkor said, by way of explanation.

"Jesus," Mairon said, a little reproachfully. "That's a switch."

"I know," Melkor said, aiming for apologetic.

"Am I okay," Mairon repeated, as though considering the question. "You mean, like, in general?"

"Yeah," said Melkor, though it still didn't seem quite right. "I think so. Or—I don't know."

"What brought this up?" Mairon asked, trying to follow Melkor's train of thought.

"Something you said the other day," said Melkor. "I've been thinking about it, and—"

"I said a lot of stuff the other day," Mairon said. "I didn't mean it."

"I know," Melkor said, "but it's not the first time you've said it, and—"

"What did I say?"

"That you had almost died," Melkor said carefully, watching Mairon's face, "and that it wasn't good enough."

"Oh," said Mairon quietly. He pushed himself up to sit cross-legged on the bed, his hands absently gathering his hair and tying it into a messy knot on top of his head.

"You've said it before," Melkor said, watching him. "In the hospital, the day you woke up, and a couple times since, and I just—" He trailed off, frowning, trying to gather his thoughts.

"You just what?" Mairon prompted, sounding tired.

"Sometimes I think you wish you had died," Melkor said, an unfamiliar timidity in his voice that made Mairon look up at him, "and honestly, Mai, it scares the hell out of me."

For a moment, Mairon was silent, looking down at his hands moving restlessly in his lap. "It's not that I wish I had died," Mairon said at last, his voice quiet, avoiding Melkor's gaze. "I didn't want to die—I still don't. It's just—" He frowned, absently pulling a strand of hair from

the knot on his head and twirling it around his index finger. “When I woke up in the hospital,” he said, changing tack, “I was... disappointed, I guess.”

“Disappointed?”

“Or maybe guilty is a better word.”

“Why?”

“Because when I woke up, I knew that I had failed. I knew those assholes had beaten me, and if they had gotten past me, then I was pretty sure they had managed to get into Angband.” He shook his head, frowning. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and forlorn. “I tried so hard to stop them, and I couldn’t do it.”

“You didn’t fail,” Melkor said, slipping his fingers under Mairon’s free hand, holding it tightly.

“I did, though,” Mairon said. “They infiltrated Tol-in-Gaurhoth. They got into our systems. They got the info they needed to break into Angband and steal Silmaril right out from under us. And they did it on my watch.”

“How could you possibly have known?” Melkor asked. “What else could you have done?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said bitterly. “But I should have.”

“How?” Melkor asked again. “I mean, last time I checked, you had extensive background checks done on every one of the Tol-in-Gaurhoth employees. You personally supervised every project they were assigned to.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Mairon said. “They lied to me, and I didn’t see it.”

“But you did,” Melkor insisted. “You knew those two idiots were up to something. You went digging, and you found out who they really were. It’s the only reason we’re here now, fighting back. If not for you, we wouldn’t have had a fucking clue who had robbed us. We’d be shit out of luck.”

“I guess,” Mairon said, though he didn’t sound convinced.

“Let’s say,” said Melkor gently, “that you had died.” He swallowed, pushing away the bitter taste that accompanied the thought and steeling himself to go on. “How would that have helped? What would it have accomplished?”

“I don’t know,” said Mairon, his voice quiet. He avoided Melkor’s gaze, looking instead at his hand, fingers intertwined with Melkor’s, watching the motion of Melkor’s thumb brushing gently over his knuckles. “I guess I’d just know I had done everything I could.”

“You’d be dead,” Melkor said, a little annoyed. “You wouldn’t know jack shit.”

Mairon looked up at last, his eyes meeting Melkor’s. For a moment, there was silence between them, and Melkor felt a growing apprehension that he had said something terribly wrong. Then Mairon smiled, shook his head, and began to laugh, burying his face in his hands. All at once, the tension between them dissipated, and Melkor grinned, feeling relieved.

“God, that was ridiculous,” Mairon said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, well,” said Melkor, shrugging. “This whole conversation is a little ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” said Mairon, ducking his head, embarrassed. “I guess it is.”

“Hey,” Melkor said, reaching out and grabbing Mairon’s hand again. “Come here.” He leaned back against the headboard, and Mairon pushed himself back to sit between Melkor’s legs, his back to Melkor’s chest, his head resting on Melkor’s shoulder. Melkor wrapped one arm around Mairon, holding him close, and turned his head to kiss Mairon’s temple. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like you’re being ridiculous,” he said, resting his cheek against the side of Mairon’s head.

“No, I know,” Mairon said, twining his fingers with Melkor’s.

“I just think it’s unfair to blame yourself for what happened,” Melkor said.

“Maybe,” Mairon conceded. He shifted slightly, smiling as Melkor held him closer, his eyes fluttering shut contentedly.

“Hey, Mai?” Melkor said, his words spoken softly in Mairon’s ear.

“Hmm?” Mairon murmured, turning his head slightly toward Melkor.

“I just wanted you to know,” Melkor said, “that if I said anything, or made it seem like I blamed you—”

“Honey,” Mairon said, pushing himself up and out of Melkor’s grasp, turning to face him. “No.”

“Because I don’t,” Melkor said, looking intently at Mairon. “At all.”

“I know,” Mairon said, cupping Melkor’s face in his hands, thumbs stroking gently over Melkor’s cheeks.

“I know I’ve been focused on Silmaril,” Melkor said. “I know I can be a dick when it comes to work stuff—I’m demanding, I’m selfish, I push people too hard. But I meant what I said yesterday, Mai. Whatever Silmaril is worth to us, it’s not worth shit compared to you. I—”

Mairon kissed him, and Melkor let himself be silenced, relishing the gentle press of Mairon’s lips, the feel of Mairon’s hands on his bare skin. “Don’t distract me,” he murmured, as Mairon pulled back, pressing his forehead to Melkor’s. “I’m trying to apologize.”

“You don’t need to,” Mairon said.

“Yeah, I do,” Melkor said. “I know you’ve been dealing with a lot lately, and I know I don’t always handle it well. I don’t always know the right thing to say or the right thing to do. Most of the time, I get it wrong.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re just being nice.”

Mairon snorted. “When have you ever known me to be nice?”

“Is this a trick question?”

Mairon smiled and shook his head. “Do you know why I was over here at three a.m.?”

he asked, settling himself cross-legged in front of Melkor.

“Because you were looking for something?”

“Well, yes,” Mairon said. “But do you know why I was up at three a.m. in the first place?”

“Why?”

“I had a nightmare.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I woke up terrified and alone, and do you know what I wanted?” Melkor shook his head. “You. I wanted you to be beside me, to have woken up when I did. I wanted you to hold me and kiss my forehead and tell me it was going to be okay.”

Melkor took Mairon’s hand in his, affection welling up in his chest. “Really?”

“Yes, really. When you say it, I believe it—even when my day has been shitty, and I feel like things are never going to get back to normal. You tell me it’ll be okay, and I know that it’s true.”

Melkor looked at Mairon, shaking his head, a grin of happy incredulity on his face. “What did I do to deserve you?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Mairon said, mock-serious. “It must’ve been pretty bad, though.”

“Come here,” Melkor said, pulling him close and kissing him. Mairon levered himself up to straddle Melkor’s waist, sliding one hand up Melkor’s chest and around to the back of his neck, pulling him closer, kissing him deeply, hungrily. The other went to Melkor’s waist, fingers dipping beneath the waistband of Melkor’s shorts.

Melkor’s phone rang, loud and shrill, making Mairon jump. “Ignore it,” Melkor said, as Mairon leaned over to look at the screen.

“It’s Thil,” Mairon said.

“I’ll call her back.”

Mairon rolled his eyes and reached for the phone, tapping the screen to accept the call and handing it to Melkor. Melkor bit back a groan of frustration and took the phone. “Yeah,” he said, more gruffly than perhaps he had intended.

“Melkor,” said Thuringwethil, her tone harried and urgent. “I can’t find Mairon.”

“You what?” Melkor said, distracted, running a hand appreciatively over the curve of Mairon’s ass.

“Mairon,” she said, annoyed. “He was gone when I woke up, and I tried to call him, but he left his phone here, and—”

“I’m here, Thil,” Mairon said, taking the phone from Melkor. “I’m sorry.”

Thuringwethil’s sigh of relief was a rush of static in Mairon’s ear. “Jesus,” she said reproachfully. “You scared me.”

"I'm sorry, Thil. I didn't mean to stay over here last night."

"I take it you two worked things out."

"Yeah," Mairon said. "I think so."

"Good," she said, sounding satisfied. "Do you guys want to get breakfast?"

Mairon looked at Melkor, who was shaking his head vehemently. "Can you give me an hour? I got zero sleep last night."

"Yeah, of course. Sorry if I woke you."

"It's cool. Sorry I scared you."

"It's alright. As long as you're okay."

"I'm great."

"Cool. Call me when you're ready?"

"Will do. See you in a bit, Thil."

Mairon ended the call and tossed the phone onto the nightstand. "Now," he said, ducking his head to kiss Melkor just once, teasingly, on the lips. "Where were we?"

"I'll show you," Melkor said, pulling him down.

The verdict, when it came, was as they had expected, and yet Melkor still found himself in a celebratory mood. They had won this particular battle, and though the war was ongoing—indeed, had likely only just begun—this small victory gave him hope. "You two," he declared, throwing an arm around each of them, "are amazing. You know that?"

"Yes," said Thuringwethil, shrugging off his arm, "but it's always nice to be told."

"You're amazing," he said, grinning.

"Might want to save your excitement," she said. "We've got a long way to go if we want to get even."

"Fuck getting even," Melkor said. "We're going to destroy these assholes."

"Ideally," she said. "But let's not talk about it just now."

"Why not?"

"Because strategy is something you talk about behind closed doors."

"Fair enough," Melkor said. He looked over at Mairon, walking beside him in silence. "You're quiet," he said.

"I'm just glad it's over," Mairon said.

Melkor pulled him closer, giving him a quick one-armed hug. "It's over," Melkor said, aiming for reassuring. "We just have to wait for sentencing."

“There’s really no need for the two of you to wait,” Thuringwethil said. “It’s not like they need your input or anything.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said. “You two are in the clear.”

“I don’t want to leave you here alone,” Mairon said.

She waved her hand dismissively. “It’s only a couple days. And besides, I’m sure you’re dying to get out of here.”

“You can say that again.”

“I can get us a flight for tomorrow,” Melkor said.

“Yes, please,” Mairon said, feeling a wave of relief at the idea.

“Cool,” Melkor said. “I’ll do it when we get back to the hotel.”

“You guys want to do dinner?” Thuringwethil asked, fishing in her bag for the keys to their rental car. They were rounding the corner to the parking garage, which was already beginning to empty for the day.

“Sure,” Melkor said. “I saw this place on the way here that—oh, shit.”

The three of them stopped, halfway up the sidewalk to the entrance of the parking garage, staring at the man stopped three feet in front of them.

“Wonderful,” said Fingon, rolling his eyes. “As if a week in court wasn’t bad enough.”

“Hey, pal,” said Melkor, grinning, unable to resist. “On your own tonight? Where’s your—oh, right. Your buddies are on their way to jail.”

“For now,” Fingon said, endeavoring to appear unruffled.

“For a good while, I bet,” Melkor said. “They’re felons now, you know.”

“You ought to know what that’s like.”

“Nope,” Melor said. “I pled down.”

“Of course you did.”

“He had a good lawyer,” said Thuringwethil, earning an appreciative grin from Melkor.

“Still do,” Melkor said. “Unlike your friends,” Melkor said, turning back to Fingon. “Or, wait. Cousins? Something like that.”

“Hard to tell,” Mairon said. “It’s so inbred over at Formenos.”

“Nice to see you out and about,” Fingon said, mock-cheerfully. “Heard you had a nasty slash to the throat there a couple weeks ago.”

“Hear about it from your cousin and his delinquent friends?”

“I thought it was common knowledge,” Fingon said, shrugging.

“It probably is,” Mairon said. “If you’re the assholes who did it, anyway.”

“Wouldn’t know who that would be,” said Fingon, his face carefully neutral. “Though if you ask me,” he continued, looking down to brush an imaginary speck of dust from his immaculate suit jacket, “whoever did it should’ve done us all a favor and finished the job.”

Mairon felt Melkor tense, and he threw out his arm, preempting any sudden forward motion by Melkor. With his attention on Melkor, Mairon didn’t notice Thuringwethil moving until it was too late. She had crossed the three feet separating her from Fingon by the time Mairon turned to look at her, and before he could do anything else, her hand was flying up, fingers curled, her fist connecting hard with Fingon’s jaw. He staggered back, caught off-guard, hand going to his face.

“Fuck,” Fingon said, dropping his briefcase, wincing as he worked his jaw open and closed. “That hurt.”

“Say anything like that again,” Thuringwethil said, her voice eerily calm, “and I’ll knock your goddamn teeth out of your head.”

“Careful,” said Fingon, bending to retrieve his briefcase, his eyes on Thuringwethil, “or you’ll be adding criminal intimidation to the assault charges.”

“You need witnesses if you want to make those charges stick,” said Thuringwethil coolly.

Fingon looked at Mairon, who shrugged, and then at Melkor, who flipped him off. He turned back to Thuringwethil, the angry downward twitch of his lips the only sign of his internal fuming. “You people are trash,” he said. “Absolute fucking garbage. The only reason you’re where you are, is because you lie and cheat and steal from people smarter than you.”

“Oh, please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “If they were smart, they would’ve had better security.”

“Stop talking,” Thuringwethil said.

“It’s only a matter of time,” Fingon said, nodding at Melkor, his eyes still on Thuringwethil. “With an idiot like that at the helm, you’re bound to crash and burn before too long. And when you do—”

“Speaking of helms,” Melkor said, ignoring Thuringwethil, “who’s at yours these days? You know, since your old man—”

Fingon lunged forward, but Thuringwethil intercepted him, stepping between him and Melkor, hands outstretched. Mairon saw Melkor shift forward and grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

“Everyone shut up,” Thuringwethil said, “and don’t move.” She looked from Fingon, who was breathing heavily, to Melkor, who made an ostentatious show of cracking his knuckles.

“It’s not worth it,” Mairon said quietly, his arm linked through Melkor’s.

“You’re right,” Fingon said, stepping back and shaking his head. “You aren’t worth it.” He raised a hand, straightened his collar and his tie. Then he turned on his heel and walked past them, up the sidewalk to the parking garage.

They watched him go, none of them moving. No one said a word. Finally, when Fingon had disappeared, Mairon sighed, letting out the breath he had been holding, tension finally beginning to drain from him. “Jesus,” he said, shaking his head. “Why does everything always have to be an ordeal?”

“If you find out,” Melkor said, “let me know.”

“Oh, believe me,” Mairon said. “I know.”

“It’s not my fault,” Melkor said. “This shit just seems to find me.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “You’re a magnet for drama, alright.”

“Didn’t stop you from joining up, did it?”

“Yeah, but—”

“We’re going to end them,” Thuringwethil said, her voice quiet. Still, Melkor and Mairon fell silent, looking at her.

“What are you talking about, Thil?” Melkor said.

“Formenos,” Thuringwethil said, still staring at the spot where she had last seen FIngon. “Those cocky, trust-fund shits have been a pain in my ass long enough. We’re going to fucking destroy them, if it’s the last goddamn thing I ever do.”

There was a beat of silence between them, and then Melkor grinned, stepping forward to throw his arm around Thuringwethil’s shoulders. “That’s my girl,” he said.

“Get off me,” Thuringwethil said, shrugging out of his grasp. She straightened her jacket and started into the garage, both men following in her wake.

“God, I’m glad you’re my lawyer,” Melkor said, still grinning, putting his arm around Mairon instead.

“You better be,” Thuringwethil said.

“Good thing I decided to hit on you ten years ago in a shitty bar.”

“Good thing you’re not as big of an asshole as I thought you would be.”

“Careful, Thil,” he said. “That was almost nice.”

“Don’t push your luck,” she said, leading them to the car.

“God, I missed you guys,” Gothmog said, grinning widely and putting his arms on the back of the booth.

“We heard you the first hundred times,” Thuringwethil said. Still, she leaned against him for a moment, gently acknowledging his contentment.

“Yeah, well,” Gothmog said, laying his cheek to the top of her head. “It’s boring as shit around here without you.”

“Me, specifically,” Melkor said.

“Shut up,” Thuringwethil said.

“Seriously,” Gothmog said, sitting up, putting both hands around his half-empty pint glass. “It was a long-ass week. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Glad to be back,” Mairon said.

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “You weren’t the only one having a long-ass week.”

“Hey,” Gothmog said, shrugging. “At least it’s over, right?”

“Not only is it over, but we won.”

“Even better.”

“We won for now,” Thuringwethil pointed out. “The real fight is still on its way.”

“We’ll deal with that when we get to it,” Melkor.

“We’ll start dealing with it way earlier than that,” Mairon said.

“Speaking of which,” Thuringwethil said.

“We’ve been out for an hour,” Melkor said, “and you’re already going to talk about work?”

“No one’s forcing you to participate.”

“You remember you said that,” Melkor said, grinning. He slid out of the booth and gestured to Gothmog. “Come on,” he said, stepping backwards into the crowd. “I bet you twenty bucks I can still beat your ass at pool.”

“You’re on,” Gothmog said, following him.

“So,” Thuringwethil said.

“So,” said Mairon.

“I meant what I said yesterday,” she said, fingers idly spinning the stem of her empty wine glass. “I want Formenos gone—obliterated. I’m done with these assholes.”

“You and me both, Thil.”

“So how do we make it happen?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said, grinning in way that, had it been directed at her, would have been incredibly disconcerting. “I’ve got a few ideas.”

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Changes

Chapter Summary

Mairon and Thuringwethil are scheming about how best to exact their revenge on the Finwions. Meanwhile, Melkor's doing some scheming of his own. It's not nearly as bad as it sounds.

Chapter Notes

Wow, sorry it's been about a hundred years since I updated. Life got crazy there for a while. Here's hoping I'll do better next time around. And thanks, as always, for sticking around. It means the world to me <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

FUTURE OF FORMENOS SUBSIDIARY IN LIMBO

A year ago, Nargothrond, LLC was one of the tech industry's emerging leaders in ethics. Today, the future of the company is anybody's guess.

In an ironic twist, the startup's founder, Finrod 'Felagund' Finwion was found guilty last week of fraud after falsifying federal documents in an attempt to infiltrate Tol-in-Gaurhoth, a recent startup acquired by tech giant (and Nargothrond parent company Formenos' rival) Angband Enterprises. Mr. Finwion and his accomplice, Beren Erchamion, a one-time security employee of Doriath, Inc., have maintained their innocence throughout the proceedings. In the face of overwhelming evidence, however, both were found guilty of multiple charges and are awaiting sentencing. Doriath could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for Formenos said only that he was "disappointed in the actions of Mr. Finwion", adding that Finwion "acted alone and without the knowledge of Formenos counterparts of supervisory personnel".

"I assume this is your handiwork," Thuringwethil said, tossing a newspaper onto the arm of the couch in Melkor's office.

Mairon glanced at the article. "Looks like the handiwork of one Imra Monsith," he said.

"Your anagrams are showing, dipshit."

"Don't misquote *Silence of the Lambs* at me."

"Especially since he actually *is* a doctor," Melkor said. "Missed opportunity, Thil."

"Bad anagrams don't deserve an honorific," Thuringwethil said.

"Good anagrams do?" Mairon asked.

“Be a little sneakier,” Thuringwethil said. “Please. For the love of God.”

“Relax,” Mairon said. “Those idiots at Formenos aren’t smart enough to make that connection.”

“Don’t underestimate them,” Thuringwethil warned.

“Yeah,” said Gothmog. “If movies have taught me anything, it’s that underestimating your enemies is always bad news.”

“He’s not underestimating them,” Melkor said, scanning his computer screen idly. “He’s taunting them.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Thuringwethil said.

“Why not?” Melkor asked, still not looking at her.

She scowled at him and then turned back to Mairon. “Is that necessary?” she asked him, crossing her arms. “You just destroyed them in court last week.”

“A hundred percent necessary,” Mairon said. “Articles like that are a morale-booster.”

“For who?”

“Me, for starters.”

“Just don’t get cocky,” Thuringwethil said. “Last week was only the tip of the iceberg. We have a long way to go if we want to take down Formenos.”

“Give him a break, Thil,” Melkor said. “Let him celebrate small victories. God knows we needed some.”

“We just had a victory,” she said. “A real one, in court.”

“Is there some kind of moratorium on victories around here?”

“Got your word of the day calendar out?”

“Fuck off, Thil,” Melkor said good-naturedly. “And give me a little credit. I’m not as big an idiot as you make me out to be.”

“Depends on the day,” she said.

“Fair enough,” said Melkor.

“What are you doing, anyway?” she asked, coming around the front of the desk to peer over his shoulder.

“Reading comments on the *Times* article,” Melkor said, still scrolling.

“How do they look?” Mairon asked.

“You haven’t looked?” Mairon shook his head. “Why not?”

“I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Jinx what?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said. “Public reaction, I guess.”

“You’re the last one I would’ve suspected of superstition,” Thuringwethil said.

“Yeah, well,” Mairon said, shrugging. “We all have our vices.”

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “If that’s the worst vice you’ve got—”

“It’s not,” Mairon said. “And you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said. “I’ve still got you beat.”

“It’s not a competition,” Thuringwethil said.

“Anything’s a competition if you—”

“Try to turn this into a competition and I swear to God—”

“Don’t,” Mairon said. “You know he can’t resist a challenge.”

“It wasn’t a challenge,” she said.

“Anything’s a challenge,” Melkor said, “if you—”

“Hey,” Gothmog said loudly, cutting the bickering short. “Are you gonna read some comments or what?”

“Nah,” Melkor said, pushing himself back and putting his feet up on the desk. “Too much of that shit’ll rot your brain.”

“No danger to you, then,” Gothmog said.

“Dickhead,” Melkor said, lobbing a stack of post-it notes at him.

“Mine,” Gothmog said, scooping them up and pocketing them.

“Was it good or bad?” Mairon asked, spreading the newspaper on his lap and skimming the article he had already memorized.

“Good, mostly,” Melkor said. “The kind of dumb moral outrage you get from armchair commentators who spend eight hours a day yelling at strangers on the internet.”

“Great,” Thuringwethil said, rolling her eyes.

“Damn right,” Gothmog said. “Those are the unwashed masses, Thil. Those are the people you want to get in your corner in the court of public opinion.”

“I’m less concerned with the court of public opinion than I am with, you know, the actual courts.”

“Doesn’t hurt to win both,” Mairon said.

“Looks like you’ve got the first one covered,” Melkor said, nodding at his computer. “How are we doing on the real thing?”

“We’re working on it,” Mairon said.

“I noticed,” Melkor said, eyeing Mairon pointedly.

“Aw,” Thuringwethil said, assuming a mocking, childish tone. “Poor baby miss his boyfriend?”

“Yes, actually,” Melkor said, making a face at her.

“How sweet,” she said, reaching out to tousle his hair.

“Hey!” Melkor said, swatting at her hand.

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s a rats’ nest anyway.”

“A carefully crafted rats’ nest,” he corrected her.

“You look fine, babe,” Mairon said, stifling a grin.

“Don’t make fun,” Melkor said, aggrieved, trying to catch his reflection in the screen of his phone.”

“Seriously, though,” Thuringwethil said, turning away and walking over to the couch. “We should get back to work.”

“You’re right,” Mairon said, sighing.

“You’re a killjoy,” Melkor said.

“I can be both,” Thuringwethil said.

“You usually are.”

“Dick,” she said.

“What?” he demanded. “It was a compliment.”

“Half of one.”

“That’s about as good as you can expect to get,” Gothmog said.

“Good point,” said Thuringwethil. “Come on,” she said, holding out a hand to Mairon. “Someone has to get some work done around here.” Mairon took her hand and let her pull him up off the couch.

“You go, kids,” Melkor said, waving them away. “Hold down the fort.”

“Someone has to,” Thuringwethil said, smirking as she headed out into the hall.

“Lunch?” Mairon asked, walking backward toward the door.

“Text me when you’re ready,” Melkor said.

Mairon smiled and followed Thuringwethil, disappearing out into the hall.

“You guys are gross,” Gothmog said, shaking his head.

“Yeah,” Melkor said smugly. “We are.” He sat for a moment, looking out the door at the spot where Mairon had disappeared from view. Then he shook himself and straightened up in

his chair, looking up at Gothmog. “Close the door, will you? There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Uh-oh,” Gothmog said, though he complied. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Melkor said. “Why?”

“A closed-door meeting with you is never good news.”

“Relax,” Melkor said. “I just want to run something by you.”

“Do I need to ask you again?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Melkor said irritably. “Yet.”

“There it is,” Gothmog said, settling back on the couch. “What are you up to?”

“Stop accusing and listen, dickhead,” Melkor said. “I have an idea.”

“Okay,” said Gothmog warily. “An idea for what?”

“For the future,” Melkor said.

Gothmog rolled his eyes. “God, you’re dramatic,” he said.

“Yes,” Melkor said, grinning, “but also, I’m serious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Angband has been doing well the last couple years,” Melkor said. “We’ve been steadily growing, coming out with new tech. We’re one of the top companies in our field.”

“But?” Gothmog prompted.

“But,” Melkor said, “I think we can do better. No. *I know* we can do better. We can do more.” He frowned, trying to order his thoughts. “I don’t want to be one of the best,” he said after a moment, leveling a serious gaze at Gothmog. “I want to be *the* best—unquestioningly. Undisputed.”

For a moment, they were silent, Melkor waiting for a reaction, Gothmog considering Melkor with an appraising look. Then Gothmog nodded slowly, as though making up his mind. “You know,” he said, “sometimes I forget how much alike you and Mai are.”

Melkor grinned. “It’s why I liked him so much, back when I met him,” he said. “He was like me, but more organized. Better at tackling the details that make big plans happen.”

“He’s good like that.”

“He really is.”

“So what are you thinking? What’s your plan?”

“What I’m thinking,” Melkor said, “is that the four of us spend way too much time doing the hands-on shit in our departments.”

“I mean,” Gothmog said, “yeah, but we *are* department heads. It’s kind of the job.”

“No,” Melkor said. “It isn’t. We’re the department heads, not the whole department. We shouldn’t be the ones doing the grunt work every damn day.”

“Okay,” Gothmog conceded. “I see your point.”

“What we need,” Melkor said, “is some good old-fashioned restructuring. We need people working under us that we can trust to take care of the details while the four of us deal with more important things.”

“Like going to court?”

“No, smartass,” Melkor said, glowering at him. “Like branching out. Developing new tech. Getting Angband products into new hands.”

“So, like, running a legit business.”

“AKA what I’ve been trying to do here for the last six years.”

“It’s a good idea,” Gothmog said. “Not so much for me, probably—I’m already pretty good at offloading work on my underlings.”

“Me too,” Melkor said. “Although, to be fair, my department could do with a little discipline.”

“No kidding,” Gothmog said.

“Watch it,” said Melkor, scowling at him. “Anyway, the ones I’m really thinking of here are Mai and Thil.”

“Those two could definitely stand to take a step back,” Gothmog said.

“No kidding,” Melkor said. “Think about how much less stress Thil would have if she’d get a team of researchers to do her digging for her, or if she’d let us hire someone with patent experience to handle the business stuff, or even if she’d hire some P.R. dipshits to handle our spin. And Mai—I mean, Jesus. I don’t even know where to start. He’s so goddamn smart, Gothmog, and the way his brain works is legitimately a little scary sometimes. Someone with his potential deserves the chance to use it, not to have it held back by micromanaging a bunch of nerds in a computer lab.”

“No arguments here,” Gothmog said. “That kid’s a genius. He could probably take over the world if he’d give himself half a chance.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Melkor said, leaning back in his chair. He crossed his arms, frowning a little, almost absently.

Gothmog had known Melkor for a long time, and he knew that something was bothering his friend. “What’s the matter?” he asked, watching the twitch of annoyance on Melkor’s face.

“I don’t know,” Melkor said. “I just...how do I bring it up to them?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mairon and Thuringwethil,” Melkor said impatiently. “How do I tell them what I want to do without them freaking out? Neither one of them is great with change, and they don’t really like being told to work less, either.”

“You’re not asking them to work less,” Gothmog pointed out. “You’re asking them to work smarter so that we can all get more done—so Angband can be better.”

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “I guess you’re right.” Still, he didn’t sound particularly convinced.

“Tell them what you told me,” Gothmog advised. “Tell them you want them to reach their full potential, or whatever. Chronic overachievers love that shit.”

“Can’t argue with that logic,” Melkor said.

“Just tell them,” Gothmog said. “It’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” Melkor complained. “I don’t see you volunteering to tell them.”

“Hell no,” Gothmog said, grinning. “But I’ll stand here while you do it, like a good friend.”

“How about you be an even better friend and write me up a report on how you want to restructure security?”

“I’m not sure I’m that good a friend.”

“Then be that good an employee,” Melkor said. “Or else.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Come on, asshole,” Melkor said, grinning. “Let’s get to work.”

“Got a minute?” Thuringwethil asked, pausing in the doorway to Mairon’s office.

“As long as you’re not bringing me more work.”

“You’re assuming I know enough about your work to give you any more.”

He laughed. “It’s not that complicated,” he said, as she made her way inside.

“Says the mega-genius.”

“Well, I am that.”

She gave him a gentle shove, barely hard enough for his desk chair to spin to the side. “Melkor’s egomania is rubbing off on you.”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I was like this long before I met Melkor.”

“That’s probably true.”

“Whatcha got for me, Thil?”

“Just some stuff to sign,” she said. “Routine paperwork.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said, scribbling his signature onto the lines Thuringwethil

had marked neatly with little colored flags. When he was finished, he sat back in his chair, letting it recline with his weight, closing his eyes. “What a day,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Tell me about it,” she said. “And it’s only noon.”

“Fuck,” he said, sitting up and yawning. “I hope Melkor doesn’t want to eat yet.”

“Odds are he’s willing to wait,” she said. “I mean, it’s you.”

“This is probably true,” Mairon said. “Although, it’s probably not nice to test him.”

“Please,” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “If anyone can stand a lesson in patience, it’s Melkor.” He laughed, and she grinned, satisfied. “So,” she said, leaning back against the wall of his office. “How are you?”

He shrugged. “Fine, I guess. Tired. You know. Same old.”

“Same old is not so great these days.”

“Tell me about it. How’re things going with you?”

“You know,” she said, shrugging. “Same.”

“Barrel of laughs, huh?”

“All day long.” He snorted, shaking his head, and she grinned, pushing herself away from the wall and dropping instead into one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk. “I’ve been thinking a lot about Nargothrond,” she said.

“You and me both.”

“I’m reasonably sure we can get them shut down,” she said. “Like, completely destroyed.”

“I don’t doubt it. I mean, having a felon for a CEO tends to—well, for most companies, anyway.”

“Melkor’s not a felon,” she said. “I made sure of that.”

“Thank God for you, Thil.”

“Normally, I’d agree. But this Nargothrond thing...God. I keep wracking my brain, trying to figure out a way to make them pay for what they did, but nothing I can come up with seems good enough.”

“They deserve whatever they get,” Mairon said.

“They deserve to have a dull knife slowly saw them in half,” she said, fixing an icy glare on the corner of his desk.

“Easy there, Poe,” he said, grinning.

“I’ve been through it in my head about a hundred thousand times,” she said, “and there’s just no good way to get away with it. Our issues with them are too public. It would come back to us.”

“Okay, seriously,” Mairon said, straightening up. “We’re not murdering anyone. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I probably want to more than any of you, but you’re right. It isn’t worth it.”

“I know,” she said. “But it’s still a nice thing to think about.”

“I prefer to think about ways we can actually get back at them.”

“Me too,” she said. “But like I said, I’m having trouble coming up with anything good enough.”

“I have some ideas on that front,” he said.

“Yeah?” she said, perking up, interested.

He nodded. “I’ve been looking into Formenos,” he said. “As a company, I mean. Do you know they’re not really attached to Formenos?”

She nodded. “They’re an LLC,” she said. “Limited liability—it’s the kind of thing you do when you don’t want a business tanking to affect your personal finances.”

“Smart move on their part.”

“Absolutely. I mean, it’s a think tank. It’s basically a glorified circle-jerk for academics.”

“You really ought to go into marketing, Thil.”

“I’m just saying, I wouldn’t want to be financially responsible for having something like that attached to my company.”

“Even though they’re totally attached to Formenos,” he said. “Unofficially.”

“Oh, for sure,” she said, nodding. “You know damn well the startup money for that place came from Formenos.”

“Gotta hand it to the old man,” Mairon said. “Finwë may have raised a bunch of idiot children, but he was smart with his money.”

“It’s a shame they aren’t more connected,” Thuringwethil said. “It’d be nice to take a chunk out of Formenos when we hit Nargothrond.”

“Huh,” Mairon said, leaning back and crossing his arms, his brow furrowed in thought.

“What?”

“I was just thinking,” he said, “about something Gothmog said to me the other day.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s been talking to some people he knows,” Mairon said, “trying to dig up dirt on those dickheads at Formenos. He heard that one of Fëanor’s kids—one of the older ones, dude named Celegorm—used to be pretty close with Huan.”

“Huan,” she repeated. “As in the piece of shit that…” She trailed off, gesturing at him.

“That’s the one,” Mairon said, raising a hand to the bandage that he still wore, more out of vanity than necessity. “I guess they had a bit of a falling out a while back and cut ties.”

“So how did Huan end up with Doriath?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said. “Gothmog’s people aren’t so great for details.”

“Figures,” she said, shaking her head. “Bet they weren’t happy to hear about this whole fiasco.”

“Honestly,” Mairon said. “I mean, a guy who used to be your friend hooks up with some creeps whose family used to be friends of your family and they steal a thing someone stole from your dad a year ago? It’s fucked up.”

“Especially when you put it like that.”

“Seems like the kind of thing you’d want to get back at someone for, doesn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Imagine you have a cousin,” Mairon said. “Let’s call him Finrod. Let’s say he gets chummy with an ex-friend of yours, someone we’ll call Huan. Let’s say those two team up with some rivals of yours and try to steal something that belongs to your family. Now, the attempt alone would probably piss you off, right?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Now let’s imagine you heard a rumor that your cousin Finrod had this thing that was stolen from your family,” Mairon said. “A thing your dad and uncle died over. You’d want to get it back, wouldn’t you?”

“But they don’t have it,” Thuringwethil said. “Doriath has it.”

“Says who?” Mairon said, raising an eyebrow. “I mean, if your cousin had the balls to go behind your back and fly halfway across the country with some people you hate to try to steal something that should belong to your family, who’s to say he isn’t lying about having the thing?”

“Fine,” she said. “But what’s the point? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I love a causing a little family infighting as much as the next morally-ambiguous asshole, but besides some intense schadenfreude, what does it get us?”

“That chunk out of Formentos you wanted, if we play our cards right.”

“I don’t follow.”

“If we can drop a hint to the right people that Nargothrond has Silmaril,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Some angry Finwions might try to find it at Nargothrond. So what? It’s not there.”

“No,” he said. “But you know what is there? A great case for corporate espionage.”

“So you’re thinking,” she said, turning things over in her head as she spoke, “that we get these clowns to take over Nargothrond and let them take the fall when it goes down?”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

“Will it work?” he asked her, leaning forward, arms crossed on his desk. “Legally, I mean. Can we make the charges stick to them instead of Finrod?”

“Sure,” she said. “We just have to hold the company liable instead of the individual. If the company is in trouble, whoever runs the company is on the hook.”

“Perfect,” he said.

“This could work,” she said thoughtfully. “I mean, if we can pin this to Fëanor’s kids, Formenos is going to take a hit—legally, financially, whatever. They’ll have to, if they want to bail those idiots out.”

“What if they shut down the company?”

“Oh, I’m sure they will. But as an LLC, they’ll be personally, financially responsible for damages.”

“Excellent,” he said, rubbing his hands together.

“You look like a two-bit movie villain,” she said.

“How about now?” he asked, dramatically stroking his chin, one eyebrow raised comically.

She laughed. “God, I love you,” she said, smiling fondly at him.

“Hey,” said an indignant voice from the doorway. “Back off, Thil.”

“Easy, killer,” she said, turning to flash Melkor a grin. “Your boyfriend’s not interested in the ladies.”

“Please,” Gothmog said, following Melkor into the office. “His boyfriend’s not interested in anyone but him.”

“True,” Mairon said, grinning. “But can you blame me?”

“It’s not blame, so much as, uh, questioning your judgement.”

“Says his best friend.”

“I mean, that’s fair.”

“You guys ready for lunch?” Thuringwethil asked, watching them make their way into the office.

“Not quite,” Melkor said. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Me?”

“Both of you.”

“Uh-oh,” Thuringwethil said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he said, glaring at her indignantly. “Or, I mean, nothing bad. I did something good. I think.”

“That’s convincing,” Gothmog said.

“Shut up,” said Melkor.

“What did you do?” Mairon asked, his tone considerably less accusatory than Thuringwethil’s.

“I had an idea,” Melkor said. “I’ve put a lot of thought into it, and I want to run it by you guys.”

“Okay,” Mairon said. “Let’s hear it.”

Melkor took a deep breath. “Okay,” he said, drawing himself up, his face growing serious. “I have an idea that I think will help make us more efficient and more productive—personally, and as a company.”

“Yeah?” Mairon said, sitting up straight in his chair.

“Yeah,” Melkor said decisively. “I want to restructure the company.”

For a moment, the office was silent as Melkor waited for their response. Then Mairon blinked, shook his head, and said. “Restructure the company. What does that mean?”

“What it means,” Melkor said, “is that some of us—looking at you, babe—spend way too much time immersed in the tedious, day-to-day details bullshit of the company.”

“That tedious bullshit is what makes a company successful,” Mairon said.

“My problem isn’t with the tedious bullshit,” Melkor said. “It’s with you micromanaging it.”

“Yikes,” Thuringwethil said.

“I’m the COO of this company,” Mairon said, his tone clipped. “Chief Operating Officer. Who else is going to micromanage this company if not me?”

“That’s not what I—“Melkor stopped, taking a deep breath. “I don’t think I’m expressing this clearly,” he said carefully.

Mairon blinked, taken aback. “Okay,” he said warily. “Try again.”

“I think,” he said slowly, trying to regroup his thoughts, “that you do a really good job at managing our operations. You’re really good at details, and at making sure our plans are executed efficiently. That’s why I made you COO, and at the time, when we were starting to really ramp up our operations, it was the right place for you to be, overseeing those things. But we’re bigger now, and better, and I think having you so bogged down in the minutia of company-wide operations is a waste of your talent.”

“Yeah?” Mairon said, a raised eyebrow the only hint of his pleasure in the unexpected praise. “And how do you suggest we better utilize my talent?”

“In R&D,” Melkor said immediately. “Full-time. You’re too smart to be running staff meetings and doing performance reviews. You have too much talent to be sitting here worrying about if some dumbass in the basement is doing his work. Mai, you’re the smartest person I’ve ever met in my goddamn life. The way your brain works is fucking incredible, and the things you

think of..."He shook his head. "I don't want to waste your potential," Melkor said. "I want to use it. I want *you* to use it, to be as fucking amazing as I know you can be."

"Shit," Thuringwethil said, when he had finished. "That's actually really sweet."

"Do you have to sound surprised?" he demanded, aggrieved.

"It's a good idea, right?" Gothmog said.

"I think it'll take some getting used to," Thuringwethil said, "but yeah. I think you make a really good point."

"You're not excluded from the waste of talent comments," Melkor said. "I want your department restructured too. You've got bigger fish to fry than individual contracts. You need to let go of some responsibility and focus on bigger picture things."

"That's probably not a bad idea," she admitted.

"I think you're underestimating my ability to multitask," Mairon said.

"I think you're overestimating," Melkor said.

"Hey," Mairon said. "I get stuff done."

"Sure," Melkor said. "More than any one person should ever reasonably be getting done in a day. But that's not as big a bragging point as you think it is."

"How so?"

"You're running yourself ragged," Melkor said. "Working all day, staying here practically every night, forgetting to eat..."

"I'm fine," Mairon said.

"You told me to have a good weekend yesterday," Gothmog said. "It was Tuesday."

"Yeah, but—"

"I watched you fall asleep in the sixty seconds it took to reheat your fifth cup of coffee today," Thuringwethil said.

"Okay, but—"

"You keep more clothes in your office to change into after an all-nighter than I even own altogether," Melkor said.

"You never used to have a problem with how much I work," Mairon said reproachfully.

"Because I'm a selfish piece of shit," Melkor said, shrugging. "I used to care more about how much got done here than I did about how much it cost you to get it done. I don't think like that anymore."

"So there's selfish reasons behind this restructuring plan."

"Absolutely," Melkor said. "A hundred percent."

Mairon sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “There’s so much I want to do—so much I want Angband to do.”

“And your little perfectionist heart can’t stand for things not to get done,” Thuringwethil said, deadpan.

“You’re one to talk.”

“I’m not asking you to scale anything back but your personal involvement,” Melkor said. “Hire people. Hire as many people as you want. Build yourself a team that you can trust to do your bidding. I don’t care how much it costs. Let other people take care of the details bullshit, and give yourself time to do more important things.”

“Like your boyfriend,” Gothmog said.

“Ew,” said Thuringwethil.

“I mean,” Melkor said, grinning, “if one of the definitely unintentional side effects of corporate restructuring is that you get to spend more time at home with me, I’m not going to complain.”

“That would be nice,” Mairon said, a little wistful.

“So,” Melkor prompted. “What do you say?”

“I think it’s a good idea,” he said. “It’ll be weird, and I’m probably going to have a hard time letting anything go—”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Gothmog muttered.

“But,” Mairon said, leveling a glare at him, “I’m willing to try it.”

“Fuck yeah,” Melkor said, grinning widely. He leaned down and kissed Mairon on the forehead. “That’s what I like to hear.”

“So what I’m hearing,” Thuringwethil said, “is that you’re giving us unlimited hiring power.”

“Don’t you basically have that already?” Gothmog said.

“Unofficially,” she said.

“Well,” Melkor said, “now you have it officially. Don’t make me regret it.”

“Are you kidding? That’s the only reason I do anything.”

“You’re a dick, Thil.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“That’s creative.”

“It’s the truth,” she shot back.

“Okay, kids,” Gothmog said loudly, preempting the bickering. “Are you going to try to one-up each other, or are we going to get lunch? I’m fucking starving.”

“We can do both,” Thuringwethil said.

“As long as you do it on the way to the elevator.”

“Fine by me,” Melkor said.

“You coming, Mai?” Gothmog asked, pausing in the doorway.

Mairon glanced at his desk. “I mean,” he said, scanning the work laid out in front of him, “I was going to—” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “You know what? It can wait.” He pushed himself up from his chair and walked around the desk, moving quickly, as though afraid he might change his mind.

“You’re the best,” Melkor said, a soft sincerity in his voice that made Mairon smile.

Mairon stood up on tiptoe to kiss him, just once, on the lips. “Come on,” he said, putting his arm around Melkor’s waist. “I think we could all use a long lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

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Home

Chapter Summary

Mairon works on letting go, with a little help from his friends. Things are changing for the better at Angband, and at home.

Chapter Notes

Wait 'til the end. Mairon has something important to say.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was dark in the lab, save for the light illuminating the only occupied workbench. Mairon sat there, alone in a pool of harsh fluorescent light, and he sighed, rubbing his eyes. They burned beneath the press of his fingertips, protesting the long hours which he had spent staring at the computer screen in front of him. “Damn it,” he muttered, staring at the error screen in front of him. He had been trying to fix this particular piece of malfunctioning code for nearly three hours, and he was still having no luck in finding the problem. “One more time,” he said, glaring at the screen as he exited out of the message, “and then I’m deleting you and starting over.”

There was a soft knock on the door behind him, and Mairon jumped, startled. He swiveled his chair around to find Melkor coming toward him, a bag in his hand. “Hey,” Melkor said. “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“Not really,” Mairon said, watching him walk toward the bench. He smiled as Melkor bent down and kissed his forehead. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” Melkor said, and Mairon snorted, unconvinced. “Alright, fine. I came to check up on you. I figured you probably hadn’t eaten anything yet tonight.”

“You figured right,” Mairon said. “What’s in the bag?”

“Tacos,” Melkor said. “Help yourself.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Mairon said, reaching inside and pulling out a warm, waxed-paper packet. He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, feeling some of his frustration begin to seep away with the promise of food.

“There’s this place,” Melkor said, “like, three blocks over I’ve been dying to try, so I finally did it. Hope it’s good.”

“It smells amazing,” Mairon said, unwrapping his food and taking a bite. “It tastes amazing,” he said, mouth full, closing his eyes.

“It’s pretty good,” Melkor agreed, taking a bite of his own taco.

“I needed this,” Mairon said, already halfway through his first taco. He hadn’t realized

how hungry he had been until he had smelled the food, and he was already beginning to wonder how much Melkor had brought with him.

“I figured,” Melkor said. “Since you didn’t answer my texts.”

“Did you text me?” Mairon asked, finishing his food and patting his pockets, looking for his phone. He scanned the benchtop, but it was nowhere to be found. “Dang,” he said, smiling apologetically at Melkor. “I must’ve left it in my office.”

“Yeah, well,” Melkor said, upending the bag on the bench and sliding two more tacos over to Mairon. “Luckily for me, you’re super predictable.” He pulled Mairon’s phone from his back pocket and laid it on the bench before dragging over a chair and sitting down.

“I’d have a good comeback for that if I wasn’t starving,” Mairon said, taking the food Melkor offered him.

Melkor laughed, watching contentedly as Mairon ate. “So what are you working on, anyway?”

“I’m trying to debug this thing,” he said, waving a hand at the computer. “But I can’t find the issue. It’s been three hours. I’m starting to get mad.”

“Jesus,” Melkor said. “Three hours? Your attention span is ridiculous.”

“It’s more stubbornness than anything at this point,” Mairon said.

“I can believe that,” Melkor said.

“Hey,” Mairon said, contriving to look affronted.

“Please,” Melkor said, unconcerned. “You make bullheadedness an art form.”

“I’m tempted to be flattered by that.”

“Of course you are,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

“And anyway,” Mairon said, “you’re one to talk.”

“No arguments here.”

“I’m glad you came, though,” Mairon said. “I was getting seriously frustrated. I needed a break.”

“I’m always good for a distraction,” Melkor said, grinning.

“You really are,” Mairon said.

“Not to rush you back to work or anything, but is there anything I can do to help?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said. “Maybe. Sometimes it helps to talk through it with someone.”

“Fair warning,” Melkor said. “I don’t know shit about programming.”

“That’s fine,” Mairon said. “You don’t need to. It’s the talking that does it, even if it’s talking to yourself. You explain the thing, and it helps you realize what you’re doing wrong.”

“Well, then,” Melkor said, settling back. “Explain away.”

“Not yet,” Mairon said, scooting his chair toward where Melkor sat and leaning against him, putting his head on Melkor’s shoulder. “I’m not ready yet.”

Melkor reached out and stroked Mairon’s hair, the motion of his hand a soothing rhythm that lulled Mairon into a peaceful haze. They stayed like that a few moments, Mairon half-dozing, Melkor brushing the fingers of one hand through Mairon’s hair and idly rummaging through the papers on the bench with the other.

“Hey, Mai?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah?” Mairon said, pushing himself up at last.

“What’s this?”

Mairon took the paper from Melkor’s hand, looking it over. “Oh,” he said, tossing it back onto the bench. “Nothing. I was just brainstorming after my last run-through of this stupid program. I needed to do something else for a minute after it failed. You know, clear my mind.”

“This is really interesting,” Melkor said. “These are some really good ideas.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “I thought so too.”

“I would greenlight these ideas in a heartbeat,” Melkor said. “No joke. Like, we should talk about some of this.”

“I’d love to,” Mairon said. “But I’m already swamped. There’s not enough hours in the day for me to take on any more projects right now.”

For a moment, there was silence between them. Then, Mairon said, “This is where you bring up the whole restructuring thing again, isn’t it?”

“I mean, I don’t want to sound smug or anything.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mairon said, crossing his arms on the bench and laying down his head with a sigh. “I mean, why am I here at two o’clock in the morning on the weekend, trying to debug a code?”

“Because you’re conscientious,” Melkor said. “And dedicated.”

“And you’re being weirdly judicious,” Mairon said. He sighed again, and then he turned his head toward Melkor, frowning. “Hang on,” he said. “What are *you* doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Friday night.”

“Saturday morning, technically.”

“Two o’clock on Saturday morning, and you’re at work?”

“You think you’re the only one who can work late?”

“I saw you leave this afternoon.”

“Did you?”

“Yes,” Mairon said. “You came into my office at four o’clock to say goodbye.”

“Damn,” Melkor said. “You caught me.”

“Huh?”

“Look,” he said, kicking his feet gently, avoiding Mairon’s gaze. “At the risk of sounding super lame, I—well, the only thing I wanted to do tonight was be with you. And since you’re here...”

Mairon felt a tightening in his chest, and a smile crept onto his lips. “You came all the way out here at two a.m. just to see me?”

“Don’t make fun,” Melkor said.

“I’m not,” Mairon said, and he meant it. “That’s really sweet, Melkor.”

“Yeah, well,” Melkor said, shrugging. “Don’t tell anyone. I worked hard for this reputation.”

Mairon leaned over suddenly and kissed him, his hand on the back of Melkor’s neck, pulling him close. “Let’s go home,” he whispered, laying his cheek to Melkor’s and closing his eyes.

“You sure?” Melkor asked, taking Mairon’s face in his hands.

Mairon nodded. “None of this needs to be done tonight,” he said. “And there are better things I could be doing.”

“Like me?”

Mairon laughed. “There it is,” he said. “The moment-ruiner.”

“Please,” Melkor said, grinning. “You like it.”

“Mhmm,” Mairon said. “Sure.” Still, he smiled, and Melkor took it as a sign of agreement.

Melkor stood up and pulled Mairon into a hug, kissing the top of his head. “Come on,” he said, putting an arm around Mairon’s shoulders and leading him toward the door. “Let’s go home.”

“You know,” Melkor said, stifling a yawn, “I could really get used to this.” He buried his face in the nape of Mairon’s neck, tightening his arms around Mairon’s chest.

“I’m surprised you aren’t already used to it,” Mairon said, snuggling back against him. “I’ve been here three nights this week.”

“Best three nights of the week,” Melkor said, kissing the curve where Mairon’s neck met his shoulder.

Mairon laughed, turning his head to offer more of his bare skin to Melkor’s lips. “Six

months ago,” he said, shivering happily as Melkor’s lips trailed over his skin, “I never would’ve suspected you of being so sentimental.”

“Six months ago,” Melkor said, his hand running gently up Mairon’s chest, “I never would’ve suspected how happy I would be just to have you spend the night.”

“Who knew you could be so sweet?” Mairon said, rolling over.

“Not me,” Melkor said, kissing him on the lips.

“It’s nice, though,” Mairon said, his lips against Melkor’s ear, turning his head to kiss the sharp curve of Melkor’s jaw.

“I do my best,” Melkor said, catching Mairon’s chin in his hand and tilting his face up to kiss him. Mairon snuggled closer still, sliding one hand around the back of Melkor’s neck and the other over the warm skin of Melkor’s bare chest.

Mairon’s phone rang then, loud and insistent, startling them both. Melkor shifted his weight, reaching out toward the bedside table where the phone lay. “Leave it,” Mairon whispered, kissing Melkor’s cheek, letting his lips linger against Melkor’s skin.

“Are you sure?” Melkor asked, the baser parts of his mind berating him even as the words left his lips. “It might be work.”

“I don’t care,” Mairon said, pushing himself up onto his elbow and leaning down to kiss Melkor’s lips.

“You hate to miss work things,” Melkor said, reaching out to brush the hair away from Mairon’s face, tucking it behind his ear.

“I’d hate to miss this more,” Mairon whispered, leaning down to kiss him again. The phone fell silent at last, and Mairon pushed himself up onto Melkor, straddling his hips, his hair falling onto Melkor’s cheeks as he kissed him. Melkor sat up, then, pressing himself close to Mairon, arms around Mairon’s waist, kissing him back.

The phone rang again, and Mairon swore, sitting back on Melkor’s legs, breathing hard.

“Answer it,” Melkor said gently.

Mairon sighed, frowning, and reached for the phone, jabbing his thumb violently on the screen to pick up the call. “What?” he demanded, pressing the phone to his ear. His brow furrowed as he listened, and Melkor watched his fingers moving, tapping an annoyed cadence onto the sheets. “And *that* was your solution?” He listened again, rolling his eyes. “No, it’s fine. I’ll take care of it.” He glanced over at Melkor, who shrugged, the picture of long-suffering acceptance. “I’ll be in this afternoon,” Mairon said. “I’m not ruining my Saturday morning just because you’re an idiot. Don’t touch anything until I get there.” He hung up the phone and tossed it back onto the table, letting himself fall back onto the bed with a sigh.

“Everything okay?” Melkor asked, stretching himself out beside Mairon, his chest pressed to Mairon’s side.

“Everything’s a crisis,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes. But then his face softened, and he reached out to brush the hair back from Melkor’s face, stroking his cheek. “But it can wait.”

“Are you sure?” Melkor said, bending down to kiss the hollow of Mairon’s throat,

feeling a delightful shiver run through him as Mairon arched into his touch, reveling in the feel of Mairon's hands on his back, pulling him closer.

"I'm very sure," Mairon said, shuddering at the touch of Melkor's lips against his neck, along his jaw.

"I wouldn't want you to miss anything," Melkor said, mock-serious. He kissed Mairon lightly on the lips, just the faintest of touches, and let his hand run slowly down Mairon's chest, fingertips raising goosebumps on Mairon's skin.

"Too late," Mairon said, pushing himself up on his elbow to kiss Melkor, pressing himself into the touch of Melkor's hand on his chest. He let his own hand wander down to Melkor's waist, slipping his fingertips beneath the waistband of Melkor's shorts. "But I think you can make it worth my while."

A mischievous grin crept onto Melkor's lips. "Let's find out," he whispered, and pulled Mairon down to do just that.

"Is Melkor with you?" Thuringwethil asked, calling out into the hall as she watched Mairon pass by her door.

Mairon stopped and then backtracked, pausing in her doorway. "No," he said. "He isn't. But it's still a little early to be looking for him."

"It's eight thirty-seven," she said.

"Good clock-reading skills," he said, mock-serious.

"I just meant," she said, flashing him a scowl of annoyance, "that when you're this late, he's usually with you."

"Judgy, judgy," Mairon said, grinning at her.

"If I had known all that annoying-ness was going to rub off on you, I wouldn't have encouraged you two to get together."

"Thank God you didn't know."

She laughed. "Yeah," she conceded. "I guess."

"Did you need Melkor for something?"

"He technically needs to sign off on hiring decisions," she said, waving a hand at the papers on her desk. "Although, worst comes to worst, I'll just forge his signature."

"You're probably pretty good at that by now."

"I'm this close to just getting a stamp made," she said, holding up her thumb and forefinger, a bare millimeter of space between them.

Mairon laughed and walked into the office, shaking his head. "So," he said, setting down his bag on her desk. "I take it the hiring is going well."

"It's going," she said, noncommittal. "I'm making an effort, anyway."

“It’s a much bigger effort than I thought it would be.”

“Tell me about it. Are you making any progress?”

“I’m trying,” he said, sighing and shaking his head. “I mean, I knew it would be hard, but I didn’t think it would be *this* hard.”

“Well, if any of us were going to struggle,” she said.

“I know, I know,” he said. “I’m a control freak. But I can’t help it, Thil. It’s worked out so well for us in the past. It’s hard to let it go.”

“Has it, though? Worked out, I mean.”

“I mean, business-wise, yes. But I think Melkor was right the other day. I don’t think I can micromanage on a larger scale as efficiently as I have on the smaller scale. If we want to make Angband bigger and better, I’m going to have to let go a little.”

“Wow,” she said. “That’s almost approaching a normal, healthy attitude.”

“And that was almost approaching nice.”

“Seriously though,” she said. “I like that outlook. You know I worry about you, working as much as you do.”

“Join the club,” he said.

“Already did,” she shot back.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, making a face at her. “Anyway, I’ve been doing some thinking lately. Maybe it was the whole almost-dying thing, but I’ve been slowly coming to the realization that life’s too short to spend every waking minute at work.”

“No kidding,” she said.

“Now, if I could only find some competent engineers that would let me actually not have to worry about being here twenty-four-seven...”

She laughed. “There’s the old Mairon.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “He’s still around.”

“Good,” she said. “I like him.”

“Like who?” said Melkor, sauntering into the office.

“Mairon,” she said, nodding at him.

“Oh,” said Melkor, grinning. “Me too.” He stopped and kissed Mairon on the forehead.

“Since you’re here,” Thuringwethil said, holding out the papers to Melkor. Melkor took them and, without question, held out his hand for a pen. “You know,” Thuringwethil said, watching him scribble his signature onto the pages in his hand, “you should probably read things before you sign them.”

“I would,” he said, “if it wasn’t you giving them to me.”

“Would you?”

“Hell no,” he said. “I’d give ‘em to you to read.”

“That sounds about right.”

“What am I signing, anyway?”

“Hiring approvals.”

“Oh,” he said, sliding the papers back across the desk to her. “Good. It’s going well, then?”

“It’s going,” she said. “That’s what we were just talking about, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s a rough adjustment,” she said, “especially for the particularly controlling among us.”

“I’m the first to admit it,” Mairon said, shrugging.

“But we’re working on it.”

“Good,” Melkor said. “That’s all I can ask for, really.”

“I mean,” said Thuringwethil, “I think you’ve proved pretty thoroughly that you’re capable of asking a hell of a lot more.”

“Aim high,” Melkor said, grinning. “It’s the only way to get ahead.”

“He’s not wrong,” Mairon said, as Thuringwethil rolled her eyes.

“I don’t have to acknowledge that,” she said.

“Better not,” Melkor said. “It might kill you.”

“Don’t want to risk it.”

There was a chirp from Melkor’s phone, and he looked up at the clock on Thuringwethil’s wall. “Shit,” he said. “I gotta go.”

“It’s not even nine o’clock.”

“I know,” he said, “but I have a meeting at nine to get ready for.”

“Since when do you get ready for meetings? Or even *go* to meetings, for that matter?”

“Since I came up with the brilliant idea of restructuring thing around here,” Melkor said. “Turns out being the head of a department means you have to do actual work sometimes.”

“Who could’ve known?” said Mairon, deadpan.

“So I’ll leave you kids to your socializing,” Melkor said, earning glares from both of them that he received with a satisfied grin. “I’ll see you later.”

Thuringwethil shook her head, watching him head back out into the hall. “Might be time

to join a church,” she said. “I think the end is near.”

Mairon snorted. “Give him some credit, Thil. He’s really making an effort.”

“I have to give him that,” she said.

“I should probably go, too,” he said. “I want to look through some personnel files and see who I can reassign. That ought to make the restructuring process a little easier.”

“I’m sure it will,” she said. “As much as you like to bitch, you’ve got some good people on your payroll.”

“Somewhere,” Mairon said. “If I can find them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Whine, whine, whine.”

“Would it kill you to be sympathetic?”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Whatever,” he said, grinning. “I’ll see you later, Thil.”

He headed out into the hall and walked down to his office, sighing at the thought of the personnel files that awaited him.

“Hey,” Gothmog said, sticking his head through the doorway almost the minute that Mairon sat down. “I met that guy this morning.”

“Guy,” Mairon repeated, momentarily nonplussed. “Oh, shit. Right. That guy.”

“Glad to know the jobs you give me are important,” Gothmog said, feigning affront.

“The problem,” Mairon said, grinning, “is that I’ve given about half a dozen people important jobs in the last forty-eight hours.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes. “You’re super important and busy.”

“Seriously, though,” Mairon said. “How did it go?”

“Fine,” Gothmog said. “I gave him the information, and he’s going to pass it along.”

“Perfect,” said Mairon, nodding appreciatively. “That ought to get things rolling at Nargothrond.”

“Slash Formenos,” Gothmog said. “You know, as long as the idiot boys cooperate.”

“I have a feeling they will,” Mairon said. “There’s a reason I picked those two as targets.”

“Method to your madness, huh?”

“Sometimes. Now we just have to wait and see if it works.”

“Did you not just say you had a feeling it would?”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, “but after the year we’ve had, I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“Fair enough,” Gothmog said. “Anything else I can help with?”

“Not unless you want to restructure my department,” Mairon said, laying a hand on the enormous stack of personnel files on his desk.

“Still working on that, huh?”

“Are you not?”

“Hell no,” Gothmog said. “I got mine done the day Melkor brought it up.”

“Jesus,” Mairon said, sincerely impressed. “How’d you do it so fast?”

“You’re putting too much thought into it,” Gothmog said.

“Of course I am,” Mairon said. “I’m picking people to help me run my department. It’s a big decision.”

“Yes,” Gothmog said, “but it isn’t one you need to overthink.”

“Easy for you to say,” Mairon muttered.

“Do me a favor,” Gothmog said. “I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to come up with an answer in three seconds or less, okay?”

“Gothmog—”

“Humor me.”

“Okay,” Mairon said, frowning. “But I don’t have time to—”

“You’re at a conference,” Gothmog said, “a thousand miles away, and you get a call about a crisis down in coding. Who do you call to handle it?”

“I—”

“Three seconds,” Gothmog said. “Pull a folder.”

Two seconds passed, and then Mairon pulled a folder from the stack and set it aside.

“Cool,” Gothmog said. “Now, that dude’s dead. Who do you call next?” This continued through four more choices, and then Gothmog said, “Now the building’s on fire. Who knows where the really important shit is that needs to be saved?”

And on it went, in a series of seemingly-ridiculous questions, until Mairon had an assortment of folders scattered on his desk, many with hurriedly-scribbled post-it notes on the covers outlining the job they had been selected to fill.

“And that,” Gothmog said, looking rather smug, “is how you promote people in your department.”

“And the questions I couldn’t answer?” Mairon said, scribbling a final note and sticking it to a folder. “The ones I don’t have anyone for?”

“That’s when you start hiring outside the company,” Gothmog said.

“Damn,” Mairon said, shaking his head appreciatively. “That was actually pretty slick.”

“Of course it was,” Gothmog said. “I’m efficient as fuck. I don’t have time to sit around agonizing over this kind of garbage. I have bigger fish to fry.”

“*Chopped?*” Mairon guessed.

“*Great British Bake Off.*”

Mairon laughed. “Thanks, Gothmog,” he said. “I owe you.”

“You and Melkor both,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” Mairon said.

“You do that,” said Gothmog, standing up. “It’s always good to have a few favors to call in. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

“Netflix awaits,” Mairon said, mock-serious.

“Damn straight,” Gothmog said, and headed out into the hall.

Melkor woke to the feeling of a hand pressed lightly to his chest, and the gentle touch of Mairon’s lips to his own. He smiled, still half-asleep, and blinked open his eyes. “That’s a nice way to wake up,” he said.

“If you have to wake up at all,” Mairon said, grinning. He kissed Melkor again, once on the lips and once on the cheek.

“I mean,” Melkor said, yawning, “*it is Saturday.*”

“Yeah, well,” Mairon said, sighing and pushing himself up. “Some of us have to work on Saturday.” Melkor made a noise of petulant, whining disapproval. “I’m sorry,” Mairon said, managing to sound contrite. “But I left them working on a project overnight, and I said I’d come back to check on the results.”

“Do it later,” Melkor said, rolling over and throwing an arm around Mairon’s waist.

“Later in your book means never,” Mairon said.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He pulled himself closer, pressing himself to Mairon’s side and laying his head in Mairon’s lap.

“Don’t tempt me,” Mairon said, running his fingers gently through Melkor’s hair.

“Please,” Melkor said, tightening his grip around Mairon’s waist. “That’s my whole purpose in life.”

Mairon laughed, and for a moment, he stayed still, running the tips of his fingers gently down Melkor’s back, smiling at the goosebumps that rose up under his hand. “Come on,” he said at last, shaking Melkor’s shoulder. “The sooner you let me up, the sooner I can come back.”

Melkor heaved an exaggeratedly long-suffering sigh and rolled onto his back, letting Mairon go. Mairon pushed himself up and out of the bed, yawning as he stretched his arms over

his head. “Can I borrow a hoodie?” Mairon asked, bending to pick up his T-shirt from the floor, shaking out the wrinkles. “I forgot to hang up my shirt last night. I’m sure it’s wrinkled to shit.”

“Take anything you want,” Melkor said. He sat up in bed and ran a hand through his hair, watching Mairon cross to the pile of clean clothes that seemed to live perpetually in a jumbled heap on the big chair in the corner. Mairon pulled a sweatshirt free and held it up, taking in the familiar, peeling letters of the Ramones’ logo on the front. He threaded his arms into the sleeves and pulled the hoodie over his head before reaching up to gather his hair into a messy bun.

Melkor watched him in silence, feeling an aching stab of affection as he did. He loved Mairon like this, unguarded and totally at ease, letting fall the wall of cool professionalism that dominated so much of his life. Watching him here, in Melkor’s bedroom, picking at the frayed hem of a ten-year-old hoodie that fell halfway down his thighs, Melkor thought he couldn’t have loved him more.

“Come on,” Melkor said, rolling out of bed and standing up, stifling a yawn. “I’ll make you coffee.”

“Thanks, babe,” Mairon said, smiling at him. He watched Melkor go, listened to the shuffle of his feet heading down the hall. He laid a hand on the bed, smoothing the tousled sheets, still warm beneath his fingers. Then he put on his pants, pulled on his socks and gathered his phone and wallet from the bedside table before following Melkor into the kitchen.

“I swear my travel mugs are disappearing,” Melkor said, frowning at the jumbled mess in his cupboard. “That’s the only one I could find.” He nodded at the mug on the island, and Mairon picked it up, feeling the warmth of it seep into his hands.

“That’s probably my fault,” Mairon said. “I have a stash of them I’ve been meaning to return.”

“Must be a big stash,” Melkor said, raising an eyebrow.

“It is,” Mairon said, sounding just short of apologetic. “But I drink a lot of coffee, and, well, I do stay here a lot.”

“When you put it that way,” Melkor said, “I can’t really be mad about the lack of cups.”

“Mission accomplished,” Mairon said, grinning.

Melkor rolled his eyes. “Lucky you’re cute,” he said.

“Oh, absolutely.”

Melkor laughed. “You want breakfast? I can probably scrounge something.”

“Nah,” Mairon said. “I should really get going. I’m already later than I wanted to be, and I still need to swing by my apartment and shower and change before I go in.” He looked at the clock on the stove and winced. “Speaking of which,” he said, nodding toward the door. He turned to go, and Melkor followed him out into the hall, taking the coffee from his hand so Mairon could put on his shoes.

“How late are you working?” Melkor asked.

“I don’t know,” Mairon said, sitting down to tie his shoes. “Hopefully just until lunchtime. It shouldn’t take long, but you know how things go.”

“Unfortunately,” Melkor said. “Do you want to pick something up for lunch on your way back?”

“I should probably just go home tonight,” Mairon said. “I’ve been meaning to do laundry for a week. It’s getting out of hand.”

“I’ve seen your closet,” Melkor said. “You could go six weeks without doing laundry and not even put a dent in your clean clothes.”

“It’s not *that* bad,” Mairon said, but he grinned, holding out a hand so that Melkor could help him up.

“I didn’t say it was bad,” said Melkor, pulling him up. “I’m just saying that you could probably afford to wait another day. Or seven.”

“Sure,” Mairon said, grinning. “And instead, I could come over here and hang out with you.”

“Exactly.”

Mairon laughed, and he wrapped his hands around Melkor’s waist, laying his cheek against Melkor’s chest. “You can come over if you want,” he said, his voice muffled against Melkor’s shirt, “but I’m literally just going to be cleaning.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes and stepping back, a hint of a grin on his lips. “You love cleaning.”

“No,” Melkor admitted, “but I love you.”

“Enough to sit around and watch me do laundry?”

“Yes, actually.” Mairon laughed, shaking his head. Melkor took his hands, holding them in his own. “I don’t care if you’re sitting around watching TV, or doing laundry, or working, or even sleeping. I just like being with you.”

Mairon reached out and stroked Melkor’s cheek. “I like being with you too,” he said.

Melkor turned his head and kissed Mairon’s palm. “Move in,” Melkor said, taking Mairon’s hand again.

Mairon blinked, taken aback. “What?”

“You’re here at least half the week anyway,” Melkor said, “and when you’re not, I’m usually at your place. We’re basically already living together.”

“Honey,” Mairon said, his voice soft. There was an ache in his chest, a warm, spreading affection that brought a smile to his lips. “I work all the time—early mornings, late nights...hell, overnight, even.”

“You don’t say,” Melkor said, deadpan.

“Okay, smartass.”

“I know you’re not always home,” Melkor said. “I know you’re busy. But when you do

come home—"

"I work at home, too," Mairon said, cutting him off. "In the middle of the night, sometimes, or early in the morning."

"I'll make you an office," Melkor said. "God knows I've got the space. You can have any room you want. Well, not the living room, obviously, or—"

"I have a whole apartment full of stuff," Mairon said, though no real argument remained in his tone.

"Bring it," Melkor said. "You're always threatening to redecorate this place anyway. Now's your chance."

"And the dog?" Mairon was smiling now, grin widening as he looked up at Melkor.

"Obviously you can bring him too," Melkor said. "Unless you think—oh, top floor, penthouse. Right. Well, I'm not super attached to this place, if it comes down to it. We can—"

Mairon kissed him, then, affection welling up in his chest. "I love you," he said, murmuring the words against Melkor's lips.

"What did you say?" Melkor asked, taken aback.

"I love you," Mairon said again, holding Melkor's face in his hands, stroking his cheeks with his thumbs. "I'm sorry it took me so long to say it."

"I don't care," Melkor said, kissing Mairon's forehead.

"I wanted to," Mairon said. "For a long time."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Mairon said, laughing. "You're so good to me, and good *for* me, and I just —" He shook his head, smiling. "I love you," he said simply. He smiled, then, a broad grin of satisfaction that lit his face with genuine pleasure. "I'll call the movers on my way home," he said.

"Yeah?" Melkor said, happiness thrilling through his chest.

"If you're sure," Mairon said. Melkor kissed him, pulling him close and holding him tightly. "I'll take that as a yes," Mairon said, laughing, and happily kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

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The Dangling Conversation

Chapter Summary

Exciting things are happening around Angband, but the boys are busy learning to deal with a little trouble in paradise...

Chapter Notes

...but not too busy to help Thil with an important realization ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“They dropped the charges,” Thuringwethil said, appearing suddenly in the doorway to Melkor’s office, a grin of delight lighting her face as she looked in at them.

“Awesome!” Melkor said, grinning back at her. “Which ones?”

“Only here,” Gothmog said, “would that question be relevant.”

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “You act like we’re criminals.”

“We are, technically,” Gothmog said.

“Yeah, but—”

“Which charges?” Mairon asked, cutting off their bickering.

“The criminal theft charges for Silmaril,” she said, coming into the office and shutting the door behind her. “The state dropped the case.”

“Lack of evidence?”

“Exactly.”

“Hell yeah,” Melkor said, thumping his fist excitedly on his desk.

“I told you I’d take care of it,” Mairon said smugly.

“Um,” Thuringwethil said, “*who* took care of it?”

“I believed you,” Melkor said, ignoring her.

“Did you?”

“Hey, I—”

“Did you have to start this argument again, Thil?” Gothmog asked, sighing.

“I’m just the messenger,” she said, pursing her lips. “If these two want to take some really good news and turn it into an excuse to bicker, then—” She shook her head. “Well, to be fair we ought to be used to it.”

“You act like we bicker all the time,” Melkor said.

“You do.”

“Yeah, well,” Melkor grumbled. “We get shit done, don’t we?”

“Every once in a while,” she said, grinning. “Somehow.”

“So what does this mean for the civil complaint?” Mairon asked her.

“It’s still ongoing,” she said. “Last I checked, anyway.”

“But this has to weaken their case, right?” said Melkor.

“You would think,” said Gothmog.

“I’m going to petition for dismissal again,” Thuringwethil said, “but whether or not the judge agrees is up in the air.”

“But, worst case scenario,” Mairon said, “it goes forward. What then?”

“Then it goes forward,” she said, shrugging. “The criminal dismissal proves they don’t have any solid evidence of theft. The worst they can do is try to drag things out—prevent us from using it as long as possible.”

“Speaking of which,” Melkor said, “where does that whole thing stand?”

“Well, the injunction is still holding, technically, but I don’t know for how long. I’m going to send in a petition today to have it terminated.”

“It should be,” Melkor said. “I mean, the state dropped the criminal case. There’s no reason an injunction should still stand.”

“There’s still the civil case,” she said. “The right judge might decide that a pending civil proceeding warrants an extension of the injunction.”

“Can’t we do anything about that?” he asked, his voice just this side of petulant.

“Can we claim some kind of hardship?” Mairon asked. “Claim they’re disrupting our business practices?”

“We can try,” she said, “and I am trying. But it comes down to a judge, at the end of the day.”

“So we just have to hope we don’t get stuck with some jackass who’s part of the old Finwion country club circle jerk,” Melkor said grimly.

“I’ll see who we get,” she said. “If it’s someone I don’t like, I can try to get it reassigned. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Aren’t you glad you diversified your department?” asked Gothmog, grinning.

“I could’ve handled it,” she said primly, raising her chin.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gothmog said, waving away her pride. “But now you don’t have to kill yourself in the process.”

“It is nice to have a bigger pool of lackeys to send running,” she said grudgingly.

“Ha,” he said triumphantly. “That was almost an endorsement.”

“Almost,” she said. “And speaking of lackeys, I should go wrangle mine and get started on some of this work.”

“Good call,” Gothmog said, pushing himself up and off the couch.

“Where are you going?” Melkor asked him.

“To check over our security protocols,” Gothmog said. “Formenos and company probably aren’t going to be happy about the dismissal. I want to make sure we’re prepared, in case they’re thinking about doing anything stupid.”

“Smart,” Melkor said.

“I have good ideas every once in a while,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“Join the club,” Melkor said.

“Wouldn’t expect the invitation to come from you,” Gothmog retorted. He laughed and dodged out of the office, narrowly avoiding the shower of writing utensils Melkor flung from behind the desk.

“You’re going to have to pick those up, you know,” Mairon said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said, wholly unconcerned. “I’ll get there.”

“No you won’t,” said Mairon mildly.

“Whatever,” Melkor said. “Let’s move onto the important shit.”

“Silmaril.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know if we’re free to use it just yet,” Mairon said.

“The case was dismissed,” Melkor said.

“The criminal case,” Mairon clarified. “The civil case is still pending.”

“Not for long. Thil said—”

“We *hope* not for long. We don’t know yet. I don’t know that Feanor’s spawn are going to drop the case that easily.”

“They have no evidence,” Melkor said.

“All the more reason for them to hold onto the suit,” Mairon said. “They have nothing else.”

“They can’t just keep holding onto it,” Melkor said, annoyed. “It’ll get dismissed.”

“It might, if we’re lucky. But with the way our luck has been—”

“It’s been better lately,” Melkor said. “Or, you know, not as shitty as it had been.”

“Still,” Mairon said. “We shouldn’t put all our eggs in one basket. “

“So you don’t want to work on Silmaril projects.”

“Dude,” Mairon said, an edge of annoyance in his voice, “I’ve *been* working on Silmaril projects. For months.”

“I know, I just—”

“And in addition,” Mairon continued, ignoring him, “I’ve been continuing our non-Silmaril-based projects. Which, need I remind you, include our best-selling system to date.”

“Well, yeah,” Melkor said. “By default.” Mairon glared at him, and Melkor pursed his lips. “Why are we having this argument again?”

“You started it,” Mairon shot back.

“All I said was—”

“That you want to completely replace all the work I’ve done for you in the last seven years and move onto something else. Yeah, I got that.”

“I didn’t say—”

“Yes, you did. It comes out to the same thing.”

“I’m not replacing,” Melkor said, trying and failing to curb his own annoyance, “I’m just diversifying.”

“Spin it however you want,” Mairon said. “You still—”

“We have both sets of projects going,” Melkor said, beginning to lose his temper. “We never stopped our non-Silmaril projects.”

“No, but you switched all future development to Silmaril.”

“It’s a good system,” Melkor said defensively, “despite the asshat who created it.”

“We didn’t need it.”

“Maybe not, but we have it now. And with the other stuff we have—”

“The other stuff you’ve apparently totally forgotten,” Mairon muttered.

“What do you want from me, Mairon?” Melkor asked, his voice louder than he meant it to be. “You want to hear that your work is good? That you’re the reason Angband is what it is right now? Because you know that’s true, and I’m getting tired of having to remind you.”

“Well, excuse me for being such a goddamn burden.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Melkor snapped, “and you know it. I’m just saying that with

Silmaril—”

“With Silmaril, what? Huh? We’re better?”

“Maybe,” Melkor said. “I mean, shouldn’t we be striving to be the best we can? To have the best tech we can?”

“And that’s Silmaril?”

“I’m just saying—”

“Yeah,” Mairon said angrily, standing up. “I hear what you’re saying.”

“Mairon,” said Melkor, exasperated, watching Mairon head for the door. “Can we not have a productive conversation about this? Can we just be adults for a second?”

Mairon turned in the doorway and looked back at him, glaring. “No,” he said, managing to sound both dismissive and petulant. He turned back and headed for his own office. After a moment, Melkor heard the door slam, the deadbolt turning after it.

“Fuck,” Melkor said, and knocked the papers off his desk for good measure.

“So they’re still holding onto the civil suit, huh?”

“Yeah,” Thuringwethil said, fingers deftly twisting her hair into a knot and clipping it into place.

“Typical,” Mairon said. “Would it kill them not to be sore losers for once?”

“Probably,” she said. “And anyway, it’s like you said. They have nothing else at this point. I mean, what are they going to do, give up?”

“On us, yes,” Mairon said. “Just as soon as I can redirect their attention to other things.”

“How’s that going, by the way?”

“Eh,” he said, noncommittal.

“Alright, then.”

“I mean, Gothmog and I made some...suggestions. We’re just waiting for them to, you know, do something.”

“You sure you made your suggestions to the right people?”

“Well, too late now if I didn’t.”

“Sorry,” she said, managing a tone of at least mild contrition. “I don’t mean to stress you out.”

“No, I get it,” he said. “You’re like me. You have to run through all the terrible possible scenarios.”

She laughed. "It's not a great habit, is it?"

"What, obsessively paranoid anxiety?" He grinned. "Probably not. But on the other hand, it's probably the reason we've gotten this far in life."

"I don't doubt it."

"So how long can they drag the civil suit on?"

"Not long," she said. "The dismissal of the criminal charges doesn't technically mean anything for the civil suit, but it definitely weakens their case. If we present the same evidence, any judge in their right mind is going to find in our favor. At this point, they're just trying to keep us from using Silmaril as long as they can."

"Petty," Mairon muttered, shaking his head.

"Yeah," she said, "I don't think you have any room to talk on that front."

"Yeah, yeah," he said grudgingly.

She grinned. "So now that the injunction's days are numbered, what does that mean for our production?" He glowered at her, and she pursed her lips. "Seriously? Still?"

"Yes, still," he snapped.

"Don't get pissy with me," she said. "I'm just asking."

"Well, excuse me for being a little angry that my entire life's work is apparently not good enough."

"You know, I give Melkor a lot of shit for being a drama queen, but—"

"I'm not being dramatic," he said, crossing his arms. "I just don't see why I should have to put up with my work being tossed in the trash while Fëanor's—"

"Oh, give it a rest," she said. "Your programs are the backbone of our entire corporate economy. And besides that, we couldn't have even integrated Silmaril without you finagling it."

"We shouldn't have integrated it at all."

"Why not?"

"Because," he said, and then fell silent, unable to come up with a reason that didn't sound nauseatingly petulant.

"Because it's not yours?" she asked gently. He scowled and turned away. "Mairon, you know Angband wouldn't be here without you. Melkor knows that too."

"He has a dumb way of showing it."

"Well, yeah," she said, shrugging. "He's an idiot sometimes. You ought to be used to that by now."

"I don't know why I have to mitigate my emotional response to his bullshit when he's the one being a dick."

“Sounds like something you should talk to him about.” Mairon merely scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. “Come on,” she said, needling him a bit. “It has to be awkward, not talking to someone you live with.”

“I don’t think you have much room to criticize anyone on that front.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m just saying, people who live in not-having-conversations-they-need-to-have houses shouldn’t throw stones. Or something.”

“Okay, first of all, terrible metaphor. And second of all, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Thil,” he said, giving her a look. “Come on.” Her brow furrowed, and she shrugged, shaking her head in non-recognition. “Ilmarë?” he prompted

“What about her?”

“Thil.”

“What?”

“You like her.”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “Ilmarë’s great. So what?”

“No,” he said. “I meant you *like* her.” He raised his eyebrows at her meaningfully.

She caught his meaning at last, and she snorted. “No,” she said, waving her hand. “No, that’s crazy. Look, I know I’ve been spending a ton of time with her lately, but it’s just because my regular friend group is such a goddamn sausage fest. It’s nice to hang out with a girl once in a while, you know?”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “Just the two of you, going to dinner, and to the movies, and—”

“You do that stuff with Gothmog,” she said. “And with me. And I’m pretty sure you’re not into either of us.”

“And it’s the same with you two, huh?”

“Look,” she said impatiently. “Just because I think she’s smart and talented and pretty and has gorgeous hair and frankly infuriatingly flawless skin and oh my *God* I’m gay.”

Mairon laughed and patted her on the back. “Welcome to the club, Thil.”

“But I—she—I mean, before I—”

“Word to the wise,” Mairon said. “Talk to her sooner rather than later.”

“Uh-huh,” Thuringwethil said, looking bemused.

“Come on,” Mairon said, holding out a hand to her. She took it and let him pull her to her feet. “Revelations that big are best digested with food.”

“They took the bait,” Mairon said, coming into Gothmog’s office and closing the door. He was grinning triumphantly, looking incredibly pleased with himself.

“Who did what?” Gothmog asked, not looking up from the paperwork on his desk.

“The dumbass Feanorian spawn,” Mairon said, putting his palms on Gothmog’s desk and leaning forward. “I heard from a source inside Nargothrond that they just took it over.”

“And the Felagund bastard?”

“In hiding somewhere.”

“That seems a little dramatic.”

“Okay,” Mairon conceded. “Maybe not in hiding *per se*, but he’s sure as hell not showing his face in public lately. And besides that, his name has been scrubbed from pretty much anything even tangentially related to Formenos—Nargothrond included.”

“They dropped that kid like a sack of shit.”

“Wouldn’t you? I mean, Formenos has enough going on without worrying about a third-rate cousin sneaking off and trying to fuck with their main corporate adversary.”

“So much for loyalty, huh?”

“Thank God,” said Mairon. “If they had any of that, we’d never have been able to goad these two dumbasses into stealing the stupid thing.”

“Ah, youth,” Gothmog said, feigning nostalgia. “So impulsive, and so easily manipulated.”

“Luckily for us,” Mairon said.

“So what now?”

“Now,” Mairon said, lacing his fingers together and cracking his knuckles in a passable imitation of a cartoon villain, “we destroy them.”

Mairon screamed, and Melkor was awake in an instant, pushing himself up, murmuring words of reassurance before his eyes had even adjusted to the dark. The dog was barking, startled, and Melkor held out a hand, palm flat, the way Mairon had taught him, signaling for quiet. The pattern was familiar by now, if less frequent in recent days, and he waited, fingers twitching impatiently, watching Mairon’s chest heave as he gasped for breath, one hand pressed to his chest, feeling his racing heartbeat.

After a moment that, despite the familiarity, felt like an age, Mairon looked up, eyes bloodshot, hair disheveled, his eyes meeting Melkor’s. Melkor held out his arms, and Mairon crawled into his lap, shivering, laying his head on Melkor’s shoulder. Melkor wrapped one arm around Mairon’s waist and used his free hand to brush the hair away from Mairon’s eyes, kissing his forehead. “You’re okay,” he said, barely conscious of the words still flowing in a soothing rhythm from his lips. “You’re safe. You’re home.” He leaned back against the headboard, rubbing Mairon’s back, listening to the slow return of Mairon’s breathing to normal.

When Mairon's shoulders no longer shook, and when Melkor could feel that his pulse was slow and steady once more, he said, "It's been a while for one of these, huh?"

Mairon nodded, and Melkor could feel Mairon's breath on his neck as he let out a shuddering sigh. "I didn't miss it," he whispered.

"I know," Melkor said, and laid his cheek to the crown of Mairon's head.

"Thank you," Mairon said, after a moment. He laid his palm against Melkor's chest and pressed a gentle kiss to Melkor's neck.

"For what?" Melkor asked, holding Mairon close, relishing the warm bulk of him against his skin.

"This," Mairon asked, snuggling closer, pressing a gentle trail of kisses to Melkor's collarbone.

"You know you don't have to thank me," Melkor said, kissing the top of his head.

"I know," Mairon said, nuzzling his cheek against Melkor's shoulder. "But we've been fighting, and I—"

"Mairon," he said gently.

Mairon pushed himself up a little and looked at Melkor. "I haven't spoken to you in two days," he said, "and yet, here I am, having a nightmare, and you—" He shook his head, at a loss for words.

"We're having an argument," Melkor said, shrugging. "It happens. It doesn't change how I feel about you, and it definitely doesn't mean I'm going to leave you to deal with shitty PTSD-nightmares on your own."

Mairon leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. "I love you," he said quietly, and Melkor pulled him back into his lap, cradling Mairon against his chest.

"I love you too," Melkor said, leaning back against the headboard and closing his eyes. They lay there for a moment in the dark, the house quiet around them. The dog jumped up onto the bed and lay against Melkor's legs, and he smiled at the serenity of it all, at the warmth of Mairon's skin against him, the smell of his hair, the steady rise and fall of his chest. "Do you want to lay down?" he whispered, stroking Mairon's back.

After a moment, Mairon nodded, and he pushed himself up, kissing Melkor's cheek before rolling over to lay beside him. Melkor slid down and onto his side, pressing his chest to Mairon's back, his arm on Mairon's waist. In a moment, they were asleep once more.

When Melkor woke, he was alone in the bed—or, he realized, as he shifted and stretched, not quite alone. He opened his eyes and looked down at the dog, who looked sleepily back at him. "Aren't you up yet, lazy?" The dog yawned, rolled over, and promptly ignored him. "Typical," Melkor said, rolling his eyes. He got up and stretched, pulling on a hoodie before heading for the kitchen.

Mairon was at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee and a stack of papers in front of him. "Good morning," he said as Melkor came in.

He didn't look up from his papers, and his tone wasn't particularly warm, but it was more than Melkor had gotten the previous morning, which had amounted to one professional-grade scowl and a vacating of the premises. "Good morning," Melkor said, heading to the cupboard for a coffee mug. He poured himself some coffee from the pot and leaned back against the counter. "So," he said, watching Mairon read.

Mairon sighed and set his papers aside, looking up at last. "So," he repeated, looking back at Melkor.

"We should probably talk," Melkor said, cradling his cup in his hands and looking at Mairon over the top of it. "I mean, as much as I love a good glare and the silent treatment..."

"Please," Mairon said, rolling his eyes. "You couldn't give the silent treatment if your life depended on it. You love having the last word too much."

"I mean," Melkor said, grinning, "that's fair." Mairon grinned, despite himself. Melkor took a drink of coffee and then set the cup aside, crossing his arms. "So," he said again. "About this fight."

"I don't even know where to start," Mairon said, sighing.

"I'm not even a hundred percent sure why you're mad at me, to tell you the truth."

Anger rose immediately in Mairon, quick and hot, but he looked at Melkor, who looked back at him, genuinely at a loss, and he sighed. "God, this seems like a hundred thousand years ago."

"I know," Melkor said. "So I'm extra confused on why it's a problem now, after all this time."

"You had just gotten out of jail," Mairon said. "I was dealing with transitioning the company back to your control and hoping like hell you were happy with what I had done while you were gone. Meanwhile, the big project we were so close to getting out of development was buggy, and I couldn't fix it. I was killing myself here, trying to get all this shit done. I was drowning, and instead of throwing me a lifeline, you jumped into a whole other boat."

"You're going to have to explain that metaphor there, chief."

"You picked up Silmaril," Mairon said, anger in his voice as color rose to his cheeks. "The minute you got back. The minute you saw I was struggling. The minute you thought, even for a second, that I was going to fail."

"Whoa," Melkor said, holding up a hand. "Is that what you think? That I was out looking to replace you?"

"That's what you did," Mairon said.

"Mairon, there has never been a single second of my life when I thought you were going to fail. Not once. I'm honestly not even sure you're physically capable of it."

"But you—"

"I thought Silmaril was a good program," he said, cutting Mairon off. "I thought it had a lot of potential. I'm not going to lie to you, Mairon. I liked it. But I never thought of it as a replacement for the work you did—for the work you're still doing. My first thought about Silmaril

was that it might be legit competition.”

“You thought it was good.”

“I thought it was very good.”

“So you stole it,” Mairon said, skeptical.

“You were struggling,” Melkor said. “Killing yourself over trying to figure out the bugs in the current system. I saw some asshole upstart with a pretty good software suite and thought, ‘man, we really don’t need that shit right now’.”

“I—“Mairon stopped, his retort dying on his lips as Melkor’s words sank in. “You were just trying to eliminate the competition,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Well, yeah,” Melkor said, as though it should have been obvious.

“And the part where you integrated it into our own R&D?”

“it’s a good program,” Melkor said. “Even you have to admit it.”

“Not better than ours,” said Mairon stubbornly.

“Oh, for sure,” said Melkor. “No question.”

“So why use it, if it wasn’t as good as mine? Why replace what I—”

“Not replace,” Melkor said. “Just supplement.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s good software,” Melkor said again. “I just figured it would be dumb to waste it. Especially since you had such grand plans to ramp up our production and everything.”

“With our own designs,” Mairon said. “Things we built.”

Melkor sighed and rubbed his eyes. “We could have this argument all day,” he said. “It doesn’t go anywhere.”

“It’s pretty circular,” Mairon admitted, running a hand through his hair. “The thing is,” he said, frowning, “I’m not even that mad about having to use Silmaril—or, not any more, I guess.”

“So what are you mad about?”

“The way you made me feel about it,” he said. “Like my work wasn’t good enough. Like you didn’t think I could fix things, or you didn’t trust me to figure it out, or—”

“Mairon,” he said, but Mairon shook his head.

“You had just come out of a three-year hiatus. I had been in charge of literally everything while you were gone, and all I wanted, honestly, was for you to be proud. I wanted you to be happy with the work I had done. And when you—”

“Mairon,” he said, pushing himself away from the counter and walking over to the table where Mairon sat. “I went to jail for three years for a really stupid decision that I hid from you. A lot of people in your shoes would’ve just cut and run. I couldn’t have blamed you if you had. I cut

you out of the decision-making process and left you on your own to deal with a mess. You could've quit. You didn't. At the very least, you could've just coasted until I got out. You didn't do that either. You turned Utumno into a brand new company, launched products that are the industry standard in non-pilot surveillance equipment. You did that all on your own, with no help or prompting from me. If you think that, when I got back, I was anything but so goddamn proud of you, then you're out of your mind."

"You didn't show it," Mairon said quietly, feeling a blush creeping onto his face.

"I'm an idiot at that kind of thing," said Melkor. "Which I realize is a really stupid excuse, but it's the truth. I'm trying to be better."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Melkor said. "Then or now. I was trying to make your life easier. I realize it didn't work out that way, and I realize I didn't do much to help. I'm sorry about that. If I had known that you felt ignored, or replaced, I would have—"

"I know," Mairon said, laying a hand on his arm. "I didn't handle it particularly well either. I'm being petty, and I know it, which makes it worse."

"You have a right to be," Melkor said. "I mean, after all the shit you've dealt with working for me."

Mairon laughed and shook his head. "Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For indulging me, and for being so patient and understanding."

"I don't think those words have ever described me."

"I'm trying to be nice," Mairon said, aggrieved.

"I know," Melkor said, grinning. "I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"Look, I know I'm being petty," Mairon said, "and a little irrational, but honestly, I just wanted you to acknowledge how shitty you bringing in Silmaril made me feel."

"Really?"

"Well, and hear you say that my stuff is better."

"There's no comparison," Melkor said, shrugging, and Mairon knew he meant it.

"I'm sorry I've been such a dickhead the last few days."

"I've been a dickhead since you've known me," Melkor said. "I think it's time you got a chance."

Mairon laughed. "You're something else these days," he said. "You know that?"

"Something good?"

"Yeah," Mairon said, smiling. "You're more patient than you used to be, and more thoughtful in the way you handle things."

“I am making an effort.”

“I can tell,” Mairon said. “And I appreciate it.”

“And anyway,” Melkor said, “it’s not much of an improvement when your baseline is basically zero.”

Mairon laughed and reached out to catch the front of Melkor’s shirt, pulling him down to kiss him.

“Does this mean we’re okay now?” Melkor asked, leaning on the table.

“I think so,” Mairon said.

“Thank God,” said Melkor. “The whole not speaking to each other thing is way harder when you live together.”

Mairon laughed. “Agreed,” he said. “Let’s not do that again.”

“No promises,” said Melkor.

“That’s probably fair,” Mairon said.

“You going to work today?” Melkor asked, reaching for Mairon’s coffee and receiving a swat to the hand for his effort.

“I was planning on it,” Mairon said. He smiled up at Melkor, who felt a stab of pleasure at the expression. “Unless you can think of something better for me to do with my time.”

“I’ve got a whole list, right off the top of my head.”

“Okay, then,” Mairon said. “Where do we start?”

“Come on,” Melkor said, grinning and pulling him up. “I’ll show you.”

Chapter End Notes

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Dinner and Diatribes

Chapter Summary

We catch up with some Feanorians and find out what they're doing at Nargothrond. Melkor's scheming, and he's bringing Gothmog along for the ride. Mairon and Thuringwethil have a really dumb fight. Things are tense, and everyone's a little snipey these days.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the stupidly long delay between updates! I tried to get it done sooner but, you know, life _(\'/)_/ Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You know,” said Celegorm, an edge of annoyance creeping into his voice, “you’re always going on about what a fucking computer wizard you are—”

“Whiz,” Curufin said absently, tapping at the keyboard in front of him.

“What?”

“Whiz,” Curufin repeated. “A wizard is something that helps you install software. Or possibly a magician, I suppose.”

“Whiz,” Celegorm said, scowling. “Wizard. Whatever. My point is, maybe I shouldn’t have taken your word for it.”

“Tell you what,” said Curufin, still not sparing him a glance. “How about you pull up a chair and give it a try?”

“How about you just work faster?”

“I probably could, if you’d shut up.”

Celegorm opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by the sound of the door handle, first turning and then rattling as someone tried to open the door. Curufin stiffened, his fingers slowing to a halt as he looked up at Celegorm. “Go away,” Celegorm growled, raising his voice and standing up, his shoulders tensing.

“Open the goddamn door,” said a familiar voice from the hallway, rattling the handle again.

“Findekáno,” said Curufin, relaxing and beginning to type again.

Celegorm crossed the office and unlocked the door, swinging it inward to let his cousin

inside. “There’s my favorite cousin,” Celegorm said, grinning and ushering him inside.

“Since when?” Fingon asked, frowning as Celegorm shut and locked the door behind him.

“Since always,” Celegorm said, throwing an arm around his shoulders.

“Stop trying to ingratiate yourself,” Fingon said, throwing his cousin’s arm off and crossing his arms.

“I don’t have to,” Celegorm said, his grin widening. “You love me.”

“Only obligatorily,” Fingon said. “And maybe not even then, if you’re doing what I think you’re doing.”

“What’s that?”

“Something really stupid, even for you.”

“For me by myself, or for both of us?” Celegorm asked, gesturing at Curufin. “Because if you’re averaging the levels out for the two of us, it gives me a lot more leeway.”

“You’re holed up in Finrod’s office,” Fingon snapped, “going through his computers and —”

“It’s not Finrod’s,” Celegorm said. “Not anymore. We own this place now, remember?”

“Unfortunately,” Fingon said. “I mean, this is really dumb, even for you, Tyelko—and especially for you, Curvo.”

“What’s dumb about it? This is a family company. It should stay in the family, even if it’s previous owner is, uh, shall we say...semi-permanently unavailable.”

“He’s in jail,” Fingon said, “for doing some dumb shit with this very company, in case you forgot.”

“Sucks for him,” Celegorm said. “Maybe he should’ve gotten a better lawyer.”

“Look,” Fingon said, beginning to lose his patience. “I know being an overly-confident dickhead who rushes into things is kind of your brand, but I’m begging you to think this one through.”

“I have,” Celegorm said.

“And since that’s not particularly reassuring,” Curufin said, “I’ve thought it through too.”

“For more than five minutes?” Fingon retorted.

“Six, actually,” Celegorm said.

“This place is a sinkhole waiting to happen,” Fingon said. “You know that, right? I mean, it’s founder is in jail on fraud charges, and we’ll be lucky if we don’t get slapped with some kind of industrial misconduct charges before this is over.”

“Not we,” Curufin said. “Finrod.”

“Nargothrond,” Fingon said persistently. “You know, this piece of shit company you pounced on like a couple of idiots?”

“This company,” Curufin said, “isn’t going to exist long enough to get us in trouble.”

“Then why did you take it over?” Fingon demanded.

“To make sure nothing valuable goes down with this piece of shit.”

“What are you—oh, for fuck’s sake.” Fingon rubbed his eyes and let out a sigh of exasperation. “Would it kill you two idiots to listen to me? Just once?”

“We listen to you all the time,” Celegorm said. “You drove us up to last year’s ski trip, remember?”

“I meant about work stuff,” Fingon snapped. “And anyway, you made an airhorn noise every time I talked for more than three minutes.”

“You have to give other people a chance to talk,” Celegorm said, grinning.

“Silmaril isn’t here,” Fingon said. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

“So says Finrod,” said Curufin.

“Why would he lie?”

“Because he’s a goddamn traitor?” Celegorm suggested.

“He is not,” Fingon began, but Celegorm cut him off.

“He teamed up with our competition,” Celegorm said.

“And your best friend, let’s not forget.”

“*Ex*-best friend,” Celegorm corrected. “And that bastard’s a traitor too. An even bigger one.”

“He was looking for Silmaril,” Fingon said.

“For our enemies’ benefit,” Curufin said.

“How could you possibly know that?” Fingon demanded. “You haven’t spoken to him since—”

“Since he stabbed us all in the back and joined up with our enemies?” Celegorm said.

“He didn’t stab anyone in the back.”

“Then why was he with Beren and his dumb girlfriend?”

“Why was he with your *ex*-best friend?”

“Because he’s a scumbag who keeps bad company,” Celegorm said.

“Look, if you want to hate him, that’s between the two of you,” Fingon said, exasperated. “But Silmaril is between all of us, and—”

“Well, mostly between us,” Celegorm said, motioning vaguely between himself and Curufin.

“It belongs to the family,” Fingon said stiffly.

“To some of us more than others.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Tyelko. We’re all on the same team here.”

“Are we? Because it seems to me like you’re more interested in protecting our dumbass double-crossing cousin than you are in looking after the company’s interests.”

“Looking out for Finrod *is* looking out for the company’s interests—and the family’s, for that matter. But that’s beside the point.”

“What *is* your point, then, Finno? Because you’re really starting to test my patience.”

“Silmaril isn’t here,” Fingon said shortly, scowling at him. “Finrod never had it.”

“Liar,” Curufin said.

“If he had it,” Fingon said, “why wouldn’t he tell us? It belongs to the family.”

“It belonged to my father,” Celegorm said.

“Who made it with company resources,” Fingon shot back. “You know, the one owned by our entire family?”

“The one he basically built by himself,” Celegorm said.

“He did not,” Fingon said angrily. “And you know it, you piece of shit.”

“Easy there, cousin,” Celegorm said, grinning in a way that was anything but friendly. “No need to get bent out of shape.”

“I’m trying to help you two morons,” Fingon said.

“We didn’t ask for your help,” Curufin said.

“And we don’t need it, either,” said Celegorm.

“Don’t make me go over your heads,” Fingon said.

Celegorm snorted. “To who? Maitimo? I hate to break it to you, pal, but just because you’re fucking my brother doesn’t mean I have to listen to him.”

“He fucks me, mostly,” Fingon said. “But either way, you listen to him because he’s the head of the company, not because—”

“Sort of,” Curufin said. “Or rather, not really.”

“Things are in flux lately,” Celegorm said.

“They wouldn’t be if you idiots would just stay in your own goddamn lane.”

“Take your own advice, shithead.”

Fingon opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak, his phone rang. He looked at it in annoyance and then sighed, thumbing the screen to answer it. “Give me five minutes,” he said tersely. “I’ll call you right back.” He hung up abruptly and glared at Celegorm and Curufin. “I’m trying to help you,” he said, gritting his teeth, “because, even though it’s apparently too hard for you to believe, I want this company to succeed. I want our family to succeed. Please don’t sabotage everything we’ve done.”

“You first,” Celegorm said.

“I have to go,” Fingon said abruptly, “but this isn’t finished.” He turned and stalked out of the room, casting an angry glance back over his shoulder at them before disappearing into the hall.

“That’s what you think,” Curufin said, grinning at Celegorm and continuing his work.

“Hey, boss,” Gothmog said, coming into Melkor’s office. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yeah, I did,” Melkor said. “Close the door, will you? I need to talk to you about something.”

“Uh-oh,” Gothmog said, grinning and shutting the door behind him. “Am I in trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Melkor said. “What’d you do?”

“I’ll never tell,” Gothmog said, grinning. Melkor rolled his eyes, and Gothmog made himself comfortable on the couch. “So,” he said, putting his feet up on the corner of Melkor’s desk. “What’s on your mind?”

“I have this idea,” Melkor said, “and I want to run it by someone.”

“What kind of idea.”

“I want to diversify the company—or, okay, maybe that’s not the right word. See, what I want to do is—”

“Whoa,” Gothmog said, holding up a hand. “Hang on, bud. Am I the person you should be talking to about this?”

“Why not?”

“Because I do security,” Gothmog said. “I don’t know much about business, and I sure as shit don’t know much about rocket science or whatever it is you do around here.”

“A decade,” Melkor said, shaking his head, “and you can’t come up with anything better than rocket science to describe what we do here?”

“God, you sound like Mairon.”

“Yikes,” Melkor said.

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

“Aw, come on,” Melkor said. “Can’t I even joke with my best friend?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Gothmog said, grinning. “But seriously, isn’t there someone better you can talk to about this shit? Not that I mind listening, but—”

“I’m gonna talk to Thil too,” Melkor said. “When I get a better idea of what I’m doing.”

“And Mai?”

“I don’t want to talk to him just yet,” Melkor said. “And I don’t want you to, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is just an idea right now,” Melkor said, “and I don’t want to tell him until things are more solid, okay?”

“What things?” Gothmog asked. “What are you trying to do?”

“Diversify,” Melkor said, “and destroy our competition.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“I’m serious, Gothmog.”

“So am I,” Gothmog said. “Those are nice goals and all, but I don’t see how you’re going to get there anytime soon.”

“We start by buying up competitors,” Melkor said.

“Yeah,” Gothmog said. “I can’t imagine Formenos wants to sell, even with its current legal issues.”

“Fuck Formenos,” Melkor said, more anger in his voice than he intended. “I wouldn’t take that godforsaken piece of shit company if it was free.”

“Well okay, then,” Gothmog said, raising an eyebrow.

“I meant smaller competitors,” Melkor said, reigning himself in. “Companies with potential that could eventually turn into real rivals.”

“I thought you were already doing that,” Gothmog said. “Wasn’t that the point of Tol-Sirion?”

“Yeah, more or less,” Melkor said. “But so far it’s been haphazard. That’s kind of my style, to be honest, but I realize it isn’t always the best style if you really want to get shit done.”

“How self-aware of you.”

“Be serious, Gothmog.”

“Okay, okay,” Gothmog said. “So you want to buy up competitors.”

“Not just our competitors,” Melkor said. “The means of production, too. Building materials, fuels, intelligence operations, projectiles—”

“Projectiles?”

“Missiles, bombs, that kind of thing.”

“That’s a little outside our wheelhouse, isn’t it?”

“A little,” Melkor conceded. “But I don’t think it would be a huge transition, to tell you the truth. We’d need to a new design, obviously, but that’s my department, so no big deal—carrying projectiles needs a little more heft than our current surveillance craft allows.”

“And a little more boom,” Gothmog said.

“That too,” Melkor said.

“And where’s that coming from?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Melkor said. “I was hoping you could help me out on that one.”

“I’m head of security,” Gothmog said. “Bombs aren’t really my thing.”

“But you’re ex-military,” Melkor said. “I thought you might have some connections you could call in a favor from.”

“None of them are arms dealers,” Gothmog said. “Not that I know of, anyway.”

“But they might know some.”

“This sounds sketchy.”

“Six months ago,” Melkor said, “I wouldn’t have cared. But these days, I want everything above board. That’s why I’m bringing it to you.”

“Jesus,” Gothmog said, impressed. “You’re really acting like a grown-up these days.”

“Unfortunately,” Melkor said, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“It’s kind of nice,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“It has its moments,” Melkor said grudgingly.

“Tell you what,” Gothmog said, standing up and scratching the stubble he hadn’t bothered to shave for the past few days. “I’ll make some phone calls and get back to you.”

“Thanks, Gothmog,” Melkor said. “You’re the best.”

“Anytime, boss,” Gothmog said.

“And remember,” Melkor said as Gothmog headed for the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gothmog said, waving a hand. “Keep it on the down low.”

“Check this out,” Thuringwethil said, tossing a folded newspaper onto Melkor’s desk. “Looks like your brother got himself a promotion.”

“Great,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. He didn’t bother to look up from his phone.

“What kind of promotion?” Gothmog asked.

“To circuit court,” Thuringwethil said.

“Huh,” Mairon said, leaning forward and picking up the paper from the desk. “That’s a pretty big jump.”

“Not when you’ve got nepotism and old money connections to bridge the gap,” Melkor said.

“Fair enough,” Mairon said.

“Hey,” Gothmog said, shrugging. “On the bright side, he ought to be too busy to bother us anymore.”

“To be fair,” Thuringwethil said, “he only bothered us that once, and that was mostly Melkor’s fault.”

“Isn’t it always?” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

“Credit where it’s due,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah. On the other hand, maybe he’ll move.”

“That’ll really cramp your minor-property-damage style,” Gothmog said.

“Shit,” Melkor said. “You’re right.” He stood up. “C’mon, Gothmog. We have business to attend to.”

“It had better not be in a gated community,” Thuringwethil warned.

“Executive privilege,” Melkor said, grinning.

“That’s not how that works,” Thuringwethil called after him as he and Gothmog retreated toward the elevators.

“Huh,” Mairon said, frowning his brow. He laid the paper down on the desk. “That looks like Ilmarë.”

Thuringwethil leaned over to look at the paper. “It is Ilmarë,” she said.

“Yikes,” he said. “She works for Varda?”

“For Varda’s foundation,” Thuringwethil corrected. “You know, the charity thing she’s always patting herself on the back about.”

“Right,” Mairon said. “And Ilmarë works for her?”

“For her foundation,” Thuringwethil said, the beginnings of a frown tugging at her lips. “She’s a nonprofit lawyer. She works for a bunch of foundations. Believe it or not, most of them are run by rich people. They’re the only ones with the time and money to waste on it.”

“Not to mention the ego to enjoy the attention.”

“Exactly.”

“And it doesn’t, you know, worry you at all?”

“Should it?”

“I mean, she’s buddy-buddy with Varda, of all people.”

“She’s not buddy-buddy with Varda,” Thuringwethil said, annoyance creeping into her voice.

“But she works for her.”

“Not everyone is as weirdly close to their colleagues as we are, you know.”

“Okay, but—”

“Do you have a point, or are you just trying to find something to worry about?”

“All I’m saying,” said Mairon, “is that she runs with a much different crowd than we do.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Thuringwethil said, rolling her eyes. “This isn’t *Degrassi*, Mairon. I’m not dating the captain of the rival cheerleading squad. I’m dating a very nice woman who just happens to work for—”

“Melkor’s sister-in-law,” Mairon said. “Wife of the brother he hates—you know, the one who put him in jail?”

“Melkor put himself in jail,” Thuringwethil said coldly. “And for the last goddamn time, Ilmarë just works for them.”

“Which is bad enough.”

“If you have something to say, spit it out.”

“I just want you to be careful, is all,” Mairon said. “We’re in a weird, precarious position at the moment, and it would really suck if personal things—”

“If we let personal shit get in the way of our actual work? God forbid one of us would let that happen.” She stared daggers at him, arms crossed over her chest, lips pulled into an angry scowl.

“Touché,” Mairon said, realizing belatedly that he had, perhaps, gone too far. For a moment, they stood together in cold, uncomfortable silence. Then Mairon sighed, and he said, “Listen, Thil, I—”

“You know what? I think I’ve heard enough from you today.” She turned away from him.

“Thil, come on. I—hey, Thil, wait, I—”

She ignored him, stalking out into the hall and disappearing from view. Mairon took a step forward, intending to follow her and apologize, but he caught himself. Thuringwethil was his best friend, and he knew better than to try to patch things up right after a fight. Annoyed with himself, he headed back to his own office, wondering how long he’d have to wait until she would talk to him again.

“Hey there,” Melkor said, grinning and kicking the door shut behind him. “You look cute.”

“I’m in my boxers,” Mairon said, looking down at his bare legs and the t-shirt he’d borrowed from Melkor.

“I know,” said Melkor slinging his backpack into the corner by the door and kicking off his shoes. “That’s my point.”

“You have despicable taste,” Mairon said, tucking an errant strand of hair behind his ear.

“That’s why I picked you.” Melkor kissed the top of his head. “What’s this?” he said, waving a hand at the couch where Mairon sat.

“What?”

“No computer? No papers? Dare I say the words? No work?”

“Rough day,” Mairon said, holding up his half-empty wine glass as though to illustrate his point.

“New engineers giving you problems?” Melkor said, half-joking, sprawling down beside him on the couch.

“Always,” he said darkly, but the response was mostly reflexive, and he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I mean, it’s mostly just new workflow hiccups, but it’s irritating.”

“Especially for a militant perfectionist,” Melkor said, grinning.

“It’s not hard to do things right the first time,” Mairon said, sniffing disdainfully.

“It is for some people,” Melkor said, patting him on the arm. “Or so I’ve heard.” Mairon rolled his eyes, but he smiled a little, and Melkor was gratified. Still, Mairon seemed a little off, and Melkor frowned, watching him for a moment. “What else is bothering you?” he asked.

“Why do you think there’s something else?”

“Because I know you,” Melkor said. “You love bitching about incompetent underlings. It doesn’t normally bum you out like this.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “I guess you’re right.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Mairon said, frowning into his wine glass. “Thil and I kind of got into the other day, and it’s bugging me.”

“Got into it, huh?” Melkor said, straightening up. “About what?”

“Ilmarë.”

“Not the answer I expected,” Melkor said, looking bemused. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Mairon considered the question a moment, gently swirling the wine in his glass. “I don’t know,” he said. “I feel like I might just want to be mad about it.”

“I know that feeling,” Melkor said, nodding.

“It’s not really a good one.”

“Eh,” Melkor said, shrugging. “It has its moments. Anger is kind of an addicting feeling.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said, “but your friend not speaking to you doesn’t feel great.”

“How long’s it been?”

“Three days.”

“Yikes,” Melkor said. “That’s, like, a record.”

“I know,” Mairon said. “It sucks.”

“You want to talk about it?” Melkor asked again, sensing Mairon’s discomfiture.

“I saw a thing in the paper,” Mairon said. “It was about Ilmarë.”

“Oh, yeah? What about her?”

“About her work,” Mairon said. “She does nonprofit law, I guess. There was an article mentioning her work for Varda’s foundation.”

“God, that sounds boring,” Melkor said, making a face.

“Did you hear what I said?” Mairon asked, a little annoyed. “Varda—you know, your sister-in-law? The one married to your dumbass brother?”

“I’m familiar, thanks,” Melkor said sarcastically. “I’ve sat through several painful family dinners with her, back when I was still speaking to the fam once in a while.”

“Ilmarë works for her,” Mairon said.

“Yeah, I got that part.”

“Why are you not upset? I mean, I get why Thil wasn’t, but I expected you to be as freaked out as I was.”

“Why?”

“Because she works for Varda,” Mairon said, exasperated.

“So she has bad taste in employers,” Melkor said, shrugging. “It’s not a crime. It just sucks for her.”

“It doesn’t worry you?”

“No,” Melkor said, “but it’s clearly bothering you.” Mairon scowled. “Why?” asked, genuinely curious.

“Because it’s Manwë,” he said, as though it should’ve been obvious. “I don’t like him,

and I definitely don't trust him, and—”

“Hang on,” Melkor said, waving a hand as though to slow him down. “That’s what bothering you? You think that because Ilmarë probably sees my brother sometimes, she’s like, spying on us or something?”

“No, but—”

“You just think Thil’s bringing someone around who could potentially hurt us,” Melkor said. “Or that she’d let something slip that could be used against us. Or that Ilmarë just might happen to see some papers in Thil’s office, or—”

“Okay,” Mairon said grudgingly. “I see your point.”

“Thil is the most careful, conscientious person I’ve ever met in my life,” Melkor said, “and she’d cut off her own hand before she let anyone hurt us.”

“I know that.”

“I know,” Melkor said, “but you didn’t do a very good job of showing it.”

“Didn’t I tell you I just wanted to wallow?” Mairon said, scowling, but there was no real venom in the words.

“Is that what you really wanted? To sit here letting this dumb fight eat at you all night?”

“No,” Mairon said grudgingly. “I guess not.” He sighed. “I have to apologize, don’t I?”

“Couldn’t hurt.” Mairon made as though to get up from the couch, but Melkor put a hand on his arm. “It doesn’t have to be this minute,” he said. “It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“She’s still up.”

“She might be busy,” Melkor said. “She has a girlfriend now, remember?”

“Oh, right.”

“And anyway,” Melkor said, grinning, “I haven’t seen you all day?”

“Miss me?” Mairon said, smiling at last.

“Always,” Melkor said, and kissed him.

Thuringwethil looked up at the knock on her door and scowled when she saw it was Mairon standing in the doorway. “Do you have an appointment?” she asked icily.

“No,” he said, “but I was hoping you could pencil me in.”

“I’m busy,” she said. “I don’t have time to spare for bullshit.”

“I know,” he said. “So I’ll make it quick. I’m sorry, Thil.”

“You should be.”

“I know. I was being an asshole.”

“Yes, you were.”

“I shouldn’t have implied that Ilmarë might do something to hurt us. What’s worse is implying that you would ever let her. To paraphrase Melkor, you’re the most careful, conscientious person in the world, and I know you’d never let anything happen to Angband, or to us.”

“Melkor said that?”

“Something like it,” Mairon said. “But don’t tell him I told you.”

“No deal.”

“That’s fair, I guess.” She flashed him a grin, and he found himself grinning back, relieved. “I’m sorry, Thil.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said, “but I forgive you.”

“You busy?”

“Not this minute.”

“Good,” he said. “I feel like I owe you a coffee.”

“I’d never turn down free caffeine.”

“A girl after my own heart,” he said. “Come on. I’ve been dying to tell you about the new kid I found Instagram-ing his workspace yesterday.”

“Oh boy,” she said, rubbing her hands together delightedly. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter End Notes

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Roll With The Changes

Chapter Summary

The gang is getting back into the regular swing of things, but the Feanorians aren't wasting any time making plans for a comeback. Luckily for Angband, it looks like Mairon might finally be getting his groove back...

Chapter Notes

Lots of scheming, sneaky meetings, and mushy couples garbage. You know, the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You know,” Thuringwethil said, setting her coffee cup down carefully on Melkor’s desk so she could slide her bag off her shoulder, “I think this is the first time in the decade-ish that I’ve worked for you that you’ve scheduled a real, honest-to-God meeting with me.”

“We’ve had lots of meetings,” Melkor said, waving her pronouncement away with a dismissive flick of his hand.

“Called by me,” she said, settling into the chair on the other side of his desk. “Not scheduled by you.”

“Well, if you want to get technical...”

“I live for technicalities,” she said.

“And we love you anyway,” he shot back.

“Handle your own legal shit, then,” she said, unconcerned, leaning forward to retrieve her notebook from her bag.

“I can’t,” he said. “That’s why I wanted to meet with you.”

“Still surprised by that,” she said. “Pleasantly, granted, but surprised nonetheless.”

“What kind of nerd says words like ‘nonetheless’?”

“The kind that might just help you out with whatever dumb shenanigans you’re trying to weasel out of this time around,” she said blithely. “*If* you want to be nice to me, that is.”

“Have I told you how pretty you look today?” he asked obsequiously, plastering an ingratiating smile onto his face.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, waving a hand dismissively at him. “You can compliment me later. Let’s get to the actual work stuff. I have other things to do today.”

“Me too,” he said, making a face. “Hence why I had to schedule an actual meeting.”

“You have been busy lately, now that I think about it,” she said, cocking her head to the side and regarding him thoughtfully. “I can’t remember the last time I heard any screaming on this floor of the building.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s a bummer.”

“Not the word I’d use, but okay.”

“Anyway,” he said, swiveling his chair in what almost seemed like nervous anticipation, “that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about—what I’ve been so busy with the last couple weeks.”

“Okay,” she said, an edge of wariness in her voice. “Let’s hear it.”

“Gothmog and I have been working on a...project. Or, not really even a project. Not yet. I have this idea, and he’s been helping me flesh it out a little.”

“What kind of idea?”

“Some business ideas,” he said, shrugging. “Future directions. A five-year plan, if you will.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that was your kind of thing,” she said, regarding him thoughtfully.

“Me either,” he said, grimacing. “But times change.”

“People too,” she said.

“Let’s not get carried away,” he said, grinning. “You haven’t even heard my spiel yet.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “Lay it out for me, then.”

Melkor did. He told her everything he’d been brainstorming the last few weeks, everything he and Gothmog had talked about, researched, and plotted. He even had a handful of papers to back up his points, some hand-scribbled notes, some actual tables and charts. When he was finished, he sat back, looking nervously at Thuringwethil. She was nodding thoughtfully but said nothing for a long moment.

“Well?” he asked at last, impatience getting the better of him. “What do you think?”

“I think,” she said, “that you’ve never actually put together a presentation this good in all the years we’ve worked together.”

“Okay,” he said, “I can’t decide if that’s a compliment or like, secretly a slam.”

“There’s no secret about it,” she said. “It’s a little of both.”

“I’m going to count it as a victory.”

“You’re nothing if not optimistic.”

“Someone has to be,” he said, grinning. “But seriously, what do you think?”

“I think you have some good ideas,” she said. “Really good, even. I think expanding our product line and diversifying what we do is going to strengthen Angband, especially since our main repertoire is so embroiled in bullshit at the moment.”

“Yeah,” Melkor said, excited. “And no one else is into both realms of unmanned aircraft, really, so it sets us above the competition. Buyers like being able to deal with one company instead of two, and market research tells us that customers also prefer uniformity across systems whenever possible.”

“Wow,” she said, nodding. “Never thought I’d hear you using words like ‘market research’, but I like it.”

“I’m not as big an idiot as you make me out to be,” he said mildly.

“As you make yourself out to be,” she countered.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Whatever.”

“You’ve put some serious thought into this,” she said. “And some serious work.”

“Yeah, I have.”

“It’s good work,” she said. “I mean, it needs a hell of a lot more work to be anything resembling an actual business plan, but it’s really good foundational stuff.”

“You think so?”

“You know I’d tell you if I didn’t.”

“Fair enough.”

“So what’s Mairon think of all this?” Melkor hesitated, shifting his weight. Thuringwethil rolled her eyes. “Have you not learned your lesson on keeping things from him?”

“Okay,” he said, annoyed, “but this is different.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, frowning.

“It is,” he insisted. “I’m not trying to actually keep anything from him, for one thing. I want him to know, and I’m going to tell him ASAP. I just wanted to have a more solid plan before I told him.”

“Yeah?” she said, still not entirely convinced.

“I want to give him something to be excited about,” Melkor said. “Not something to worry about, or something to have to try to fix. He’s got enough of that.”

Thuringwethil said nothing but gave him a strange look that made him scowl suspiciously at her. “What?” he demanded.

“That’s really considerate of you,” she said, shaking her head. “And sweet, actually.”

“Why do you have to say it like that?” he demanded, aggrieved.

“Like it still surprises me?”

“Yeah,” he said, scowling. “Like that.”

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. “Force of habit, I guess.”

“Get with the times, Thil,” he said, grinning and leaning back in his chair, throwing his arms wide as though to present his new, improved self.

She shook her head, but she smiled, satisfied. “You love him, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

Melkor let the chair fall back to a neutral position, and when he spoke, all joking and sarcasm had disappeared from his voice. “Yeah,” he said simply, a smile tugging at his lips. “I really do.”

“It’s nice,” she said, “seeing you happy. Both of you.”

“Same to you, Thil.”

“God, when did we get so sappy?”

“I don’t know,” he said, making a face, “but that’s enough for today.”

“Agreed,” she said, gathering her things and standing up. “Need anything else from me?”

“Not at the moment,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I’m trying to get through my to-do list quickly today. I want to meet Ilmarë for dinner, but she’s got a late meeting thing tonight.”

“You could just leave, you know. I have a feeling your boss wouldn’t mind.”

“I appreciate it,” she said, “but I’ve got too much to do to bail just yet.”

“Tell me about it,” he said.

“You’ve developed a work ethic,” she said, feigning sympathy. “Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve always had a work ethic,” he said. “Just not the over-work obsession you and Mai like to cultivate. Which, let’s be honest, is more a desire for self-flagellation than for achievement.”

“It can be both,” she said serenely. “It tends to go hand-in-hand for us overachievers.”

“I know,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I live with Mairon, remember?”

“How is it, by the way?” she asked him, pausing on her way to the door. “Now that you’ve had time to settle in, I mean.”

“The best,” he said. “I mean, besides the fact that he and I have very different definitions of clean, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t actually understand the concept of sleeping in. Oh, and the dog was an adjustment. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I don’t give a shit,” he said, grinning widely. “He’s there, all the time, with me. I don’t

care about anything else.”

“Stop,” she said. “You can’t be this cute before noon. I can’t handle it.”

“Can’t help it, Thil,” he said. “I’m gross now, and it’s kind of your fault. You encouraged me.”

“On and off,” she reminded him.

“Which was fair, under the circumstances.”

“I’m really glad things worked out this way.”

“Me tool. Can you imagine how shitty it would’ve been around here if they hadn’t?”

“No,” she said, “and I don’t want to. Which is why I always tell you not to fuck it up.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that anymore,” he said.

“Oddly enough, I kind of believe you.”

“You should,” he said. “I’m kind of a really great boyfriend.”

“You really are,” she said. “Which is crazy. I mean, who would’ve thought?”

“Me,” he said at once. “And also, ouch. Harsh, Thil.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, waving a hand unconcernedly. “It’s not like you don’t deserve it.”

“I’m a changed man, Thil,” he said, grinning. “Reformed, you might say.”

“*You* might say.”

“I just did.”

She looked at him for a moment with an expression he couldn’t quite read. “It’s nice, you know,” she said at last, folding her arms across her chest and shifting her weight.

“What is?”

“This,” she said, waving a hand vaguely toward him as though to indicate the very concept of Melkor.

“Okay,” he said. “The cracks about me actually doing work things are getting a little old.”

“Not yet they aren’t. But that’s not what I meant.”

“What, then?”

“I just meant that you’re happy—or maybe happy isn’t quite the right word. Maybe it’s content. Whatever it is, it’s good. It suits you.”

“I am happy,” he said. “And I think Mairon is too.”

“So do I,” she said. “You know, it’s kind of funny. I knew he’d be good for you, but I

had no idea how good you'd be for him—and you really are.”

“Yeah,” he said, swiveling his chair from side to side. “I’m pretty much the best.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she said, but her tone was less biting than it might have been. She’d known him long enough to recognize when he was deflecting. She glanced at her watch and made a *tsk* noise that managed to change the subject and break the minor tension in one quick, concise syllable. “Okay, for real this time,” she said, letting a familiar briskness take over her tone. “I’ve got a meeting in twenty minutes, and I need to get some paperwork gathered up before I have to go.”

“Nah,” he said, his own easy nonchalance sliding back into place. “I’m all good for now. I’ll probably bother you later when I have more for you to do.”

“Same as always, then.”

“Bye, Thil,” he said, watching her disappear across the hall. He sighed, sitting still for a moment, thinking of bygone days when he had had nothing to do at work beyond scrolling through reddit and acting out half-baked pranks with Gothmog. “Fuck responsibility,” he muttered to himself, but he tapped his computer to wake it up, sighed again, and went back to work.

“He’s a liar.” The words were spoken, not shouted, and were ostensibly calm, and yet Maedhros could hear the pointed accusation in each clipped syllable.

“Don’t be dramatic, Curufin,” he said. “I’m sure—”

“Get your head out of your ass, Maitimo,” Celegorm said. “The evidence is right there. You can’t deny it.”

“Evidence,” Maedhros said, rolling his eyes. “Right.”

“We found the files on the Nargothrond servers,” Celegorm said. “They’re called Silmaril. What more do you want?”

“You found three files,” Maedhros corrected. “Not even whole program files.”

“I don’t care how many or how complete they were. They were *there*, Maitimo.”

“And?”

“Oh my God,” Celegorm said, grabbing fistfuls of wild blonde hair in an exaggerated gesture of exasperation. “Are you being stupid on purpose, or have I misjudged how dumb you can actually be?”

“Finrod worked for us,” Maedhros reminded him

“With us,” Curufin corrected.

“Nargothrond was part of Formenos.”

“Associated,” Curufin said. “Loosely.”

“You’re being pedantic.”

“It’s his thing,” Celegorm said.

Curufin shot them both a look of contempt. “Finrod made an exceptionally clear point of keeping Nargothrond separate from Formenos. He didn’t want to be directly associated with it.”

“Or with us.”

“It was an ethics company,” Maedhros said. “More of a think tank than a company, if we’re being honest. I mean, for Christ’s sake, Curvo. You’re the one that constantly called it a circle jerk for washed up philosophy majors.”

“I thought it was,” Curufin said, shrugging. “I also thought we could trust our own family members. Clearly I can be wrong.”

“You know, under different circumstances, I might be shocked by the fact that you actually admit a capacity for being wrong,” Maedhros said. “But you had to go and ruin it with a bunch of batshit conspiracy theories, didn’t you?”

“Under different circumstances,” Celegorm said, “I might agree with you. But this isn’t the time for making fun of Curvo, much as I might like to. There’s some serious shit going on here, Maitimo.”

“Yeah, there is,” Maedhros said, “but it’s coming from outside the family, not within it.”

“It’s coming from both,” Celegorm said, “and here’s your proof.”

“Dad probably sent him that stuff,” Maedhros said. “You know, for testing.”

“Dad hated Finrod,” Curufin said.

“He did not.”

“Maybe not hated,” Curufin amended, “but he didn’t respect him, or his ethics garbage. He let Nargothrond be associated with Formenos to keep grandad happy.”

“He could’ve let Finrod test some Silmaril stuff for the same reason,” Maedhros said stubbornly. “Like I said, they’re not even full program files. It’s bits and pieces.”

“Just because we didn’t find full stuff doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist,” Celegorm said. “It doesn’t mean Finrod doesn’t have it.”

“He doesn’t have shit right now,” Maedhros said. “He’s about to get sentenced for fraud.”

“Uh-huh,” Celegorm said. “And remind me, big brother, what was he doing to get sentenced for fraud?”

“Dicking around our arch-nemesis’ company,” Curufin supplied.

“You can’t say arch-nemesis with a straight face,” Maedhros said. “You just can’t. It’s ridiculous.”

“You can’t deflect just because you don’t want your boyfriend to be wrong,” Celegorm said. “Besides, I always said our half-cousins were a little too chummy.”

“Didn’t stop you from palling around with Írissë,” Maedhros retorted. “And speaking of

palling around, who's best friend got indicted along with our dear cousin, might I ask?"

"Ex-best friend," Celegorm corrected.

"Still," Maedhros said. "You always did have good taste in friends."

"Stop bickering," said Curufin, "and focus on the real problem here."

"We have plenty of problems around here without you two inventing new ones. Formenos is in trouble, and if we don't focus on getting in back on track—"

"What do you think we're trying to do?" Celegorm demanded.

"I honestly don't know."

"You know, I was pretty pissed when you tried to hand over Dad's company to our shitass uncle," Celegorm said coldly, "but now I'm thinking you had the right idea."

"Oh, really? Big fan of Uncle Fingolfin's these days, are you?"

"Fuck no," Celegorm said. "I'm just starting to think that handing over the reigns was the only good thing you ever did for this company."

"Oh, fuck you, Tyelko," Maedhros said, glowering at him. "My whole life has been an exercise in doing what's best for Formenos, and—"

"Oh, poor you," Celegorm interrupted, rolling his eyes. "Dad's favorite boy, forced to learn how to take over the family business."

"Please," Maedhros said, with equal vitriol. "We all know Curvo was Dad's favorite."

"Indeed," said Curufin smugly. "And as Dad's favorite, I think—"

"I don't give a hot shit what you think," said Maedhros, cutting him off. "You two have done nothing but give me grief and be a pain in my ass since Dad died, and I'm tired of it. Like it or not, I'm the one running this place. If you don't like it, you can get your own goddamn company."

"We did," Celegorm said. "It's called Nargothrond. Maybe you've heard of it?"

"Sure," Maedhros said. "It's a shitty little subsidiary that's turning out to be more trouble than it's worth."

"It's an LLC," Curufin said.

"Whatever," Maedhros said. "I'm shutting it down."

"You're not," Celegorm said.

"Want to bet?"

"Yes, actually," Curufin said. "Nargothrond is an independent entity. We don't need your permission to exist, and you absolutely don't have the authority to shut it down."

"Fine," Maedhros said. "You want to be independent? Have at it. Go stew in your own dumbass paranoia on your own time, in your own building, at your own business. But when this

whole stupid thing backfires on you, don't come crawling to me for help."

"Drop the angry babysitter tone, Nelyo," Celegorm said. "We're adults now."

"Sure," Maedhros shot back. "As evidenced by your very adult 'you're not the boss of us' proclamation."

"What Tyelko lacks in eloquence," Curufin said, "he makes up for in substance."

"And what we all lack in condescension, you've got in spades."

"This isn't productive," Curufin said, standing up from his chair. "We're ten seconds away from outright name-calling."

"Sooner, maybe," Celegorm said.

"Let's go," Curufin said, beckoning to Celegorm. To Maedhros, he said, "Maybe when you've calmed down, we can talk again."

"Sure," Maedhros said. "When you're ready to talk some sense, give me a call."

Curufin merely shook his head, fixing Maedhros with a familiar look of infuriating disdain. Without another word, he and Celegorm left Maedhros' office, shutting the door as they went. Maedhros treated them to a soft, ten-second stream of pent-up curses, glowering at the back of his door. Then he sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and picked up his phone. "Something tells me I'm going to need backup," he said, and thumbed the speed dial button for Fingon.

Despite his talk with Thuringwethil, Melkor didn't talk to Mairon about his plans for almost a week. At first, he told himself he was waiting for the right time. He and Mairon were busy, after all, and he was loathe to interrupt either the bustle of the office or the coveted tranquility of their time at home. The delay gave him time to think, and he found himself pushing back the conversation to look up another statistic, or explore another option, on and on until it had been almost a week, and he realized at last that he was stalling. When it came down to it, Melkor was, much as he hated to admit it, nervous. He had put a lot of thought and work into this proposal, and there was no one whose opinion he valued more than Mairon's. Still, Melkor was nothing if not bold, and so at last, he forced himself to speak.

He caught Mairon one evening after dinner, when they were cleaning up the kitchen. He laid out his plans over the clatter of dishes, the rattle of cutlery dropping into the dishwasher. He watched Mairon's hands slow on the leftovers, his attention shifted to Melkor's words. Melkor got out the folder he had shown to Thuringwethil, the culmination of his planning and Gothmog's, and spread everything on the island. Mairon looked over every page, each and every figure, considering it with careful attention. He asked questions here and there, but mostly he was silent, listening to Melkor talk.

At last, Melkor talked himself out, trailing off and watching Mairon, waiting for a response. Mairon, oblivious, said nothing and continued perusing the papers strewn on the countertop. "Well?" Melkor finally demanded, unable to wait any longer.

Mairon looked up, startled, as though he had forgotten that Melkor was there. "Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I got a little absorbed."

"And?"

Mairon waved a hand at the island. “You put a ton of work into this.”

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “Well, Gothmog helped, but yeah. I know it’s still rough and all, but I—”

“It’s brilliant,” Mairon said, cutting him off.

Melkor found himself grinning, relief spreading warmth through his chest. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “I mean, I know we’ve talked about broadening our scope in the past, but it was always a vague, hypothetical kind of discussion. This is an actual plan.”

“Well, the beginnings of one, anyway.”

“It’s great,” Mairon said, and Melkor could tell that he meant it. “Seriously. You must’ve put a ton of work into this.”

“I did,” Melkor admitted, “but it needs a lot more.” He hesitated a moment and then said, “I thought you could help me with that.”

Mairon snorted. “You know I already have twelve new plans and seventeen corrections on my mental to-do list.”

Melkor laughed, took his hand, and kissed it. “Thank God,” he said. “Part of me thought you were going to be mad.”

“Why would I be mad?”

“Because I—” Melkor rubbed the back of his neck, a little sheepish. “Well, I mean, you get kind of mad when I keep things from you. Not that you shouldn’t. I mean, you’re totally justified. I’ve gotten us into some real shit doing that. And not that I was really keeping this from you, but—”

“Babe,” Mairon said, laying a hand on his chest, “what makes me mad is when you leave me out of the loop. When you don’t give me a chance to weigh in before you do something that affects me. This isn’t that.”

“No, it isn’t,” Melkor said. “I was dying to tell you about this—I almost did, too, about a hundred times. But I wanted to have a more solid plan before I got involved. I’ve dumped enough half-baked ideas on you over the years and expected you to sort them out. I don’t want to do that anymore.”

Mairon stood on tiptoe to kiss him, his hand sliding to the back of Melkor’s neck. He leaned into Melkor, his free hand on Melkor’s chest, gently gripping his shirt. Melkor kissed him back hungrily, relief making him bold, his hands encircling Mairon’s waist. Mairon was pulling him closer, so close it was maddening, pulling him down to whisper in his ear. “I love you,” he whispered, his breath hot on Melkor’s neck, his lips burning a trail of kisses into Melkor’s skin. “So goddamn much.”

“I love you too,” Melkor said, shuddering under the pass of Mairon’s hand, sliding down his chest to tug at the waist of his pants.

“Fuck,” Melkor breathed, as Mairon’s fingers slipped down to stroke him. “I need to come up with new business plans more often.”

Mairon laughed, kissing his cheek. “Well,” he said, mock-serious, “good work deserves to be rewarded.” His hand was on Melkor’s inner thigh, stroking upward, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Mmm,” Melkor said, steadying himself against the counter. “Do I get to pick the prize?”

“Anything you want,” Mairon said, his hand cupping Melkor’s cock through his pants.

“Perfect,” Melkor said. He picked Mairon up and threw him over his shoulder, grinning widely at Mairon’s laughter and his totally unconvincing protests, and carried him to their bedroom to claim his prize.

When Melkor wandered into the kitchen the next morning, he was surprised to find Mairon sitting at the table, his laptop in front of him and a cup of coffee in one hand. “You still here?” he asked, glancing at the clock. It was almost ten o’clock in the morning.

“It’s Saturday,” Mairon said, shrugging.

“And?”

“Fair enough,” Mairon said. “I’m working from home this morning.”

“You’re the only person I know that actually means that when you say it.”

“Nah, Thuringwethil does too.”

“That’s probably true.”

“You slept later than I thought you would,” Mairon said. “Considering we went to bed fairly early last night.”

“After what you did to me last night,” Melkor said, raising an eyebrow at him, “I’m surprised I’m up this early.”

Mairon laughed. “I take it you enjoyed yourself.”

“As our downstairs neighbors can probably attest.”

Mairon laughed again, and Melkor relished the gleam of pride and self-satisfaction in his smile. “So, what are you working on this early?” he asked, turning to get himself a cup of coffee.

“About that,” Mairon said, and the tone of his voice made Melkor turn back to look at him. “I have an idea I want to run past you.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“It’s...well, it’s kind of a risky idea.”

“Okay.”

“And it may or may not be entirely legal.”

“Now I’m really interested,” Melkor said, bringing his coffee to the table and sitting

down. “Alright. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Mairon did. It was a simple plan, inspiring for both its audacity and its cunning, and it didn’t take long to lay out in full. Melkor was silent as Mairon spoke, but a grin blossomed on his face as he listened, so big and genuine and excited that all nervousness fled from Mairon, and he finished his proposition with a satisfied nod of his head.

“Oh, babe,” Melkor said, real admiration in his voice. “You are a fucking evil genius.”

“It’s a good idea,” Mairon said, hedging despite his enjoyment of the praise, “but it has some serious risks.”

“Anything worth doing has risks,” Melkor said. “But if the rewards outweigh them, then you take those risks.”

“Do you think these are risks worth taking?”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know if I can make that call.”

“Yes, you can,” Melkor said. “If anyone’s earned that right, it’s you.” Mairon nodded slowly, but he didn’t answer outright. “I trust you,” Melkor said gently. “If you think we can pull this off, then I’m behind you, one hundred percent.”

Mairon smiled, a warm ache of love and gratitude spreading through his chest at Melkor’s words. “Let’s do it,” he said, with an air of mischief in his voice that made Melkor laugh.

Melkor stood up and went over to Mairon, stooping to kiss his forehead. “You’re brilliant,” he said, “and I love you. Now let’s go fuck some shit up.”

Chapter End Notes

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Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy

Chapter Summary

Mairon's got a plan--a risky one, yes, but all big plans have some risk. More importantly, Mairon's birthday is coming up, and Melkor has BIG plans.

Chapter Notes

Like, REALLY big plans. He's smitten, you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hang on,” Gothmog said. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re planning to give one of our Glaurung systems to some random dude—”

“Not give, exactly,” Mairon said. “And it’s not just some random dude.”

“Who is then supposedly going to hand it over to Fëanor’s spawn—”

“A select few of them,” Mairon said.

“So that they can, what, exactly? Steal Silmaril back from us?”

“It’s going to be a rigged system,” Mairon said patiently. “It’ll look like the real thing, but they won’t be able to pry the Silmaril programming back out of it.”

“And you’re okay with this?” Gothmog asked, turning to Melkor.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Melkor said, shrugging.

Gothmog turned to Thuringwethil. “This is crazy, right?” he asked her. “It’s not just me?”

“Welcome to my lifetime,” Thuringwethil said.

“It’s not crazy,” Melkor said. “It’s actually pretty fucking smart.”

“Damn, that dick must be good,” Gothmog said.

“You have no idea,” Melkor said, putting a hand on Mairon’s thigh and waggling his eyebrows lasciviously at Gothmog.

“Gross,” Gothmog said.

“You asked for it,” Thuringwethil said, a half-second before Melkor said the exact same thing.

“Now *that’s* gross,” Mairon said, grinning.

“That’s gotta be a sign of like, impending doom,” Melkor said, giving an exaggerated shudder.

“If it is,” Gothmog said, “it’s probably because of this dumbass plan you two cooked up.”

“Mairon cooked up,” Melkor said.

“Gee, thanks,” Mairon said.

“No, I’m behind you one hundred percent,” Melkor said. “I just want to be clear that this was entirely your idea.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mairon said. “Hedge your bets.”

“I’m not hedging, I—”

“Babe, I’m fucking with you.”

“Oh,” Melkor said. “You could’ve said so.”

“I just did.”

“Thil,” Gothmog said imploringly. “Please talk some sense into these dumb idiots.”

“Run me through this again,” Thuringwethil said, turning to Mairon.

“Okay,” Mairon said, cracking his knuckles. “We set up a scheme to look like Glaurung is available on the black market. We pick someone to buy it, someone with ties to Nargothrond.”

“You have someone in mind?”

“I do,” he said. “I’ve been doing some digging.”

“Okay, and then what?”

“Nargothrond—well, specifically, Fëanor’s third and fifth spawn—set about trying to take it apart and get Silmaril back.”

“And you’ve already weaseled some fake-ish Silmaril files onto their servers over there,” Melkor added.

“Yes,” Mairon confirmed. “So, while they’re busy dicking around with that, we file our patents for Silmaril. We should be clear now, since the criminal charges were dropped.”

“Is that true?” Gothmog asked Thuringwethil.

“I can’t see why not,” she said.

“We can then tip off the proper authorities that our IP has been stolen,” Mairon said, “and we get them both on hardware *and* software.”

“See?” Melkor said, looking at Gothmog. “Fucking brilliant.”

“Are you concerned,” Thuringwethil asked, “about the fact that Nargothrond isn’t super attached to Formenos?”

“Meh,” Mairon said, shrugging. “The one kid—Curufin, I think he’s called—he’s a pretty solid programmer. He’s the most like Fëanor, from what I’ve heard. Getting him out of commission is key. The fact that Celegorm’s there is a nice bonus, considering it was his dumbass friend that tried to kill me.”

“If I ever see that son of a bitch,” Melkor growled.

“Don’t make me do a murder trial,” Thuringwethil said. “I hate murder trials.”

“You go to jail,” Mairon said to Melkor, “and I’ll kill you.”

“What did I just say?” Thuringwethil demanded.

“So you’re on their side?” Gothmog demanded, looking at Thuringwethil.

She shrugged. “Nothing their doing is technically illegal, unless Mairon’s dumb enough to get caught selling our own system onto the black market.”

“I’m not,” Mairon said.

“This doesn’t sound at all risky to you?” Gothmog said.

“Oh, it sounds risky as hell,” Thuringwethil said. “But—and I realize the cosmic irony of me saying this—sometimes you have to take risks if you want to get anything done.”

“Hell yeah, Thil,” Melkor said, grinning and holding out a hand for a high five. “Welcome to the dark side.”

“Please,” she said, high fiving him anyway. “I’ve been here a while.”

“What d’you say, Gothmog?” Mairon asked. “You in?”

“I guess if you three think it’s okay,” Gothmog said, shrugging. “What the hell. Count me in.”

“Score one for peer pressure,” Melkor said, slapping him on the back.

“Alright, then,” Mairon said. “If we’re all onboard, then I’ll get things rolling.”

“Sounds good,” Melkor said. “Let me know if you need help.”

“Will do,” Mairon said. He glanced at his watch. “I better get down to the lab and make sure nothing’s on fire. I haven’t been down there yet today.”

“That has to be a record.”

“Nah,” Mairon said, grinning. “There was the time I was dying in the hospital, remember?”

“Get out of here,” Melkor said, shoving him toward the door. Mairon laughed and complied, disappearing toward the elevator. Melkor followed him to the doorway and leaned out into the hall, waving. Then he shut the door to his office and turned back to the other two. “Now that he’s gone,” Melkor said, looking around as though Mairon might somehow overhear, “I need to talk to you two.”

“About what?” asked Thuringwethil.

“Mairon’s birthday,” Melkor said.

“Oh, yeah,” Gothmog said. “That’s coming up.”

“Next week,” Melkor said, nodding. “And I have big plans. I’m going to need your help to pull it off.”

“Now this is the kind of scheming I can get behind,” Gothmog said, grinning.

“Can’t argue with a good surprise,” Thuringwethil said, sitting down. “Let’s hear what you had in mind.”

“We’re going to take it, right?” Celegorm asked. “I mean, we have to.”

“I’m as tempted as you are,” Curufin said, “but we have to think of the consequences.”

“What, we suddenly become the saviors of Dad’s whole company and probably get promoted to CEO or whatever? I mean, that’ll be you, obvs, but I believe you’ll remember me after your rise to the top.”

“While I appreciate your acknowledgement of my rightful place as heir to Dad’s kingdom,” Curufin said.

“Despite the fact that you’re fifth in line,” Celegorm put in.

“We can’t get there,” Curufin continued, ignoring him, “if we do it illegally.”

“Why not?” Celegorm said. “*They* did.”

“They have some kind of ungodly good luck,” Curufin said, frowning.

“Apparently,” Celegorm said. “But hey, after the shit luck we’ve had the last year or two, maybe we’re due for a little upswing this time around.”

“Maybe,” Curufin said, “but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Okay,” Celegorm said, “that’s fair, but what better signal that our luck’s changing than one of their fucking drone systems showing up practically on our doorstep?”

“It does seem to be a stroke of uncanny good luck,” Curufin admitted.

“Right,” said Celegorm. “So what are you worried about? You don’t trust the kid?”

“No, I do,” Curufin said. “I looked into him. He’s got connections all around Granddad’s old circles. He seems legit.”

“Then what?”

“Let’s say our friend Turin comes through,” said Curufin, beginning to pace. “Our first concern is the thing itself. I have my doubts that it’ll be whole and functional.”

“I thought you said you trusted the kid.”

“I do,” Curufin said again, annoyed. “But I don’t trust Angband. Say what you will

about them—”

“I have,” Celegorm said, “and will continue to.”

“But,” Curufin continued, “they aren’t sloppy. I have serious concerns about how this thing ended up on the black market.”

“Black market,” Celegorm said, grinning. “It sounds so, like, gangster-y.”

“Would you prefer I call it the underground economy?”

“No,” Celegorm said. “That’s nerdy.”

“The informal sector?”

“That’s even worse.”

“Whatever we call it,” Curufin said, “I doubt Angband would be careless enough to let one of their pieces slip onto it.”

“Everyone fucks up,” Celegorm said, shrugging.

“Theoretically, yes,” Curufin said, “but underestimating Angband would be a very serious mistake.”

“I’m not underestimating them,” Celegorm said. “They’ve been a royal pain in my ass for over a year. I know exactly how much trouble they can be. But they are fallible. The Doriath thing proves that for sure.”

“Yes,” Curufin said thoughtfully. “You’re right about that.”

“Look,” said Celegorm. “I get that you’re cautious, and I’m glad. Someone has to be. But I think you’re looking a gift horse in the mouth here.”

“The problem with this horse,” Curufin said, “is I can’t be sure if it’s a gift horse or a Trojan one.”

“What’s the worst that it could be? C’mon, brother. Worst case scenario.”

“Either that it’s broken and useless and we waste or money, or it’s a trap.”

“How could it possibly be a trap?”

“It’s bugged, or it’s some kind of malware. I don’t know. I don’t trust those assholes.”

“So we use dedicated computers. We don’t let it access our main shit.”

“It’s not a long-term solution. Eventually we need connectivity.”

“Yes, but let’s look at best case scenarios. The thing is real and whole and functional. We can get a look at Silmaril. We can copy it, even if we have to do it longhand.”

“That’s the whole reason I’m considering it. I mean, to have it back...” He trailed off, longing and anger and determination written on his face.

“It would be a real kick in Nelyo’s teeth,” Celegorm said, grinning.

“Among other things,” said Curufin. Still, he was pensive, tapping his fingertips on the desk, unsure.

“To have it back,” Celegorm said, echoing his brother’s words, “would be worth the risk we’re taking.”

“It would be worth anything,” Curufin said. “And we’d mitigate the risks, of course.”

“Duh,” said Celegorm. He waited for a moment, watching Curufin weigh his options, until his impatience got the better of him. “You know what Dad always said,” Celegorm added, doing his best to keep the impatience from his voice. “Fortune favors the bold.”

“That it does, big brother,” Curufin said, grinning at last. He picked up the phone and dialed the number for Turin Turambar.

“This is your five-minute warning,” Thuringwethil said, ducking her head into Mairon’s office.

“Mmhmm,” he hummed, unconcerned, still typing.

“I’m not joking,” she said. “We have a reservation.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’m wrapping things up. Where are we going, anyway?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Come on,” he said, giving her a plaintive look over the edge of his laptop. “It’s my birthday.”

“Boss’s orders,” Thuringwethil said.

“Since when do you listen to Melkor?”

“Since he had a good idea, for once,” she said.

“Must be somewhere good,” Mairon said, glancing at her again. “You’re extra dressed up. Did you change since I saw you earlier?”

“Yes,” she said. “Which reminds me.” She ducked out of the room, and Mairon heard her footsteps heading for her own office. A moment later, he heard her returning, and she reappeared in the door of his office holding a garment bag. “Here,” she said, bringing the bag to his desk.

“What’s this?”

“A change of clothes.”

He frowned, stood up, and took the bag from her. He zipped it open and found one of his good suits inside, jacket and all. “So, like, *really* fancy, huh?”

“Jacket required,” she said.

“And Melkor agreed to this?” he asked, pulling loose the knot of his tie.

“He picked it,” she said, turning back to shut his door. “With help, of course.”

“Yeah, black tie and jacket isn’t exactly his favorite thing.”

“No,” she said, taking his shirt as he shrugged out of it, “but he knew you’d like it.”

“He’s right,” Mairon said, taking off his pants and handing them to Thuringwethil. “How much is he paying them not to have to wear a jacket?”

“He isn’t,” she said, turning her back to fold the clothes and give him a little privacy. “I helped him pick out a suit yesterday.”

“Wow,” Mairon said, impressed. “Is that my birthday present?”

She laughed. “It’s mine to you,” she said, “and it only cost me three hours of listening to him whine.”

He grinned. “I’d accuse you of exaggerating, but I know Melkor.”

“He was in rare form,” she said, turning back around as he tucked his shirt front into his pants.

“I mean, he only own like, two suits, so it shouldn’t have been a hard decision.”

“We got a new one,” she said. “His other two were...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

Mairon laughed. “You’re going to have to tell me how you did that,” he said. “I’ve been bugging him to get some actual dress clothes for months.”

“You’d have an easier time, I think,” she said, handing him his tie. “You have your, I don’t know, masculine wiles, or whatever. I only have threats of violence.”

“Masculine wiles,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s a new one, Thil.”

“Whatever,” she said, shoos him away and tying the tie herself. “He loves you.”

“He does,” Mairon said, smiling.

“There,” she said, pulling the knot tight and straightening the fabric carefully. “You’re ready.”

“How’s my hair?”

She looked him over, thinking not for the first time that she would love to know what kind of black magic he had used to grow out his breakup undercut so quickly, and with no discernable stage of awkwardness. “You look great,” she said, and she meant it. “Now come on, or we’ll be late.”

He grabbed his wallet and phone from his desk and slid them into his pockets before following her out into the hall, stopping only for a moment to lock his office door.

“Where are Melkor and Gothmog?” Mairon asked, nodding at their dark offices and closed doors.

“They’re meeting us,” she said, leading him past the break room and turning toward the elevators. He paused, waiting for her to push the down arrow, but she headed for the stairs, and he

gave her a look of puzzlement.

“Are you really going to make me get some exercise?”

“Like you need any,” she said.

“That’s my point.”

“Come on,” she said, holding open the stairwell door.

He followed her, his bemusement only deepening as she headed up rather than down.

“Where are we going?” he asked, following her up the stairs.

“The roof, genius,” she said.

“No shit,” he said. “Why?”

“Do you want your birthday present or not?”

“What is it?” he asked. “A helipad?”

“No.”

“Then why is it on the roof?”

“Because sometimes it’s easier to just do what Melkor says than to argue with him,” she said. They had reached the door to roof, which was propped open with a wedge. “Come on,” she said. She pushed open the door and held it for him. Mairon followed, utterly intrigued.

He stepped out onto the roof. The summer sun was still high and warm, but there was a nice breeze that made it comfortable. The view from the roof was breathtaking, and normally, Mairon would’ve gone to the railing to look out, breathing in the warmth and dust and feeling a fondness in his chest for the city he had made his own. But instead, his gaze was drawn to the west, where the small tower that housed their various antennas and receivers stood, perfectly positioned to block the bright sun and give them a little pool of shadow.

Gothmog was standing in the shadow of the tower, leaning on a podium, of all things, and grinning at them. “About time,” he said. “You better hurry up. The show’s about to start.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll see,” Thuringwethil said, nudging him forward.

He let himself be nudged forward. There were three podiums set up in a row, and Thuringwethil pushed him towards the middle one, taking the last open one for herself.

“Okay, seriously,” Mairon said. “What are we—”

A familiar theme music began, blasting out from speakers Mairon couldn’t see, and he froze, sudden realization splitting his face with a huge grin of excitement and disbelief.

“This,” said a familiar voice, “is *Jeopardy!* Today’s contestants: a lawyer for Angband Enterprises, Thuringwethil—ah, it appears the last name has been smudged beyond legibility, so sorry about that.” Thuringwethil waved gamely, smiling. Mairon watched her, delighted and perplexed. “Well, then, we have a computer engineer and—I swear I’m only reading the script

I've been given—world's hottest COO—Mairon Smith.” Mairon laughed and waved, looking around for Melkor, who was nowhere to be seen. “And finally, a security operations manager and all-around strong man, Gothmog Valarauka.” Gothmog flexed his arms, his dress shirt straining over his muscle, and Thuringwehil wolf-whistled, grinning. “And now the host of *Jeopardy!*,” the announcer continued, “for one day only, Melkor Bauglir.”

Melkor appeared at last, striding out from behind the tower in a suit and tie, a wide, endearing grin on his face, and Mairon laughed. He couldn't help it; the whole thing was crazy and funny and so incredibly thoughtful that he almost thought he would burst from the love for his friends that welled up in him. “You guys,” he said, a warm ache spreading through his chest, “this is—”

“Shush,” Melkor said, barely suppressing his own grin. “It's not your time to talk.”

“But—”

Melkor shushed him again. “Don't make me kick you out of your own gameshow.”

“Was that really Johnny Gilbert?”

“Yes,” Melkor said. “Turns out he'll record you a fake *Jeopardy!* intro if you pay him in cash. Now be quiet so I can do the host thing.” Mairon obliged, watching in awe as the familiar screen flickered into life behind Melkor. “Thank you, Johnny Gilbert,” Melkor said, doing a passable imitation of Alex Trebek. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, pandering to an audience that didn't, as far as Mairon could tell, exist. “We have no returning champion today, but that won't stop us from playing our birthday boy's favorite game. Let's get to it. Take a look at the Jeopardy categories.”

He turned to look at the gameboard, and the top tiles flipped into place as he spoke. “Science,” he read, and then, “Bands from the 1980s, World History, Authors, Crossword Clues, and Rhyme Time. Mai, since it's your birthday, you get to go first.”

“Thanks, babe,” Mairon said, smiling.

Melkor tried not to smile and failed. “Where do we start?”

“I'll take Bands from the 1980s for \$300, Melkor.”

The \$300 tile flipped over, and Melkor read the words that appeared on the screen. “On New Year's Eve 1984, the drummer for this band lost his arm in a near fatal car accident.” Melkor had barely finished speaking when the buzzer went off. Mairon's nameplate lit up, and Melkor called on him.

“Who is Def Leppard,” Mairon said.

“Correct,” Melkor said, and Mairon's point total reflected his earnings.

“Settle in, Thil,” Gothmog said. “It's going to be a short and brutal game.”

Mairon easily ran through the 80s bands category and did the same with science, racking up \$3000 before the other two had answered a single question. He found the first Double Jeopardy question in the authors category (“*At the time of his death in 1992, he was researching his paternal “roots”/“Who is Alex Haley?”*”) and doubled his winnings.

Thuringwehil got the \$300 question in crossword clues when Mairon sneezed (“*Quiche*

kingdom, 8 letters"/"What is Lorraine?"), and Gothmog lucked out in Rhyme Time when Mairon dropped the buzzer during the \$200 question (*"It's the derogatory term for a tattoo on a woman's lower back."/*"What is a tramp stamp?"/"Correct."/"Nice."/

Mairon finished the round with a more-than-healthy lead, and when it was over, he rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Do we have another round?"

"Of course we have another round," Melkor said, feigning offense. "What do I look like, an amateur?"

"Haven't you embarrassed us enough?" Gothmog asked, side-eying Mairon.

"No," Mairon said.

Melkor laughed. "That's my guy."

"It's his birthday," Thuringwethil said, reaching over to pat Gothmog on the arm. "Let him grind your face into the dust a little. He's earned it."

"I'm just saying," Gothmog grumbled, picking up his buzzer, "that no one should be that smart *and* have reflexes that good."

"I'm a man of many talents," Mairon said.

"Can confirm," Melkor said.

"Gross," Thuringwethil said.

"Want to see the Double Jeopardy categories?"

"Yes, please!" Mairon said, grinning.

"Alright," Melkor said, clicking the controller in his hand. "Here we go." The tiles reset, and the amounts on the answer cards doubled. "Here are our categories for Double Jeopardy: Quasi-Related Pairs, Name's the Same, Geography by Song Lyrics, Anagrams, Dog Breeds, and Stupid Answers."

"Finally," Gothmog said, nodding at the last category tile. "We might have a chance."

He didn't. Neither, though it didn't console him much, did Thuringwethil. Mairon made it through the entire Double Jeopardy round without missing a single clue. He found both Double Jeopardy questions and doubled his money each time. Halfway through the game, Gothmog started making lewd doodles on the pad in front of him, and Thuringwethil started calling out the answers she knew in tandem with Mairon.

If Mairon noticed their nominal capitulation, he didn't show it. He continued furiously buzzing in and smugly answering with as much gusto as ever, grinning after each correct response. By the time Melkor announced that it was time for the Final Jeopardy round, it was clear the game was an absolute slaughter.

"What's the point?" Gothmog said, leaning heavily on his podium. "The game's a runaway."

"Unless Mairon blows it," Melkor said.

"I won't," Mairon said.

“Hey,” Melkor said, grinning, “look on the bright side, Gothmog. At least you got one!”

“I’d be more excited if we were playing for real money,” Gothmog said.

“Aren’t we?” Mairon asked.

“Is my incredible investment of time and energy not enough for you?” Melkor asked, throwing his arms wide as though to encompass the entire set that he, Gothmog, and Thuringwethil had created.

“It’s pretty amazing,” Mairon admitted, smiling.

“I’m glad you like it,” Melkor said.

“Quit stalling,” Gothmog said. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Thuringwethil said, reaching over to smack his arm in reproach.

“It’s a runaway,” Gothmog said. “Let’s get it over with.”

“Don’t count yourselves out yet,” Melkor said. “Mairon could bet really, really poorly.”

“I won’t,” Mairon said.

“And Final Jeopardy questions are notoriously tricky,” Melkor continued.

“That part is true,” Mairon said.

“Let’s see if you three are up to the task,” Melkor said, resuming his host persona. “The category for Final Jeopardy is,” he said, pausing dramatically, “Potpourri.”

“That’s...vague,” Thuringwethil said.

“And weird,” Gothmog said. “What kind of questions can you ask about weird, smelly stuff?”

“Potpourri on *Jeopardy!* just means the questions are super random and unrelated,” Mairon said. “But it isn’t typically a Final Jeopardy category.”

“This isn’t exactly a typical game,” Melkor pointed out.

“True,” Mairon admitted, “but potpourri is like, super vague as a category. It makes it hard to know how to bet.”

“Oh, please,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes. “As long as you reserve \$601 dollars, you’re good to go.”

“Nice math, buddy,” Melkor said.

“Pardon me for strategizing,” Mairon said.

“About what? Exactly how embarrassing you can make this?” Gothmog asked, grinning.

“Yes,” Mairon said. “It’s a delicate process.”

“You’re an ass,” Gothmog said, “and I’d punch you if it wasn’t your birthday.”

“Thank God for small miracles,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Stop bickering,” Melkor said, “and make your wagers.” The three of them dutifully turned back to their podiums and wrote down their wagers. “Okay,” Melkor said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s see our Final Jeopardy clue.” The tile flipped, and Melkor read the final answer of the game. “This is the most important question I have ever asked you.”

The theme music started, and Mairon knew, in the back of his mind, that the timer had started as well, but he couldn’t stop staring at the question, perplexed. “What kind of question is that?” he demanded.

“The Final Jeopardy question,” Melkor said.

“But it’s not even a trivia question!”

“You’re wasting time,” Melkor said, tapping the spot where a watch would be if he ever bothered to wear one.

“The most important question you, Melkor Bauglir, have ever asked? That’s probably different for all three of us.”

“I’ll accept more than one correct answer.”

“And who decides what’s correct?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Thuringwethil said, laying down her pen, “just answer the damn question.”

“I do,” Melkor said, answering Mairon.

“But—”

“Five seconds,” Melkor said.

Mairon thought for a moment and then scribbled down an answer, finishing just as the music ran out.

“Time’s up,” Melkor said. “Put down your pens.”

“Dumb, dumb, dumb,” Mairon muttered.

“Don’t be a sore winner,” Thuringwethil said.

“I’m sorry,” Melkor said, “should anyone who’s not the host be talking?”

“Shut up,” the other three said in unison.

“Minus a hundred bucks from all of you for host abuse.”

“That’s not how this game works,” Gothmog said.

“Moving on,” said Melkor, grinning. “Let’s start with Gothmog, currently in third place, probably going to lose this game super hard.”

“Fuck you,” Gothmog said blithely.

“This is the most important question I’ve ever asked you,” Melkor said. “And let me say, before I hear any more whining, that I’ll take reasoning into account before deciding your fate.”

“Definitely not how this game works,” Mairon muttered.

“Gothmog,” Melkor said, ignoring Mairon. “Your answer?”

The answer card on the front of Gothmog’s podium flickered to reveal the answer he had scrawled.

“Want to play pool?” Melkor read. “Huh. Interesting.”

“We wouldn’t be friends if you hadn’t asked me,” Gothmog said. “Kicking your ass at pool and bullshitting on my shifts, that’s how I got to know you.”

“That and your kick-ass Beastie Boys T-shirt,” Melkor said.

“That too,” Gothmog said.

“That’s a good answer,” Melkor said. “I like it. How much did you wager?” The screen flickered again and revealed Gothmog’s wager—\$200. “Nice,” Melkor said. “You end up with \$400. Respectable.”

“Better than zero,” Gothmog said, shrugging.

“Let’s go to our second-place contestant,” Melkor said, walking over to Thuringwethil’s podium. “What’s the most important question I ever asked you?” The screen flickered to reveal her answer. “Anything I can do to help?” He nodded thoughtfully. “Another interesting choice.”

“You’d been a regular at the bar for a couple months,” she said. “I’d already turned down a date with you, and I thought you were going to turn out to be the kind of creep that hangs around hoping I’ll change my mind. But you weren’t. I mean, you hung around, but you did it because you genuinely liked me as a person. You kept me company, you made me laugh, and one night, you even offered to help me clean up.” She smiled at him. “That’s the day I realized we were friends. If you hadn’t asked me that question, I’d probably be working in a shitty office somewhere, hating my life, with no real friends. Instead, I’m here, with the best friends in the world, playing a ridiculous personalized game of *Jeopardy!* with you dumb idiots. It’s easily the best and most important question you ever asked me.”

“Aw, Thil,” Melkor said, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye. “How sweet.”

“Don’t make me slap you,” she said.

“That’s better,” he said. “I was starting to worry you’d been bodysnatched.”

“Melkor, I swear to—”

“And how much did you wager?” The screen flickered to reveal her bet: \$300. “And Thil will finish with \$600,” Melkor said. “Not bad, not bad. Now let’s head over to the contestant who’s been in the lead, to an almost-embarrassing degree, for the entire game.” He walked over to Mairon’s podium. “Mairon, what’s the most important question I ever asked you?” The screen flickered and revealed Mairon’s answer. “Why not?” Melkor read, cocking his head to the side. “You’re going to have to elaborate on that one.”

“We’d been meeting for a couple months,” Mairon said, “and you’d been letting me talk your ear off about all my ideas. Not only did you listen, but you were excited about what I was saying—so excited, apparently, that you offered me a job. I thought it was ridiculous, that you couldn’t be serious, but you just looked at me with that ridiculous grin of yours and said, ‘Why not?’. It was the first time I ever started to consider that I could do something different with my life, that I didn’t have to follow in Aulë’s footsteps. You were the first person to tell me to do what *I* wanted, not what everyone expected. It’s the most important thing anyone has ever done for me, I think.”

Melkor waved him away, feigning nonchalance. “It was selfish,” he said. “I wanted you to work for me.”

“It wasn’t,” Mairon insisted. “It was sweet and kind, and it made me one hundred percent sure that the nasty rumors I’d heard about you weren’t true. It made me want to be around you and work with you. If you hadn’t put the idea in my head that I was worth something, that what I wanted was worth something, I don’t know where I’d be.”

“Stuck in a tenured position with Aulë, probably,” Thuringwethil said.

“Perish the thought,” Mairon said, grimacing.

“I just want to say,” Melkor said, “how nice it is for all of you to point how just how fucking nice I am.”

“Not the intended effect,” Thuringwethil said.

“But the one you accomplished,” Melkor said, grinning.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mairon said. “You’re awesome, and we’re all lucky to have you. Now show the good people how much I won.”

“Hang on a minute,” Melkor said. “I didn’t say you were correct.”

“Oooo,” Gothmog said, grinning. “Gonna choke on the last question, Mairon?”

“No,” Mairon said defensively. “It’s a subjective question.”

“And I’m the subjective decision maker,” Melkor said.

“Spit out your subjective decision,” Mairon said, “and remember, I know where you live.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Melkor said. “You live there too.”

“Tell me I’m right so I can win.”

“I’m sorry,” Melkor said, feigning regret, “but that’s not the answer we were looking for.”

“What?” Mairon demanded, outraged.

“Womp, womp,” Thuringwethil said.

“Better luck next time, buddy,” Gothmog said.

“Shut up,” Mairon said, swatting his hand away.

“Luckily you only wagered a thousand,” Melkor said, revealing Mairon’s bet. “So you still win.”

“No surprises there,” Thuringwethil said.

“What was the answer?” Mairon demanded.

“You want to know?” Melkor asked.

“Yes.”

“You want to know what is, objectively, the most important question I’ve ever asked you?”

“Yes, damn it. Spit it out.”

“Will you marry me?”

“I—what?” Mairon froze, stunned.

Melkor walked around the podium, and Gothmog and Thuringwethil backed up to give him space. “Mairon,” Melkor said, taking his hands, “you are the best fucking thing that’s ever happened to me, and there is nothing I want more in the world than to spend the rest of my life with you.” He knelt, still holding Mairon’s hands, and looked up into his face.

“Melkor,” he said softly, feeling tears beginning to prickle at the corners of his eyes.

“I love you,” Melkor said. “More than I ever thought I could love anyone or anything in the world. You are the kindest, smartest, and most loyal person in the world, and you love me better than I ever thought I could deserve. You make me laugh, you’re there for me every time I need you, and you keep me on my fucking toes, every single day. I want to be with you forever, Mairon, and so I’m asking you again. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Mairon said, smiling, tears in his eyes.

“Wait,” Melkor said, hardly daring to believe it. “Really?”

“Yes, you idiot,” Mairon said, laughing and pulling Melkor to his feet. “Come here.” He put his arms around Melkor’s neck and kissed him so fiercely and so passionately that Gothmog began to clap, whistling his approval, while Thuringwethil laughed and shouted something about decency laws.

Mairon broke away, laughing and wiping his eyes. Melkor was grinning like a lunatic. “Did you hear that, guys?” he demanded, turning to Gothmog and Thuringwethil. “This fool actually just agreed to marry me!”

“Hell yeah I did!” Mairon said, kissing his cheek.

“As if there was any doubt,” Thuringwethil said, carefully wiping her own eyes.

“Congratulations, guys,” Gothmog said, slapping Melkor in the back. “You have to admit,” he said, turning to Mairon. “It was probably the most important question he’s ever asked you.”

“Okay,” Marion said, “but he didn’t ask it until after the game had finished.”

“Technicalities,” Melkor said, waving a hand dismissively.

“I’m just saying, the question didn’t exist when I gave my answer.”

“And yet you still managed to trounce us,” Gothmog said.

“Well, duh,” Mairon said.

“I still think you should make him pay up,” Thuringwethil said. “How much did you end up winning?”

“Unfortunately, that screen has been mysteriously deleted,” Melkor said, hurriedly blanking out all the screens.

Mairon laughed. “I think I can let it slide,” he said. “I got a way better prize, anyway.”

Melkor picked him up and kissed him, spinning him around until Mairon laughed and kicked his legs, begging to be put down.

“Come on, lovebirds,” Thuringwethil said, grinning at them and shaking her head. “Let’s get going. We don’t want to be late.”

“Dinner’s on me,” Melkor said, still grinning happily. “Anything you want; I don’t care. I’m so fucking happy I could scream.” And he did, shouting out over city, with his friends laughing and pulling him back. “I’m getting married!” Melkor yelled, throwing his arms triumphantly into the air. “You hear that, world? Married!”

“Come on, you lunatic,” Thuringwethil said, rolling her eyes as Mairon kissed Melkor again, and Melkor finally fell silent. “Before someone calls the cops.

Later, after they had eaten the best dinner Mairon had ever tasted, and drunk too many bottles of eye-wateringly expensive wine, and had the best sex he could remember, Mairon lay in Melkor’s arms, his head nestled in the crook of Melkor’s shoulder, his hand on Melkor’s bare chest, feeling the beat of his heart and thinking he couldn’t possibly be any happier, ever, than he was in that exact moment, Melkor said, “I still can’t believe you said yes.” He said it quietly, happily, hugging Mairon closer to him.

Mairon smiled and kissed his neck, burying his fingers in Melkor’s hair. “I love you,” he said, willing Melkor to feel the aching surge of affection that made his heart feel as though it was going to burst.

“I love you too,” Melkor said, kissing the top of his head. “Forever.”

“Forever,” Mairon echoed, and kissed him again.

Chapter End Notes

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Friends Will Be Friends

Chapter Summary

“Me and Ilmarë,” Thuringwethil said, smiling gently. “I like the sound of that.”
“Don’t you get mushy just because the rest of us are,” Mairon said, grinning.
“I can’t help it,” she said. “All this lovey-dovey bullshit must be contagious.”
“Oh, please.”
“I’m serious,” she said. “There’s an epidemic, and you’re patient zero.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You know,” Mairon said, tapping his ring finger thoughtfully against the side of the mug in his hands, “I can’t get over how normal it feels. How completely un-different. Like nothing’s changed.”

“That’s because nothing has,” Melkor said, pouring himself a cup of coffee. “Not really. It was a bigger deal when you moved in, to tell you the truth.”

“The dog still hasn’t recovered,” Mairon said, mock-serious. He smiled at Melkor, steam from the cup held just shy of his lips curling a blush onto his pale cheeks. “It *is* different though,” he said. “Legally, if nothing else.”

“Or will be, as soon as we file the paperwork.”

“Already done,” Mairon said.

“Of course it is,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes.

“We’re married,” Mairon said, grinning as though he couldn’t quite believe it.

Melkor brought his coffee to the table and set it down, bending to kiss Mairon with warm, coffee-scented lips. “Yes, we are,” he said, and sat down.

For as lavish and intricately planned as the proposal had been, the wedding had been incredibly low-key. Mairon had said he didn’t want any fuss, and Melkor was quick to agree. The smaller the better, as far as he was concerned. It cut down on the chance of any unwelcome guests.

It had been a tiny, intimate ceremony, just a few words from a justice of the peace and some handwritten vows. They’d done it in Thuringwethil’s backyard, standing in the shade of her wisteria. Ilmarë had taken some beautiful pictures of the two of them, including the one of their first married kiss that now hung framed on the living room wall. Gothmog had made dinner, and the five of them had eaten on the screened-in back porch, talking and laughing until Mairon had insisted they have a first dance. Melkor had grumbled, and Mairon had laughed, pulling him up and cajoling him until Melkor smiled, holding him close, lost in how absolutely radiant Mairon looked. The five of them partied long into the night, drinking too much, laughing too loudly, and crashing contented in Thuringwethil’s living room until the next afternoon. It was, Mairon said later, everything he could have wanted.

“It’s funny,” Mairon said, pulling Melkor out of his reminiscences. “A year ago, I was trying to figure out how I was ever going to get over you.”

“Yikes,” Melkor said, wincing. “That feels like forever ago.”

“Yeah, it does,” Mairon agreed.

“I’m sorry about that,” Melkor said. “Still. I probably will be forever.”

Mairon leaned over and kissed him. “Don’t worry about it. You’ve more than made up for it.” He ran a finger over Melkor’s wedding ring and smiled.

“I’m glad,” Melkor said, stroking Mairon’s cheek. “I still feel kind of bad, though.”

“Get me another cup of coffee,” Mairon said, “and we’ll call it even.”

“You’re an addict,” Melkor said, taking his cup and standing up. “You know that, right?”

“You married me,” Mairon said. “What does that say about you?”

“I have good taste,” Melkor said.

“In the boyfriend department, anyway.”

“Husband department,” Melkor corrected.

“Oh, my God,” Mairon said, grinning widely. “We’re married.”

“You’re adorable,” Melkor said. He brought Mairon’s cup back to him and kissed his forehead.

“So I’ve heard,” he said, grinning up at him. He ran a hand through his unruly hair, still tousled from sleep, and sighed. “Back to work tomorrow,” he said.

“Theoretically,” Melkor said.

“Theoretically, huh?”

“I mean, we did just get married. We deserve a honeymoon.”

“You mean in addition to the two weeks we just spent traipsing around a goddamn tropical paradise?”

“Why not?” Melkor said, grinning. “I don’t plan on getting married again. We might as well celebrate.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment in theory, we *do* have to go back to work eventually.”

“Eventually,” Melkor repeated.

“Why do I feel like you and I have very different definitions of that word?”

“Because you know me,” Melkor said.

“Fair enough,” Mairon said. He sighed, staring wistfully at his cooling coffee. “Unfortunately, the underlings can only hold down the fort for so long.”

“I’m telling Thil you called her that.”

“She’s not the one I worry about, and you know it.”

“I’m begging you to hire people you can actually trust.”

“I did, finally,” Mairon said. “You convinced me. It’s just—”

“I know,” Melkor said. “You’re a control freak.”

“The polite word is conscientious.”

“I’m not polite.”

“Yeah, well, I like you anyway.”

“You love me,” Melkor said, grinning.

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “I do.”

“You admitted it,” Melkor said, “in front of a judge.”

“A justice of the peace,” Mairon said, “but close enough.” He yawned and stretched. “There’s a lot I should probably do today. Work piles up like crazy when you’re on vacation.”

“Does it?” Melkor said. “I never noticed.”

“Typical,” Mairon said, smiling and shaking his head.

“Well,” said Melkor reluctantly, “I guess I’ve had you to myself for two weeks. I should probably let you get back to work.”

“Probably,” Mairon said. “But you know what?”

“What?”

“I think I’d rather spend one more day with you instead.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Melkor said. “Because I wasn’t really going to let you go back to work just yet.”

“You weren’t, huh?”

“Nope,” Melkor said. He stood up and pulled Mairon from his chair, winding his arms around Mairon’s waist.

“What are you going to do with me, then?” Mairon asked, laying his palms against Melkor’s chest. “If not let me go back to work?”

“Come here,” Melkor said, taking his hand and pulling him towards the hall, “and I’ll show you.”

“Happy first day back at work,” Thuringwethil said cheerily. She walked into Melkor’s office, a tray of drinks in her hand.

“One of those better be for me,” Melkor said, eyeing them greedily.

“Oh, did you want coffee?” she asked, blinking innocently at him.

“First day back in this hellhole after my kickass honeymoon? What do you think?”

“One for Mai,” she said, handing him an obnoxiously large espresso-filled Frappuccino. “One for Gothmog,” she said, turning to hand him a flat white. “And a dirty chai for me.”

“And for your best friend and favorite boss?”

“I got Mai a Frap,” she said, “and I don’t know if I’d use the word favorite...”

“Thil,” Melkor said, “it’s eight a.m. Don’t make me beg.”

“You take the fun out of everything,” she said, grinning. She handed him the remaining cup.

“Large espresso roast, redeye.”

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?”

“Not lately,” she said. “You guys have been gone for a thousand years.”

“Not quite that long,” Mairon said.

“I wish,” said Melkor at the same time.

“I take it you had a good time?” Gothmog said.

“The best,” said Melkor.

“I think I only got three emails the whole time you were gone,” Gothmog said. “I was seriously considering sending a rescue party in case you were kidnapped.”

“Ha ha,” Mairon said, rolling his eyes.

“Nah,” Melkor said, grinning. “I just kept him busy.”

“Busy, huh?”

“And satisfied,” Melkor said, his grin widening.

“I should know better by now,” Gothmog said, shaking his head.

“You really should,” Thuringwethil said.

“So,” Melkor said. “Status report. What did we miss?”

“Well, no major fires or industrial accidents,” Gothmog said. “So that’s a plus.”

“No one quit,” Thuringwethil said, “and no one got fired. I collected all the progress reports from the departmental meetings and left them on your desk, Mai.”

“Perfect,” Mairon said. “Thanks.”

“So what you’re saying,” said Melkor, “is that Mairon took an extended vacation and nothing went to shit? The company still exists? The world didn’t end.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mairon said. “I’m a control freak. Old news, guys.”

“And yet still relevant.”

“I was actually pretty good, I think,” Mairon said. “I barely did any work.”

“That’s because—”

“Once was enough,” Gothmog said, as Melkor grinned at him.

“You’re right, though,” Melkor said, turning back to Mairon. “You were pretty good while we were gone.”

“That’s because you kept me busy,” Mairon said.

“Oh, please,” Gothmog said. “Not you too.”

“Sorry, Gothmog,” Mairon said, looking anything but. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“And this is how you treat me?”

“Like a friend?”

“With friends like these...” Gothmog muttered.

“Everything was fine,” Thuringwethil said. “Although, not gonna lie, I’m really glad to have you two doofuses back.”

“Can’t say I’m glad to be back,” Melkor said. “You know, after the whole remote and secluded island thing, but hey. I’m glad to see you too, Thil. And you, Gothmog.”

“And now, if mushy time is over,” Thuringwethil said, “I have some news.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“I took the liberty of filing the patent papers while you were gone,” she said. “And I pulled some strings with the law office to get them fast-tracked. I was notified late Friday that everything went through.”

“Shit,” Melkor said. “Really?”

“Silmaril is ours?”

“Legally,” she said.

“Holy fuck,” Melkor said, grinning and banging his palms on his desk. “Talk about some good fuckin’ news on a Monday morning.”

“Now, I don’t want you to get too excited,” Thuringwethil said. “I’m a hundred percent sure they’re going to launch legal challenges as soon as possible.”

“But,” said Mairon, “in the meantime, we’ve got a chance to destroy Nargothrond, and implicate those two asshole kids of Fëanor’s in the Tol-in-Gaurhoth fiasco.”

“Exactly,” she said, grinning in self-satisfaction.

“Thil,” said Melkor, “we don’t deserve you.”

“No,” she said. “You don’t. But I’m here, so count yourselves lucky.”

“Sounds like we suddenly have some work to do,” Mairon said.

“We always have some work to do,” she said.

“Yes, but this is a little more urgent than usual.”

“Please,” Melkor said, rolling his eyes. “Like everything’s not always a crisis with you two.”

“Eat me,” Mairon said.

“Maybe later,” Melkor shot back.

“Before we devolve into gross locker room comebacks and a shit-ton of work,” Gothmog said, raising his voice to speak over the three of them, “there’s something I want to talk to you three about.”

Melkor’s instinct was to make a joke, but Gothmog’s face was serious, almost worried, and Melkor frowned. “Everything okay, big guy?”

“Yeah, no,” Gothmog said, shaking his head, waving away the concern. “Everything’s fine. I just—” He took a deep breath and let it out in a sharp, quick burst. “I met someone,” he said.

There was a beat of silence. Mairon and Thuringwethil exchanged a look.

“Okay,” Melkor said at last. Gothmog was fidgeting nervously, and Melkor kept expecting something more. “Cool.”

“You okay, Gothmog?” Mairon asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I’m great,” he said, nodding. “I just really like this girl, and I think I want you guys to meet her.”

“Hang on,” Melkor said. “Really?”

“In all the years I’ve known you,” Mairon said, “I don’t think I’ve ever actually met one of your girlfriends.”

“Me either,” Melkor said, “and I’ve known him longer.”

“I’ve known him the longest,” Thuringwethil said, “and it’s mostly because Gothmog doesn’t really *do* serious girlfriends.”

“There’s no prize for knowing me the longest,” Gothmog said. “And I haven’t *historically* done serious girlfriends—historically being the operative word.”

“You aren’t allowed to start using words like ‘operative’ before nine a.m.,” Melkor said. “Don’t leave me alone on the uncultured island.”

“You’ve been alone on that island for a long time,” Mairon said.

Melkor made a face at him. “I want a divorce.”

Mairon snorted. “You pay for it, then.”

“Can we focus?” Thuringwethil said. “This is actually kind of a big deal.”

“No,” Gothmog said quickly. “No, it’s not. Don’t put that kind of pressure on it.”

“It’s not pressure,” she said. “It’s just, you know, exciting. You never bring girls around.”

“Not that I can blame you,” Mairon said.

“Thil didn’t bring anyone around before Ilmarë,” Gothmog said, “and no one made a big deal out of it.”

“That’s because we’re afraid of her,” Melkor said.

“Aww,” Thuringwethil said, grinning at him as though he’d said something endearing.

“So who is she?” Mairon asked. “How’d you meet her?”

“Her name’s Ruvivë,” Gothmog said, “and I met her a while ago, actually.”

“So it’s not a super new thing?” Melkor asked.

“No,” Gothmog said.

“Good,” Thuringwethil said. “Meeting us isn’t exactly, uh...”

“Brand new girlfriend appropriate,” Melkor said. “And I appreciate how you included yourself in that statement.”

“I know what I’m about,” she said, shrugging.

“I know,” Gothmog agreed. “But I think she can handle it, and more than that, I really want you guys to meet her.”

“Whoa,” Melkor said, raising an eyebrow. “You’re really gung-ho about this, huh?”

“I really like her,” Gothmog said, and Melkor grinned at the earnestness in Gothmog’s face.

“Then we’ll meet her,” Melkor said. “I’ll even behave for the evening.”

“No, you won’t,” said Gothmog.

“Okay,” Melkor said, grinning all the wider, “but I’ll at least try to tone it down a little.”

“And that’s the best you’re going to get,” Mairon said.

“Believe me,” Gothmog said, shaking his head. “I know.”

“So when are you thinking?” Thuringwethil asked.

“Sometime this week,” Gothmog said. “Whenever we’re all free.”

“For you,” Melkor said, “I can be free anytime.”

“Your nosiness knows no bounds.”

“That too.”

“I’ll see when she’s free,” Gothmog said. “And Thil, can you ask Ilmarë to come? She’s a little, uh...”

“Nicer?” Mairon suggested.

“Less intense,” Melkor said, nodding.

“Not as scary as the three of us,” Thuringwethil said. “I get it.” She glanced at her watch and sighed. “I better go get some actual work done,” she said, picking up her bag from the chair where it lay.

“Me too,” Mairon said. “Can I come get those reports from you?”

“Yeah,” she said, “and we can talk about next steps for Nargothrond.”

“Somewhere else, please,” Melkor said. “I’m not quite ready to work just yet.”

“See you later, babe,” Mairon said, waving as he trailed Thuringwethil out the door.

Melkor waved back and then turned to Gothmog. “So,” he said when they were alone. “A real, honest-to-God girlfriend, huh?”

“A real, honest-to-God husband, huh?” Gothmog shot back.

“Fair enough,” Melkor said. “I’m excited for you, dude. I’ve never seen you get excited like this over anyone.”

“I’ve never *been* excited like this over anyone,” Gothmog confessed. “It feels...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“Weird, right?”

“Yeah,” Gothmog agreed. “But also really great.”

“It’s a weird combination,” Melkor said, “but it’s the best.”

“You know,” Gothmog said thoughtfully, “I think this might be your fault.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve never been a relationship guy,” Gothmog said. “Not seriously, anyway. It always seemed like such a hassle. Such a huge risk. I’ve never liked being vulnerable like that. It just didn’t seem worth it.”

“I’m not seeing how this relates to me,” Melkor said.

“I look at you and Mairon,” Gothmog said, shaking his head. “Some of it’s been messy. Some of it’s been hard. Some of it was downright miserable. But the way you are together is so

incredible. I mean, you were good as friends and all, but as a couple, you're amazing. You bring out the best in each other. You take care of each other. You two are better as a couple than you were as friends. It's been making me think that maybe a relationship—a real, serious one—might be worth trying after all."

There was a softness on Melkor's face that Gothmog had seen only a handful of times, and he smiled, expecting Melkor to demure, to thank him, to offer something deep or profound or touching. Instead, Melkor smiled and said, "God, you're such a fucking sap, you know that?"

Gothmog laughed, and Melkor grinned, pulling him into a bear-hug. "I'm happy for you," Melkor said. "All jokes aside. If she makes you this happy, then I can't wait to meet her."

"Thanks, man," Gothmog said.

"Now let's quit with the mushy shit and check the standings for our fantasy league, yeah?"

"You saw how bad I kicked your ass last week, right?" Gothmog said, grinning and pulling out his phone.

"It's not over 'til it's over," Melkor said. "A hundred bucks says I kick your ass before the season's over."

"In addition to the five grand we already have on the line?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll take your money any day of the week," Gothmog said. "Get ready to pay up."

"What do you think she's like?" Mairon asked, straightening a stack of papers and setting them to the side.

"Who?" Thuringwethil asked, typing an email and not bothering to look at him.

"Gothmog's girlfriend," Mairon said, picking up his notepad and scribbling a reminder to tell the R&D lab manager that he was an idiot. "What's her name?"

"Ruivë," Thuringwethil said, hitting send and sitting back in her chair. "I think we're going to find out in a couple hours."

"Yeah," Mairon said, shifting to sit cross-legged in his chair, "but in the meantime, what do you think she's like?"

"You know," Thuringwethil said, "the reason I let you work in here is because you're quiet and not distracting."

"We've been working for three hours," Mairon said, looking at his watch.

"Shit," Thuringwethil said. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said, balancing his notepad on his lap and stretching. "I thought we could use a gossip break."

"You know, I haven't had much of an opportunity for gossip since you've been gone."

“Now’s your chance.”

“Honestly,” Thuringwethil said, “I have no idea. Gothmog doesn’t really have a type, *per se*, so it’s hard to tell.”

“Where’d he meet her?”

“Somewhere on the way to work, apparently. I don’t know. He’s been pretty vague about the whole thing.”

“Yeah,” Mairon agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him wig out like this.”

“He’s really nervous,” Thuringwethil said, nodding. “It’s very un-Gothmog-like.”

“He must really like this girl.”

“I hope so,” she said. “I mean, if anyone deserves a nice girl to settle down with, it’s Gothmog.”

“It’s probably a little early for settling down talk.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “It’s funny, though. If you’d have asked me a couple years ago, I would’ve said Gothmog was the most likely to settle down first.”

“Yeah, same,” Mairon said. “He’s the most domestic out of the four of us.”

“He does like that kind of thing,” she said. “Cooking and decorating and like, kids.” She made a face at that last point, and Mairon laughed. “I take it you and Ilmarë aren’t going to be spawning?”

“Me and Ilmarë,” Thuringwethil said, smiling gently. “I like the sound of that.”

“Don’t you get mushy just because the rest of us are,” Mairon said, grinning.

“I can’t help it,” she said. “All this lovey-dovey bullshit must be contagious.”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “There’s an epidemic, and you’re patient zero.”

“You’re dramatic.”

“Still,” she said, ignoring him, “of all the things to be going around, getting serious partners isn’t the worst.”

“Nah,” Mairon said. “Actually, it’s kind of the best.”

“It kind of is,” she said. There was a picture of her and Ilmarë framed on her desk, and she picked it up, running her thumb gently over the edge of the frame, smiling.

“But back to Ruivë,” Mairon said, interrupting her train of thought.

“I don’t know,” she said again, shaking her head. “It’s really hard to tell with Gothmog. She’s got to be pretty great, though, if he’s this jazzed about it.”

“Do you think—” Mairon’s phone chirped, and he paused, frowning, looking down at the

screen. “Okay,” he said, scrolling quickly through the email that had come through, “this is getting ridiculous.”

“What?”

“It’s all these acquisitions we’ve been doing,” he said. “Small companies and start-ups and all that.”

“Right,” she said. “The diversifying.”

“This is the seventeenth email I’ve gotten about it today.”

“That sucks.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “No exaggeration—seventeen emails.”

“Yikes.”

“It’s getting out of control.”

“I’ll say.”

“It’s not even like I know that much about this shit,” he complained, tossing his phone aside and rubbing his eyes. “It just kind of fell on me to do, like most everything else around here.”

“You mean,” she corrected gently, “that you made it your business and refused to let anyone help you.”

“Yeah, that too,” he admitted, sighing.

“You know,” she said, “there’s an easy solution to this problem.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Well,” she amended, “not super easy up-front, but it’ll pay off in the long run.”

“I’m listening.”

“Lackeys,” she said.

“I don’t have anyone I can spare,” he said. “I’m actually still trying to hire people to fill the workload we currently have. And anyway, none of my people have any experience with acquisitions or business or any of that crap.”

“So hire new people.”

“We don’t even have a department for this kind of thing.”

“So make one,” she said, shrugging. “Stop making this a problem. Stop making it *your* problem. Get a team to help you set up a new department, get Melkor to sign off on it, and get back to screaming at your engineers about bad coding or whatever.”

Mairon laughed. “It has been a while since I did a good dressing down of quality assurance,” he said.

“Only you could say something like that with so much glee.”

“Only you could say the word glee and not sound completely ridiculous.”

“We all have our talents,” she said, grinning.

“You know what, Thil? You’re right. This isn’t my area, and it doesn’t need to be my problem.” He stood up, stretching until his joints popped in a loud, painful-sounding cacophony. “Know any good business managers?”

“No,” she said. “But you know who might?” He shrugged. “Someone with experience in dealing with nonprofits and foundations and all that jazz.”

“Oh man,” he said, his face lighting up. “That’s not a bad idea. Do you think Ilmarë would mind me asking for recommendations?”

“I’ll have her call you,” Thuringwethil said, picking up her phone to text Ilmarë.

“Thanks, Thil,” he said, grinning. “You’re the best.”

“I know,” she said, “but it’s always good to be reminded.” She sent the text, set her phone down, and stretched her arms over her head, yawning. “What time are we meeting Gothmog again?”

“Seven,” Mairon said.

“Okay,” she said, glancing at the time. “So we still have a few hours left to get some work done.”

“That’s why you’re my best friend,” Mairon said, smiling at her.

“I need some coffee,” she said, stifling another yawn.

“I sent the front desk kid for it ten minutes ago.”

“And that,” she said, “is why you’re my best friend.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t go home and change,” Mairon said. He was sitting in the passenger seat of Thuringwethil’s car, visor pulled down, checking his hair in the mirror.

“Look who’s talking,” she shot back evenly.

“Touché,” he said, grinning.

“Fortunately, the two of us dress to kill on a regular basis, so when things like this come up...”

“Exactly,” he said, flipping the visor closed and straightening his tie. “Is Ilmarë meeting us there?”

“Mhmm,” she said, turning into the parking lot, eyes scanning for a spot. “Melkor too?”

“Yep,” said Mairon. “He didn’t want to wait around while we worked.”

“Typical.”

“Can’t blame him,” Mairon said, shrugging.

“I guess not,” she said, pulling into a spot and killing the ignition. “We’re a little single-minded sometimes.”

“Just a little,” he said. They got out and headed across the street to the bar where they were supposed to meet.

It wasn’t their usual grungy spot, but the two of them had been there before. It was a nice place, with tapas and a wine list that even Thuringwethil approved of. Mairon liked it, and he could see why Gothmog had picked it. Nice, he thought, but not too nice. Casual, but not too casual. A good ‘meet your boyfriend’s friends’ place.

Mairon held the door for Thuringwethil and then followed her inside. Ilmarë waved at them from the table where she sat with Melkor, and the two of them hurried over to join them.

“Hello, love,” Ilmarë said, standing up to kiss Thuringwethil’s cheek.

“Hey, beautiful,” Thuringwethil said, smiling at her.

“Hey,” Melkor said, grinning.

“Not you, doofus,” Thuringwethil said, dipping her fingertips into Melkor’s whiskey and flicking it at him.

“Hey!” he protested, wiping his face on his arm. “That’s good shit. Don’t waste it.”

“Language,” she said blithely, sitting down beside Ilmarë. “Been here long?” she asked, reaching out to take Ilmarë’s hand.

“A few minutes,” she said. “Melkor kept me company.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Thil,” Ilmarë said, her tone mildly reproachful. “Be nice.”

“She can’t,” Melkor said.

“I can,” Thuringwethil said. “When I want to be.”

“Play nice, kids,” Mairon said, settling next to Melkor and kissing his cheek.

“Hello, husband,” Melkor said, feigning an exaggerated chivalry.

“That’s still so funny to hear,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Get used to it.”

“I plan to.” He turned to Ilmarë. “Thank you again for all the pictures, Ilmarë. They’re amazing.”

“Oh, please,” she said, waving him away. “I was happy to do it.”

“Honey,” Thuringwethil said, shaking her head, “you may be the only person on the

planet who actually means that when you say it.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“I thought we were going to be late,” Mairon said, checking his watch.

“You were,” Melkor said.

“Well, not to steal a line from you, but we were here before Gothmog, so I don’t think it counts.”

“I’ve taught you well, young padawan.”

“Maybe they’re looking for parking,” Ilmarë said.

“Parking’s fine,” Thuringwethil said.

“He’s stalling,” Melkor said.

“Yeah, probably.”

“You think so?” Mairon asked.

“He’s nervous,” Thuringwethil said. “Not that I blame him. It’s no joke introducing someone new to you guys. Take it from me.”

“We’re not that bad,” he protested.

“No, no,” Ilmarë said quickly. “You guys are lovely. It’s just that you’re all so close, and so familiar. You know each other so well. It’s a little hard walking into a group like that.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever been called lovely,” Melkor said in a loud aside to Mairon.

“First time for everything,” Mairon shot back.

“And last, knowing us,” Thuringwethil said.

“Oh,” said Ilmarë, craning her neck toward the door. “I think that’s them.”

It was definitely them. Gothmog cut an easy path through the crowd, his bulk negating the need for any pleasantries or pardon as he moved toward them. The woman preceding him was small, especially so close to Gothmog, but she was no less imposing. Her eyes cut through the crowd as easily as Gothmog’s bulk, the hardness of her gaze bringing out an immediate appreciation in Thuringwethil. She wore a smart, knee-length dress and a leather jacket that made Melkor warm to her, and Mairon eyed the artful sweep of her undercut with approval.

“Hey, guys,” Gothmog said, beaming as he reached them at last. “Meet Ruivë.”

Chapter End Notes

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Better Days

Chapter Summary

Domestic bliss and a little comeuppance for your enemies makes for a pretty good couple of weeks.

Chapter Notes

Nothing like a three day vacation to get some writing done :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Here you go,” Gothmog said, placing a bag on the desk between Melkor and Mairon. “Complements of Ruivë.”

“Again?” Mairon said, raising an eyebrow.

“Dude, don’t complain,” Melkor said, pulling a hot, foil-wrapped sandwich from the bag. “It’s free, and it’s fucking delicious.”

“What he said,” Gothmog agreed, pulling out two sandwiches and handing one to Mairon.

“It’s really nice,” Mairon said, “but she knows it’s not necessary, right?”

“Dude,” Melkor said, indignant. “If the woman wants to give us free food, then let her.”

“I’ve told her,” Gothmog said, “but she insists. She’s still not over the whole trick or treating thing.”

“It was like, a month ago,” Mairon said, “and really not a big deal.”

“Yeah,” said Melkor. “It was fun.”

“Sirya’s still talking about it,” Gothmog said. “You have no idea how much that means to Ruivë. It’s been rough, what with all the school bullshit.”

“Like I said,” Mairon said, waving him away. “I’ve been there. Anything for a fellow misfit.”

“Yeah, well,” Gothmog said. “You guys know how much it means to me too, right?”

“Gothmog, if you thank me again, I’m gonna deck you,” Melkor said. “We get it. We’re the world’s nicest people. Get over it.”

“I’ll get over it when I damn well please,” Gothmog said. “Because seriously—” His phone chimed, and he trailed off, looking at the message that popped up. “Fuck’s sake,” he

muttered.

“What’s up?” Mairon asked.

“Same dumb shit,” Gothmog said, picking up his sandwich and standing up, “different day.”

“Always a crisis,” Mairon agreed.

“Luckily for you,” Melkor said. “You were heading into throat punching territory.”

“Go back to being an asshole,” Gothmog said, “and I’ll stop being nice to you.”

“Deal,” Melkor said, grinning as Gothmog retreated down the hall.

“Never thought I’d see the day when we were accused of being nice,” Mairon said.

“Me neither,” Melkor said, shuddering. “It’s gross.”

“I feel like I need to yell at someone just to make up for it.”

“You know what?” Melkor said. “That’s not a bad idea.” He stood up and stretched. “I’ve been meaning to yell at my department and haven’t gotten around to it.”

“Why?”

“Why do I want to yell at them, or why haven’t I gotten around to it?”

“Yes.”

“I want to yell at them because it keeps them on their toes, and it makes them work harder to try and get back in my good graces.”

“That checks out,” Mairon said, nodding.

“I haven’t gotten around to it,” Melkor said, “because I’ve been busy being a newlywed.”

“Gross,” Mairon said.

“Tell me about it,” Melkor said, leaning down to kiss him. “Dinner tonight?”

“Maybe,” Mairon said. “I’m a little swamped today.”

“That’s a no,” Melkor said.

“It’s a maybe.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said. “Text me when you need a ride home, okay?”

Mairon grinned. “Love you,” he said.

“You better,” Melkor said, ambling out of the room. “Hey, Thil,” he said, turning sharply to avoid running into her as he entered the hallway. “You’re in late today.”

“Just because you haven’t seen me yet doesn’t mean I wasn’t here,” she said.

“Sure it does,” he said amiably. “I’m the boss. That’s how it works.”

“Self-centered piece of shit,” she said.

“I should get that printed on a business card.”

“Christmas is coming,” she deadpanned.

“See you later, Thil,” he said, and headed for the elevator.

“You guys have such a beautiful, loving relationship,” Mairon said.

“We ought to be on a Hallmark card,” she agreed. She nodded at the food. “Ruivë?”

Mairon nodded. “I think there’s one still in the bag.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Coffee’s not really doing it for me this morning.”

“Coffee’s not a food,” he said.

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Just because I treat it like one doesn’t mean I don’t know better,” he said. “And it definitely doesn’t mean you should copy me.”

“Can’t argue with that,” she said.

“I mean, even I know I’m a bad role model.”

“Amen,” she said. “Although, to be fair, you have gotten better.”

“It’s the Melkor influence,” Mairon said.

“I never would’ve imagined that would be a good thing.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“You busy?” she asked, dumping the spare breakfast sandwich onto the desk and peeling open the foil.

“Not yet,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I talked to Ilmarë about our expanding business problems,” she said. “She gave me some names.”

“She’s a gem, that one,” Mairon said.

“Tell me about it. I did some low-key background checking on them, and a couple look promising.”

“You’re a God-send, Thil.”

“I’m definitely earning my Christmas bonus this year,” she agreed. “I scheduled two of them for interviews later this week.”

“Cool,” he said. “Let me add it to my calendar.”

“Already done.”

“Score one for the hive mind,” he said, grinning.

“It’s a thing of wonder,” she agreed.

“I owe her one.”

“Take her to lunch,” she said. “She’s easily bribed with food.”

“We have that in common.”

“You have a lot in common, actually. It’s a little scary.”

Mairon laughed. “I’m glad she’s cool with helping us.”

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “She seems…”

“Nice?” Thuringwethil offered.

“I was going to say morally sound.”

Thuringwethil laughed. “That too. But she’s a compulsive helper. You should’ve seen how fast she whipped out her address book when I brought it up.”

“I’m glad she was okay with it.”

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “She seems like a legitimately good person. Like maybe she wouldn’t want to get involved with us.”

“She’s already pretty involved with me,” Thuringwethil pointed out.

“Well, yeah, but romantic stuff is different than business.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Totally different scenario.”

“Not really,” Thuringwethil. “We’re just doing it in the opposite order.”

“Fair point.”

“She doesn’t really care what I do,” she said, shrugging. “She likes that I’m smart and motivated and resourceful. She doesn’t care what I use that shit to do. I feel the same way about her.”

“You sound happy, Thil,” he said, smiling.

“I am,” she said. A strange look came over her face, a softness that Mairon rarely saw in her. “She told me she loves me,” she said softly, a smile stealing onto her lips.

Mairon grinned. “It’s the best, isn’t it?”

“It really is.”

“Jesus,” Mairon said, sitting back and stretching. “When did we become such gross, sappy idiots?”

“I blame Melkor,” Thuringwethil said. “He started it.”

“And he’s easy to blame.”

“Especially when he’s not here to defend himself.”

Mairon shook his head, still grinning. “Well,” he said, standing up and tossing his garbage into the can, “I guess I should get to work.”

“Me too,” Thuringwethil said, though she didn’t look inclined to move just yet.

“I owe you, Thil,” he said, heading for the door.

“I’ll add it to your tab,” she said, waving as he made his way out.

Mairon was happy to be home. It had been a long day and, indignity of all indignities, winter had finally begun to creep in. There was a chill in the air, and a he was sick of it already. He closed the front door behind him and unbuttoned his coat before unraveling his scarf.

“Oh, please,” Melkor said, looking over at him from where he lay sprawled on the couch. “It’s not that cold yet.”

“No one’s asking you to wear a scarf,” Mairon shot back.

“Okay, cranky.”

“Shit,” Mairon said as the dog came bounding out to greet him. “You’re lucky I love you; you know that? There’s no one else I’d go back outside for at this hour.”

“Not even me?”

“Nope.”

“Well, that’s rude,” Melkor said. “Especially considering that I just took him out ten minutes ago.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes,” Melkor said. “You ungrateful thing.”

“Thank you,” Mairon said, managing a convincing veneer of contrition. He stripped off his scarf and coat and hung them up. “I love this dog,” he said, sitting down beside Melkor and drawing up his feet beneath him, “but I hate taking him out in the winter—especially down eight million floors.”

“It’s not winter,” Melkor said, putting an arm around Mairon and pulling him close. “Not yet.” Mairon curled into him, burying his face against Melkor’s neck. Melkor jumped, swearing and pushing him away. “Your nose is cold, you jerk.”

“Not winter, huh?” Mairon said, grinning.

“Eat me,” Melkor said.

“Maybe later,” Mairon shot back. He scooted closer, and Melkor let him back in, wrapping an arm around him.

“Good day at work?” Melkor asked, kissing the top of his head.

“Busy,” Mairon said, laying his head on Melkor’s shoulder.

“I can tell,” Melkor said, glancing at the clock.

“I’ve been good lately.”

“Better,” Melkor conceded.

“It’s harder this time of year,” Mairon said. “It’s dark when I leave and dark when I get home.”

“Mm,” Melkor agreed, only half-listening, leaning his cheek against the top of Mairon’s head.

“And then,” Mairon said, on a bit of a roll now, “I have to fight traffic to get back here and deal with a hundred thousand idiots wandering the streets and crowding my bus stops.”

“I offered to come get you.”

“It’s days like this,” Mairon said, ignoring him, “that I want to pack up and move out into the middle of nowhere.”

“That’s always an option,” Melkor said.

“You like this place too much.”

“I told you,” Melkor said, “back when I asked you to move in, that I wasn’t super attached to the place anymore. If you want to move, we’ll move.”

Mairon pushed himself up, looking skeptically at Melkor. “You’d leave this place?” he asked. “Really?”

“If you wanted to,” Melkor said, shrugging. He frowned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you’re sweet,” Mairon said, “and I love you.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Melkor said. “It’ll ruin my reputation.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Mairon said, leaning in to kiss him.

“So when’s that dude starting? The one Thil recommended?”

“He started last week,” Mairon said.

“Shit,” said Melkor. “Was I supposed to meet with him?”

“Next week,” Mairon said. “After he’s had a chance to get things rolling.”

“Perfect,” Melkor said.

“He seems good,” said Mairon. “He’s got a lot of ideas.”

“And, more importantly,” Melkor said, “he’s going to take a lot of work off of us.”

“God willing,” Mairon said, crossing his fingers.

“If you let him.”

“I’ve been better,” Mairon insisted.

“You know, if you have to keep saying it...”

“It probably means that my friends are assholes who won’t acknowledge my valiant efforts to reform my behavior.”

“And your husband?”

“Him too. Although, he gets a pass because he’s extremely cute, and he’s letting me warm my feet under him.”

“If you’re cold,” Melkor said.

“And I am.”

“Then I know a better way to get warm than trying to leech my body heat.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mairon said, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean, I was going to offer to make you a hot toddy—I already had two, by the way, full disclosure—but if you’re offering something even better...”

“Who says we can’t do both?”

“God, I love you,” Melkor said, kissing him. He stood up from the couch and stretched, then reached out a hand to help Mairon up. “You’re going to make me make you a hot toddy first, aren’t you?”

“You know me so well,” Mairon said, grinning. “But I promise,” he said, sidling up to Melkor and standing up on tiptoe to kiss him, “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Deal,” Melkor said, and led him to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” Maedhros said, spreading his hands in a diplomatic *mea culpa* gesture. “I really don’t know where he is. Do you want me to try him again?”

“Sure,” Oromë said. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

Maedhros dialed Celegorm’s number again. It rang once, and then went to voicemail. “I guess we could just go over and look for him,” he said.

“Not without me,” Fingon said, bustling into Maedhros’ office.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Oromë said, grinning. He held out his hand, and Fingon shook it.

“Good to see you again,” Fingon said.

“Wish it were under better circumstances,” Oromë said.

“Not your fault,” Fingon said, waving him away. He turned to Maedhros. “Any word from your brothers?”

“Neither one of them is answering my calls,” Maedhros said, frowning and checking his phone again.

“Typical,” Fingon said, rolling his eyes.

“Look,” Oromë said, “I hate to do this, but I really can’t keep my guys waiting much longer.”

“I know,” Maedhros said apologetically.

“Our tax dollars are paying you whether you’re standing around or raiding a building,” Fingon said. He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Don’t snipe,” Maedhros said. “He’s doing us a favor.”

“Not to be a dick about it,” Oromë said, “but that’s the truth. I have a warrant. Waiting for your idiot brothers is just a courtesy.”

“I know, I know,” Fingon said, “and I really appreciate your patience.”

“You kids get the old family friend leeway,” Oromë said. “Although, fair warning, it doesn’t extend forever.”

“I’m sorry,” Maedhros said. “I know he’s around somewhere. He’s just ignoring me.”

“Let me try,” Oromë said, pulling out his phone.

“You still have his number?”

“Absolutely,” Oromë said. “I figure it’s better to keep that little shit’s number in hand just in case.”

“For just such an occasion,” Fingon said.

“He always did know how to get into trouble,” Oromë said.

“And out of it,” Maedhros added.

“Let’s hope his streak continues,” Oromë said. He found Celegorm’s number and pressed the button to call. It rang twice before Celegorm answered. “There you are, you delinquent,” Oromë said.

“Son of a bitch,” Fingon muttered.

“Where are you?” Oromë asked. He paused, listening. “Oh, perfect. I’ll be there in five minutes. Yes, really. Stay put.” He hung up and shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Well,” he said, turning and grinning at the Finwions. “That was easy.”

“He’s such an asshole,” Fingon said.

“Nothing new there,” Oromë said. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

Celegorm met them in the lobby of Nargothrond. “Oromë,” he said, grinning his most charming, devilish grin. “Long time, no see.”

“Long time, no misdemeanors,” Oromë said.

“There’s nothing on my record,” Celegorm said.

“And who do you thank for that?” Oromë held out his hand, and Celegorm shook it. “It’s good to see you, Celegorm.”

“Yeah, likewise,” Celegorm said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“He’s got a search warrant,” Fingon said.

“Wait, what? Really?”

“Afraid so,” Oromë said.

“For what?” Celegorm demanded, a scowl quickly replacing his grin. “What’s going on?”

“We have a warrant to search the premises for evidence pursuant to a reported theft of intellectual property from the offices of Tol-in-Gaurhoth,” Oromë said.

“In English, please,” Celegorm said.

“Tol-Sirion is coming back to bite you in the ass,” said Fingon. “Like I told you it would.”

“Where’s Curvo?” Maedhros asked.

“Upstairs,” said Celegorm. “But hang on a second. You can’t just barge in here.”

“A judge says I can,” said Oromë. “Or, well, my officers can.” He turned and nodded over his shoulder at the minions waiting patiently behind him. At his signal, they entered the building and headed up the stairs, fanning out to execute the terms of the warrant. “I’m not much for turning over buildings anymore.”

“Too much for you, old man?” Celegorm said, grinning.

“Watch it, boy,” Oromë growled, and Celegorm’s grin widened.

“Not the time,” Fingon said, “or the place, for that matter. Jesus, Celegorm. This is serious.”

“They need to search your computers,” Maedhros said.

“And your files,” Oromë added. “Anything that might’ve come from the offices at Tol-in-Gaurhoth.”

“Tol-Sirion,” Celegorm said stubbornly.

“Just let them look,” Maedhros said. “It’s not like we have anything to hide.”

“Right,” Celegorm said, though the little frown that pursed his lips didn’t escape his brother’s notice. “But, uh, what exactly are you looking for?”

“Some kind of computer files or something,” Oromë said. “I don’t know. Ask my tech wonks.”

“It’s Silmaril,” Fingon said. “Those fucking assholes over at Angband are claiming Finrod stole it out of Tol-Sirion.”

“Shouldn’t you be asking Finrod about that?” Maedhros said.

“We have,” said Oromë.

“And what did he say?”

“Nothing,” said Fingon. “Like I told him to.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Oromë, rolling his eyes. “You’re a very good lawyer, Finno.”

“Don’t call me that,” Fingon said, annoyed. “My client has the right not to incriminate himself.”

“You know, I’ve always said that it can’t hurt to say anything if you have nothing to hide.”

“You would say that, *detective*.”

“Same to you, lawyer boy.”

“Can you two cut it out?” Maedhros asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I have enough to deal with. I don’t want to add obstruction to our list of legal problems.”

“No one’s obstructing,” Fingon said.

“Yet,” Celegorm added.

“Don’t start,” Maedhros growled at him.

“I mean, even if we did have Silmaril, which we don’t, would it matter? The damn thing’s ours anyway.”

“No, it isn’t,” Maedhros said.

“Angband’s patent went through last week,” Fingon said.

“I don’t give a damn what the legal bullshit says,” Celegorm said. “My dad made the fucking thing.”

“I know, kid,” Oromë said, laying a hand on Celegorm’s shoulder. “And this whole thing sucks. But the law’s the law, and I have to uphold it. So, if you’ll excuse me, I have a search warrant to execute.”

“This is bullshit,” Celegorm said, pulling his phone from his pocket as Oromë headed for the elevator.

“And this is not the time for texting,” Maedhros admonished.

“Like hell it isn’t,” Celegorm said. “Someone has to warn Curvo.”

“Warn him about what?”

“Don’t answer that,” said Fingon quickly.

“Jesus, kid,” Oromë said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You couldn’t have waited until I was out of earshot?”

“What did you do?” Maedhros demanded.

“Nope,” Fingon said. “Shut up. Don’t say another word.”

“And I thought this was going to be an easy day,” Oromë said, shaking his head. He reached for the radio at his waste and spoke into it as the elevator doors opened. “Find the brother,” he said tersely. “I have a feeling we’re in for a long day.”

“God, I love it when a plan comes together,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Can’t argue with that,” Thuringwethil said, clinking her wine glass against his.

The news of the Nargothrond arrests and seizure of the company had come in late the night before. Mairon hadn’t gotten his hopes up, hadn’t wanted to believe that it had really worked. They had had so much bad luck in the past year, so much hurt and devastation, that he didn’t want to set himself up for more. But then the alerts had started coming through on his phone, and he’d scoured the news sites, and he’d begun to think that maybe, just maybe, things were looking up. Then he saw the newspapers, and he’d let himself feel the joy of a job well done.

“I assume they’re going to be out on bail,” he said, flipping idly through his menu. He was almost too excited to eat, but he looked anyway, the words and pictures only half-registering.

“They aren’t yet,” Thuringwethil. “Word from someone I know over in the clerk’s office said the oldest brother is fucking *pissed*.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“You know damn well I let Melkor sit in jail for three days before I posted his bail.”

“I forgot about that,” Mairon said, laughing.

“It served him right,” Thuringwethil said.

“Can’t argue with that,” Mairon said. “So what’s our next move?”

“We sue the shit out of Nargothrond for IP theft and copyright infringement and a laundry list of other shit I’m still working on.”

“Perfect,” Mairon said. “That ought to keep the occupied for a while.”

“I hope so,” Thuringwethil said. “Although, between you and me, that kid of Fingolfin’s is a pretty savvy lawyer.”

“Not as savvy as ours.”

“Duh,” she said, rolling her eyes. She frowned though, tapping her fingertips thoughtfully on her wine glass. “He bothers me, though. He seems like he could be a pain in the ass if he wanted to be.”

“Huh,” Mairon said. “Maybe he needs something else to occupy him.”

“Maybe,” she said. “We’re going to have to think about it. Not over lunch, though. I want to relax.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “So, what’s new with you, Thil? We’ve been so busy the last week or two that I haven’t gotten to talk to you.”

“Shit,” she said, running a hand through her hair. “I don’t know, Mai. I’ve been so busy lately I feel like I haven’t had time for any news.” She took a sip of wine. “Ilmarë’s moving in.”

Mairon choked on his wine. “Jesus Christ, Thil,” he said reproachfully, reaching for a napkin. “You can’t set me up like that.”

“Like what?”

He gave her a look of affront. “Oh, nothing much new with me, except for the fact that my first real, serious significant other ever is moving in with me, and I didn’t feel the need to tell my very best friend in the whole world until right now.”

“When else did you want me to tell you? When the thought first crossed my mind?”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “Duh. What part of best friend are you not understanding?”

“Well, I’m telling you now,” she said. “Ilmarë’s moving in.”

“That’s big, Thil.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you excited?”

“I am,” she said, smiling. “A little nervous, but yeah, excited.”

“It’s an adjustment,” Mairon said, “but it’s good.”

“You two seem to have survived it.”

“And if we, two extremely dysfunctional adults, can do it, then I have every confidence in you.”

She laughed. “I never thought I’d see the day when anyone moved into my house.”

“Except me, maybe.”

“I’ll admit, I’ve sometimes wondered if we’d end up two old single people living together and bitching about the rest of the world.”

“That’s still an option.”

She laughed again. “Not now, it isn’t. You’re married.”

“Melkor ruins the fun again.”

“As usual.”

“You know, speaking of Melkor and of moving, we’re thinking about moving out of the apartment.”

“No shit,” she said, looking surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought Melkor would ever give that place up.”

“He’s surprisingly chill about it.”

“You ready to get out of the bachelor pad, huh?”

“I mean, I like the place. It’s huge, and it’s comfortable, and it’s surprisingly quiet for being a penthouse in the middle of the city.”

“But it’s very much Melkor’s place.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Which is all well and good, but—”

“You’re married,” she said. “You ought to have something that’s yours, together.”

“Does that sound selfish?”

“It sounds normal.”

“Well, there’s a first when it comes to us.”

“Your words,” she said. “Not mine.” He laughed, and she grinned back at him. “You know,” she said thoughtfully, almost as an afterthought, “there’s a house out near mine for sale.”

“Yeah? You want us that close to you?”

“You, yes. Melkor, I might have to think about.”

“Well, we’re just starting to think about it,” he said. “So you’ve got time to change your mind.”

“I’ll send you the details, if I find them.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “Now let’s get a waiter over here before I starve to death.”

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Hey Jealousy

Chapter Summary

Nargothrond isn't going down quietly. Things are about to get personal.

“Nothing fills me with more satisfaction,” said Mairon, laying aside the newspaper, “than seeing front page pictures of Nargothrond being raided.”

“You might not want to repeat that outside of this office,” Thuringwethil said.

“Why not?”

“It gives off a certain vibe,” Gothmog said.

“The vibe that we hate those fuckers?” Melkor asked.

“Well, yeah,” Gothmog said.

“Good,” Melkor said. “Because we do.”

“It’s bad form,” Thuringwethil said. “Especially when you’re involved in some nasty legal disputes.”

“I’d say it’s an even better idea in that case.”

“Yeah, you would,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Which is why you have me.”

“What, to civilize us?”

“Please,” she said, snorting in disdain. “There’s no hope for that. I just do my best to keep you out of trouble.”

“It’s a fair point,” Mairon said. “You don’t want to get caught sounding bitter or nasty in public. Professional image isn’t something to mess around with.”

“Exactly,” Thuringwethil said.

“But in the safety of this office,” Melkor said, “I’m free to say exactly how much I hate those trust-fund rich-boy fuckers and hope they choke.”

“Because lawyer-client confidentiality?” Gothmog said.

“It’s called attorney-client privilege,” Thuringwethil said. “And no. He probably meant because we’re all as fundamentally broken as he is and like to see our enemies get trampled into the dust.”

“I’m not fundamentally broken,” Gothmog said.

“Sure you are. Melkor’s your best friend.”

“Hey!” Melkor protested.

“Fair,” Gothmog said, ignoring him. “But hoping your enemies crash and burn is pretty natural, in my opinion.”

“Sure,” Thuringwethil said. “In private.”

“And since we’re in private,” Mairon said, “can we speculate on what happens to Formenos?”

“It’s...unclear,” she said, tapping her nails thoughtfully on the arm of Melkor’s couch. “Fëanor was a lot of things, but he wasn’t stupid. The basis of Nargothrond’s formation was that it was, at its core, a separate entity. Anything that went wrong there, stopped there.”

“Can’t really fault him,” Mairon said. “You don’t want a dumbass nephew tanking your whole company.”

“Or a dumbass couple of sons,” Melkor said.

“Those two are in deep shit,” Gothmog said.

“Oh, for sure,” Thuringwethil said. “We can’t prove that they were involved in planning the, uh—”

“Tol-in-Gaurhoth thing,” Mairon said, laying a hand on Melkor’s as his husband’s fingers clenched into a fist.

“Right,” Thuringwethil said, “but we can catch them in the fallout.”

“Yeah, luring those goons into taking over that burning trash heap of a company was a pretty smart move,” Gothmog said.

“Thank God you’ve got pretty smart friends,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Every goddamn day,” Gothmog said, grinning back at him.

“So two of the kids are going down,” Melkor said, “and Formenos likely takes a good PR hit, yeah?”

“I’d think so,” Thuringwethil said. “Even if they’re technically separate, their connected enough for it to look super bad.”

“Good,” Gothmog said.

“Yes,” said Mairon. “As a first step. But I want more.”

“You always do,” Melkor said.

“Gross,” said Thuringwethil.

“Not what I meant,” Melkor said, “but still true.”

“Still gross,” she said. “I’m still looking for a way to stick this to Formenos, too, but they did a really good job of separating Formenos for just such an occasion as this.”

“There’s got to be a way to connect them,” Mairon said.

“I’m doing my best,” she said.

“I know,” he said.

“While Thil’s kicking legal ass for us,” Melkor said, “I think we should be working on putting ourselves ahead. Disabling Formenos is all well and good, but the real goal is leaving them behind.”

“Good point,” Mairon said. “The business management department is still getting itself up and running, but I think it’s time we had a strategy meeting to hammer out our long-term goals.”

“Agreed,” Melkor said. “We’re going to need you in on this, Thil. Or at least one of your underlings to take notes.”

“Give me some possible times, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“While you kids are climbing the corporate ladder,” Gothmog said, “I’m going to make sure our asses are covered. Formenos isn’t going to take any of this lying down.”

“They never have before,” Thuringwethil added.

“And anyway,” Melkor said, “we’re not that lucky.”

“Hey,” Gothmog said, shrugging. “Maybe we’ll get lucky. There’s a first time for everything, right?”

“Hey, cousin,” Caranthir said, knocking lightly on the frame of Fingon’s open door. “You busy?”

“Always,” Fingon said. “But I can make time for my favorite cousin.”

“Oh, Nelyo’s coming?”

“Wise ass.” Caranthir grinned and came into the office. “What can I do for you, Moryo?”

“You can listen to what I heard this morning,” Caranthir said, sitting in one of the plush chairs that flanked Fingon’s desk.

“Oh, yeah?” Fingon said, perking up. “Good gossip?”

“Maybe,” Caranthir said, shrugging. “In the right hands.”

“Go on.”

“So there’s this guy,” Caranthir said, “that works with me on the business side. Real nice guy, been working here for years, quiet, does his work—”

“I get it,” Fingon said. “Unimpeachable character and all that. What about him?”

“Apparently,” Caranthir said, “he used to work as an event photographer. Still does, on occasion, but he used to do it a lot in college to make some extra money.”

“Yeah? You want some new headshots or something?”

“No,” Caranthir said, scowling in annoyance. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Get to the point.”

“So my guy was going through some old hard drives,” Caranthir said, “cleaning things out and whatnot. And he found some pictures from an old party he photographed. The party was at Utumno.”

“Oh, yeah?” Fingon said, sitting up straighter. Caranthir had his attention at last. “Anything good?”

“A lot of what you’d expect. Group shots, dancing, general festivities...and one extremely interesting picture of a couple executives caught in a...less than professional activity.”

“Which ones?” Fingon demanded. “And what exactly were they doing?”

“Bauglir and Smith,” Caranthir said. “They were kissing under the mistletoe.”

“Oh, gross,” Fingon said, wrinkling his nose.

“Yeah, it’s pretty tacky, but I guess it was a Christmas party.”

“I meant those two, together. I’d have thought the combination of egos would be, like, mutually exclusive or something.”

“Apparently not,” Caranthir said. “It got me thinking—wondering if this was a one-off, or something that happened in the past, or maybe if it was still a thing.”

“And?”

“And I did some digging,” Caranthir said, pulling out his phone and tapping in some commands. “I found this, on Instagram.” He passed the phone to Fingon.

“Who’s Ruivë?” Fingon asked, looking at the username.

“No idea,” Caranthir said, “but the picture is from this past Christmas.”

“Uh-huh,” Fingon said, studying the pictures with a kind of horrified fascination. “So this is an ongoing thing.”

“I’d say so,” Caranthir said. “I took the liberty of doing a public records search. Turns out they got married a couple months ago.”

“Jesus,” Fingon said. “Really?”

“Yeah. I got a copy of the license from someone I know over in the courthouse.”

“Huh,” Fingon said thoughtfully.

“Told you it was interesting,” Caranthir said smugly.

“Interesting, yes,” Fingon said. “Kind of gross and weird. Definitely don’t want to think about it too hard. But I don’t know that we can actually do anything with the info. I mean, it might be a dumb idea, but it’s not exactly illegal to be romantically involved with your coworkers.”

“You better hope not,” Caranthir said, and Fingon glowered at him. “Look, all I know is

that they've definitely been keeping their relationship on the downlow. There was absolutely no publicity about the wedding, not even within the company, from what I can tell. And besides what I showed you, I can't find any pictures of them together."

"They're private," Fingon said. "So what?"

"So it kind of seems like they aren't super wild about anyone knowing what they're up to. Might be a shame if word was to get out."

Fingon considered for a moment. "I mean," he said thoughtfully, "if nothing else, it might make me feel better about our shitty luck with Nargothrond."

"That," he said, "and also maybe shift some gossip and speculation back at them, where it belongs."

"Fair point," Fingon said. "Forward me the details, and I'll see that they get into the right hands."

"Will do," Caranthir said, picking up his phone.

"Good work, Moryo," Fingon said, grinning.

"Finally, some recognition," Caranthir said, grinning back before turning away.

"What the literal, actual fuck?" Melkor demanded, pounding his fists on his desk.

"My thoughts exactly," Mairon said sourly.

"This has to be illegal. This is illegal, right?"

"No," Thuringwethil said. "I'm afraid not. Everything here is public record."

"Marriage records technically are," Mairon said, "but pictures?"

"They don't belong to us," Thuringwethil said, "so we can't do anything about it."

"I told that little bastard to delete that picture," Melkor said. "But on the other hand, I was right about the Christmas party that year."

"This is really not the time to gloat," Mairon said, scowling at him.

"Maybe not," Melkor said, "but I don't want to forget about it later."

"I don't get why you guys are so pissed," Gothmog said. "Or," he backtracked, as both Mairon and Melkor turned to scowl at him, "okay, I get that you don't like being blindsided, but other than that, it's not a big deal. You guys are married, and you're not exactly secretive about it. I mean, you're out together all the time."

"That's not even remotely the point," Mairon snapped. "This isn't about us being married. This is about sending a message."

"Oh, for God's sake," Gothmog said. "You're being paranoid."

"Is he?" Melkor demanded. "Because this looks a hell of a lot like someone letting us

know that they have ways of getting information about us and that they aren't afraid to publish it."

"It's your marriage," Gothmog said, "not, I don't know, internal company records."

"Not yet," Mairon said darkly.

"Don't you think you might be overreacting?"

"Maybe," Mairon said, "but it's better than underreacting."

"Is it?"

"Someone wants us to know that they know about us," Melkor said. "It's a threat."

"Oh, for God's sake," Gothmog said. "No, it isn't. Let's be honest, guys. We know who did this, and we probably know why. We're hitting the Finwion dickheads where it hurts, and they've got absolutely nothing to throw back at us. It's like when you kick someone's ass, and they're down, and they know they've lost, so they just throw up some dumb insults to take the sting out of it."

"Maybe," Mairon said, "but I still don't like it, and I'm not going to let it slide."

"I'm afraid to ask what that might look like."

"In the long-run," Mairon said, "it means succeeding in our business endeavors so entirely that no one even remembers that Formenos was a company."

"Uh-huh," Gothmog said. "And in the short-run?"

"It means I go do some digging and see what I can find to humiliate them publicly."

"I don't know what I expected," Gothmog said, shaking his head.

"And that's why I love you," Melkor said, grinning at Mairon.

"My incredible ability to multitask?" Mairon said, grinning in return.

"You're both insane," Gothmog said. "You're perfect together."

"And now everyone knows it," Thuringwethil said.

"Too soon, Thil," Melkor said. "Now, while I'd love to sit here and watch you reimagine the plot of *Carrie* to feature those Finwion twits, we do have a meeting we need to get to."

"Shit," Mairon said, looking at his watch. "You're right."

"Melkor reminding us about a meeting," Thuringwethil said, shaking her head. "What is the world coming to?"

"Something frightening," Gothmog said. "Which is why I'll leave you three to it."

"That," Melkor said, "and the fact that this meeting doesn't concern your department."

"And for that," Gothmog said, grinning, "I'm eternally grateful."

"And I'm a little jealous."

“You better be,” Gothmog said. “I’m gonna go put on the hockey game in my office.”

“Damn,” Melkor said. He turned to Mairon. “Do I absolutely have to go?”

“Yes,” Mairon said, “you absolutely do.”

“Damn,” Melkor said again.

“Have fun being adults!” Gothmog said cheerfully, waving at them as he stood to go.

“I absolutely will not,” Melkor said, scowling at him.

“Cheer up, babe,” Mairon said, patting him on the shoulder. “It’s only an hour.”

“It better be,” Melkor said. “I want to catch the rest of that game when we’re done.”

“So how close are we on functional testing?” Mairon asked, shuffling the pages on his desk into order.

“Next week, probably,” said Melkor. “How about preliminary integration?”

“Same,” Mairon said. “It would be great if we could knock them both out.”

“Yeah,” Melkor said. “I just need to double check on permits.”

“Please do,” Mairon said. “Weapons testing isn’t something we can half-ass.”

“No, I know,” Melkor said. “Everything’s filed. I just need to confirm the date. We’re going to have to refile if we’re involving aircraft, though. For now, we’re just on actual systems evaluation.”

“Okay,” Mairon said. “Let me get an update from the prototype crew and see if they can make it happen.”

“Cool,” Melkor said. “So Langon said we’ve got buyouts pending on three other companies.”

“One went through today,” Mairon said. “Still waiting on the other two.”

“And what are you planning to do with them?”

“Strip ‘em for parts,” Mairon said. “They’re too similar to what we’re doing to keep them whole, but I’ll take all their best staff and probably all their means of production.”

“Good. If these tests pan out next week, we’re going to need some production space.”

“Langon’s already working on negotiating some tentative contacts for purchasing, too.”

“For our systems?”

“Yep.”

“Good man, that Langon.”

“Great man,” Mairon said. “Hell of a business manager.”

“That he is,” Melkor said. “Any updates on the boat people?”

Mairon snorted. “Boat people,” he said, shaking his head. “Honestly.”

“What?” Melkor said grinning. “They’re people who make boats. Boat people.”

“They’re manufacturers of unmanned submarines,” Mairon said.

“Right,” said Melkor. “Boat people.”

“They’re just about ready for Silmaril integration out there,” Mairon said. “The recon version, anyway. I’m thinking I’m going to need to go out and supervise in the next couple weeks.”

“Hmm, don’t like that.”

“What?”

“The idea of you going out there.”

“Why not?”

“Because last time you were out of town on business, someone tried to kill you.”

“I think the odds of a repeat on that front are pretty slim, don’t you?”

“Can we not joke about it, please?”

“Why not? It’s how I cope.”

“Mai.”

“Babe, it’ll be fine,” Mairon said, kissing the back of Melkor’s hand. “It’ll just be a couple days.”

“Is it absolutely necessary?”

“I’m the head engineer for the entire company,” Mairon said. “I’m in charge of all our software programs. I think it’s pretty necessary.”

“Fine,” Melkor said. “But I still don’t like it.”

“You could come with me,” Mairon said.

“Huh,” Melkor said thoughtfully. “I guess I could.”

“Think about it,” Mairon said, “and if you decide you want to go, I’ll have them book you a ticket.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure,” Mairon said, smiling. “It’d make the after-hours a hell of a lot more fun if you came.”

“Oh, I’m going to come,” Melkor said, giving him a meaningful grin, “and I’m going to make you—”

Someone knocked at the door of Mairon's office, and they both jumped. "Come in," Mairon said, clearing his throat.

"Hey," said Ruivë, smiling as she came through the door. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No, it's fine," Mairon said. "You looking for Gothmog?"

"I was looking for you, actually," Ruivë said. "Both of you."

"Well," Melkor said, "you found us. What's up?"

"I brought dinner," she said, hoisting a bag onto Mairon's desk.

"Damn, that smells good," Melkor said, standing up to peer inside.

"That's so nice," Mairon said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Ruivë said. "I came to apologize."

"For what?"

"For the whole newspaper thing," she said. "That picture they had of the two of you? It was from my Instagram."

"Yeah," Melkor said. "Gothmog told us."

"I had no idea anyone would get ahold of it," she said, "and I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have posted it without asking."

"Ruivë," Mairon said, "you didn't do anything wrong. You posted a picture. People do it every day."

"Yes, but I know you guys like your privacy, and I didn't mean to—"

"Of course you didn't," Melkor said. "You just posted a nice picture from a Christmas party. It's not your fault some of our asshole competitors tried to use it against us."

"Still," she said. "I feel bad. You guys have been so nice to me and Sirya, and I hate to think I did something to hurt you."

"You didn't," Mairon said. "Please don't worry about it."

"But if you really feel the need to try to make it up to us," Melkor said, "feel free to keep bringing us dinner."

"Don't be an ass," Mairon said, slapping his arm.

"Deal," Ruivë said, grinning at Melkor. "Look, I have to get back, but—"

"Go," Melkor said. "Don't worry about anything, okay?"

"Okay," she said, nodding. "See you guys for drinks tomorrow?"

"See you then," Mairon said. He watched her go, his expression souring as she disappeared from view. "If I wasn't pissed before," he said darkly, "then I am now. How dare

those assholes drag Ruivë into this?”

“I know,” Melkor said. “It sucks.”

“I’m going to kill them,” Mairon said, his tone conversational, “and put their heads on a spike as a warning to every other dipshit who thinks about fucking with us.”

“And that,” Melkor said, leaning in to kiss him, “is why I love you. Now, let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

Don't Bring Me Down

Chapter Summary

It's quiet around Angband these days. And then it's not.

"I'm sorry," Melkor said, mouth half-open in surprise. "They're doing what now?"

"Probably a bunch of stuff I don't want to think about," Mairon said. "But we'll call it dating."

"They're related," Melkor said.

"Yeah, I know," Mairon said. "I mean, technically they're half-cousins, so it's not *that* close, but..." He raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

"It's still kind of gross," Melkor said.

"It's gossip-worthy, for sure," Mairon said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," Mairon said. "I'm considering a few options. This only has one chance to go public."

"It's not going to go over well," Melkor said. "Especially in that crowd."

"Finwë's grandsons fucking?" Mairon said, grinning. "Yeah, I doubt it'll go over well with any crowd."

"How do you find this shit out?" Melkor asked, shaking his head. "I mean, seriously. You always get the good dirt on people."

"Practice," Mairon said, "and a knack for getting people to tell me things."

"You always were charming," Melkor said.

"I know," Mairon said, sitting on the arm of Melkor's chair and leaning against him.

"And full of yourself," Melkor said.

"You're one to talk."

Melkor laughed, and Mairon leaned down to kiss him. "Is it too early to go home?" Melkor asked, sliding an arm around Mairon and pulling him down into his lap.

"It's three o'clock," Mairon said, wriggling into a more comfortable position.

"That's not an answer," Melkor said.

"Yes, it's too early to go home," Mairon said, and Melkor made a noise of disgust. "But

it's never too early for a little afternoon pick-me-up," Mairon said, mischief in his eyes, a grin on his lips.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Melkor asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I doubt it," Mairon said, grinning, "but it's probably close enough to suffice. Is the door locked?"

"No," Melkor said, glancing at it, "but it's probably fine, right?"

"At this point," Mairon said, "anyone who walks in here without knocking deserves what they get."

"Fair point," Melkor said, and kissed him.

There had been a time in the not-so-distant past when Melkor wouldn't have been caught dead working past three o'clock. Now, as he glanced at the clock, he counted himself lucky it was only five, and then shook his head at the thought. "How the mighty have fallen," he muttered, gathering up his things and shoving them into his bag. Still, he couldn't really complain.

He had always loved his work, despite all his goofing off and protestations about being forced to go to meetings. It was his love for building things that had started Utumno, and it was his perseverance that carried it through the turbulent early years to an established place of respect in the industry. His attention had waned, as it was wont to do, when things got easy and repetitive and smooth; it was one of the reasons he had been so grateful, years ago, to have found Mairon, who relished the boring, tedious details of day-to-day operations.

Now he found himself immersed once more, reinvigorated by new directions and even greater success. Hiring Mairon, he knew, was the single greatest decision he had ever made in his life. Angband had been on an upswing for years, and the Silmaril ruling in their favor had propelled them to new and greater heights. They had more contracts than they could handle, and Mairon was constantly approving new acquisitions, thanks to their new business manager, who was funneling smaller companies to Angband for assimilation into their production scheme. Things were going, to put it mildly, exceptionally well.

"What are you in such a good mood for?" Thuringwethil asked, breaking into Melkor's thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"You're humming," she said, "and smiling like an idiot."

"That's nice," Melkor said, rolling his eyes. "Can't a guy be in a good mood?"

"Sure," she said. "But when it's you, that's usually a bad sign for someone else."

"Rude," Melkor said, though he had to admit that she had a point.

"So?" she prompted, crossing her arms.

"I was just thinking about the business," he said, shrugging. "Things are going super well lately. It's nice not to have to worry, for a change."

“Knock on wood,” she said, “or I swear—”

He turned and knocked on the top of his desk. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not about to jinx us.”

“You better not,” she said. “The last month has been so calm. I’ve actually gotten to hang out with Ilmarë, if you can believe it.”

“Tell me about it,” Melkor said. “Mai’s been home for dinner every night this week.”

“We’ve got some skewed metrics,” she said, grinning.

“Hazard of the trade,” he said, grinning right back. “I thought you’d be busy with the lawsuit attempts.”

She snorted. “Fingon has no grounds, and he knows it,” she said. “He’s just mad.”

“Can’t say I blame him,” Melkor said. “The whole town knows he’s fucking his cousin.”

“Half-cousin,” Thuringwethil said. “But the point still stands.”

“Yeah, the half isn’t much to hide behind,” Melkor agreed.

“I’d feel bad,” she said, “if they weren’t a bag of dicks.”

“I wouldn’t,” Melkor said. “Even if they weren’t a bag of dicks.”

“He had it coming,” she said.

“And boy did he get it,” Melkor said, grinning viciously. “From what Mai’s heard, he hasn’t been able to show his face anywhere since the news broke.”

“You know, if Mai ever leaves us, he’s got a promising future in espionage,” Thuringwethil said.

“He doesn’t have to leave us for that,” Melkor said. “Didn’t you read about the latest round of acquisitions?”

“To be honest with you,” she said, “I don’t read much about them these days except for where it pertains to legal.”

“That’s extremely unlike you.”

“In my defense,” she said, “there are a metric fuck ton of them.”

“It’s slowed down a bit lately.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” she said. “We need to catch up a little. Stay on top of things.”

“We’re doing pretty well, actually,” Melkor said. “We’ve been focusing on buying up functioning industrial spaces rather than intellectual property lately. It’s giving us way more production capacity.”

“We’re going to need it, if the order reports I saw were accurate.”

“They probably aren’t,” Melkor said. “I think we got some more overnight.”

“Shit,” she said, shaking her head. “Does it feel good to be winning or what?”

“It really fucking does,” he said. “Things were hairy there for a while, not gonna lie. The Silmaril thing really fucked us for a bit.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, shrugging. “We turned it around.”

“We always do.”

“We’re batting a thousand there, aren’t we?”

“So far so good.”

“Got plans for the weekend?” she asked.

“We’re looking at a house tonight,” Melkor said.

“Oh, nice,” she said. “Where at?”

“Not far from you, actually.”

“Text me the address,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I know anything about it.”

“Will do,” he said. “Mai likes this one.”

“That’s promising,” she said. “He’s picky.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, I should’ve known.”

“Then again,” she said, as though he hadn’t spoken, “he married you. How picky can he be?”

“Ouch,” he said, feigning affront.

“Seriously though,” she said. “Buying a house is a big commitment. You gotta make sure you like the one you pick.”

“At the rate we’re going, we’ll never get one.”

“It’s only been, like, a month,” she said.

“Which is basically forever.”

“Which is why Mai’s in charge of all major decisions.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melkor said, waving her away. “What about you? Any big plans?”

“Not really,” she said. “Ilmarë’s out of town for the week. I’m fending for myself.”

“You can come over, if you want. Mai keeps complaining that I won’t watch any good trash TV.”

“Maybe I will,” she said. “I’ve got some catching up to do on that front too.”

“God, I can’t believe we actually have some time to dick around for once. I feel like I’ve

been working nonstop lately.”

“Welcome to the big kids’ table,” she said, grinning.

“I don’t like it,” he said, scowling.

“You should’ve known Mai was a bad influence.”

“The worst,” Melkor said, nodding gravely. “Pick you up after the house viewing?”

“Buy me dinner too?”

“You’re a mooch,” he said, shaking his head. “We’ll pick you up at seven.”

“I love it,” Mairon said, an enormous, child-like grin on his face. He was turning slowly in a circle, taking in every inch of the house that he could.

“You do?” Melkor asked, half-unbelieving. They’d looked at what felt like a million houses already, and Mairon hadn’t been anything more than lukewarm on any of them.

“I really do,” Mairon said, turning back to him. “What do you think?”

“If you like it, I like it,” Melkor said.

“No, really,” Mairon said. “What do you really think?”

“Babe, I’d live in a cardboard box if it meant living with you.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Mairon said, grinning.

“Okay, fine,” Melkor said, smiling. “But I’m not nearly as picky as you are about this stuff. As long as I’ve got room for all my extremely cool collectibles—”

“Your weird junk, yes,” Mairon said.

“Then I’m good with whatever,” Melkor said, ignoring him.

“Oh my God,” Mairon said. “Are we buying a house?”

“Yes,” Melkor said, taking his hand and pulling him close. “We are.”

“I’m going to look at the backyard again,” Mairon said, kissing his cheek before bouncing away toward the back door. “The beast is going to love it.”

Melkor watched him go, smiling fondly. Then he turned to the realtor, who was standing quietly by the door. “Make it happen,” Melkor said. “The quicker the better.”

“Absolutely,” she said, and went outside to make the call.

“Looks like they’re finally selling the Nargothrond premises,” Gothmog said, folding down the top half of the newspaper and continuing to read.

“I saw that,” Mairon said. “Pass me the cream, will you?”

Thuringwethil slid it across the table. Tuesday morning brunch had started a couple of months before, when a fire alarm malfunction had forced them all out of the building at ten a.m. in such a rush that none of them had anything to do but kill time until the system was fixed and they were allowed back in the building. It had continued largely because it was, in all honesty, a break they all needed. They had been so busy in the past few months that the four of them hardly had time to breathe, let alone sit down and catch up on non-work-related things.

“Not much else they can do with it,” Melkor said, leaning sideways to read over Gothmog’s shoulder. “All three of the idiots who used to run it are out of commission.”

“The whole business is out of commission,” Gothmog pointed out.

“Thanks to Thuringwethil,” Melkor said, grinning at her.

“And Mairon,” she said, nudging him gently with her shoulder.

“It was a team effort,” Mairon said judiciously. “Even if part of the team didn’t know it.”

“How’s the kid doing these days, anyway?” Melkor asked.

“Turin?” Mairon said, shrugging. “No idea. I think he bounced around a while. Haven’t heard anything lately.”

“I’m not surprised,” Thuringwethil said. “You fuck up a place that badly, and no one’s going to want to hire you.”

If Mairon had possessed a bit more of a conscience, he might have felt bad for how thoroughly he had ruined the kid’s life. As it was, he felt only the warm pride of a plan well executed. It wasn’t his fault the kid hadn’t spotted the phishing attempt that had let Mairon back-channel the incriminating Silmaril evidence onto Nargothrond property. And anyway, he reasoned the kid had enough rich friends that he’d land on his feet eventually.

“It really threw Formenos for a loop,” Gothmog said, pulling Mairon back into the present.

“Tell me about it,” Thuringwethil said. “They’ve spent so much time recently getting out from under the Nargothrond landslide that they haven’t had time to do anything else.”

“It’s been nice,” Melkor said. “Quiet, for once.”

“Yeah,” Mairon said. “I’m not sure I like it.”

“Of course you don’t,” Gothmog said, rolling his eyes. “You’re not happy unless you’re mitigating some kind of disaster.”

“That’s not true,” Mairon said. “I just feel like it’s too quiet. Like they’re up to something.”

“The only thing they’re up to,” Melkor said, “is licking their wounds and trying to figure out how to live on grandpa’s remaining cash.”

“I hope you’re right,” Mairon said.

Thuringwethil’s phone rang, and she glanced at the screen, smiling as she picked up the

call. “Hey, babe,” she said. “Say hi to the gang.”

“Oh, good,” Ilmarë said. “I’m glad I’m catching you all together.”

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe nothing. And honestly, I probably shouldn’t even be telling you this.”

“But?” Thuringwethil prompted, her face growing serious.

“I saw Fingon,” Ilmarë said. “At the courthouse.”

“What’s he up to?”

“I don’t know for sure,” she said, “but he’s having some really big-time meetings. I’ve seen him with Oromë recently, in and out of a bunch of offices, so I did some snooping. Your name came up.”

“Mine?” she asked, taken aback.

“No, sorry,” Ilmarë said quickly. “Angband. They’re talking about the company. I don’t know what it’s about, but—”

“If Fingon’s involved, then it’s nothing good,” Thuringwethil said grimly.

“I know,” Ilmarë said. “I would chalk it up to the regular bad blood between you all, except that, well...” She trailed off, and Thuringwethil could hear the hesitation in her voice.

“Well, what?” Thuringwethil asked, feeling anxiety begin to build in her chest.

“I don’t know what it’s about,” Ilmarë said. “Maybe it’s not even related to you guys.”

“Babe, come on. Spit it out.”

“He’s meeting with Eonwë’s office,” Ilmarë said, coming to it at last. “And since Manwë got that promotion up the change to circuit court—”

“Then it must be something big,” Thuringwethil finished for her, grimacing. “Shit.”

“I know,” Ilmarë said. “I’m trying to keep my ear to the ground over here, but it’s all being kept quiet. I wish I could tell you more.”

“No, this is great,” Thuringwethil said. “Thank you.”

“I’ll keep you updated,” Ilmarë said. “As soon as I hear anything.”

“Thank you,” Thuringwethil said again, and she hung up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Mairon asked. The other three hadn’t been able to hear Ilmarë’s words, but they could tell from Thuringwethil’s face that something was wrong.

“I’m not sure,” she said, shoving her phone into her bag and pushing Mairon toward the end of the booth. “But it’s not good.”

“What—” Melkor started, but she shook her head.

“Not here,” she said. “Let’s get back to Angband, and we’ll figure out what’s going on.”

Works inspired by this one: [seagrass blues](#) by [Gooooothmoooog \(Sharkchimedes\)](#), [Til I Hear It From You](#) by [chokingonwhys](#), [Love disguised as jealousy](#) by [OninekoHikari](#)

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