

a little trouble

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a little trouble

by [finalizer](#)

Summary

In which everything is almost the same, except Arda is a suburban town in the middle of nowhere and everyone's favorite dark lords are the mysterious couple that live in the old, haunted-looking house down the road.

a day in the life

Chapter Notes

context: mairon works as manwë's assistant (at valinor) but spies for melkor's rival company (utumno) on the side

timeline: year 2; February

The return of Mairon's penchant for slamming doors was the first sign that something was wrong.

First, it was his car door. Melkor heard it loud and clear from his spot on the couch as he lounged with a can of soda in hand. Amused, he set his phone down and waited patiently for the next displays of dissatisfaction.

Within moments, keys jittered in the lock. Mairon stepped quietly inside, at first glance perfectly composed—then slammed the door shut with a careless swing of his hand. He took a bracing, calming breath.

He was home now. He could take his mask off, let it all out.

Melkor wasn't above admitting he enjoyed it greatly, watching Mairon fly off the handle.

One, it was far healthier than bottling it all up, letting it stew and marinate. Two, he truly did look beautiful when his cheeks flushed red with rage—Melkor would never deny himself a sight as marvelous as that.

“Is something wrong?” he asked innocently.

He hoped to elicit a reaction, though he knew well enough from past experience that Mairon would say *no*. He would deny being in a mood, deny any and all annoyance, any and all irritation. Still, Melkor asked. He liked the way Mairon would scowl at him before he answered.

At first, Mairon barely spared him a glance.

He toed his shoes off angrily, then, also angrily, set them neatly by the doorway. A perfectionist through and through, even as smoke rose off him in blistering waves.

“No,” he insisted—and Melkor applauded his own foresight. “Everything’s peachy.”

“Anything I can do?” he offered.

“I’m fine.”

Melkor took a contemplative sip of his soda. He wanted to be supportive, he really did. He wanted to reach out, with his heart, with open arms, offer a helping hand—and here Mairon was, slapping it all away.

That particular avenue exhausted, the only other option was to indulge him, to let Mairon wear himself out. Which was well enough; Melkor had nothing especially interesting planned for the

remainder of the afternoon.

“Bad hair day?” he probed.

Halfway to the kitchen, Mairon paused and—*oh*, there it was, that scowl. It was absurd how dearly Melkor cherished it.

Mairon held his gaze for a handful of seconds, gloriously offended, before continuing his silent rampage.

A series of ominous sounds rang out from the kitchen. Jars clattered, knocking against each other in protest as the fridge door was pulled open, followed by a soft thud, and another. Things were being tossed onto the counter. A tantrum-sandwich was in the works.

Melkor made to speak, to be nuisance and ask if the lettuce was unharmed, when Mairon snapped.

“You know what,” he said, just loud enough to be heard over the rustling and clinking. He never raised his voice, never had to. He was scary enough as it was. “As a matter of fact, things are not okay.”

This was new. Typically, it took some time before Mairon went from silent rage to furious tirade, and he very rarely did so unprompted.

“Oh?” Melkor offered indulgently, like Mairon’s admission had come as a surprise.

There was a clang, then two more in quick succession as items were dropped into the sink. Mairon wasn't being his usual careful self—but Melkor was in no mood to haul himself upright and engage in damage control just yet. Not that he had to. He knew, of course, how this would end. Mairon would cool off eventually and meticulously scrub at whatever mess he'd made until the crime scene was spotless. It was a special routine of his, reserved for those special cheat days whereon he allowed himself to lose his cool.

“A certain someone,” Mairon explained, “continues to take credit for things that he did not do. I get pushed around, I’m given these stupid—intern work, is what. He gives me intern work. And I do it all, no questions asked, on top of everything else I've already got going on, and then he knocks on the boss’ door and tells him, *look what I did.*”

There was another noise—a thud, a creak, some rustling. Mairon was scrambling onto the counter to reach one of the upper shelves. Melkor leaned back into the cushions, closed his eyes and pictured it. It was a sight to behold, one he’d seen many times before—Mairon's irritated expression, his brows pinched in determined concentration.

With a muffled grunt, Mairon hopped back down to the floor.

“I drove around for hours for signatures for the negotiations next week. And I bring them to him, and he takes them and strolls into your brother’s office, and as good as slams the door in my face. And what makes it worse is that—”

Abruptly, silence fell.

Melkor frowned, listening attentively for any signs of life.

Mairon suddenly appeared back in his field of vision with a sizable jar in hand.

He held it out.

“Open this.”

Obediently, Melkor took the jar and, with very little difficulty, popped the lid. Mairon glared at it, offended, then snatched it back and returned to the kitchen.

“And I don’t care that he’s my superior,” he went on. “I really don’t. I’m tired of him, of the lot of them. I’m so tired. And he has the audacity to then brag about results that aren’t even his to brag about. And his attitude about it all—*fuck*, that bastard is going to drive me into an early grave.”

Mairon’s voice was growing quieter, shakier with every word. It was a red flag, a glaring warning sign. He had started off fairly well, but he was suffocating his anger now, his frustration, shoving it deep down, where it would simmer and boil until it finally exploded. It would be a frightening day when it did.

For the sake of his own safety, among other things, Melkor sighed and rose to his feet, set his unfinished can down on the coffee table. He couldn’t let Mairon self-destruct. He was too precious to him to allow that. Besides, they were fresh out of decorative pieces for him to hurl at the walls should his eventual meltdown turn violent.

Quietly, he crossed over to the kitchen.

As predicted, Mairon was too engrossed in his white-hot rage to hear Melkor’s approach. It wasn’t until he set the lettuce down on the counter and swiveled around to grab something from the other side that he caught sight of him—he turned and very nearly slammed straight into Melkor’s chest. In hindsight, it was lucky he wasn’t brandishing a knife—or worse, the mayonnaise.

Instinctively, Mairon took a step back, as far as he could without backing himself up against the counter. He regained his footing and looked up at Melkor with unconcealed relief. He blinked, exhaled. His anchor was here. He was all right.

Melkor raised his hands to Mairon’s shoulders, trailing lightly, then higher. He took Mairon’s face in both palms and gently lifted his head. Like magic, the furrow of Mairon’s brow softened. As was often the case, he needed a touch, even the slightest shred of physical contact, to guide him back down to the ground before he floated too far out of reach.

Melkor felt the press of fingers against his abdomen, felt them curl into the folds of his sweater. It was a wordless request, a plea for closeness. He leaned down to press a kiss to Mairon’s forehead and, desperately, Mairon melted into it, rocked forward like he couldn’t quite get enough.

“You forget to breathe,” Melkor chastised him.

Mairon tucked his face against Melkor’s shoulder. “I’ll breathe when that prick gets his head out of his pompous ass.”

Melkor scoffed. “Knowing him, you will most likely suffocate.”

He rested his chin on top of Mairon’s head, wrapped his arms tighter, and into that embrace Mairon melted. He went limp, like his bones could no longer hold his weight.

Melkor closed his eyes, let it all wash over him. There were moments, irreplaceable, silent seconds frozen in time. This was one of those, something to be tucked safely away and carried with him always.

It wasn’t until Melkor finally caught sight of what lay on the counter at Mairon’s back that the bliss shattered like brittle glass. It was, quite possibly, the most exquisite sandwich ever produced.

“That looks heavenly,” he said, suddenly unimaginably hungry, yearning to just reach out and steal it for himself. “Do I get one?”

Mairon grumbled at him.

“I want a sandwich like that,” Melkor insisted.

“You’re ruining the moment,” Mairon repeated, this time audibly.

“Olives *and* green peppers.”

“Please, do shut your mouth.”

beginnings (part 1)

Chapter Notes

the seduction of mairon wherein everything is the same except it takes place in an office building

timeline: year 1; March

The first thing that Mairon noticed when he stepped out of the elevator and into the downstairs lobby was the quivering secretary at the front desk.

Right away, that confirmed his suspicion that the tall, dark haired stranger leaning against said desk was Manwë's esteemed guest of honor.

Begrudgingly, the two of them had finally arranged a meeting in person. Their squabble was ongoing, never ending, a vicious back and forth fought by their lawyers, their innumerable cronies. Now, it was their turn to negotiate, the two overlords', to lay out the terms of a ceasefire or, more likely, make everything a thousand times worse.

So, naturally, the secretary's trepidation was understandable. It was just that—as Mairon got closer, the rational part of his brain seemed to fizzle out of existence. The thoughts came unbidden; he was helpless to stop them—this man, this stranger, this fiend he'd been conditioned to despise, was unbelievably, unsettlingly attractive.

It was fine. He was fine. There were plenty of beautiful people in the world. He saw them, he appreciated them, he moved on with his life. Idle thoughts were harmless.

When the man caught sight of Mairon, his lips quirked. It was a barely-there smile, yet cloying, patronizing. It was the smile of one who fancied himself the king of the world.

He radiated superiority; it flowed from him in waves. It made him look that much more like Manwë—the sharp eyes, the aristocratic features, the haughty way he carried himself, like every room he entered was his to conquer.

Mairon could handle this. He was ninety-nine percent sure he could handle this.

He was wrong—he wasn't even offered he chance to open his mouth before the man spoke, tearing through Mairon's carefully constructed greeting.

“Is my little brother too high and mighty to come down and meet me himself?”

His voice was deep, a careless, amused drawl. He wasn't expecting an answer, not really—he was only here to pick a fight. And Mairon, a born diplomat, the kind of person who had a response to just about anything, was struck silent. He was unnerved, distracted. Certainly, he'd expected trouble, Manwë had advised him of that much. He just—he hadn't quite expected *this*.

“He has other matters to attend to before your meeting,” he managed, keeping his tone neutral, professionally polite.

He wasn't about to engage in a game of sarcasm and wits. That wasn't his place. And, if nothing else, a cold tone and detached attitude was what he needed right then, to stop the unwelcome heat spreading throughout his body before it went too far.

In short—were the circumstances any different, were this a random stranger in a dodgy bar, Mairon would be on his knees in a bathroom stall already, with rough fingers tugging at his hair.

Numbly, he blinked. He swallowed tightly. Idle thoughts were harmless, yes. Full-blown sexual fantasies, on the other hand, posed a genuine threat.

Manwë had said many, many things about his brother over the years. But not once had he mentioned the depth of those ice-blue eyes.

“So,” the stranger said, “he sends his little worker bees to take care of whatever’s beneath him.”

The secretary was looking nervously between the two of them. Mairon didn't blame him—the stranger was certainly intimidating. He, though, had nerves of steel. The stranger could push all he wanted, Mairon wouldn't push back. He wasn't an easy target. He was not going to be toyed with.

Mairon took a breath, smoothed away a crease on his lapel that wasn't really there.

“I’m here to bring you upstairs,” Mairon told him. “You either come along or you don’t.”

A hint of surprise flickered over the man’s face. This was something new, something unfathomable. He wasn't used to anyone talking back to him; he very likely expected the world to fall to its knees before him. In his defense—even Mairon, with his iron resolve, *had* considered doing just that.

There was a twitch off to the side. Anxiously, the secretary’s hand hovered near the phone, like he meant to call security and have them both escorted out of the building to continue their friendly chat a safe distance from company premises.

Mairon didn't wait around to find out if the call went out. With a final glance at the bemused stranger, he turned on his heel and headed back to the elevator. It didn't take very long for footsteps to ring out behind him, following in his wake. Though Mairon could not see him, the man’s irritation was palpable. He was very obviously upset at losing at his own little game.

The elevator doors slid shut behind them, engulfing them in deafening silence. Mairon stuck determinedly to one side, staring blankly at the polished steel in front of him. He was being watched, inspected. He could feel it. There was something sharp to it, an edge of hungry curiosity. It made him uneasy, unsettled—because it ate away at his carefully constructed composure. He *wanted* to turn, to match that ferocity, the heat of the stranger’s gaze.

“You do this often?” the man asked. He shifted in Mairon’s peripheral vision, like he was cocking his head. “You hardly seem like the type to play the errand boy.”

There was a suggestive hint to the way he said it, something Mairon couldn't quite place—until he could. The last thing he needed was open flirtation. If this wretched infatuation went both ways, it spelled far more trouble than it was worth.

Mairon rolled his fingers into rigid fists at his sides.

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

He got a scoff in response.

“Flattery? No, I was—”

A soft *ding* chimed and the doors slid open. Immediately, Mairon stepped out, leaving the man’s words dangling in the empty air. He rather liked the idea of pissing the guy off, for reasons that weren’t entirely malicious. He—*fuck*—he was flirting right back, playing hard to get.

Manwë’s office was at the very end of the hall. Mairon walked at a brisk pace, desperate to outrun the stranger, to outrun the way his stomach churned with alarming excitement.

He reached the heavy oak doors and glanced down at his watch. He had two minutes to spare. Propriety was key; he couldn’t knock now, no matter how alluring the notion was of putting a wall between himself and the stranger. He swallowed down his dismay.

He felt the presence reappear at his side. The man hovered not two feet away, casually disregarding the concept of personal space.

“That was not very polite,” he chastised.

Mairon glanced up at him. A pout curled at the man’s lips, like that of a child being denied their favorite sweets. It was disconcertingly endearing.

Curtly, Mairon told him, “I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

“Yet, here we are. Waiting.”

Mairon held his gaze. He was too stubborn to admit defeat. He wasn’t going to cower, wasn’t about to give the smug stranger the satisfaction.

The silence lingered.

Then—“I’m Melkor,” the man finally said. He made it sound very much like he anticipated a parade to be thrown in his honor.

“I’m well aware of who you are.”

The man—Melkor—remained quiet. His brows were raised, like he expected Mairon to continue, to elaborate, like there was something he’d forgotten to say.

Mairon said nothing.

“Do I not get a name in return?” Melkor asked.

Name, number, whatever you want. Mairon bit down hard on his tongue. He took a sharp breath and opened his mouth to speak.

Just then, the doors to Manwë’s office swung open. The sunlight pouring in from the windows behind him lit his white hair up like a halo. He looked murderous. Mairon, kind as he was, made a note to fetch him a mug of chamomile tea once this inevitable train wreck was over.

Manwë looked from Melkor to Mairon. With a jolt, Mairon realized Melkor was still staring at him, patiently awaiting his answer.

He tilted his head towards Melkor, but didn’t look up. He couldn’t.

“I doubt it’ll be relevant,” he said quietly.

He nodded at Manwë and turned to go. There was a shift in the air as he departed, a sour, palpable disappointment. He wanted to turn back. He wanted to allow himself one last glance. But he *couldn't*—he couldn't.

And it frightened him, as it itched, as it clawed at him later, how much he wished he had.

waking hours

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 2; March

Unlike Mairon, Melkor worked best in the mornings.

He lacked the uncanny ability to stay up late, to focus on the task at hand until it was complete. To be fair, Mairon made up for said ability by sleeping in until noon. He would burrow into his pillow, curl up under his blankets to snuff out the invasive daylight.

Melkor didn't have the same kind of drive. Once the sun went down, his only thoughts were of sleep or sex, neither of which allowed for very much work to get done.

As a result, he spent most mornings at his desk in the downstairs sunroom. It was his primary workspace, his office away from the office. He loved it, with every fiber of his being—the pale glow of the rising sun made everything better, made his miserable work bearable, almost pleasant in its tranquil monotony. And so, he sat for hours, caught up on missed deadlines, shuffled through files and folders that needed his signature, his approval—while Mairon continued to sleep soundly, blissfully free from the troubles of the waking world.

Despite his reputation, Melkor was a considerate person—when the situation called for it. He made little to no noise when he snuck out of the bedroom, closed the bathroom door to muffle the splash of the running water. He'd scoured the internet for the quietest coffee machine money could buy. Just because his insomnia was chronic, painfully incurable, didn't mean he intended to drag Mairon into the mess of it all, to startle him awake at unspeakable hours.

It was a chilly Wednesday morning. Idly, Melkor wondered if four-thirty could even be considered *morning*. Sleep was a distant memory. Between one breath and the next, he'd found himself wide awake, unable to get his mind to shut back down.

So—there he was, facing an intimidating pile of financial reports, accompanied by dearest companion: his first coffee of the day.

He was behind on just about everything. His organizational skills could use some improvement. The cure was to set an orderly, structured routine, he knew this; he simply lacked the self discipline to put it to practice.

At some indeterminate point into his grueling work, he heard birds outside. The sun was up, properly now. It bounced off the glass around him, bathed everything in a heavenly glow.

In an earlier burst of frustration, he'd done his hair up, sometime between his second and third refill; it'd been an unwelcome distraction. The idea was to force himself to concentrate on the numbers that kept blurring, swimming on the pages in front of him before Mairon stirred awake and stumbled downstairs. Melkor had no doubt his arrival would dispel any thoughts of his professional responsibilities.

There were three mugs on his desk—Melkor had a nasty habit of using a new one every time he

revisited the kitchen, forgetting the previous one on his way. He stared at them like they would help him, do the work for him. He was making headway, but it was slow. It was excruciating. He yearned for a vacation. He yearned for a time machine, so he could quit while he was ahead, stop his past self from starting a business with the sole intention of being contrary, of pissing off his parents.

Were there a clock in his makeshift office, Melkor was sure he'd spend more time watching the minutes tick by than doing anything remotely productive. He had a short temper and an even shorter attention span—he wasn't the sort to bury himself in organized, systematic work. It was a small blessing that his assignments didn't have deadlines. He ran the show, he made the rules. But even kings, he thought, owed their subjects a certain degree of dedication.

He took a moment to squeeze his eyes shut; he lost himself in the way it made stars dance across his vision, sparkle in the pitch black void. For an instant, the weight on his shoulders was gone. The world was gone. All sound, all feeling was gone.

He heard the thump, then, of soft footfalls on the staircase. It registered vaguely in the back of his mind. His eyes remained closed.

A handful of seconds later, there was a creak behind him as the old, wooden floors gave away Mairon's presence.

Two insistent arms wrapped around his waist. A soft kiss was pressed to the side of his neck. Mairon sagged heavily against him, pillowing his chin on Melkor's shoulder. And just like that, his work was gone from his mind, erased instantaneously like it had never been there to begin with. He couldn't find the strength to care about it in the slightest with Mairon curled against him. He was dead weight—groggy, pliable, more than half asleep.

A slurred, "Good morning," was muttered against his skin. Mairon's lips were warm. Everything about him was so warm.

In a rush, Melkor closed the folder he'd been working his way through. He pushed it to the left side of the table, to the unfinished pile.

Gingerly, he rose, careful not to knock Mairon off his unsteady feet. Behind him, Mairon leaned back, giving him space to maneuver around.

"Why aren't you in bed?" he asked, though he knew the answer he would get. More and more often, Mairon would find his way downstairs, seeking out company and comfort.

"Didn't want to stay up there without you."

Quietly, he said it, words running together.

Melkor turned. Mairon's eyes were downcast. No—closed, they were closed. Puffy with sleep. He'd staggered down the stairs in a complete haze, so desperate to not be alone.

"Was cold," Mairon told him. "Couldn't sleep."

Melkor stepped around his chair and pulled Mairon close against him. Sensing that he no longer needed to keep himself upright, Mairon went almost entirely limp.

On many occasions, Melkor had been tasked with the responsibility of hauling Mairon upstairs, carrying him to bed whenever he fell asleep in a less than ideal position. This time, he opted for the couch; they both had to be up for work soon enough, there was no use getting too comfortable.

He led Mairon to the front of the house. He sat and pulled Mairon down with him, laid back and positioned Mairon beside him. From the back of the couch he pulled down a blanket and covered them both, paying special attention to the shivering form at his side. *He* was all right; he very rarely found himself affected by the cold. Mairon, on the other hand, was not so lucky. Like a tropical plant, he thrived off the heat and shriveled miserably in the cold.

Mairon pressed himself close. He curled into the heat, into Melkor's space, like he could leech the warmth from him. Within seconds, his breathing evened out, his fingers going limp against the front of Melkor's shirt.

Melkor wouldn't sleep. As much as he wanted to, he knew he wouldn't. It wasn't within his grasp—but that wasn't to say he couldn't enjoy a well-deserved sliver of peace and quiet. He closed his eyes. He matched his breaths to Mairon's. In and out, slowly, sparingly.

He was just fine with four, maybe five hours of sleep a night. He made up for it with coffee. It wasn't especially healthy, but it did the trick. Mairon didn't have that luxury—with every sip, his hands would shake, his irritability would grow. *He* needed *this*. But not Melkor. He was okay. Just fine.

He woke two hours later.

Mairon was perched on the edge of the coffee table, watching him with a fond, lopsided little smile.

Melkor startled, sat up in a heap of mussed hair, his feet tangled in the blanket.

“You're late,” Mairon reprimanded him.

Blearily, he blinked, still trying to understand how his body had betrayed him so grievously despite three cups of what was essentially pure caffeine. His head felt full of cotton, his limbs heavy, useless.

“*You're* late,” he shot back. It came out grumbled, pathetic.

Mairon, unbothered, reached behind him and procured a steaming mug. Though he didn't enthusiastically support Melkor's bad habits, he indulged him from time to time. Melkor took the coffee, struggled momentarily to make his fingers bend the way he needed them to.

He took a sip, took a deep breath, looked back up at Mairon.

He got a faint shrug in response.

“Called in sick,” he said. “Might as well do that, too. Better things to do than work today—I've got a laundry list of ideas.”

below zero

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 3; December

The moment Mairon stepped into their bedroom, shivering, rubbing his palms together, Melkor sat up in concern.

“Have you been outside?” he demanded.

Defensively, Mairon said, “No,” which was a filthy lie. His cheeks, the tip of his nose were flushed red. His lips were tinged purple, very nearly blue. He looked half-dead, like he’d spent a week in a snowbank.

“Why did you go outside?”

“I didn’t,” Mairon insisted.

As he hovered by the door, he shot a furtive glance at the radiator by the window. Any attempt at approaching it would confirm Melkor’s suspicions. It would also put him just within arm’s reach, give Melkor unfettered access to inspect his icy hands.

“Come here,” Melkor asked him.

Mairon didn’t budge—not towards the radiator, nor the bed, or anywhere that was infinitely warmer than the drafty doorway. His pride would be the death of him.

With a groan, Melkor pushed himself up and off the bed. He wasn’t getting any work done, anyway. He closed his laptop, set it haphazardly on the bedside table. The vase that stood there teetered dangerously as it was struck; Melkor righted it before it had the chance to fall and shatter.

In the time it took him to cross over to the doorway, Mairon had hidden his hands in the sleeves of his overlarge sweater. With a pointed look, Melkor tugged them back out, held them up. Begrudgingly, Mairon let him. He was shaking; he was ridiculously, impossibly cold.

Melkor hummed in contemplation.

“Third degree frostbite,” he said mournfully. “No saving them. I’ve no choice but to recommend amputation.”

He looked up to meet Mairon’s scowl. They stood that way for a little while, Mairon’s wrists in his grip, before Mairon snatched his hands back.

As was no doubt his intention from the start, he made for the radiator. He sat cross-legged on the floor, stretched his hands out in front of the aged steel surface like it was a bonfire in the woods.

With a mighty sigh, Melkor followed. He perched at the edge of the bed, looming worriedly over Mairon.

“There’s a blizzard,” he said. “Have you noticed? It’s on the news. You can see it right outside—right there, you’ve got a window.”

“Your point?”

“The hell were you doing out?”

“I—look, I just left my phone the car. I went to go get it, is all. I wasn't making bloody snow angels.”

“You left your phone in the car?”

“Mm,” Mairon confirmed.

“Just—out in the driveway?”

“That is where the car is.”

“You’re telling me you’ve turned blue in the span of the twenty seconds it takes from the front door to the driveway and back?”

“There’s absolutely no reason to be ridiculing—”

Melkor interrupted him. “This just won’t do.”

He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Mairon’s waist, dragged him up and backwards with utter disregard for his vocal yelp of protest. Together they crashed down onto the bed; the mattress gave a little bounce.

“Surely, there must’ve been an easier way to do this,” Mairon grumbled.

He had a point. Melkor was essentially trapped beneath him now, with no way to arrange either of them into a more conformable position.

Mairon, bless him, pushed himself upright just enough to allow Melkor some wiggle room—he was very likely simply too cold to argue. Clumsily, Melkor maneuvered his way up against the headboard. He parted his knees, held out his arms, crooked the fingers of both hands to beckon Mairon over.

With a fond smile that he tried valiantly to hide, Mairon complied. He leaned back against Melkor—*fuck*, he was *freezing*—and settled comfortably, melting into his embrace like a puzzle piece slotting into place.

Awkwardly, with Mairon’s weight heavy against him, Melkor stretched one arm out to reach for the comforter. He swung it across Mairon’s shivering form, leaving his head poking out and very little else.

“You could've asked me to go,” he said after a moment. He snaked his arms around Mairon’s waist, nice and tight. “Please tell me you at least wore a coat. You’re shaking like a chihuahua.”

“Are you done yet?”

“Not quite.”

“I was doing just fine by the radiator.”

“I am genuinely terrified that you are going to freeze to death right now,” Melkor went on, just to be a nuisance. “That you’ll die in my arms.”

“I will, if you don’t stop talking.”

Obediently, albeit with a poorly concealed grin on his lips, Melkor fell silent.

Within minutes, he was overheating. Mairon pressed snugly against him, the suffocating warmth of the comforter—it was making him drowsy, almost feverishly so.

“You know,” he said, a brilliant suggestion coming to mind, “I’ve heard this body heat thing works best when neither party is wearing clothes.”

In his arms, Mairon sighed, then promptly wiggled his hands free and pressed his cold palms over Melkor’s forearms.

“Dearest, if you want these hands wrapped around your dick then be my guest, but we’ll see which one of us is complaining about the frostbite then.”

beginnings (part 2)

Chapter Notes

this one happened bc [joannabelle](#) wanted more of melkor harassing mairon into joining the dark side of corporate sabotage ☹️

timeline: year 1; May

The second time Melkor showed up at Valinor was even more of a disaster.

The main issue—a seemingly insignificant tidbit—was that nobody had deigned to warn Mairon about his arrival. Certainly, preparations had been taking place over the course of the last week for the scheduled legal board meeting, but not once did it occur to Mairon that the tall, dark stranger would make an appearance.

Yet there he was, leaning back in his chair at Manwë's left. All at once, he looked like he would rather be anywhere but there and like he owned the entire company and everyone in it. There was a smugness to his barely-there smile, that glint of amusement that never seemed to go away.

Despite the serious allegations he was facing, he appeared to be ignoring just about everything the gathered lawyers were discussing. Instead, entirely unsubtly, he kept his gaze trained on the opposite end of the table. On Mairon.

Mairon could feel it.

He glanced up from his notes—and there they were, those piercing blue eyes that haunted his every waking moment. A chill ran down his spine. Something churned in his gut. Quickly, he looked back down. He scribbled something in the margin. He pretended to listen attentively to Manwë's tirade.

A quarter of an hour later, he was asked to bring a document around to the front of the table. His every movement was trailed, catalogued, dissected. He didn't have to turn his head to know that Melkor was watching, still watching. He was—he was most certainly looking at Mairon's ass. It was a marvel that none of the self-proclaimed intellectuals seated around the table noticed the obvious leering.

The clock ticked and ticked. Melkor and his brother had a snappy back and forth. Some lawyer read a four page statement about work ethic word for word. An intern brought in coffee and donuts. Mairon found himself wondering if it was possible to perish of boredom, to simply fade away, lost to nothingness.

Then, the *gaze* was back.

If nothing else, it was bound to liven up the meeting. He took a breath and looked up, openly meeting Melkor's eyes. It was a challenge. Melkor's smile widened. It was flirtatious, undeniably so—and not one soul in the room noticed. Not even Manwë, whom Mairon had always held in such high regard for his incredible intellectual capacity.

Anyone with decent enough eyesight and an appreciation for beautiful things could admit that Melkor was the kind of person who made an impression. Mairon's interest was perfectly rational. Melkor was stunning. Sharp features, cold eyes, pitch black hair, and his lips—

Mairon sat up straighter.

Across the table, Melkor's grin widened.

“I'm sorry, are you finding something amusing?”

Melkor turned to face the lawyer who'd spoken. In an instant, it was all gone from his expression—the delight, the amusement, every last shred of warmth.

“Of course not,” he said with convincing sincerity. “Do carry on.”

Mairon bent his head down. His notes swam out of focus before him. Valiantly, he pretended he had not just been the object of Melkor's diverted attention.

He didn't look up again until the meeting was adjourned. A conclusion of sorts had been achieved, he assumed. He hadn't been listening too closely. Now, all around him, chairs scraped and papers shuffled. Under the pretext of diligently looking over his work one last time, he stayed behind, waiting until everybody was gone. It sent a little thrill through him, that he didn't even give Melkor the satisfaction of watching him leave.

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Within a half hour of the meeting's end, everything was back to the way it should be. Everyone had dispersed. The coast was clear. Tired beyond belief, Mairon deemed it time for a much-deserved break. He picked himself up and ventured to the employee lounge down the hall.

He pulled the door open and found the room occupied by the very last person he wished to see—now, or ever.

“What are you doing here?”

Melkor, reclining in one of the plastic chairs, lifted his paper cup in explanation.

“There's a buffet for visitors downstairs,” Mairon said. “You're not supposed to be in here.”

His body screamed at him to turn and leave, but he was too proud, too stubborn to run away. He turned his back on Melkor and crossed to the counter. He needed something very strong and very sweet to alleviate the pain and hardship he was cruelly being made to suffer.

Melkor scoffed. “My brother owns the place. I should think that allows me to get coffee wherever I please.”

Mairon hit the brew button with more force than strictly necessary. With a singular intensity, he watched his cup fill up. He didn't want to let his gaze wander. For what felt like eons, the awkward sputtering of the machine was the only sound in the room. He should have run while he had the chance.

The noise stopped. The silence that followed was unnerving. With clumsy hands, Mairon tore open two sugar packets, and the sound of it was like roaring thunder amidst the stillness of the room. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. Hell, he *knew* he was. Finally, he lost his nerve—

“I’m sorry, is there something you need?”

In a rush, he turned. To his abject surprise, Melkor was no longer seated at the table in the middle of the room. He was standing not two steps away, peering down at him.

Mairon took an involuntary step back, taken aback by their sudden proximity, and was dismayed to find the movement impossible. The counter dug into the small of his back. He was trapped between an immovable object and an unstoppable force. Said force was head taller than Mairon, if not slightly more so, and inspecting him like he was particularly enticing dessert.

Mairon didn’t like it—because he liked it.

Blindly, he reached back and groped around for his cup. He was ready now to make his swift escape. Out of the room, down the hall, wherever, anywhere else but here.

“I have to go,” he muttered.

Melkor cocked his head slowly to the side.

“What’s the rush?”

“I have another meeting to get to,” Mairon lied. Automatically, curtly, the way he would dismiss a handsy drunkard at a bar.

He did not owe Melkor any explanations, he thought. He was well within his rights to shove past him without another word. But he did not move.

“Oh, come now, Mairon,” Melkor said, his words dripping with cloying sweetness, “even you need a break now and again.”

Mairon was too slow to stop his reaction from passing over his face. Melkor knew his name. He had looked into him. He’d as good as stalked him. Mairon was both enraged and absurdly charmed by the notion.

Out loud, he made the former known.

“That’s not very polite,” he snapped.

At the very least, Melkor had the decency to look vaguely ashamed—or concerned, even hesitant, suddenly, like the idea of causing Mairon insult worried him.

Mairon frowned. He had to get out of here.

“Look, I don’t know what your—”

“Go out with me.”

Mairon waited.

The punchline didn’t come.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You know what—I’m not so sure I did.”

Melkor's smile was changed now. There was a defensiveness to it, an uncanny fragility.

“What is there to be afraid of?” he asked Mairon. “A drink or two has never killed anyone, as far as I know.”

Mairon's mouth felt dry. His hands felt sticky. He was not the kind of person to ever be at a loss for words.

He clenched his jaw and tried to keep his voice level, impassive.

“It's not appropriate.”

Melkor's eyes lit up. It was alluring, their mischievous glint.

“So, what you're saying, is that it's unbecoming, given our roles in this game.”

Mairon's grip tightened around his paper cup.

“You're saying that, if the circumstances were different, your answer would be different as well?”

Melkor took a step forward, a predator stalking his prey, and successfully closed the distance between them. Mairon's head was spinning. He wanted to reach out; he wanted to *touch* so badly it terrified him. His breath hitched, lungs screaming for air as Melkor leaned in closer.

It would've appeared utterly scandalous, the way they stood now, to anybody that might happen to burst inside the room at that moment.

“Just keep in mind,” Melkor muttered—and Mairon felt the words creep into his bones, infectious, irresistible, “that what Manwë doesn't know won't hurt him.”

With that, he pulled away. He turned on his heel and took a step and then another and vanished out the door and Mairon barely registered any of it.

He hadn't waited for Mairon's response. He hadn't had to; he already knew what it would be.

Mairon wanted to hit something. He wanted to sprint to the door and call Melkor back inside, flip the lock and beg to be bent over the flimsy table.

But his self control was impeccable—instead, he exhaled, shoulders sagging. His relief, his disappointment, whatever it was, coursed through his veins like wildfire.

It was complicated. Everything suddenly felt so complicated. Melkor was gone. By way of logic, it should mean the problem was gone. Yet as Mairon lifted his cup to his lips, his hands trembled. And he knew—he wasn't going to lie to himself—he *knew* that it wasn't fear, not apprehension or disgust of any kind. It was a pull, exhilarating, magnetic. A screaming, burning need.

And *that*—that did scare him.

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Hours later, Mairon was seated across from Manwë, shuffling through one last batch of papers before they turned in for the night.

It was then that his hand slipped into his pocket, searching for his phone, and found a slip of paper instead. A slip of paper on which the hastily scribbled digits eerily resembled a phone number.

He froze. Frantically, his head snapped up.

Manwë remained blissfully oblivious to Mairon's discovery, typing away at his laptop, eyes glued to the screen.

He didn't know.

Mairon swallowed.

And what Manwë didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

and your enemies closer

Chapter Notes

maedhros needs a side hustle, fëanor needs intel, shenanigans ensue

timeline: year 4; April

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

Maedhros was rummaging through one of the drawers in the upstairs office when a creaking floorboard out in the hall froze him in his tracks. For a hideous moment, his lungs stopped working, ribcage flooding with anxiety.

No—he would be all right.

No one was home.

The wind was heavy and the house was ancient. That was all. Creaks and groans. Ghosts and ghouls. *No one was home.*

Still, he sat unmoving, holding his breath. He listened for a sign, another sound, anything. It was like waiting for the guillotine to drop. He tried to remain rational. Old house. Wind. Noisy. But his hand itched for his phone; perhaps he should text Fingon, relay his last goodbyes.

In the end, common sense won over.

He released a shuddering breath and returned to his task. Every document he picked up he scanned for what his father had called *something dirty, incriminating, damaging, something I can work with, you'll know it when you see it, I'm sure of it*. Maedhros had nodded—but he had no idea what he was looking for. He despised, more than anything, getting caught up in his father's vengeful schemes. But he had no choice. He was a weapon to be pointed and deployed.

He slid the stack of papers back inside and opened the next drawer. He got a folder out, an old, mangled thing. He flicked through its contents—a university diploma, and another, and another, a marriage certificate, a juvenile incarceration record, insurance files, social security files. He stopped. He supposed this was what he'd been sent here for. Not that it mattered. There was no way he'd sneak any of it out without his employers noticing.

But—the idea of finally making his father proud tugged at him, screamed at him. It was so enticing his fingers twitched. He could roll up a page or two, stick them in his waistband, make a run for it. Carefully, he weighed his options. His hands trembled.

“The grass is outside.”

Maedhros jumped, dropped the folder, smacked his elbow on the cabinet. His heart was suddenly in his throat, blood rushing in his ears.

Mairon stood in the doorway, leaning elegantly against the wall. He was watching Maedhros with just about as much interest as one would watch their plants grow. If anything, he looked bored. But there was something under it, simmering just beneath his skin. Something malicious, vengeful,

horrifyingly gleeful.

He should have texted Fingon.

His mouth felt dry. For a brief moment he considered going with *this isn't what it looks like*. Even if he could speak, though, he was quite literally holding the evidence of his crime in his hands. His fingerprints were all over, should anyone wish to prove his guilt in a court of law.

“I wasn’t aware that your responsibilities had been upgraded from mowing the lawn, which, may I remind you, is outside,” Mairon went on, “to playing the maid. Did Melkor ask you to look through those? Bit of spring cleaning?”

Mairon tsked and shook his head. “I’ll have to have a chat with him about that.”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” Maedhros squeaked, despite his best intentions.

He got a patronizing little nod in return.

“Of course,” said Mairon. “Why don’t we set those down and head downstairs, hm? Tea, coffee, whichever you prefer. Melkor should be home in a bit. I’d deal with you myself, but I suppose it would be best to get a second opinion—wouldn’t want to do anything *irrational*.”

Maedhros couldn't move. His lungs were seizing.

“Uh,” he choked out, “no, thank you. I really should get going. I finished the lawn. Front, back, the scraggly patch on the side. So—I’ll be on my way. Please.”

Mairon’s expression twitched. For a split second, he looked like he would tear Maedhros to shreds with his bare hands. It was unfathomable, how someone as unassuming as him could be so frightening.

“This isn't a negotiation.”

Maedhros swallowed.

“You did your work. Haven't paid you yet,” Mairon went on. “Now, come along. You’ll get what you earned and be on your merry way.”

The frenzied, panicked part of Maedhros’ brain was going haywire. He was taller than Mairon. Worst case scenario, he could push past him and make a break for it. But, deep down, he knew. Running was futile. Escape was not an option. They would find him anywhere, no matter what, no matter how desperately he tried to hide.

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Maedhros’ hands shook violently as he attempted to lift his teacup to his lips.

He didn't put it past these people to lock him in the basement and torture him for all eternity. They seemed like the type. He tried to remember if anyone knew where he was, in case he genuinely needed rescuing, someone who would call the police, get them to search for him. His father—but he doubted his father would even notice he was gone. *He really should've fucking texted Fingon.*

Before the door even swung open, Maedhros knew that Melkor had arrived. The temperature in the room had dropped. He shivered and set his cup down. He would face his end with pride.

The moment Melkor’s piercing gaze landed on him, he knew for certain that he was well and truly

done for.

“Hello there, Nancy Drew.”

The door slammed shut behind him. Maedhros winced. It was almost like a punctuation mark, a loud bang to mark the end of his story.

“I hate to play the villain,” Melkor told him—which was a lie, it simply had to be, he was a *demon*, “but I’ve been advised of your exploits, and it seems you really leave me with no choice.”

He could use a pen and paper, jot down his last will and testament, he thought, before he was hacked into tiny pieces and buried all over the country.

“You—made him tea?”

The question was directed at the individual sitting just past Maedhros, perched on the kitchen table—*on*, because he wasn't one for chairs, apparently. Or he liked to pretend he was tall. Or something. Maedhros' mind was racing. The tremors wracking his poor hands were growing stronger.

“On my way over, I was considering dangling the kid from the roof, among other things, and you *made him tea*.”

Mairon slid down to the floor and set his mug down on the tabletop.

“If I'd chained him to fence like you asked, he would've died of fright before you got here. What's the fun in torturing someone with little to no sanity left?”

For the life of him, Maedhros couldn't tell if they were joking, if this was sarcasm, some sort of cruel, dark humor. He prayed it was. He prayed he wouldn't get dismembered.

He looked nervously between his two captors. They appeared to be having a telepathic conversation, saying nothing but understanding one another just fine.

“It's like good cop, bad cop,” Mairon finally said aloud. “You have fun now. If you'll excuse me, good cop needs a shower.”

Melkor frowned.

“No. No way. If you go, who's going to help me hold him down when I—”

The screaming in Maedhros' head built to a crescendo and came crashing down in a violent wave.

Frantically, he stood, cracking his knees against the coffee table on his way.

“It wasn't me,” he croaked—or he may have yelled. He was paralyzed with fear, barely keeping himself upright. “I mean, it was, but it wasn't me. It wasn't my idea. What reason would I have? It was—”

“Fëanor,” Melkor said. “Yes, I know that. But he's not here—and you are.”

“Hey, if you want to hurt him by hurting me, or killing me, or anything, I can tell right off the bat, it won't work. He won't care, or notice, I don't think. You shouldn't have to exert yourself for nothing.”

To the side, Mairon tilted his head contemplatively.

But Melkor wasn't convinced.

“Right. But like I said, he’s not here. I’ll deal with him on my own time, if I please. This—this is purely for my own sadistic pleasure.”

Maedhros was a grown man—almost, just about. He was not going to cry. He was not going to surrender. He would *not* go down without a fight.

Mairon was watching him, trying to hide his obvious amusement. They were insane, the both of them.

They took their places side by side. This was it, Maedhros realized. This was the moment they finally decided how to off him. He should have said goodbye, he thought. He should've run. He should have disobeyed his father.

Now—it was all too late.

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“That was stupid,” Mairon said.

He and Melkor were seated on the back porch, poking at the teriyaki chicken that Melkor had gotten on the way home.

“Do elaborate.”

Mairon stabbed a piece of chicken with one of his chopsticks.

“Having a reputation isn't enough,” he said. “One needs to cultivate it, uphold it at all costs. Can’t have him running around telling everyone we’re frauds.”

“Do go on.”

“You shouldn't have let him go like that. You should have messed him up—just a little.”

“We messed him up plenty, don't you think? Psychological torture is often more effective than its physical counterpart. I don’t think he would come back, if I’d broken any bones.”

Mairon turned to him.

“Come back?”

“To—the lawn?”

Mairon snorted at that, covered his mouth with his hand.

“You really think he’s going to come back after that?”

Melkor met his gaze.

“Oh, no, dearest. You’re mowing your own lawn from now on.”

disclaimer: maedhros still has both hands

will you do me the honor

Chapter Notes

by (moderately) popular demand, the engagement

timeline: year 2; August

It happened with no prelude whatsoever, as far as Mairon was concerned.

The day had been entirely unremarkable. He'd gone to work and powered through a grueling nine hours. He'd come home and microwaved a couple of slices of leftover pizza, crashed on the couch with some mindless reality TV.

Melkor had arrived half an hour later, tossed his keys onto the coffee table, stolen a slice from Mairon's plate. He'd seated himself at the kitchen table, half a room away—in hindsight, that was the only abnormality. Instead of sitting beside Mairon, knocking against him as was his habit, he'd put distance between them.

Mairon hadn't paid it any mind at the time, too preoccupied with the nonsense he was watching.

If he had, perhaps he would've noticed Melkor's silence, the way his fingers curled and uncurled at his sides, the way his attention wandered and his hand hovered over his pocket—

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“Some people have got too much money to spare,” Mairon said, eyes on the television screen. He lifted a slice of pizza, missed the mark and jabbed his cheek, and tried again.

A few seconds of contemplative chewing later, he turned to Melkor. “Not you, dearest.”

“I should hope not.”

It was quiet, not particularly enthusiastic, Melkor's response. He was tired, Mairon reasoned. Everyone had those days. At times, the monotony of work affected even the mightiest of the people to walk the planet.

“I mean,” Mairon carried on. “With that much in the bank, you'd at least think she'd learn how to use it to her advantage. Instead, she looks like Fifth Avenue threw up its leftovers on her.”

“Mm,” Melkor hummed—and his heart very obviously wasn't in it. Placatingly, he added, “Well, you know how it is. The big man up in heaven gives gifts to some and not to others. We can't all be as gorgeous as you, sweetheart.”

Mairon's reaction took a bit longer than usual to kick in. The woman onscreen grabbed at her co-star's hair, yanking out a chunk of extensions. Distractedly, he dragged his eyes away and turned—the slice he was holding wilted pathetically in his grasp with the motion—to glance dubiously at Melkor.

“The pinnacle of perfection,” Melkor told him, a suspiciously indulgent smile gracing his mouth.

Mairon continued to stare. Something was off. Something was off and he had no idea how to get to the bottom of it.

“You’re making fun of me,” he said finally.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I just meant—this isn’t about me.”

“No, of course not.”

“Right,” Mairon scoffed.

He tried to leave it at that. He let the silence marinate. There was another shriek from the television, but Mairon was watching Melkor now, searching for a clue, an ulterior motive. He dropped his pizza back down onto his plate with a slap.

“No, listen. It’s a waste of resources, it’s what it is. If you’ve got the means, put them to good use. If you’re going to invest in a jacket that costs about as much as small house, at least don’t wear it with *that*. If you’re going to spend, what, a college tuition on your hair, at least look into the topic, find out what works for you. There’s nothing stupider than following the pack. I know the world’s not fair, but giving these kinds of people a voice—have some respect for creativity, for authenticity, it’s all that I—”

“Marry me.”

Mairon fell silent, words unsaid hanging limply in the air.

His mind was playing tricks on him, that was all. He’d misheard, end of story. A sequence of words had left Melkor’s lips and his own subconscious was filling in the gaps with fanciful, impossible things.

Or—he’d heard right, but it hadn’t meant a thing. Melkor had said it to shut him up, stun him into silence.

He took a breath, weighed his options.

With the utmost eloquence, he whispered, “What?”

Melkor wasn’t laughing. He wasn’t smiling. He was sitting impossibly still, looking at Mairon with a burning, anxious anticipation. It was rolling off him in waves.

Mairon had never seem quite like that.

“You heard me.”

“Did I?”

“I know you heard me, Mairon, stop that.”

So—he hadn’t misheard, this wasn’t a daydream. The pretty words had been real. All that remained now was the question of exactly how seriously Melkor had meant them.

He looked at Melkor, dazed—and Mairon was well aware of just how stupid he looked then, his eyes wide in disbelief, mouth agape, his speech failing him miserably.

In apparent defeat, Melkor slumped back into his chair. Then, his hand moved and he leaned forward again, restlessly, and there was a gold band between his fingers now that had not been there before. He held it up. It caught the light and shimmered.

He offered Mairon an encouraging smile, a nervous little thing.

“Come on, Mairon. Marry me.”

The blood rushing in Mairon’s ears came to an abrupt halt. The noise from the television was just that now—garbled, senseless noise. His heart was clawing its way out of his ribcage, tearing through his chest.

“You’re serious,” he said.

“Don’t I look serious?”

Mairon bit back a smile—and possibly an onslaught of tears, if the tightness in his throat, the prickling behind his eyes was anything to go by.

“I think you might be.”

Melkor gave a slight shake to his head, like he couldn't quite believe it was taking Mairon, the brilliant creature that he was, so long to come to a fairly simple conclusion.

He spread his arms just so in a grand invitation.

“And?” he asked. It was hopeful, but not too hopeful, not too desperate. He was nervous, so nervous, and trying so valiantly to hide it.

Mairon lost the fight with the hysterical glee bubbling up inside him, no longer able to contain it. He let out a giddy, undignified snort of laughter.

“Fine,” he said—and his mouth was forming into a grin without his explicit permission. “I will. If it’s so important to you.”

Melkor rolled his eyes. He pushed himself out of his seat and crossed the distance between them, dropped into a low crouch in front of Mairon. He fixed him with a beaming smile.

“Is that a yes?” he pressed, waiting for the magic word.

In his hand, he wiggled the ring between his fingers to coax out Mairon’s answer. If Mairon wasn't sold on the idea of marriage alone, the sparkly bauble was sure to seal the deal.

Mairon huffed—and if it was a teary, watery kind of huff, that was nobody’s business but his own.

“Of course, it’s a yes.”

Melkor rocked back on his heels with a mockery of a relieved sigh, as though he had actually considered an alternate universe wherein Mairon had refused him.

“That’s good news,” he said. He tried to disguise the emotion in his voice with false bravado, a thin veil of sarcasm. “You had me worried there. You know, I—”

“Please, do shut up.”

Mairon curled his fingers into the front of Melkor’s shirt and tugged him forward, drawing him

into a deep kiss—the kind that relayed everything his words could not. He tugged harder, leaned back, and Melkor took the hint, rising just enough to splay himself on top of Mairon on the cushions. There was something about that, his weight on Mairon, that felt right, so right it compared to nothing else in the world.

Much to Mairon's displeasure, Melkor quickly broke away. He propped himself up on his elbows, caging Mairon's face between them, and continued the monologue that had so rudely been interrupted moments before.

“Because I've already put the down payment on the ring and—”

“You are a horrible person,” Mairon told him sweetly. “Absolutely horrible.”

His wriggled his hands free and dragged Melkor's face back down to his.

Again, mere seconds later, Melkor pulled back.

“I'm starting to get the impression that you really don't want this ring.”

“Is that so? Meanwhile, I'm under the impression that you're playing awfully hard to get for someone who's just proposed.”

“Is that so?” Melkor echoed.

“You're impossible.”

“You love me.”

“I do,” Mairon admitted. “I do love you—so why don't we call it a truce and—oh, you know—get on with the whole thing.”

“You just really want the ring.”

“I really do.”

nothin' like summer

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 4; June

Mairon came downstairs one Sunday morning to find Melkor flat on his back on the floor of his office in nothing but his boxers and an unbuttoned gaudy print shirt. The long foreboded heatwave had finally hit the city.

He stopped at the threshold of the open French doors and cocked his head in mild interest.

“This is new.”

In an apparent daze, Melkor cracked open one eye and lazily waggled his fingers in greeting. It wasn't exactly the most exuberant of hellos.

“What’s going on here?” Mairon asked. It was not an unwelcome sight—he could get used to seeing it every morning. “Not that I’m averse to it.”

Melkor’s eyes had floated closed again. With a visibly tremendous effort, he lifted one arm off the floor and gestured vaguely around the room.

“It’s hot, you see. And the tiles are cold.”

“Taking a nap in your office is a great opening for a joke about an unhealthy dependence on your job,” Mairon told him. “Come outside with me.”

Melkor dropped his arm down with a slap, then drew in a sharp breath and sat up, pushing himself upright on his elbows.

“Out there?” he asked. “In the sun? Have you lost your mind?”

And then he was back on the floor, spreading his arms over his head much like a child making snow angels.

There were times—not very often—when Melkor was right and Mairon conceded. More commonly, Mairon was right and Melkor conceded. Mostly, though, they tended to cling steadfast to their convictions; there was nothing that could make them crumble, then.

Mairon gravitated towards the sun, for instance. Melkor despised any weather warmer than partly cloudy with a violent passion. There was no middle ground.

Though—

Mairon glanced up at the glass ceiling of the room. Beams of sunlight flickered in, dancing over the furniture, the tiled floors. Perhaps there was a part of Melkor, buried somewhere deep down, that craved the light.

“You know where to find me,” he announced.

“Mhm,” Melkor grumbled after him. “Nice knowing you.”

/

It was regrettable, Melkor thought, how short his attention span was. He couldn't do what Mairon did, sit around patiently in utter silence, thinking, scheming, waiting.

An hour and a half later—during which time he'd started and dropped two audiobooks, then failed miserably at trying to occupy his mind with music—he scrambled upright and took a moment for everything around him to stop reeling.

He looked past the glass. Mairon was still out back, reclining with his face turned to the sun, a paragon of blinding beauty. Melkor wanted to poke at it.

“You're blocking the sun,” Mairon told him, as soon as Melkor stopped by the chaise to hover over him.

“I'm worried about you.”

“Why?”

“You—you look a bit too red.”

“Would do you good to join me for a few minutes. Might improve your mood.”

“I'm not in a mood. You're *very* red.”

“I'm good, thank you,” Mairon insisted. He fidgeted around for a comfortable position and went still once more. “If you're all done on the floor, dearest, feel free to fetch me an iced coffee.”

When Melkor failed to immediately comply with the command, Mairon opened his eyes at last, squinting against the sudden brightness. Brazenly, Melkor continued to stare at him in stubborn silence.

But, in the end, he did cave. All it took was a quirk of Mairon's lips, a brilliant, beaming smile. If the heat hadn't already melted Melkor's insides, this would do it.

“You do so love to indulge me.”

Lips pursed, Melkor turned to head back inside.

He cursed his weakness. *Mairon* was his weakness. He was bold and he was arrogant and he was horrible and Melkor cursed what that did to him. He didn't make a habit of submitting. But with Mairon, when he was dead set on something, there were only two alternatives—you did his bidding and slipped quietly out of his way, or you got trampled on.

So, there Melkor was, shaking out the ice tray to dump its contents into the blender.

He didn't register the presence coming up behind him until Mairon properly entered his field of vision and leaned against the counter.

Instinctively, Melkor jumped. The movement sent a handful of ice cubes scattering across the kitchen floor. He glared at them, too proud to crawl around on his hands and knees to retrieve them, then at Mairon.

“Please find a new hobby” he said. “Something other than materializing from the shadows.”

“You were right,” Mairon told him—which was *truly* very satisfying. “Everything hurts and everything is spinning. I’m really going to need that coffee.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Mairon smiled then, wide and suggestive. He made to speak, to say something no doubt bound to be awful, but Melkor beat him to the punch—on a whim, he pressed down on the blender, turning it on. The scowl that followed was *glorious*.

Once the noise died down, innocently, he asked. “You were saying?”

“Fuck you,” Mairon said. “Now you’ll never find out.”

Melkor made a great effort to pretend to be upset by this.

He reached for the glasses he’d set out on the adjacent counter and poured an even amount into each, then topped off his creations with whipped cream and matching twisty straws that he hadn’t even been aware they owned until a few minutes earlier.

Mairon grabbed desperately for his coffee like it was the only thing keeping him from slipping away into unconsciousness.

“Here’s an idea,” he pondered aloud—once he’d taken a sip and made a wholly inappropriate sound of pleasure that had gone straight to Melkor’s nether regions. “Let’s go sit out on the porch.”

“Tell me,” Melkor asked, “which part of ‘have you lost your mind’ omitted you the first time around?”

There was nothing that could persuade him to out sit in the dry, stifling heat—not even if Mairon dragged their bed outside and laid out a trail of roses, sprawled himself on top and beckoned Melkor over with a look that promised a reckoning.

“How about a compromise? Finish these off, pack up, and we drive up to the lake.”

Mairon made a face. “I will not be submerging myself in a murky pit of freezing water.”

“It’s refreshing.”

“It’s masochism.”

“Not all of us are afraid of drowning in the shower, sweetheart.”

Mairon swallowed a big gulp of coffee and frowned, not especially nicely. “Now, now, there’s no need to poke fun at my perfectly logical phobia.”

“Fair. Forgive me. But it’s either the lake or our dear neighbor’s cookout this evening.”

“You’re joking.”

Melkor set his glass down on the counter and flicked the tap on—at some indeterminate point in the last five minutes, he’d gotten caramel down the side of his hand.

“Got an invite earlier, gold lettering and all,” he said. “He said anyone who’s anyone is going to be there—can’t fathom who that means. If he sees us out in the garden, he’ll bang on the door until we come over. I’m sure of it. Best not to be home.”

“Why are you only telling me this now? I’m going to go get dressed. You can pack a cooler. And you’re a fiend.”

Melkor offered him a bright smile. “I knew you’d see reason.”

Polishing off the rest of his coffee, Mairon rinsed the glass to keep the leftover whipped cream from congealing and set it down in the sink.

“I’m not touching the water, mind you. You’re slathering me in sunscreen and I’m crashing on the beach and not getting up. I’ll just watch you in the—” Mairon trailed off. His eyes went unfocused for a moment. “Yes, let’s go. Sounds wonderful.”

“They don’t call me a genius for nothing.”

“Nobody calls you that.”

“I recall *you* once did. And nobody else really matters, now, do they?”

Mairon failed to hide his smile—though, truth be told, Melkor had long since learned to pick up on just about any shift in his expression, however minute. He crossed the small distance between them and took Mairon’s face in his hands.

“I suppose there’s one upside, at least, to you staying out in the sun for so long,” he said.

“And what’s that?”

“Freckles,” Melkor managed—that was about as much as his brain was able to supply in that moment. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the bridge of Mairon’s nose. “So many.”

Mairon wriggled free. He’d gone red, on top of his already egregious sunburn.

Still, they remained only inches apart, at ease with the proximity. Mairon’s hands slid down the length of Melkor’s arms, fingers wrapping loosely around his wrists. Melkor was familiar with that magnetism, that constant need to touch, to be touched.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, unabashedly, because he couldn’t help it if he tried.

“I know,” said Mairon.

Melkor scoffed. He shook his head, utterly enraptured by that accursed arrogance. He was so in love his lungs burned with it.

“And?” Mairon asked.

“And what?”

“And what,” Mairon echoed. “You obviously want something, appealing to my vanity.”

“Can I not compliment my husband? Must there always be an ulterior motive? You’re beautiful. End of story. Take it or leave it.”

For a few seconds, Mairon looked over him, searching his face for any signs of deception. As expected, he found none.

“All right,” he conceded.

He yanked on Melkor's wrists, signaling none too subtly for him to lean back down. Gladly, Melkor obliged and Mairon went up on his toes and they met halfway. Head feeling a bit fuzzy, Melkor broke away for a moment, desperate for another look. So many freckles. He was smiling stupidly, he knew it. He closed the distance between them again, then, and drew Mairon for another kiss.

“Now, go pack—before we're ambushed.”

in sickness (and in health)

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 8; November

Melkor desperately needed a cup of something hot, something boiling that burned all the way down, that set his insides on fire and relieved the incessant shaking of his frozen hands.

He closed the front door behind himself and kicked his muddy boots off. He missed the doormat entirely, got filth all over the floors. On his way to the kitchen, he tossed his coat and scarf carelessly onto the couch, leaving a literal trail of destruction in his wake.

It was a small miracle that he'd managed to make it back in one piece. The heating in his car had malfunctioned no more than a week ago and he'd been too lazy to go and have it fixed since. Then, earlier that morning, the snow had started—and it showed no signs of stopping. It was mid-November. It was too early.

The water took forever to boil. As his body slowly began to thaw out, Melkor found himself lulled into a trancelike state by the bubbling of the kettle. It was the only sound for miles, it seemed—which was an immediate red flag. There was no Wolf circling hungrily around him, no Mairon nagging at him to clean the mud off the entryway floor.

The kettle clicked off, snapping Melkor back to attention. His mind was growing fuzzier as he got warmer; he felt groggy, like he was waking from a monthlong sleep. He could clean the muddy mess later. He could worry about his responsibilities later. All he wanted now was his tea, a hot shower, and a nap. He wasn't one for naps, typically, but his ears burned from the cold and his eyelids weighed heavy, and he wanted nothing more than to curl up and disappear into the dark.

Steaming mug in hand, Melkor climbed up the stairs—only to be met with the dog wagging its tail at him from the top step. It'd been loitering about upstairs, where it most certainly did not belong. The doggy door was ajar. The red flag grew redder.

“Now, where's your father?” Melkor asked.

The dog did not answer.

“Don't look at me like that. Get your own treat. Kitchen, last drawer on the bottom right side.”

It didn't seem to grasp the instructions.

“What are you even doing up here?”

Melkor sidestepped the dog, careful not to spill the contents of his mug. He was followed to the bedroom, of course, trailed by the pleasant jingling of Wolf's collar.

The lights were off, save for the dim bedside lamp. The curtains were drawn, the windows shut tight. It was stuffy. It smelled of death. Tissues were strewn over the bedside table among several empty mugs and a bottle of paracetamol.

The verdict—Mairon was sick. The harmless cold he'd developed over the weekend had gotten much, much worse.

He was bundled furiously atop the bed, asleep under layers upon layers—the duvet, a blanket, and another on top. Only his head stuck out, hair glowing copper in the yellow light.

That posed a problem, a bump in the road.

Certainly, Melkor could still enact his plan of taking a scalding shower, burning his tongue on his earl grey, and curling up with a blanket and an inane television program. Mairon slept like the dead. He would be all right on his own. He needed rest, after all.

But Mairon was shivering violently. His sock-clad feet poked out of the blanket bundle, toes curled against the cold. Melkor was helpless against the twinge of sympathy that twisted at his heart like barbed wire.

He put his tea aside, setting it carefully on the dresser. Naturally, there was a coaster there—there were coasters everywhere. Mairon was very fond of protecting surfaces from Melkor's innate chaos.

He crossed the room and crouched at the side of the bed. He nudged at Mairon's shoulder, lightly at first and then harder, over and over until Mairon's brow furrowed and he startled awake with quite possibly the most endearing snuffling sound Melkor had ever heard. The barbed wire around his heart tightened.

Honey-gold eyes flicked open, bleary and unfocused. They were rimmed red, a stark contrast to the sickly white of his skin. He looked positively awful.

Melkor shuffled closer.

“Remember that time we went on a walk down by the river and you said you wanted to sit for a while—and I couldn't stand it for a second because the rustling of the willows was so damn loud?”

Mairon dropped his head back onto his pillow with a pathetic thump, eyes drifting shut once more.

“I remember,” he said. His voice was small and hoarse, raspier than usual.

“That's what you look like now. Like the leaves. Shivering and shaking all over.”

Melkor was quite sure that, were he capable of it, Mairon would have rolled his eyes. Sadly, he did not seem to have enough control over his body at the moment to do so.

Instead, he muttered, “Fucker,” and sniffled feebly.

He was cursing—by the looks of it, he was perfectly fine. Yet his voice was weak and discomfort plain on his face. He hadn't even swatted at Melkor, smacked him upside the head for poking fun at him. It wouldn't do. Melkor couldn't just leave him to suffer all by his lonesome.

He shot a sidelong glance at his tea. It could wait. Sometimes, sacrifices had to be made in the name of love.

“All right, move over.”

He got an incomprehensible grumble in return, likely another curse.

Resolutely, Melkor—instead of walking around the bed like a sensible adult—rose to his feet and

clumsily clambered over Mairon to cozy up behind him. Momentarily crushed beneath Melkor's weight, Mairon choked out a strangled, pointedly displeased wheeze.

Melkor pulled back a corner of the blanket pile and maneuvered his way underneath it, wrapped himself around Mairon's smaller frame to help put a stop to his shivering. With a tiny contented sound, Mairon pressed back against him. Melkor brought his arm around Mairon's waist, twined the fingers of his right hand with Mairon's. He squeezed. Weakly, Mairon squeezed back.

Almost immediately, Melkor's eyes began to droop. This was what he had wanted, after all—a surge of warmth, a soft pillow under his head. The feverish heat emanating from Mairon's skin was a bit much, but surely better than the frozen wasteland he'd faced outside.

He turned his head a little to the side, pressed his face into the sheets. Quickly, he realized something was wrong. The smell—

“Did you let the dog on the bed?”

“I was cold,” Mairon grumbled.

“Spooning with the dog, really?”

“He's warm.”

“Everything smells like dog now.”

“You big baby. Get over it.”

Frankly, there was no use arguing with that. Obediently, Melkor got over it. He wormed closer instead, buried his face in Mairon's hair. It smelled lovely, as always, not at all like *eau de dog*.

Regrettably, regardless of the degree of his exhaustion, Melkor was unable to find his inner peace. Within minutes, the smallest of things began to bother him, gnaw at him, until he couldn't take the silence any longer.

“Your feet are cold,” he complained.

“I'm wearing socks.”

“Sorry. Your socks are cold.”

“You're free to leave, dearest.”

There was an edge to the way he said it—Melkor could either be quiet or be on his way. Mairon had been irritable lately, subject to a string of unpredictable, unpleasant mood swings. Evidently, the fever made him testier, made his already short temper a tad shorter.

Melkor fell silent.

He supposed he could do Mairon this one favor, keep him warm and let him rest with little to no inane commentary on the side. He tightened his grip around Mairon's waist and forced his eyes closed. He focused on the pleasant things. The smell of Mairon's hair. The feel of their hands wrapped together. How polite it was of Wolf to curl up at the foot of the bed rather than climb rudely over them both.

After that, things were quiet, fairly uneventful. The dog snored a bit. Something lashed violently against the windows—Melkor, in his hazy half-conscious state, assumed it must be sleet, the most

horrendous form of precipitation. But it was nice. The weather was out there. In here, he was comfortable, the long-awaited, desperately needed warmth seeping into his aching bones.

Mairon's hoarse whisper was what finally broke the silence.

"Can I have your tea?" he asked.

There were no limits to what Melkor would do for Mairon. Except—he was warm and he was comfortable, and presently had no intention whatsoever of getting up. It wasn't very chivalrous of him, but he kept up the act, pretending to be asleep.

It came as no surprise that Mairon knew him too well to fall for it. He knew Melkor's tics, his breathing patterns, the obvious jump in his pulse when he was lying through his teeth. For a beat, there was nothing. Then—even drained as he was, Mairon, the wicked creature, wriggled out of Melkor's embrace and twisted around to stick his freezing hands beneath the hem of Melkor's sweater.

With an undignified hiss, Melkor yanked himself away and sat up, making a mess of the blankets. Mairon's hands were cold enough to wake the dead. It was unholy.

Not especially gracefully, Melkor rolled himself off the other side of the bed.

"You are evil," he told Mairon.

"Please," Mairon said.

His eyes were wide and sad. In that moment, he looked so small, so helpless, and though he knew full well it was a ruse, nothing but a cruel trick, Melkor broke. He was so weak. Where Mairon was involved, he bent like a twig under the slightest pressure.

"Fine."

"Can you heat it up?"

"No, not this one. This is mine. I'll get you another."

Quietly, Mairon said, "Thank you."

He wasn't one to ask for help, Melkor knew this. He was no good at accepting it, either, and even less so at expressing gratitude. Yet from where Melkor stood, Mairon's eyes looked glassy—watery, almost. It was probably just the fever.

Melkor crossed the room, stopped to pick up his own cooling tea to take to the microwave downstairs.

He was stopped in the doorway by another mumbled request.

"Can you make me toast?"

Melkor glanced over his shoulder, gave Mairon a wilting, admonishing look that spoke clearer of his exhaustion than his words ever could.

"Don't push your luck," he said.

/

He made him toast.

A quarter of an hour later, Melkor was back upstairs with a tray in hand—two teas, a brimming plate, a blister of something slightly stronger than paracetamol.

Mairon's smile just about made it worth it.

He would burn the world to the ground to keep it there, to keep Mairon happy, to keep him safe.

the most wonderful time of the year

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 4

There was an unspoken agreement in the household, always had been, a shared dislike of holidays. Regardless of importance, of popularity, no celebrations took place. There were no exceptions. Unanimously, Christmas was the worst, but the rest of them—hardly better.

February

“This is the most opportunistic holiday of all, I think.”

Mairon emerged from the final supermarket aisle, eyeing the flashy box of chocolates in his hands with distaste. It was adorned with cartoon hearts in gaudy shades of bright pink and cherry red. He was disappointed in humanity.

Melkor took the box from him and tossed it into their basket. As tacky as the packaging was, it was on sale, and sugar was a need, a staple good.

“Do elaborate.”

“Do you see anyone buying kitschy pink teddy bears on any other day? No—they’re ugly. *Today*, they come off the shelves by the hundreds. As do the sweets. Between today and Halloween—I’ll bet their revenue is higher than the rest of the year put together. And for what?”

The line to the checkout was small, and quickly made smaller when the person in front let Melkor cut ahead. Mairon scoffed. Their infamy was often highly advantageous.

“That’s the thing about corporations, love. They make money.”

“Suppose we can’t blame the corporations, then,” Mairon went on. “But people—you think they buy chocolates and bears to show affection? No, they’re opportunistic. They want something in return, whatever it is. A gift of their own, a ring, a good fuck.”

The cashier raised his eyebrows at that, then quickly ducked his head to hide his reaction. Mairon fell silent. He’d divulged enough about his personal convictions already—and just about anything could be used against him, against them, if wielded correctly.

Wordlessly, he glanced up at Melkor and motioned with a tilt of his head, the universal sign for *you pay*, at the register.

Melkor did—half the bags were filled with his sugar rush supply, after all.

They were halfway across the parking lot when Mairon decided to deliver the proverbial final blow, just to be a nuisance.

“And you’re as bad as the lot of them,” he told Melkor gravely. “You’re here thinking five boxes of chocolates will be enough to get me into bed with you.”

Melkor’s steps beside him faltered. Mairon kept walking, eyes on his car at the far end of the lot. He could sense that Melkor had stopped fully in his tracks. He pursed his lips to keep from grinning.

Then came the shout—it carried over the whistling wind.

“I wasn't aware I had to get you anything to get you into bed with me.”

Amused, Mairon pretended not to hear. He stopped at the car, unlocked the trunk with his free hand. He didn't have to turn to know the look on Melkor’s face—the sheer panic, the incredulity. He was wonderfully fun to toy with.

With a wicked smile, he called back, “Your loss.”

/

Mairon was not alone in hating humanity for all it was and ever would be. His and Melkor’s alliance was strategic in that way. This was something they agreed upon.

“That is disgusting,” Melkor said, as he stared out at something on the street.

They were seated across from each other in a window booth at the Hobbit Hole, sipping on overlarge coffees in quaint mismatched mugs. Rather than make their purchase and bolt to avoid unnecessary human interaction, they had chosen to stay inside for once. It wasn't a change of heart—it was the sudden snowstorm brought about by some cruel, vengeful deity.

Mairon followed Melkor’s gaze and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“What is?”

Melkor took a slurp and set down his mug. With the hand he freed, he pointed at something in the distance.

Mairon continued to see nothing.

Melkor sighed.

“Some kids making out in their car. Bet they think no one can see them. Shouldn't have parked in the street like that.”

Mairon hazarded another look. Nothing. Visibility was awful. Certainly, a car stood parked across the road, but it seemed only Melkor’s inhuman eyesight could identify the details. All it did was make Mairon cold, looking out at the snow.

“Let them,” he said. He turned back to his blissfully hot coffee and took a sip. “Don’t act like you’ve never gotten handsy in the car before.”

Melkor made a face.

“That’s different.”

Mairon gave a small shrug. He leaned across the table to grab Melkor’s coffee.

“I don’t see how.”

Melkor huffed. “It just—is.”

Absentmindedly, Mairon tapped the rim of the mug he’d stolen.

“Here’s how I see it,” he finally said. “Either you’re fed up with how many people you’ve had to watch kiss today, or you’re jealous. You wish that were you getting off, don’t you?”

He cocked his head in smug satisfaction and picked up Melkor’s coffee for a taste. As soon as it touched his lips, he sputtered, hand going up to cover his mouth.

No milk, no sugar. Nothing. Mairon wasn’t sure why he had expected anything different.

“Oh no—you’re not in a mood because you want to fuck. It’s because of this. That’s awful.”

He slid the mug back and Melkor intercepted it halfway, wrapping his fingers protectively around it.

Mairon knocked his own coffee back and drained it to rid himself of the unsavory taste in his mouth.

When he met Melkor’s eyes again, there was a devious glint to them. Whatever the look entailed, it spelled trouble.

“Yes?” Mairon prompted.

“I think I’d like to take you up on that offer,” Melkor said. “Head out to the car and—you know. I’ll leave out the specifics. We’re in polite company, after all.”

“That was not an offer, you animal.”

Melkor said nothing.

Mairon met his stare.

“All right,” he promptly conceded. “Let’s go.”

/

It wasn’t all doom and gloom. The two of them could enjoy themselves every once in a while, partake in the many wonders the world had to offer.

Very often, their most absurd ideas were the most fun. But sometimes, simplicity was the way to go—things widely proven to work, the most commonplace of activities.

Like the pair of handcuffs Melkor spun around his fingers as he entered the room.

“No,” Mairon said.

Melkor’s smile deflated.

“Why ever not?”

Mairon only barely refrained from crossing his arms in a childish sulk. “Nothing in the world could get me to change my mind, dearest. That’s a definite *no*.”

Melkor's shoulders sagged in disappointment. He crossed to the bed, threw himself down onto the duvet beside Mairon.

"They're pink. Here, touch—look how soft."

Mairon grimaced. "A child could pull those apart."

"Oh, please don't be boring," Melkor asked him. "This one day of the year, be like everyone else. Do something cliché, something fun."

Mairon turned over onto his side to fully take in Melkor's pout. Gently, he tucked a loose strand of silky black hair behind Melkor ear, an affectionate gesture to soften the upcoming blow.

"That has got to be the least sexy thing you've ever said."

The curl of Melkor's mouth went from mildly grumpy to properly devastated.

"Mairon."

"Hm?"

"Please."

"No."

"Please, Mairon."

"No."

"Please, I'll even—"

Brilliant.

Mairon sat up, the spark solidifying into an idea in his mind.

"Fine," he said.

Melkor lit up in delight.

Mairon took the cuffs from him. He held Melkor's gaze as he did so, as he ran his fingers over the cheap pink fur.

"—But I'm cuffing *you*."

March

"I'm staying in today," Mairon said, halfway down the staircase.

He stepped into the dining room and faced all those present—Melkor and the dog.

Over his steaming mug of tea, Melkor frowned.

"Work?" he asked.

"No work. I'm terribly ill, I'm afraid," Mairon explained, then feigned a weak cough.

Wolf trailed behind Mairon to the kitchen, circling his legs until he was given the attention he craved. Once he got a loving pat on the head and a snack from the treat drawer, he scampered away to gnaw on it in the faint patch of sunlight behind the sofa.

“Right,” said Melkor. “But really, it’s because—?”

Mairon pulled out a bottle of store-bought fruit smoothie and slammed the fridge door shut. Inside, something rattled precariously.

He sank into a chair opposite Melkor and fished his phone out of his sweatpants pocket. He clicked the screen on to display the time and date—a quarter past eight, the seventeenth of March—and slid it across the table.

“Here’s a hint,” he said.

Melkor choked on a laugh.

“It’s your special day,” he cooed. “I completely forgot.”

Mairon bared his teeth in unconstrained fury.

/

The problem, naturally, was the hair. On every other day, it was a virtue. He looked good, he stood out, he turned heads. On the seventeenth of March, it was a bloody curse. The freckles were no help either, nor was his painfully *average* height.

At a point in time, Mairon had decided that enough was enough. Enough jokes had been cracked at his expense, his limit well and truly exceeded.

The spring after he’d moved to the town, uprooted his life and began anew, he’d happened to stop for coffee wearing a peacoat in a muted, but perfectly distinguishable dark green.

Thorin had been the first to toss out a snide comment. At first, Mairon had brushed it off. The town was full of assholes. He wasn’t there to make friends, to play nice, to force a smile onto his face and laugh politely at things that weren’t remotely funny.

But news carried fast—the suburbs were boring, the people in need of entertainment. Thorin had told Bilbo—or so Mairon assumed—who passed it on to Gandalf, who’d told Bard, who’d told Thranduil, and before the day was up, Mairon had received a vicious text from Fëanor himself—who had somehow gotten ahold of his number for the sole purpose of poking fun at him.

The next year, as part of the new, properly *hilarious* running gag, the cafe had announced a discount for all residing leprechauns. Ever since—one day a year, Mairon became a recluse, shutting himself away from the cruel world outside.

/

He wondered, briefly, if Maedhros understood his pain.

His hair was even brighter, far redder than Mairon’s.

But he was tall. He had that in his favor.

Nobody dared to ask *him* if he was close enough to the ground to see the four leaf clovers.

/

“Made you coffee—only if you promise not to throw it in my face.”

Uncertainly, Mairon looked up.

Melkor was hovering beside him with a mug in hand.

Venomously, Mairon asked, “Is it green?”

“No, but I drew a clover on the foam,” Melkor admitted with no small amount of pride. On the off chance his endless well of money ran dry, he could score a gig at the Hobbit Hole serving masterful lattes.

“I promise not to throw it in your face,” Mairon recited obediently.

He took the mug. It was an impressive clover—but didn't help to mellow his rage.

Melkor sat down to Mairon's left, folding his legs underneath himself.

“Is this a pride thing?” he finally asked—it was evident the question had been bubbling up inside him for some time now. “Vanity? Don't know what else it could be.”

The coffee was as good as it smelled. Small mercies. Mairon figured he could forgive the derogatory foam art.

“I don't like being called names,” he said simply.

Melkor scoffed, a low sound in the back of his throat.

“Please. Not two weeks ago, Maglor called you a very inventive combination of curses I dare not repeat—and you laughed in his face.”

“I'll have you know, I made it so that he unfriended his father on social media, created a beautiful rift between them, and last I heard, he's been written out of the will.”

“How—?”

“Unimportant.”

“Revenge is not always the answer,” Melkor tried.

“You're one to talk, oh, dark one.”

Without warning, Melkor snatched the mug from Mairon's grasp and set it down on the coffee table with a loud thunk. He took Mairon's hands in his and squeezed, meeting his eyes with a concerning intensity.

“If this is a vanity thing, I promise you, you're gorgeous. If it's *people*—they're just trying to get under your skin. Cheap tricks, bad jokes to knock you down a peg. They're just jealous, the lot of them. Since when do you even care about that? Don't let them get to you, sweetheart. I fear for what might happen if you snap.”

“I'm not going to snap,” Mairon insisted.

“Robbing someone of their inheritance seems like a stepping stone towards snapping.”

“I disagree.”

“They don't matter,” Melkor insisted. “None of them matter.”

With that, he got up. He returned Mairon's coffee to him and took a step back.

“I'm going to shower,” he said—and his smile was suddenly *too* wide. “See you around, Patrick.”

Mairon made to lunge at him, to tear his throat out with his teeth. He remembered just in time about the mug in his hands—placed there strategically to allow Melkor a clean escape.

October

Every time the doorbell rang, Mairon burrowed deeper beneath the covers. He pretended not to hear the hurried knocking that followed, the gleeful hooting and hollering.

Children were horrid.

Halloween was horrid.

Everything was horrid.

/

“It doesn't make sense,” Thuringwethil said. Her tone was painfully genuine. “You're the bane of the town, both of you. Local *demons*, is what—how can you hate Halloween?”

“It's a stupid holiday.”

It was a carefully planned intervention, this confrontation.

Unlike Mairon, Thuringwethil adored the whole circus of dressing up as someone who would have gotten burned at the stake in the Middle Ages and dishing out handfuls of candy to excitable, irksome children. She and Ungoliant both. It was awful and Mairon wanted no part in it.

“I'd rather get mauled half to death by a feral animal than interact with children for an entire evening, thank you,” he told her.

It earned him a dirty look.

“Set a bowl up on your porch,” Thuringwethil suggested. “No one's gonna have at it with your doorbell if they find what they're looking for. Put up some cobwebs, hang up a ghoul or two.”

Mairon grimaced.

“No—no, I don't want children anywhere near the house. They're terrible. They scream. Why should let anything dressed like a stupid little elf scream anywhere near my house, my *sanctuary*, where I retreat for peace and quiet?”

“I think it would help if the place didn't look like the dictionary entry for *haunted house*.”

And that marked the end of that friendly talk.

/

“HR organized a party at the office.”

Mairon looked up, unimpressed.

“Of course they did,” he said.

“Do you want to—”

“No.”

/

“Your girlfriend was right,” Melkor said later, as they sat bundled under a heavy blanket with *Sinister* playing on the laptop between them. It was far less terrifying than the advertisements had implied it to be.

“My who?”

Melkor did not elaborate.

“We have a reputation,” he went on. “Everyone thinks we’re scary. We could use that, prove them right.”

“That would require effort—and presentable clothes. Do you really want to put on presentable clothes right now?”

“Next year, Mairon,” Melkor clarified. “It’s two in the morning. Bit late to be making plans now.”

Mairon leaned back against the pillows.

“I wouldn’t know. I tuned out the moment the doorbell first rang,” he sighed, “the first *trick or treat*.”

“Think about it,” Melkor insisted. He snapped the laptop shut. Neither of them was paying very much attention to the film. “We do up the entire front lawn, make it a graveyard. Special effects, costumed actors, blood and gore and all that. We won’t even have to leave the bed—just sit back and enjoy.”

Mairon fought the urge to laugh. It was a ridiculous concept, but the excited, mischievous way Melkor went about explaining it was heart-wrenchingly endearing. It was the chaotic idea of a delighted child—laid out by a formidable criminal mastermind.

“Though, I suppose,” Melkor continued, “it would be nice to see it all go down in person—the little ones screaming, running for their lives. Reckon even the parents might get spooked.”

He turned to face Mairon and leaned in close. He looked him in the eyes and spoke slowly with an impossible, alluring intensity.

“Close your eyes. Imagine—you’re in a soft robe, you’ve got some good wine, you’re looking out at the nightmare you’ve created.”

Mairon rolled his eyes, then obediently closed them.

“They’re all running from the carnage. They scream, but the heavens do not listen. Violence, bloodshed, the world tearing apart at the seams. It’s pure chaos. And the one who reigns supreme, of course, is the one who controls that chaos,” Melkor whispered. “*You*.”

Instinctively, Mairon moved closer, drawn in by the glittering words, the pretty promises. He reached out, fingers tracing Melkor's jaw, brushing the arch of his cheek, traveling further still and burying in his hair.

He opened his eyes.

"Are you quoting Bonaparte at me?" he asked.

"Didn't think you'd notice."

"You wound me."

"Apologies," Melkor said. "That was meant to impress you."

Mairon closed the infinitesimal gap between them and grinned wickedly against Melkor's lips.

"Impress me, then."

convince me

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 3; May

They were in a dimly lit dive bar, the same one that had once served as the backdrop for their first date, when Melkor popped the question.

Not *the* question, per se, that had already been done, but an important question nonetheless.

This time, it was one of a more professional nature.

“I think you should come work for me,” Melkor said, looking down into the amber abyss of his scotch glass.

It was clear the words had come out unbidden, a sort of impulse, tongue loosened by sweet talk and spirits.

“I already work for you.”

“I mean,” Melkor paused, motioned vaguely with the hand that wasn’t wrapped tightly around his glass. “What I mean is, leave Valinor for good.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m serious.”

“And drunk,” Mairon insisted. “What’s the point of having a man on the inside if the man is no longer on the inside?”

Melkor frowned down at the sticky surface of the bar. Despite his truly remarkable tolerance, he was four glasses in and visibly struggling to get his sentences out in the correct order.

“I won’t need you, or anyone, any spies on the inside,” he explained. “Not if you come work with me. We could do so much more with you on my side than with Manwë constantly diverting half your attention. Great minds—can do a lot of great together.”

“Eloquently put,” Mairon summarized. His first drink was still half full. “Shame on you, appealing to my intellect like that. What’s next? My vanity?”

“You don’t need me to do that,” Melkor countered swiftly. He drained the remainder of his whiskey in one elegant tip of his glass. “Ego’s big enough.”

The bustle of the bar drowned out the silence that fell between them then. Nearby, someone wailed at the bartender to take pity and let him have one more beer, just one more, to turn a blind eye to his indebted tab and empty pockets. Some people just didn’t know when to quit.

“I don’t think I can do that,” Mairon decided.

Melkor's gaze snapped back up.

“Why?”

“Think about it. You're smart,” Mairon sprinkled just enough flattery over his words to stay on the good side of someone with a quick temper and liquor-fuddled mind. “This is my career on the line. If I hand in my notice and immediately jump ship, become your—whatever position you plan to give me, we'll get back to that—your dear brother will most certainly catch on.”

“He won't do anything.”

“Corporate espionage. Sabotage. Millions of dollars lost in transactions that never quite saw the light of day. I can be charged with any of that, should he get his hands on the proof. One call to security is all it takes.”

“He wouldn't have you arrested.”

“No? He doesn't particularly like *you*. I daresay if he found me on your payroll he'd have a hard time containing his anger. Might flip a desk.”

“It's a heavy desk,” Melkor mused.

“Don't want to know how you know that,” Mairon said. “Let's not get into that. Just—please understand my concerns when I say I don't want to end up in prison for any period of time whatsoever.”

Slowly, Melkor cocked his head to the side and looked off at some distant point across the room. His eyes were unfocused, a foggy ice blue in the pale overhead lights.

“Shouldn't have done all those naughty things, then.”

It took a few seconds for Mairon to process the comment. His fingers tightened around his glass.

“Are you serious?”

“Well, you did—”

“Well, I did. I did do it,” Mairon snapped. “And I did it for you, asshole.”

Melkor said nothing. They stared at each other from across the tense blanket of silence. Mairon willed himself not to feel too enraged. Melkor was drunk, that was all. He hadn't meant to offend.

It took a few minutes for Melkor to come to his senses.

“Fuck,” he said, not especially articulately. “M sorry.”

“The hell are you drinking so much for?”

“You know—I'm not too sure.”

“Even you have your limits,” Mairon said, and briskly changed the topic. “Let's just pretend you didn't say any of that. Going back to my position—what I really want to know is what role you want me to play in your little game. Which cog in the machine am I to be?”

Melkor smiled widely.

“Whichever you want,” he offered.

“Anything? Really? Very well. You step down and I take over.”

A perplexed frown slipped onto Melkor’s face as he tried valiantly to deduce whether or not Mairon’s suggestion had been sarcastic. It was very endearing.

“I’m only joking,” Mairon assured him. “I’m no figurehead. But, of course, I’ll gladly take on any slightly less public position of power.”

“Good to hear that’s settled.”

Mairon hummed in disagreement, a low sound at the back of his throat. He knocked back the remainder of his drink and winced at the way it burned on the way down. “I never said I’d do it.”

“You did, too.”

“*You did, too?* What are you—four? I never said *now*. Just because you offer me a nice paycheck doesn’t change the fact that I land myself a one way ticket to prison if I don’t think this through to the last detail.”

“Not only am I offering you a brilliant job, but a—brilliant night. Tonight. And every night. It’s a deal breaker.”

“Now, that just makes you sound like a desperate hooker,” Mairon pointed out. “You couldn’t resist me if you tried, dearest, no matter who I work for. And try not to be too offended by this next part, but you’re in no state to get your cock out of your trousers at this point, so where is this heading, really?”

Melkor grimaced.

“Please,” he said.

“Not now. Next quarter, or later. A few years, perhaps. I put some time in between jobs, make it look like I got a better offer. No one will get suspicious, and I won’t be wearing orange in a cell. It’s not my color.”

“That’s a long wait,” Melkor countered—*whined*, and quite childishly at that.

“Please, trust me on this. It’ll be worth the wait,” Mairon assured him. “Until then, just keep your fingers crossed that Manwë doesn’t figure me out.”

His expression softening ever so slightly, Melkor raised both hands over the bar with two thumbs up.

“My deceiver,” he said.

“Don’t call me that.”

“My deceiver, doing battle in the shadows.”

“This is a new level of pathetic.”

“God, you love me.”

Mairon scoffed. “I do, which is why we’re going home now, before you make even more of a fool

of yourself. Come on, up you get.”

“My hero.”

“I beg you, shut your mouth.”

lost to weakness

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 9; February

“That sounds like a you problem.”

And it was, in fact, a Melkor problem.

“No,” Melkor insisted, “it’s an *us* problem. Legally, given the *legal* nature of our relationship, any problem that concerns one of us, concerns both of us.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Mairon moved briskly from corner to corner, tidying up as he listened to Melkor drone on. There weren’t enough hours in the day. There was work to be done. Melkor was being downright ridiculous.

“Right,” said Melkor, “all right. Can I at least try to appeal to your humanity, then? Your compassion? If there is a single compassionate bone in your body, let it come forth. How can you be so cruel?”

Mairon ran a Clorox wipe over his beside table for what was possibly the third time. In his defense, he was being distracted.

“Easily,” he said.

He set the wipe down and turned—walking right into Melkor, who was now looming menacingly over him.

“Yes?” Mairon prompted.

“Please,” Melkor begged. “Do this for me. I won’t survive on my own.”

Mairon tried and failed to push past. He had no means of escape, cornered between the bed and Melkor’s broad frame. There was something to be said for tactic—and Mairon cursed himself for walking straight into a trap.

With no other way out, he used his words.

“Don’t be a baby.”

Melkor’s face fell.

His family—a wealthy, influential, and far too numerous bunch—were holding a gala. It was an opulent, bowties-required event that Melkor had no intention of attending if he had to attend alone.

Manwë had insisted, time and time again, that it would be lovely to see him. Whether or not he meant it didn’t really matter—Melkor knew it was in the best interest of his career, his reputation

to show up and rub elbows with the elite, to steal his brother's contacts out from under him.

But, the fool he was, Melkor had waited until the last possible moment to ask Mairon to accompany him. Naturally, Mairon had declined.

"I need backup," Melkor tried to reason. "All right, I admit, I *would* do fine on my own, but I don't want to be on my own. Who am I without my right hand man?"

Mairon scowled up at him. "How is that meant to appease me?"

Melkor frowned.

"Right hand man? Your *inferior*? I thought that was only limited to the workplace, you old romantic."

Though obviously a joke, the quip made Melkor panic. He reached out and, before Mairon could even react, took Mairon's hands in his own and clung tightly.

"You know I would do anything for you, right?" he asked quietly.

Mairon looked up into Melkor's wide blue puppy eyes with no small amount of sincerity.

"I appreciate that, really," he began, "but—"

Melkor grimaced.

"—but, in case you've forgotten, I'm not on Manwë's good side. None of theirs. Varda looks at me like I'm something that got stuck to the underside of her shoe. I helped you cheat them, Melkor. I lied to their faces. I stabbed them in the back. And now you want to spend an evening in a room full of people who would surely like to have us killed, given the chance."

"Life goes on," Melkor insisted. "People forget."

"If Manwë's anything like you, he hasn't forgotten," Mairon told him. "They'll treat you with civility because you're family. I don't have that luxury."

"Now, *legally*," Melkor tried—and promptly trailed off as Mairon's warning glare burned dangerously bright.

"You said you would do anything for me," said Mairon. "So, indulge me, and let me watch Netflix in my pajamas while you enjoy your thousand dollar champagne."

Melkor's lips twisted into a pout—then, suddenly, his expression cleared.

He stared down at Mairon, scanning over every inch of his face.

Then, he pushed.

Mairon legs, pressed up against the edge of the bed, gave way. Inelegantly, he sprawled backwards onto the mattress—and immediately raised himself up on his elbows to meet Melkor's smug smile with a deadly glower.

"That's not fair," Mairon told him.

Melkor said nothing. Instead, he dropped slowly to his knees between Mairon's spread legs.

Mairon scoffed. “That’s definitely not fair. That’s not how adults argue.”

Melkor continued to say nothing. He tilted his head to the side, contemplative, calculating, then got back up, seemingly altering his course of action. He climbed onto the bed to hover over Mairon, bracketed his head with his elbows, and leaned in close.

“Come with me,” he implored.

“No,” Mairon whispered back. “It’s a stupid idea.”

Melkor kissed him. Once, then twice, each interval punctuated by Mairon’s refusal.

“Still stupid.”

Kiss.

“Idiotic.”

Kiss.

“Suicidal.”

Melkor pulled away, clearly dismayed.

“Tell me what to do to get you on my side.”

“I am on your side,” Mairon assured him, “but I’m also on the side of reason.”

Melkor sighed. He brought one hand up to brush Mairon’s hair out of his eyes, trail his fingers lightly over Mairon’s cheek.

The hand then vanished.

In a matter of seconds, Mairon felt it reappear by the hem of his shirt, toying, then dipping lower still.

Again—

“Come with me.”

The teasing fingers slipped under the waistband of Mairon’s trousers. Completely involuntarily, Mairon drew in a sharp breath and arched up into the heat of it—and berated himself for it instantly, for his accursed weakness.

Valiantly, he fought it. He tilted his chin up, up, close enough to brush his lips against Melkor’s.

“No,” he whispered.

There were two ways the situation could escalate. Either Mairon gave in and let himself be bribed, and everyone’s clothes came off, or Melkor set aside his desperate pleas and iron resolve for a quarter of an hour, and everyone’s clothes came off anyway.

Yet—neither happened. Neither acquiesced.

Melkor took his hands off Mairon and drew back, though it visibly pained him to do so. He slid off the side of the bed and stepped away, examining the sight before him, the creased sheets, Mairon’s

sharp glare. He spread his arms in a mocking display of reluctance.

“No deal, then,” he sighed.

There was a smug edge to the way he said it, like he knew it was only a matter of time before Mairon snapped.

It was infuriating, that cockiness. Gorgeous, of course, but infuriating. Mairon’s fingers gripped the bedsheets tighter. He took a steadying breath and held Melkor’s gaze, let him think for a moment that he’d won.

“Fine,” Mairon said, with a hint of begrudging defeat in his voice. “You’re right.”

Melkor’s delight sharpened.

“No deal,” Mairon finished.

With a grunt, he sat up, and reached down to retie the drawstrings of his trousers. As he got off the bed, he brushed nonchalantly past Melkor, who now stood frozen with his arms limp at his sides.

It was an act, of course. There were very few things that Mairon enjoyed more than Melkor’s clever fingers taking him apart. But sometimes—sheer stubbornness, the childish need to best the other won out.

He was by the door when he felt a tug, Melkor’s hand encircling his wrist. It was his turn to flash a smug smile. He let himself be maneuvered across the room, pushed back down onto the bed.

“Bastard,” Melkor grit out. He was hovering over Mairon again—but this time clearly with no intention of relenting until they were both too worn out to move.

He kissed him, and Mairon grinned against his lips, slipped his fingers around the back of Melkor’s neck into his hair. Some temptations were too sweet to pass up, Mairon knew this. He’d beaten Melkor at his own game.

“Wicked thing,” Melkor muttered—his mouth at Mairon’s throat, hands back where they had started at the waistline of Mairon’s trousers.

He leaned back, retreated to dutifully complete his task, and Mairon lifted his hips to ease the way.

“Don’t go,” Mairon told him. “Honestly, who cares? Just fuck them.”

“Thought the idea was to fuck you.”

“Very clever—”

He broke off with a hiss. Melkor’s head was between his legs. He screwed his eyes shut and knocked his head back against the sheets.

“Just don’t go,” he managed. “Stay with me.”

“Compelling,” Melkor mused.

“Isn’t it?”

Melkor turned his head, pressed a light, deliberately careful kiss to the inside of Mairon’s thigh.

“Fine,” he bit out. “So much for all the theatrics.”

“Entirely unnecessary,” Mairon agreed.

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There were three missed calls from Manwë the next morning, and a disappointed text from Varda, who had hoped to yet again publicly disgrace Melkor. She never missed an opportunity to remind the masses that she'd turned him down before promptly marrying his brother. She was charming that way.

Melkor deleted the voicemails without listening, sent Varda the middle finger emoji. Beside him, Mairon snuffled, his face crushed endearingly against his pillow.

Melkor had learned a valuable lesson the previous night. It was the moral of this whole story, he thought, what Mairon had so eloquently said.

Fuck them.

halcyon

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 12; July

The calm before a storm—the darkened skies, the deathly stillness of the air, the palpable tension before the first drops of rain fell—those were well known phenomena.

But very rarely was the calm *after* a storm romanticized in that mythical way—the silence, the haze, the bleary eyes, the dull throb in your skull—

Considering, of course, said storm was a raucous fourth of July, and the calm the hangover that followed.

Mairon wasn't one to wallow in self pity. He had been, once. Now, he tried to make the best of a terrible situation.

With his coffee at his side and his current read in his lap, he laid back on the sunbed in the yard and focused the entirety of his energy on pushing back the nausea tugging at him from the pit of his stomach. The morning was perfect—hot, but not too bright, not too sunny. The air was sticky but not uncomfortably so, the grass dewy and fresh. He would be all right.

Some time later, Wolf, loyal as ever, made himself comfortable in the patch of shade the sunbed cast on the ground and promptly began to wag his tail. Valiantly, Mairon tried to ignore it. The dizzying back and forth, the swishing sound it made as it hit the grass—it was like nails on a chalkboard to Mairon's aching temples. It wasn't the dog's fault, of course. Mairon couldn't chastise him for enjoying himself.

Melkor was a terrible husband—he shouldn't have let Mairon drink as much as he did.

Not only that, but he'd disappeared into the bathroom at an unholy hour earlier that morning and had not emerged since, leaving Mairon to suffer the aftereffects of their irresponsible evening by his lonesome.

In that respect, having the dog beside him was nice. Mairon was prone to grow irritable, sometimes, when everything got *too* quiet, when he felt too alone for just a bit too long.

Almost as soon as he thought it, as though summoned, there was a loud bang and a yelped curse from inside, followed by a tremendous creak as the back door was yanked open. Melkor stepped out onto the porch. He was wearing a crisp, white sheet mask and very little else.

Mairon set his book down.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Hm? Oh, that,” Melkor said. He hopped down onto the slick grass and only barely managed to keep his balance. “Stubbed my toe on the desk, mug fell off the edge. Empty, at least. But it's fucked, now. The *Wish You Were Here* one from Minnesota. Good riddance.”

“Come, now. That was a gesture of goodwill. An olive branch. And you still refuse to babysit Tilda.”

“Who in their right mind willingly wants to leave their children with me? Or us, either of us?”

“Manwë, for instance,” Mairon said. “Hasn’t ended in tragedy for him—yet, I suppose.”

With that, he swung his legs over the side of the sunbed and sat up. Around him, the world spun, sheer lights dancing in the corners of his vision. His head felt like it would split open from the inside at any moment.

He ran his hands through his hair to comb it into shape and jolted inwardly at the reminder that a good five inches were missing. It was shoulder-length now, to combat the heat, among other things, and Mairon found it harder than he thought it would be to get used to the change.

“You’re good with kids,” he told Melkor—because that was the truth. “As unfortunate as that may be.”

“Debatable.”

“I think not,” said Mairon. “Is that what you were doing all morning?”

Melkor followed Mairon’s gaze, looking inquisitively up at the sky before realizing Mairon was referring to what was on his face.

He huffed. “You were out cold by three—too many shots, if you ask me—and I was stuck staring at the ceiling for another hour because some fucker decided to shoot off every last firework he could find within city limits. It was Maeglin, I just know it. I nodded off, I think, after that, and then the sun came up and I was awake again by five-thirty. So, you see,” he motioned to the mask, “I’m making up for lost beauty sleep.”

“You’re always gorgeous,” Mairon assured him, then grimaced as another wave of nausea washed over him. He was *not* going to throw up. “Fuck—are you not hungover?”

“No,” Melkor said. “You know me—unstoppable. But I *am* tired. Would love to be out by ten tonight, but that seems unlikely.”

Beside Mairon, Wolf abruptly sat up and hurriedly scampered away, no doubt in search of his water bowl to escape the suffocating heat. It was bound to rain later. It hung heavy in the air, the promise of an actual storm.

Melkor took the dog’s departure as an invitation to finally cross the remaining gap between them and sit next to Mairon. It was almost like he hadn’t wanted to get between him and Wolf earlier, for fear that Mairon would pick a favorite and it would not be him.

The sunbed dipped under Melkor’s weight and, instinctively, as though tugged by an unseen force, Mairon turned to face him. His hair was up in a horrendous knot, with blades of grass still stuck among the strands from when they’d laid on the ground the previous night to watch the fireworks. His chest was bare, his legs spread wide in loose-fitting sweatpants, and, absurdly, Mairon felt his pulse quicken in response.

“Skip coffee,” he said—staying on topic, ignoring the rising heat. It was the last thing he needed now. Fuck, he was barely half-conscious, everything a blur, yet his fingers still yearned to stretch out and *touch*.

“I’ll be a zombie,” Melkor bemoaned.

Mairon shook his head at him. He reached up and slowly peeled the mask off Melkor’s face. Whether it was the sun, or the length of time he’d had it on, it was all but dry. Underneath it, Melkor’s skin was almost translucently pale.

“You already are. Skip coffee. Today and tomorrow and the day after that. You’ll pass out eventually and sleep for a week, then you’ll be as good as new. Or you’ll end up in the ER. Hopefully not.”

Again, Mairon’s vision spun violently.

He tried and failed to blink the haze away. When that didn’t work, he dropped his head forward onto Melkor’s shoulder with a pathetic groan, turned his face into the crook of his neck. Melkor’s hair smelled of grass. He smelled nice, like soap, or fresh flowers—it was the mask, the lingering scent of it.

“Easy for you to say,” Melkor told him. He ran the pads of fingers back and forth over Mairon’s shoulder. His hands were cold. Mairon realized, in comparison, that his own skin felt awfully hot. Unfortunate. Heatstroke on top of an already murderous hangover wasn’t ideal—it was in his best interest to head back inside as soon as possible. “You sleep like the dead, no matter what. The entire continent could collapse into the sea and you would be snoring away.”

Mairon bristled and pulled away. “I don’t snore. And I prefer my apocalyptic visions without abnormally large bodies of water, thank you.”

For a moment, then some more, Melkor simply looked at him in uninterrupted silence, before bringing both hands up to cup Mairon’s face. Graciously, Mairon let him. When he felt ill, irritable, such as now, Melkor’s touch was just about the only human contact he could tolerate.

“You’re lovely,” Melkor told him. He had the tendency to be very affectionate when sleep deprived, and not only then. “Dangerously so.”

Mairon mirrored his hazy, soft smile. “I know that, dearest.”

“And mine,” Melkor went on.

“Oh?”

“Completely mine.”

Mairon’s smile grew. “Jealous?”

“Of who?”

“Oh, I don’t know. My hairdresser, or the beautician, or when I was fitted for that suit last month—the guy had his hands all over me. All the doctors, too, if you think about it. Poking and probing and sticking their fingers everywhere. I can see it—the thought of it gets your blood boiling. Am I all yours, really?”

Melkor dropped his hands from Mairon’s face.

“I get it,” he said. “Unnecessary imagery. If you wanted my hands on you, all over you, you could have just said.”

“Where’s the fun in that? It’s amusing to get you all riled up.”

“I thought you were hungover,” Melkor reminded him.

“I can make an exception.”

“You’re going to put your hangover on hold to—?”

“Have you seen yourself, dearest, what you’re wearing?”

“Sweatpants?”

“The gray ones—how could you?” Mairon said. “You want straightforward? All right, have it. Take me upstairs, please, and do what you will, tire us both out. We could both use the sleep.”

Melkor took a breath. It was unsteady, just the slightest bit so. Mairon was getting to him, of course he was. He could be a miracle worker when he put his mind to it.

“Promise me you’re mine,” Melkor said.

“You know I am.”

“Promise you won’t cut your hair again.”

“The fact that I’m emotionally invested in what’s in your pants should not be a bargaining chip to give you the authority to decide what I do with my hair.”

Melkor leaned in closer. Desperately, Mairon looked up at him. Half his vision was blurry, still, the other too bright, too loud, yet he *wanted*, he wanted so badly he burned with it.

“But for the time being, I suppose,” he quietly said, “simply because I might lose my mind entirely if you don’t touch me this instant—fine, I promise.”

“Superb,” Melkor said. The smile that followed made the ground drop out from under Mairon’s feet. “After you.”

beginnings (part 3)

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 1; June

Dates weren't job interviews. There was nothing to fear.

If a date went south, you flipped the finger and left without a word. There were no repercussions. No damage done. You didn't get a permanent mark on your record, or your name on an industry-wide blacklist.

Yet Marion was nervous and he could not quite put his finger on why that was. Stopped at a traffic light, he flattened his palms against the steering wheel—they were clammy, and his heart was pounding, *what the hell was going on with him*—and ran himself through the options.

Maybe it was because he was going out with Melkor *again*. It wasn't very formal of a setting, it was dinner at his house, that was all, but Mairon supposed that, on top of the fact that they'd made it to a *second date*, implied a level of intimacy he frankly had no idea how to deal with.

Or, it was because he was going out with *Melkor*, doing it behind Manwë's back. He was going to spend the evening with someone he'd been taught to see as the enemy, someone who was very clearly not his enemy anymore. No, that couldn't be it. He wasn't breaking the law. It was just a date, just a fucking date.

Or, it was simply the awful day he'd had. A contract had fallen through and everyone had been on edge for hours, the tension in the office thick enough to slice through with a knife. Mairon had spent half the afternoon irritably dragging his hands through his hair and it had eventually reached the stage where he'd had no choice but to tie it up in a mess of a bun. All in all, he wasn't exactly in the ideal headspace for an amorous outing.

The light turned green and Mairon hit the gas. Blessedly, his GPS had finally stopped lagging only moments ago, just as he'd exited off the highway and turned onto a residential street. He would need it. All of these houses looked the same—he was in the middle of a picturesque, quaint suburban utopia with green lawns and spotless curbs, the kind of neighborhood where everyone knew everyone, knew each other's business, each other's troubles. It was hell. He couldn't fathom how *this* was where Melkor lived.

The house numbers were rising steadily as he drove on, slowly approaching the one that blinked green on his phone screen. The perfect rows grew more sparse, then the lawns became desolate, and then there was nothing but overgrown shrubbery and tall, looming trees. At the end of the road, there were only three houses, fairly far apart. One of them looked empty. The other two—one of the other two was Melkor's. Now, *that* was more like it.

It was a mess of a house, really, a dark two story Victorian. It was, at once, exactly what Mairon had expected, and yet the polar opposite. It seemed strange that Melkor, wealthy, pristine Melkor, would tuck himself away in a place like this.

Mairon pulled into the driveway beside Melkor's gleaming BMW and collected the plastic bag of

takeout from the passenger's seat. He was tense all over as he stepped outside. The slam of the car door practically echoed in the emptiness, startling him.

Trees surrounded the house, untamed and winding around the exterior walls like malevolent guardians. It was the home of a storybook villain. In a way, Melkor truly was living up to the reputation that Manwë had assigned him.

Mairon swallowed. *What the hell was he doing?* He was squeezing himself in between Melkor and his brother, into a blistering personal dispute, two towering piles of old money and influence, throwing himself onto a ticking time bomb that was due to blow at any moment.

It was a bit too late to come to his senses and turn back now.

The front door of the house swung open and a familiar sheet of black hair billowed out in the wind.

“Are you going to stand there much longer,” Melkor asked, “admiring the rotting wood?”

Mairon shoved it all down—the nervous anticipation, the bubbling hysteria. There was nothing to fear.

“It’s a lovely shade of mold you’ve got there,” he fired back. “Brings out your eyes.”

He got a sharp smile from Melkor in return, the kind that made Mairon’s stomach flip over, upside down and sideways. Yes, Melkor was quite possibly the most beautiful man that Mairon had even laid eyes upon and no, that did not mean he would give himself permission to turn to jello before he even set foot in the house.

Once he did step inside, though, it all made sense. Prickly on the outside, lavish on the inside—a perfect representation of Melkor’s true self. It made for the perfect reclusive hideaway, a brilliant secret bunker no would dare approach.

A bit smugly, Melkor asked, “Not bad, is it?”

Mairon blinked, tore his gaze away from the chrome finishings, the French doors at the far end of the dining room that led out into a spacious sunroom and vast backyard.

“Keeps the neighbors away, at least.”

Mairon scoffed. “What neighbors?”

“May I?” Melkor interjected. He motioned at the takeout bag hanging limply from Mairon’s fingers.

Numbly, Mairon let him take it, and watched as he took it with him to the kitchen.

“They drive by sometimes,” Melkor said, “the white picket fence neighbors, in their family minivans. They don’t stop, though, and that’s all that matters.”

Hesitantly, Mairon crossed the length of the living room to linger by the kitchen table.

“Don’t be too harsh on the wine,” he said, somewhat startled by his own openness, how tentative his voice sounded. “I had limited time, options, and not to mention financials. The food, too, go easy on it. Just go easy on me. I’ve had a shitty day.”

Melkor turned to smile at him over his shoulder. “It’s all good. Lucky sushi doesn’t need reheating. I would hate to have to tarnish it in the microwave.”

It was an obvious jab at Mairon's tardiness. Yet, somehow, it helped alleviate the tightness in his chest.

"My apologies," he said. "I take full responsibility for the traffic and the road work on the 76."

"As you should," came the amused reply.

Melkor swiveled around with an elongated ceramic platter in hand—vintage, an heirloom, if Mairon were to hazard a guess—and crossed to the table in a few long strides. He slid the platter onto the polished tabletop with an air of inborn aristocratic grace.

Mairon's heart was in his throat.

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"No, you're not," Melkor said, voice still tinged with laughter. "You're not boring. You're *not*—quit looking at me like that."

They had relocated to the living room some hours ago, wine glasses in hand. The steadily emptying bottle stood on the coffee table before them, marking the passage of time.

"I swear, quit looking at me like that. You're fishing for a compliment, and for what? You're beautifully arrogant already. Which begs the question, really—how does someone like you end up working for a hack like Manwë?"

Mairon tilted his head innocently. "Beautifully arrogant?"

"Yes, beautifully. Answer the question."

Mairon took a deep sip from his glass and looked down at his lap. He knew the answer, of course, but he'd never said it aloud to anyone before. He didn't quite know how to arrange the words.

He cleared his throat. "I don't know. The opportunities, I suppose. The prestige, the order—everything there seemed to be so perfect, at first. I wanted to be a part of something like that, see how far that could take me."

"Doesn't look like it's met your expectations."

Mairon's gaze flicked back up. He was clever enough to catch the deeper meaning behind the careful words.

"You're trying to recruit me. I really do prefer my social engagements without a side of business —"

"No," Melkor interrupted sharply, in a strange, desperate way. It was as though he'd never had anyone see through him quite as quickly as Mairon had. "No—don't get me wrong. You seem unhappy there, is all. I mean, look, of course I would like you on my side; I would be stupid not to—but that's hardly a topic for today. I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's all right," Mairon told him softly.

It was odd to see someone so powerful, so unruffled, unbothered, be so clumsily apologetic. Who was he, Mairon thought, to elicit that sort of reaction from someone like that.

With that, they fell back into silence. It was a good silence, the comfortable kind, a natural lapse in conversation. It had been like that all evening, easy talk punctuated by moments of quiet—there

was no need to go to astronomical lengths to impress one another, to make a good impression, to fear rejection. There would be no rejection. Instead, Mairon felt a pull. He felt the want. And what he felt, he saw reflected in Melkor. They were building up to something spectacular.

“You’re staring again,” Mairon said.

“As are you.”

“Pour me some more.”

“You sure? We worked out the hard way that you can't hold your liquor,” Melkor reminded him, but reached for the bottle nonetheless.

He poured just a bit, then Mairon motioned at him to keep going, and he cautiously did until the glass was halfway full.

“That was vodka,” Mairon insisted, “from a dive bar.”

It was not so long ago that Mairon had taken the leap and called the number that Melkor had so secretively slipped him that afternoon in the break room. They’d gone for drinks—and Mairon could not quite remember the rest. He chalked it up to anxiety, in hindsight, a failed attempt at liquid courage. Courteously, Melkor had driven him home and, graciously, called the next day to check up on him, to give him a second chance despite the mess he’d made of himself.

“Exactly—from a dive bar,” Melkor echoed. “Watered down. And yet there you were, tripping over your feet.”

It was a jab and a precaution in one—but it did not stop Mairon from taking a very long, very deep gulp. He finished the wine in one go and defiantly set the glass down on the coffee table with a clank. He was fine, barely tipsy. He could hold a few glasses of wine—if anything, the alcohol was doing wonders for his nerves. The *vodka* had been at fault, clearly, not him.

He met Melkor’s eyes, dared him to comment.

“Now, really,” Melkor said—and he was very obviously finding this funny, “you’ve already had too much to drive yourself home. I certainly won’t be giving you a lift again.”

“And why is that?”

They were skirting around something, saying it without quite saying it, without proposing it outright. It was a game. One thing would lead to another, and then another, and another.

“Your dog scares me,” Melkor said. He set his glass down delicately on the table beside Mairon’s and leaned back into the cushions.

“I rather think he likes you,” Mairon said. “He wasn’t nearly as amicable towards the last guy.”

He selected his words carefully to elicit a very specific reaction. To spark interest, jealousy, to guide Melkor down the right path, help him make the right turn at the fork in the road, and, *oh*—there it was.

Mairon could pinpoint the moment Melkor understood his intent—and the moment he promptly saw through him. Of course he did, he was just as conniving. Equally stubborn, too, and just as much of a tease.

“On second thought,” Melkor mused, sharp smile in place, “let’s put this *date* thing on the back burner. I think I do want to talk shop tonight. Offer a proposal, I mean. I do want to recruit you, if you’re interested—there you go, a job offer. I could use someone like you. And you could benefit from joining the winning side.”

It was a very obvious attempt at derailing the conversation that was meant to lead them straight to bed—but Mairon could not deny his interest. Still, it was a topic for later, as dearly as Melkor tried to pretend otherwise.

Mairon scoffed, ready to chastise Melkor for tarnishing a lovely evening with talk of work, when Melkor leaned in close, so close, barely a breath apart.

“Only joking,” he said. “I *am* offering you job, don’t get me wrong. Just—not now. Got more important things to do first. Now, tell me, do you really want to go home tonight? Did you, even for a moment, consider that an option, driving up here? You’re not quite as cunning as you think you are.”

Mairon pursed his lips to stifle a smile. He ducked his head in mock surrender, in an utterly false display of embarrassment. “You’re right. I did drink too much. I won’t be driving back. If you have a spare room, or if I could crash on the couch—”

As expected, the last worn, threadbare string holding Melkor’s composure together snapped.

He pushed forward and pressed his lips to Mairon’s with little finesse. He braced one hand on Mairon’s cheek to lift his head, fingertips pressing into the hollow of his jaw to soften the impact, the other hand going straight to Mairon’s waist, greedy and bruising, so jarringly possessive.

It was perfect. The heat of it, Melkor hovering over him, pressing into him. It was fucking perfect.

Mairon smiled into the kiss. His hands were at Melkor’s throat; he pushed them further, curled them around his neck and brought him closer, kissed him harder, then pulled away just enough to whisper, “There you are.”

Melkor laughed breathlessly against his lips. “Was this your dastardly plan all along? You don’t seem like the type to put out on the first date.”

“No, I am,” Mairon admitted. “I—really am. Though, technically, not the first date.”

“Wicked creature.”

Mairon’s smile broadened. “You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

There was a split second of silence, then, weighing heavy between them.

“I would have you,” Melkor said—and Mairon barely heard him over the pounding in his chest.

He pushed his fingers into Melkor’s hair at the base of his skull, rough and to the point, and *tugged*. “Have me, then.”

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Melkor awoke to the agonizing sound of a blaring alarm. It was a strange few seconds while his mind registered his surroundings—one, he never set an alarm, and two, it was light out, and he didn’t usually sleep in this late. He must’ve been exhausted beyond belief, to be out for so long.

Mairon, he remembered.

That explained the alarm that was not his own.

Melkor turned his head just in time to see a wave of copper hair swaying across freckled shoulders as Mairon leaned over the side of the bed to grope blindly for his phone. It was somewhere on the floor among his clothes, discarded hastily the previous night.

“Hadn’t noticed that before,” Melkor said—out loud, apparently, because his brain-to-mouth filter did not clock in until his second or third espresso.

The blaring stopped.

Mairon groaned softly and dropped the phone back onto the carpeted floor, where it landed with a gentle but damning thud. Obviously, he had not hit snooze.

“Noticed what?” he asked in a tired voice, raspy with sleep, that made Melkor want to scream.

He turned to face Melkor, propping himself up on his elbow to stay upright. He was clearly the responsible type—he would not lay back down, lest he laze about for too long and find himself running late.

Melkor blinked up at him. “The tattoo.”

“Mm,” said Mairon. “You did have me on my back all night.”

“That I did,” Melkor confirmed. “It’s nice.”

“I know that.”

“Arrogant.”

“Is that the bathroom? That first door?” Mairon asked—he nodded his head in the direction of the corridor.

“What?”

“Bathroom. Work. It’s a long drive from here. I’ll be late.”

Slowly, regrettably, reality set in. Mairon would leave soon, scamper back to Valinor like the responsible worker bee he was. It was a harrowing thought. Mairon was meant for bigger things than whatever they had him doing there. And he—what if that was it? What if Mairon did not want to see him again?

Stiffly, he nodded, and Mairon rolled himself off the side of the bed, picking up his clothes as he went.

“I’ll go out on a limb and assume there’s nothing I can do to persuade you to stay,” Melkor tried.

“Oh, go ahead. Weave me tales of all the things you would do to me to keep me in your bed.”

“Please come back.”

With a smile, Mairon said, “No.”

And he was gone.

In the bathroom, the faucet squeaked and water sloshed. Melkor took a breath, closed his eyes. Were the roles reversed, he would have slid right back under the covers in a heartbeat, surrendering himself to Mairon's wicked lips, his clever fingers.

Briefly, he considered kicking himself free of the sheets and making a run for the bathroom. He would plaster himself to Mairon and kiss him senseless, make it so he had no choice but to call in sick and spend the rest of the day under the covers with him.

Which—that was new.

He wanted to keep this one.

He wanted to wake up with him, pull him closer on cold mornings, shove him away when the summer heat got too sticky. He wanted to listen to him complain haughtily about work, about his incompetent colleagues. He wanted his presence in his house, his voice yelling at him from downstairs to make himself useful, to stop lazing about. To kiss him whenever the opportunity arose, to hold him—

Fuck, he was in love.

And that most certainly was not how Melkor planned to spend his morning, up to his neck in startling revelations.

The old pipes squealed in protest as the shower shut off. Melkor, caught up in his thoughts, had barely registered just how much time had passed since Mairon left the room.

"I'm using your towel," Mairon called out to him. "Used your hair stuff, too."

Use it all, Melkor thought. *Take it, take all that I have.*

That, at least, he managed not to say aloud.

He wasn't exactly surprised at himself. He was used to his own emotional outbursts, to feeling so very much, so very quickly. He longed for instant gratification, dead set on fulfilling every last craving that hit him.

And so—it worried him that he did not know how Mairon felt in turn. He did not know what it had meant to Mairon, this time they'd spent together. He wondered if, in Mairon's eyes, this had only been a fling, one night and nothing more. Melkor couldn't have that, he couldn't.

Mairon stepped out of the bathroom dressed in the previous day's clothes, attacking his damp hair with a towel, as though the harsher he rubbed at it, the faster it would dry.

"Used your toothpaste, too," he admitted. He let his arm fall to his side, towel in hand; his hair was adorably tousled. "God, I'm never late. I'll have to let it air dry. No time for breakfast, either—I'll have to wait until next time to see your culinary prowess for myself, I suppose. Are you even listening?"

Melkor blinked. "What?"

Mairon was suddenly at his side, crouching by the edge of the bed.

"I had a good time. I'd love to do it again."

"Do what again?" Melkor asked—desperately, he needed clarification. "Sex? Dinner? Impromptu

shower in my bathroom?”

Mairon’s hand was on his cheek, then, pulling him into an oddly tentative, soft kiss; gone was the smug confidence from the night before. Melkor did not comment. He closed his eyes and kissed him back.

“All of it,” Mairon said, once they parted. “To see you again.”

“Intrigued, are you?”

He made to lean in for another kiss, but Mairon rocked back on his heels and out of reach.

“Very,” Mairon admitted. “Unfortunately, I am also late. I’ll see myself out.”

Melkor sank back against his pillow.

He was fucked.

“You do that,” he said.

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Mairon made it down the hall in one piece. He was halfway down the staircase by the time his mind finally caught up with his body and he stopped, weak in the knees. He only barely managed to stop himself from melodramatically sinking down and dropping his head into his hands.

That feeling, that coiled tension in his chest, was still there.

His nerves buzzed with it and he didn’t understand why—and Mairon did not like it when he did not understand something. He felt awake, *so awake* it frightened him.

With a deep breath, he balled his hands into fists at his sides, dug his nails into his palms, and kept walking. He swallowed down the—*giddiness*, was what it was. He felt like a child, a stupid, lovesick child, head over heels for a man he’d only just met. He was being ridiculous.

Later, he told himself. He crossed the living room and pulled the front door open, stepping out into the brisk morning air.

He would think about it later.

sweetest distraction

Chapter Notes

(somewhat) direct follow up to [halcyon](#)

timeline: year 12; July

As the scorching heatwave gradually came to an end, it left behind dried up lawns and bone-dry air. It was hot, still, but not quite as deadly.

Melkor had been in the process of desperately making himself an iced coffee, despite Mairon's repeated advice to reduce his caffeine intake, when he realized the refrigerator was out of ice cubes. No one had refilled the dispenser. He scowled at the empty container and valiantly resisted the urge to kick the fridge door in childish frustration.

Beside him, Wolf made a an innocent, curious sound and, before he could think better of it, Melkor snapped rudely at him to mind his own business. Hurt, the dog ran off across the room to chew on something by the television. Melkor considered himself lucky that Mairon wasn't around to witness that—he would be slapped with divorce papers before he could utter a single syllable.

For lack of a better option, Melkor yelled.

"We're going out."

There was a moment of silence, then a soft thump rang out from upstairs.

"Since when?" Mairon yelled back.

"We're out of ice and I'm going to die."

Melkor waited, expecting a dismissive *die, then*. But it did not come. He waited some more. He leaned against the wall by the staircase and sighed. He sighed at how awful life was with no ice, sighed at how dearly he hated the concept of summer. He closed his eyes, considered moving to Antarctica. Siberia, maybe. The north. The bottom of the fucking ocean—nice and chilly, no people, nothing but peace and quiet.

"Fine," came Mairon's voice—from right beside him. "Where are we going?"

Melkor blinked.

Every so often, a bad patch would roll around and Mairon would refuse to leave the house for days on end. He would bury himself in work, in distractions. Hole himself up in the bedroom, linger around in the yard after sunset like a phantom chained to the place it haunted, lighting up cigarette after cigarette, a vice that clung to him through thick and thin. Melkor understood it now, better than ever, how hard it all was to manage, regardless of how relatively simple Mairon made it look. He understood what was going on on the inside, what the true cost of dealing with it was. Still, Mairon was doing admirably. Just as he had promised—with every scrap of strength he had, he fought.

Such as now.

“Did not expect that,” Melkor said.

“Expect what?”

Melkor looked at the staircase, then at Mairon, like it was obvious. “For you to—actually agree to come with me.”

Mairon rubbed idly at his wrist, at his pulse point.

“I’m starting to go stir-crazy,” he admitted. “Let’s just go.”

Melkor blinked again, really took in the sight before him. He made no move to head for the door. He found himself unable to take a single step.

Mairon’s hair was out of his face. He looked tired—but good. Sitting out in the sun the way he liked to was good for him. He looked alive, properly alive, all rosy cheeks and pale freckles. He wore a barely buttoned, oversized linen shirt—*one of his*, Melkor realized—and matching trousers, both in black. It was a good look, soft and comfortable. He was beautiful, jaw-dropping, heart-stopping. Melkor wanted to hold him and never let go.

It was getting a bit pathetic, Melkor thought, that more than ten years down the line, Mairon still had that effect on him. With every little thing he did, Melkor went fuzzy at the edges, marveling at Mairon’s very existence.

“You in there?” Mairon asked—when it became painfully clear that Melkor was in the middle of something. The words seemed to echo.

Impulsively, Melkor responded with the first thing that came to mind.

“Stunning.”

“Hm?”

Melkor cleared his throat. “You’re stunning.”

Mairon hesitated. He seemed surprised by the comment.

Slowly, almost abashedly, he reached around to the back of his head and wiggled his tiny, half-up knot.

“It’s long enough to tie back now,” he said, “sort of. Kept falling in my eyes.”

“Should have thought about that before chopping it all off.”

“You said I looked good.”

“You always look good. First thing in the morning, after eight hours of work, at the grocery store, when you’re driving, washing the dishes, when we’re out and you get shitfaced and your eyes are all smudged, even now. Especially now. Always—look, don’t listen to me. It’s hot. Feeling a bit sick. And I’m biased—I’m in love with you, you know.”

Again, Mairon fell still. He opened his mouth as though in slow motion, gears turning, whirring to generate some sort of coherent response.

Melkor took that time to berate himself for being an embarrassment. Rambling, raving embarrassment. He was suffering from heatstroke—it was the only logical explanation. His brain was melting. His bones itched. He wanted to drop to his knees and ask Mairon to marry him all over again.

“Sap,” Mairon said finally, like he’d read Melkor’s mind. It was very fond, the way he said it. “No need for that. We’re already married. You don’t need to woo me.”

“Want to.”

“Shush. Go get in the car. You’re driving—my wrist’s acting up.”

Obediently, Melkor pushed off the wall.

“I just can’t help it,” he admitted.

Mairon scoffed. As he crossed the living room, he looked at Melkor over his shoulder with a radiant smile. “I love you, too. You—Melkor, your keys are on the counter.”

In lieu of collecting himself, Melkor had taken to blindly following Mairon to the door. At Mairon’s remark, he swiveled and turned back. He’d forgotten his phone, too. And his sunglasses. He looked down at himself to make sure he’d remembered to put on clothes that morning.

“You distract me,” he explained.

“Excuses,” Mairon chastised.

Keys tucked safely into his pocket, Melkor slipped on his atrocious—Mairon’s words, not his—slides and pulled the front door open. They were met with a gust of blistering, dry air. In the back of his mind, Melkor made a note to discuss with Mairon his brilliant idea of moving to the South Pole.

As they walked down the driveway, he bumped his shoulder affectionately against Mairon’s.

“I snapped at the dog earlier,” he said absently. “I was being nice to win back your favor in advance, in case he snitched on me later.”

“Did you apologize?”

“What?”

Mairon stopped in his tracks, squinted up at Melkor through the blinding sun. “Did you apologize? Go back inside and apologize to him right now.”

“Are you serious?”

Mairon frowned. He took a moment to think it over.

“No,” he said finally. “Well—yes, in a way. Don’t let it happen again. This is your final warning.”

“All right,” said Melkor.

“You know what that means.”

“I do.”

Mairon stared at him for a few more seconds before resuming towards the passenger's side. The crunch of gravel beneath his feet just about drowned out the pounding in Melkor's chest, the rush of blood in his ears. He was obsessed, enamored. He was losing his mind completely.

"I'll apologize later," he promised.

Mairon glanced at him over the roof of the car. He tried and failed to look menacing, to stifle his fond amusement. Melkor supposed that was consolation enough, that Mairon was just as far gone as he was, if slightly better at hiding it.

"You better," Mairon said, "or else."

"I know."

"Or else."

a way with words

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 1; September

It had been naive to think that the master plan would be easy to execute. It was dangerous, after all, very illegal, putting carefully crafted professional relationships, putting *entire careers* at risk.

Mairon, at the very least, was being sensible about the whole thing. He laid low and drew little attention to himself. He did what was asked of him, when it was asked of him. Nobody suspected a thing.

Melkor, on the other hand—

The door to the break room swung open and Mairon looked up from his abysmally bland store-bought salad. His eyes went wide. He stabbed his spork into a stale piece of lettuce and glared up at Melkor.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed. He thanked his lucky stars that the room was empty.

In lieu of a sensible answer, Melkor posed a question of his own. “What are you eating? Blink twice if you need help. There’s a burger place right down the street. I’ll go get you—you’re like a stock photo of a man eating salad alone at his desk.”

“Now, technically,” Mairon said slowly—he glanced cautiously at the entranceway, then back at Melkor, “not my desk. Don’t have a desk. Only the important people get desks.”

“If you worked for me,” Melkor said as he stepped closer, “you’d have your own office, let alone a desk. A very pretty office, I promise you.”

Mairon kept his eyes on the door.

“I do work for you,” he said. “No desk.”

Melkor followed his gaze. He frowned, then understanding dawned. He sighed and turned back to Mairon.

“Nobody’s going to walk in—the hallway was empty,” he assured him. “And we’re just talking. It’s not like I have you bent over the table. And I meant employed officially, on the record. One day, you will have a desk, the best desk, I promise, I really do—and then I will bend you over it. Hey, will you stop fidgeting? There’s no surveillance in here.”

At long last, Mairon peeled his eyes away from the door, instead fixing Melkor with pointed look. He glared for a few seconds, then deflated.

“I know,” he said quietly. “Sorry. Long day. Can’t blame me for being cautious, though, can you?”

Melkor closed the distance between them. As he crouched down to Mairon’s level, his features relaxed into something softer, less Melkor-like, into a gentle, almost compassionate little smile.

“You’re too clever for your own good,” Melkor told him.

Mairon stared at him as Melkor reached out and hooked an errant strand of Mairon’s hair around his fingers, twirling absently.

“They’re not smart enough catch you. When the time comes, when you’re finished here—you’ll be long gone before they even notice the damage that was done.”

“You’re very melodramatic. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Please, that’s the very reason my parents wrote me out of their will. They couldn’t stand the theatrics.”

Mairon’s lips twisted up into a fond smile despite his best intentions—and Melkor met him halfway, tugging him into a kiss with a vise-like grip around his wrist.

All too quickly, Mairon tugged himself free, shooting a paranoid glance at the doorway.

Again, Melkor sighed.

“No one’s coming. Let me kiss you.”

“Really, right in front of my salad?”

Melkor grinned and pulled at him again. Mairon indulged him with a chaste, barely-there peck on the lips before dropping decisively back into his chair.

Melkor rocked back on his heels with a dejected grimace.

It was difficult, resisting his pouty blue eyes, but one of them had to be the responsible one. One of them had to make sure they weren’t caught in a bloody embrace in the Valinor staff room with Manwë himself only a few doors down.

“Did you come to personally evaluate where my loyalties lie?” Mairon asked him then. “If so, you’re horribly reckless and I deserve to get caught for working with you. But if you’re here because you can’t stand to be apart, I can forgive that. You being a sap, of course, not you being irresponsible.”

With a groan, Melkor pushed himself to his feet. He crossed to the counter at the far end of the small room and leaned heavily against it.

“My lawyer backstabbed me and took the day off to take her son to the dentist. So, here I am, graciously delivering the signed papers in person. Manwë’s keeping me waiting, the prick.”

“He’s not dropping the lawsuit?”

“Sweetheart, he’s never, ever let me get away with anything. Little brother has to bring me down to make himself feel powerful.”

Mairon made a face.

“And so, given the situation,” Melkor went on, “I figured I’d track you down while I wait and make heart eyes at you until you kick me away.”

Mairon scoffed, but it was halfhearted at best. He understood perfectly. As reckless as it was, he was glad to see Melkor. It was a weight off his chest, a balm to soothe the bad day he was having.

It made everything better, having him here, if only for a moment.

He picked the plastic lid off the table to cap his horrible salad—there was nothing of value left to pick at—and reached out to toss it into the nearby bin.

“You are very clingy,” he told Melkor fondly.

“I missed you.”

“It’s been, what—” Mairon squinted at the numbers on the faraway microwave, “—six hours.”

“Too long,” said Melkor.

“You see me every day.”

“Not enough. You know—bear with me here. Your stupid mugs are in my cupboards, and your clothes are all over my house, and the upstairs bathroom smells like you, and none of that’s enough. You might as well move in, you know, with your big dog and all.”

Mairon stilled. He replayed the words in his head, once, then twice, then again.

Hesitantly, he asked, “Is that another one of those pick up lines you blurt out without consulting your brain—”

“No,” Melkor said immediately. He seemed to pause then, take a moment to think, to properly mull over the gravity of his proposal, before continuing. “No, I am—I’m fully serious. If you want.”

Mairon’s hands rolled into fists in his lap, nails digging into his palms. He squeezed harder still. The sharp pain of it grounded him.

He wanted. It was absurd. It was moving so fast, too fast. But there was nothing keeping him attached to his own apartment—nothing, nobody. To say that he belonged there, that he would miss it, would be a lie.

It was far nicer, waking up in Melkor’s house, in his bed, to the sound of someone moving about the house. To not be alone.

He wanted. And Melkor was looking at him so imploringly and Mairon *wanted*.

“I’d like that,” he said finally, quietly—then broke into a smile, because he worried he might cry otherwise, “but I don’t think you’re ready to properly meet Wolf.”

“Not ready or not worthy?”

“Well—”

The door burst open.

It was an intern, one of Aulë’s new, timid underlings. He poked his head in without invitation and frantically scanned the room.

Mairon wiped his face clean—to hide the smile, to hide his displeasure at their very fucking important conversation being so rudely interrupted. His first impulse was to strangle the kid, but murder was arguably more illegal than what Mairon was already doing and he didn’t especially want to spent the remainder of his lunch breaks in a prison cafeteria.

“There you are,” the intern gasped. His eyes were big, focused on Melkor. Then they grew bigger and he added a hasty, polite, “—*sir*. Sorry. Your, um, brother. He’s ready for you. I thought you were in the conference room downstairs. I’m sorry, I didn’t think—”

“It’s fine,” Melkor cut him off. His tone was different now—stiff and cold and terrifying. Nobody else could be privy to the words he used with Mairon, to the way he said them, the way he looked at him when he did. The rest of the world simply did not deserve it. “Just lead the way.”

The intern paled and nodded rapidly. His head jerked back and forth like a dashboard figurine.

It was very entertaining, the scene before him, Mairon thought. Just about everyone feared Melkor. In essence, the world crossed to the other side of the street to avoid him, to get out of his way. And that same Melkor got on his knees for him. Mairon had to admit his ego enjoyed that greatly.

“We’ll continue this later,” Melkor told him firmly, pointedly—and he *winked*, the bastard, before disappearing out the door and into the hall. He seemed very jovial for someone heading to confront their estranged brother about a multimillion dollar lawsuit, as the guilty party no less.

Mairon took a deep breath and held it until his lungs ached.

He was patient. He could wait. In theory. But in practice, he found himself wishing he could turn back time to make it so that they had not been interrupted. He wanted to know how it ended, that conversation, to know what their next move would be.

He wanted to feign sick, suddenly, take the rest of the day off. To sprint to the conference room and pull Melkor out and tug him outside and into his car. He wanted to drive to his apartment and pack up what little he owned, leave it all behind.

He squeezed his eyes shut and exhaled.

Melodramatics were Melkor’s forte, primarily, but the more Mairon thought about it, the more he was sure—all exaggeration, all hyperbole aside—that Melkor would be the death of him.

the darkest day

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 9; October

There was something angelic about Mairon just before noon, soft and relaxed and *good*. The golden rays of mid-morning sunlight cast a pale glow as they filtered in through the window, illuminating his hair like a halo against his pillow. It was a sight for sore eyes.

It was one of the few upsides to Melkor's chronic insomnia—the privilege of watching Mairon sleep. The lines around his eyes, around his mouth softened. The creases vanished from his brow, the tension from his shoulders. The face beneath the mask was calm in a way it never was when he was awake—there was always too much to do, too much on his mind, so much to worry about.

Melkor set down the tray he was holding on the empty side of the bed, careful not to make too much noise. Delicately, he crawled onto the bed to loom over Mairon, and as he leaned down, his hair cascaded over his shoulders and around his face, shrouding them both from the world. Mairon, predictably, did not stir.

Melkor settled in comfortably, bracing his palms on either side of Mairon's head. He ducked down, pressed a light kiss to the bridge of Mairon's nose, then another, and another, and yet, all Mairon did was snuffle incoherently.

That didn't dissuade him. Melkor rearranged himself, squeezed his knees around Mairon's hips. He nudged his nose against Mairon's, then kissed his cheek, warm from sleep, then the soft skin right by his ear, and whispering a warning.

“Wake up,” he urged quietly. “But don't freak out. You'll spill the orange juice.”

Mairon snuffled again, more annoyed now. Melkor gave his hips another insistent squeeze.

It was then that those gold eyes finally snapped open. They gaped blearily, unseeing for a moment, before snapping into focus with a flash of panic. In hindsight, Melkor mused, he could see how the unexpected weight over his body, or the ominous curtain of darkness blocking out his vision might pose a cause for concern for someone who was barely half-conscious.

Mairon jerked upright and, automatically, Melkor grasped at his shoulders to keep him in place.

“Don't move,” he warned.

Mairon stilled under him then, palpably relaxing—it was only Melkor. There was no threat. He was awake. He was all right.

“Fuck off,” he told Melkor irritably.

“Rude.”

“What do you want?”

“Orange juice,” Melkor explained. He motioned to the corner of the bed with a sloppy tilt of his head.

Mairon brushed aside Melkor’s hair to peek at the breakfast tray, then sunk tiredly back against the sheets.

“Lovely,” he said. His voice was small, hoarse with sleep. “What’s the occasion? What time is it? Wake me up like a normal person next time, would you?”

“No,” Melkor said sweetly. He let go of Mairon and sat back on his heels, careful not to crush Mairon’s lower half beneath his weight. “It’s almost eleven. And watching you eat granola bars every morning with your coffee hurts my heart. That’s the occasion.”

“Not all of us wake up at five. I don’t have the bloody time to cook,” Mairon said, then yawned. The yawn was followed by a grimace. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and when he opened them, he fixed Melkor with an apologetic look. “I’m just—sorry, I barely slept. It looks wonderful, thank you. Just shove over before it gets cold.”

Melkor did as he was told and scooted back to lie down at the foot of the bed as Mairon clumsily unbundled himself to sit up in a vertical enough position to eat, swearing at the covers when they refused to give way.

“You must’ve been a dream back home with this,” Mairon said idly, once he was free. He reached for the juice first. “Can’t imagine why they liked Manwë more.”

“Yes, well,” Melkor mumbled, staring at the ceiling. “You see, Manwë didn’t get expelled from boarding school at fourteen for smoking in the locker room. Besides, I burned my hands on the stovetop once, when I was seven or so, and was essentially banned from the kitchen. So, even if I’d wanted to, I wouldn’t have been able to cook for my parents. Of course, that also would have required them to be around enough for me to have time to—”

He trailed off with bitter twist to his lips. “No, no, no. No therapy session. Let’s not ruin the mood today.”

Mairon bit into his second piece of French toast, careful not to get crumbs all over the sheets. If there was one thing he and Melkor agreed on, it was that food did not belong under the covers.

“What’s today?” he mumbled, mouth full.

Melkor turned to face him. It was the question he had been waiting for.

“*Halloween.*”

/

Being a holiday, Halloween, in principle, was awful—but there were certain upsides to a day celebrating gore and terror.

A handful of years ago, Melkor was struck with the brilliant idea of transforming the front yard into an interactive horror show to traumatize the neighborhood children for the remainder of their tiny, miserable lives. But alas, life had gotten in the way of putting his plan to action—until now. Now, he was ready to make his dream a reality.

Regrettably, it did not pan out. Every special effects company he attempted to enlist the help of unequivocally turned him down. They quoted guidelines, company policy, legal restrictions,

cultural norms, and on and on. They all told him, in no specific terms, that no amount of money would get them—nay, *allow* them—to ruin children’s lives like that.

As such, he and Mairon were left to their own devices.

This brought them to the basement beneath the house. They stood side by side, staring in dismay at the mounds of cardboard boxes lined neatly against the stone walls. Melkor wished he’d labeled the carton of Halloween decorations that Maeglin had forced upon them a few years back before he’d banished it beneath the house.

Something skittered across the floor in a darkened corner of the room. Melkor swiveled his head towards the sound.

“What? What is it?” Mairon snapped.

Melkor looked to him, confused.

“You keep glancing around,” Mairon said. “There’s nothing there. Nothing is going to drag you into the void.”

Melkor winced. He crouched down and pulled open one of the boxes.

“I’ve got monsters in my Minecraft basement, you know,” he admitted. “Ever since they started spawning, it freaks me out, coming down here alone to do the laundry.”

“Is that why you never do the laundry? Minecraft?”

Melkor huffed. “I do—sometimes. When you tell me to do it, I do it. On occasion. At least I have a legitimate reason. What’s yours, for not cleaning out the shower drain?”

“No need to be a prick.”

Melkor held his hands up in mock surrender.

Mairon glowered at him for just a little while longer to make sure he got his point across, before moving on to the next box.

“Check the last two over there? I’ll finish this row.”

Melkor did as he was told. He stood up, dusting off the knees of his trousers, and reached for the topmost box.

“Have you considered,” he asked, as he tugged it open, “that we might’ve put all the spooky shit in the attic instead?”

Mairon closed a carton full of gaudy Christmas baubles with more force than strictly necessary. His mouth was curled in distaste.

“No, I haven’t put anything—”

He trailed off and turned slowly to look up at Melkor with incredulity. “We don’t have an attic.”

Melkor frowned. “Yes, we do.”

“We—what attic?”

“What attic—?” Melkor dropped his hands to his sides, then raised one and pointed up. “The one at the top. Behind the bookcase in upstairs hall, there’s that old door that we keep covered to block out the drafts. It’s always been there. Mairon, you’re joking.”

Mairon, still crouching, sat back in stupefied surprise, dropping heavily onto the concrete floor. “I’ve never—I don’t believe you. The bookcase by the big plant, that one? Are you actually serious—we have an attic?”

Melkor gaped at him. “Mairon, you’ve lived here for—”

“What’s up there?”

Melkor whistled out a long sigh. “Honestly, I forget. Spare furniture, antiques—bits that came with the house. The devil himself stops by every once in a while, I imagine. There’s couches and everything for him to nap, if he wants.”

Dejectedly, he closed the flaps of the box he’d just inspected. It was full of cables, old batteries, electronic devices that no longer worked. Melkor, admittedly, was a bit of a hoarder.

“No,” said Mairon. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why would I be lying?”

With that, Melkor crouched back down and peeled open the last box on his side—and he promptly stumbled back, a choked sound caught in his throat.

“What?” Mairon stared. “*What?*”

Melkor drew in a shaky breath. He looked at the box, then turned on Mairon.

“Bastard. Could’ve mentioned there were spiders.”

“Yay. You found it,” Mairon deadpanned. He didn’t even try to conceal his obvious amusement. “What kind of spiders? Move over. What else is in there?”

“The creepy rubber ones,” Melkor said. He cursed how jittery his voice was. “Fuck you. And fuck Maeglin. And some other stuff—plastic tombstones and such.”

Mairon dragged the box closer to the dim lightbulb swinging overhead. He looked briefly inside, rummaging through its contents, before swinging the flaps closed.

“That’s it,” he confirmed. “Take this upstairs. And then you’re taking me to the attic.”

Again, Melkor graciously did as he was told.

Mairon led the way up the stairs in silence—then swiveled around precariously, menacingly, in his oversized Uggs when he reached the top step. He stared Melkor down with fiery glare.

“If you’re lying, I swear—I hope the next time you’re down here alone, your stupid Minecraft monsters take you under.”

/

There was, in fact, an attic.

Mairon stood, dumbfounded, as he watched Melkor push aside the heavy bookcase in question to

reveal the hidden door.

“Someone could have been squatting up there,” he chastised Melkor, “and I wouldn’t have known.”

/

A few hours later, they sat on the front steps, pressed snugly against each other. Mairon’s head was lolling onto Melkor’s shoulder. He was tired. Or drunk. Or both.

Through whatever means they had at their disposal—namely, themselves—they had spent the majority of the evening deterring happy children from approaching their sanctuary. Costumes were redundant. Melkor’s stature paired with Mairon’s blood-curdling reputation proved infinitely more effective than any amount of fake gore could ever be.

From the basement, they had dragged up two iron-cast torches and assembled them on either side of the stairs to add to the atmosphere of dread and doom, and brought out a bottle of wine to pass between themselves as the hours ticked by.

Once the sun had gone down, Mairon had been forced to head inside and fetch a thick cardigan from upstairs. He’d wrapped himself up and returned to the startling sight of a cheerful little boy dressed as some kind of cartoon demon taking a handful of candy bars from the bowl at the foot of the steps, then skipping merrily off back down the driveway.

They weren’t completely heartless—the candy *was* there for the taking. It was just that nobody else had worked up the courage thus far to come and get it. By the looks of it, it appeared now that Melkor alone wasn’t quite as frightening as the two of them combined.

Mairon snatched the bottle back from Melkor’s fingers, where it dangled loosely, precariously, and took a sip. The wine was as cold and getting colder still as the evening turned slowly to night.

“Don’t tell me you’re drunk,” he said. “If I’m not drunk, how are you drunk?”

“You are drunk,” Melkor said. He looked over at him. “You’re burning the alcohol at a quicker rate to make up for lost body heat.”

Mairon met his gaze. The torchlight reflected in Melkor’s pale eyes, giving him an unearthly appearance. It cast dark shadows over his face, across his cheeks. He looked very regal, very frightening.

“Tell me about the spiders,” Mairon asked on a whim.

“No. Don’t bring up the spiders. Burn them, give them back to Maeglin. I don’t care.”

“Childhood trauma?”

Melkor made grabby hands, demanding the bottle. Mairon passed it to him.

“Something like that,” Melkor said. He knocked the bottle back like he needed help getting his next words out. “Big tarantula. Unpleasant. Not a fun experience.”

Mairon reached over with both hands, gently brushed Melkor’s hair back from his face to tuck behind his ears.

“Poor baby,” he said.

Melkor leaned out of reach. “Very funny. Tell me, when you drink water, aren’t you afraid you’ll drown?”

Mairon pulled his hands back as if burned and forcefully stuck his bottom lip out in a pout. He was most certainly drunk—he found himself feeling far more offended by the jab now than he normally would.

“Fuck you,” he snapped. “I can’t swim, Melkor.”

“It’s never too late to learn.”

“How do I learn to swim, pray tell, when I step into the water and I’m immediately paralyzed *because* I can’t swim? Forget about it.”

Melkor made the correct decision to say nothing more about it. Instead, he took another swig of wine and looked out onto the darkening driveway. The street lamps were on now, bathing everything in a haunted, pale glow. It was foggy, too. It was *perfect*, and not a penny had been spent on a special effects crew.

As quickly as it had flared up, Mairon’s anger dissipated. He dropped his head back down to lean against Melkor. He was so warm, so comfortable. Mairon couldn’t stay mad at him if he wanted to.

“How many children came by?”

“Just the one,” Melkor said. “Brave kid. He’s going places.”

“We’re too scary,” Mairon muttered. He wasn’t slurring yet, but the pacing of his words was off in a way he couldn’t quite figure out how to fix.

“Does that bother you?”

“No. It means I have you all to myself.”

Melkor scoffed. The sound rumbled through him and Mairon felt it reverberate where his cheek was pressed against his shoulder.

“That does sound perfect,” Melkor admitted. He wrapped his free arm around Mairon to yank him closer—and stilled. “You’re shivering. Let’s go inside. No one else will come by at this hour.”

“We can’t leave the candy unguarded.”

“Yes, we can. Get up.”

Mairon kicked his shoes off in the doorway and, without bothering to arrange them neatly by the wall, made a beeline for the couch.

“I’m not going to make it up the stairs. And not because I’m drunk. I’m tired.”

Again, Melkor corrected him, “You are drunk.”

Mairon pretended not to hear. He wrapped the flaps of his cardigan snugly around himself and toppled over onto the cushions, pressing his face into the pile of pillows by the armrest.

“We won’t fit here together,” Melkor said. “Not comfortably.”

Mairon grumbled something indecipherable, then, “You go to bed. I don’t mind. I’ll go upstairs at

some point. I don't know—later.”

For a moment, the living room was impossibly quiet, as though Melkor had vanished where he stood. But eventually, the floorboards began to creak again as he resumed his walk to the kitchen.

Water was poured, the kettle clicked on. Mugs and spoons clinked and the cupboard doors clacked as tea bags were retrieved. It all sounded very hazy to Mairon, very far away.

It wasn't until a few minutes later, when the tea was steaming and set down on the coffee table that

—

Mairon shot up, sharp and alert.

“I've got it,” he announced. “It was Ungoliant's pet tarantula, wasn't it? I'm right, aren't I? Fuck, I am. Here I was, thinking something venomous had bitten you when you were a kid—and all along, it was your ex-girlfriend's tiny pet spider. This is absolutely the funniest thing ever. I'm going to lose my mind, I really am. Goodnight, Melkor.”

—Melkor decided that he was most definitely going to sleep upstairs after all.

light the fuse

Chapter Notes

psa: maeglin owns a motel called The Motel

timeline: year 9; December

“It’s a terrible idea.”

“Mairon, love of my life—”

“No.”

Melkor’s lips curled into a pout. He made quite the amusing sight, with his puffer coat hanging loosely across his shoulders and the pom-poms of his wool hat swinging side to side like pigtails. He was breathing heavily, exhausted from what was his third, or perhaps fourth, trip down to the basement to retrieve every last box of redundant holiday decor.

“Why?” he asked. Gingerly, he set down the box he was holding and wheezed faintly on his way back up. “Explain—why not?”

It was too early, Mairon bemoaned. Too early to think properly, too early to drive hours upstate and deface personal property, as was Melkor’s intention.

Delicately, he slipped the old receipt that served as a makeshift bookmark between the pages of the novel he’d been reading—until Melkor had so rudely interrupted his quiet morning—and set it to the side. He rearranged the blanket in his lap and clasped his hands neatly over it.

“Manwë will know it was you,” he said. “And Manwë despises you. And then you will end up in prison again.”

Melkor pursed his lips. “He won’t—”

“He will. You’re not his only enemy, of course, but would anyone other than you—any of his competitors—trespass onto his property and spell out profanities with Christmas lights on his manor? Tell me, would they?”

Melkor tugged his hat off with a huff. Electrically charged wisps of jet black hair poked out like a ragged halo around him; he didn’t bother to smooth them out. He shed his coat next, and dropped both it and the hat onto the coffee table in an unruly heap.

With yet another tired wheeze, he sat heavily on the floor in front of Mairon—and immediately leaned forward and plucked Mairon’s mug right out of his hands. As their fingers brushed, Mairon shuddered. Melkor’s were ice cold. The basement was an unforgiving, uninhabitable tomb this time of year.

Melkor took a hearty sip and grimaced as soon as the sickly sweet liquid touched his lips.

Mairon scoffed at him. “Come, now, what did you expect?”

“At least it’s hot,” Melkor argued.

He braced himself and took another deep swig, before returning the mug to Mairon’s waiting hands.

“Tell me, sweetheart,” he went on. “What the hell are we going to do with all these lights, then?”

Mairon looked from Melkor to the coffee in his lap, dismayed at how little was left. He drained it in one gulp and leaned forward to set the mug down on the coffee table beside Melkor’s hat.

As he leaned back into the cushions, it clicked.

Again, he lurched forward—this time with vigor. He took Melkor’s frozen hands in both of his and squeezed.

“That’s brilliant,” he said.

“Is it?” Melkor asked. He looked at down at their intertwined hands, then back up at Mairon’s face, at the devious smile on his lips. “What is?”

“Manwë was the first name on your shit list that came to mind, yes?”

Melkor nodded warily.

“He shouldn’t be the first name.”

“He shouldn’t?”

“Not in this case,” Mairon said. “This isn’t about who you hate the most. It’s about who put you in this predicament to begin with.”

Melkor frowned. Mairon could just about see his mind working, gears turning, thoughts and ideas flickering in and out of existence. Then, when it finally dawned on him, Melkor’s brows jerked up in surprise.

“Really?”

Mairon nodded.

“Isn’t he your friend?” asked Melkor. “Seems nasty, even for you, to do him like that.”

Mairon shrugged. It was a tiny twitch of his shoulders.

“It hurts me to see you this way,” he said sympathetically. “You’re so distraught. You’re getting frown lines just thinking about all those unnecessary boxes taking up precious space in your home. You poor thing, I don’t like seeing you upset. And if I have to stab a friend in the back to fix this, so be it.”

Melkor scoffed.

“You’ve quite the way with words,” he said.

“Is that a yes?” Mairon asked. “That’s what we’re doing?”

“We?”

“There’s no way I’m letting you go alone.”

“Very well,” Melkor agreed. His eyes sparkled, burning with a dangerous glee. “That’s what we’re doing.”

As if to cement their pact, he then jugged his chin out, tilting his head up towards Mairon, endearingly presenting himself for a kiss. Graciously, Mairon obliged him. He leaned down and Melkor met him halfway. It was chaste, soft and sweet, but earth-shattering all the same. Mairon would never tire of it, the way Melkor melted for him.

All too quickly, Mairon pulled away.

“I need a shower. I can’t commit a crime looking like this,” he announced. “Why don’t you channel all that rage of yours towards something productive in the meantime—find a way to get Maeglin out of town for a few hours.”

/

On their drive back from Maeglin’s fine establishment, the sun began to disappear. It was just past four; it was an abomination, the entire concept of winter.

Mairon was behind the wheel, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel with an almost manic sort of energy. They had taken his car—agreeing that Melkor’s was too flashy to blend in with the bland suburban landscape of the next town over. It had been a smart decision. The cars lining the streets, dotting the parking lot of *The Motel* had all been aged and weary, sedans and minivans in muted shades of black and beige.

As they pulled to a stop at a red light, Mairon shot a glance at Melkor in the passenger’s seat. He was unnervingly quiet, had been for the whole duration of the trip back.

“Second thoughts?”

“Hm?”

“You look nervous,” Mairon told him. “Having second thoughts?”

“No,” said Melkor. “He brought it on himself. Shouldn’t have forced all those lights on us in the first place. I was thinking, though—we should’ve taken a picture to hang on the fridge. Like a proxy decoration of our own.”

Mairon hummed in melancholy contemplation.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “We should have.”

The light turned green, then, and he turned his full attention back to the road. As he switched lanes, he drummed his fingers against the wheel in an effort to release some of the pent-up restless energy that had been buzzing just beneath his skin all week. It was like there was something inside him trying to escape, to break free, and no amount of sleep or adrenaline could make it go away.

“I like how you dotted the *I* in *shit*,” he said, mere moments later. “That was clever. And that you tucked the ladder out of sight. Until he finds it, he’ll never take any of it down.”

“Why, thank you,” Melkor preened.

“I’ll have you know, it never ceases to be terribly attractive, the happy look on your face when you

wreak havoc.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Mairon saw Melkor turn to him and fix him with a curious look. Mairon couldn't *see* the look. But he felt it, he knew it was there. Valiantly, he ignored it.

“Flatterer,” Melkor eventually said. “Are you not worried he'll call the police? You seemed to think Manwë would.”

Mairon made a sound, an unbothered *eh*. “I think it'll bother his customers more than him. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if he comes back and sees it and *likes it*. It turned out so flashy and festive—right up his alley.”

“Right,” said Melkor. “Except, I thought the idea was to piss him off, not—where are you going? Other way.”

Mairon switched the blinker on.

“Supermarket. I want nachos. Look, he's bound to get a complaint or two from someone or other, some uptight parent staying in room 104 with the big, shiny *fuck* over the door, claiming their kids are too young to be seeing things like that. And that's our revenge. Forcing him to handle the worst of customers.”

“Oh, you're brilliant.”

“And if that fails,” Mairon went on, “at the very least, we've freed up quite the chunk of space in the basement. We win.”

“You've thought this all out, haven't you?”

“Of course. You want anything else? I'll get nachos, microwave dinners, maybe? Let's not cook. We can watch *Saw* and—wine, I'll get wine—and have trash for dinner and suffer the resulting stomachaches in the morning.”

Mairon pulled the car in a brightly lit corner of the store parking lot. He bumped clumsily into the curb during his first attempt, then backed up and tried again. Second time was the charm.

Beside him, Melkor was quiet again. He stared straight ahead at the dashboard, unblinking, his fingers curled into tight fists in his lap.

Without a word, Mairon killed the engine and stepped outside into the freezing air. He slammed the door shut in the hope of waking Melkor from his trance—and when that didn't work, he walked around the back of the car and knocked on the passenger's side window.

Melkor startled and looked out at him in abject confusion.

Mairon nodded to the handle and Melkor obediently unlocked the door, opening it just wide enough for Mairon to poke his head inside.

“Were you thinking about fucking me in the car, just now?” he asked. “Naughty. Give me your wallet. I didn't take mine.”

“I—”

Melkor opened and closed his mouth, embarrassed at being caught red-handed, and promptly handed his wallet over.

“What was it that got you going? Me—what, being organized? Methodical?”

“Something like that,” Melkor admitted quietly.

Mairon scoffed. He met Melkor’s eyes and held his gaze for a handful of seconds; it was just long enough to tease, and just brief enough for Mairon’s own composure to remain intact.

“No worries,” he said as he withdrew himself from the car. “You can fuck me when we get back. Or—whichever way you want to play it.”

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In conclusion, the evening was a mind-blowing success.

Mairon’s phone was on silent, discarded halfway across the room, as he let Melkor back him up against the wall by the staircase, as his head was knocked back, Melkor’s fingers hot against his throat.

That being the case, the text he got from Maeglin went blissfully unnoticed until the next morning. Its contents, when finally revealed, were entirely unsurprising.

21/12, 8:33 PM

from: maeglin

shit i fucking love it thank you so much

home

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 1; August

The ever-growing hoard of Mairon's belongings taking up residence in Melkor's house was one of the telltale signs of a blossoming relationship. Within a few months, the odd shirt or pair of socks were joined by mugs, towels, even a decorative whisk that had somehow wormed its way across town and into the topmost kitchen drawer.

The smell of Mairon's shampoo lingered for hours in the bathroom and the scent of his vanilla coffee creamer hung in the air, sickly sweet, long after he slipped back into his car and drove off to work.

His habits made themselves at home. He left his dirty spoons inside dirty mugs in the sink, rinsed hastily to wash at a later time. He collected Melkor's dirty laundry from around the house to toss into the hamper as if it were his own. Some days, when it hadn't rained in a while, he filled a pitcher and went around watering the plants in the sunroom and out in the garden to keep the leaves and the flowers from losing their vibrance.

Mairon, however subconsciously, was making the place his home away from home. All that was missing was his dog and perhaps a few select articles of clothing. The rest he could live without. He cursed his own sentimentality as he thought it, and would never dare say it aloud, but he had everything he needed when he lay warm and comfortable in Melkor's embrace beneath the soft sheets. He kept his eyes closed, breathed evenly, focused on the way Melkor's fingertips dug into his bare skin as if to keep him close and keep him there forever.

He didn't need much to be happy, he decided. He needed *this*.

And if it came with a selection of unfortunate side effects, so be it.

Fairly quickly, the employees at the supermarket a few streets down stopped looking at Mairon as if he were a different species every time he popped in to restock on groceries on his way back to his apartment. The baristas at the Hobbit Hole no longer eyed him suspiciously whenever he paid for his order and stood around waiting in silence at the end of the bar. The people of the town had gotten used to him—and it was as good as it was bad.

Good, because as much as Mairon adored attracting attention to himself, the scrutinizing stares weren't exactly the sort of attention he craved. The idea was to be admired, to be desired, not inspected like a caged animal in a zoo. And as he became a regular, those stares began to die down, gradually withering away to nothing.

And bad, because the gossip mill fired up almost instantaneously. See, suddenly showing up in a small town was one thing, he supposed; it wasn't especially interesting. But showing up in a small town as the resident devil's new beau—that was something else entirely. Within days, the whispers began to circulate.

Bilbo mentioned it to Thorin, who mentioned it to however many members of his family, both

immediate and extended, who then mentioned it to just about everyone they knew and soon, everybody and their mothers were whispering about the eye candy that Melkor had managed to drag to their little corner of the world.

With how reclusive and terrifying Melkor was, any news concerning him and his relationships was automatically worth double. And as such, anyone he managed to bring home and keep around for more than a few days was worth looking into.

Thranduil eyed Mairon with distrust as he passed him in the dairy substitutes aisle of the supermarket and that same evening, discussed the matter with Bard over a lovely dinner of vegetarian pasta. Galadriel twitched as she brushed against Mairon on her way out of the cafe, as though his presence alone was causing her hair to stand on end.

Those two, at least, said nothing. Others were not quite as pleasant. Fëanor, for one, took to interrogating Mairon as they stood in the queue at the kebab shop, demanding answers to absurd questions—his first grade teacher's maiden name, if he liked his bread gluten-free, what his preferred brand of condoms was.

Still, that incident was easy enough to ignore and move on from. Mairon had better things to do with his time than dwell on questionable interactions with Melkor's even more questionable exes.

The most bizarre was yet to come.

That morning, Melkor left for work as usual. Mairon had the day off. He planned to spend it lingering about the house, lounging around and reveling in how right everything felt, how soft the sofa cushions were, before finally heading back to his apartment after noon to make sure it didn't fall into disrepair, that his dog didn't start howling at the walls and bothering the neighbors.

He spent more time at Melkor's now than he did at his own place, which was quite unlike him. Two months into a relationship was usually too early to talk of love and eternal devotion—or so Mairon had once thought. But his things were in the cupboards. The house keys in his pocket. Melkor's groceries on his shopping list. It terrified him, how certain he already was that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Melkor in this huge, cold house at the edge of this cramped, vicious town.

His thoughts swam in and out of focus as his coffee mug grew colder between his palms. He was at the kitchen table, watching the sunlight dance over the treetops out in the garden, cast speckled shadows across the floor at the far end of the room.

He was already so very fond of all of it—of waking up here, of the way the old pipes in the upstairs bathroom whined with each use, the way Melkor grabbed at his hair and tugged his head back to kiss at his neck, even of the odd folk music the old man next door blared at odd hours of the day.

Mairon's mind was made up. He belonged here. There was no doubt, not the smallest shadow of it.

But not everyone in the town was convinced.

The rapid knock at the front door came as a surprise—and not the fun kind. Mairon looked up at the entranceway and watched it for a few seconds, hoping that whoever it was would take the hint and be on their way.

When the knock came again, louder and more forceful this time, Mairon sighed and dragged himself upright.

As he neared the front of the house, he straightened his robe and combed his unbrushed hair as

neatly as he could over one shoulder. A reputation was a hard thing to cultivate and he couldn't risk tarnishing his before the townspeople even had the chance to assign him one.

He pulled the door open and was met with the sight of a woman, more or less his height, peering at him with a dangerous intensity. Her hair was a spectacular mop of dark curls cascading over her shoulders, her eyes dark and cat-like, narrowing the moment they met his.

“You’re the boyfriend,” she said—it was not a question.

“Melkor’s not here,” Mairon told her. “I can take a message. Who shall I say came calling?”

The woman held his gaze, then smiled, sharp and unnervingly amused.

“I’m not here for him. I’m here for you.”

With that somewhat threatening announcement, she brushed past Mairon and waltzed into the house like it was her own. Frozen in place by her sheer brazenness, Mairon let her pass.

When he finally closed the door and spun around, the woman was halfway between the living room and the kitchen, admiring the overgrown ficus that Melkor had somehow managed to keep alive for years on end despite his infamous lack of a green thumb.

“Look, you’re probably not a burglar—I don’t think they knock. I could do with an introduction, though.”

She tilted her head to look at him, her curious, bright eyes sliding over him, inspecting him.

“Thuringwethil,” she finally said. “I live two streets down, just past the bookshop. You must be Mairon.”

“News travels fast.”

“Yes, well. It’s not every day that our boogeyman brings home someone quite this intriguing. Usually it’s locals. It never lasts. It gets messy afterwards, coexisting like that. I suppose there were a few people from the outside world, but none of them ever stayed longer than the one night. *You* are something else. Don’t worry, I’m not interested,” she added hastily, when Mairon’s brows knit together in a look of concern. “I’m really not. In fact, my girlfriend is your boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend and personally, I’m not looking to make that situation any more complicated than it already is.”

Mairon blinked. His mind was struggling to keep up with the influx of information; he hadn’t even finished his first coffee yet.

“Right—just to get this straight. You’re here—you’re here why, exactly? To interrogate me, like Fëanor did, might I add, just last week, and feed the information back to your girlfriend? Is there some law I’m unaware of in this town against minding one’s own business?”

Thuringwethil scoffed. “I’m actually here to get a cup of coffee and get to know you. I solemnly promise to keep any and all information I might learn about you to myself.”

Mairon stared her down.

“No, I mean, you’re right,” she said, “I will tell my darling everything—but that’s only because there are no secrets between us. But she didn’t send me here. She’s visiting her cousin out of town and I am regrettably all alone and out of coffee. I see you’ve got a cup right there and are equally

lacking in company. Bruch? I cook a mean pancake.”

An hour passed, then two, and then three.

The facts were these:

One, the pancakes were truly out of this world. Two, Mairon felt quite certain that he and Thuringwethil were on the right track to becoming the closest of friends; this sort of casual camaraderie was not easy to come by. All in all, just because his significant other and hers had once tried their hand at romance and failed violently and spectacularly did not mean the two of them had to be enemies as well.

“No, listen,” Mairon told her insistently. He set his fork down with a clank for emphasis. “I am not in it for the money.”

Thuringwethil popped a blueberry into her mouth and leveled him with a suspicious look from across the table.

“He’d horrid,” she said. “I mean, I don’t know him very well, admittedly, but I hear he’s just the worst. What’s in it for you, if not the money?”

“I’d tell you, but the truthful answer contains vivid details of a particular bit of male anatomy that you’ve repeatedly said offends you. So, I’ll go with—his winning personality.”

Thuringwethil snorted.

“I like him,” Mairon said. It was a bit of an understatement, but he wasn’t about to spill his guts to someone he’d only just met. “We get along. That’s all there is to it. He and *your darling* didn’t get along and that’s why they’re no longer together. And it’s probably the reason she only tells you the nasty things about him, too.”

In the kitchen, the coffee machine beeped as it turned itself off, having sat in idle for too long.

“All right, let’s say I believe you,” Thuringwethil said, after an intense moment of deliberation. “In which case, I’m very happy for you. For him, less so, but that’s only because I’ve been taught to despise the ground he walks on. It’s a matter of solidarity. If the love of my life hates him, I ought to, too.”

“You’re in his house, drinking his coffee.”

“Yes, but I’m doing it with you and not him. The moment he comes back I’m making a run for it. Through the back, if you don’t mind—I feel like it might be quicker. Might just make it out unseen.”

“And until then?”

“Until then,” Thuringwethil said grandly, lifting her nearly empty mug in a toast, “I’m enjoying a wonderful morning with my new friend.”

Eventually, wilting under her insistent stare, Mairon gave in and brought his own mug to clink against hers. And that was that, their eternal bond cemented.

“Refill?”

“Oh, no. I’m already far too jittery for this hour of day.”

With that, Thuringwethil drained the remainder of her coffee and slid the mug to the side. She leaned forward on the tabletop, propped up on her elbows with her head cradled in her hands.

Mairon himself leaned back, stretching his legs out in front of him, settling them comfortably on one of the chairs on the opposite side of the table. He closed his eyes and tilted his head one way, then the other, working out the knots and kinks in his neck. He hadn't slept all that well. And the way Melkor had pinned him face down to the bed the previous night likely hadn't done him any favors either.

When he opened his eyes again, Thuringwethil was smiling at him fondly, the way a kid looked at their puppy curled up and sleeping, or the proud way a mother looked at her child crossing the podium in their graduation cap.

"What?" Mairon asked.

"I'm trying to understand," she admitted. "See, it's like, when Ungoliant and I moved in together, it took so much work. She dries her dishes one way and I do it differently. I didn't use to make my bed and hers looked straight out of a catalogue. You know—habits, likes and dislikes, so many disagreements about knick knacks, you would not believe. And then there's you. You look like you came with the house."

Whatever he'd expected her to say, that was not it. Mairon felt his expression soften, open up, melt into something startlingly sincere.

That was exactly it. He knew it well. He fit right in with Melkor's weird trinkets and scattered paperwork. He'd aligned himself to the ups and downs of life in the house, in the town, without breaking a sweat. It was perhaps absurd to think in terms of destiny, of *meant to be*, but that was the reality that Mairon now found himself in.

And if Thuringwethil could see it, Mairon mused, he hoped that Melkor could, too.

It was then, as *destiny* would have it, that keys jingled in the lock and the front door was pushed open.

Mairon dropped his feet from the chair with a heavy thud and whipped around to look at the nearest clock. The rapid passage of time had gone entirely unnoticed. That, and Melkor was home exceptionally early.

Thuringwethil glanced at the door, then back at Mairon. She sighed, deflated, and twisted her lips into a grimace as she pushed her chair back and stood.

Melkor stilled in the doorway, the grocery bags he held in one hand hanging loosely at his side.

"Infiltrating already?" he asked Thuringwethil. The look in his eyes was venomous as he held her gaze and closed the door with a violent slam.

"I'm leaving," she announced. As she crossed to the entranceway, she fixed Melkor with a smile, not an especially nice one, and held her hands up in mock surrender. "Hold your fire."

Melkor was not amused.

"As for you, Mairon," she said. "I shall be seeing you for lunch on Saturday."

Mairon frowned. He watched as Thuringwethil braced herself against the wall and struggled to squeeze her heel into the back end of her sneaker without untying it.

“I’ll come get you at one,” she went on.

“All right,” he agreed—it did not appear as though he had any say in the matter.

With that, she shot him one last grin, which she then redirected at Melkor, albeit with a bit more bite to it, and disappeared out the door.

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It wasn't that Melkor hated the woman. Thuringwethil was perfectly harmless, kind and bubbly despite her dark exterior. It was her choice of significant other that was the problem.

Mairon stood quietly beside the kitchen table. He didn't look ashamed at being caught fraternizing with the enemy, nor did he look uncomfortable in his relative state of undress, hair up and out of his face, feet bare against the cold floor.

And there was something about it, the way he just stood there like he *belonged*, that squeezed at Melkor's chest. His ribs felt too tight. It was too much. Mairon looked like he was *home* and Melkor desperately wished, in that moment, that he could keep him forever.

And it made him furious, all of a sudden, that his nosy neighbors were invading his sanctuary, interrogating his esteemed guest. No—not a *guest*. It wasn't the right word. It didn't feel right. Mairon was so much more than that. He could be so much more. Melkor had considered, more than once now, asking Mairon to move in with him—but the timing was never right. More than that, he feared Mairon's reaction. That he would say no, he didn't want to. That he would say it was all moving too quickly. He was afraid that Mairon would wake up one morning, change his mind, and vanish, never to be seen again.

Melkor was just about ready to drop to his knees at Mairon's feet and beg for his hand in marriage. But he couldn't—not yet. He could not allow himself to be so stupidly impulsive.

“You're staring,” said Mairon.

Melkor cleared his throat. He readjusted his grip on the grocery bags to and made his way over to the kitchen.

“You could have just, you know, not let her in,” he said. It was a neutral opener, less desperate than *I love you, you're beautiful, I want you to stay*. Moderation was key—and especially until he figured out if Mairon felt the same way about them, what they meant to each other, where they stood in the grand scheme of things.

“Wasn't an option. She invited herself in,” Mairon said. “I rather like her. It's a shame you hadn't introduced us earlier.”

“I think you know why that is.”

Mairon's shoulders jerked in a careless shrug.

It was silly, but Melkor found himself feeling childishly betrayed by that, by Mairon making friends with the friends of his enemies. It quickly passed. He would let it slide. Mairon could burn the entire house down in a failed attempt at cooking dinner and Melkor would let it slide—and that was a daunting thought. Mairon could get away with anything and Melkor would let him. He had Melkor's heart and soul wrapped snugly around his little finger. He could pull the strings and get what he wanted, every time, all the time, until the end of time.

Melkor turned to the counter to start putting away the groceries. It was a distraction, to help tuck his rampant, lovesick feelings away, too. He would save them for another day.

“She wasn’t bothering you?” he asked sincerely.

Mairon made a soft *uh-uh* sound. “Surprisingly, no,” he said. “I’ve never hit it off quite like that with anyone before.”

Melkor shot him an exaggeratedly outraged look over his shoulder.

“Oh, you don’t count,” Mairon said. “Don’t give me that look, you child. I mean, with a friend. I don’t have very many of those and she’s—it’s different.”

Melkor wasn’t convinced.

With an extremely endearing sigh of exasperation, Mairon’s expression softened into something gentle, almost pitying.

“Would you stop that?” he asked. “I’m not going to sleep with her. I’m really not looking for that sort of thing. At all. Not even close. And I can assure you, she’s not the least bit interested either.”

Melkor believed him, of course. Still, he teased. “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” Mairon said firmly.

“One hundred percent?” Melkor pushed.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m in a—we’re—”

Melkor broke into a smile. Mairon’s cheeks were flushed pink. It was far too easy to rile him up.

“You look precious when you’re flustered,” he told him.

“You’re awful,” Mairon fired back.

The words were harsh but his eyes were bright and amused, a warm, dark gold in the dim light of the kitchen. Melkor wanted to swoop in and kiss the bridge of his nose, his cheeks, hold him close and stay like that until they both ran out of strength to remain upright.

But there were important matters to attend to first.

Melkor spun around and pulled a takeout container from the last plastic bag—and promptly hissed at how hot it still was. He had an unfortunate habit of burning his hands on anything and everything.

“Now, don’t go calling me names or you won’t be getting any hot wings.”

Mairon’s eyes snapped to the countertop.

“I take it back and I apologize,” he quickly recited in a deadpan tone. He kept his eyes trained squarely on the box. “You’re not awful. You are wonderful beyond compare and humanity is lucky that you walk among us, *oh, great one.*”

“Well, in that case, you are more than welcome to help yourself.”

To anything.

Melkor managed to keep that part to himself—for now. The invitation did not extend solely to the takeout. Mairon could help himself to the food in Melkor's cupboards, the soap on his sink, the sunbed in his backyard, the money in his many bank accounts, to the air in his lungs, and whatever else his heart desired. He could take whatever Melkor had, every fiber of his being, and he could do with it what he wished.

And Melkor would let him.

comes and goes

Chapter Notes

cw for depictions of a severe depressive episode

timeline: year 10; June

It was one of those days. Melkor knew this, instinctively, the moment he crossed the threshold and entered the house.

The air outside was sticky. The heat wasn't stifling, but there was no wind and the humidity made it almost unbearable. The short distance from his car to the front porch had dragged on forever and he was thrilled to finally shut the front door behind himself.

He'd gotten stuck at work for hours. Normally he would shirk his duties, let his employees handle whatever nonsense needed handling. He would go home, take a cold shower, and throw himself onto the bed in a heap, forgoing clothes entirely.

But on occasion, his rare responsible streak shone through and he stuck around. He was in charge, after all, and he had to play the role every once in a while, lest anyone forget it.

And so he'd remembered to renegotiate a multimillion dollar contract, at the price of forgetting Mairon's birthday. By the time he'd realized this, the sun was low in the sky, glowing red through the windows of his office like a terrible omen.

They didn't celebrate birthdays, the same way they didn't particularly celebrate holidays or anniversaries or whatever the hell else people used as an excuse to get drunk and make bad decisions.

But he'd forgotten, and he'd forgotten to call, and he'd gotten so dearly tangled up in his work that it had been too late to drop everything and run out the door. It wasn't until he'd sorted the mess out that he had allowed himself to breathe and get in his car to drive home in deafening silence.

The idea was to sneak inside, creep up behind Mairon and squeeze the life out of him. To wrap his arms around him and drag kisses down the side of his neck until he squirmed out of Melkor's grasp and turned around to properly meet his lips. To celebrate the way *they* did.

But it was one of those days and Melkor's heart sank the moment he set foot in the house.

Inside, it was warmer than usual. The air conditioning was on but the back door was open. The heat burrowed its way in like a parasite.

He crossed the living room, paused in the kitchen to grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator. He wasn't going to be any good to anyone dehydrated and delirious.

Mairon was sitting on the porch with his back to the door. His bare feet hung off the edge, dragging on the grass below. He was dangerously still; the only sign that he was still alive and breathing was the steady cloud of cigarette smoke hovering over him.

Melkor stepped out, deliberately making his movements loud enough as not to startle him. He sat down with an exhausted grunt and set his bottle down between the two of them.

Mairon's dog, curled around himself on the grass below, perked up at the sound. He eyed Melkor for a brief moment, then returned to his comfortable position, rearranging his paws one over the other.

"Isn't that a bit counterproductive?" Melkor asked. It was as neutral of an opener as he could think of on such short notice.

Mairon blinked numbly. The fingers holding up his cigarette were trembling.

"What?"

"The face mask, and the—" Melkor trailed off, motioning vaguely towards the cigarette. "One poisons you and the other is the antidote, is that what this is?"

Mairon huffed in vague amusement, but otherwise said nothing.

These were the worst days. And they were growing more common.

Mairon would say nothing. For hours he would sit—whether outside, smoking until the air grew thick with it, on the couch with a book in his lap, eyes open but unseeing, or anywhere else around the house, somehow living and dead, all at once.

He'd stay awake at night. Melkor would feel his breaths growing shaky, worryingly erratic, as he lay beside him. Mairon often wouldn't sleep for days until his body shut down without his permission and he stumbled onto the couch or the bed, or wherever else, sliding into oblivion against his will.

Melkor felt as though it was his responsibility to do something about it, though logically he knew there was nothing to be done. The episodes would go away on their own and Mairon would smile again, laugh again, be his delightfully cruel self again, terrifying some kid into a crying mess for taking the last box of granola cereal at the supermarket. It would be all right for days, entire weeks, sometimes, until it wore off and another one of the bad patches rolled around.

It was hard to reach Mairon when he got like this, but Melkor knew he had to try to get him to talk. Without it, he'd wither away in silence for ages, unravelling further still.

"I got caught up with work," he said—to get a conversation going. "A developer pulled out just hours before the project was meant to go live and we had to find a suitable replacement. I lost track of time. I'm sorry."

He paused and looked at Mairon. His face was unnervingly blank as he lifted his shaking hand to his lips and took a drag from his cigarette, so deep that it made Melkor's throat itch just looking at it.

"I forgot your birthday," he added. He hoped the confession would elicit a reaction. Any reaction, anything, to stir something in Mairon's empty, glazed stare.

Mairon said nothing. He exhaled, surrounding himself with a nauseating wave of smoke.

"Mairon?"

At that, he finally turned. His head quirked ever so slightly to the side, a hesitant jerk of muscle,

and he looked over at Melkor like he'd only just realized he was beside him.

“What?”

“Did you forget, too?” Melkor asked—amused, but cautious, *terrified*. “That it's your birthday?”

Mairon's brows furrowed, but his stare remained impassive, as though the physical reaction, his forehead scrunching into a frown, was happening against his volition.

“I—” he started, stammered, then stopped. He looked up at Melkor with a strangely humored, self-deprecating twist to his features. It was better than the emptiness. “I forgot. I'm not—I haven't been thinking clearly today.”

It was the longest sentence he'd said thus far and Melkor's heart was suddenly pounding desperately in his chest. This was a lifeline he could tug at to drag Mairon out of the depths. One sentence, then another, each longer than the first, then paragraphs, then he'd put out the damn cigarette and fold himself into Melkor's embrace in tears. Tears were better. The detachment was worse.

“It's early enough to make up for it,” Melkor mused. “If I'm not mistaken, there's Prosecco in the fridge. Or—I could drive down and get something less disgusting and be back in a few minutes.”

Mairon made a low sound of disagreement, then followed up with a soft, “No.”

Melkor swallowed thickly but said nothing. It was slippery, the precipice over which he was treading. One wrong move, a push too harsh, and Mairon would shut down and curl in on himself much like his dog, and make it even harder to reemerge later.

“No, I—”

Melkor blinked. Mairon was talking, *willingly* following up on whatever it was he wanted to get across. This was good.

Then Mairon twitched, suddenly, like he'd startled himself awake. He cleared his throat and looked at the cigarette burning between his fingers like he was seeing it for the first time. He made a low sound, a hum of displeasure.

With a flourish, he took one last drag and put the cigarette out on the porch, pressing it firmly into the old wood. It was an uncharacteristic disregard for propriety and it sent a cold shiver rolling down Melkor's spine.

“I don't want to drink,” Mairon said finally.

“At all?”

Mairon hummed in confirmation.

“Never?”

“No.”

“You used to.”

“I don't now,” Mairon snapped—then took a shaky breath and lowered his voice. “I don't now. I don't like how it makes everything too quiet. I don't want that, that haze. I just—I need to be in control.”

Melkor watched him warily.

Mairon looked down at his palms, folded in his lap. “I don’t want to lose control.”

He fell quiet and for a moment it felt like he’d delivered a closing statement, like he’d bowed to the masses and the curtain was sliding closed. There was a strange finality to his words and Melkor found himself dizzy with uncertainty. Of one thing he was sure: Mairon wasn’t really talking about the alcohol.

A car whistled past in the street out front and the echo of it danced in the hollow air around them, breaking the silence.

“Of what?” Melkor finally asked, for the sake of knowing.

He wanted to know where he stood, where they both did. He wanted to know what Mairon was feeling, why he was feeling it, or whether he felt anything at all.

“Me,” Mairon said. It was hardly above a whisper. There was a broken edge to it, like something deep down had shattered, splintered into a million tiny pieces. “Myself. My—I don’t want to lose myself.”

The cold feeling in Melkor’s chest grew until he had to clench his hands into fists to stop them from shaking. Mairon wasn’t detached, he wasn’t deathly silent for lack of feeling. He felt *too much*. He was terrified of losing his grip on himself and everything around him. That terror went bone deep, it was larger than life, and for a sickening second Melkor felt like was suffocating him too.

“You won’t,” he promised Mairon. The words were impossibly difficult to choke out. “You’re not going to fall apart. You’re stronger than that.”

“And if I’m not?”

“You are. I know you, and—” Melkor closed his mouth, opened it, and closed it again. He couldn’t put into words what he knew to be facts. He just *knew*. “—I know you.”

When Mairon looked at him, then, there was a glimmer of something desperate and frightening, something *unhinged* in his eyes. Melkor felt his blood turn to ice in his veins.

“Do you, now?” Mairon asked. The cold, steady tone was unlike him—dangerous, amused, like the notion of Melkor *knowing him* was entertaining, all around absurd, a fickle fantasy.

He then blinked rapidly and looked down. At his hands, then up at the expanse of the sky illuminated by the last dregs of daylight, then back over at Melkor. He blinked—once, then twice, like he was waking from a nightmare.

“You do, don’t you.”

Melkor uncurled his hands, feeling the reddened indentations his fingernails left across his palms.

“Do you want to come back inside?” he suggested. It was quiet, tentative. “It’s late.”

Mairon looked away from him, at nothing in particular.

“I’m so tired,” he said simply, as if that was explanation enough for everything. “I’ve not done anything today and yet I can’t find the strength to sit up straight. It’s all—so hard. You know, I’m

going gray. A bit. Have you noticed? At the back of my neck.”

He laughed at his own observation, a sound caught somewhere between self-pity and hysterical abandon.

“Well, that’s going to do a number on your narcissism,” Melkor quipped. It was risky, joking about any of this. Silently, he hoped it did not misfire.

“You’re hilarious,” Mairon told him. “Help me up.”

Taken aback by the request, Melkor remained motionless, watching Mairon watch him.

“You said we’re going inside. Help me up.”

It was like a switch had been flicked and Mairon was very nearly himself again. There was still the strange, manic tinge to his voice and the fact that he was delirious enough with exhaustion to be unable to stand up on his own—but aside from that, life had flooded back into his expression. There was something fond and familiar in the expectant way he was looking at Melkor.

“Right,” Melkor said eloquently.

He pushed himself upright. He left his bottle of water behind. He could get another one; this one in particular didn’t require his immediate attention.

Mairon, on the other hand, did.

Melkor walked around him, looming over his back like a malevolent angel and without warning, slid his hands beneath Mairon’s underarms, hauling him to his feet like one would a disobedient child kicking and screaming in the toy aisle.

Mairon made an incoherent sound of surprise. He swiveled around on unsteady feet and peered up at Melkor in mild disbelief.

“I really don’t weigh anything to you, do I?”

“It’s like holding a squirming kitten,” Melkor said, and Mairon scowled. It was a good look, infinitely better than the emptiness. Melkor finally felt like he could breathe again.

Still, there was something that kept nudging at him, deep down, a horrid suspicion that it was all a ruse. He couldn’t quite tell if Mairon was faking it, pretending to be all right now to cease Melkor’s worries.

Even so, it took effort to put on a mask like that—and as long as Mairon kept trying, as long as he refused to give up, give in completely, it was a good sign.

Mairon swayed then and Melkor reached out to his waist to keep him balanced. He could feel Mairon trembling, like his body was struggling to remain awake and alert after so many hours of inactivity, let alone several long, sleepless nights.

“I’m sorry,” Mairon murmured.

He wasn’t talking about the stumble, Melkor could tell. Whenever he came up to the surface, out of that haze, shaking and gasping for air, he would apologize.

“You don’t have to be,” Melkor told him.

It wasn't his fault. It was never his fault that his mind was doing this to him, unraveling, twisting and warping reality until he could do no more than relinquish control and stare blankly into the distance.

Mairon huffed out a humorless laugh.

“It’s getting old. All of this is exhausting, you know, trying to keep everything under control. Life,” he said, with a sharp smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, “is exhausting.”

“It certainly is.”

Mairon kept quiet for a moment, then said, “I’d kiss you now, but I’ve got all this all over my face and—it would do you good, it’s a good mask—but I imagine you’re opposed to getting all sticky.”

“I don’t mind sticky. You reek of nicotine, though,” Melkor said somberly. He pursed his lips together in apology, adding in a little shrug for dramatic effect.

It wasn’t that he hated the smell. It could be relaxing or even intoxicating, depending on the time of day and the way Mairon looked at him whilst he took a drag. He even plucked the cigarettes out of Mairon’s fingers every so often and stole them for himself when the mood arose.

But in this moment—he was being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn.

And he knew that Mairon knew that. With a half-hearted roll of his eyes, Mairon stepped away from Melkor to head back into the house. He kept his hand braced on the wall, on the off chance his knees buckled beneath him and sent him crashing to the floor.

Melkor shot a look at Wolf, who was now sleeping on the grass, and at the water bowl at the edge of the porch to make sure it was full for the night.

He then turned to follow Mairon inside.

“Brush your teeth and maybe I’ll reconsider,” he said.

Mairon barked out a genuine laugh. “With all due respect, dearest, fuck you. I’m going to bed.”

Melkor closed the porch door behind them, leaving just enough of a gap for the dog to shove it open the rest of the way if he wanted to scramble back inside in the middle of the night.

“Unrelated to the kissing thing—you still ought to brush your teeth,” he pointed out.

Melkor trailed upstairs after Mairon, feeling his way through the darkness.

“You know what, I won’t. To spite you. I’ll curl up around you and stick my face in your neck and breathe all over you.”

And in that moment, Melkor really couldn't help himself.

“I love you,” he said, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he even had a chance to stop them. That happened, sometimes, when his heart felt so full it threatened to burst out of his ribcage.

“I know that,” Mairon said. He paused by the entranceway to the bathroom. “And I love you, too, but I’m still not brushing my teeth.”

“I know that,” Melkor echoed. “I’ll survive.”

Mairon's lips quirked up, amused. And with that, Melkor's already remarkable restraint crumbled.

He reached out with both hands, settling them on Mairon's cheeks, and pulled him into a kiss, sticky mask and all. Mairon grinned against his lips, satisfied with having won the game. His hands came up, fingers digging into Melkor's forearms. There was still something tense about him, made evident by the tremors coursing through him, but less so now, like he was trying now to desperately control it, to keep it under wraps.

Finally, they broke apart.

"Am I that irresistible?" Mairon inquired innocently.

And that tense *something* was there in his eyes as well, distant and hollow, bubbling insidiously underneath the surface. But Mairon was pushing against it, fighting it with all he had. And that was all that mattered. That was all Melkor could hope for.

"Don't flatter yourself," he said. "I'm only making an exception because it's your damn birthday."

from now on

Chapter Notes

disclaimer: this is not how the law works

timeline: year 8; October

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

Manwë was a smart guy. He figured it out.

There was a traitor in their midst. The realization struck him one fine morning and the proof was easy enough to come by once he knew what he was looking for. He swallowed down his disappointment, made the tough call, and had Mairon marched out of Valinor in handcuffs.

Melkor, in turn, surprised everybody by turning out to be a noble kind of person. It was the last thing anyone expected him to do—take the blame. He took all of it, every last scrap.

He pulled a few strings, told a few lies, twisted the truth to suit his narrative. In his version, Mairon had hardly been involved at all. Whatever he'd done, he'd done solely because Melkor had coerced him into it, and certainly not because they were madly in love and happily married. That little tidbit never saw the light of day, Melkor made sure of it. Sacrifices had to be made for Mairon's sake, to keep him out of an already unsavory story.

To the world, it was to be clear as day that the entire scheme had been of Melkor's design and nobody else's.

And so he took the fall.

Then came the three years of solitude. The sentence was remarkably short given the transgression, but money and power opened up doors that lesser men could only dream of.

Still, it was lonely, and it dragged on.

Melkor counted the days, going about his routine numbly, automatically, mind set on two things and two things alone—revenge (well, *possibly*, he hadn't quite decided on his retribution yet), and Mairon. The former paled in comparison to the latter.

And Mairon counted the nights, unable to sleep in the big, empty house. Everything was far too quiet, hollow and suffocating, and it felt as though the malevolent shadows dancing across the walls and ceilings grew bolder and more relentless with each passing hour.

The leadership of Utumno fell to Mairon.

The official story had to be manipulated, of course. As far as the public was concerned, he was an interim somebody-or-another, random as they came, plucked from a pile of uptight bureaucrats in three piece suits. A select few, however, their lawyers and those tasked with keeping the truth under wraps, knew the sordid details—who Mairon was, what he and Melkor had done, and that none of it could ever come out.

Dealings with Manwë and his self-righteous posse were designated to hoards of legals teams and them alone. Mairon's involvement remained a securely protected secret as he fostered Utumno's power from behind the curtain. Again, what Manwë didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Everything was taken care of, carefully constructed to the smallest detail. And it was decided that upon Melkor's return, Mairon would officially take up his mantle as second in command, Valinor be damned—*finally*, thank you very much, goodbye and good riddance.

Eventually, there came the reunion. Mairon came home exhausted, toed his shoes off, then looked up and froze in his tracks. Melkor was lounging on the couch with a cup of coffee in hand—good coffee, he'd missed his beloved coffee—and a truly bright smile upon his face. Mairon barely managed to choke down the hysterical laugh bubbling in his throat. His legs moved of their own accord. The rest, as they say, was history. Three years was a nauseatingly long time, after all.

And in the end, many years and some months later, when everything was settled and all debts were paid, Melkor came back to work.

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The lobby was nearly empty, massive and imposing, the walls and floors and windows shining, glistening in the morning sunlight, polished to the nth degree. It was achingly familiar. It was his life's work, built up from scratch, dreamed up and made a reality. Nobody was going to take it from him and nobody, least of all Manwë, was ever going to be involved in his business again.

But, of course, nothing was ever going to be exactly the same. Not really.

The first oddity was the receptionist. He finished his telephone call, set down the receiver and looked up. His eyes landed on Melkor, narrowing for single millisecond. Recognition dawned, then, and he slumped back in his seat, breathing out a full-bodied, tearful sigh of relief.

Nobody had ever been *relieved* to see Melkor before; he usually brought about quite the opposite sort of reaction.

He was required to pick up his identification card, for the sake of formality, and to sign for a thick, overflowing folder of legal paperwork that the leadership of Valinor had sent over earlier that day. The receptionist handed it all over with disconcerting glee and Melkor did his best to ignore and forget that entire interaction. He had far too many things on his mind to worry about one malfunctioning employee.

The short journey to his office was uneventful, save for the thrilled smile he received from the head of HR as she boarded the elevator and stood excitedly at his side. He ignored her, too. She disembarked a few floors before he did, leaving him perplexed by the cheerful, "It's good to have you back, sir," she offered before disappearing down the corridor to her own lair.

Something was evidently amiss.

The two cowering interns he passed on his walk down the hall were no different. They sensed his presence and their backs straightened, their expressions brightened, and though they greeted him briefly and respectfully, their voices shook with unsurpassed relief.

Relief. He was properly tired of it already and confused beyond measure. He was one strange interaction away from grabbing the nearest bystander by the shoulders and shaking a sensible explanation out of them.

He reached his office and paused in the doorway—and just like that, it all became clear.

Everything was just as he remembered it. The long row of windows along the back wall was intact, the floors unblemished, all the knick-knacks and bits and pieces he'd accumulated over the years in their rightful spots. His desk stood as it always did at the far right end of the room, dark and intimidating, the epicenter of his might.

And behind it, sharp eyed and utterly menacing, sat Mairon.

He was in the middle of a meeting with one of the project managers—a tall, burly man known by all for his rough demeanor and quick temper. Yet there he was, hands in his lap, on the verge of tears.

Melkor hardly listened to what was being said. Instead he stood, transfixed, watching Mairon tilt his head to the side, regarding the terrified man with a cold stare. There was something inhumanly captivating about him in that moment—hair swept across one shoulder, flowing like a wave of molten lava over the unblemished crisp cotton of his black shirt. He was absently toying with one of the rings on his hand, adding to his air of disinterest and abject disappointment at the offending employee's groveling. He was in his element and it was *glorious*.

That, Melkor realized, was the source of everyone's relief. Three years with Mairon at the helm and Melkor was now downgraded to a secondary threat.

The company was running smoothly—thriving, putting it mildly. Whatever structural changes Mairon had implemented brought about truly impressive results. Whatever he'd done on an interpersonal level, however, to leave employees shaking with sobs in the face of his wrath, was something else entirely. He'd taken control, taken up the mantle in Melkor's absence and crushed any doubts anyone might have had about him. It was alluring, intoxicating, watching him flourish in the position he was always meant to have. He wasn't a simpering, sycophantic underling. He belonged at the top.

It took what felt like hours for Mairon's eyes to finally flick to the side and catch sight of Melkor hovering in the doorway.

His expression softened at a speed that should not have been humanly possible, the harsh lines of his glare making way for a small smile.

The whimpering project manager faltered and followed Mairon's line of sight, craning his head over his shoulder to hazard a peek at the door. Predictably, he wheezed with *relief* at the sight of his former (and now—blessedly—reinstated) boss.

Melkor very nearly rolled his eyes.

A minute passed like that, in silence, punctuated by the occasional snuffle from the distraught employee, who was now staring at the floor at Melkor's feet as though he would be granted mercy and allowed to leave the office in one piece, unscathed, rather than eviscerated on the spot.

Then, Mairon's smile vanished as suddenly as it'd appeared and he cleared his throat. The man swiveled back around to face him, panicked.

"We're cutting this short, it seems. Just fix the flaw—or we reconvene tomorrow. Let's hope we don't have to."

With a frantic nod and tense word of gracious farewell, the man scampered from the room as quickly as his body allowed it, a thankful whimper escaping his lips as he passed Melkor and disappeared down the corridor.

Mairon leaned back in his chair with a smirk.

Melkor stepped inside and closed the door. He crossed the short distance to the desk and dropped the accursed folder of legal nonsense onto it with a dull thud, then folded himself into the chair the employee had just vacated and arched an eyebrow in amusement.

“I see you’ve raised hell.”

Mairon mirrored his expression. “Somebody had to.”

“It’s a good look on you.”

“What is?” Mairon asked.

“Power,” Melkor said simply. “It suits you.”

Mairon narrowed his eyes, trying to deduce whether or not Melkor was showering him with compliments because he meant it, or because he wanted something. It was often hard to tell.

In the end, he clicked his tongue and made a face akin to a grimace.

“It’s a shame then, that I must relinquish full control of the company back to you, my lord,” he announced theatrically, as was his forte.

Melkor considered that for a moment.

“Actually,” he started—and Mairon fell impossibly still. Melkor scoffed at that, amused. “No, no. Come now, don’t get your hopes up, I’m not stepping down. I can’t do that. But I did promise you the world. And standing there, watching you tear that man to pieces, reminded me of that promise. So, here’s what I propose. I remain the figurehead and the executive power. Notable decisions are made by me and me alone. Everything else is yours—day-to-day operations, employee affairs, jurisdiction over all the departments. Everybody answers to you and you answer to nobody but me. In theory, at least. In practice, you’re perfectly capable of swaying me and my rulings should you put your mind to it.”

Without missing a beat, Mairon corrected him, “Put my mind to it? All I need to do is smile at you and you fall to your knees.”

Melkor ignored that because it was true. “Is that a yes?”

“It’s a yes,” Mairon said firmly, instantly, at last cutting whatever frayed threads might have remained between him and his past life. “Do I get an office or merely a meager desk at the foot of your throne?”

“Please, I promised you the best office. And the best desk, of course. A sturdy one,” he said suggestively, leaving no room for Mairon to question the implications. Then, on a more serious note, he added, “One floor down, the big one with the glass doors. I’ll have the current COO reassigned and relocated. To the best of my knowledge he hasn’t been operating at the height of his skills for some time now.”

“I can certainly attest to that.”

Mairon couldn’t bring himself to feel bad for anybody who was being shoved aside to make room for him. He was getting what he wanted, finally tossing away the persona he’d worn for so long under Manwë’s watchful eye. He was going to rule at Melkor’s side.

He'd considered, of course, the rumors and repercussions that would arise should everyone discover the true nature of his and Melkor's relationship. And he'd decided that he didn't care. He had the skills, the knowledge, and the expertise to take the reins. If anyone dared to challenge him on that front, he'd leave them broken and begging for forgiveness.

"Then, that's settled," Melkor announced. "The formalities can wait until tomorrow. Now, I've got a job for you."

Mairon made a disapproving sound and leaned forward. "I wouldn't advise rushing into anything so quickly. I've got three years worth of reports to brief you on. I restructured half your departments, and you ought to be shown around and introduced to the new heads. Then—no, and also, there's an entire crate of petty legal documents from your brother in the second conference room that makes that little folder of yours look like a speck of dust. There's a lot to go over—it would be rash to delegate new responsibilities before wrapping your head around everything that's transpired in your absence."

Melkor patiently waited for Mairon to finish his grand monologue. It was quite the sight, seeing him so organized and authoritative, taking responsibility for a million things at once and executing them all wonderfully.

At the same time, it was quite entertaining, listening to him rant, considering Melkor had been meaning to ask him the very same thing.

"That's what I meant," he explained, "when I said I had a job for you."

Mairon huffed. "You could have just interrupted and spared me the trouble, then."

"And missed out on listening to your voice? Why, I would never. I've missed it too much."

This time around, Mairon was dead certain the oodles of compliments were heading in a very specific direction, though he was not yet able to discern what that direction was, or why Melkor was heading there.

There was only one way to find out—Mairon had to follow the path and see where it led him.

Melkor pushed himself upright with a hand on each armrest and got to his feet.

"After you," he announced, gesturing with a grand sweep of his arm. "Show me around."

The door closed behind them with an soft click as they left the office behind and started down the long hallway.

The day's trend of turning heads and inquisitive glances continued. The red terror of Utumno was gracing the masses with his presence, now with Melkor, dark and sinister, at his side. Though they made an imposing pair, many of the looks they attracted belonged to employees who visibly couldn't decide whether they should cower before Mairon or nod with respect (*relief*) towards Melkor. Further still, there were those whose eyes narrowed at the sight of their two bosses side by side in perfect harmony. Mairon's lips were quirked up in that sincere way he only ever smiled in Melkor's presence and the two of them seemed far more at ease with each other than *allegedly* recently-acquainted professional colleagues had any right to be.

People were bound to start talking. The corporate rumor mill was almost as abhorrent as that of their sickening little neighborhood.

If their casual touches and fleeting, blatantly lovesick looks didn't give it away, something else

would. Melkor's money was on the wedding rings. Someone was going to figure it out eventually. They were a clever bunch, his employees.

"We're going to start with accounting," Mairon was saying. "I fired the director two months into my despotic rule, when I cross-referenced his reports and discovered he'd been siphoning money into an offshore account for the last five years. That's all taken care of now, don't you worry. But it is rather changed up down there, and there are a few more recent things I would like to run by you while we're at it. So, accounting, and we work our way up from there."

Melkor could do little more than nod and trail after Mairon in agreeable silence. He had it all figured out. He had everything under control, each and every intricate moving piece of the vast enterprise filed neatly away in his beautiful, brilliant brain.

The secretary of the creative department jumped to her feet at an alarming speed upon seeing Melkor and greeted him as though he were a victorious king recently returned from war. Mairon glared at her.

Two doors down, Melkor's appearance garnered the same reaction.

And again in IT, and again a floor below.

It seemed Mairon had put the fear of god into every living soul in the building and Melkor, their once feared leader, was now a blessing in comparison, a balm to soothe the horrors they'd gone through. Against all odds, Melkor found that he greatly enjoyed it, watching everyone shuffle out of Mairon's way, seeing how afraid they were of his very shadow. Melkor couldn't look away. He was proud, and he was far too aroused than he had any right to be innocently walking the corridors of his empire.

Mairon, on the other hand, was growing irritable.

"They fawn over you like you've just singlehandedly saved the human race from extinction."

Or maybe he was simply jealous of all the attention Melkor was getting. Not that he craved all that attention for himself—rather that he wanted Melkor to belong to him and him alone.

"I'm their long-lost boss," Melkor reasoned.

Mairon's face twisted. "And what does that make me? Disposable?"

"Their worst nightmare," Melkor assured him—because he always knew what to say to pull Mairon out of a mood.

Sure enough, Mairon worked his jaw for a moment, then said, "I'll take it."

Melkor allowed himself a genuine laugh, earning a confused glance from a passing pair of employees. He wasn't about to withhold his affections, gossip be damned. The rumors were going to flood the building by sundown anyway—he might as well give them a sturdy push in the right direction.

"Let them celebrate my glorious return for a bit," he went on, in case Mairon was not yet convinced. "They'll get over it soon enough."

"Let's hope so. They can't afford to be distracted."

"You actually are a tyrant."

Mairon took that as a compliment as well, because of course he did.

“Thank you. There are four new staff members in legal. We’re going there next.”

The adventure ended in the second conference room, where a stack of heavy cardboard boxes resided in teetering piles, one on top of another. Manwë’s vindictive underlings were utterly heartless.

Mairon stepped inside first and walked to the table in the center of the room to shuffle through the most crucial paperwork. He was nothing if not meticulous and had laid it all out earlier that day in preparation for Melkor’s imminent arrival.

Melkor followed him inside, pulling the heavy door shut behind himself.

It was a modestly sized room, with tall windows and bare walls, and the only conference room in the building that was not fashioned with glass doors. Mairon had chosen well, considering the documents now housed within its four walls were of a severely sensitive nature and had to remain shrouded from prying eyes.

Mairon stood at the edge of the desk, flipping through a thick manila folder. Stalking up behind him, Melkor rested his hand on the small of Mairon’s back in a gentle, familiar gesture as he peered over his shoulder to glance at the paperwork.

“Must we do this today?” he muttered. “We have all of eternity to get this done. Manwë deserves to wait.”

There were better things to do than sit in tiring silence in a claustrophobic room with nothing but bitter coffee and each other’s exhausted sighs for company.

Melkor tugged Mairon closer, fingertips digging into his side, and pressed a soft kiss to his temple.

Mairon’s whole demeanor shifted in response. In addition to always knowing what to say, Melkor always knew what to *do* to soften Mairon’s composure and melt him down into an affectionate pile of goo. He visibly relaxed, leaning into the embrace. Yes, he was born to lead, to be at the top of the hierarchy at Melkor’s side, but even kings and their lieutenants deserved to take a moment to unwind every so often, behind closed doors, to shake their authoritative personas and just *breathe*.

That scrap of idyllic bliss was short lived.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Mairon said ruefully, to Melkor’s dismay, “but there are a few forms here that need to be filled out and sent over to Valinor by the end of the day. It’s the fine print, easy to overlook, but disastrous should you fail to comply. They’re doing this on purpose, trying to get you to slip up. They’ve already torn you down and they’re still not satisfied, the bastards.”

Melkor’s lip curled in displeasure. It was an unfortunate setback, but not entirely catastrophic.

“The day is young. We can do it later.”

Mairon set the folder down gingerly and glanced up, gracing Melkor with an expectant look. “And what do you propose we do now?”

Melkor supposed he could *describe* his intentions in vivid detail—but actions spoke louder than words.

Mairon barely had the time to register the dangerous flash of Melkor's smirk before he was being spun around, Melkor's fingers digging into his hips hard enough to bruise. Mairon's back hit the edge of the table with a sharp jolt that sent an unbidden gasp slipping past his lips.

Melkor hovered over him with a sudden unbridled hunger and Mairon's eyes swept up to meet his for split second. Just the briefest of moments was enough to realize that *okay*, this was happening now, they were going ahead with something this rash and irresponsible. And just as swiftly, Melkor ducked his head down and closed the distance between them, drawing Mairon into an impassioned kiss, and whatever reservations Mairon might have had about the whole situation immediately dissolved. His hands moved of their own accord, gravitating to the fabric of Melkor's shirt, twisting into it, holding on as if he were a lifeboat in a raging ocean.

It was easy to give into that, to forget that anything else existed besides Melkor's touch, and that roiling, obliterating heat that seared up inside him. But even then, a traitorously rational part of Mairon blazed through. He needed some solid answers before he could allow himself to get fucked senseless in a relatively public setting in broad daylight.

The fingers that had been grasping desperately at Melkor were now pushing him away.

Mairon nudged the two of them apart and with a curious tilt to his head stared up at Melkor, who was breathing hard, eyes glistening and lips parted. Despite the unceremonious severance, Melkor's hands remained on Mairon, stubbornly unwilling to break contact. He wasn't about to give up this easily.

"All right, what gives?" Mairon demanded, voice unsteady despite his best intentions. "What is it? You're absurdly affectionate today."

Melkor paused and his lips quirked up, as though something about Mairon's perfectly reasonable question had thoroughly amused him. He then leaned in close, and closer still, pressing a kiss to the arch of Mairon's cheekbone, then another to his hairline, before whispering in his ear, low and dramatic like he was telling him a deeply personal secret.

"It's our anniversary."

And then he pulled back so suddenly it startled Mairon, who found himself stunned into complete silence not only by Melkor's words, but his hasty retreat as well.

He blinked numbly and gaped openly at Melkor while he took his precious time to arrange the appropriate response in his mind. Something loud and nagging in the back of his mind told him it was true. The month was right, and the day—he'd been so overwhelmed with work that he'd lost track of time. He hadn't realized what *day* it was.

Finally, he said, "Fuck."

Melkor huffed a laugh. He wasn't upset—for whatever unfathomable reason. His grin was still in place and the way he was looking at Mairon was so fond and painfully endearing, like it was *funny* that Mairon had gotten so immersed in the work he was doing that everything else ceased to exist.

"Fuck," Mairon said again, louder this time. Distress settled over his features as he stumbled over his eloquent words. "Fuck, I forgot. I didn't—fuck."

"Stop that," Melkor admonished him. "It's fine. You've been all alone, neck deep in grueling work for three years. I know that feeling, when one day smears into the next, and weeks become months, and every once in a while you snap out of that monotony, experience this little burst of clarity, and

can't quite remember where or when you are. You're drained. I don't expect you to remember every little thing."

Mairon looked dismayed. "Little? That's not—this isn't little."

Melkor's grasp on Mairon's hips tightened and he allowed himself to lean forward once more, feeling a spark of warmth bloom in his chest as Mairon welcomed the touch despite his earlier reservations. He laid a kiss on Mairon's forehead, chaste and fleeting, if only to cut short whatever panicked apologies might have been brewing in his throat.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "You're here now, and I'm here now, and that's all we need. We're alone in this big, empty room, and there's plenty of hours left in the day to see to these absurd responsibilities." He tilted his head in the direction of the paperwork. "I'm sure if we put out heads together we'll come up with a worthwhile way to pass the time."

Melkor pulled back far enough to observe Mairon's reaction, to see that raging, burning spark ignite once more, take hold of him and hurl caution to the wind. Almost as an afterthought, he inched the slightest bit closer so that his hips were flush with Mairon's.

As expected, it was not long before Mairon's hands, motionless until now against Melkor's chest, jerked upwards, tugging roughly at the nape of his neck to haul him down to his height—and Melkor went willingly.

There was no time for languid drags of fingertips against skin, for lazy kisses and soft sighs. Melkor shoved forwards, uncaringly slamming Mairon back onto the expanse of the table; absently, distractedly, he slid the masses of documents away with his free hand. He stayed like that for a moment, reveling in Mairon's grunt of pain and twisted pleasure as the back of his head hit the polished wood. And then he was being dragged close again, beckoned and grasped at with greedy hands, stepping closer in between Mairon's parted legs. Desperate fingers tugged at his hair as Melkor kissed him with unrestrained ardor, utterly lost in the feeling of Mairon beneath him, hot and pliant and so achingly comfortable, familiar and *so right*.

He briefly attempted to drag one of Mairon's hands away, to intertwine their fingers and pin them to the tabletop above his head, but Mairon evidently did not have the patience for such ventures. Instead, he yanked his hand free and focused his attention on undoing the buttons of Melkor's shirt, groaning in unbecoming frustration against Melkor's lips as the task proved to be too complex for his trembling, desirous fingers.

The sound of it burrowed deep in the pit of Melkor's stomach, each and every unearthly moan and gasp from Mairon's lips sending him spiraling, fast and violent. He rocked against Mairon's hips, swallowing the desperate whine he received in response, the palm of his hand cradling Mairon's jaw, tilting his head back to gain access to the expanse of his neck, to press filthy kisses along the column of his throat, to drag his teeth across unblemished skin.

Mairon's lips parted in a soundless gasp, his thighs tensed around Melkor's hips of their own volition in an effort to pull him as close as physically possible, to relieve the growing inescapable, ineffable heat scorching through his veins, his muscles, every tangible part of him succumbing to its spectacular ache.

The barrier of clothes still between them was unacceptable and, dizzy with overpowering desire, Mairon renewed his efforts to tear at the uncooperative buttons so that he could drag his nails over Melkor's chest, to feel his heat, the pounding of his heart against his own chest, the weight pressing down against him until his lungs screamed with the need to draw air, and his vision blurred and blackened and sent stars spiraling through his skull.

But as his fingers once more found the offending buttons and with a deliberate determination skillfully undid two, then three, Mairon felt Melkor tense above him. He diligently continued his endeavor though Melkor's kisses grew mellowed and uncertain.

That just wouldn't do.

Mairon drew his chin up to dislodge himself and looked up at Melkor curiously, to gauge whether anything was amiss. His chest heaving, his palms flush against the bare skin of Melkor's chest, he made a low, questioning sound to urge Melkor to meet his eyes. And when he did, the look in them could only be described as completely and utterly sheepish.

The possibilities were endless, of course; the list of unbidden, intrusive thoughts or external stimuli that could have torn Melkor's mind away from the activities at hand could drag on forever. But Mairon knew him well enough, he could read Melkor's expression to a tee, he could interpret each little quirk of his lips, each shudder that ran down his spine, every minuscule movement and involuntary jerk of muscle.

As the realization struck, the grin that flickered onto Mairon's lips was somehow fond in its exasperation, and he couldn't resist his huff of laughter.

"You forgot to lock the door, didn't you?"

Chapter End Notes

pretty sure my guy would have gotten more than 3 years in prison but i wanted to keep that number to reflect the 3 ages melkor spent in the halls of mandos. so yes. years 5-8 in the slammer babey

he said, she said

Chapter Notes

so ages ago [thealbinopeacock](#) asked for the corporate rumor mill going wild with speculation soooo here's the 5k of absolute nonsense you ordered ☹️

timeline: year 8; November

Rumors spread around Utumno like a wildfire, whether they were true or false or anywhere in between. They were a respite from the ordinary workday, a metaphorical foamy caramel mocha in a sea of cheap vending machine leakage. They were a breath of fresh air. A glimmer of something new, something special. *A spark.*

It was Wallace from IT who kicked the first stone and started the landslide, the avalanche that swept everyone off their feet.

“Anyone else find it suspicious that the boss man comes back and instead of kicking his temporary replacement to the curb, he reinstates him as COO and fires the previous bloke?”

His coworkers eyed him, thoughtfully chewing their lunches and sipping their coffees.

“Like, you'd think he'd want to get rid of a usurper. Instead, he rewards him.”

“Which sucks,” said Ellen. “I had this calendar where I'd been crossing out the days until Mairon left. And now he's—well, he's as good as in charge of all of us. We're stuck with him. And for what reason? We're good people. We don't deserve to be punished.”

“You have to admit he's competent. This guy no one's heard of comes in one day and takes over and changes the game. Unheard of.”

“He's an asshole.”

“A proper tyrant.”

“A villain.”

“Well-dressed, though. I still haven't figured out where he buys his clothes.”

“Custom made. Imported from abroad. He'd probably fire you for asking.”

“No, he wouldn't. He'd get off on the attention. He seems like the type.”

“He's a nightmare.”

“An attractive one.”

Wallace blinked. “How did this conversation go off-track *this* badly?”

Ellen choked on her kale salad. “Oh, god, wait. I got it. They're fucking.”

“They—who’s fucking?”

“They,” she insisted, pointing upwards with both index fingers as though to the high heavens.

“Boss one and boss two.”

A blanket of silence fell over the table. The hum of conversation from other corners of the cafeteria suddenly felt distant, far away, unimportant. A new rumor had put down its roots.

Ellen looked around, expectant. Her colleagues, in various stages of doubt and disbelief, looked back.

The team’s newest intern set down her homemade sandwich and joined the conversation.

“Melkor is married,” she said.

“No, he isn’t.”

“He wears a ring. It’s very obviously a wedding ring. But what do I know, I’m new. Has he always had it?”

Wallace blinked again. “Now that you mention it, maybe. Sounds familiar. I don’t know. I don’t make a habit of staring at his hands.”

“And there you have it,” the intern concluded, then paused, and nonchalantly added, “They’re nice hands.”

Ellen waved her fork around and jabbed it in the intern’s direction. “All right. But you never know with these soulless corporate types. He could be cheating on her. Him. Whoever.”

“With *Mairon*? Who in their right mind would get involved with Mairon? I don’t think he even has feelings. He’s like a robot. A black widow. Like he’d eat someone after sleeping with them. A total nightmare, remember?”

“Yes, but an attractive one. They’re both attractive. I said they’re fucking, not—whatever, eternally devoted or madly in love. I can’t imagine either of them being madly in love. They both seem like the marriage of convenience type of man.”

Wallace finished his ramen and set his spoon down with a clank.

“Okay, so, the leading theory is that the boss man is now tearing apart his perfect white-picket-fence nuclear family scenario by having an affair with his temporary replacement,” he deadpanned, tone flat. “You’re all out of your minds.”

“I never said anything about him having a family. He’s married, not—fuck, can you imagine? What if he has kids? Tiny Melkor juniors.”

“Absolutely not. Please, let’s not go there.”

“So, what? He comes back from prison and meets Mairon and, what? *Oh, shit, he’s hot, I’m going to cheat on my spouse and hit that and then make him COO so that I can continue to hit that regularly.* You’ve all been watching too much television. This isn’t *Suits*.”

“Life imitates art.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m going back to work.”

Wallace pushed his chair back with a loud scrape and stood. He collected his tray and fixed his coworkers with a warning glare.

“If you’re going to keep at it, at least do it out of earshot of anybody who might—”

He froze, eyes glued to a spot over their heads. Ellen whipped around and the team followed suit. It was all very loud and very conspicuous. Wallace made a mental note to print out the definition of subtlety and hang it up on their floor’s notice board.

At some point, Mairon had walked up to the counter. His back was to them as he tapped away at his phone, oblivious.

Ellen stared at the back of his head as he waited for his order, as though she could read his mind through sheer force of will. When he reached for his coffee, she made a strangled sound. Everybody turned back to her. She held up her hand and pointed frantically at her own ring finger.

Wallace was still standing by the table, tray in hand, exasperated.

“He—wears rings?”

Ellen tsked. “What if he’s married, too? What if this is like, a two-way affair? Imagine the drama.”

“Impossible to tell. Too many rings.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m a realist. I said it’s suspicious, all this. I never said we should write a Fifty Shades book about it. Look, I shouldn’t have brought it up. Maybe competence is all it was. Tiriam was a shit COO. Melkor came back and made the obvious switch. Whatever bumps the revenue.”

“Or, hear me out,” Ellen said grandly, theatrically, “they’re lovers.”

Wallace left.

/

Mairon set his cup down with a smack on the edge of Melkor’s desk beside a precariously ordered pile of folders.

Melkor looked up.

“They know,” Mairon said.

“It’s been five days.”

“They know *something*.”

“Good for them.”

“I was hoping it would last longer,” Mairon confessed. “Like a fun game of Clue.”

Melkor reached for Mairon’s coffee, took a sip, cringed, set it back down. The pile of folders somehow did not budge.

“Right then,” he said. His smile was dangerous. It made Mairon dizzy. “Let’s give them a game.”

/

“See, Ellen said they were obviously hooking up, but what if she got it wrong?”

“Ellen who?”

“Ellen the software engineer.”

“You’ve been fraternizing with the IT team?”

Maura rolled her eyes. “They’re closer to the boss man’s floor. They always know what’s up before we do. And Ellen’s an incorrigible gossip. And possibly insane.”

She and the two other paralegals were sitting around a conference table, pretending to work. The paperwork scattered in front of them was untouched. There were more pressing matters at hand. The gossip mill was back in full swing.

“Fine,” said Eliot. “What do *you* think is going on?”

“See, Ellen thinks there’s sexual tension. But we all saw what happened in the lobby yesterday. What if Mairon has something on the boss man? Like, he’s blackmailing him. You know, *make me COO or all your dirty laundry sees the light of day*. It makes sense. He had access to all of Melkor’s work for three years. He could have found something.”

“Sorry,” Simm broke in, “what happened in the lobby?”

“Just your casual everyday screaming match.”

“They weren’t screaming. It was more vicious and hush-hush than that. Like hissing. Ferocious whispering.”

“Ferocious whispering,” Simm echoed blankly.

“You know what I mean. Like, if you’re having it out with someone but you don’t want anyone else to know the details. Because if it’s true and Mairon’s holding something over Melkor’s head, he wouldn’t want us to know—you know, that he got his job that way.”

“Not buying it,” Eliot decided. “Melkor’s the most powerful man in the city. Why would he let some arrogant nobody bully him?”

“Did he not just get out of jail? He doesn’t want to go back. Duh. Whatever Mairon has on him has to be worth something. It has to be something Melkor wants to keep covered up, no matter the price.”

“A string of lovers? Secret lovechild?”

“Tax evasion?”

“Murder?”

“Sure,” Maura said, “or that he’s secretly a lizard person. I’m serious, guys, this could be it.”

“Maybe they were fighting about something recent. It’s only been, what, three weeks of them working together? They’re bound to disagree over some things. That’s how life works.”

“You weren’t there. It was something else. You can’t develop that kind of passion in three weeks.”

“That kind of what, now?”

Maura smacked her palms flat on the tabletop and leaned forward. Her eyes gleamed. She was dangerous when she got too excited.

“Like, vitriol. They were at each other’s throats. Think about it. When you first started working here, did you immediately make friends and enemies? No. It takes a while for serious feelings to develop. To judge someone’s character. Three weeks and they’re arguing like lifelong rivals? Don’t think so.”

“Maybe it’s different when you’re rich and powerful and used to yelling at people. Who cares if you’ve only known someone for a few days, you know. You’ll do anything to stay on top.”

“Or *anyone*,” Simm quipped.

“Oh, shush. Ellen’s delusional. I just mean, what if they knew each other before all this? What if Melkor hand picked Mairon to be his replacement? And then he comes back, years later, and his protege stabs him in the back. Blackmails him. Starts making demands.”

“That’d be enough to drive anyone over the edge.”

“See, Eliot agrees.”

“I’m not saying I agree. I’m saying it makes sense. And that we need more information.”

“What, the security footage from the lobby?”

“No, I mean intel. I mean, Melkor’s married. I think. So, to whom? How long? Who knows about this? Maybe he *is* trying to cover up some kind of affair. Next, where Mairon came from. Where he used to work, where he went to university, whether the two of them have known each other all along. Next: common friends, shops they both frequent, cafes, and so on. That sort of thing. Full recon.”

Simm hummed in thought. “What if he’s a spy?”

“Who, Mairon? Sent by who?”

Simm ducked his head and muttered in a conspiratorial whisper. “Valinor.”

Maura stared at him, unimpressed. “You’re worse than the IT people.”

/

“It seems your lover boys broke up.”

“Very funny. Consider this—they know we’re onto them and that performance in the lobby was a ruse.”

“You’re unhinged, Ellen.”

/

“I was minding my own business in the restroom, as one does, and overheard Divin and Estra from the third floor talking by the sinks.”

“Of course you did.”

“Estra is convinced, swears up and down, to hell and back, that she heard Mairon call the boss man *dearest*.”

“We have an in-house medic, you know, if she wants to get her ears checked out.”

/

“You know Rio? The little guy from accounting?”

“*You're* little.”

“He’s littler.”

“Sure. What about him?”

“He accosted me at lunch yesterday. I think he was trying to be friendly. Keyword trying. Digging for answers under the guise of small talk. It felt like a polygraph.”

Melkor rolled over. Mairon was on his side, face smushed into his pillow, brow creased in consideration. It was Saturday, bright and early, sun spilling through the curtains like molten lava, and Mairon was talking about work.

“Why are thinking about Rio from accounting first thing in the morning?”

“I keep wondering who put him up to it. He wanted information.”

“You don’t think he might’ve been curious himself?”

“He’s like a church mouse. He never speaks out of turn. Never speaks unless spoken to, actually. Can’t imagine it was his idea to confront me.”

“Maybe you’re not as scary as you think.”

“Maybe you’re sleeping on the couch tonight.”

Melkor looked unimpressed. “Very well. You’re proper scary. So, what? You think my employees are launching a full-scale investigation?”

“Into us, individually, yes.”

“Individually?”

“He didn’t ask about you. He asked where I went to school. If I’m from around here. At this rate, they’re more likely to discover what really happened with Valinor than to figure out what we are.”

“And what, exactly, is that?”

Mairon said nothing.

Melkor pouted. “Come on. I just want to hear you say it.”

“You get off on the strangest things.”

Melkor reached out, wrapped his free arm around Mairon’s waist, fingertips digging into his back, and tugged him closer. “Say it.”

“Married. Husbands. Soulmates. Star-crossed lovers. Two halves of a whole. Is that good or do you

want more synonyms? I can go fetch a thesaurus—”

“Adorable how you’re pretending not to be affected by this.”

“By what?”

Melkor kissed him. “This.”

And again. “Us.”

Again. “The power of love.”

Mairon yanked himself free and sat up. He tried and failed to disguise his smile. “Are you not worried about this? Would it not be better to tell the truth and save everyone the trouble of going through the skeletons in our closets?”

“It’s fine. Let them pry. They won’t find anything. Trust me. Mairon, really, trust me. When have I ever let things go wrong? For you, I mean, at least. Plenty of things have gone wrong for me, but let’s not dwell on that.”

“I’m allowed to be worried about you.”

“You don’t have to be this time. I promise.”

Mairon stared at him. His cogs were turning. He was thinking of all the possible outcomes, what could go right, what could go wrong, what was innocuous enough to reveal, and what *had* to stay hidden. He considered what Melkor would do to keep their secrets, what lines he would cross. He wondered if he himself would be willing to go along with it all. Well, obviously. Ride or die until the end of all time. It had always been them versus everyone else. Still, it was preferable not to have to face the music. Especially if—

“In the meantime,” Melkor interrupted, before Mairon could overthink himself into a frenzy, “we let them talk. Like a fun game of Clue.”

/

“I heard someone tried to chat up Mairon last week.”

Ellen huffed. “Kid from accounting. Some quiet type. I don’t know what he was thinking. Or why he picked Mairon. He should have gone for the boss man.”

“How the hell is that a better idea?”

“He can be friendly. Chill. Relaxed. He has better vibes. I feel that, between the two of them, he’s less likely to fire someone for asking casual questions. Or, you know, less likely to kill them and bury them in the back lot.”

“Well,” interjected Simm, “I saw them exchanging some shady-looking files the other day. The kind of beige-y manila folders you see in crime dramas.”

They had joined forces, the various departments. Now, lunch time was gossip time. They discussed developments, shared sightings, put together clues, even took the time to debunk some of the more ridiculous theories, like when Bea from PR insisted that Mairon was Melkor’s illegitimate son.

“I mean,” Maura said, “this *is* a corporate building. We do handle a lot of files.”

“Yeah, but isn’t it all digitalized?”

“Not everything can be digitalized.”

Reeves, the assistant chief of security, dropped his tray onto the table with a clatter. It was loaded with everything the cafeteria was serving that day. He sat and steepled his fingers over his meal. “Sorry I’m late, but I’ve narrowed down the number of Mairon’s rings that could be a wedding ring to three. The one with the red gem, the weird stacked one, or the gold one with the squiggly lines.”

“Ellen got to you, huh?”

“I didn’t get to anybody,” Ellen snapped. “The evidence is right there. You’re all just too afraid to look. It’s an affair.”

Eliot shoved the remainder of his sandwich in his mouth and mumbled, “Speaking of, he’s got no social media presence. Mairon, I mean. But I think I might have found his wife.”

“He’s gay,” said Reeves.

“No, he’s not.”

“He’s the gayest person I’ve ever met and I’m saying this as a gay person.”

“Here, look at her,” Eliot insisted, angling his phone towards Reeves. “Relationship status: married. One kid, reddish hair. Seems about the right age. Lives here in the city. Works as a tax consultant. She’s got her own firm and everything. *And* she went to uni with Mairon.”

Simm frowned. “I thought we didn’t know where he went to uni.”

“Wallace did some digging.”

“I thought Wallace wanted no part of this.”

“He said he wants this to be resolved as soon as possible so that we can all go back to work. I told him this would help, so he—well, helped.”

“Pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“Pretty sure whatever Mairon is threatening the boss man with is illegal,” Maura said.

“You’re still on that?”

“That is the only plausible explanation.”

“Or that he’s a spy,” said Simm.

“Why would Valinor send a spy? They already got what they wanted from Melkor. They dragged him through hell and back. They can’t possibly want to start up another legal mess. Do you know how much it costs to take someone to court?”

“Yes, fuck’s sake, I work in legal.”

“Then there’s no reason for you to be this stupid.”

“All right. Okay, let’s not,” Ellen interjected. “We’re a team here. We’re on the same side.”

“We would be, if you’d shut up about them screwing for a single moment.”

Ellen scowled. “Reeves did say Mairon’s gay.”

Everyone retaliated at once.

“Yeah, but Melkor isn’t.”

“Just because he’s gay doesn’t mean he’s going to hook up with anyone who has a dick.”

“There is zero, and I mean *zero*, tension between them.”

They all turned to look at Eliot.

“Oh, you know, like, in those early stages of a relationship, people are inextricably drawn to one another. Mairon and the boss man are nothing like that. They’re more like—damn, empty nest parents or, I don’t know, college roommates. Like they’ve known each other almost too long.”

“Holy shit,” Simm gasped. “What if they are married? *To each other?*”

“Right,” Ellen said, “and I’m the fucking president.”

/

“Just one more thing,” Rio said. “We’re almost ready to file the semestral tax reports, but, um, Em told me to tell you that you’ve yet to fill out the personal data on your form. The, uh, marital status, et cetera. Just a formality. Sir.”

Melkor looked up slowly. Rio was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. His jaw was clenched in anticipation. He was a nosy little fucker.

“Funny,” Melkor drawled. “Em sent over the finalized set of documents just this morning. You must have missed that.”

Rio blanched. Melkor cocked an eyebrow at him. Rio turned and fled the room.

/

“I heard accounting boy tried something again.”

“Was he fired?”

“Not yet.”

/

“I never thought I’d grow tired of being the center of attention,” Mairon mused.

“But?”

“They’re all watching. I feel like a zoo animal.”

/

Ellen sat in the corner of the cafeteria, her chicken salad untouched. Boss one and boss two were a few tables down, near the windows. It was rare for anyone from the executive floors to make the trip down for lunch, to sit and eat with the commoners, yet there they were, in the middle of a

genial conversation.

“They’re being friendly,” Maura observed. “Trying to throw us off again.”

“Or they’re friends,” Wallace said. He was having sushi and pointedly ignoring the conspiracy theories being passed around the table. “Imagine that. Two coworkers getting along over lunch. Preposterous, isn't it?”

Ellen scoffed. “Like, gal pals. That sort of friends.”

“Friends don't share food like that,” Richard said.

Richard was from PR. He claimed to *know* people. Understand them. To be able to see into their psyches. He was team Ellen. He was moments away from writing elaborate fantasy-setting fanfiction of Mairon and the boss man.

“You are literally eating my animal crackers,” Rio pointed out. “Right now. Sharing my food.”

He was new to their group, too. Eliot had given in and recruited him. They needed information and Rio was clearly willing to go to great lengths to get it.

“Yes,” Richard said, “but it’s different. We’re actually friends. The boss man is Mairon’s boss. They can’t be friends like we’re friends. And—Mairon is just eating his curly fries right off his tray. Would you eat curly fries right off Melkor’s tray? No. My point exactly.”

“They are quite literally the two most important people in this building. It’s practically equal footing. If anyone’s going to steal the boss man’s curly fries it’s going to be Mairon.”

Richard glared at Maura. Maura glared back.

/

“You know,” Melkor said, “you can order your own food right over there.”

He cocked his head in the direction of the counter at the far end of the room.

“No, it’s fine.”

“No, really. Get your own fries.”

Mairon made an impolite face and plucked another curly fry off Melkor’s tray.

“I can feel Ellen from IT staring at me. She hasn't touched her food. She literally has not moved an inch since I sat down here.” He then blinked, and smiled an evil smile, “Actually, scratch that. *I am* going to get something to eat.”

In order to get to the food bar, one had to pass within earshot of Ellen’s table, where she and her conspiracy mafia sat and gossiped. Mairon stood, fished his phone out of his pocket, and dialed.

Thuringwethil picked up immediately.

“I’m going to mess with some people at work,” Mairon informed her. “Play along.”

“You could have just pretended to talk on the phone, you know.”

Mairon huffed a laugh. He was nearing the accursed rumor table. He raised his voice ever so

slightly. “That would be sad. Why would I do that when I’ve got you, sweetheart?”

/

Ellen had just taken the first bite of her lunch and was now choking on a piece of cold chicken.

“Did you hear that?” she wheezed. “*Sweetheart?*”

“That tells us nothing,” said Maura.

“Two-way affair, you dullards.”

The IT intern shrugged. She was a silent observer, only speaking when faced with solid facts.

“Not necessarily. It means he’s got a significant other. Could be he’s dating them, could be he’s married. Honestly, could be he’s talking to a friend. Maybe he’s affectionate like that.”

“Does he really strike you as the affectionate sort?” Eliot asked.

“I’m just brainstorming,” the intern said. “My point is, even if he’s in a relationship, that doesn’t prove he’s somehow cheating on his partner with the boss man. There’s nothing to suggest that. All we have are Ellen’s theories.”

“They’re solid theories,” said Richard.

A hush fell over the table as Mairon made his way back across the cafeteria. He had a takeout bag in one hand and his phone in the other, still pressed to his ear.

“We’re going to stay late today. Let yourself in with the spare key, feed the baby, would you?”

His voice faded as he moved further away. But they’d heard enough.

Ellen was suddenly on the verge of hysterical tears. Richard was shooting giddy *I told you so* glares at everyone, gesticulating wildly.

“*The baby?*” Ellen managed. “There’s a *baby?*”

/

Mairon dropped the bag onto the table and set his phone down beside it. Melkor eyed him curiously.

“I got nachos. Thuringwethil’s gonna feed the dog later. We can stay and work on the contract. I think I killed Ellen, also.”

/

“*He has a baby!?*”

Wallace was at his wits’ end. Ellen’s voice was loud enough to penetrate the thin wall between their offices. She would not stop rambling. He was going to lose his mind.

/

The latest rumor blew through the office like a hurricane. Some people believed it without question, said Mairon was exactly the type to keep his private life private like that. They thought it

was cute. There were skeptics, too, who thought the notion was absurd. Ellen must have misheard. Their entire lunch table must have misheard. They must have misunderstood. It was impossible.

Rio was determined to get proof. Again, he went straight to the source.

Mairon was dumping cinnamon sugar into his latte. Rio was stirring his own unsweetened black coffee for the sole purpose of looking like he had business at the condiments stand. He was buzzing with anticipation. And anxiety. He thought he might throw up.

Mairon considered him dispassionately. “Are you all right?”

Rio was a nervous mess, but he had a lie ready to go. He’d played this entire conversation out in his head. He just had to stick to the script.

“Oh, yes. Sorry. My sister’s in the hospital. She’s having a baby. I’m very excited for her.”

Mairon’s expression was unreadable.

Rio tried harder. “Kids are just the best, aren’t they?”

This time, Mairon’s blank stare turned into a sort of grimace. This was unexpected. Did he hate his kid? Did he even have a kid? Holy shit, what if he didn’t even have a kid?

Rio backtracked. “Sorry—I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mairon said. “It’s just not my thing. Children. Not a big fan.”

“You don’t—” Rio’s voice squeaked and he winced at the sound. He cleared his throat. “—don’t have kids? Or, um, don’t want any?”

He regretted the words as soon as they left his lips. He felt trapped. It was getting hot. It was just him and Mairon in the break room and Mairon looked strangely amused and all at once like he knew something Rio didn’t. Rio felt like he was about to die. He had the overwhelming sense that Mairon was a predator toying with his prey. *He was the prey.*

Mairon capped his styrofoam cup and turned his full attention to Rio. There was definitely a smirk there, unsettlingly devious, on his perfect freckled face. The tension was suffocating. There was no air in the room.

“Listen, do me a favor. Tell Ellen to come see me first thing tomorrow.”

Rio’s heart rate doubled. Tripled. Quadrupled. He was in danger. Fuck. Ellen was in danger. *Fuck.* He knew. Mairon knew.

He nodded numbly, his muscles moving of their own accord, and stood frozen to his spot as Mairon offered a cloying, patronizing smile and left the room.

/

“We’ll remember you fondly,” Richard said. “You were brave to the very end.”

Ellen shuddered. She’d drained her green tea and was ready to face her judgement. She was going to get fired for prying. Her sister had always said that her relentless curiosity would be her downfall. Her sister always had to be goddamn right.

She solemnly handed her empty mug to Richard and stepped into the elevator. The doors shut

behind her with a soft whoosh.

“Does she have any family?” Richard turned to Simm. “Who's going to arrange the funeral? Are we going to have to do it?”

“Stop freaking me out. I’ve had enough of people freaking me out. You should have seen Rio yesterday. That man has seen some things. He needs therapy, pronto. Also, I’m gonna call Reeves to keep an eye on the security footage. Just in case Mairon drags a stained, human-sized carpet roll out of his office later, or something. I’ll see you at lunch.”

/

Ellen hadn't even managed to fully sit down before Mairon started talking. The door was still inching shut, slowed by the automatic closer, when he said, “I’m going to tell you the truth.”

Ellen blinked. She wasn't going to have the chance to churn out some of the excuses she’d prepared. He wasn't going to let her explain. He was going to do his villainous monologue and then fire her.

Still, she tried. “Sir, I don’t think I know what you mean—”

“Frankly, the amount of time everyone’s been dedicating to solving this mystery is impeding their productivity, and while I don’t mean to sound like a capitalist nightmare, this is the reality we live in. As fun as this has been, of course.”

There was something else. There had to be an ulterior motive. There was no way Mairon was going to give her everything, just like that. He’d known about their gossip ring all along. He’d played them. He wasn't going to come clean now. He was going to do something horrible. Ellen was as sure about that as she’d ever been about anything.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly, meekly. It always worked wonders on the arrogant boss types, playing the humble servant. “We got carried away. Workplace rumors get that way sometimes. Not much else to do. I mean, besides work. I mean, at lunch. The rumors. We do that at lunch.”

She was *majorly* fucking this up.

Mairon hummed in disinterest and picked up his phone. Ellen watched him swipe through his gallery in eerie silence. He was unlike anyone she’d ever met. Strange and alluring like the sparkly gems the storybook genie always told the main character not to touch. He was inhumanly calm, like the eye of a storm—still and collected and impossibly quiet even as everything around him went to shit. Ellen had never felt more threatened in her life.

When he turned the phone towards her, she felt the breath leave her body in one fell rush. It felt like a hallucination. A bad trip. He swiped through a folder of images quickly, casually, like they were just two friends catching up over brunch.

“We’re not big on selfies, but here’s some from the wedding. We didn't make a huge deal of it. We’re not on social media, as I’m sure you’ve discovered through weeks of stalking, so there’s no one to impress. Here’s a few from the honeymoon trip. It was more of a long weekend, really. The suite smelled like caramel apples the entire time and we honestly could not figure out why that was. This is my dog, Wolf. There’s no baby. He’s the baby I mentioned on the phone. For the record, I was talking to a friend. No affairs here. This is her. She lives down the street. That’s her with her girlfriend. Melkor’s ex, actually. It’s a right mess. And here’s one from Halloween a few years back. We considered hiring costumed actors for the front yard to scare the local kids, but

figured the parents might take offense. The neighborhood is full of overeager PTA moms like that. Thranduil, especially. He's the biggest mom of them all. And this—oh, not this one, that's private.”

He abruptly clicked his phone off and set it down. He looked up at Ellen, expressionless, maybe a little bit expectant, a touch vindictive. She couldn't seem to remember how to speak or breathe or do anything other than stare straight ahead at him.

Mairon held up his hand and motioned to one of his fingers with the other. “This one's the wedding ring. I think Mr. Reeves got that right. Or was close, at the very least. Now, if that's all, I think we've all got actual work to get back to.”

What felt like a thousand years later, Ellen slowly regained the ability to form sentences.

She took a shaky breath. “Why are you telling me all this, really?”

Mairon smiled then, sharp and cruel and dizzyingly sweet all at once. It was the first thing that seemed *right*, that seemed genuine, fitting, that was the real him.

“Because no one will ever believe you.”

baby steps

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 12; July

The Hobbit Hole was quaint, neat and small and cozy, homey in a way the cafes downtown weren't.

Those were stuffed full of people, rushing madly on their way to work, irritable on their way back. Nobody took the time to slow down, unwind, to breathe in the familiar, bitter scent of coffee grounds that always lingered in the air.

Here, it was different. Quiet.

A handful of patrons sat around, chatting idly. They took their time, swirling their coffee, their hot chocolate in their mugs. Those in pairs looked at one another, talked to one another; those alone flipped page after page in their books, smiled fondly at the screens of their phones.

Dishes clattered from the kitchen in the back—it was a comforting sound, strangely enough, like one's mother preparing breakfast early in the morning before school as the children waited eagerly at the table. Outside, leaves rustled in the wind. That was new, too. In the city, it was always the hum of cars, the howls of sirens. Here, tucked away in an unfamiliar corner of the world, a soft guitar tune droned from a set of speakers, hidden somewhere among the rows of books and knick-knacks.

It was very different. It was *nice*.

Manwë wasn't used to nice. He was used to the cacophony of the streets, the utter chaos, to orders being shouted, to being shoved and bumped into at the Starbucks down the street from his office. It had become part of a tiresome routine, ingrained into the very fabric of his existence so fiercely he no longer took the time to think about it. He'd never bothered to wonder if there was another way about it all.

Perhaps there were certain upsides to life in the suburbs, in a little town where traffic was scarce and this little cafe seemed to be the center of the universe. Quaint, a little bit like a storybook, the kind parents read to their children before bedtime, the kind children adored and parents later shook their heads at the absurdity of. Those worlds weren't real. Life wasn't sweet like that.

Yet here he was, doubting all he knew.

The owner of the cafe, much like everyone else Manwë had met here so far, had been welcoming, warm and inviting, offering a newcomer's discount that Manwë was fairly sure hadn't existed until that moment. It was a very generous, small-town thing to do. A tiny, seemingly insignificant gesture Manwë suspected he would treasure forever, somewhere in the back of his mind. It happened so rarely these days, that people treated others with kindness.

He smiled at the memory of that interaction, not ten minutes past. The drive down had been worth it, if only for that glimmer of hope, that reminder that maybe civilization was not yet past saving.

See, Manwë had never made a habit of visiting his brother.

A few years back, the only reason to do so would have been to serve him with a lawsuit, or snarl at him from across the room. Then, everything rearranged itself, slowly but surely. Hurling insults became stiff pleasantries, that then morphed into small talk about the weather, about life, tentative *how are yous* and *I'm glad to hear thats*.

It was like a particularly slow-working salve had been slathered over their relationship, mending old wounds at a glacial pace. Slow, so very slow, but no less effective.

Miraculously, things had deescalated to the point where they no longer lunged at each other's throats the moment they set foot in the same room. It was so much simpler now, being civil, not having to pour effort into being spiteful. Really, in hindsight, it was pathetic how many years they'd spent in animosity. It took nearly reaching middle age, several traumatic life experiences, and some more bumps and twists along the way before they learned to tolerate one another.

Inch by inch, day by day, they got closer to what could perhaps even be called a functioning friendship.

So, here Manwë was, drinking the day's special in a cafe the size of his downstairs foyer, on his way to see his brother.

It wasn't a social visit. They didn't do social visits, didn't go out of their way to catch up over tea and biscuits. No matter the progress they were making, they needed a reason to see each other. They had not yet reached the point where they could drop in unannounced—to say *hi*, to bring over a Tupperware container with a slice of homemade pie—and Manwë doubted they ever would. Too much harm had been done along the way, he thought, for either of them to ever feel comfortable enough around the other to reach a level of familiarity like that.

See, Melkor had left his sunglasses at Manwë's the last time he and Mairon had come by for dinner—which hadn't been a social visit, either. They'd had a legal mess to sort out that day, some important people from a contractor firm to meet. If it'd taken the form of a sort of garden party along the way, if Melkor and Mairon had crashed in the guest room that night, a little too buzzed to drive home, that was beside the point.

Now, all Manwë was doing was returning a missing item and delivering a sheaf of documents from their previous get-together. That was all. He was nice like that, always willing to lend a helping hand. He was not, in any way, shape, or form, simply looking for an excuse to see his brother. Because that would be ridiculous. That would be absurd.

“—have not seen you 'round here before.”

He was snapped out of his thoughts, hurled back into the present. The tone was silky smooth, appreciative. It took a moment for Manwë to realize it was directed at him.

He looked up. It was a waitress, young, with vibrant auburn hair. Her lips were quirked into a meaningful smirk, eyes burning into him like she was trying to drag him to a back room with the power of her gaze alone. Tragically, he was used to this—being ogled, hit on, asked out multiple times a day. He was attractive. He knew this. It was a fact, a permanent feature, something he could not opt out of, just another thing he had to find a way to deal with.

He offered her a polite smile and curled his hand tighter around the mug, pointedly clinking his wedding ring against the porcelain.

She looked down at the sound and immediately frowned.

“I’m just in town to see my brother,” Manwë explained, quickly, before she could attempt to get another word in. It was the only way to let her down gently. He was unavailable, he wasn’t staying, she wasn’t going to see him again, how unfortunate.

Going on past experience, it was best to sever ties before they even had a chance to form, before the guys and gals batting their lashes at him got wound up and overexcited.

The waitress looked back up at him, blinked rapidly, eyes a fraction wider, her smile dropping dejectedly. She clutched her little notepad tighter, knuckles going white, cheeks going red. They all reacted like this, at one point or another. It was best to pretend to be oblivious.

“I’m glad I stopped by,” he went on, conversationally, casually, like he hadn’t noticed her advances. “You can’t get coffee like this downtown.”

She made a sound that was probably meant to be a polite laugh. When she spoke, she was clearly trying to match Manwë’s even tone (she failed).

“I didn’t know Thranduil had a brother.”

Manwë felt his brows knit in confusion, an involuntary, genuine reaction. The name was vaguely familiar. Mairon would rant about the neighbors, sometimes. Thranduil must have come up, at one point in time. Something about a hick husband and unruly kids. Something about wine, perhaps.

“Sorry—” the waitress backtracked. “Sorry, I just thought—because of the hair. You look a bit like him, is all. Didn’t mean to assume.”

Manwë schooled his expression back to normal, to what he wanted the world to see.

With a soft, indulgent laugh, he asked, “This is the kind of town where everyone knows everyone, is it?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

She was still a bit jittery, a little bit red, but her voice was almost cheerful again. She seemed to be getting her pep back and Manwë was, deep down, glad he hadn’t ruined her day. Rejecting flirtations hardly ever went over well; some people took less kindly than others to being turned down.

“I hope you don’t mind if I ask, then,” the waitress went on, and Manwë knew what was coming, he knew how dearly little towns like this one loved gossip, “—who is your brother?”

A near-hysterical giddiness bubbled up in his chest.

In their line of work, his brother had a reputation. Intimidating, vindictive, with a hair-trigger temper. He assumed it was the same here, where Melkor no doubt stood out among the beige-clad folk with their neat houses and family size sedans.

Manwë was curious, if not outright excited, in anticipation of the reaction he would get.

“Oh, I don’t know if you know him,” he said innocently. “Tall, dark hair, somewhat scary, I’m told. He lives out by the edge of town.”

The waitress’ eyes went wide again, first in recognition, then abject horror. It was strangely

satisfying, and somehow the most fun Manwë had had all week.

“*Oh*,” she said. “Right. Wow. I wouldn’t have—right, enjoy your coffee.”

With that, she was gone, and Manwë stared blankly at the spot where she’d just been standing. It took an astronomical effort to keep a straight face, to choke down the laughter itching to burst out.

Back when they were children, he’d found it thrilling, the way everyone scrambled away in fear when they realized he was related to *that evil kid*. When they grew older, it began to annoy him. Just because his brother was *like that* did not mean *he* was, too. He’d made it a goal to cultivate his own reputation, to make certain people knew him for who he was, and ignored the rest. Now, it was amusing. It was plain funny, how they all ran. And funnier still, because he knew Melkor wasn’t nearly as scary as the masses made him out to be.

Nobody who wore socks with sandals could ever pose a real threat.

A half hour later, Manwë was seated at his brother’s kitchen table, the relevant documents out in front of him. Melkor was sitting on the opposite side, squinting dubiously at the tiny text at the bottom of a contract.

Manwë had left the cafe without fanfare. He’d bid goodbye to the owner, given him a winning smile and complimented his establishment. The owner had obviously attempted to smile back, but it had ended up looking more like an awkward grimace. News had spread fast.

Nobody had looked at Manwë as he’d headed towards the door, as though they feared Melkor would slip into their houses at night and strangle them in their sleep simply for interacting with his brother. Truly, it was ridiculous; it made Manwë wonder what exactly his brother had done around town, what kind of havoc he’d wreaked, to elicit this kind of response.

Naturally, Manwë had decided, right then and there as the bells over the exit door chimed sweetly, that he would drop by again, at one point or another, simply for the thrill of it all.

He’d then driven the two blocks to the outskirts of the town, and Melkor had invited him inside. He’d forgone a greeting and left Manwë at the door, because siblings, however estranged, were like that. Manwë had made himself at home at the kitchen table, setting out the papers and the forgotten sunglasses. Melkor tried and failed to hide a mysterious little half-smile when he laid eyes on them, one that Manwë did not know how to interpret.

Now, he watched as his brother inspected the paperwork with a frightening intensity. Being on relatively good terms did very little to lessen the overwhelming distrust they had for one another. It made sense; it wasn’t something particularly easy to move on from, not when they’d spent well over a decade giving each other solid reasons to doubt every little thing.

It was going to take hard work, a great deal of effort. It was going to take *trust*, which was certainly something of an oxymoron. But they were on the right path.

For starters, Melkor had let Manwë into his home. Right there—that was trust. He’d even left him alone downstairs for a few minutes, unchaperoned, and refrained from making any snappy comments about Manwë snooping around, spying, being a general nuisance. It was growth. Progress. They were finally becoming reasonable adults.

As it usually happens in stories like this, in books and movies where troubled families are forced to come together, it was something horrible that did it, that nudged them closer, something that one wouldn’t have gotten through without the other.

It was tentative at first, then suddenly less so. Somehow, it didn't take much for them to fall into a steady rhythm. Which made it slightly awkward—two strangers coming to terms with the fact that they were family, suddenly realizing that they *could* get along, and quite easily at that.

More importantly, though, they learned that they would be there for each other. That they *wanted* to be there.

He would not admit to it aloud, but Manwë was glad—as awful as it sounded, given the circumstances that had led to it—that he and Melkor had managed to reach common ground.

They were now rebuilding something that had never truly existed in the first place, something that was, for so many years, held back by a burning, irrational hatred, one that had no clear beginning, no solid reason behind it. To say Manwë had his brother back would be a lie. He'd never lost him; he'd just never had him.

So, he was glad. Despite everything.

Repairing what seemed irreparable turned out to be easier done than said. Conversation came naturally, proving that they had more in common than just DNA, that they'd had the potential to get along their whole lives, a potential they'd squandered and buried six feet under. Their humor seemed to align, sharp and dry, a matching strain of sarcasm; they could go back and forth without once falling into uneasy silence. It had taken time, of course, to open up, to ease into their new situation, but it took no effort whatsoever to fall into sync.

Even now, going over dull legal work, they managed to weave in fragments of conversation between the lines, little bits and pieces about their lives, their plans, their pasts and futures. *How's Varda? Fine. She still hates you. When on earth did you get that tattoo? College. You're ever so observant. Please tell your dog to stop licking my socks. It's Mairon's dog; he doesn't take orders from me.*

Melkor was surprisingly civil, and it was surprisingly easy to be civil towards him in turn, without all the unnecessary hate in the way. Manwë had never taken the time to get to know his brother, and it made him feel stupid, immature, for letting their senseless antagonism go on for so long, when they could have been *this* from day one instead. They could have been unstoppable, if only they'd made the effort to work together.

They could have taken over the world, if they'd put their minds to it.

It was twenty minutes into his and Melkor's chat when the staircase creaked and Mairon crept down into the room—eerily on cue, just as Manwë's internal monologue had turned to thoughts of world domination.

He was in a long, charcoal bathrobe, feet bare, toweling off his hair. He didn't look at Manwë as he greeted him, and offered a small, indecipherable sound in lieu of a *hello*.

He padded quietly into the kitchen, then asked, musingly, “Why is somebody in this house always in a state of undress when you come by?”

Manwë took a moment, thought back on previous visits, and found it to be true. He had a knack for dropping by early in the morning, apparently arriving right around shower time. He made a mental note, tucking it away for safekeeping, to pick a more reasonable hour next time. He blinked. *Next time?*

Aloud, he said, “Just my luck,” and got another mysterious sound in response.

Mairon draped his towel across his shoulders, hair dripping. It was far shorter now than it had been the last time Manwë saw him.

His back still turned, Mairon inched up on his toes and reached to open a cupboard. He pulled out a mug and set it down on the countertop with a clank.

“Do you want coffee?” he asked.

He didn't specify who he was addressing, yet Manwë knew, instinctively, it was him. He was slowly learning Mairon's quirks, too, his speech patterns and mannerisms, the way he occupied a space, the way he moved, the way his face twitched when he was annoyed, or how his hands shook when he was having a bad day.

“No, thank you,” Manwë said. “I stopped by the coffeeshop on Shire Street for breakfast. It's a charming place.”

Mairon huffed. Manwë didn't see his face; he had no way of telling what the huff had meant. Perhaps he was amused. It had sounded a little amused.

At the same time, petulantly, Melkor said (he *whined*, it was a whine), “I want coffee.”

Mairon hummed absently. “That's nice.”

He did not take out another mug.

The water he poured into the coffee machine was just enough for a single serving. He reached for the sugar bowl, the cinnamon, brewed a concoction for himself and no one else.

Distantly, Manwë wondered whether this was a love language between the two, a sort of cruel teasing, or if he'd dropped by at a very inopportune time. If they were fighting, he certainly did not want to be caught in the middle.

He turned back to his brother, then, to silently communicate the question, and found that he didn't have to.

There was a smile on Melkor's face, subtle but there nonetheless, crinkling around his eyes. It was surreal, watching someone who society at large considered to be a monster make big, wide moon eyes at their favorite person in the whole world.

It never ceased to amaze Manwë, that his brother could *melt* like that. He'd never seen him so happy, so content, as when he looked at Mairon. He brought out a side of Melkor that was so full of genuine, childlike wonder, like he couldn't believe something as incredible as Mairon existed, like he couldn't wrap his head around how lucky he was.

See, when Manwë had found out the truth about what happened at Valinor—the real truth, not the lies he'd been fed the first time around—it had taken him a while to digest it. It'd made no sense. Melkor had taken the blame for everything, made it seem as though Mairon hadn't been complicit in any of it. He'd gone to prison *for him*. To protect him. It was like being thrust into an alternate reality, one where Melkor cared about somebody other than himself. Never, not in a million years, would Manwë have thought his brother was capable of a sacrifice so great, of loving someone so completely. He'd gone through hell, willingly, because he'd rather brave it himself than have Mairon do it in his stead.

In truth, Manwë had always thought Mairon was difficult—and not necessarily in a bad way.

He'd always been headstrong, stubborn, far too serious for his own good. He had an ego, a superiority complex a mile wide. He'd never gotten along with his peers at Valinor, making enemies faster than he made friends.

Now, just as Melkor was changed around him, Mairon was visibly different as well. He was softer around the edges, comfortable in a way Manwë had never seen him before. His eyes were still cold, but somehow soft at all once, like there was something in there, inside him, finally filling up the emptiness. He'd found a place he belonged, his *home*, where he didn't have to pretend to be somebody else.

Manwë, for one, was absurdly happy.

He was happy they had found each other, his brother and the man who'd betrayed him and stabbed him in the back *for* his brother, that they'd been at the right place at the right time, that they'd seen something in one another that no one else ever had. It was a match made in the deepest pits of hell (*lovingly*—Manwë meant that lovingly).

Better still, now that they had each other, it made the rest of the world that much safer. They were keeping off the streets, away from the trouble.

Manwë knew what it was like to love somebody so much it hurt—that part he understood. But he'd never struggled with finding his place in the world like they had, his brother especially. Melkor had never gotten along with their parents, nor his classmates, his teachers, *nobody*. He'd never really had anyone in his corner, had someone who liked him, who wanted him around. Not until now. It settled something in Manwë's chest, a warm sort of relief. He was glad his brother had found his way, with only minimal damage along the way.

The coffee machine beeped, shrill and loud, and Manwë blinked, sat up straighter in his chair.

He'd zoned out. He needed to sleep more.

Across from him, Melkor was skimming the last of the documents, but he was oddly distracted now, twitchy and antsy. He tapped his fingers against the table, eyes going back and forth like he was searching the page for something he could not find, expression blank like his thoughts were elsewhere.

Manwë leaned forward to point out the sneaky small text to him, an addendum on the back of the page. Abruptly, though, Melkor set the paper down with a smack, flattened it to the table with both hands. He looked up at Manwë, expression caught between a frown and a grimace, and pushed up from his seat.

Almost as an afterthought, he held up his finger, said, "Give me a sec," and beelined for the kitchen.

Manwë declined to comment. He wasn't about to start analyzing all of Melkor's quirks and oddities; he did not have nearly enough time to get started on a task of that caliber. Patiently, he leaned back in his chair, legs stretched out in front of him, and dug his phone out of his pocket. He was running very late—he did not have time for *anything*, it seemed.

He looked up at Melkor idling by the kitchen counter, inches away from his husband, looking down at him with an honest-to-god pout creasing his features. He was complaining about the coffee, Manwë figured, standing there, whining like a little kid accusing their mother of playing favorites. Melkor had a childish side to him, a particular kind of petulance, that Manwë hadn't picked up on until fairly recently, only over the last few months. And so he watched now as his

brother stuck his bottom lip out, playing the victim, trying to get his way.

By all rights, Manwë was not eavesdropping.

He was just *there*, along for the ride. If he caught the tail end of, “*it tastes better when you make it*,” that was certainly not his fault. There was no way he could have avoided hearing it. Manwë was not intruding. They were just being very *loud*—in actions, rather than words.

At the counter, Mairon rolled his eyes so fondly it sent a pang through Manwë’s chest. He wondered if they realized, either of them, how they appeared to an outsider, how every little glance, every gesture, even this seemingly insignificant exchange about coffee creamer, of all things, looked so affectionate. It was public indecency, every smile they shared.

Melkor was visibly careful around Mairon, still—not too obviously, but just enough for Manwë to catch on. It showed in his movements, a cautious sort of restraint, how he gave Mairon space, just in case he needed it. He looked at him like he would raze the whole world to the ground to keep him safe. It was a lot. They were a lot. Manwë blinked, again feeling like he was trespassing, baring witness to something so intimate, something he had no right to see.

“—could just say you’re lazy and I would—”

The final straw was when Melkor stuck his tongue out, just for a split second, like an obnoxious little kid, and Mairon’s lips twitched into the tiniest smile, barely there, but so full of love it made Manwë want to look away, to close his eyes, to apologize for having seen it.

He didn’t realize he was getting to his feet until he heard his chair scrape against the hardwood.

It was very loud, very jarring, and his eyes snapped towards the kitchen just in time to see two heads turn, eerily synchronized, to look at him.

Awkwardly, he stared back. He gripped his phone tighter, curling his fingers around it until the edges dug uncomfortably into his palm, then shoved it back into his pocket.

He cleared his throat, and answered their silent question with a bland, “You have your stuff. The, um—” he shot a glance at the table, at the papers, the sunglasses, then looked back to his brother. “I don’t want to, you know, get in the way here. I’m running late, as it is. I’ve got to be at work soon. I’ll get out of your hair.”

Truly, he could not remember the last time he’d felt so uneasy, so out of place, couldn’t remember the last time he was so obviously encroaching on another’s territory, their privacy. He wondered, idly, if he’d ever done this before, stuck his nose in other people’s business so crudely, without even realizing he’d done it. Mentally, he penciled in a late-night introspection session for later that day. He was learning so much, not only about his brother, but about himself, too.

“It’s Sunday,” Mairon pointed out.

Manwë pursed his lips, made a face. He was painfully aware.

“Sometimes,” he said tiredly, “when you leave the wrong person in charge of a project with a big, looming deadline and they cock it all up, you end up coming in on a Sunday.”

“You’ve got to find a better work-life balance.”

This specific brand of humor was another thing. Back at Valinor, Mairon had always been quiet and cordial, polite, almost subservient. Now—*well*, honestly, he was a massive asshole. And every

time Manwë was met with a shining example of the real him, he was reminded that, back then, Mairon had been pretending, the whole time, with every breath, every word, to be someone else.

Strangely, he liked this Mairon more.

He wanted to get to know him, much like he wanted to get to know his brother. The only difference was, that he would be meeting his brother for the first time, so to speak. With Mairon, he would be relearning him, unraveling everything he'd once kept hidden.

It was too soon for that, though, Manwë knew this. These things took time. His work-in-progress relationship with his brother was too fragile for him to sit Mairon down and interrogate him under the guise of a sweet heart-to-heart.

One day. Just not today. Baby steps.

Mairon was still staring at him. Melkor, too, though he was alternating between watching him and glancing at Mairon. Melkor could not, for the life of him, take his eyes off Mairon for longer than a minute, like he would disappear otherwise.

Manwë looked away, down at the floor, at his sock feet, then back up, and quickly said, "I'll see you around."

For a split second, Melkor's face did an odd thing, eyes going cold, meeting Manwë's with a hard intensity. It was very familiar—it was the most random things that reminded Manwë that, *right*, they were related. The way Melkor glared, the way he texted with both thumbs, the way he held his mugs by the rim rather than the handle. Little, seemingly non-genetic things that they had in common.

But as soon as it appeared, the look was gone.

"See you," Melkor said.

It almost seemed like there was more he meant to say, but whatever it was had gotten lodged in his throat before he could spit it out.

Manwë smiled tightly and swiveled towards the entranceway.

As he departed, he heard a murmur behind him, a hushed exchange, of which he could not make out a single word. Obviously, they were talking about him.

Playing dumb, he leaned against the wall by the door and started to pull on his shoes, which he then realized was impossible to do standing up—his brain did that sometimes, shorted out, when he felt overwhelmed. In a crouch, he did up his shoelaces slowly, meticulously, letting his curtain of hair hide him from whatever was going on in the kitchen. He waited; he knew something or another was coming.

As expected, his brother had something to add—he'd just needed a push. Mairon, presumably, had bullied him into it.

"You know—" the voice rang out, abrupt, like he had to get it over with quickly, before he lost his nerve, "—you don't need a reason to come by."

In the middle of tugging on his other shoe, Manwë turned his upper half towards his brother. He shook his hair out of his face.

“I know,” he said simply. Internally, he cringed, knowing full well he did not sound convinced.

Mairon seemed to no longer be a part of this—his back was to them as he went through the motions of making another coffee. Evidently, Melkor’s whinging had been successful. That, or they’d made a bargain, somewhere in the midst of their whispering—a cup of coffee in exchange for Melkor telling his brother whatever it was that he’d kept bottled up for so long.

So, there they were, Manwë on the floor, hands on his laces, Melkor looking out across the room, leaning rigidly against the kitchen table in a position that was probably meant to look casual. It did not look casual.

Quietly, forcefully, in a tone that suggested he was trying to turn this whole talk into a joke rather than have a serious conversation, Melkor admitted, “I’m running out of things to leave at your house.”

It took a moment for the words to make sense, but when they did, Manwë felt himself go red. He ducked his head down again, double knotted his left shoe so aggressively he felt his foot go numb.

He hadn't been clever, dropping by unannounced with a perfectly logical explanation in tow—you left your ID, your keys, your glasses, your hair tie. All this time, he was being invited. Those had all been invitations.

He felt himself go redder. He was running late. He couldn't do this now, couldn't think about the implications. This wasn't the right time to sit down and talk about feelings, not when his mind was in disarray, not when his brother had the high ground, the obvious advantage. He needed time to think, to prepare.

“Right,” he said eloquently, voice a tad jagged, and stood. He grabbed at the doorknob and slipped outside without looking back. *Next time*. Obviously, there was going to be a next time. He’d practically just been invited for a next time.

He was being immature, he knew this, running away when things took a serious turn. It was very *Melkor* of him, yet another instance of their shared faults. But it was okay, this once, because he would be back to sort it out. It was fine, because he’d made it very clear that he was in a rush. They wouldn't hold his prior engagement against him. He would be forgiven for making this one single awkward escape.

It wasn't until he was halfway down the driveway, heading to his car, that he realized he was smiling.

He’d been manipulated, so cleverly, so absurdly well. Melkor knew him better than he’d expected. He knew which buttons to press, which strings to pull to get what he wanted. What they *both* wanted.

And that was it, really, that tugged at Manwë the most—the confirmation that his brother wanted it as much as he did, to fix this, *them*, to bridge that horrible chasm. It made a silly, fuzzy warmth course through him, from his chest to the tips of his toes.

He slipped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut behind him. The silence helped clear his head. He leaned back, both hands against the steering wheel, and sat until his heart stopped pounding.

It was a nice feeling, the knowledge that everything along the way, everything they’d been through, that they’d put one another through, hadn't really been for nothing. The road had been a

mess, chaotic and winding, but it had led them to this moment. There was hope for them yet. And, for now, that was good enough.

the art of hiding in plain sight

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 4; September

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

“We’re headed in the same direction. Might as well.”

Mairon looked up. “You’re joking.”

“He won’t know.”

“Is that a risk you’re willing to take? Are you going to tell him you bumped into me at the corner coffeeshop and we decided to carpool?”

“He won’t see.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Does he stand in the lobby watching everyone arrive at work one by one?”

“It doesn't have to be him. Anyone sees, and I might as well go turn myself in.”

“You’ve got a flair for the dramatic.”

“I’ve also got a flair for common sense. I’m taking *my* car, and I’m taking the highway. You figure something else out. And you’re going to behave yourself today. That’s not optional. That’s a request.”

“Or what?” asked Melkor.

Mairon blinked up at him, slightly murderous.

“You don't want to know what.”

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It wasn't as grand as last time, or the time before that. The halls of Valinor were used to spectacles, and this was not one of them. There were no hoards of lawyers or teetering mountains of paperwork, no looming threat of an impending court date hanging overhead. For once, rather than wield every intimidation tactic at his disposal, Manwë held a normal, civilized meeting. It was at a little conference table for six, three on each side, surrounded by squeaky clean, floor-to-ceiling windows with an impressive view of the city beyond.

He dragged Mairon along, because he always did.

Mairon had always been there for the ride. He worked late, listened to Manwë rant and rant and *rant*, obediently followed him around—to legal gatherings, to the courthouse, for a secret smoke on the roof of the building—wherever need be when Melkor made a mess of things. Such was the case with Melkor. He made it his life’s work to be difficult, to throw a wrench into anything and

everything his brother set out to do.

Up to a point, it'd been a dull pattern: follow Manwë into a Melkor-situation, rinse, repeat. Then the monotony had been broken, that one fateful mid-morning in the upstairs employee lounge, a phone number slipped into an unsuspecting coat pocket.

And so this time, heading to a meeting seemingly identical to all the others, Mairon had something to hide.

Manwë brought with him a stuffy, blonde somebody-or-another from legal, whose name Mairon tried valiantly to recall for the entire duration of their elevator ride up to top floor, to no avail. He was about ninety percent certain it started with a *B*. Then the doors dinged and slid open, and Mairon remembered that he didn't really care.

When they stepped into the room, Mairon took the leftmost seat facing the windows. Manwë sat beside him, and the lawyer to Manwë's right. As the man sank into his chair, sagging like he'd been on his feet for days on end, he dropped his pile of binders onto the glass-top table with a jarring crash, and Mairon flinched. Loud noises, these days, made him jittery. He was overworked; he knew that well enough. If he squeezed in more than five hours a night, his hands would stop trembling. He would stop jumping at the slightest of sounds. It was an easy enough fix.

For the first few minutes, Manwë was quiet.

Mairon watched him scroll through his recent texts, smiling fondly at the screen, watched him type out a reply in that funny way of his. He seemed to be in a good mood—relaxed, amiable. They weren't doomed yet.

Further down the table, the lawyer was going through something. He stirred his coffee ceaselessly with his left hand as he frantically flicked through sheafs of papers with his right. He'd been going at it for some time now, as though in a trance, and showed no signs of slowing down.

On the inside, Mairon felt a little bit like that. His heart beat faster than usual, thrilled at what was to come.

He wondered, with a morbid sort of curiosity, if they were going to be able to pull it off. His husband was about to walk through that door. They were going to exchange greetings like complete strangers. He was going to have to hold back every single snappy comment he *knew* he was going to want to make the moment Melkor opened his horrible mouth.

It would be easier to pretend to hate him. Hate was a strong emotion—Mairon could work with that. But he couldn't be that obvious. He had to be indifferent. He had to pretend he barely knew the man, that he'd met him in passing no more than a handful of times, that he truly did not care.

And it seemed impossible, because he cared *too* much. He knew what kind of books Melkor liked to read, what kind of music he listened to, knew the way he sprawled on the floor in the kitchen when it was too hot and only the chill of the tiles could save him. He knew how to tell when Melkor was stressed, how he brought his hand up to his mouth, picked at his thumb with his forefinger, but never quite touched his lips. He knew how violently opposed he was to bagged milk and pistachio Turkish delight, how it infuriated him when someone poured their cereal in the wrong order.

And he had to pretend he didn't.

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“We’re not taking him to court. We’re not threatening him with anything. He shouldn’t act up too badly.”

“To be honest, sir,” said the lawyer, “if I may? We should not underestimate his willingness to make a mess of a perfectly straightforward situation. With all due respect. Sir.”

Manwë’s face twitched a little.

“I didn’t mean any offense, sir. Just trying to prepare for the worst. I mean—in case it comes to that. You—we never know. Not with—you know.”

“Did I not ask you to refrain from having a double espresso this morning?”

“Sorry, sir.”

Manwë huffed. It was very patronizing.

To Mairon, he said, “If he does make things difficult, I apologize in advance for his behavior.”

“Not your fault.”

“As his brother, I feel as though I should.”

Counterpoint, thought Mairon, *as his husband, maybe I should.*

Aloud, he said, “No need.”

“You’ve no idea what he can be like. You’ve got a situation where there’s a straight line between points *A* and *B* and he somehow manages to drag it out and scramble everything.”

Impressively, Mairon managed not to howl with laughter. He had an inkling of what that was like. Laundry, for example. A simple task, three hours at most, that often took Melkor three whole *days* to get done from start to finish. Or buying dog food—what on earth was so inherently difficult about buying dog food?

“Everyone has their bad days,” he said blandly.

“I could count on the fingers of one hand the amount of *good* days he’s had from the day he was born.”

Mairon said nothing. Undeniably, Manwë had a point. Melkor could be a piece of work, a nuisance, a nightmare. But whatever he did, Mairon forgave him, because he was stupid like that—like a giddy third-grader blushing bright red after a kiss from their crush.

Idly, he wondered how Manwë would react to the truth. *Hey, actually, your brother and I have been married for almost two years. Sorry we didn’t invite you to the wedding. It wasn’t personal. We didn’t invite anybody. You know, it’s funny, how I’m your brother-in-law and yet I’m out here calling you ‘boss’. That’s a little messed up, don’t you think?*

It would not go down well, he imagined.

/

Melkor showed up six minutes late with a coffee cup in hand from the breakfast place down the street.

There was a lawyer with him, a thin young man with an odd mustache and rigid frame. It was readily apparent that he was not there to be useful. He stared at the ground as they walked in, announcing to the room that he was present to keep up appearances for the sake of propriety, to make it look like Melkor was prepared to take the situation seriously. Which meant, naturally, that he wasn't.

Mairon's eyes flicked to Melkor and, stubbornly, Melkor held his gaze. He smiled, big and bright—because he was allowed to, because he was an asshole, *the* asshole, and nobody expected any different from him.

Determinedly, Mairon attempted to scowl in return. Just enough to make it believable. Moderation was key. He didn't think his face succeeded.

In theory, all this was a walk in the park. He had one job: to wipe everything off his face for an hour or two and pretend not to give a flying fuck about the man he loved. There was nothing difficult about it, really, no reason for him to be nervous. He was a good liar. He was the best damn liar in the building. Given a few months and insider information, he could overthrow the whole company. Yet there he was, inexplicably, *nervous*.

They did not stand, did not rise to shake hands (though Manwë's lawyer-man twitched in his seat like he meant to). As luck would have it, they were past niceties like that. Where Melkor was involved, Manwë skipped right over manners and turned into a right prick, and Mairon was indescribably grateful. He didn't think he'd be able to reach over and greet Melkor like a complete stranger, knowing all the while exactly what those fingers could do, how gentle they could be, how they felt when they ran through his hair.

In the span of the ten seconds it took them to get seated, Melkor's face had gone carefully blank. Something in his eyes remained alight, a smoldering spark, but it was hidden now, tucked safely away from the untrained eye, almost as though he'd picked up on Mairon's trepidation. He toned down his overt smirking, remembered to be responsible, as per that morning's request (*threat*—it had been a threat).

Mairon swallowed. It felt like there was a clump of cotton balls lodged in his throat. The room was growing warm and his insufferable husband would not stop staring at him. Lying was harder, Mairon realized, when there were feelings in the way, when that pesky fluttering in his chest disrupted the calm.

Beside him, Manwë shuffled some papers, oblivious. The air was electric around him. Naturally, his mood had soured since his brother's arrival.

Mairon tore his gaze away and focused on a far-off point, an unidentifiable object in one of the office windows of the skyscraper across the street. Melkor didn't seem eager to look away—the best Mairon could do was ignore him completely.

Time ticked by slowly, minutes dragging like hours. It wasn't until Manwë cleared his throat and smacked his paperwork flat against the tabletop that Melkor's attention was diverted. Mairon felt the heat of his stare leave him all at once, like clouds eclipsing the sun, abruptly leaving you cold.

Relieved, he allowed himself a quiet sigh.

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“I called my accountant last night, you know,” Melkor told Manwë solemnly. (This was a lie. Mairon knew this.) “—And he told me he's never once seen anyone spend so much on legal fees to

sort things out with their *family*.” (This part was true. Their string of ongoing squabbles was costing them both a fortune.)

“If you were the slightest bit more agreeable, we could come to an accord over lunch, rather than in a courtroom.”

“If you were the slightest bit more reasonable, maybe we could.”

“We’ll get nowhere by tossing around the blame,” Manwë retorted. Notably, he was refusing to accept that even a smidge of this was his fault. “Can we just get this over with?”

“If that’s your approach to everything, I pity your wife.”

“Don’t be disgusting.”

“I have said nothing wrong.”

“I will pay you, right now—just name your price—if we manage to wrap this up in the next ten minutes,” said Manwë, voice tight.

“Inadvisable,” said his lawyer. “Grounds for a bribery charge.”

“I know that,” snapped Manwë. “Sarcasm.”

The lawyer looked down at his hands. Melkor’s lawyer continued to stare blankly at the opposite wall. He appeared to be absent from the conversation entirely. Mairon envied him.

“That’s not an altogether bad idea—if I take you to court for a change. It would even the playing field,” Melkor mused aloud. “Do you prefer cash? I could take PayPal, if you put ‘bribe’ in the transaction title. In all caps—” he added with a flourish of his hand, “make it easier for the feds to pick up on. Stop looking at me like I just strangled your puppy; it was your idea.”

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The nerves began to dissipate once Mairon realized Manwë was an idiot.

He shuffled a stack of folders and nudged them towards Mairon, silently communicating that he wanted them passed to his brother but was too stubborn to do it himself.

Obediently, Mairon reached over the table. Melkor leaned forward to take the offering, and eagerly at that. It was automatic, familiar, like he was reaching for a slice of toast at breakfast. He caught himself midway, shuttered his expression, dispersed that fond look in his eye. Still, their fingers brushed and the touch lingered, and lingered, and *lingered*, and Mairon was loath to pull away. But he had to, for the sake of their little charade.

He sat back in his chair and snuck a glance at Manwë—he was scowling, watching his brother open up the topmost folder and skim over the papers inside. Scowling was his default in Melkor-situations. Rage was his baseline. It made him blind.

In that instant, Mairon knew they could get away with anything.

Melkor could walk around the table, strip off his shirt, and curl up in Mairon’s lap, kiss him like his life depended on it, swivel them around and pin him to the table, and Manwë would chalk it up to Melkor being a nuisance. Mairon could kiss him back, arms around his waist, fingers in his hair, and Manwë would still, *somehow*, chalk it up to Melkor being a nuisance.

In hindsight, there'd been no need to worry. They could have carpoled. They could have parked out front and fucked in the driver's seat before going inside.

Still, a shadow of adrenaline lingered.

There were few activities more fun than lying. The risk of hiding in plain view was intoxicating. With every little look, each tiny gesture they exchanged, things that only the other could read, Mairon had to bite back a smile, smother the hysterical laughter bubbling in his chest. He forced himself to look bored, when he was anything but. There would be time for it later—to break down in giggles over dinner at the absurdity of what had happened.

Assuming they bothered with dinner.

The rising temperature in the room was an unexpected side effect of their game. In body, Mairon was seated primly at the table. In his thoughts, he was elsewhere, being pinned down against the nearest flat surface. A phantom pain weighed against his wrists, a pressure that was really never there.

It made it all the more difficult, nodding numbly along to Manwë's bureaucratic nonsense, pretending to care, with those thoughts lighting him up from the inside, a sticky heat spreading slowly through him like molasses.

He wondered, idly, if the break room was empty.

Melkor, though talented enough at deception, was not nearly as good at keeping everything under wraps. To an outsider, perhaps, he would appear bored, with his lazy smile and cocky drawl. But he was distracted now. The devil was in the details, the slight tension in his shoulders, the way he flexed his fingers, the twitch in his jaw like he wanted to swallow Mairon whole.

To those who barely knew him, his divided attention reeked of impertinence. Mairon, who could read every last bit of him, knew it was something else—that he was impatient, restless, *greedy*.

Scratch that. He *prayed*, desperately, that the break room was empty.

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“Which reminds me, actually, of when you dyed your hair this nice peachy pink in your first year of uni.”

“And that's relevant, how?”

“You weren't always this boring,” Melkor said. “Well, no, you were. You were born in a suit with a briefcase in hand. But you used to be better at hiding it.”

“Meanwhile, you've always been a nasty piece of work and never once bothered to hide it, when you really should have.”

“Why would I pretend to be someone I'm not? Imagine, you meet someone, and you draw them in with a face that's not yours. Then, you decide you like this person, that you want to keep them around. Tell me, what's the perfect moment in that relationship to come clean about who you are? Might as well be my awful self from the start. At the very least, it's honest.”

Manwë stared at him in silence, something akin to disgust curling at his lip. Across from him, Melkor waited patiently for a reply. Off to the side, Mairon took an inconspicuous sip of his water.

With a defeated, infinitesimal shake of his head, Manwë sighed.

“God, I feel sorry for whoever you end up with.”

Mairon choked.

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Nearly an hour later, it was plainly apparent that Melkor was going out of his way to be difficult.

His lawyer had spoken no more than three words from the moment he'd entered the room. At some point in the proceedings, Mairon had begun to wonder if the man was a lawyer at all, or rather a poor intern Melkor had snatched up in the lobby and ordered to keep quiet.

In either case, Melkor was running the show. He was very clever in the way he went about it—he behaved himself (more or less), didn't do anything egregiously untoward. But he made a point to drag the meeting out, to nitpick at everything he could, taking his sweet, sweet time to go over the minutia of the meeting's agenda to get a rise out of his brother. Because Melkor wasn't doing anything wrong, *per se*. He was simply being very, very thorough. If Manwë snapped, *he* would be the one at fault.

So, Melkor interrupted every chance he got, added useless commentary to everything Manwë said under the guise of being helpful and informative, relayed allegedly relevant anecdotes that really weren't relevant to the topic at all. It was a twisted offensive maneuver, an attempt to drive Manwë over the edge, to get him to be the one to lose his train of thought and admit defeat. Melkor preferred blunt force, but he could be calculating, too, when he put his mind to it.

For the first fifteen minutes, Mairon had enjoyed the show. It'd been fun, watching his husband enact his evil plan. But not long after, it had become very clear that Melkor had every intention of playing the long game, a very long game, no matter how very long. Time was precious and he was wasting oodles of it. And now, Mairon was well and truly annoyed. He was sore from sitting motionless for so long. His ribs hurt. His jaw hurt from clenching his teeth in an effort to stay silent. The first dark clouds of an impending migraine floated in over the horizon.

He loved Melkor to a fault, more than anything in the world, but there were times, such as now, where he wished for nothing more than to lock him in a broom closet, order him to sit there in the dark with the cobwebs and spiders and think about what he did. Sometimes, putting him in time-out was the only option.

Still, Mairon had always found it difficult to be cross with him. He could excuse any number of Melkor's faults because of the things that counteracted them, the wonderful things about him that never saw the light of day unless it was just the two of them shielded safely from the rest of the world.

That, and Mairon was far more turned on than was reasonable in an office setting. That, too, put a damper on his irritation, morphed it into a thrumming impatience instead. Melkor's smirk was deadly. His hair was draped over one shoulder, glossy in the sunlight, and Mairon knew how soft it was, how nice it felt to run his fingers through it. He wanted to pull on it, kiss the hiss of pain from Melkor's lips, tilt his head back and drag his mouth over his neck.

“Am I straining your attention?”

Panicked, Mairon blinked. His head jerked around to Manwë and found him looking straight ahead, addressing his brother.

Smoothly, Melkor countered, “How can I be expected to pay attention when the company you keep is so distracting?”

Mairon wanted to throw a stapler at him, but also kiss him stupid. He *really* wanted to kiss him right then.

The exasperation in his expression must have been evident enough, though. Between one moment and the next, Melkor seemed to snap awake and realize that flirting was not the way to go, not if they wanted to make it out in one piece. Visibly, his gears turned. He reevaluated his approach.

Yet rather than shut his mouth and *behave*, he decided the best way to draw attention away from his advances at Mairon was to flirt with Manwë’s lawyer-man, as well. There was a certain ingenuity to it, Mairon had to admit—if Manwë assumed Melkor made bedroom eyes at anything that moved, he’d never look too closely at his personal life. He’d never suspect a thing. He would carry on, oblivious, under the assumption that Melkor was doing this to piss him off, distracting his underlings to be a bother.

But Mairon’s satisfaction was short lived—while the sinister plot was a solid idea, it had a single massive downside. He knew he had nothing to worry about, no reason to feel that vicious sting, yet as he watched Melkor make a suave comment about the lawyer’s suit, watched the lawyer make a strange wheezing sound at the back of his throat, Mairon was already making plans to disable the elevator after hours and leave the man stranded inside overnight.

It wasn't jealousy, not quite. How could it be, when there was no real cause for it? Still, Mairon didn't like the prickling in his chest. It felt like losing control, the idea that an easy lie could come apart simply because his feelings were stronger than his need to stay hidden. The thought that Melkor might sweet-talk someone else, regardless of whether or not he meant it, made Mairon see red.

But it was *good*, too, this sudden spark; it made Mairon’s heart rate pick up. It made him want to get out of here. It made him want to remind Melkor who he belonged to.

He turned his gaze across the table, as Manwë prattled on. It was background noise at this point, insignificant.

Melkor regarded him, casual, unbothered.

Feelings were easy to communicate without words—entire sentences, not so much. Nonetheless, Mairon tried. *Stop messing around*, he said. *Stop dragging this out. Stop wasting everyone’s time. The sooner we wrap this up, the sooner the workday ends. The sooner I can get my hands on you.*

/

“That’s why we told your lawyer to bring it.”

“I switched lawyers last minute. The one you spoke to is home with a chest cold. I do hope he recovers soon, the poor man.”

“The one thing that could move us forward. That was—”

Manwë trailed off. A vein in his forehead twitched. He closed his eyes to compose himself, did a year’s worth of breathing exercises in the five seconds it took him to speak again.

“Is there any particular reason you’re like this?”

“Childhood trauma. Listen, don’t make a big deal of something that isn’t one. So, what? We’ll have to reconvene. Is that so bad, the thought of seeing me again?”

“We need it done by next week.”

“So, we’ll get it done by next week.”

“We could have sorted it today, had you not made a mess, as per usual.”

“I sincerely apologize,” Melkor said in a way that made it very clear there was nothing sincere nor apologetic about him. “I was very distracted this morning. I had something very important to do.”

If Mairon could have kicked him under the table without drawing attention to himself, he would have.

“You need to grow up.”

“How very bold of my baby brother to say that.”

Manwë’s lawyer-man, fairly silent until now, cleared his throat and attempted to diffuse the tension with that pitchy, timid voice of his.

“Maybe we should—”

Four pairs of eyes snapped to him and his mouth clamped shut with a tiny squeak. He became very fascinated, then, with the plain beige manila folder in front of him.

Hope was lost. No progress was being made. There was only one course of action from here on out.

Mairon waited three seconds, then five, tried to sound impartial, to look disinterested. He gave Manwë a small, placating nod, then flicked his eyes across the table to Melkor.

“Maybe we should take a break.”

Chapter End Notes

plot twist melkor shows up to the break room expecting sexy times but instead mairon tells him off for being a giant brat & when the meeting reconvenes he is much more well behaved and manwë is ???

bundle of joy

Chapter Notes

huge thank you to [crackinthecup](#) for looking over this chapter for me bc my brain simply does not cooperate these days

timeline: year 12; August

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

Mairon hadn't been to Valinor in years.

It hadn't changed a bit, which was annoying. Still perfect and flashy, a brilliant beacon of hope and sunshine and glitter, a warm light for all mankind. It made Mairon's stomach clench up unpleasantly.

He allowed himself a quick glance skyward as he swung the car door shut. The mirrored glass walls towered imposingly into the clouds like a modern-day Mount Olympus. It gave him vertigo. It pissed him off.

As he got closer, the foyer doors slid open with a familiar *whoosh*.

It was like visiting a memory from years ago—an old school, your childhood neighborhood, the kitschy cafe you'd gone to on your first date—and hoping it felt different, and realizing it didn't. It still felt off. A place you didn't belong, a place you were glad to have left behind.

At least this bad memory had air conditioning.

Outside, the August heat was oppressive. Mairon almost felt bad, leaving Melkor behind in the car. But he had the window cracked open, his favorite Spotify playlist on, and the Kid in the backseat to keep him company, if all else failed. He would live.

It was muscle memory, stepping into the lobby and veering right toward the elevators, something Mairon had done hundreds of times before. He took his sunglasses off and set them atop his head, ignored the strangled sound the receptionist made.

“You—have to sign in.”

Mairon kept walking.

Truthfully, he did not have the time nor energy for bureaucratic trivialities. There was nothing official about this; he was doing Manwë a simple favor.

“Visitors have to sign in.”

Mairon pushed the *up* button.

“You know who I am, Eönwë. You sign me in. Would you give Manwë a ring, too, tell him I'm coming up?”

Eönwë made another strangled sound.

The elevator doors slid open and Mairon stepped inside.

“You can’t just—you—*he’s in a meeting.*”

The doors slid shut.

Much like the majority of Valinor, the inside of the elevator was made up of mirrors, polished to perfection. For lack of options, Mairon was forced to stare at his own unamused reflection.

Going in, he’d expected some dirty glares. He knew well enough he was not welcome here. He hadn’t left a particularly good last impression. Though, technically, all charges had been dropped. As far as the world at large knew, he’d been cleared, never done a thing wrong in his life.

Still, betrayal, or even the mere idea of it, was not easily tolerated.

As he reached the big man’s floor, the elevator dinged softly, like a wind chime twinkling in the breeze. The walls were a crisp white, the carpet soft beneath Mairon’s boots as he treaded down the corridor—all of it was positively ethereal.

A pair of skittish interns gaped as he walked past, their eyes growing a fraction wider. Word must have spread; he’d become a legend, a living cautionary tale. Well, it was either that, or the shock of how out of place he looked among all the three-piece suits and crisp blouses.

He hoped it was the former. Infamy was thrilling. It was far more interesting, being the villain of a story.

Yet, beneath that, it felt wrong. Being within these walls sent jitters through him, a nameless, insidious anxiety thrumming under his skin, screaming at him that he didn’t belong. He wondered, distantly, if it was guilt, a bout of unexpected remorse for what he’d done.

He forced the feeling down. It was in the past; what was done was done. He didn’t have time for melodrama.

Manwë’s office, predictably, was empty. Eönwë had implied as much.

Beyond the glass doors of the main meeting room a little further down the hall, the king was holding court. Manwë looked very grand with his white hair spilling over his shoulders, hands clasped politely on the table in front of him. He had a glazed look in his eye. Evidently, that was a mannerism he shared with his brother—much like on Melkor, it was a sign that he was bored as all hell.

He was listening to an advisor drone on, a dull-looking elderly man who Mairon assumed wasn’t particularly interesting. But Manwë persevered. He couldn’t let his people down.

Mairon, the good Samaritan that he was, cut the monotony short.

He rapped on the glass door and didn’t wait for an invitation before poking his head inside. A dozen pairs of eyes turned to stare him down. At the far end of the table, the head of accounting sputtered loudly. She’d choked on her coffee and was trying to hide her predicament behind an elegantly raised hand. Mairon graced her with a smug little look—notoriety was a *drug* and he was utterly high on it—before swiveling back to Manwë.

“You’re late,” he said.

It was so utterly silent that his mock-whisper resounded through the room like a shout.

Manwë's phone was upside-down on the tabletop in front of him. When he flipped it to check the time, he cursed under his breath in a very unlordly manner.

“Oh, we've gone well past our scheduled hour.”

Everybody moved at once like an alarm had gone off—gathering their things, hastily draining their last sips of coffee, tripping over one another to follow Manwë's unspoken command like the mindless cronies they were.

At the sudden rush of noise, Manwë looked up sharply.

“Stay put. We're not done.”

And in an instant, everybody fell inhumanly still. Another hush swept over the room.

Mairon had never been so glad to have left a place behind.

Vaguely, he remembered how it had been. Manwë's word was law and it was followed religiously, in complete disregard of one's own feelings or ambitions. The only way to the top was to be the perfect servant, an utter ass-kisser, but even then glory wasn't strictly guaranteed.

“Go on with the report,” Manwë elaborated. “You can summarize when I get back. I'll only be a few minutes.”

Mairon slipped back out into the hall. He leaned heavily against the bland, white wall.

As he waited for Manwë, his attention drifted, eyes scanning the length of the corridor, pausing on the break lounge a few doors down. It was the one place in the building he'd thoroughly enjoyed. A handful of good memories had been made there—illicit makeout sessions, and the like. He vividly recalled the way the backs of those plastic chairs would dig into his spine when—

“I do apologize. I completely lost track of time.”

The doors closed after Manwë. Behind the glass, rather than return to their meeting, his royal court stared.

Mairon ignored them. He looked up at Manwë with a mildly exasperated sigh.

“You were supposed to be waiting for us downstairs.”

Manwë, too stubborn to take the blame for things that were absolutely his fault, did not grace this with a response.

Instead, he asked, “Did you pick him up?”

“Yes, he's in the car. And Melkor sends his regards, and—”

Mairon held out the folder he was carrying; automatically, Manwë took it from him.

“—these.”

“That's perfect. Thank you. Look, I'll pick him up around nine. He shouldn't be any trouble.”

“He won't be,” Mairon assured him. “We'll give him a pack of animal crackers and set him loose

in the yard with Wolf.”

Manwë’s face twisted into his usual concerned-parent-worried-about-leaving-his-child-with-questionable-family-members cringe. Naturally, he was very finicky about his son’s wellbeing.

“Please don’t let him play outside in a heatwave for six hours. And please feed him something other than animal crackers. Dinner, maybe? And water—that’s important. Kids need water. Or juice. He needs to stay hydrated. Did I mention the heatwave?”

“I’ll think about it,” Mairon promised. “If there’s any of those donuts left when you’re all done here, do bring them.”

“I’ll think about it,” Manwë countered pleasantly. More seriously, he added, “Thank you for doing this, really. I appreciate it.”

“Sure,” Mairon said, and they slipped into silence.

With an awkward sort of nod and a sound like he meant to clear his throat, Manwë turned and disappeared back into the meeting room.

There was no music in the elevators in Valinor—just the mechanical drone of the machine, the gears and pulleys, the soft buzzing of the fluorescents overhead.

On his way back down, Mairon again stared at his reflection. For a moment, he felt inclined to smash the mirrors. Thankfully, that moment passed.

As dearly as he enjoyed all the dirty looks he got, he did not intend on setting foot here again. It set him on edge. Some things were meant to stay in the past.

He’d had no choice in the matter this time around, though—Valinor was conveniently on their way home from the preschool and the documents that’d needed delivering had a strict due date.

Mairon had been selected as the lucky messenger because Melkor was, if he remembered correctly, legally prohibited from coming within twenty-five yards of the building. So, he’d parked out front and waited patiently with the Kid as Mairon scuttled off to do his bidding.

(More importantly, Melkor’s choice of footwear that morning had been atrocious and Mairon stubbornly refused to let him be seen in public.)

Mairon was halfway to the front doors, picking up speed like he could outrun that unsettling anxiety blossoming in his ribcage, footsteps echoing about the vast foyer like gunshots, when Eönwë called out to him.

He paused, turned.

Slowly, Eönwë set down the receiver, like the phone call he’d just finished had been particularly distressing.

He hesitated, vexed, looked between Mairon and the phone like it was all a complex math problem.

“Manwë said to tell you, um, *cranberry juice*. He said you would know.”

It was amusing, watching the big man’s resident goody-two-shoes furrow his brows in confusion, like he couldn’t fathom why Manwë was suddenly treating the enemy like a friend.

He’s my brother-in-law, actually, Mairon didn’t say.

“Noted. Thank you.”

Outside, the noon sun was blinding. Mairon squinted and groped desperately for his sunglasses. He managed to reach the car in one piece. He yanked the driver’s side door open and slid inside.

The leather seat burned. The air smelled like humid Cheetos.

“Did you go see my dad?” asked the Kid from the backseat. He was eating Cheetos.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I had to go give him something.”

“A present?”

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

The Kid turned his attention back to his tablet. Mairon found it troubling that a five year old had been given one—but the Kid was spoiled rotten. Manwë and Varda would fawn over him like he was the best, most precious, most wonderful little baby boy to ever walk the Earth. He got anything he wanted and got away with anything he wanted. It was frightening, truly.

But today, Manwë was working late and Varda was out of town at a conference, and Mairon was stuck with him. As was Melkor, but Melkor *liked* the Kid (which was unfathomable) and it wasn't much of a chore for him to play caretaker for a few hours. (More unfathomable still was that Manwë, the loon, trusted them both enough to have them put down as authorized guardians. He'd just—done it, no questions asked.)

Mairon blinked.

His hands were clenched over the steering wheel, knuckles white. The clock on the dashboard told him he'd lost two minutes. Slowly, like wading through molasses, he woke from a blank trance.

It took him another few seconds to realize Melkor was touching his face, smoothing out the frown creasing his forehead.

“Where'd you go?” Melkor asked. “Was it that bad? In there?”

“It's fine.”

Melkor pulled his hand away but continued to hover. Mairon kept his gaze trained on the asphalt road as it blurred in and out of focus through the scorching heat. Still, he felt Melkor's eyes on him, concerned.

“What happened?”

“Really,” Mairon insisted; he glanced at Melkor then back at the road, “nothing.”

“Just say the word and I'll—”

Melkor paused, turned to look back at the Kid. The Kid was far too busy swiping his Cheeto-covered fingers over his tablet screen to overhear.

“—*k-word* my brother for you.”

“That’s very sweet, dearest, but he was the only person in that entire building who didn’t look at me like I was the gum stuck to the bottom of their shoe. It’s all good. He was a perfect gentleman. Besides, if you kill him, we’ll be stuck with the Kid for all eternity.”

Melkor made an *eh* face. “I suppose Varda would come get him eventually.”

“Right. Well, we’d be stuck facing her wrath, then.”

“What’s a wrath?” asked the Kid. Evidently, he wasn’t quite as oblivious to his surroundings as they’d thought.

Melkor half-turned in his seat, leaning his elbow against his headrest. Mairon took advantage of this moment of inattention to lean over and steal a sip of Melkor’s iced coffee.

“You know when you forget to brush your teeth before bed and your mom comes into your room to yell at you, and then she sees your toys strewn about everywhere and she gets even more mad?”

The Kid looked up from his game, wide-eyed.

He whispered, “Yeah.”

“That’s what.”

Melkor and the Kid had a natural camaraderie, a rock-solid bond that had just *happened*, seemingly out of nowhere. Putting it quite simply, he was good with kids, through absolutely no effort of his own.

Contrarily, Mairon wasn’t a fan. Children freaked him out. He got on with the Kid well enough, but their interactions rarely went beyond sarcastic jokes and snappy back-and-forths. The Kid seemed to love it, though, being treated like a friend rather than a responsibility. With Mairon, there were no rules.

Naturally, Varda wasn’t overly fond of the fact, but she didn’t like Mairon very much to begin with, so his interactions with the Kid didn’t particularly taint his and Varda’s relationship any more than Mairon simply *breathing* did.

She liked Melkor even less, but he had the makings of a good parent, which was astounding in and of itself, so she couldn’t very well let loose an avalanche of unfounded criticism. It was improbable, that the one thing they agreed on, of all things, was raising a child.

Melkor turned back around in the car seat just as Mairon was setting the stolen coffee back in the cup holder. He narrowed his eyes. Innocently, Mairon said nothing.

He craned around to fasten his seatbelt, and started the car.

“You still have that on your arm,” the Kid piped up from the back. His voice was slightly singsongy, airy and suspicious, like he had hidden intentions and the punchline was yet to come. Children were devious like that.

“Mm,” Mairon told him.

“Did you draw those yourself?”

“Mm,” said Mairon as he pulled out onto the road.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. This is why you have to listen to your mom and dad when they tell you not to scribble on yourself with your markers. See, I did. And now I can’t get it off.”

“I think you’re lying,” said the Kid in a tone that implied he *knew* Mairon was lying.

“And why’s that?”

“I’m not stupid. And ‘cause you always tease me.”

“Is that not allowed?”

“You’re my uncle. You have to be nice to me.”

Mairon jabbed his finger in Melkor’s general direction.

“Technically, *he’s* your uncle.”

“So are you. And I know what tattoos are ‘cause my dad has one. So, I gotcha,” he announced—and there was that punchline of his. “Liar. Busted! Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!”

Driving home with a small child in tow was an endless stream of, “*Are we there yet?*”

Then came a perky, “*Are we here?*” when they pulled up to an Aldi to stock up on cranberry juice, among other things.

When they reached their destination, the Kid’s grand conclusion was an excited, “*Ooh, a haunted house!*”

“You live in a haunted house?” he asked later, voice thick with amazement, as they unloaded their groceries from the trunk of the car.

He stood on his tiptoes and made a grab for the carton of cranberry juice, but Mairon gently swatted his hand away just in time. The Kid blew a raspberry at him.

He took a step back when Mairon went to slam the trunk shut and bounced impatiently on his heels, Cheeto-coated hands wrapped around the straps of his little backpack.

“Yes,” Mairon said.

“Is it *really* haunted?”

“No.”

“Then that’s not right. Are you lying again?”

“Guess you’ll have to come in and find out.”

Melkor maneuvered the bags he was holding to one hand to fish his house keys out of his pocket. Casually, he tossed them to Mairon, who walked ahead to unlock the door.

“Do you want it to be haunted?” Melkor asked the Kid.

The Kid peered up at him with a frown. He thought about it. He did a lot of thinking. Children were suspicious about everything, Mairon had noticed; they doubted the most simple,

straightforward things like everything had a double meaning, like adults always hid metaphors in their sentences.

After lengthy deliberation, the Kid decided, “No.”

Melkor made a small *hmm* sound and reached his hand out. The Kid took it, wrapped his sticky, pudgy fingers around two of Melkor’s and let himself get dragged along toward the door.

“Then you better be on your very best behavior. The bad ghosts only come out to scare bad children.”

In an instant, the Kid’s eyes went saucer-wide. He froze and tugged Melkor to a halt alongside him.

“But Mairon said there are no ghosts. I don’t wanna go in if there’s ghosts. You said no ghosts!”

“I wouldn’t know,” Mairon confessed. He paused on the front steps and shrugged. “I’ve never seen them myself. Perhaps because I’m always on my best behavior.”

“Fine,” the Kid said quickly, “I’ll be good. You can tell the ghosts. I promise. But I wanna meet your dog. My dad said you have a big dog, so I wanna play with him. But not with the ghosts.”

Two hours later, they had waffles.

When the Kid had first come inside the house, he’d taken a quick look around—at the polished floor and sleek kitchen appliances and had decided that, no, it was not haunted after all. “*Too new*,” he’d said, “*ghosts like old stuff*.”

All it took after that was an excited bark from the yard to send the Kid speeding through the house and out the back door, shedding his backpack as he ran. Wolf had sniffed him, deemed him a friend, and thus an unbreakable bond had been born.

Some time later, Mairon had ducked out back for a smoke and, in an instant, Melkor had materialized beside him, dragging him quickly back inside.

“Not in front of the kid,” he’d chastised, pulling Mairon along. “For your own sake. Varda would have your head, and to be frank with you, I don’t want her to have your head. It’s a good head. Let’s keep it on your shoulders. They’re good shoulders. You’re too bloody perfect for me to let her skin you alive, okay?”

And so, Mairon had been shuffled along through the living room with his half-lit cigarette and banished to enjoy his little moment of me-time in the driveway.

As he’d sat on the front steps, the smoke curling around him making everything go quiet for a blessed few minutes, Old Man Saruman from next door had popped up out of nowhere with an aluminum foil parcel in hand.

Ergo—waffles.

Mairon slipped soundlessly into the kitchen and set the bundle down on the countertop like it was a volatile explosive.

Melkor blinked at it. With his hands otherwise occupied at the moment, he motioned with his head in the general direction of their eccentric neighbor’s house, posing an unspoken question.

Mairon sighed. “He said, he was looking out his window and saw the Kid playing in the back, and thought he might be hungry. And then he talked about how much he loves kids, how much he wishes he had his own, or that there were more running around the neighborhood so he could make them all waffles and—homemade prune juice.”

Melkor eyed the little bundle distrustfully. Old Man Saruman had a thing for prunes. If there were prunes in the waffles, nobody would have a good time.

“I don’t trust those for a second,” he announced.

It sounded very menacing coming from a tall man with a sharp knife in hand, even if said man was using said knife to slice fruit.

Melkor was in the process of making a fresh pitcher of ice-cold lemonade, simply because the Kid had declared he wanted some. The wooden cutting board in front of him was soaked through with juice; it spilled over the edges and all across the countertop. It was so very like Melkor to make a mess—he was dangerously skilled in the kitchen but, *good god*, the chaos he left in his wake was a nightmare.

Mairon knew he’d be left with clean-up duty, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be mad. He was too distracted by the undone buttons of Melkor’s atrocious palm tree print shirt to care about much else.

He felt a flush coming on which, if prompted, he was fully prepared to attribute to the heat. The back door was open so that they could keep an eye on their tiny houseguest. And so, it was hot. Case closed. Mairon refused to admit that being around his stupid husband made him blush even now, ten-odd years into their little fling.

“No, I’ve decided,” Melkor said abruptly. “You need to toss the waffles in the bin.”

A stray drop of lemon juice ran down his palm as he waved the knife to emphasize his point. He brought his hand up to his face to lick it off and promptly made a whiny *bleh* sound. With that, he turned back to the cutting board.

Meanwhile, Mairon’s inopportune unseemly thoughts were joined by a hysterical giddiness bubbling suddenly in his stomach.

See, *Melkor* had fallen hard and fast. He’d just *known*. And Mairon knew this because Melkor had never had any reservations about saying those three little words over and over, every morning, every night, in between every kiss.

It’d taken months before Mairon had dared to say them back.

Because it had scared him, how completely he’d wanted this, how utterly ready he’d been to give all of himself away. And even now, whenever he was reminded of the depth of his feelings, it felt like a slow-motion punch to the gut. It was almost too much, sometimes.

Beside him, Melkor made another elaborate *bleh* sound and leaned over to rinse his hands in the sink.

When he turned back, Mairon was still rooted in place, staring somewhat helplessly at Melkor’s face. Screw him. Screw him and those piercing blue eyes that went wide and so *warm* when they looked at Mairon, like in that instant nothing else mattered.

It made Mairon feel a tad bit less ridiculous, the knowledge that they were in the same boat.

“I’ll throw the waffles out,” he said blandly.

“You do that.”

Melkor’s eyes slipped down to his lips and then he was stepping closer, like a dam had broken and he too could no longer hold back.

He took Mairon’s face in his hands and kissed him—*damn him, he tasted like lemons*—and he took another step forward, and Mairon took another step back, and then a sharp stab of pain shot through the base of his skull as the back of his head hit something very solid.

He hissed in pain for the theatrics of it all, then helplessly, he laughed—brain finally shorting out. Melkor pulled away just enough to whisper an indulgent apology against his lips through a smile of his own.

Then, a little more clearly, he asked, “Has that fridge always been there?”

Mairon swatted at him but made no real effort to move away. He couldn’t, not when his face was cradled in Melkor’s hands like that. It turned him to goo, made him warm all over.

Instead, he burrowed closer and gave Melkor a tiny kiss, a reprimand. Melkor, the bastard, smiled even wider against his lips, and Mairon felt like he was coming undone, like he’d been put through Melkor’s fancy new food processor on the highest setting.

But Melkor wasn't done. He pressed his lips against Mairon’s again, and again, more insistently now—less of a kiss and more of a *kiss*.

And as much as Mairon *wanted*, as dizzy as he was, as fervently as his nerves sang with desperation, he forced himself to make a low, disapproving sound in the back of his throat and wriggle out of Melkor’s loving embrace.

“There’s a little person in the backyard,” he muttered, and cursed himself for being so responsible. “Not now.”

He punctuated that with another soft kiss, this time an apology.

A few hours later, the sun was going down.

They’d ended up ordering curry takeout. There had been a vote and Mairon had lost, two to one.

The Kid shoveled his chicken vindaloo like a seasoned professional, occasionally sipping at his Sprite like it was an afterthought rather than something he needed to stay alive. Mairon sat and watched, dumbfounded.

He suspected Varda’s cooking was to thank. Personally, Mairon no longer agreed to let anything she made anywhere near his person. *It’s not that spicy* was code for *don’t be a little bitch*, and Mairon, a grown adult immune to peer pressure, preferred to simply walk away unscathed.

After dinner, the Kid had disappeared back into the yard, this time armed with a new tennis ball (Wolf had chewed through the first one) and a bright red hula hoop (it was Thuringwethil’s).

But soon, his abundant stores of energy dwindled. As the sun set, everything glowing yellow and orange and pink, his laughter quieted, his enthusiasm faded away, until he sat cross-legged on the grass and refused to get up.

“I’m gonna sleep.”

“On the grass?” asked Melkor.

“The grass is good,” confirmed the Kid.

It took some time, but Melkor successfully persuaded him to come inside for his nap. He promised him iced cocoa and a comfy seat in front of the TV, and soon the Kid was up on his feet, making grabby hands until Melkor relented and hoisted him up into his arms.

In the past, a number of well-meaning but incredibly irritating people had told Mairon he would change his mind about children. They would say that all it took was a single moment—something insignificantly significant, like one’s husband having a silly, baby-voice conversation with the sleepy five year old he currently had wrapped around him—to feel that parental instinct kick in.

Mairon waited patiently.

He watched Melkor drop the Kid on the couch. He watched the Kid squeal. He watched Melkor poke the Kid in the tummy until the squealing turned to screaming laughter.

The moment never came. He didn't feel enlightened, didn't feel any new paternal bones sprouting in his body. Nothing changed—which pleased him immensely.

The two of them spent nearly fifteen minutes flipping through channels—Mairon watched from the kitchen, marveling at Melkor’s saintlike patience—until the Kid finally gasped and jabbed his finger enthusiastically at the screen.

And then, within minutes of settling down, he was asleep with his legs stretched out, his head tucked crookedly against Melkor’s arm.

Eventually, Mairon came to join them. He brought with him two tall glasses of iced coffee (decaffeinated, because Melkor wasn't allowed anything else past four in the afternoon). He set one on the coffee table, and passed the other to Melkor.

The sky outside had shifted from golden-red to a muted purple; now, the brightest source of light in the room was the glaring screen of the television.

From the speakers across the room an episode of *Adventure Time* droned on quietly. There was a frown etched between Melkor’s brows as he watched. He reached out blindly for the coffee Mairon handed him, too morbidly fascinated to tear away from the TV.

“Manwë texted he’ll be here in twenty,” he said distractedly, eyes still on the horned demon onscreen yelling at a small boy and his strange dog.

“Splendid,” said Mairon. “You’ll spill your coffee.”

He righted Melkor’s glass before it ended up sloshed onto his lap.

Careful as not to jostle the Kid or the beverage, Mairon sat on Melkor’s other side. He curled his legs up in front of him and leaned against Melkor, using his shoulder to rest his head.

Though the back doors had already been closed, the room was still a touch too warm, almost uncomfortably so, but Mairon couldn't find it in himself to care. He had a cold drink and his favorite person-cushion, even if Melkor wasn't the most comfortable of pillows. Briefly, everything was right in the world.

He felt Melkor shift beside him, then a soft pressure at the top of his head, a little kiss, and Mairon wished he could keep this moment, capture what he was feeling like one would a photo, and store it away for safekeeping.

Then came a snore from the other end of the sofa and the bubble burst.

Mairon pushed himself halfway upright and looked at the Kid, then at Melkor. He hoped his expression got his point across quite clearly.

“Please don’t agree to play babysitters again unless we’re getting paid for it. He got handprints all over the fridge. The dog’s covered in Cheeto-crumbs. It’s exhausting. I’m exhausted.”

“You hardly did anything.”

While this was a good point, Mairon refused to give Melkor the satisfaction.

“I tied his shoes.”

And Melkor did that horrible thing again, eyes crinkling, that warm light seeping through as he smiled, just barely, lips quirking. Mairon wanted to climb inside that feeling and live there.

“He really likes you,” Melkor insisted. The genuine conviction in his voice left no room for doubt.

“Because I tied his shoes?”

Melkor huffed a soft laugh.

“Because you let him have Sprite with dinner, I think.”

“Ah. That’ll do it.”

Melkor’s smile turned a bit more serious; he dipped his chin to look Mairon in the eye as though telepathically trying to communicate, *I mean it, he likes you.*

With the hand that wasn’t wrapped around his glass he reached out toward Mairon’s face and the backs of his fingers over his cheek and through his hair, sweeping a stray strand behind his ear. Because he knew Mairon was weak, that a shred of familiar contact would make him crumble, that a single gentle touch could convince him of utterly anything.

It worked, of course.

Mairon settled back against Melkor’s shoulder in a daze—he really was tired—and if it weren’t for the imminent arrival of their little houseguest’s father, he would have allowed himself to fall asleep, leaving Melkor no choice but to haul him up to their bedroom later in the evening.

But Manwë was minutes away and Mairon was going to have to put his people face back on. He just had to hold on a bit longer.

Within seconds the Kid snored again, the wet snuffly sound echoing about the room, upsetting the balance. He squirmed and shoved against Melkor, kicking his legs out over the side of the sofa to get comfortable.

But then it went quiet again. Mairon turned his head and buried his face comfortably against Melkor’s shirtsleeve, trying his best to ignore the annoying voices from the television. He was going to enjoy this moment while it lasted.

Despite his best intentions, he must have drifted off. It was the combined efforts of the heat and Melkor's even breathing that did it, that lulled him into a deep enough trance to pull him under.

The last thing he remembered before everything went dark was Melkor's contemplative voice breaking through the silence.

"You know, I think he's drooling on me."

Chapter End Notes

it's the 5 year anniversary!! if you've been here since august 2015 god i am so sorry

starstruck

Chapter Notes

a love letter to [this post i saw on tumblr](#) and also to long drives on summer nights

timeline: year 9; July

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

There's something utterly delightful about having a *reputation*, the kind that starts like an urban legend, a story parents tell their kids to keep them on their best behavior.

Don't go near that house. You know who lives there. Promise me you won't go there. Now, eat your vegetables or those monsters will steal you away in the night and gobble you up.

Neighbors cross to the other side of the street to avoid them, eyes blown wide. When they cut to the front of the line at the coffee shop, everyone lets them, too frightened by the stories—none of which are true, of course—to object. Nobody parks too close to their car for fear of scratching it, for fear of accidentally breathing the same air as them should they load their groceries at the same time.

They don't do anything wrong, *per se*. They don't commit any crimes—at least not the sort the public thinks they do. They don't murder small animals, or torture children in their basement. They don't worship the devil, or make blood sacrifices during the full moon. It's just the *reputation* that precedes them. Everyone expects them to be awful, so they step into those shoes, graciously fulfill the role that's thrust upon them. It's not all bad; frankly, it can even have its perks.

But society's expectations, however amusing, weigh heavy. They become an unpleasant burden to bear. As much fun as the whole charade can be, it's a relief to shed all of it every now and again, a breath of fresh air to step out of the box they've been put into. Sometimes, it's good to just *be*.

On occasion, such as now, they drive to the next town over for a late evening grocery run, a blessed half an hour away from the haunted stares of their neighbors at the local supermarket. And, Mairon says, the weather's nice. He wants to head out somewhere far enough to enjoy the drive, to get out of the house for a while, clear his head.

Still, their infamy spreads far and wide.

Even miles away, there are those who recognize them, whose reactions are *extreme*, to say the least. As they mill around trying to pick the right cheese to go with their crackers, then the right wine to go with their cheese, they run into one of Melkor's least favorite characters, the despicable Ar-Pharazôn—and while he's not necessarily local, he's somehow always there, always lurking, always around. When he saunters casually into the wine aisle, he looks up from his phone and catches a glimpse of Mairon idly reading the label on the bottle in his hands. He promptly walks into a display stand and smashes a crate of Garnacha.

As dearly as Melkor dislikes him, in that moment he can only think, *same*.

And that thought lingers.

And lingers.

It ages like, well, a fine wine.

On their way back, as they speed down a dimly lit road, it's overpowering enough for Melkor to twitch in his seat—restless, impatient.

Essentially hypnotized, he watches Mairon drive. He watches strands of his hair, carelessly bunched up to escape the heat, whip around his face in the whistling wind from the rolled-down windows. He watches the way his hands wrap loosely around the wheel, the rings on those long, practiced fingers glittering, reflecting the streetlamps as they zip by. It's a sight he's sure he couldn't pull his eyes away from if his life depended on it. Quite frankly, he thinks he's so in love he could die.

Part of him wants nothing more than to get this trip over with, to get home and unload the groceries, get his hands on the treats. *One* treat in particular, actually. (God, that's *bad*. God, he's pathetic.)

Contrarily, the other, equally lust-addled but infinitely more patient side of him *doesn't* want this to end. He's beyond glad the drive is taking forever. For as long as he's able, he wants to drink in the sight, to stare unabashedly, unblinking, until his eyes burn.

The night is late enough for the sky to have faded to black, but Mairon seems to radiate a warmth, a bright light that just can't be extinguished. Everything about him is golden. He's being melodramatic, Melkor knows this, but there's something about their environment, the rush of it all, that shorts out his remaining rationality.

The scrap of road they're on is desolate, two lanes surrounded by thick forest, the streetlamps seemingly miles and miles apart. It really is dark; the moonlight is pale, barely there. There's nothing but the headlights, the trees blurring on either side, the hiss of the wind. It makes everything just a touch more exhilarating, puts it on the dangerous side of exciting.

Unsurprisingly, it boils to a peak.

It often ends this way when Mairon is involved—he makes Melkor's sanity slip, makes his baser instincts take over. He makes him want to do things he wouldn't normally consider doing in a public setting, or, more aptly, a semi-public setting, or, truthfully, *anywhere*.

And however he tries to resist (no, he doesn't, not particularly), he can't help but imagine Mairon sprawled on their bed, face shoved into the pillows, wrecked so beautifully, so completely. Turning him on his back when he's done with him—he would have to, Mairon would lack the strength to do it himself—and finally letting him breathe. Mairon, red in the face, so prettily flushed all over, strands of hair stuck to him with sweat, eyes glazed over.

He would kiss him then, so thoroughly Mairon would forget his own name. He would kiss him until he wanted to go again, and he would take Mairon apart until it was too much, would make him shake and shatter until he could no longer move, could no longer make a sound.

It would be a disservice, he decides—well, there's not much deciding going on, his mouth forms the words before his brain can approve them—not to tell Mairon exactly what he's thinking.

“If you weren't driving, I'd kiss you senseless.”

It's a bit of an understatement, but it seems to do the trick.

Instantly—and it's an unlikely display of impulsiveness, of that well-concealed wicked streak of his—Mairon yanks the wheel and swerves the car off to the side onto the gravel patch by the road.

In the blink of an eye, the ignition is off, and everything goes dark and deafeningly quiet. Melkor, momentarily stunned, stares blankly out at the tree line in front of them, at the dust rising up from where they'd skidded to a stop. Then, entranced, he turns to face Mairon.

Mairon's eyes are dark. He blinks, takes a steeling breath like he's surprised at himself, like he hadn't intended on being quite *this* dramatic. But as soon as it'd appeared, all hesitation vanishes. His gaze steadies and focuses on Melkor, and it's suddenly *too* calm, too controlled. And Melkor knows, right away, that Mairon had felt his eyes on him all along, had felt him watching, staring, fantasizing. They'd been building up to this—it's the *furthest* thing from impulsive.

Until this moment, Mairon had kept his eyes on the road and his hands to himself. He'd pretended not to catch on to Melkor's undivided attention, had put on a grand show of restraint. But he *wants* just as badly. Melkor's invitation had simply given him the opening he'd needed.

"Not driving anymore," he says.

For a handful of seconds—the kind that drag on and on—they sit there, staring at each other. The soft smile growing on Mairon's lips makes Melkor dizzy. It's sweet and knowing and vicious all at once, like he means to reach over and run his fingers gently, deceptively so, through Melkor's hair, then tighten his grip and tear him apart.

Melkor's brain shorts out. "Isn't pulling over in a spot like this just the perfect way to get murdered?" he asks, because he can't piece together much else.

"I thought *we* were the creatures lurking in the dark."

"Fair point," Melkor says. He *thinks* he says it, but he doesn't quite hear the words leave his lips, because Mairon is undoing his seatbelt and swinging his leg over to straddle him. He takes Melkor's face in his hands and tips his head back forcefully, violently, knocks it against the headrest with a damning thud.

His gaze lingers on Melkor's lips before flicking back up to his eyes.

"Do your worst," he says.

Put your money where your mouth is, he means.

That snaps Melkor awake. His hands, hovering uselessly at his sides until a moment ago, dig into Mairon's waist with a feverish hunger. Mairon makes a pained sound; it's going to bruise and Melkor knows him well enough to know he *wants* it to. Melkor leans forward just as far as he's able with Mairon's fingers digging into the back of his neck, his thumbs against Melkor's jawline holding him firmly in place. He kisses him and, graciously, Mairon leans in to meet him halfway.

Everything is fuzzy when they part. It's so quiet around them on that patch of road, Melkor realizes, that his labored breathing is as loud as thunder, that he can hear the rush of his blood thudding in his ears.

And if they do get murdered, if someone materializes out of the woods in a cheap rubber mask like in a low budget crime flick, *what a way to go*. Suddenly, all those songs and poems and cheesy one-liners make sense—the idea of *I'll die happy tonight* isn't so far away, in that moment.

He feels ridiculous. He must look it, too, because he finds Mairon watching him intently when he

meets his eyes again, his expression sharp and amused.

“Look at you,” Mairon says, and his voice is a hoarse little whisper that makes Melkor dizzy, that shoots all the way down. “You want me so much it’s making you stupid. You’re so good to me, you know that?”

His thumb slides over Melkor’s bottom lip, tugging, teasing. It’s cruel and he’s gorgeous and Melkor wants to be taken apart, he wants to take *Mairon* apart, and, really, either option is fine—he can’t decide, he doesn’t want to, can’t be bothered to, doesn’t want to think about anything.

All he knows is that every last part of him is on fire, he’s burning alive and it has very little to do with the summer night. He knows that his pants are too tight, and that his fingers are locked in place, clenched against Mairon’s sides so fervently he thinks they might be stuck inside him.

“I think,” he starts, pauses to make an embarrassing little sound when Mairon shifts against him, then starts again. “I think that if someone did sneak up now and kill us, I’d go happy.”

He says it because it’s still all he can manage in that moment, the thought spinning around his mind like a broken record. He’s achieved enlightenment, the epitome of bliss, and he needs the world—he needs *Mairon*—to know it.

Visibly, Mairon bites back a laugh. Melkor must certainly look as wrecked as he feels. Delirious. Senseless. Oh, how the tables have turned.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mairon says pleasantly.

His hands are gentle, feather light, barely grazing now, running against his jaw, his neck, tracing idle patterns—and then they’re gone.

Mairon ducks his head and dips against Melkor’s throat, kisses him there. There’s the slightest drag of teeth, a dull ache and a promise of more, and Melkor considers how utterly awkward it would be to come from that alone.

“Don’t die on me just yet, okay?”

The words are hot against his skin; he feels more than hears the hum of them, and it’s all so sweet, so deceptively tender.

Mairon’s fingers reappear then, seemingly out of thin air, down at his waist, undoing his zipper. Belatedly, Melkor jolts awake, clarity rushing in like an avalanche, making his head spin.

One moment his hands are—*somewhere*, he doesn’t remember where, it doesn’t matter—the next one of them’s in Mairon’s hair, grabbing a fistful too close to his scalp. And he *tugs*, and he knows it hurts, he can just about feel the aftershock of it himself. He tilts Mairon’s head back, angles him just right and closes the gap between them, and of all the things Mairon’s car is forced to bear witness to, it’s that kiss that’s the most indecent of all.

It’s a gift to be able to watch Mairon’s perfect composure break, to watch the fractures grow and spread until he’s falling, crashing through the ice at his feet. His movements begin to stutter, fingers struggling, clumsy, uncoordinated. The fact that it’s so unlike him to be anything less than utterly in control makes it all the more mesmerizing. Perhaps Melkor’s half-baked plan to take him apart then and there *is* working after all.

He decides to kick it up a notch while he’s still got his wits about him, while he’s still capable of stringing together a handful of words in the correct order.

“If we were anywhere else, I’d flip you around and hold you down.”

Mairon swallows. “I know.” Beneath his fingertips, Melkor can feel the shiver that runs through him. There’s a second, maybe two of silence where Mairon holds back, tries not to sound too obvious, too eager. “We can make do and I could just promise not to move.”

Melkor’s laugh is a disbelieving huff.

“You couldn't if you tried.”

The words come out before he remembers that Mairon is not the sort to shy away from a challenge. And a challenge this is.

Mairon tilts his chin up—proud, undefeated. He stretches his arms out on either side of Melkor’s head, leans them comfortably against the headrest. What goes on behind him Melkor doesn't see, but the headrest jolts once, and he knows Mairon intends to make a point of crossing his hands at the wrists to keep himself properly restrained.

Bluntly, Melkor says, “If you touch me, you lose.”

And, *God*, he *wants* Mairon to lose. He can’t, for the life of him, figure out what had compelled him to issue such a dare just as Mairon had been about to touch him. Somehow—because, of course—Mairon still has the upper hand here. It’s exquisite, artful psychological warfare.

“Can I kiss you, though?” Mairon asks, deceptively innocent.

Melkor answers him without words; instead he leans forward, obliges him. His body moves of its own accord, well-versed in what to do and where to go where Mairon is involved. He puts his hand around them both and there’s very little thinking involved after that, really. How could there be, with Mairon’s lips against his, his breaths coming fast in little gasps, his arms straining like he wants to, *needs* to touch but knows he can’t. Melkor can picture it quite vividly, in minuscule bursts of clarity between one heavy breath and the next—Mairon’s nails digging into his palms in sheer desperation, fingers shaking, trying to defy him and break free.

All of Mairon is trembling, he registers, from his fingertips to the erratic flutter of his heart, his shuddering whimpers. All of him is flushed, hot to the touch, coming apart at the seams.

A sharp prick of pain blossoms at his lip, and with it the taste of blood, and it stings when Mairon’s tongue runs over it, fades to a dull ache when Mairon kisses him harder. Melkor knows he’s not going to last very long. He’s not particularly embarrassed. He’s too far gone to feel even the slightest inkling of shame.

Mairon drags a line of messy kisses across the line of his jaw, the sloppy kind that make Melkor want to implode. He stops right by his ear, where his jaw meets his neck, and presses another kiss there, this one softer, the kind that lingers. It feels more calculated, infinitely more devious. It feels like Melkor’s playing a losing game.

“I was going to blow you, you know,” Mairon says, and, *oh*, as wrecked and breathless as he sounds, he’s undoubtedly the one in control here. He’s still trying to one-up Melkor like the monster that he is. But—*fuck*—it’s beyond attractive, it’s *ridiculous* how attractive it is, and Melkor’s movements stutter, grip clenching wholly against his will, and they both shudder.

An eternity later, Mairon adds, “Seems a shame. We took my car and all. There’s just enough space down there for me to get down on my knees. Too bad you chose the rules.”

“You're terrible.”

“Absolutely.”

“I love you.”

“I know,” he says, the arrogant bastard, but his voice cracks and he jerks forward into Melkor's palm, lets out a soft, little groan. He tucks his face against Melkor's shoulder again like he means to burrow his way inside, then leans back just enough to mutter against his pulse—*I love you, too*—so quietly that Melkor barely catches it at all. He feels lips press hotly against his skin, feels the scrape and drag of teeth, and knows he's well and truly coming undone.

Mairon's breath catches in a desperate burst and it's a single word, a tiny shaky *please* that does it, that sends Melkor hurtling over the edge. With the hand that's already fisted in Mairon's hair, he yanks him back again just enough to kiss him hard—he barely registers the violence of the motion, he just knows he needs *this*, and needs it now. He kisses the whimper of pain—and *that's* what gets Mairon off, because of course it does—from Mairon's lips, holds him there until they're both utterly out of air.

Drained, Mairon drops like a stone. He sags against him and, instinctively, Melkor wraps his arms around him to cradle him close. It's a smidge disgusting given the state of them, but no force in the world could make him care. Against him, Mairon is warm and pliable, relaxed in that way he only ever is when his mind is blissfully void of anything other than comfortable white noise. Melkor turns his head and presses his lips to the side of Mairon's head, just by his ear, careful not to jostle his tangled hair and the earrings caught crudely in it.

He adores Mairon like this, when he's coming down. He's wonderful, of course, when he's irritable, and stubborn, and *oh so* serious—but it makes it all the more breathtaking to see him taken apart, laid bare, unraveled so wholly. In those moments, his mask is gone, his pretenses and defenses, too. He just *is*, and he makes it look so beautiful.

There's something even more gratifying, still, to be the one to make him this way, to be the one to coax him into that state, to work him up and wind him down until he's too exhausted to complain about it, to take apart the puzzle pieces and slot them back together to create the most incredible thing.

When Mairon finally hauls himself mostly upright, he frees his arms from their self made prison—he'd won, of course—and settles them decisively on Melkor's chest. It's more of a smack, really.

“Fuck you. I have to drive another ten minutes like this,” he says, and he sounds *delightfully* worn out.

“How are you going to blame this on me? You're the one sitting on me.”

“Could've kept your pretty mouth shut.”

Mairon collects himself as much as he's able, rights his clothes, rudely wipes his sweaty palms off on the front of Melkor's shirt.

He puts on a good act, his exasperated-by-his-idiot-husband routine. But Melkor can read between the lines of his face, can see how pleased he is with himself, with the direction their mundane evening had taken. Because it exhilarates him, every now and again, being terrible, positively *awful*, doing the sort of things that would get him in trouble if he were to get caught.

Mairon reaches up to undo his hair, yanks at the tie with reckless abandon. He sweeps his fingers

through it, brushes the knots out, and ties it all back up again. It's mesmerizing—the controlled movements, the artistry of it, the sheer beauty Melkor can never quite find the right words to describe.

It's too dark to make out the flush on Mairon's cheeks but Melkor knows well that it's there. He knows Mairon's every quirk, every tick, every reaction. He goes red so, so easily, and it's a sight to behold, something Melkor sometimes feels horribly undeserving of. *God*, he's so far gone, he's still prepared to die right then and there, and die happy.

Mairon doesn't seem to notice that Melkor's gone loopy, lovesick like an idiot on day one of his honeymoon. Or if he does, he kindly doesn't point it out.

“Right,” he says instead. He looks up at Melkor and his gaze is sharp, pupils still blown wide. “Fuck you,” he says again, seemingly just as out of it as Melkor feels, his thoughts incoherent, his lips loose.

He's going to make the ten minute trip home in five, Melkor thinks, maybe even four if he disregards the concept of traffic lights and treats the speed limit as more of a mild suggestion.

“Are you gonna take me home, or what?”

He phrases it much like a joke but there's an unspoken promise there of a reckoning to come—

Mairon huffs at him, and then the mood shifts. In an instant, he pushes off and swings back around into the driver's seat to start the car.

—and Melkor intends to keep it.

Chapter End Notes

aside from all the horny stuff [this](#) is the dynamic i was going for

getting hotter

Chapter Notes

[@vxctorvale](#) and [@HailAleksander](#) requested a tropical honeymoon getaway but i took some liberties and went with a tropical 10 year wedding anniversary getaway instead ☺

timeline: year 12; October

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

The sweltering heat made it feel very much like the skin was melting clean off Melkor's body.

His mind, blissfully empty up until a half hour or so ago, was a jumble of thoughts, most of which revolved around water. Now, he thought, if he didn't up and dive into the sea or perhaps down a glass of something iced in a matter of seconds, he would lose the plot entirely.

He'd already ducked out of the direct sunlight, sprawled out on the padded rattan chaise under the shade of their huge straw umbrella. It wasn't enough. His hair was sticking to him all over with sweat.

It was incomprehensible, how Mairon did it—how he resolutely steered clear of the water, laid out in the sun for hours, how he seemed to enjoy every minute of burning himself to a crisp.

The weather was infernal, today and the day before and the day before that, and Melkor was on the verge of succumbing to it, perishing, wasting away into nothing.

It took great effort, but he lifted his head and looked back over his shoulder.

Still no Mairon.

He rationalized it—there was a line at the bar, the bar was all the way up the beach by the resort pool. Still, it was an itch he couldn't scratch, an uncomfortable prickle in his gut, the apprehension he felt when Mairon was out of sight for too long.

The only way out was through, though. He forced the nerves down, forced himself to unwind the tension rippling through him. He closed his eyes and knocked his head back against the cushion. He kept one leg propped up on the chaise, dropped the other over the side into the sand. It was nice and blistering, just painful enough to distract from his thoughts.

He took a breath, and another, in and out. He listened to the steady drone of the crashing waves, to children screaming about their inflatable toys and glorious tiered sandcastles, to vendors hollering about their wares as they traversed the shoreline with their portable coolers, on the hunt for tourists desperate enough for ice cream to pay triple what they would in town.

“Stop that.”

Melkor startled, and promptly pretended he didn't.

He forced his eyes open and squinted up at Mairon through the onslaught of white-hot sunlight.

Mairon stood over him with two elaborate drinks clenched precariously between the fingers of one hand, and a two-liter bottle of water in the other. It was ice-cold, dripping with perspiration. Melkor's heart lurched at the sight of it.

“Stop what?” he asked.

A particularly shrill scream rang out from the shore and, on instinct, Melkor turned to it, watched a man hoist his kid off his shoulders and into the waves.

Beside him, Mairon set the drinks down—there was a compact little table between their two seats, tucked safely out of the sunlight—and took a step back. He pushed his sunglasses down his nose and took a proper, lengthy look up and down Melkor's person over the rim. Vaguely, he waved a hand at all of him.

“All that.”

Melkor ignored the remark, too preoccupied with Mairon's appearance to bother with his own. There was, of course, the lovely smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, accompanied now by a nearly crimson blush—he was, tragically, severely sunburned. It would certainly hurt like a bitch in a handful of hours, once the heat subsided and the time came to wash the day away, but it was quite a wondrous sight to behold all the same.

With a grunt, Melkor sat up, swung his other leg over the side. He dug his toes into the hot sand—there was a childish glee to it that one never seemed to grow out of.

He grabbed at Mairon and tugged him close between his spread knees, tilted his head back to get a good view; he looked him in the eyes, even if he had to look up quite a bit to do so. The chaise wasn't built for amorous encounters, it was far too low to the ground. On second thought, if he were to casually disregard that they were out in public, he *was* right at eye level with—

“You're very handsy today,” Mairon told him.

He'd pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head and was peering down at Melkor with a soft, amused smile curling at his mouth.

He was a vision. This—the way he looked—was what made the unbearable heat and humidity worth it. He had his shirt unbuttoned, the kitschy tropical print one Melkor had procured for him in various shades of black. He was sensible enough to have slipped it on before heading to the bar; he was burned enough as it was. There were freckles across his collarbones, over his arms. The part of Melkor's mind that wasn't too overheated to function wanted his mouth on them now, immediately, as soon as humanly possible.

Mairon's hair was up and out of the way, loose and messy, locks of it floating around him like a copper halo in the feeble breeze, and the gold he'd adorned himself with—on his hands, in his ears—only added to the glimmer of it all. It made him a beacon of light, shimmering, irresistible.

Feeling slightly dazed, Melkor murmured, “What would I do without you?”

Mairon cocked his head.

“Not have anything to drink.”

“Unfathomable.”

“I'm pretty sure one of the pricks I used to work with at Valinor was at the bar,” Mairon said,

offhanded. “You run half a world away and your past still chases you. Wonder if that means something.”

“What it means is that all assholes with too much time and money on their hands end up on this island eventually.”

“How self-aggrandizing of you.”

Melkor made a face at him. *Am I wrong?*

Mairon sighed indulgently. Then, he nudged his head in the direction of the little table.

“The honey-coconut one’s for you.”

“I adore you.”

“That’s nice.”

“Don’t ever leave me.”

“Don’t plan on it.”

“I need you.”

“To bring you drinks?”

Melkor yanked him closer, hands splayed at the small of Mairon’s back. Mairon’s feet caught in the sand and he very nearly tumbled into Melkor’s lap in an inelegant heap.

They were only an inch or two apart now. Melkor’s neck hurt from craning it back the way he had to to keep his eyes on Mairon’s face.

“It’s too hot for this,” Mairon said, but his actions were contradictory.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on Melkor’s shoulders. He pushed his hands up into Melkor’s hair, adjusted the angle of his head, slanting it even further back. Faintly, Melkor felt something crack; he made a mental note to visit a chiropractor back home.

The amused little smile on Mairon’s lips grew.

“Can’t believe I fell in love with you, of all people.”

Melkor scoffed.

Without warning, he let go and rocked back—again, Mairon stumbled—out of reach. He leaned to the side and reached for his drink.

“No take-backs,” he said.

He took a sip. A few minutes in the sweltering heat and ice-cold was no longer ice-cold. It was a travesty. It was blasphemous, somehow.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Mairon promised.

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The air conditioning was on full blast, battling the heat that lingered even as evening turned to

night. Stubbornly, despite the humidity, they kept the balcony doors open to let in the sound of the crashing waves.

Mairon had showered first.

They'd come back to their hotel room after a delightful round of drinks at the poolside bar; the music had been deafening, pleasantly so, the neon lights bathing everything in ethereal pinks and blues and reds. Mairon had kicked his shoes off—neatly, of course—and made a beeline for the bathroom to wash the sweat from his skin, the sand from his hair.

He pulled on a pair of soft pajama bottoms and crawled onto the bed, sinking into the plush of it. Phone in hand, he propped himself up against the headboard.

He had a missed call from his therapist's office, which he ignored—he would get back to her later, when he was sober and slightly more than a third awake—and a handful of texts that seemed substantially more pleasant than whatever it was his shrink wanted to discuss.

He opened up a picture from Thuringwethil of her and Wolf, the dog's outstretched tongue plastering her curls to the side of her face, and a text from Maeglin querying Christmas ornaments, as if it wasn't barely a week into October.

In hindsight, he thought, perhaps the air conditioning wasn't the best idea. A shiver ran through him. It was a tundra against his over-warm, aching skin; he'd spent too long in the sun that day and would surely feel the proper agony of it come morning. Worse yet, his hair was damp. The chill of the air made his ears burn.

But he didn't budge. He couldn't find it in himself to move.

Melkor emerged from the bathroom a quarter of an hour later, scantily clad, having completed his own routine.

He smacked the lights off with a flick of his hand and crossed the room in three long strides, dropping down onto the bedcovers. He stayed like that for a few seconds, then rolled partially on top of Mairon, using his hip as a pillow.

They remained like that, settled in comfortable silence.

Mairon went about his mindless scrolling. Unlike Melkor, who lay with his eyes closed and breathing even, Mairon did not know how to shut down so completely.

Eventually, an indeterminable amount of time later, Melkor moved, wriggling into a more comfortable position.

"You always smell so good," he said wistfully.

"It's the same wash," Mairon pointed out—they shared almost everything, save their individual little haircare luxuries. "You smell the same."

Melkor ignored him. Instead, he repeated, "So good," and turned his head to place a trail of kisses down Mairon's stomach, over the jut of his hipbone. His cool skin was a welcome comfort; Mairon's own still felt like it was on fire, despite the cold spray of the shower he'd forced himself under earlier.

Evidently not pressed close enough, Melkor turned fully onto his stomach, pinning the lower half of Mairon's body wholly under his. He crossed his arms over Mairon's abdomen and rested his

head on his forearms, looked up at Mairon through pitch black lashes. The blue of his eyes was ice-cold even in the muted yellow glow of the lone bedside lamp.

He was unreal. The sight never got old—not after the first time, or the second, or the thousandth. His gaze was fervent, like he would burn the world to the ground to get his way. It made Mairon feel small, like he was prey, or like he was privy to something holy he was entirely undeserving of. As absurd as it sounded to say aloud, to *think*, even, it felt a bit like being worshipped by a god.

There was a particularly restless energy about Melkor tonight, something hungry and eager that Mairon felt reverberate through his bones.

“What do you want?” he asked him. “You clearly want something.”

He got no answer. Silently, Melkor kept looking at him.

They breathed in tandem.

Melkor then lowered his head again, pressed another kiss to Mairon’s skin right above the hem of his pajamas. He looked back up, and continued to say nothing, but his intent had become quite clear.

Mairon held his gaze.

Distracted, he clicked his phone off and tossed it carelessly to the side.

He reached out and tangled his fingers into the hair at the crown of Melkor’s head, gently at first, graciously giving his permission. Immediately, Melkor’s expression went dark with want—because *this*, this was what he wanted. Mairon’s fingers curled; he gave Melkor an impatient tug.

“Go ahead,” he prompted.

Later, after Melkor had dug his fingers into Mairon’s waist and tugged him roughly down the length of the bed, undone his lacings and made his vision white out time and time again, Mairon found himself wondering distantly, somewhat hysterically, if the rumble of the waves outside was loud enough to mask the desperate sounds he tried and failed to keep behind gritted teeth, or if their neighbors were regrettably in on the spectacle of it all.

The thought dissipated as his back arched, as his breath caught. He reached out, grabbed at whatever was within reach, kicked up a mess in the sheets. The roaring in his ears rose, growing louder and louder, and then he crashed violently over the precipice.

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A strange humidity hung in the air in the mornings. It wasn't sticky like the nights were, wasn't uncomfortably stifling.

The curtains billowed in the crisp breeze. It was chilly, really, when the sun wasn't out yet. The room was nearly glowing, everything illuminated in pale blue as the world outside came to life.

Melkor rolled closer, nudged his head up against Mairon’s bare shoulder. It was magnetic, like the pull of gravity.

Clumsily, through the haze of sleep, his hand trailed down the length of Mairon’s arm until it reached his palm. He twined their fingers together.

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When Melkor stepped out of the surf, sloshing seawater over the sand, he found Mairon standing at the water's edge, contemplatively looking out at the endless expanse of the Mediterranean.

He'd been sitting when Melkor had gone in, a good several meters away from the reach of even the mightiest of the day's pitiful waves.

His feet were in the water now.

It wasn't all that strange. He would go to cool off every now and again, wade in the shallows, up to his calves and no further. It was rare, but it happened. It was all right so long as he had control, absolute certainty that he wouldn't get knocked over.

But there was something wistful about his gaze this time, something determined in the set of his shoulders.

Melkor sidled up beside him, dripping. They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the waves like two aged seamen reminiscing on the good old days.

The sun was high in the sky; the wind had dwindled down to nothing. It was scorching, suffocating almost.

Melkor looked down. Mairon's brow was furrowed. He held his head high, like the sea was proposing a challenge, a dare, and he was working up the courage to rise up to meet it.

Softly, Melkor laid out the question. "Do you want to come in with me?"

Mairon didn't look at him.

"I don't know." He was quiet for a moment, then. "I think I might."

"I'll hold on to you," Melkor assured him.

Mairon scoffed. It was a strange, nervous sound. He kept his eyes on the water.

"Promise?"

"Swear on my life."

Mairon exhaled and closed his eyes. Then, he squeezed his eyes shut tighter and jerked his hand out to the side for Melkor to take. He waved it pointedly as if to imply the whole thing would be off if Melkor didn't take the hint and grab him within a matter of seconds.

Melkor complied, took hold of the offered hand—immediately, Mairon's fingers latched tightly around his—and slowly, he turned and walked backwards.

It was fine up to a point, until a wave only an inch or two higher than the rest gave Mairon pause. He pulled back, resisted. His other hand swung up to Melkor's arm too, fingers clenching, as if to get him to stop.

It wasn't a windy day; the waves were tame, steady. The water was barely brushing his thighs.

"It's okay," Melkor told him.

"Fuck," Mairon replied.

But he let himself get pulled deeper.

It was a bit like exposure therapy, conquering something awful little by little.

Melkor hesitated, just for a moment. He wondered if Mairon would make a point to return the favor; for instance, if he would one day casually set a spider down in the palm of Melkor's hand and forbid him to flail or scream.

When the water hit Mairon's chest he made a small, strangled sound. Melkor stopped and pulled him close. His free arm went around Mairon to keep him steady. He was shaking—whether from fear or the cold, Melkor wasn't sure. His grip was verging on painful.

“You're all right,” Melkor told him. “We're gonna stay right here, promise.”

Mairon said nothing. He stared down at the water like it would rise up to meet him, to swallow him up.

“Hey,” Melkor said, then again when Mairon didn't react. “*Hey.*”

Mairon's eyes flicked sharply up to Melkor's face.

“I'm not letting you go,” Melkor assured him.

He got a twitch of a nod in return.

“I know,” Mairon said faintly.

Again, he nodded, more to himself than Melkor this time, and closed his eyes, breathed in. He took a step back, away from Melkor, so that he was no longer hanging off him.

“Must've drowned in a past life,” he muttered.

“Very funny.”

Mairon tried to scoff, but it came out as more of a timid sigh.

“It's the only explanation.”

His grip loosened like he meant to let go, then he dug his fingernails back into Melkor's arm.

“How do you think Wolf is doing?” Melkor asked.

“Are you trying to distract me?”

“Yes.”

“It's not working.”

“Answer the question.”

“Surely better than I'm doing right now.”

Melkor made a face. “Debatable, considering the company you left him in.”

“It's good company,” Mairon insisted. He was looking down at the water again. He'd stopped trembling as badly, but his vise-like hold on Melkor remained.

“He doesn't like strangers. Though,” Melkor added contemplatively, “you must admit he was very well-behaved when he met me.”

“He liked you because he could tell I did, is all—we don't need your ego getting any more inflated than it already is. Now, shut up and be quiet. I'm going to let go.”

“You sure?”

Mairon hesitated, unsure. “Yes,” he said anyway. He gritted his teeth and took another step back, bringing his hands down until their fingers were just barely intertwined. “Just—stay here.”

“I won't,” said Melkor. “I'll dive underwater and drag you down with me.”

Mairon scoffed. “Fuck you.”

Melkor returned his smile.

“I'll stay,” he said. “You know I will.”

Tentatively, Mairon unraveled their clasped hands and withdrew. He took another, stumbling step back—a flash of panic crossed his face—and stopped. He stood with his hands still raised, a bundle of coiled tension, but he stood alone, unsupported.

When he looked up at Melkor, there was a hint of something dangerous in his gaze, a frantic sort of intent.

“Pull me up, will you?” he asked.

Before Melkor could question the request, Mairon dropped, submerging himself completely.

Melkor waited a second, then two, mostly out of sheer surprise, then reached out just as Mairon came back up to the surface of his own accord, gasping. Before he even got his eyes open, his hands found Melkor's, desperately seeking something solid.

“Fuck,” he managed.

He blinked, and blinked again, trying to dislodge the water.

His hair was plastered across his face, the knot it was in now lopsided, hanging limply to one side. Water ran in rivulets down his forehead, his neck, his shoulders, as they heaved with desperate gulps of air.

“Shit,” he said. “Never doing that again.”

As ever, even soaked and trembling, teeth chattering, he was beautiful. He was the most beautiful damn thing Melkor had ever seen.

The idea struck him, then. It latched on like a thorn, a burning need begging to be fulfilled.

“How about,” Melkor asked, “just one more time?”

When Mairon glanced up, brows knit in endearing confusion, a soft, “Hm?” on his lips, Melkor felt that overwhelming pang again, the one that came more and more often with each passing day, a rush of staggering emotion that'd plagued him for well over a decade now.

“Just one more time,” he repeated.

Abruptly, he pulled his arms away and brought his hands to Mairon's face instead; Mairon swayed forward, bracing himself against Melkor's waist.

He dragged his thumbs over Mairon's reddened cheeks, brushed errant strands of sopping wet hair out of his eyes.

"Trust me," he said, and leaned down.

The kiss was a proposition, a question, and when they parted, Melkor could tell that Mairon had guessed what he was about to do. He got a little nod in response, and grinned.

"On three," he said.

Again, Mairon nodded. He offered Melkor an anxious, barely there shadow of a smile.

Briefly, Melkor bent down again, pressed his lips to Mairon's like he could pass on a piece of himself—a shred of courage, of reassurance, of the tangled mess of feelings that burned in his veins.

He pulled back just enough to whisper against Mairon's lips.

"One, two—"

Chapter End Notes

you can tell when a bitch (i'm bitch) grew up reading percy jackson when she's like
oh i know i'm gonna stick an underwater kiss in this mf

and also i have decided that mairon has a septum piercing in this chapter but lacked the
right moment to mention it. thank you

all there is to it

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 9; March

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

The empty stretch of the road ahead was the first time that day Mairon's head felt clear.

The morning commute had been chaos: blaring horns, sirens, the usual. In the office, he hadn't gotten a moment to himself; somebody constantly needed something. He grabbed calls between one meeting and the next, found himself accosted on his lunch break, then on his smoke break, and his second smoke break. The first three days of the week had gone by just fine, yet today, he'd woken up with zero drive and had powered through the day in a haze kept upright solely by copious amounts of coffee.

The here and now was a blessing. The sky was bleeding from blue to purple. There wasn't another soul in sight, no cars, no people. There was no noise. He could finally hear his own thoughts, hear the music he'd put on without having to turn up the volume to an extreme.

Everything was neat and orderly, just as it should be.

Then Melkor reached for Mairon's phone, tearing through the calm like a clumsy hand going through a rice paper screen. It was an apt comparison; Mairon had seen it happen more often than one would think was the norm. The sight, the sound of it never failed to unsettle him on some deep, visceral level.

He smacked Melkor's hand away.

"Not this again," Melkor pleaded.

"Too bad you're not driving."

In a sulk, Melkor retreated. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes under the pretense of annoyance. Within minutes, he was drumming his fingers against his thigh to the beat of the song.

The drive home before a long weekend offered a strange kind of freedom. Gone was the worry over the next morning's alarm, the hectic mental itinerary, the ever-growing list everything that was due in what was essentially just a couple of hours.

Even so, Mairon planned.

They had to stop for liquor and snacks. And ingredients. Thuringwethil had insisted she didn't want gifts; instead, the attendees were to bring food. "Homemade," she'd warned. "I'll know if it's store-bought. I won't let you in." Mairon had nodded sagely, though they both knew full well it wouldn't be him doing the cooking.

For once, rather than go out and get pissed in a garish club, she'd decided to throw a smaller get-together for her birthday, just a handful of people. "Maybe twenty," she'd said, "thirty at most." Again, Mairon had nodded. His interpretation of a *handful* differed ever so slightly. He wondered

if he ought to get her a bottle of Karuizawa Vintage, if he could get his hands on one. He knew the sheer price of it would annoy her.

“You think he broke his wrist?”

Melkor was talking again.

Mairon blinked himself back to awareness.

“Hm?” he glanced briefly at Melkor, then turned back to the road. “Who, Reeves?”

“Mm.”

“Were it any other door, I’d say he’d be fine—but the revolving door?” Mairon pursed his lips and gave a little shake of his head. “Sprained, if he’s lucky. *Broken*, if he’s lucky, really. Surprised his hand’s still attached.”

Melkor made a face. “He’ll file an insurance claim.”

Mairon hummed, contemplative.

“He might sue,” Melkor insisted.

“He won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Insurance, sure, but that’s not our loss. Lawsuit, no, because he’s a bad liar. He’d have to tell the truth,” Mairon said. He slipped into a mockery of Reeves’ particular cadence, “Got so distracted by my boss’ facial hair that I got my arm stuck in the door. Oops, my bad.”

He flipped on the turn signal and switched lanes.

“If it meant a hefty payout, I’d do it,” Melkor mused.

“He wouldn’t. He’s too proud.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I know things.”

By the time they pulled into the supermarket parking lot, the wind had picked up, the sky darkening to an ill-looking navy blue, almost gray, in the blink of an eye. Rain was on the horizon—no doubt it would start up at some point in the night and continue all through the next day.

It was nearing the end of March, but nature didn’t seem to have gotten the memo. Mairon threw his hood up as he stepped out of the car, pulling his coat tighter around himself. The air was cold and smelled of the oncoming storm.

Rain was much more pleasant to deal with from indoors. All Mairon had to do was finish the shopping and drive home. He didn’t plan on leaving the house the next day. He would laze about, Melkor would cook, get everything ready for their Saturday outing. Just one more hour and he could get some rest.

Bitterly, he longed for a scarf, for anything to wrap around himself to shield from the biting wind. His eyes watered. He felt his nose getting red. He felt himself growing irritable.

He swung the car door shut—*gloves too*, he thought, the metal freezing beneath his palm—and, on the other side, Melkor did too.

Now, Melkor didn't seem bothered. His leather jacket was unzipped, thrown on like it was an afterthought, his hair whipping in the violent wind. Not a thing about him seemed cold, not even the tiniest bit uncomfortable.

It was a good look, that arrogance, like not even the weather could touch him.

See, Mairon knew fairly well what Reeves would or would not do because his own approach to the situation was very much the same. Melkor's effect on him was just as, if not more so, profound. And yes, he was absolutely too proud to admit it aloud. The key difference—he wasn't enough of a clumsy wreck to jam his arm in a revolving door.

He contemplated it as he walked around the front of the car, struggling to stuff his keys into his coat pocket with frozen-stiff fingers. On second thought, he rationalized, there was another major difference to consider. Melkor was his husband. He could stare as much as he pleased. He could touch whenever he wanted. And he didn't actually have to admit to anything at all—because Melkor already knew.

“Where were you?” Melkor asked him, once he was close enough to hear.

It was a sixth sense of sorts. He could always tell when Mairon's mind floated off, separated briefly from his body.

Mairon stopped in front of him and wordlessly tilted his chin up. It wasn't a question, more of a demand to be met. And with a smile that lit Mairon's nervous system up like a live wire, Melkor obediently leaned down to meet him. The kiss was a welcome spark of warmth. For a blissful moment, the howling wind was gone.

When they parted, Mairon took a step back and sniffled, wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Gross,” he muttered—mostly to himself. It was inaudible over the frantic rustling of the trees lining the street, anyway. He couldn't wait to be inside, to wrap a blanket around his shoulders and curl up in the corner of the sofa.

“I do drinks and snacks, and you get” he said, waved his hand vaguely, “whatever you need.”

Halfway across the parking lot, Melkor's eyes lingered on him still. He could feel it. It was a particular kind of gaze—unnerving, amused. He could sense Melkor smiling.

Finally, as gently as he could, he snapped. “What?”

Melkor left him hanging for a few more seconds, just to be nuisance.

“You're getting off on it too, aren't you?”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“That's decided, then. I'm not shaving it off.”

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At ten in the morning on Friday, Mairon made the executive decision to be responsible—one coffee followed in quick succession by another was an objectively bad idea. Instead, he reached for the orange juice.

Outside, the storm raged so violently the windowpanes shook with the force of it.

As expected, the rain had started sometime in the night, a roar of thunder jolting Mairon out of his sleep. He'd slept fitfully after, for minutes at a time, unable to find solace in the soft sheets, or the extra blanket he'd piled onto himself, or even Melkor's warmth.

The counter blurred in front of him. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and looked blearily down at the bottle in his hands.

He reopened the fridge and put it back in.

He withdrew his executive decision and filled the coffee machine with fresh grounds. Tomorrow was another day; he could try again.

As he made to reach for a mug, a sound rang out over the cacophony of the rain, a muffled thud of sorts. Mairon ignored it—Melkor was in the basement shuffling through mountains of boxes, he was the most likely culprit. But the sound came once more, this time obviously an insistent knock.

Mairon glanced over at the door with narrowed eyes.

On cue, the doorbell rang, and then again.

His first instinct was to keep on ignoring it, pretend nobody was home. But both cars were parked out front and the weather wasn't exactly ideal for a morning stroll. It wasn't until he'd already crossed to the entranceway and undone the top lock that his sleep-addled brain finally supplied the brilliant idea that it was early enough to pretend to be asleep. Regrettably, it was too late now to enact said plan.

The last person he expected to see was Ungoliant, scowling and dripping in the doorway. Behind her, her car was parked just out by the curb—yet the short trip across the front lawn had drenched her completely.

Mairon frowned, mildly concerned.

"Believe me," she said curtly, "if there was anyone else I could go to, I wouldn't be here."

"Right," Mairon said. He watched a droplet drip from her fringe and into her eyes, watched her blink it away. "Why *are* you here?"

"Bit of an emergency."

She drew her shoulders in and squeezed past Mairon into the house.

Momentarily dumbfounded, he let her pass. He lingered by the door and absently watched the river of rainwater roll down the street towards the storm drain by the intersection. He took a second, maybe a minute, to wonder what the hell he'd done to deserve this.

It wasn't until he felt the wind bite and front of his robe grow damp that he realized the rain was getting inside, soaking into the hardwood.

"Is something wrong?" he called, pushing the door closed. "Did something happen?"

He didn't mean to immediately resort to the worst possible scenario—that Thuringwethil was dead or grievously injured just because her girlfriend had shown up drenched and wild-eyed at his door. But his exhausted mind was struggling to keep up, and his irksome anxious streak acting up as of

late.

“Yes and no,” came the entirely unhelpful reply.

Shoes kicked off in the entranceway, Ungoliant made straight for the kitchen. She stood on her toes and grabbed a mug from the cupboard over the sink, set it under the spout of the coffee machine that Mairon had readied for himself, and hit *brew*. It was all done with a practiced ease, the sort that indicated she'd done it many times before. Mairon knew she had, of course, but he wasn't sure how to feel about seeing it up close and personal.

Still, his morbid curiosity was stronger than whatever inkling of jealousy had begun to stir in his gut.

There was no doubt he had an emergency on his hands—she'd come in the pouring rain, stoic persona replaced with something frenzied, almost fragile. Of course, the reddest flag of all was that she'd come to see *him*. They weren't exactly friends. Far from it.

He followed her to the table, sitting to face her.

He watched as she closed her eyes and took a deep whiff of her coffee—black, no sugar, he noted, and frowned about it. She let out a soft sigh of relief like she'd been on the brink of death and the coffee was the antidote.

Then: “Have you got something I can—” she trailed off and motioned vaguely at all of herself. She was dripping. Her hair was sopping wet, the ends curling around her jawline, her fringe plastered to her face.

Were Mairon in a slightly more sour mood that morning, he'd kindly advise her to fetch her own towel, since she obviously knew where to find just about anything in the house. But the situation was dire—allegedly—and she was jumpy about *something*, and Mairon didn't want to be a prick.

The chair scraped the floor as he stood.

He grabbed a clean kitchen towel and set it down on the countertop while he slid a mug of his own beneath the coffee machine. His earlier desire for a second helping had graduated to a burning need.

He dropped in three sugar cubes, then another two. He got the creamer from the fridge and poured until his coffee looked more like milk than anything else.

On his way back to the table, he tossed the towel at Ungoliant, who offered no words of gratitude in response. She dried her face, wrung out the ends of her hair, then folded the towel lengthwise and slung it around her shoulders.

“I want to propose,” she said.

“Not to me, I hope.”

“You're such a prick.”

“When?”

“Hm?”

“At the party?”

“God, no,” Ungoliant said. “After.”

It was great news, of course. It was exciting—he was happy for his friend, he really was. But in that moment, he found himself thoroughly unable to react. It very likely had something do with the fact that it wasn't his friend relaying the message, rather said friend's significant other, of whom he was not overfond.

Ungoliant rocked forward. “What will she say?”

“What?”

“As sick and twisted as it is, you're her closest friend. I know you talk about these things. It's awful. You can be like two little girls at a slumber party. Tell me—what will she say?” Ungoliant repeated.

“I can't be having this conversation with you.”

Ungoliant frowned. She opened her mouth to retort, but Mairon spoke first.

“No, listen,” he said, then stopped and winced inwardly. As much as he wished it, there was no impersonal way to talk about something so intimate. “The things she's told me about,” he paused, waved his fingers vaguely, “her feelings and about the two of you—I can't tell you those things. She entrusted me with them and I don't want to betray that trust and gossip behind her back. I'm sure you know far more than I do, anyway.”

Ungoliant glared.

“Besides—what people say, what they feel, it changes. Today it's a yes, tomorrow it's a no. It's a yes when she's drunk, it's a no when she's sober, or vice versa. I don't want to say the wrong thing and mislead you.”

“A hint,” Ungoliant pleaded. “A shred of enlightenment. Anything.”

“This isn't something you can prepare for. And I know better than anyone that that's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. Some things you just can't orchestrate all the way through.”

“You're no help.”

“In my defense, *I* haven't got firsthand experience with this sort of thing.”

“No,” she warned.

Mairon shrugged, made to stand. “It's no problem. I can go get him, if you—”

“Fuck you. Sit down.”

Mairon sat, amused.

It was a bit like watching a circus performance—or a car wreck, whenever Ungoliant and Melkor went at each other's throats. It was almost a shame that one half of the duet was too busy facing off against the cobwebs downstairs to sit down with them and descend instantaneously into a senseless argument.

On the other hand, Ungoliant was painfully serious about this, palpable tension rolling off her in waves. Given the circumstances, there was a fine line between what constituted teasing and what was outright cruel.

Mairon went on as though the interlude had never happened.

“What I see, though,” he said, “is two people made for each other. I’m sure just about anyone can see that. She loves you, for whatever accursed reason, and it’s evident that you love her, too. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Damn right.”

“I say, go for it. Worst case, she says no. Doesn’t immediately mean it’s over between you. There are other arrangements, aren’t there? Partnerships, just—dating, and the like. But that’s for you two to decide. My help ends here.”

“They really put you in charge of a few hundred people?” Ungoliant asked.

“You’re going to insult my social skills, I presume. Go ahead.”

“This pep talk of yours is making me want to walk off a cliff.”

“Thank you.”

The words were punctuated with a clang from downstairs as the basement door swung open and slammed against the concrete wall. Fate had worked its wicked magic, after all, Mairon mused.

Ungoliant made a noise under her breath, something that might’ve been a bitter *brilliant* or a creative expletive. She closed her eyes to stop herself from visibly rolling them, picked up her coffee and took a bracing sip.

Only about a dozen stairs separated the basement from where they were sitting, from a situation that could go very poorly very quickly.

Melkor emerged from the staircase carrying an aged, dilapidated cardboard box with a bright red toolbox balanced precariously on top.

“There has got to be something to get rid of spiders. In general. As a species. You know, for instance, there’s the—”

He stopped at the top of the stairs, finally catching a glimpse of their esteemed guest.

Slowly, elegantly, Ungoliant turned in her seat to face him.

“The fuck are you doing here?” Melkor demanded.

“The fuck is on your face?”

He scowled and turned to Mairon. “The fuck is she doing here?”

“Shoo,” Mairon told him.

“I live here,” Melkor said slowly, pointedly. *And she’s the enemy*, he obviously meant to add, but was either too courteous or too nonplussed to say it aloud.

“Please shoo.”

Melkor, looking quite murderous, glanced between the two occupants of the dining table—Mairon put on his serious face, did his best to soundlessly convey the gravity of the issue—and huffed.

“All right,” he said, popping the *t*. He set the box down by the wall and picked up the toolbox.
“Traitor.”

He conceded—passive-aggressively, but a concession nonetheless. He turned and returned to the staircase, heading to battle the upstairs bathroom faucet. It never failed to act up when the weather got this way, despite countless renovations. *The foundation of the house is cursed*, Melkor would often say.

“Delight, isn’t he?” Ungoliant said, watching his retreating form.

With that astute assessment, she turned back to Mairon.

He stared at her.

“I don’t know what you’re expecting me to say to that.”

She took a sip of her coffee.

“I’m glad you’re having better luck than I did, is all.”

Mairon stared a little longer.

Ungoliant matched his expression and stared right back.

This was getting boring. Mairon cleared his throat, just exasperated enough to convey his stance on the whole thing.

“Look, you’ve made a home together. From where I’m standing, you’re as good as married already. And where it goes from here is not something I should or will interfere with,” he summarized.

“You—”

“She loves you, you love her. Does anything else matter? Is there anything else to it?”

Ungoliant’s mouth snapped shut. She stayed like that for a while, her lips pursed and expression caught between livid and contemplative.

With a scoff, she shook her head. “He always did like the smart ones.”

Mairon suspected she was praising herself more so than him, just then.

“Still fucking useless, though,” she added.

“Glad to help,” Mairon said. Then, as thunder rolled outside, he frowned. “Where does she think you are right now? On a walk?”

“I’m grabbing Dracula from the vet. Was on my way, then I panicked and came here.”

She stood to leave as soon as her mug was empty. Her hands were unsteady as she set it down on the tabletop.

It gave Mairon pause. A strange ache lit up in his chest all of a sudden, a startling realization—he wondered, briefly, if Melkor had felt that way too, before he’d asked *him*. He wondered if he’d been just as afraid of the answer as Ungoliant was now.

He followed her to the front of the house, watched as she leaned down to zip up her boots.

Blandly, he offered, “Good luck.”

He was surprised to find how deeply he meant it.

Ungoliant scoffed, but it wasn't mean or scornful. There was fragility to it, an anxious, poorly disguised hysteria.

“Nothing to do with luck.”

“You know, I can't even begin to fathom why you came here if you clearly planned on picking apart every word I said,” Mairon told her. “I don't even like you all that much. I'm just trying to be nice.”

“You're both assholes,” Ungoliant said pleasantly, wagging a finger between Mairon and the general direction of the upstairs. “Match made in fucking hell.”

Mairon cracked an unwitting smile. Across the hall, Ungoliant did too. It was a common language between the two of them, an exchange of barbs that were not *quite* meant to hurt. Well, not always.

“I mean it,” he said. “You'll be fine.”

“Better be,” she said, softer now, “or it's on you.”

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By seven that evening, it was still raining.

The light from Mairon's laptop was blinding. He sat at the table with three separate performance review files open, taunting him. His head was beginning to ache, eyes burning the way they did whenever he sat in a too-dark room staring at a too-bright screen.

For lack of anything better to do, he was catching up on paperwork. He was often told he wouldn't know a work-life balance if it smacked him in the face, which was admittedly a fair judgement of his character.

Melkor was off to the side in the kitchen, working his culinary magic. Mairon was not allowed to help. His presence generally tended to be detrimental to the wellbeing of any dish ever prepared.

So, instead, he suffered through his bureaucratic responsibilities.

He was giving off the illusion of relaxation, at the very least, in a worn turtleneck and the only clean pair of sweatpants he could find. (That, though, was Melkor's fault. He'd been tasked with doing the laundry while he rummaged about downstairs earlier that day. Certainly, he'd put in a load, started the machine and everything. Only, he'd forgotten to take it out. By the time Mairon had checked up on it, everything was halfway dry and wrinkled to hell, and had necessitated a whole second cycle. Hence, no clean sweatpants.)

It was around the time that Mairon caught himself rereading the same sentence for the fourth time that he decided enough was enough. Slowly, he closed his laptop, blinked himself out of his trance.

He shuddered at the sudden chill that overcame him—engrossed in his work, he hadn't noticed how drafty it was where he sat. The kitchen looked far more inviting. The glow from the overhead lamp

was golden, the mere thought of the heat emanating from the oven beckoning, *luring* Mairon over.

He pulled himself up onto the countertop by the fridge. It was the only spot that wasn't littered with ingredients. Immediately, he felt warmer, cozier.

"You done?" Melkor asked him, not looking up from his task.

"No," Mairon said, "tired. Sick and tired."

"Tell me."

"About?"

"The reviews. Heard you made someone cry yesterday."

Mairon huffed. He crossed his legs at the ankles, knocked his heels against the cupboard beneath him.

"What goes on in that room is between me and the employees. Confidentiality, et cetera."

Melkor stuck his finger in the seasoning and gave it a taste. He scrunched his nose, not quite pleased with it yet.

"Hold this," he said, offering Mairon the spoon.

Mairon took it, and Melkor reached over to the overcrowded basket of spices by the backsplash.

"I'll rephrase, then," he said as he searched, little glass jars clinking. "I saw, with my own eyes, Ellen crying on her lunch break. And the, uh, the rest of them, her crew. All there as witnesses."

"Could be unrelated."

Melkor found the herbal salt, shook a bit into his bowl. He wasn't one for measurements. His recipes were all a bit of this, bit of that, whatever and however much of it felt right.

"You plan on ever giving her a break?"

"I'm not doing anything wrong," Mairon insisted. "I'm asking after her day, her wellbeing, opening up a bit about myself. It's important to create a bond with employees, you know that. I'm being friendly. It's her dear friends who are at fault. They just—they still don't believe her."

"Poor thing," Melkor said. He made such commiserating words sound condescending, somehow. It was unreasonably attractive.

Mairon mused on that. His type was *asshole*, no doubt about it. If he could shake his head at himself, he would.

Melkor reached to take the spoon from him.

"Not wrong, then, but certainly devious," he said fondly. "A dick move."

"That so?"

"Mm."

"Takes one to know one."

“Sure does.”

Mairon tried to fall silent and sit still; logically, he knew he ought to take a few minutes to relax, breathe in and out, watch Melkor’s practiced movements. But he’d been feeling a bit neglected all day—a little too much for his liking. Melkor had a tendency to disappear into his work, become utterly consumed. They were alike in that way, so Mairon couldn't exactly pass judgement. Still, he wouldn't be opposed to a sliver of Melkor’s undivided attention, even if only for a moment.

“Dearest?”

“Hm?”

“Melkor.”

Nothing.

“*Melkor.*”

Finally, he turned.

With the slightest incline of his head, Mairon beckoned him closer. There was no need to do anything, say anything. Melkor knew when he was being summoned.

He put the spoon down, setting it gently against the rim of his bowl.

He came close, stepping between Mairon’s parted knees, crowding into his space. The first kiss was gentle, nice and sweet. Then, Melkor leaned back just far enough for Mairon to see the sharp edge in his expression. In one swift move, he took Mairon’s chin in his hand and knocked his head back against the cupboard door. He looked at him for a second, then two. The second kiss was rougher, a reprimand. It made Mairon’s lungs ache.

“You keep bothering me and I’ll mess something up,” Melkor told him then, a whisper against his lips.

“You never do.”

“Let’s not tempt fate.”

He offered Mairon a knowing smile before turning away. Unperturbed, he went back to his work, reached for the mirin, unscrewed the bottle cap with steady fingers.

It was perfectly clear that it had been his punishment, that second kiss. Understanding dawned. He was to sit now, jittery and restless, plagued with thoughts of a thoroughly improper nature for however long it took Melkor to finish. And Melkor would make sure to take his sweet time; he was dedicated to his craft, both in the kitchen, and in driving Mairon absolutely insane.

Predictably, Mairon found himself breathless. He was burning all over.

“You’re the cruelest thing,” he said as he slid down from the countertop.

“Apologies,” Melkor said, not especially apologetically.

Work was always a reliable distraction. Briefly, Mairon considered going back to his laptop, forcing himself to sit through another grueling hour, maybe two.

But the thought of revenge, of implanting an idea of his own in Melkor’s mind to plague him as he

dawdled, was far, far sweeter.

He turned towards the staircase.

“Hurry up and put those in the oven,” he told Melkor. His tone, the implication it held, left no room for doubt. “I’ll be waiting upstairs.”

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Thuringwethil was drunk before the party even began.

Mairon had arrived early at her request, tasked with helping to hang tinsel and streamers around the common areas of the house. “The bathroom, too, yes,” Thuringwethil had insisted, and he’d held her up as she teetered dangerously on the toilet lid to reach above the mirror.

He was glad to be of assistance, of course, but also offered Thuringwethil the brilliant suggestion that it might be best to hire someone slightly taller for the job the next time around.

Melkor wasn't due until the other guests arrived. As Mairon had learned, Ungoliant had tried to get Thuringwethil to invite *just* Mairon and not his plus one. But Thuringwethil, being the sensible individual she was, knew you couldn't get one without the other.

“Tell him to get more Prosecco,” she called out from the bathroom. She’d been cooped up in there for the last twenty minutes, putting the finishing touches on her makeup. “At least two bottles. Mm, three.”

Mairon braced his hand on the wall by the living room windows and turned precariously on the little step ladder he’d been provided with.

“Tell me you did not finish the whole bottle.”

Thuringwethil poked her head out into the corridor. Her eyelids glimmered a shiny, iridescent pink. She wiggled the empty bottle at him, then squinted up at the tinsel hanging off the curtain rod.

“More,” she instructed.

“You can’t see out the window.”

“More,” she insisted, with a wave of the bottle. “Make it an infestation. Glittering little parasites.”

“Parasites,” Mairon echoed blankly. “Right.”

He got back to work.

In the end, no more than fifteen people sat gathered in the living room—Thuringwethil had evidently reconsidered her previous, deranged definition of *close-knit*. Mairon knew five, maybe six of them, at most; strangely enough, among them were Thranduil and his beau. Either Thuringwethil had friends in odd places, or she’d invited him for the sole purpose of acquiring a few new bottles of quality wine.

And, hell, the man *did* know his wine. It was good wine. Barely two glasses in, Mairon already felt himself slipping.

The birthday girl herself was a vision, with her cloud of curls and satin dress, glitter in her hair, on her eyes, falling across her cheeks. Thirty-five was the new twenty-one, she’d said.

They'd dragged the kitchen table to the living room to serve as the designated snack bar, set it next to the window. It was a grandiose buffet—everyone had delivered home-cooked goods as instructed. Bottles upon bottles of wine and champagne lined the back of the table. Beer was banned. Unanimously, everyone had apparently decided that beer could go fuck itself.

A bottle of—something—in, Thuringwethil suggested karaoke. Someone yelped in agreement. A few people grumbled. Mairon flipped her off. No amount of money or power or eternal glory could get him to embarrass himself like that.

Maeglin, unsurprisingly, was the one who jumped at the opportunity, but he was quickly booted off the makeshift stage—the coffee table—when he opened with the first line of *Last Christmas*. He whined about it, claimed it was the only song he knew the lyrics to.

Not dissuaded in the slightest, Thuringwethil grabbed him before he sat back down, hit play on the giant set of speakers by the television, asked if he would do her the honor of a dance. She spun him around, sang off-key to something in rapid-fire Spanish. Soon after, two others got up to dance. Putting it mildly, their choreography was better suited to a club. No—a club bathroom. They were practically fucking, is what it was.

Over the course of the evening, Melkor politely rejected three separate advances. It was nice at first. Mairon found himself feeling smug about it, hiding his amusement behind his wine glass. It was flattering, really, how everyone seemed to appreciate what was his. He knew full well how lucky he was.

But a handful of hours and salacious comments later, it grew into sheer annoyance. He was truly, madly, fucking annoyed.

See, the first comment he brushed off as an honest mistake. The *second* fucker already knew damn well Melkor was married. The *third* was lucky Mairon didn't smash his glass over his head.

Deep down, he really was just a wretched, jealous thing, he thought. This rush of possessiveness was a new, particular variety of fury he couldn't quite recall feeling before. If he could do it without coming off as entirely unhinged, he would slap everyone's hands away and stick a little name tag to Melkor's shirt, letting everyone know exactly who he belonged to.

Time ticked by at an odd speed. Sometimes minutes blew by. Sometimes a minute lasted an hour. Lady Gaga's *Poker Face* seemed to go on for ten minutes.

Unsurprisingly, the ticking time bomb in the room went off eventually—and multiple times, at that.

Melkor put his hands together in a pray-tell gesture, leaned forward on his elbows. “On what fucking planet is it an *insult* to hold someone's hand wearing gloves?”

“Every fucking planet,” Ungoliant spit.

“What fucking solar system?”

Then, ten minutes later:

“You're wrong.”

“I'm really not, though.”

“So you're just going to stand by that? Ninety years, that's what you think?”

“Yes, it is.”

“And you’re a fucking piece of shit, is what you are.”

Thirty minutes:

“Honey isn't vegan.”

“I never fucking said it was, you wanker.”

One of Thuringwethil’s friends leaned close to her and whispered—failed spectacularly at it, everyone heard her clear as day—“What’s their deal, exactly?”

A tense silence blanketed the room. From the speakers, Pitbull called out his signature *Dale!*

For a moment, the two individuals in question said nothing. Melkor glared straight ahead, lips pursed. Evidently, he did not trust himself to *not* say anything offensive in that moment. Ungoliant finished her drink in one massive swig.

“We used to fuck,” she said.

The nosy friend whistled. “Messy.”

Melkor drank to that.

A quarter after midnight, Thuringwethil decided enough was enough. Enough small talk, enough adult-ish niceties.

“Truth or dare time,” she announced, because she was awful, terrible, an all around nightmare. Mairon shook his head. Nobody seemed to notice.

“The rules. Nothing incriminating—personally, criminally, either or. Nothing that will end in bodily harm or divorce. Not too much nudity. Some is okay. No infringing on personal beliefs and convictions. Maeglin isn't drinking tonight, so we’re not gonna make him drink, all right? No damaging personal property, also. And no murder,” she finished, almost as an afterthought.

“Doesn’t that go under bodily harm?”

“Bodily harm is reversible.”

Miraculously, between his—whichever drink he was on and the next—Mairon realized he was genuinely enjoying himself.

He appreciated that all of Thuringwethil’s friends were massive assholes, all-around mean and sarcastic. It was good. They were good. He wouldn't have survived a night of canned jokes and forced laughter.

Maeglin, ever the enthusiast, accepted each and every dare. He stuffed an entire slice of birthday cake into his mouth. He did a handstand. He proved he could twerk.

Bard admitted to regularly skinny dipping in the town lake. He then recited entire passages from Macbeth from memory for six minutes straight—yes, they timed him—because *he* could do *that*, apparently.

They did a round of truths, going around in a circle.

Ungoliant played Thumbelina in a high school play. She did ballet for five years, actually. And she was blonde for a few years, too.

Melkor described in sweet, sweet detail the piercings he'd gotten on a dare when he was nineteen.

Someone—whose name Mairon could not, for the life of him, recall—blew his boss for a promotion. That, Mairon drank to.

He himself—he cheated on his driver's exam. He once smoked three packs in one day and slept with three different people—on the same day. Finals were rough. University was wild. (Melkor didn't seem to like that particular tidbit. Oh, well. He could fuck Mairon about it later.)

They went back to dares.

A—someone else, a nameless someone—ate a Carolina Reaper. Thuringwethil sprinted upstairs to type up and print out an agreement for him to sign: he did it of his own volition in knowing violation of her *no bodily harm* rule. She would not face any legal repercussions for his idiocy.

Said someone was later handed a bottle of milk and carton of tissues. Mairon had never seen so much tears and sick and mucus on any one person's face.

Another someone gave Thuringwethil a birthday lapdance. Truthfully, she was no good at it, and picked an abysmal song to do it to; it wouldn't have been Mairon's first choice, or even his hundredth.

Yet another someone confessed to pissing onto an exotic plant at the botanical garden. He'd gotten arrested for it. He then bet he could go the rest of the night without pissing, which was odd, but nobody objected.

Everything was growing warm and fuzzy. Beside him, Melkor was warm, too. His head had drooped onto Mairon's shoulder at some point. It was nice. Better than a name tag.

Mairon found himself blinking sleepily—he was too old to be staying up this late; he had no idea how Thuringwethil did it, how she had so much energy, though he suspected drugs or secret rendezvous with cans of Red Bull in the kitchen—and promptly getting glitter in his eyes. He'd been dared to let Thuringwethil go wild on his face and had ended up with an atrociously sparkly red smokey eye. He poked gingerly at his eye, trying to dislodge the offending particle without ruining his friend's masterpiece.

Even Thranduil's speech began to slur eventually. That, more than anything, was a sign of the end times—the man was typically indomitable. In the heat of an impassioned soliloquy, he crossed the line of generally accepted politeness and called one of Thuringwethil's coworkers a bitch, in response to which she threw a handful of grapes at him and called him a cunt, in response to which they both had their wine glasses confiscated and replaced with flutes of nonalcoholic champagne, the sort children were served on New Year's when they wanted to mimic their parents.

At—a time, whatever time it was—Mairon started to feel woozy, his stomach churning unpleasantly. He switched to lemonade. He wasn't above admitting that he wasn't particularly adept at holding his liquor. He came to the conclusion, then, that he was quite possibly very drunk already. He cracked a pretzel between his fingers and watched it crumble to the carpet.

When people gradually decided to start trickling out, Maeglin was selected by default as the designated driver. Eight other guests crammed into his car, hazardously piled up in each other's laps. Poor fucker would be driving all around the city in circles to drop them all off. And the rest of

the poor fuckers would be stuck hailing cabs the next day to fetch their own cars from Thuringwethil's street.

On their way out, Bard and Thranduil liberated a bottle of expensive brandy from the liquor cabinet. Mairon suspected that they hadn't been given explicit permission to do that, but said nothing. He wasn't a snitch. *No*—he absolutely was, actually, he'd made a career of being a traitor. He just didn't give a fuck about this. Now. Specifically. The brandy.

Naturally, he and Melkor were the last to go. They lived the closest. They didn't have the excuse of needing to drive home. They would walk. Which was good. Mairon didn't think he could drive. Didn't think he should. He couldn't tell his right hand from his left. He had to really concentrate on it.

Melkor was helping clean up. He'd gotten up, unprompted, and started collecting glasses. He and Ungoliant worked in unison, which was fucked up, like watching two rabid hyenas have a friendly discussion about dish soap instead of tearing one another to bloody shreds.

Mairon and Thuringwethil sat helpfully on the couch. Her legs were in his lap. His head was knocked back against the cushions. Everything was spinning, and not in an especially fun way.

"I've got glitter everywhere," Thuringwethil told him solemnly.

"Mm."

"I peed glitter."

"That can't be good."

"In the kitty-cat, too. I'm sure there's glitter up there."

"I believe you," Mairon assured her.

He then found himself leaning heavily on Melkor by the front door—Melkor was talking to Thuringwethil. He was holding Mairon up, had an arm around his waist. Mairon's coat was on. He didn't remember putting it on, or heading for the door, for that matter. He pressed his face against Melkor's shoulder for a second, tried to dispel his swelling nausea. There was only a slim chance he'd make it home without hurling on a street corner.

He took a steadying breath and looked up. Behind Thuringwethil, Ungoliant stood in the kitchen, stuffing unopened bags of chips into a cupboard. She met his eyes. He offered her a smile, as comforting and genuine as he could muster. He was fucking dizzy. He hoped she got the message, the encouraging *good luck* he was trying to convey.

She smiled back.

After that, everything was white noise.

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Mairon woke to a splitting headache and a text from Thuringwethil.

It was a picture of her hand adorned with a stunning blood-red gem.

from: bestie<3

fuck yeah

Chapter End Notes

[a look into mairon's notes from the performance reviews](#)

precious

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 1; August

Mairon let himself in.

It was quiet. He pulled the keys from the lock to pocket them and turned, expecting the usual exuberant welcome, the kind of kiss hello that made the world stop spinning for a moment.

But it did not come.

Melkor did not greet him.

He was on the couch, blankly staring down at his hands clasped together in his lap. Strands of hair hung limply around his face, shrouding it from view. He looked pale. He looked—wrong.

Mairon toed his shoes off, keeping his eyes on Melkor, and closed the front door, swinging it just hard enough to elicit a slam. Melkor flinched—but that was just about the only reaction he got.

Something was *decidedly* wrong.

Hesitantly, Mairon approached and set the bag of takeout he'd bought on the coffee table—crab rangoon and orange chicken at Melkor's request. He took in the scene. A bottle of cold medicine stood nestled between blisters of glossy pills and an open can of soda. Not a good sign, *never* a good sign.

“Are you all right?”

Finally, Melkor startled. Slowly, as though in a daze, he looked up and blinked at Mairon. His eyes were glazed over, unfocused, like he wasn't quite *seeing* him. He made a little sound, a weak hum of acknowledgement, and returned his gaze to his hands.

“Might have forgotten to mention—think I'm sick. Might be,” he admitted. “Hoped it would go away by now. Sorry—I should have called you. What time is it?”

It was worse than it looked. When Mairon got sick, he became irritable, overdramatic. Melkor, however, appeared to succumb to delirium. He was, it seemed, one of those people who, affected by fever, completely lost touch with reality. It was all wrong, all of it—the cadence of his words, the pallor of his skin, the glassy look in his eyes. Worry gripped at Mairon, intense, instinctive.

“I fucked up,” Melkor went on.

Carefully, Mairon pushed away the coffee table and crouched down in front of Melkor, palms on his knees to steady himself. He reached out for him, but Melkor swayed back.

“No, don't come too close. I'm contagious,” Melkor warned, and offered a weak, silly smile. “Protect yourself. Like with—what's that called—with the beak.”

“Oh, of course,” Mairon said. “How could I have forgotten my plague doctor mask? I’ll go fetch it from the car; I’ll only be a minute.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

Despite Melkor’s continued protests about germs and the sort, Mairon leaned in closer. He took Melkor face in his hands and ran his thumbs over his cheeks, over the little scar under his eye. He was uncomfortably warm.

“Your face is beautiful,” Melkor informed him.

“Yes, it is.”

“And with the freckles. You look so nice after you’re out in the sun, you know that?”

“You’re really warm.”

“I really want to kiss you,” Melkor said, “but I’ll get you sick.”

He had a point. It didn’t take much for Mairon to catch just about anything.

“Mm,” Mairon agreed. “Best not do that.”

For a moment, Melkor’s brows pinched in thought. Then, he grinned to himself and pushed forward. This time, it was Mairon who tried to lean back, but Melkor chased him.

He pressed a determined kiss to the bridge of Mairon’s nose and swiftly pulled away—somewhat dazed, dizzy, but visibly satisfied.

“Loophole,” he proudly announced. The more he talked, the more hoarse his voice became—fainter, weaker, Mairon realized.

He never knew what to do in situations like these. While typically, he would turn the other way, shy from any problem that wasn’t his to solve, he now found instinct kicking in, a forceful, protective thing.

“Bed,” he insisted.

“You’re beautiful,” Melkor repeated.

“Yes, we’ve covered that.”

“You know what—you know what I’m thinking about?” Melkor rambled on, amused, conspiratorial. “You look even more beautiful with co—”

“Okay. Shh. You need to get to bed.”

Melkor hummed in agreement.

“And not have sex,” Mairon clarified.

A brief flash of disappointment crossed Melkor’s face. In a huff, he pushed himself upright—Mairon scooted back to give him space. He managed to get to his feet with relatively little difficulty, but it was when he tried to take a step forward that the problem arose. He wobbled precariously, footing unstable, and Mairon shot to his feet to steady him.

“Maybe you’re right,” Melkor murmured.

Mairon’s fingers were clenched in the fabric of Melkor’s shirtsleeves, knuckles aching with the force of it.

“I’m always right.”

Leading Melkor to the bedroom was no small feat. Crossing the living room was all right, as was the first part of the staircase, up until the halfway landing. Melkor grew unreasonably tired, then, distracted, leaning heavily against the wall like he meant to slide down it and nap right there on the floor.

“Almost there,” Mairon reasoned. “I can’t carry you. Come on. Come *on*.”

Mairon was not a quitter, never had been. Whatever he started, he saw through to the end. He steeled himself and yanked Melkor off the wall, wrapped an arm around his waist to maneuver him the rest of the way.

With Melkor’s weight sagging heavily against him, Mairon led them up the remaining stairs and down the hall.

“Bed,” he instructed—and, miraculously, Melkor made it there all on his own.

His movements were clumsy, robotic almost, as he peeled back the covers and dropped down onto the mattress. He was horribly out of it, present but not, conscious but only barely.

Hesitantly, Mairon asked him, “Can I trust you to stay put while I go get you something to drink?”

Melkor made a sound—just agreeable enough for Mairon to take it as a yes.

Back in the kitchen, Mairon boiled some water and rummaged through the cupboards for the least caffeinated tea he could find. As it steeped, he returned to the takeout bags in the living room to store them in the fridge for later. Absently, he shoved a piece of chicken in his mouth as he scooped the food out of the styrofoam containers and into Tupperware—he wasn’t sure if he’d eaten anything since breakfast, he couldn’t quite remember.

Having cleaned up all traces of his work in the kitchen, he returned to the coffee table again, carefully reading over the labels on the pills, the bottle of syrup. Whatever Melkor had fucked himself up on, it was either very clearly doing its job, or he’d taken far too much of it.

He slipped the blister packs into his pocket and took them upstairs with him.

Melkor was stubbornly still awake, slumped against the headboard, having waited patiently for Mairon’s return. As Mairon set the tea and pills down on the nightstand, Melkor’s eyes followed him closely.

“This wasn’t what I had planned, you know.”

“No one ever plans to get sick,” Mairon agreed.

He switched on the bedside lamp and detoured to turn off the harsh overhead lights, before settling on his side of the bed beside Melkor. He would linger for a little while, wait for the tea to cool down just enough to drink. He would feel more at ease once Melkor took a few sips, sufficiently warming himself up before dozing off.

As he was readjusting the hem of his trousers that had ridden up in the process, Mairon faltered, fell completely still. *His side.* His side of the bed. He was claiming a side. He thought back on it—he'd only been here a handful of times before, there was no—

"I feel bad," Melkor said, jarring Mairon out of his thoughts.

"I can see that."

"No, not—I mean, this isn't usually what people do on any one of their first, I don't know, five dates."

"Suppose not."

"This whole—doting on someone. You'd think that wouldn't come up until, you know, forever. Marriage, I mean, something like that," Melkor went on, breaking off with a faint laugh. "Or, at the very least, let's say, the twenty-fifth date."

"You plan on counting?" Mairon asked, amused. "Marking each one down in your diary?"

"Mm, no," said Melkor. "I plan on losing count."

Again, Mairon faltered. He pushed down the strange feeling that swelled in him.

He forced out a brittle laugh. "Well, none of this has been conventional, exactly, from the start, though, has it? I—come on, I have the keys to your house."

Melkor offered a jerk of a shrug, evasive, nonchalant, like he meant to pretend that this was normal for him, for just about anyone.

He was quiet for a long time, then, before he responded.

"Do you know why—the first time I saw you, do you know what I thought?"

Mairon shook his head. "I don't."

"I'm gonna tell you."

As surreal as the evening was, it was amusing, *endearing* to see Melkor like this. Honest, unbothered, whereas until now, Mairon had only ever met his composed side, his imposing, regal self.

"Didn't think you could be real," Melkor admitted. "No—that's not it. Rephrase. It's different. Not like that. Not exactly like that. A bit. It's stupid. I just—I knew you would be mine."

Mairon felt his smile vanish. Whatever he'd expected, it hadn't been that.

"Had to be," Melkor insisted.

Mairon swallowed. Quietly, he indulged him. "Love at first sight?"

"No," Melkor's tone was serious. "Different. I knew you would be mine. And that I would be yours."

A few seconds passed before Mairon realized his mouth was agape. He clamped his jaw shut and swallowed again.

Melkor was looking down at his hands now, head drooping, almost lolling against his chest.

Mairon watched him in silence, unable to speak. His chest felt tight, too tight.

“In the lobby,” Melkor went on. “I didn’t know your name yet. But I think—I would’ve done anything you asked of me. It’s like I already knew, then, you know, that you would be precious to me.”

Melkor glanced up at him then, eyes wide and expectant.

“I understand,” Mairon said immediately, almost inaudibly, but just loud enough for Melkor to catch.

“Good,” Melkor said, his voice disconcertingly distant. “I don’t think I’m making very much sense.”

Mairon almost laughed, numbly, hysterically. The problem was—in a way, Melkor *was* making sense, perfect sense. Mairon was simply in the wrong headspace to be able to process it, to slot the pieces into place. He needed time. He needed to think, to truly understand.

"And your voice, too. I don't remember the first thing you said to me, but I remember hearing your voice for the first time."

"What's so special about my voice?"

"It's scratchy."

"Scratchy," Mairon echoed, bemused.

"In a nice way," Melkor insisted. "Very attractive."

“All right, just drink your tea,” Mairon said blandly, motioning to the mug. He was not very subtle in changing the course of the conversation. “What did you take? Earlier?”

Melkor’s brows knit together. He followed Mairon’s gaze to the nightstand, to the tea, the blister packs of pills Mairon had brought up. His movements lagged—jagged, uncoordinated. He would be out like a light soon.

“When? And how many?” Mairon pressed. “You don’t get to pick and choose the dosage, you know, it’s one every couple of hours. I’ll have to set a timer to wake you up in a bit.”

Melkor squinted at the pills for a solid minute before he managed to recount how many he’d taken of each, to the best of his knowledge. Understandably, in his state, memories were fleeting; catching them, holding onto them was a challenge.

Mairon glanced at his phone, did the math. He would wake Melkor just before ten, heat up a scrap of dinner and portion out one last dose before tucking him in for the night.

“You don’t have to stay,” Melkor said—*slurred*—as though he’d read Mairon’s mind. “I’m no fun today.”

“Oh, you’re always heaps of fun,” Mairon assured him. “Tea, now.”

Melkor glowered at him, unhappy with being bossed around. But he complied, twisting around to reach for the mug. He settled back against the cushions and lifted it to his lips with white-knuckled fingers, and promptly winced as he took a hearty sip and burned his tongue. His eyes watered; he

looked like he might cry.

“Traitor,” he said.

“Me?” asked Mairon.

“The tea,” Melkor explained. “Good, though. I think. I can’t feel my mouth.”

They sat in silence as Melkor sipped on, emptying half the mug before he decided he’d had enough.

Once it was set aside, Mairon instructed him to lay back—“No, careful, *be careful*, you’ll hit your head”—and dragged the comforter over him, up around his neck. Melkor, normally too warm, never needing that extra layer, that second blanket, gladly burrowed into the heat.

Gingerly, Mairon held the backs of his fingers up to Melkor’s forehead. His skin burned.

“That’s quite the fever,” he said.

“Sorry,” Melkor mumbled.

“Just get some sleep,” Mairon told him. “I don’t mind hanging around downstairs. I’ve got some work to do, anyway. I’ll come check on you later.”

“Promise?”

“Of course,” Mairon said—and when that wasn’t enough to placate Melkor, who cracked an eye open, waiting for the magic word, he added, “I promise.”

Mairon stood, crossed to the windows and pulled the curtains closed.

Before he left the room, he shot one last look at Melkor. His eyes were shut. He snuffled and grimaced at something, nothing in particular, and turned over onto his side, tucking the lower half of his face underneath the comforter.

Downstairs, it was cooler. The crisp evening air hit Mairon as soon as he emerged from the staircase. The back door was ajar, crickets chirping loudly, furiously in the garden. The breeze was nice; it helped clear his mind.

He tried not to think about it, but even so, the words kept coming back.

I knew you would be mine. And that I would be yours.

He sat himself down at Melkor’s makeshift desk in the sunroom, posing himself strategically in front of the open door.

Almost as soon as he did, it struck him.

It was that he *wasn’t* panicking that frightened him.

He felt it. Whatever it was that Melkor felt, he felt the same. It was what had gripped him then, that first day, what gripped him now, finally put into words. It was a mirror, his own reflection beamed back at him.

He wasn’t the type to care. He did not get attached. He used people to get what he wanted, discarded them soon after. He never paid very much attention to who anyone was beyond what

they could give him.

But since the first proper conversation he and Melkor shared, he hadn't as much as looked at anyone else. He hadn't thought about anyone else. He hadn't thought about the *advantages* of having Melkor on his side, of having him in his bed. It just *was*. They just *were*. Some lever, some accursed switch had been flicked in Mairon's head. Something had gone wrong.

Or *right*, it had gone right.

It felt right.

And that frightened him because, whatever it was, it was completely out of his control.

Melkor had dropped *forever* in there somewhere. Forever was a nauseatingly long time. It was—it wasn't something Mairon could wield, bend to his will.

Mairon leaned back, extending his legs out in front of him. The chair squeaked in protest, as did the floorboards. Strangely, it was a comforting sound.

This overwhelming *thing*, if Melkor felt it too, if they were both trapped by this current with no way out, there was no use in trying to control it. He wondered what it would be like to let go. Let it go where it would, where fate—if such an absurd thing existed—led it.

Mairon closed his eyes. He took a steadying breath. The beating of his heart made his ribs ache; he felt the force of it in his throat.

He exhaled.

He could try to live with that.

You would be mine. And I would be yours.

He wanted to try.

The swelling in his chest spilled over with the admission. Something cracked open, sharp and bright, and quickly settled comfortably like it belonged there, like it had been there all along, waiting to one day be awoken.

Mairon opened his eyes.

God, he *wanted* it.

right on the money

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 12; June

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

Mairon could sense the whispers around him.

His eyes were on his phone, but his attention was elsewhere. On the looks directed at him, the way the handful of people in the cafeteria murmured to their colleagues, turning their faces away from him as they spoke, like he might try to read their lips.

He had his headphones in, but was listening to silence. He didn't want to be bothered; that was the easiest way to ensure he wouldn't be. He was tired, drained and numb, not looking to engage in small talk with employees trying to make friends with him to claw their way up the corporate ladder.

And so, as he poked unenthusiastically at his lunch, he felt the gossip circulating around the room like a sticky film on his skin. He tried to pretend he didn't. When he wasn't looking at his phone, or tearing his grilled cheese to bits, he stared out the floor-to-ceiling window beside him, at the sixty foot drop to the city streets below. He'd taken to having his meals on his own floor, avoiding the main cafeteria downstairs whenever possible. Too many people, too loud, too much. It made him feel small. Cornered. On display.

Taking quite the chunk of time off work meant that the rumor mill had fired up again. Worse yet, it was working overtime. He had known this going in, even before his first day back—Melkor had filled him in on what he had missed, what the word on the street was, what the masses were jabbering about. But that was nothing compared to experiencing it firsthand.

Scraps of it swirled around him wherever he went—whether that was the lobby, one of the conference rooms, the toilet, even as he strolled down the halls. That he had found a better job. Quit. Or gotten fired. Poached by a competitor. Involved in organized crime. Broken up with Melkor. Divorced him. Cheated on him. His wife had found him out. Had him locked up. Had him killed.

He tried valiantly not to smile to himself as he idly pulled his sandwich apart, not especially hungry, watching strings of mozzarella stretch from the two perfect, golden triangles.

It was funny, he thought. There were few things that could distract him when he was stuck in one of his bad patches, aside from impulsively getting a new tattoo, but this—this was certainly entertaining. Listening to the conspiracy theories, the rumors, people left and right trying to deduce the reason behind his mysterious absence.

The theories being infinitely more fun than the truth made all of it easier to stomach. He'd had half a mind to tease the lot of them, play along, at least for a little while, to pretend that he had, in fact, been on the run from the mob. But it was best, he ultimately decided, to keep himself rooted firmly in reality. No game was worth ruining the progress he had made. It was no joking matter, as Melkor would say.

On cue, a shadow loomed suddenly over Mairon. He startled, flinching, and looked up to find Melkor throwing himself down in the seat beside him. Melkor promptly winced, like he'd sat down wrong. As he wiggled delicately to rearrange the placement of his ass in the chair, Mairon took to dutifully plucking his headphones out of his ears, putting them carefully back into their case.

"I completely forgot to tell you this morning," Melkor started. "I was just passing down the—the hall there—and I saw you in here, and it was like, *oh, right.*"

"Mm," Mairon prompted. He slid the plate with the second, untouched slice of grilled cheese towards Melkor.

Melkor gave him a look, a tiny, virtually imperceptible frown—*you're not eating enough.* All the same, he picked up the offering and took a very big, very inelegant bite.

Mouth full, he went on. "We got the contract. I got the call this morning. You were asleep. And then I forgot to tell you because you opened your pretty eyes and I got distracted."

"Fuck's sake, stop," Mairon chided. "I told you, you would; the competition was nonexistent."

"*And,*" Melkor continued. He then promptly choked, held up a finger, and finished chewing, before speaking again—slower now. "Last night at Manwë's. The balding guy everyone was fawning over."

"Mhm."

"I had someone look into him. He works for the Department of Infrastructure; high up the food chain, too. Looks like Manwë, the bastard, still has the government in his pocket. I called him and left him a very unpleasant voicemail about it."

"Nobody listens to voicemails anymore," Mairon told him.

"You don't listen to my voicemails?"

"What?"

"Joking. I've never left you a voicemail. Manwë does, though. Listen to his. And he's not going to like this one."

"Don't be a hypocrite," Mairon said. He crushed a particularly burnt piece of bread between his fingers and poked distractedly at the crumbs that sprinkled down onto the tabletop. He lowered his voice—they had an audience, after all. "You have the government in your pocket, too. Or, you know, they could just be friends, him and your brother. Acquaintances, the like."

"Manwë doesn't have friends."

"That's not very nice."

"Corporate types," Melkor said sagely. "None of us have friends."

His own portion gone, he snatched the half-eaten triangle out of Mairon's hands. It was clear, apparently, that Mairon wasn't going to get around to finishing it before it got cold, and would instead sit there grinding it to dust.

Melkor took a bite and grimaced, muttered something about there not being enough ketchup.

Mairon sighed. “Explains why he and Varda were trying so hard to charm the guy, though. They’re not usually like that, are they? Varda isn’t, at least, and yet there she was with the Aperol Spritz. Spritzes. Duplicitous shrew. That is why I do not like that woman.”

“No, see, that’s not it, sweetheart,” Melkor’s mouth was full again; he hadn’t learned his lesson. For someone born into old money, he had appallingly poor manners. “You and Varda don’t like each other because you’re the same. Uptight. Conniving. Controlling. *The sensible one.*”

Mairon gaped at him. Five seconds, ten seconds. Oh, but Melkor was right. Hell, he was right. He snapped his mouth shut in quiet concession.

But then—

“Ha,” he said. He barked out a laugh. “You have a type.”

Melkor scowled. “I do not.”

It was then Melkor’s turn to fall silent, turn his gaze inward. He narrowed his eyes at the crumbs on the now-empty plate and pursed his lips. Mairon could pinpoint the exact moment Melkor understood it to be true—Melkor muttered a string of profanities under his breath and scraped his chair back as he stood.

But he didn’t seem to struggle with shaking off the shock of his introspective realization too badly. As he crossed the short distance to the coffee station against the perpendicular wall, Melkor’s attention quickly returned to his primary concern.

“He’s only forty-four, by the way,” he said, “the government guy. I don’t look that old, do I?”

“No,” Mairon assured him. “You look sixteen.”

Pleased, Melkor reached up to poke at his cheeks, as though to test the elasticity of his skin. He did look good, there was no denying it. The genetics in his family were a wonder. The only sign that any time at all had passed since their first meeting, perhaps, were the lines around his eyes when he smiled. And, oh, he was beautiful when he smiled.

He was beautiful, period. His hair was down, the collar of his navy blue dress shirt unbuttoned, the sleeves artfully rolled up. As divine as he looked in a suit, he looked better like this. Business casual—*very* casual. Unlike at Valinor, here, Melkor cared very little what his employees wore to work. So long as everyone’s privates were neatly hidden away, there was no cause for concern. Mairon himself showed up in his Martens more often than not on days he knew he would not be hosting any external meetings. And sometimes even then.

Mairon shook his head, as though that would help clear it. He blinked rapidly. Stifled a yawn. He wasn’t drained without reason. The prior week had been a blur, a low that just kept getting lower. Talking it out could only do so much. His meds could only do so much. Trying to force himself to go out and socialize could only do so much. And on top of it all, of the nonsense inside his head, he was exhausted beyond words.

They had returned home from Manwë’s little get-together entirely too late the previous night. It had been a garden party of sorts, an upper class barbecue, for close-knit family and friends—and government officials, as it now turned out. And Mairon had simply crashed. Collapsed in a heap on the couch with his shoes on, Melkor’s delicate sensibilities be damned. Tired of small talk, of smiling, of wearing his people mask.

Given the state of him, he had forgotten to set his alarm, and had instead found himself dragged

from sleep the next morning by birds chirping outside their bedroom window. Immediately sensing that he was awake, Melkor had offered him a quiet, “Good morning.”

“Hi.”

“Sleep well?”

Melkor had been facing him, pillowing his head on his arms.

“No,” he’d admitted. “Slept, what—three hours?”

“It’s eight.”

Mairon had twitched in surprise, rolled over to grasp at his phone to verify Melkor’s claim, before turning slowly back to him.

“Did you just wake up?”

Melkor had hummed a quiet *no*. “Around six-ish.”

“And you’ve just been laying there watching me sleep for two hours.”

“Yes.”

“Creepy.”

“I had a weird dream,” Melkor had said. “We were at Manwë’s party thing, of course. Except my father was there. He’s bloody haunting me. And you—the two of you were getting on so well. Talking for hours. And then suddenly, he was telling me off, telling me we should have signed a prenup. Terrifying. I woke up screaming.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. But it was a close call.”

“Poor thing,” he’d said. And he had beckoned Melkor to him, let him curl up close against his chest.

It had been nice. There were nice moments, every now and again, amidst all the *bad* on the bad days, reminders that everything was all right.

Back in the present, the coffee machine shuddered and began to spurt. Mairon blinked again. He felt *blurry*, like a camera out of focus. That was the only way to put it to words. And though he knew it was only a shitty day, a shitty week, dreariness brought on by his medication and the like, it annoyed him, still, that he couldn’t simply slap cold water on his face and get his act together.

“Thoughts on soba for dinner?” Melkor asked him out of the blue. He was a godsend, always piping up with something or another whenever Mairon happened to need a diversion. “I’m craving noodles.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mairon said. It came out dismissive. Empty. He winced. Tried again. “That sounds good.”

He knew that Melkor knew that he wasn’t at his best. But he didn’t want to appear ungrateful, disinterested, to push the boundaries of what he could get away with. He didn’t want to *get away* with anything. The idea was to be as normal as possible, stick to a routine as average as could be.

Especially around Melkor. Melkor, who deserved the world. Mairon couldn't believe it, sometimes, how lucky he had gotten in life, to meet someone like that, who loved him like nothing else mattered.

“With the sauce?”

Mairon swallowed. “Mhm,” he replied automatically.

His cheeks were burning. Like he was flushing. Served him right for having inappropriate, entirely too sentimental thoughts about his husband in the middle of the workday, with said husband right there, and a collection of hawk-eyed onlookers just waiting for a sign, a hint, anything. He recognized a pair of them as compatriots of Ellen's. The rest were unfamiliar faces, but though not everyone participated in the gossip, every sentient being in the building knew *of* it.

And Ellen—her reaction to his return had been the strangest of all. Considering how overzealous her behavior had always been, he had anticipated questions, theories, the like. Yet she ended up being the only person who didn't stare at him like he was a museum display. Melkor had assured him, swore to him, that she knew no more than the rest of them. Perhaps she was doing it on purpose, playing the part of a friend. Casual, to get him to feel comfortable around her. Like she hoped he would eventually open up and tell her the whole truth himself. He wouldn't. Regardless, it was nice to have even a single person treat him like a human being. And maybe, just maybe, she was being genuine.

Over the clatter of dishes and silverware, Melkor was still talking. Something about the trees in the backyard. Gardener, Friday, appointment, pesticide, Wolf staying with Thuringwethil. He reached over to the refrigerator. Splash of creamer, spoonful of sugar. He didn't drink his coffee black anymore, not since falling down an internet wormhole about gut health.

Around them, as Melkor divulged more and more details about *their* home, *their* dog, *their* neighbors, there was no doubt that their lovely audience was beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Absently, Mairon wondered what Melkor's intent was. Melkor was no fool; he had to know what he was doing. By the looks of it, the easy way he ignored everyone in the room, he just didn't care.

And truthfully, neither did Mairon.

It wasn't a secret, not really, not anymore. They had stopped playing their little workplace game a long, long time ago. It was a bit like growing up, for lack of a better term, *maturing*. Realizing that the handful of people who would most definitely throw around accusations of nepotism, who would call Mairon a whore behind his back for getting his job the way he did—that those people didn't matter. They were background noise. He was qualified, intelligent, good at what he did. Exceptional, even. What he and Melkor did on their time was none of their business. And, on the off chance it all became too much, it would only take a snap of Mairon's fingers to have them transferred, relocated, *fired*, if they gave him the grounds to do so.

So, no—not a secret. But nobody knew *for sure*. And it was that little tidbit, that glimmer of uncertainty, that bothered Mairon. Those curious eyes that followed him everywhere, inspecting him, assessing him, looking him up and down. Dissecting the scraps of conversation between him and Melkor, looking for clues in the glances they exchanged. It would be so much easier to nip that curiosity in the bud. To orchestrate a spectacle, provide indisputable proof, make it so they stopped, once and for all, whispering and muttering and acting like he couldn't see them passing gossip from one eager ear to the next.

It would be complicated, though, Mairon mused, to arrange a display that was not too flamboyant,

but just conspicuous enough. There was a fine line between his personal life and the workplace that Mairon had no intention of crossing. Some things were his—*theirs*—and theirs alone. It had to be something small. But incontrovertible. Confirmation that Melkor was his. Quick and painless. No dragging it out.

Melkor turned away from the coffee station, carrying his mug. He was still talking. About the basement, now, the renovations they were carrying out. He set the coffee down on their table and whirled around to go back for the spoon he had forgotten on the counter.

Mairon took a breath. He had an idea. He would regret this later, he supposed, when he was in a better mood, more connected with reality. Or maybe he wouldn't. Time would tell. Now—he was irritated and restless, tired of the gawking. He could still feel the bloody *stares* on him, clinging to him like he was nothing but a strip of flypaper.

It all came down to a split-second, impulsive decision.

Showtime. One night only. No repeats, no reruns. Because it was improper. Just once, he would do this *once*, and only once, to make it official.

Melkor was back at the table. Still talking. He dropped the spoon into his mug and made to sit.

“And that is exactly why, as you see, I had to—”

As he lowered himself down, Mairon rose halfway out of his chair. He stretched his arm out and cradled Melkor's cheek, drawing him effortlessly into a kiss, short and to the point. He was making a point. That was all.

It was worth it. He knew immediately, as soon as he did it, that he would not regret it, not ever. The endearing look of surprise on Melkor's face when they parted flooded every inch of Mairon's body with unimaginable warmth. And maybe it wouldn't be the last time, either, that they kissed in front of spectators. Public displays of affection weren't that bad, Mairon decided, not when they were the ones hosting the show. Not when Melkor looked at him like that.

He tried to bite back a smile. And failed. It wasn't supposed to be romantic—just a performance, nothing more. But Melkor's eyes were wide and it hurt Mairon, hurt him physically, to leave it at that.

He took Melkor's chin in his hand and tugged him back in. One more kiss. Short and to the point. Again. He was making a second point. He considered if he might make a third, later in the day.

When it was over, he let his touch linger. He traced a line across Melkor's cheek, from the corner of his lips, up to the curve of his ear. Soft and warm and grounding.

“Sorry,” he muttered—perfectly unapologetic. “They were getting annoying.”

/

Hi Boss,

I hope this email finds you well.

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for your actions today in the fourth floor lunch room. The event that took place has had an immense positive impact on both my mental wellbeing and my financial situation. There was a betting pool, you see. I won a lot of money.

Furthermore, please accept my deepest apologies for starting the aforementioned betting pool in the first place. In hindsight, I can see how that would be considered inappropriate workplace behavior. Which is why, to apologize, I would be delighted to invite you someplace egregiously expensive for lunch later this week. I feel somewhat bad for shoving my nose in your business.

I look forward to your response.

Please don't fire me.

Regards,

Ellen

Chapter End Notes

fun fact i wrote most of this before starting [day 88](#) so the ending of that was ultimately designed to tie into this. my brain is so huge

out with the old

Chapter Notes

the trop finale pissed me off so bad i dusted off this draft from last september. happy to be back

for my dear [anna](#), my number one supporter and the mastermind behind this prompt

timeline: year 12; July

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

Mairon wakes early that morning and turns sluggishly over to face him. They stay like that for a moment in a lazy, silent embrace, sleep-drunk and warm, before Mairon grumbles his decision to get up and take a shower. He rolls away and off the bed before Melkor can so much as think up a suggestive quip about joining him.

It's like that when a series of less than ideal days builds up. The very idea of putting effort into himself and his surroundings becomes an insurmountable chore. The previous night, by those standards, was rock bottom. Mairon skipped his routine. No shower, no hundred dollar under-eye cream—the sort of negligence he usually has it out with Melkor about.

He's downstairs making coffee by the time Melkor banishes the sleep from his body and idle worries from his mind. He's being restless about it, spooning grounds into the filter handle in a way that has half of it spilling onto the countertop. He halfheartedly tamps it down with his forehead drooped low and pressed against the cabinet up above, the towel slipping slowly but surely off his head.

Melkor comes up behind him to get a good look at his masterful handiwork and fetch a mug for himself from the very cabinet being obstructed. Silently he reaches over Mairon and just as silently Mairon steps back to let him.

“You smell nice.”

Mairon scoffs. “You know when you reach that point where your hair just feels so disgusting you can barely live with yourself?”

“Somewhat,” Melkor says. He's not very particular about that sort of thing himself. Not very *neat*, as he's often told. And washing his hair is a whole process. Drying it takes the better part of an hour. “Better now?”

“Can't even tie it up properly anymore when it gets like that. Too short now. These pieces here start poking out and I look like that awful meme you sent me with the chicken with the ugly ponytail.”

“You make a lovely chicken.”

“Thank you.”

Realizing Mairon is in no rush to be done and free up the machine, Melkor sets his mug down to

the side and crowds into his space. He stands behind Mairon with his arms on either side like he means to maneuver him around like a puppeteer; Mairon's hands drop from the appliances and move to cling to the lip of the counter as he lets Melkor work in his stead.

The coffee is tamped down with the precision only a pretentious savant can have and the filter slotted into the machine, but then Mairon slaps his hand away, interrupting the process before Melkor can complete his ritual.

"Froth the milk first."

"You do that in another cup and pour the espresso in after."

"And then I'll have to wash two cups. I hardly want to wash the one. Do it in this one and then brew the coffee over top."

Offended on behalf of the coffee machine and pretentious savants everywhere, Melkor does as he's told with only a sarcastic drawl of, "Yes, majesty," in lieu of any actual complaint.

The milk done, he puts the mug under the spout and lets the coffee brew. It makes a muscle in his jaw spasm. The things he does for love.

As the machine hums, Mairon says quietly: "I'll do the dishes later. And vacuum. And the plants. I'm killing the plants. I haven't watered them in, hell if I know, weeks. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. It's just plants. Some plants and some dust."

"I'm being useless."

"You don't exist solely to be useful."

"I've not done anything around here in weeks."

"You're not my cleaner."

"No, but as your partner, I should be pulling my weight."

"Mairon—"

"You'll get bored of me, no, if I keep this up?" Mairon's head knocks back tiredly against Melkor's shoulder. "There's only so much moping a person can stomach. I've been a mess, and on top of that a difficult, moody piece of shit, and—"

"And here I was thinking you despised self-deprecation more than anything."

There's a long silence. "Oh, fuck off."

Melkor switches the machine off and pinches Mairon's sides. Ticklish, he winces and tries to worm free, but Melkor holds firm and twists him around in his arms to face him. He takes Mairon's chin in his fingers and jerks it up to make sure he has his full attention.

"Have a nice, long think about all the shit we've seen each other go through, and tell me again how certain you are two or so months of skipped chores will be the final straw in all this."

Mairon takes a shaky breath, insides rattling like something's come loose in his chest. He tries to pull his face away but Melkor refuses to relent. The stubborn glare lingers for a moment before Mairon's eyes flicker back to the sink, that beautiful, neurotic brain of his still honed in on a single,

stupid detail.

“I’ll take care of it in a moment. Promise.”

“Sweetheart, come on. You’re being silly. Screw the dishes. You know what, go grab the bin and hold it up for me. We’ll toss them and get new ones. IKEA opens in an hour. How about it?”

For the first time that morning, Mairon’s eyes light up with interest.

Melkor lets go of him, sufficiently content he’s broken through the surface of the funk, and Mairon turns to sweeten his atrocious coffee.

“We can go,” he says after he’s had his first sip. “I’ll still wash up, you absolute idiot, but we can go after. That’s the last good sponge we have, I think. And you got turmeric on all the towels. And I want to drive.”

He insists on driving when he wants something to concentrate on outside of the confines of his mind. It’s such a small thing that relaxes him so deeply, Melkor thinks, watching patches of the summer sun flit on and off Mairon’s face as his fingers tap serenely against the wheel. The knot in Melkor’s chest begins to slowly unwind. Such a simple solution to an otherwise immeasurable problem.

The decision to skip the majority of the showroom apartments, packed and sweaty as they always are, is unanimous, and they head straight for the main floor, though it reveals itself to be just as crowded. It’s an ungodly sight for a weekday morning, but they’ve travelled too far to turn back now.

Melkor turns a blind eye to the way Mairon’s face twitches and drags him resolutely to the first of the kitchen aisles with the intent of picking his mind about the sort of island that would suit their needs best.

Well—Melkor’s needs. He decided quite a while ago he would upgrade the space, but never got around to enacting his scheme. For someone who enjoys cooking as much as he does, the size of the kitchen has always been a downside. But the house had charmed him so dearly when he first saw it, he was willing to overlook even the most grievous of faults.

“Like this one,” he points out, waving vaguely at the storage underneath. “With the—look, drawers *and* shelves. Look how deep. For the KitchenAid and rice cooker and all the trinkets. I’d need it bigger, though. Depth’s all right, but the length would have to be double at least.”

“Wouldn’t it get in the way of the table?”

“We can move the table up to the wall,” Melkor reasons. “We can also get a different table.”

“I like the table.”

“Table stays, then,” he concedes. “This bench top is horrendous, don’t you think? The quality of these things terrifies me. Is this bloody plastic? I’d have the guy match it to the counters, naturally. Light tan granite. Add some inches to the whole thing, too.”

He leans forward on the display island then, bracing himself up on his elbows and jutting his ass out like a stripper looking to sucker a crowd of weak-willed men out of their money.

Mairon stares at him.

“I’m testing the height.”

“Oh, are you?”

“You know, for cooking.”

Mairon’s empty stare cracks just so into a smile. Hook, line, and sinker.

With a hopeless grin, Melkor yanks him along by the hand deeper into the maze of the store like an excited teenager on their first date. He can’t help it. Mairon makes him fucking stupid.

Melkor hands him the reins when they reach the tupperware; Mairon is far more adept at the art of decluttering. Melkor’s idea of organized is organized chaos.

A little tower of glass containers and minimal bamboo lids soon builds up in the corner of their shopping cart, followed by a couple of jars for storage, some tall, some stout, and new kitchen towels with a second set for backup in the event of another incident involving difficult South Asian spices. Melkor prides himself on his good taste but acquiesces to Mairon’s more practical choice, one that’s less likely to become visibly filthy in a matter of days.

“Put that down.”

“You don’t even know—”

“Does it matter? You’ll break it if you keep playing with it.”

“But look.”

He pokes the pepper grinder in Mairon’s face. It’s sleek wood with a minimal groove where the flared cap unscrews.

“We don’t need that,” Mairon says gently like he’s letting down a child. “You’ve already got three. How about a new bottle for your olive oil, instead?”

“Yes, yes, but this looks like a—”

“No, it doesn’t,” Mairon snaps. He lowers his voice, eyes flitting briefly to the side. “Please put it down. You’re posturing. I know what you’re doing and you don’t need to. I’m fine. And there’s a little girl staring at you and her mother looks like she’ll take you to court if you end up unintentionally teaching her child about the comedic properties of phallic objects.”

“So you admit it. It looks like a—”

The workplace section is ignored. They breeze past swivel chairs and standing desks and swarms of gamers trying to decide if the BEKANT or UPPSPEL is more fitted to their particular needs.

Melkor’s office is disordered enough as it is, and Mairon never quite got used to using the second spare bedroom as his workstation away from his workstation. He moves regularly about the house with his laptop, and when he grows irate with being holed up but wishes to avoid being accosted by his employees back at Utumno, he sits in the garden with it, or the local coffee shop, or at his and Thuringwethil’s favorite taqueria. Whatever the case may be, he travels light. He has no use for a BRÄDA or a DAGOTTO.

Among the model beds and hanging sets of sheets and comforters just a little further down the hall stands a basket of plush sharks at the perfect height for children to grab at while their parents make

important decisions. Linen or cotton. The white or the gray. Not now, sweetie, stop pulling on my shirt. Put the shark back. No, we're not getting the shark.

Melkor picks one up by its swishy tail and softly thumps Mairon on the back of the head with it.

"Can we get a BLÅHAJ?"

"Absolutely not."

"Sweetheart, please—"

Things don't get tossed full force into their cart again until the overhead sign reads *Home Organization*. A foul-smelling seagrass basket catches Mairon's eye, and the rest is history.

He reads the measurements and stares intently at the display as he plays back the layout of their house in his mind.

"Pantry, dry storage," he lists off. "Your magazines. The closets upstairs could use some work, too. Winter things. Beach things."

He hauls a couple off the shelf and moves on to the next basket on display, sage green and mesh metal with an ornamental little hole in the center for easy grabbing.

"For the blankets by the couch, what do you think? It won't snag. Can be used for anything, really."

"How do you even pronounce this?"

"DRÖNJÖNS," Mairon says without hesitation.

"That was incredibly sexy. I don't like these, though."

"Not a fan of the metal?"

"The color. The metal's fine. Do they have it in black?"

Mairon's eyes roll hard into the back of his head.

Melkor snorts and takes a sneaky, ominous step forward. "How could you say I don't like metal? Come on, how did that thought even cross your mind? You know exactly how much I love—"

He reaches for Mairon's chest with an impish grin and Mairon viciously slaps his wandering hand away. Obediently, Melkor retracts it.

He knows he's pushing his luck. If he causes too much of a scene, he's at risk of losing Mairon's favor, albeit temporarily. There's a fine line between being an annoyance to distract him from his otherwise gloomy thoughts, and irritating him to point of genuine anger.

"What is with you today?" Mairon demands. "You're a fucking animal."

His tone is suspiciously pleasant, like he's not really mad, not *yet*, and Melkor narrows his eyes, not sure what to think.

"Grab three of these. No, the green ones, Melkor," he orders. "Are you still thinking about the, uh ___"

He trails off and flicks at his own earlobe, the gold on it twinkling like treasure.

Melkor averts his gaze and gets to moving baskets into their cart. There was a fleeting idea for him to get an ear pierced, just the one, something small and inconspicuous for the sole purpose of having something fun in common with Mairon. But he kept chickening out. Mairon—no stranger to needles in his ears or his face or, hell, even all over his arms—assured him he would hold his hand during and kiss it better after. And yet Melkor never grew the balls to pick his phone up and make the appointment.

“Maybe. Not yet. Maybe one day,” he says evasively. “You’ll be the first to know.”

Between the baskets and the next section of home goods, they pick up a few sets of clear storage bins with the intent of get rid of the leaning heaps of shitty cardboard boxes in the basement once and for all. A brilliant idea, Melkor thinks. He’s had enough of spending hours digging around for seasonal decorations and rarely-used appliances, breathing in the mildewy fumes of the concrete walls in the unsettling darkness.

The mirrors and picture frames are passed by, unlike what comes next: a new collection in the lighting department. It draws Melkor’s attention like he’s a moth and it’s a gorgeous, rustic flame, and though he complains loudly, Mairon hauls him bodily away.

“It’s a *lamp*.”

“But look at the trim. The *pattern*. When you switch it on, look how it disperses the light. Hold on, let me go, I’ll show you.”

Under his breath, Mairon calls him a fucking nerd.

“It’s kitschy,” he says aloud. “Where would you even put it? We don’t need another ceiling lamp anywhere, do we?”

“Oh, *look*. They have it in black, Mairon.”

Before checking out, they pick up a voluminous fern for the front room and a few elegant, cool-toned clay pots to refresh the recently growing collection of plants in Melkor’s home office: philodendrons and Chinese evergreens and snake plants that don’t mind the sunlight and can easily survive the drop in temperature in a room made mostly of glass when winter rolls around.

“The fun thing about pots like these,” Melkor rambles, “is when you’ve gone overboard the clay gets wet and stains and you know straight away.”

“Given the state of things, I would be more worried about under-watering, dearest.”

The self-deprecation again, Mairon converting into the sort of pitiful creature he loathes the very most. Melkor resists the urge to flick him lovingly on the nose; it’s nothing IKEA’s legendary iced black tea can’t fix, after all.

“Well, that’s where I come in. You haven’t killed the plants because *I’ve* been watering them. I can be responsible, you know. On occasion. It’s not all on you.”

The grand finale finds them sitting in the food court with their limited edition STORSTOMMA rainbow bags at their feet, picking at their Swedish delicacies.

Mairon seems less than impressed, with an obvious bone to pick with his dry fries and bland hot dog seasoned only with a splash of watery ketchup. It’s his own fault, Melkor tells him, for

ignoring the station with pickles and caramelized onions.

“I’m aware,” Mairon says. “Just—the pickles always slide off mid-bite, and I felt like if that happened to me today it might be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. I might actually lose my mind, you know?”

“Haven’t you lost it already?”

“And now I’m stuck with moist cardboard.”

“*You’re* complaining. You. This is the food of your people.”

“You’re a cunt. Give me that.”

Mairon yanks Melkor’s tray towards himself. He wields the two fries he has in hand, already dipped in his favorite mud-colored concoction of ketchup and mustard, and sticks them in the cranberry sauce from Melkor’s plate of meatballs.

Melkor makes a face. “Did I knock you up or something?”

“What?”

“You’ve been in a mood all morning. Now this,” he explains, eyes on the fries. “You’re having weird cravings and I am merely being observant.”

“Don’t be vulgar.”

Melkor blinks. “Pray tell, how is—”

“It is when you say it like that in the middle of the IKEA food court.”

“Oh,” Melkor says. He tries valiantly not to laugh at Mairon’s expense. “My darling’s just mad because he’s secretly into that. Who would have thought?”

“I am going to harm you.”

“Oh, are you? In the middle of the IKEA food court? Do elaborate.”

He knows immediately from the look on Mairon’s face that he’s pushed his luck a bit too far. He’ll have to be particularly accommodating for the remainder of the day—prepare a luxurious pot of tea with a freshly baked pastry on the side, or something of that ilk—lest he end up sleeping on the couch with nothing but Wolf’s cold, wet snout for comfort.

And it’s not that he’s *wrong*. Melkor knows he’s hit the nail on the head; he can read Mairon to a tee. He’s absolutely into it and taking his embarrassment out on Melkor for inadvertently unearthing something that he would much prefer to remain under lock and key. But that’s all right. He’ll let it lie now and bring it up at a more opportune time. He will not forget. There is no way in hell, no way on God’s green earth that he will ever forget.

“I am not putting the baby in the back,” Melkor argues a half-hour later.

The trunk door lowers and shuts and they stand face to face at the back of Mairon’s car, Melkor’s hands gripping hard at his new BLÅHAJ.

“Please,” he says. He sticks his arms out, and instinctively, Mairon takes the shark in both hands. But Melkor doesn’t let go. He steps into Mairon’s space to meet him and curls his lips into a pout

over the BLÅHAJ's soft, little head. "Not for me. Do it for Ancalagon."

Mairon fights a smile. Melkor's irresistible, he knows. He leans down and seals the deal with a quick kiss.

"Just for the drive," he promises. "You'll never have to hold him again when we get home."

Melkor clambers in on the driver's side in Mairon's stead, following his claims of a sudden stomachache. He feels gross, he said, is worried he might be sick from eating too many cardboard hot dogs.

The BLÅHAJ is settled in Mairon's lap with a clear view out past the front windshield. Mairon looks put out by this at first, of course he does, like it's Manwë's kid he's been tasked with babysitting. He's doing Melkor a bloody great favor. Holding his plush toy is *such* a chore.

Not that it's anything but a performance. Stopped at a red light, Melkor lets his eyes wander and catches Mairon's arms tightening around the BLÅHAJ only a few minutes down the line, his chin drooping slowly to rest on its squishy shark head.

It isn't until days later that Melkor begins to understand the extent of the damage he's wrought, though.

Mairon refuses to part with the damn thing. When he's not pestering the dog, he clings relentlessly to the shark instead. Wherever he is, Ancalagon is there: on the couch, or the bed, or the garden chaise, under his head like a pillow or at the foot of the bed to help elevate his legs. On occasion, he outright *hugs* it, when he's slumped over reading or staring at his phone. He shoves it between his fucking knees for spinal support when he sleeps, when he could be using Melkor as a perfectly good body pillow instead.

A grave mistake has been made, Melkor realizes with dawning dread.

He's invited an enemy, a *usurper* into his home, one that may very well cost him everything he's ever loved.

Chapter End Notes

i'm sorry to ikea food. ikea food my beloved i adore you mairon is just a picky eater.
he doesn't deserve you

in and out

Chapter Notes

timeline: year 12; August

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

At four in the afternoon on an otherwise uneventful Monday, Melkor finds himself sitting on the closed toilet seat in Thuringwethil's bathroom, sweating bullets.

The sickly smell of antiseptic hangs heavy in the air as her voice warps and echoes around them. He's trapped in a vacuum, an airless space. The walls are closing in, and so on; he's being dramatic, he knows, but he doesn't particularly care about maintaining his air of menace in that moment, given the circumstances.

"You weren't kidding," Thuringwethil says to Mairon. He's here somewhere, somewhere in the room, hanging back. Melkor isn't alone, at the very least. If it all ends here, he isn't alone. "He's completely out of it."

Mairon hums. It's a nice sound, familiar and grounding.

All the same, Melkor feels his head move in silent agreement, a sluggish up and down that makes his vision spin. So what if he's wary, he thinks sullenly. Everyone's got their quirks. And he's well within his rights to be wary of Mairon's unhinged best friend, waving about her latex gloves and single-use needles like she knows what she's doing and hasn't been roped into this scheme solely for the pricy bottle of pink gin Mairon had promised her in exchange.

Melkor knows she's doing it on purpose, her whole act. It's an *act*. He knows, in the back of his mind, that he's not going to get an infection and die, or develop a keloid and die, and he knows that her hands are too steady to miss his ear entirely and administer an amateur lobotomy instead. She's scaring him because she doesn't like him and he'll be damned if he lets her—any more than he already has.

"Right, then," she says, and he is *not* afraid. "Mandatory disclaimer, darlings: again, I'm not certified, so you're proceeding at your own risk, but I did do all of mine and half of Mairon's, as we know. Even my septum, which was quite the feat, if I do say so myself. Not his, though. And my tragus too, if you can imagine how fun that one was."

"I don't know what any of those words mean," Melkor says tightly. He's surprised he manages to make use of his vocal cords at all.

"Don't worry about it." Mairon's hand is on his shoulder, warm and steady. "Though she was a bit drunk and bled all over me in a panic."

Melkor's stomach drops and loops and knots itself into a neat, little bow. He's surrounded by villains and traitors.

"I didn't do his tits though."

"I wouldn't trust you to."

Melkor blinks. “How do you know about that?”

“What—his tits?”

“Why are we talking about my tits? Just get on with it before he loses consciousness and cracks his head open on the lip of the tub. It’s far too cramped in here.”

It’s a nice tub, Melkor thinks, claw-footed. He blinks at it. Bottle-green tiles on the walls, long and narrow, vertical. The whole bathroom is nice. He’s loathe to admit his bitch of an ex and her bitch of a girlfriend have decent taste.

“He’s like a cat in a patch of sunshine all summer long, tits out and about,” Thuringwethil says. “Et cetera.”

Melkor’s head, when he lifts it from the mosaic floor to stare Thuringwethil down for her fucking audacity, weighs a ton. His shoulders ache from the tension. He’s actively *dying*.

Thuringwethil pays him no mind, wiping the cap of an unmarked pen with rubbing alcohol. She thinks she’s better than him. She’s getting off on this. She’s going to tell her girlfriend just how much of a little bitch he was and they’re going to titter and snicker about his suffering all through the night.

“I am not going to jump your dear husband, fret not.”

“I’m not,” Melkor stammers. “That’s not what—”

“What, then?”

“Nothing.” He looks back down at his white-knuckled hands in his lap. He’s not in the right state of mind to be jealous, *possessive*, but for the sake of it, he points out: “You were looking.”

“I’ve got eyes. I suppose you might find it hard to believe, but some people are capable of differentiating between appreciation and attraction. Just because you want to stick your dick in anything with a pulse and double-Ds doesn’t mean the rest of us do.”

“He wants to what?” Mairon asks innocently.

“Appreciation,” Melkor echoes.

“Yes, just about anyone can appreciate Mairon is pretty, you dullard.”

“Thank you. Do stab him already, would you?”

“I thought you enjoyed being the center of attention.”

“Mm,” Mairon hums. “Starting to rethink that. Stab-stab.”

Thuringwethil makes a small sound, a dismissive *yes, yes, don’t get your fucking knickers in a twist*. There’s cling wrap over the countertop and a sterile sheet of gauze over it, her freshly cleaned supplies laid in a neat row. She’s very professional about the whole thing, this sadistic hobby of hers. In hindsight, Melkor thinks, insofar as he’s capable of coherent thought, he’d expected worse. A dive bar of a piercing parlor, the click of a lighter, flames licking a rusted sewing needle. At the very least, sepsis won’t be what does him in.

“You have way too much hair. Tie it up, put it away.”

Something—someone—shoves at his shoulder and he drags his arms awake to follow her command, bones like rubber, unwieldy and clumsy. He bunches his hair up at the top of his head, twists and loops it, running on muscle memory alone, and flinches when a hangnail snags on the hair tie. As if the day couldn't get any fucking worse. He yanks his pinky finger free, resisting the overwhelming, steadily growing urge to throw up. If he chickens out entirely, this close to the finish line, she wins, and they'll spend the next week, not just the one night, cackling at his expense. Mairon, too, the fiend. None of them will ever let him live it down.

Just then, Mairon—speak of the fucking devil—appears suddenly in his line of sight, settling carefully into a crouch beside him. There's pale eyes looking up, meeting his, coming into focus. No, no, not a devil. He's an angel, his guardian angel descended from the heavens. This is what it's like to die.

The angel holds out a hand, palm up, and Melkor takes it and squeezes hard.

"I don't want to stick my dick in anything with a pulse," he says quietly, sullenly. His voice is thin and pathetic and he's resigned to his fate now, he thinks. If he goes, he goes. He's reviewed his will recently enough, not that his worldly possessions were ever going to go to anybody else.

"You do love a double-D, though. You should've numbed him," Mairon muses, glancing up. "You've got something with lidocaine, haven't you? I really think he might pass out."

"I'm fine."

There's a flicker of concern in Mairon's eyes when he looks back. He's not a traitor. He isn't. He never was. He's on Melkor's side of this, always has been, always will be, until the end of time. He'll try not to die, Melkor decides, he swears it to himself, he'll fight so he can stay right here with Mairon.

"You don't look fine. You're really pale."

"I am fine," Melkor insists.

"You're going to be a big boy?"

Melkor nods, eyes flat and empty. He'll fight. He stares at the opposite wall, unseeing. The pattern on the tile is moving, spinning like the inside of a kaleidoscope, and it's making him nauseous. *He'll fight.*

"Right," Thuringwethil says again, cutting through the silence. She's loud, so loud. She yanks on a fresh pair of sterile gloves, pitch black and absurdly sinister for no fucking reason, and lets them slap against her wrists. Melkor doesn't flinch. He *doesn't*. "Please keep your foreplay out of my bathroom. Final call, now—only the right?"

"Only the right," Mairon confirms. "I don't think he could sit through both."

"I could."

"Shush."

"Tilt your head just a—Mairon, tilt his head just a bit, please," Thuringwethil mutters. Her hands are on him now, the latex creaking, and Melkor feels a lump lodged in his throat that he can't quite seem to swallow down. "Lovely, just like that."

There's a poke at his earlobe then, sudden and jarring, and a violent shiver runs down his spine.

Despite his best intentions, he jerks to the side and Thuringwethil cusses him out in frustration —“*Idiota. Cabrón. Hijo de la reputa madre.*”—and steps away to grab something out of sight.

“That was a marker, you man-child,” she snaps. She shows him the marker, the one from before. It’s purple and harmless and Melkor does feel a bit stupid, admittedly. “I need to know where I’m sticking the needle, so don’t fucking move, please and thank you.”

Melkor thinks he nods. He isn’t sure. He squeezes Mairon’s hand and Mairon squeezes back, still there with him, always with him, as his ear is wiped down and dried off with little squares of gauze.

Perhaps it’s irrational, yes, this fear of his, but he can’t help the way his heart is stuck in his throat and his lungs are too big for his chest and he understands so, so clearly all of a sudden what it is Mairon means when he’s manic and says his bones are going to try and crawl free from his body if he sits still and does nothing for a single second longer.

“Weren’t you supposed to be a big boy?” Thuringwethil snaps from up above, her pretty voice mangled with exasperation, and then her hands return, fingers at the back of Melkor’s head, the hollow of his cheek, tilting him roughly back into position.

This time, he doesn’t flinch. He’s better than that. The marker does its job, pokes about his lobe, front and back, a connecting line scraped just across the edge. Melkor bites his tongue until he tastes blood and stares at the way Mairon’s fingers go white and then violet in his unrelenting grip. He can’t do anything about it. He’s frozen stiff and he couldn’t let go if he wanted to.

His head has moved again, tipped towards the overhead light. Fingers on his lobe, pinching, inspecting. Checking something. Something. He hears Mairon’s voice in his head. *She’s just checking the angle’s right. Breathe. You need to breathe. You’re turning purple. Melkor, breathe.* Maybe it’s not in his head. Maybe Mairon is speaking.

Thuringwethil squeezes his ear hard and jabs him with the marker again, more viciously this time, making that final mark, and there’s no turning back now, and Melkor tries very, very hard not to make a wounded noise in the back of his throat. He’s not scared of a bloody marker. He thinks he might be having a panic attack. Fucking *coward*. He feels himself shaking and he owes Mairon a life debt for bringing him here, where he can embarrass himself in private and not have to pay for making a scene in a parlor and wussing out before the deed is done.

“Not bad,” Thuringwethil sing-songs. “That’s all done, then.”

Melkor sucks in a rattle of a breath through clenched teeth, bracing himself—and then it clicks, what she’s said.

“What,” he grits out. The lump in his throat is suffocating him.

“You big baby,” Mairon tells him. It’s a soft whisper, honeyed and proud. *Proud*—that makes no fucking sense. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“What,” Melkor repeats.

“This is my least favorite part, personally,” Thuringwethil says. She’s holding up a tiny silver earring. “So, there’s a little plastic tube in your ear now, and what I’m going to do is thread the earring through it. Done right, you’re not supposed to feel a thing, but that’s a lie. The ear feels the difference.”

“Or the nipple,” Mairon muses.

“Or the nipple,” she agrees.

Melkor, for a split-second, detaches from his body. He’s all foggy, feels just about brain-dead. He processes it, slowly. Somehow, he blacked out, worked himself into such a frantic state that an entire rod of metal had gone through his ear unnoticed. There’s a hole in his ear. There’s a little chunk of his flesh in the hollow cavern of a needle tossed somewhere in the sink of his husband’s best friend’s bathroom. He wracks his memory and he’s unable, he realizes, to pinpoint the moment it happened. Just like that, a thing in his ear. In and out.

He blinks, and finds that he’s only starting to feel it properly now that it’s been pointed out to him that they’re all done: a building soreness, a tug on his ear, a slight pinch and drag when the earring’s forced through, but it’s all right. Nothing hurts anymore, now that the panic is over. It’s hardly more than a fever, really, sharp and bright and confined to just the side of his head, and that’s all. That’s all it was ever going to be. All that fuss for fucking nothing.

The silver ball is screwed into place and then—the end. Melkor’s eyes are glazed over still and his heart is pounding like a war drum, but he made it to the end unscathed. No casualties. Adrenaline surges, comes over him in a tidal wave, and he feels, he thinks hysterically, like he could take over the world if he wanted to.

“All good? You with me?”

He nods and tries to let go of Mairon’s abused hands, to set him free, but needs help in the end to pry his locked fingers apart.

In the background, Thuringwethil talks. She launches into her clean-up routine, rattles off aftercare instructions as if there’s any need for that. There is not. Melkor barely hears her. Whatever he misses, every third word, every fourth, he’s got Mairon to remind him. Mairon’s an expert. *Something, something, it’s numb now, but it’ll get achey in a few hours. Pulsating and too-warm, that’s normal. Something, something, something, comes in waves. It’s important you don’t touch. Sterile salt spray. No changing the jewelry for at least a month, and no hoop until it heals up all the way. Are you even listening, rat bastard?*

“I’m—”

“Yes, yes, he’s listening,” Mairon answers for him.

Achey—a bit, maybe. If anything, it feels itchy. Melkor reaches up to prod at it, instinct taking over, and gets his hand smacked away. Mairon is standing now, hovering above him all of a sudden, and holding out a sucker swathed in a bright green wrapper like Melkor’s a brave kid at the doctor’s getting his cartoon plaster and sweet treat. Sour apple—Mairon knows him so well. That’s the love of his life right there.

“A prize,” he says, “for a job well done.”

Melkor inhales. It takes effort. His insides are still in knots and he’s barely drawing enough air to see straight, but he crookedly matches Mairon’s stupid smile and gathers up all his strength to speak.

“To be honest,” he manages, “I had hoped for a different kind of suck—”

There’s a clang of metal and a ear-splitting crack as Thuringwethil slams her palms down against the granite countertop.

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

She hauls Melkor to his feet by the scruff of his shirt and he goes willingly, afraid of what she might do if he doesn't. He allows himself to be pushed all the way out the door and into the hall, Mairon following suit with the back of his hand pressed against his lips to mask his soundless laughter.

“Get out and do not come back—I swear—unless you're bringing me the gin, Mairon,” she warns. “Goodbye and good riddance and I do sincerely hope the door hits you on your way out, the both of you.”

Chapter End Notes

stay safe everyone dont try this at home (the author has done 4 of her own piercings including her septum and has also pierced her brother and bff)

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