

day 88

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day 88

by [finalizer](#)

Summary

As much they both tried to pretend otherwise, everything would be different now. The same, but different. There was no going back from something like this.

set in the same universe as **a little trouble**

Notes

this work is directly related to [a little trouble](#) and will probably make very little sense as a standalone

after lengthy deliberation and many conversations with [crackinthecup](#) i've decided to finally explore the story behind the little references that i had sprinkled in throughout ALT — this is being posted separately due to the subject matter and required content warnings

please review the tags/cws before proceeding

timeline: year 11; May

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

30/05, 1:33 PM

to: Melkor

outgoing missed calls (5)

30/05, 1:59 PM

to: Mairon

Melkor missed the meeting. Tell him to answer his phone.

30/05, 2:11 PM

to: Melkor

outgoing answered call (1)

30/05, 2:23 PM

to: Mairon

Tell him to call my secretary to reschedule for tomorrow.

30/05, 2:31 PM

to: Mairon

Is everything okay?

30/05, 2:45 PM

to: Mairon

He seemed off.

30/05, 2:59 PM

to: Mairon

Did something happen?

30/05, 3:05 PM

to: Mairon

outgoing missed call (1)

Manwë was already on his way downstairs. His footsteps echoed as the call rang and rang and went to voicemail. He paused to clear the rest of his schedule with the secretary at the front desk and stepped out into the gray afternoon.

As he pulled to a stop at a red light, he stared blankly down at his hands wrapped around the steering wheel, knuckles white with tension. He was annoyed. Furious, even. “Something came up,” Melkor had told him, “sorry.” And he’d hung up. Just another flimsy excuse. Another attempt at weaseling out of behaving like a reasonable adult.

And Manwë’s patience had run out. *What is it? What came up? What’s so bloody important?* He was going to sit Melkor down at the kitchen table and stay put until he reviewed the proposal and signed off on it, filled out all the forms, agreed to the expenses, the legal fees. He would scribble an extra clause in there, too, to make sure Melkor never missed an appointment again. *Next time you cancel on me with less than twenty-four hours’ notice, you owe me five grand.* It was a childish, spiteful thought—but he was out of strength, he was so unspeakably tired.

The light turned green and he stepped on the gas.

Manwë exhaled. There was no use worrying about this in the middle of traffic. He would cross that bridge once he got to it—if Melkor was even home, if he would bother to open the door. *If if if.* Everything was always *if* around him. If he picked up the phone, if he made the meeting, if he cared about anyone but himself.

Red light again. White knuckles.

Except he’d apologized. Melkor wasn’t one to apologize. He wasn’t in his right mind. He couldn’t be. Manwë stretched his fingers out until his joints ached, rapped them noisily against the cool leather of the steering wheel. And Mairon wasn’t picking up, either. And he always did. Regardless of their mutual animosity, he would always pick up during working hours, or at the very least send off a text to let Manwë know he was otherwise occupied. He was the professional one, the one who could be counted on to be responsible. He seemed to have a fairly solid grasp on Melkor, too, an uncanny ability to wrangle him into doing whatever needed doing. And if Mairon wasn’t picking up—it didn’t bode well.

Green light. Deep breath. Blinker switched on.

They were sprawled in front of the television, he thought. Day drinking, watching Manwë’s calls go unanswered. Blowing him off. Another glass of wine, another ping as he texted to ask if they were all right. Idiot. He was an idiot for even bothering to be worried. Another glass of wine, *do not disturb* on, boxes of takeout littering the living room floor. They were messing with him. And again, the vindictive little voice in his head piped up. He would catch them red-handed. He would have Melkor sign the papers. Goodbye, good riddance. And he would never speak to either of them again.

Exit ramp ahead.

Turn right at intersection.

Arrival at 4:19 PM.

Manwë's hand was already numb from knocking when Melkor finally opened the door.

He readied an insult. He met Melkor's eyes. And he froze.

They were dull, puffy like hadn't been sleeping, bloodshot like he hadn't seen sunlight in days. His hair was up and out of his face in a careless way that bordered on sloppy. He never knew Melkor to be sloppy, not like this, not to this extent. There were shadows on his face like he'd lost weight, a translucency to his skin like he'd been skipping meals. It was four in the afternoon and he looked like he'd only just tumbled out of bed.

He didn't know his brother. Not well. But well enough to grasp that something was wrong. Binge drinking, maybe. A previously untapped alcoholic streak. Sleeping off a monstrous hangover. He would figure it out.

He brushed past Melkor, using his abject surprise at having his pathetic alone-time interrupted to push his way inside. He closed the door behind himself and leaned heavily against it.

"You have a fun night?" he asked.

"What?"

"You look a bit rough."

It seemed to take Melkor a moment to gauge the meaning behind the words. He blinked slowly, groggily, as though it took tremendous effort to pry his eyelids back open.

"I'm not drunk," he insisted.

"Never said you were drunk." Semantics. He couldn't help being spiteful and obtuse and as irritating as his piece-of-shit brother who could never get his head out of his ass for long enough to realize there were other people in the world with him. He was lazy, he never took anything seriously enough, he always took the easy way out. And Manwë was over it. He couldn't do it anymore.

"I'm not hungover," Melkor told him. "What are you doing here?"

"You missed our one-thirty."

"I'll call and reschedule. You can go now."

"If a client missed an appointment and told you something came up and didn't elaborate, tell me you wouldn't drop them on the spot."

Melkor cleared his throat. He made a low sound, a humorless huff of a laugh, and turned to walk deeper into the house.

"We all have bad days," he said. "Do you want something to drink before you head out?"

“Bad days,” Manwë echoed. “I have plenty of bad days—but unlike you, I’m an adult. I’ve got responsibilities. I’ve got people depending on me. And I can’t afford to throw a fit just because I happened to get up on the wrong side of the bed.”

He followed Melkor to the kitchen and Melkor let him. He said nothing. He didn’t snap at Manwë for keeping his shoes on.

“Where’s your keeper?” Manwë demanded. “He’s not answering his phone either. If you won’t listen to me, maybe he can talk some sense into you.”

Melkor’s gaze flicked to him.

Manwë jerked his head in the direction of the staircase. “Want to go get him for me?”

Melkor flinched. He quickly turned back away. Silently, he opened a few cabinets, retrieved two mugs and a bag of pre-ground coffee.

It was another cruel, spiteful thought that came to Manwë then. Not drunk. Not hungover. Melkor was *upset*. Devastated. A complete wreck. Something had happened. Mairon had left him. It had to be that. He’d finally seen through to Melkor’s rotten core and packed his bags. Good on him. Manwë didn’t know the specifics, he didn’t think he cared, but he knew enough to know that Mairon could do better.

Or no. No, that couldn’t be it. Melkor didn’t seem *betrayed*. The look on his face wasn’t one of hurt, of annoyance, the kind of grimace Manwë was used to seeing on his coworkers when they regaled him with tales of their relationship woes. No, Melkor’s reaction was far more extreme—like Manwë had struck him, winded him well. It was something else entirely.

A heap of coffee spilled onto the counter as Melkor tried to spoon it into the espresso machine.

“Your hands are shaking,” Manwë pointed out. He couldn’t hold back from adding on a jab. “Are you on something?”

“He’s not here,” Melkor said.

“What?”

“Mairon,” he quietly elaborated, “he’s not here.”

More than a lovers’ spat, then. Separation? Divorce? Custody battle over their big, drooling dog? Good, Manwë thought. Melkor deserved a wake-up call. A big, glaring neon sign that he could no longer get away with being the way he was. Nobody was willing to put up with it.

“Are you two fighting?” he pressed. “You’re all gloomy.”

“None of your business,” Melkor said simply. “Again, I’ll reschedule our thing. If you don’t want coffee, you can go now.”

And then, there was a shift, a realization. Manwë’s smile dropped.

It wasn’t irritation or shame or any variant of the two. Melkor’s voice was wrecked, tight and defensive like he didn’t want to talk about it—not because he was embarrassed but because it *hurt*. The rings around his eyes, the enlarged blood vessels. He’d been *crying*. Manwë’s chest constricted with sudden panic. What if he was wrong? What if something was wrong? What if he—

“What’s going on with you?” he asked.

Melkor blinked at him. “Nothing,” he said. And he made to turn back to the counter.

Before he could, Manwë grabbed his arm and whirled him around. And instead of pulling away, lashing out, Melkor went limp. He let himself be manhandled, let Manwë squeeze a bruise into his arm. He didn’t meet Manwë’s eyes.

“Leave it.”

“Tell me.”

“Leave it alone,” Melkor repeated.

But he was the younger brother. He would be a bother. Sometimes, that was the only thing that worked on older siblings—annoying them into submission. “Tell me—or I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re a piece of shit.”

“Tell me,” Manwë insisted.

For a long moment, Melkor stared at him. Not mad, not aggressive. Not hatching a scheme, not crafting a lie. He didn’t even try to tear free of Manwë’s grasp. If Manwë didn’t know any better, he would think Melkor was afraid. Wanting so desperately to tell him what was wrong—because Manwë was sure now that something was undeniably wrong—but being unable to get it out.

And then Melkor looked down. He shook his head, resigned, a tiny little spasm of muscle, and took a ragged, trembling breath.

“He’s at the hospital.”

Manwë went still. Nausea churned suddenly in his gut. He had trivialized it. Joked about it. He—*fuck*. He let go of Melkor’s arm.

“I’m—sorry to hear that,” he managed. He stumbled over the words, his shame swelling. No. Shame and *fear*. A routine check-up, a fever, a broken bone wouldn’t have Melkor in this state. It was something else. He didn’t want to know. No. He desperately needed to know. His heart was racing. Delicately, he asked, “Is it something serious?”

Melkor said nothing.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Melkor scoffed. *You?* he seemed to be asking. *Since when do we ask each other for help? Since when do you care?*

And Manwë’s concern only grew. He didn’t know *why* he cared, why he needed to know. There was, very likely, absolutely nothing he could do to fix whatever this was. But Melkor was shaking. His eyes were blank. The coffee lay forgotten on the counter. He was picking anxiously at his nails.

“You said you would leave,” he said. “I answered your question. Leave.”

“Did something happen?”

“Can you just go?”

It was so soft and earnest that Manwë’s blood ran cold. Alarm bells, red flashing lights, wailing sirens. His mind went completely blank. Something was so wrong.

“Melkor, what’s going on?”

There was no response. Melkor was barely breathing—rapid, shallow bursts, in and out. Manwë suddenly had no idea what to do.

“Are you—is he all right?” Manwë asked. “Did something happen?”

“Go.”

“Please, tell me,” he begged. The plea came out just as jagged as Melkor’s own. He felt frantic, frightened, his instincts screaming at him. *Wrong wrong wrong.*

Melkor’s chest heaved. His chin was trembling. He tried to fight it, tried desperately to keep quiet. Neither one of them knew how to be vulnerable around the other, neither wanted to be. But Melkor was clearly on the brink of collapse. He only needed a single push to come crashing down.

Arms extended. “Please, tell me,” Manwë repeated. *And push.*

And he watched Melkor’s eyes empty, then, watched his shoulders sag. He couldn’t pretend any longer. He didn’t have the strength to feel anymore. His words, when they finally came, were nothing above a whisper.

“He tried to hurt himself.”

Everything stopped. Manwë felt himself go numb. Melkor wasn’t looking at him. He was looking away, down at the ground.

“What?”

The question left his lips before Manwë could stop it.

He’d accused Melkor of lying. And Mairon. Both of them. Of fucking with him. Everything was always about him, wasn’t it? He had come to poke his finger in Melkor’s face and curse him out for missing a meeting. A *meeting*. Like that mattered. He felt sick to his stomach, utterly mortified. He gritted his teeth. Shuddered. Took a deep, calming breath.

Before him, Melkor was just about curled in on himself, unsteady on his feet as though he could no longer hold himself upright.

“Melkor, I’m—” He stopped himself. *I’m sorry.* What good would those two words do? Useless. A useless sentiment. He composed his voice, tried again. Quiet, tentative. “Is he all right?”

“I don’t know,” Melkor inhaled again. It was a sharp sound, an awful, rattling thing. “He’s alive.”

“Good,” he said numbly, stupidly. “That’s good. Is he awake yet? Have you talked to him?”

For a split-second, Melkor met his gaze. He was frowning. His eyes were wet. He shook his head.

“Just go home.”

“Melkor.”

Impatiently, Melkor sighed. “No, he hasn’t spoken to me in weeks. Happy? Now, go.”

“What do you mean, weeks?” Manwë asked.

The question came out harsher than he’d intended, and again, Melkor flinched, and made to turn back to the counter, but again, Manwë grabbed at him, kept him still.

“Fuck off.”

“Melkor, when did this happen?”

Melkor looked away. Inhale. Exhale. His eyes roved, unfocused, across the far wall. Inhale. Exhale. His hands were shaking. Impossibly quietly, he said, “Eighty-eight days ago.”

The floor slanted beneath Manwë’s feet.

It was at the tip of his tongue. *What?* He must have misheard. But Melkor was digging his nails into his palms, visibly clenching his jaw to remain composed. Manwë’s chest hurt; it was cracking open.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you call?” he muttered. “You could’ve told me. You could have come to me.”

“Don’t,” Melkor said. “Why would I come to you? When have either of us ever done that?”

“Melkor, please. Is there anything I can do?”

“You can go.”

“Talk to me,” Manwë pleaded. “Do you need anything? I feel terrible; I want to do something to help.”

“I don’t care how you feel.”

“Don’t be difficult. I want to help.”

“We can do the meeting tomorrow—whatever time works for you.”

“No.”

“It’s fine,” Melkor insisted. “I’ll get a grip by then. Just woke up on the wrong side of the bed today. Go home.”

The words were an echo of Manwë’s own from minutes ago. Melkor’s lips twisted like he meant to smile, to brush it all off as a joke. But the words were rushed and his breathing was quickening and there were crescent-shaped marks on his palms, and belatedly, Manwë realized he had been backing Melkor into a corner—quite literally—this entire time. Melkor’s fingers curled around the countertop. His chest heaved.

Manwë took a measured step closer. Raised his hands just so. He knew what this was. He’d dealt with panic attacks before.

“Hey, look at me,” he said softly. “You’re a terrible liar, you know that?”

“Just go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he insisted. “*Christ*, Melkor, you’re insane if you think I would leave you alone in this state. Please, let me help in some way.”

Melkor opened his mouth to speak, to retort, to tell Manwë to get lost, but he choked on a ragged breath, and what came out instead was a dry sob. His chest heaved and just like that, he was gasping, his eyes losing focus. It happened so suddenly, so quickly, there was no time for Manwë to react, to properly panic.

Melkor’s hand pressed down hard between his ribs like he could force his lungs to draw air. He managed a small gulp of air, managed a feeble, strangled, “Please, go,” and then his shoulders were shaking and he was hyperventilating, and Manwë briskly crossed the inch of space between them, caught him before he crumpled.

Melkor awoke with a sore back to the overwhelming scent of antiseptic. It was light in the room. It was daytime. Another morning. Two days. Thirty-six hours. It was impossible, how the world was somehow still spinning.

He didn’t remember falling asleep—not that he was surprised his body had finally given up. Two days without rest, with little more sustenance than vending machine animal crackers would do that to a person.

He rolled his neck one way, then the other. His bones crackled in protest. Were he any more delirious, he would have shushed them. Then, he looked up.

Mairon’s eyes were open.

His heart lurched. He followed it, threw himself forward. *Closer closer closer*. But Mairon did not look at him. He was staring blankly up at the ceiling. The fluorescents made him look transparent, like Melkor was imagining him there. A mirage, a phantom, a horrible hallucination.

“Mairon?”

Carefully, with a touch so light it felt like air, Melkor took his hand. His fingers were limp. Fragile. Wrists wrapped up tight in thick gauze. Cold. Unresponsive. Not a twitch.

“Sweetheart, can you hear me?” Melkor begged.

No response. Nothing. Mairon blinked. His eyes were empty. The steady beep of the monitor beside the bed was the only sign he was really there.

But he couldn’t hear him. No. He didn’t want to hear him. No. No, Melkor didn’t know. He couldn’t tell which it was. He panicked. Bile rose up in his throat. Chest tight, ribs squeezing, lungs constricting.

He let go. Gently, he set Mairon’s hand back down on the crisp sheet.

“I’ll go get a nurse, all right? I’ll be right back.”

Mairon said nothing.

He said nothing as the nurse went down her checklist, recited the drill questions in a delicate, measured tone. *Do you remember what happened? Do you know where you are?* He let her poke and prod and take a blood sample. He didn't move a muscle when she checked his bandages. Inhale. Blink. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Blink. Silence.

Before she left, she pulled Melkor aside and assured him everything was all right. His condition was stable. With the painkillers he was on, his response time might be slower, he would be sleepy, a bit loopy for a while. It was best not to add any stressors or pester him with any big questions just yet. Let his mind and body recover. A doctor would be by later to check on him.

Melkor nodded. Thanked her. The door closed and they were alone again. With shaky steps, Melkor crossed the length of the room and sat back down in his chair. It squeaked in protest, like it didn't want him to be there.

"They just want to run some tests," he said quietly. He was talking to himself as much as to Mairon. "Everything will be fine now. I promise, sweetheart."

There was silence. Deafening silence. His temples hurt so badly he felt tears pricking at his eyes. He was tired. He was so tired. He wished he could wake up from this. He wished it wasn't real.

Then, the bed frame creaked and Melkor turned to it—and Mairon was looking back at him. He thought for a moment he was imagining it. But then gold eyes met his—so pale and hollow—and Melkor's heart was in his throat.

Mairon said nothing. His lips were dry and chapped. And before Melkor could find the right words to say, Mairon blinked and turned back around, back to the ceiling.

There was a muffled thud from outside. The hum of voices. Barely decipherable. Something about a gurney. It faded in and out. The machinery beeped and blinked. The television in the corner of the room seemed to buzz. And louder than all of it was the sound of Melkor's pounding heart, his jarring, ragged breathing.

He would be sleepy, a bit loopy for a while. He was probably too tired to talk. Everything was probably fuzzy. Too loud, too bright, too much. As much as he wanted to say to Mairon, as many questions as he had, Melkor remained silent. He would let him rest.

He took Mairon's hand in his own again and held it tight. And when Mairon did not pull away, he kept holding it.

A doctor came and left.

Another came, spewed a string of medical terminology that made very little sense to Melkor. He was in no state to understand. She could tell. Her eyes were sad. She repeated herself in simple English. What the situation was, what their next steps would be. Depending on how he healed and whether or not he regained full feeling in his left hand, another surgery might be required.

Again, Melkor was in his chair.

He held Mairon's hand until whatever drugs they were pumping into him dragged him back under. His eyelids were paper-thin, so mottled and purplish they looked to be covered in bruises.

"He needs rest," a soft-spoken nurse told him. The clock told him it was past nine. "Go home, clean yourself up, get some sleep. You're no use to anyone dead on your feet. Get something to eat. He'll be asleep until morning."

Melkor came back the next day. He had taken a freezing shower. He'd fed the dog. Fed himself—a slice of cold, leftover pizza from the back of the fridge.

He was dizzy with panic as he pulled into the hospital parking lot, wondering what he would do if he walked into that awful, sterile room and Mairon was gone. It had been stupid to leave him alone. He shouldn't have left him all alone.

Melkor's head spun when he stood to exit the car. The sun was barely up. He'd managed thirty minutes of restless sleep before he'd given up and stared at the ceiling.

He took Mairon's hand in his—distantly, he wondered if Mairon could feel it; the damage in his right hand was minimal, one of the doctors had said—and spoke quietly. He rambled on about nothing in particular. Meaningless stories about work, about something he'd seen on television, about how Wolf had tricked him into giving him two snacks that morning.

A nurse came by. Melkor fell silent, let her work. She left. He droned on. Mairon woke up, didn't look at him, kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling like there was something there, something fascinating that Melkor could not see. Like the white, plastic tiles up there were infinitely more interesting than anything Melkor could offer him. The doctor with the sad eyes came by, read something off a screen, something off a chart, gave Melkor a little smile. She left. He rambled again.

Just past noon, after lunch, once the dishes were cleared and Mairon settled comfortably upright against the pillows, Melkor went off on another tangent about the dog. He found he could not stop talking. He couldn't bear the silence. The beeping. The inescapable sound of his own frantic heartbeat. He knew that if he stopped, even for a second, voicing aloud every little inane thing that popped into his head, he would start asking questions. He would snap and he would lunge forward, shake Mairon's shoulders until he got a response. *Why?* he would ask. *Why?* he would demand.

And then, just as suddenly as he'd done the day before, Mairon turned to him.

Melkor's words faltered. The story he was telling faded into nonexistence.

For a minute, there was silence. But unlike the day before, Melkor snapped out of his surprise in time.

“Do you need something? Do you want me to get someone?” he asked. Soft, careful. Panicked. Mairon was staring at him. Wasn't saying anything. Melkor attempted a crooked smile. “Do you want me to be quiet?”

“Fuck you.”

“Mairon—”

“You had no right.”

“Mairon, please don't—”

“Leave,” Mairon said. His voice was a strangled rasp, a shadow of a whisper. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“They told me—later, they told me, five more minutes and it would have been too late.”

Melkor sat slouched on the kitchen floor, hands folded in his lap. They were still trembling. His breath still came in sharp little bursts.

“Tactless,” Manwë said. He was sitting beside him, back against one of the cabinets. He had folded his jacket and thrown it across one of the kitchen chairs, kicked his shoes off and placed them neatly by the door. He was settling in for a long afternoon.

“I think that was meant to comfort me.”

“Tactless,” Manwë insisted. “Completely unprofessional, to say something like that.”

Melkor seemed to shake his head. It was a barely-there jerk of muscle, almost a shiver. “There was so much blood,” he said. He didn’t appear to have heard Manwë, more so talking quietly to himself and no one else. Speaking whatever came to mind, whatever horrible memory pushed itself to the forefront.

“Everywhere, just—everywhere, somehow. And I can’t stop thinking about it. How much of a difference could five minutes have made, you know? I keep thinking, just that little bit longer and—how is that possible?”

Manwë looked down at the floor. He had no answer to that. He couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like, what Melkor was feeling. It made him sick to even wonder, to try to put himself in Melkor’s position. And what was worse—he’d assumed the worst. That Melkor was lazy. Shirking his responsibilities. Blowing him off. He had just about rubbed his hands together in excitement, waiting for Melkor to tell him that Mairon had grown bored of him, that he’d left him. He felt awful. The lingering memory of that horrible, vindictive glee made him nauseous.

“Was it really that cruel?”

Manwë blinked. He returned his attention to his brother, tearing his gaze away from the pile of crumbs he’d blankly fixated on. “Was what cruel?”

“What I did,” Melkor said. His quiet voice was a foreign thing. He was never quiet, not like this. “That I couldn’t let him go. If that was what he wanted—”

“No—absolutely not.”

“Was it selfish?”

“Melkor, no,” he repeated sharply. His voice shook with emotion; he couldn’t help it. It hurt so much, so deeply, in a way so unfamiliar to him, that Melkor would think that, somehow, any of this was his fault. “It wasn’t cruel. Wasn’t selfish. You did the only thing you could do. He just—he doesn’t understand that right now. But he will, one day, I promise you. He just needs time. And he needs help, the kind you can’t give him all on your own. When he’s ready—he’ll reach out. You’ve done nothing wrong. Tell me you understand that.”

Melkor stared down at his hands. His eyes were red, his skin blotchy, the hollows under his eyes the color of ash. He seemed to sway, like he would collapse if he wasn’t already sitting down. Manwë felt the alien urge to reach out and hold him, prop him up, catch him before he fell apart.

Above them, up on the counter, the coffee machine beeped and shut down. The automatic timer

had gone off—it had sat untouched for too long. Idly, Manwë wondered how much time had passed. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Thirty? He couldn't tell.

He swallowed. Asked the first thing that came to mind, if only to fill the silence. “Are you getting any sleep at all?”

“Not really.”

“You could ask for a prescription. At the hospital. Triazolam might help—or something like that.”

“It won't.”

“Don't be stubborn. If you just—”

“I've tried it. It doesn't work,” Melkor cut him off. He was picking at his fingers, worrying at a bleeding hangnail. “It makes me tired, it makes my head hurt, but I can't sleep. Not just Triazolam. Just about everything.”

“Have you spoken to a counselor?” Manwë probed—he knew that sometimes what people needed was a silent companion, someone to nod along and pat them, and tell them *there, there*. But he found that he couldn't shut down the part of himself that wanted to fix this, somehow, that was always looking for a solution to the problem at hand.

“Hey,” he tried again.

“I don't know what to do,” Melkor muttered. It was barely a whisper. The shaking was getting worse.

“There's nothing more you can do right now,” Manwë told him softly. He knew it wasn't what Melkor wanted to hear, what anyone in his situation wanted to hear. But it was the truth. “It's up to him to take that first step. You can't do that for him.”

“I can't lose him.”

“You won't lose him.”

“You can't promise me that,” Melkor said. His voice broke. He looked up and his eyes were wet. Manwë felt so horribly sick. He was so horribly out of his depth. “I can't lose him.”

“You won't,” Manwë assured him. “It'll be okay. It'll just take some time.”

Melkor's chest heaved again and he gasped, and gasped again, desperate for even the slightest sliver of air. Manwë moved without thinking. He reached out—and immediately, Melkor folded into him, tucking his face into his shoulder. He trembled violently, his breathing quick and strangled.

Manwë held him. He couldn't think of anything else to do, anything else to say. “Breathe,” he murmured to him, as though that would be of any help. “Deep breath, hold, and let go. And again.”

There was no solution, no magical cure to offer. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't pat Melkor comfortingly on the shoulder and swear to him that everything would go back to normal in the blink of an eye. Because it wouldn't. It would get better, but it wouldn't be quick. It wouldn't be painless. No matter how much he wanted to, Manwë couldn't change that. All he could do now was be there, offer whatever scraps of support Melkor would accept.

Melkor wasn't one to open up. Manwë couldn't quite shake the feeling that before him, Melkor hadn't told anyone else about what had happened. Hadn't let his guard down, let his distress show. He had no one. Nobody to comfort him, to sit next to him in silence when he needed them to, to pull him out of his thoughts before he lost himself in them completely. All this time, he'd been suffocating, suffering through all of it alone. All that pain, all his hurt, had rotted and festered and was eating him alive little by little, burning through him like acid.

And there was no way to snap his fingers and fix it.

"Manwë." It was whispered against his shirt. Small and muffled and tearing at his heart like a blunt knife. "I don't know what to do."

Two weeks in the psychiatric ward was the standard. Check in, take your meds in the morning, take your meds in the evening, pick at your bandages until they stopped itching, lie through your teeth to the resident shrink, nod along to their spiel, promise not to hurt yourself again, check out.

But Mairon didn't talk. He barely ate. He tried to refuse the pills he was given. No signs of improvement. No signs of life, of any will to keep on living.

The head doctor was very blunt about the whole thing. He invited Melkor into his office and laid out the facts. He saw no use in sugarcoating any of it. Mairon was likely to try to hurt himself again. Fact. He needed supervision. Fact. He needed to remain hospitalized. Fact. Medicated. Fact.

"Either we keep him here on involuntary hold," he told Melkor, "or we can arrange for him to be transferred externally once you submit the appropriate paperwork. That's up to you, if you want to look into it. There are about a dozen clinics in the county—you can try and see if any are covered by your insurance. We'll need a final decision from you by the end of the week, with everything signed and filed. From there, processing time will be between three to five days."

Melkor nodded. He said he would handle everything. Part of him was grateful for it, the doctor's cold tone, the sternness of it; it gave him a sense of direction, of stability. It was leagues better than the pity, the false sweetness he'd found himself on the receiving end of a few more times than he could possibly bear.

He curled up on the bed with his laptop. He read review after review, inspected the small text, every little asterisk, every little footnote. He looked into the staff, their methods, their qualifications, looked into the management, their affiliates, their affiliates' affiliates. He stared at the screen until the sun went down and came back up, until his eyes burned.

There was a closed inpatient clinic a half hour's drive south. A picturesque stone building nestled among the trees, dappled in sunlight. It was beautiful—it felt like an apology. For locking Mairon up. For keeping him shackled. Forcing him to stay. To exist.

He visited the next day. Found it met his expectations. Signed a folder of paperwork. Name, date of birth, height, weight, blood type, allergies, next of kin, et cetera, et cetera. He moved on autopilot and skipped lunch and dinner and tripped in the entranceway when he got home that evening. The room was spinning. He slid to the floor and waited for it to stop. And when he finally ordered dinner, it didn't even bother staying down. Pointless, all of it.

He didn't consult with Mairon. He knew what the answer would be. Silence. He would be met with silence. A glare, maybe, if he was lucky. A look of betrayal, of pure hatred, possibly. He wished Mairon would understand. He was trying to help. To keep him safe. He would do anything to protect him, even if that meant protecting him from himself. But there was no use trying to explain any of that. Mairon would see through it. He would see what Melkor truly was.

Selfish. *Selfish selfish selfish.*

Manwë held him until the shaking stopped. Until he was breathing again. Answering his questions with nods and faint, little sounds, and eventually, telling him yet again to fuck off and go home. Good. That was progress. He was going to be all right.

It took some convincing, some reasoning, before Manwë managed to get him to his feet and shuffle him out into the backyard for some fresh air. He sat him down on the porch, told him he would be right back. *Stay put. Five minutes, okay?*

As he headed back inside, the giant wolf-dog bounded past him. He flinched. Not a dog person. He shot a glance at Melkor through the glass, watched as the dog nosed at him, propped its snout up on Melkor's knees. He watched Melkor's shoulders heave as he stroked its fur, back and forth, back and forth. It seemed to calm him down. Small mercies. He did have a companion, after all. Maybe not one who talked, but certainly one who listened.

Though Melkor's breathing had steadied, there were fresh tears in his eyes when Manwë returned with a glass of cold water and a bowl of tangerine slices. The fridge was very nearly empty. The fruit was half a day away from going bad. He couldn't leave now. He couldn't leave Melkor to fend for himself. He had to stay. He had to order dinner in a few hours. Order groceries. Non-perishables. Something for Melkor to pick at when he couldn't be bothered to switch on the stove. Fix supper. Make a cup of tea. Tuck Melkor into bed. Make sure he woke up the next morning.

30/05, 5:59 PM

to: Varda

I have to stay the night. I'll call later.

Melkor picked at the tangerines with little enthusiasm. Manwë helped him along. They were too soft, sickly sweet.

It was fifteen minutes before either of them said another word.

"I can't get the blood out of the bathroom tiles," Melkor finally murmured. "It's in the cracks. In the grout."

Manwë felt bile rise in his throat. He set the bowl down, took a deep breath. Counted to ten. Exhaled. Unclenched his fingers. Took another breath.

“Replace them,” he said. He kept his cool. He kept his tone level. He was the rock that Melkor needed. He had to be.

Melkor glanced up at him.

“Don’t overthink it,” Manwë told him bluntly. “Replace them. All of it. Get rid of all of it if you need to.”

There were good days, good weeks sometimes. And then there were the bad ones. He wouldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. He went out of his way to be difficult, refused outright the pills they handed him in a little paper cup. And when he did take them, they came back up more often than not. Like he was dead set on forcing his body to reject anything that could help him.

He wanted to be left alone. To disappear, just about. He dismissed the questions he was asked, ignored the advice he was given. Twice, they’d had to sedate him—to get him to cooperate, to get him to sleep.

There had been warning signs—Melkor felt wretched for not having realized how dire the situation was. He should have done something, he should have done more. He should have done *anything*. But he had dismissed the sadness, the emptiness, he’d chalked the mood swings up to temperament, made the irritability out to be a quirk of character. He’d made himself believe, over and over again, that he was imagining that distant look on Mairon’s face, that vacancy, the way his eyes would flick to the side, dart suddenly across the room, like he was seeing movement that was not there.

Onset in early adulthood was quite common, Melkor was told. At first, the symptoms might have been mild. From there, there was a variety of stimuli that could have triggered the first critical episode, jumpstarted the decline. And untreated, undiagnosed, that was most certainly what had happened—a downward spiral. Gradually, the doctor explained, it had become worse, but had remained manageable, for a time. Then, finally, not so much. But Mairon had fought. He’d fought with himself, until he couldn’t anymore. And now—he didn’t *want* to fight anymore. And there was no way out of this, she told Melkor, until he made the conscious effort to get better. Accept he was unwell. That he needed help. That help was being offered.

Sometimes, she said, it got worse before it got better.

Melkor stopped by the clinic every day, twice a day when his schedule allowed it. It was ridiculous, he knew it well, how dependent he was on making sure everything was all right. He couldn’t go about his day until he laid eyes on Mairon, made sure he was still there. In the morning, a quick hello, a chat with one of the resident psychiatrists. And again after work, to check in, check that his world was still in one piece. Only once did he go an entire day without a visit: when he had curled up on the sofa one afternoon, feeling dizzier than usual—and didn’t wake up for seventeen hours. He’d been delirious with exhaustion in the days leading up to it, worn so thin he could barely walk straight.

He went as soon as he was able the next day. And from that point onward, he began forcing himself to try to take naps throughout the day, to keep his eyes closed, relax his body, as well as he was able, for as long as he was able. It didn’t help much. He was still so tired. Nor did it change

anything.

Mairon was still small and pale under the fluorescent lights. If anything, he had grown thinner, the hollows beneath his eyes stretching, expanding, as though they intended to spread until the shadows consumed him completely. His rings were gone, as were the remainder of his favorite adornments—he was not allowed anything small, anything sharp, anything he could use to hurt himself. His glow was diminished without them. He was empty, a husk, a translucent sheet of paper, and Melkor imagined he could just grab him and squeeze him and he would simply crumple into nothing.

He gave single-word answers to long, winding questions on the off chance he answered Melkor at all. Curt, dismissive, evasive. “You’re wasting time and effort,” he once said—it was the longest sentence Melkor had heard from him in weeks.

And the next day—the day after Mairon had dismissed him like he was nothing to him—the staff informed Melkor that Mairon no longer wanted to see him. At all. Ever. Just like that. That simple. Like it was that simple to throw it all away, to discard him and the decade they had shared between them. And that maybe, just maybe, the staff said, it *would* be best for a time, for a little while, to try that—to stay away. See if that would change anything. See if that would help.

Melkor nodded.

He said he would call. Every day, twice a day. Asked to be contacted immediately if anything should change.

And then he stumbled to his car and sobbed until he couldn’t breathe.

Manwë ordered gyūdon, thinking that resurrecting childhood memories might make Melkor feel better, operating under the foolish assumption that their childhood had been as enjoyable for Melkor as it had been for him. Stupid. He should have asked. He should have gotten pizza.

Melkor poked at his portion, left the soup Manwë had ordered as a side dish wholly untouched. He ate barely half of what was on his side of the table—and only once Manwë badgered him into doing so. He had to eat something, anything.

Instead, Melkor set his utensils down, began to revisit once again what was better left untouched.

“They said it was quick,” he said. “Most likely. He lost a lot of blood fast. Don’t worry, they didn’t offer that up—I had to beg for it. They wouldn’t give me anything they deemed too *traumatic*. I had to beg to find out if he’d been in pain. He wasn’t for long, was he? He couldn’t have been, right?”

It was like a wound had been opened—*reopened*—Manwë had torn it back open with his own two hands—and Melkor was bleeding words, bleeding every awful sentence that pushed its way into his mind, ridding himself of all the hurt he had kept suffocated deep down until now.

And Manwë didn’t know what to do, how to react. He had no idea what to say, whether he should encourage this honesty or silence it once and for all.

“Please, don’t do this to yourself,” he begged him. It was neutral enough. He could find a way, he thought, he had to, to take Melkor’s mind off this, even if for a moment. “Melkor, you cannot keep hurting yourself like this.”

“And he cut deep, too, you know,” Melkor carried on—like he hadn’t even heard. “He went in for a second surgery almost four weeks ago, now. And nothing. There’s a high likelihood of permanent nerve damage in his left hand.”

“Melkor, stop.”

Melkor looked up at him. “Deep and decisive, that was what they said.”

He was cold.

He was cold and clammy and he was so pale his lips were nearly blue.

The blood on the floor glistened like spilled wine.

We’ve got an ambulance dispatched. They’re on their way. Keep applying pressure. Stay on the line with me, okay?

He’d come home from work early. The meeting had ended early. Just a couple of minutes early.

They’re two minutes out now. Stay with me.

It was white noise. White noise in his head and red stains on his palms.

His chest hurt so badly he couldn’t draw breath. In and out. In and out, he knew this, he knew that was how it worked, but it wasn’t doing anything. He curled into the corner of the ambulance and let the EMTs do their jobs. They swam in and out of focus. Their voices warped and echoed.

They whisked the stretcher away, leaving nothing but bloodstains behind. Something about surgery. Someone getting called to the OR. *Seventy over forty. Two units.* Something about an IV drip. *Two liters of fluid.*

He sat down in one of the plastic seats in the waiting room and tried to remember how his lungs were supposed to work.

Everything was a blur—the people around him, the sounds they were making, the words they were speaking. Whether they were speaking to him, about him, he didn’t know. He couldn’t tell. His heart was pounding so rapidly he thought it might give out.

Finally—he didn’t know how long had passed, he didn’t have his phone on him, he couldn’t see clearly enough to discern the glaring red numbers on the clock across the hall—a nurse came and took him to a private room with a desk, a plush chair, and a sink. She urged him towards it. He washed his hands, going through the motions absently, automatically. Soap, water, paper towel. Repeat. It wasn’t coming off. Repeat. The nurse gave him two white pills and a paper cup of water. *To calm you down, dear.* She gave him a clipboard with paperwork and a pen. She left. The silence made him want to scream.

“I’m not asking,” Manwë said—sharp and strict. Melkor needed a firm hand. “Either make up the guest bedroom or bring me a blanket for the couch.”

It took a minute, some glaring, but eventually, Melkor nodded. He did as he was told.

He brought him a soft quilt and two spare pillows from upstairs. The guest room was in bad shape, he said, hadn’t been aired out in months. That was all right. Manwë removed the cushions from the back of the couch and stacked them by the coffee table, fluffed up his meager pillows, arranged his spartan setup for the night.

All the while, Melkor lingered quietly by the staircase.

“I’ll clean the dishes. Go shower,” Manwë instructed—and repeated himself when Melkor did nothing but frown at him in abject confusion. “I mean it, go. And while you’re up there, bring me a charger, if you have another one.”

“I’ll shower in the morning,” Melkor said. He nodded towards the kitchen. “There’s a couple in the last drawer. Pick your favorite.”

“Go wash your face, at least. Brush your teeth,” Manwë insisted. “When was the last time you washed your hair?”

“I’m not a child.”

“You need to stick to a routine. Even on the bad days, *especially* on the bad days. Force yourself to commit to that. You let yourself go once, and then again the next day, because it’s easy, because you’re tired, and then it’s that much harder to get back on track, to undo that damage. You can’t destroy yourself, Melkor. You’re too important. He needs you.”

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“He needs you.”

Mairon scoffed. It wasn’t a very nice sound. “He doesn’t.”

“I’m sure if he were here, he would tell you otherwise,” Manwë told him.

“But he isn’t here.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Mairon glared at him. His eyes were sunken, the purple shadows underneath a stark contrast to the

sickly pallor of his skin. Everything about him seemed fragile, frail, like a single, well-positioned flick of one's fingers could knock him over.

“Why are you even here? Since when do you care what he needs?”

Manwë ignored the jab. “He hasn't slept more than three hours a night since you've been gone—did you know that?”

“Now, see, if you knew him, you'd know that's not unusual. He seems to be doing just fine. He's living and breathing. I'm told he calls before nine, after six, which means he's going to work. I don't see what the problem is.”

“I dragged him to see a doctor,” Manwë told him. “He was put on prescription anxiety medication. His hands won't stop shaking. I have to call him every day to make sure he's eating and showering and getting out of bed before noon. He works from home, now, in case you were wondering. It's not safe for him to drive in his state. I know you're hurting, Mairon—but he is, too. He needs you. He needs you to be okay. To try, at the very least, to be okay. And I think you know that. I think you pushed him away because, deep down, somewhere very deep down, you couldn't handle what you did to him. You couldn't handle the look on his face.”

For a split second, Mairon's eyes went wide with a flash of stunned rage—and Manwë feared he had gone too far—but as soon as it had appeared, it was gone. Mairon averted his gaze, looked back down at the spotless tile floor.

He was sitting at the edge of his bed in plain pajamas and black, hospital-issue grip socks. Small, unassuming. His hair was in his eyes. Manwë wondered whether that was a choice—or if they didn't trust him with a rubber band to tie it back. There was a bandage around his left forearm, pulled snug around his wrist, all the way up to his elbow; he'd undergone a third surgery not long ago, Melkor had said. He looked so out of place. Tired and sullen and miserable. Manwë couldn't remember ever before seeing him so utterly *empty*.

“Please talk to him,” he asked softly. “That's all I ask.”

“We've talked. Lots. Tough to find common ground, though, when we both want different things.”

Manwë was quiet for a long time before speaking again. “And what is it that you want?”

It was Mairon's turn, then, to fall silent. He frowned, just a minuscule crease of his brow, eyes narrowing, like the question had taken him aback. Like he had no answer. He didn't know. Patiently, Manwë waited as he stared at the tiles like they would give him a hint.

Finally, Mairon's shoulders jerked—like he'd laughed. And when he looked back up at Manwë, he seemed to be amused.

“What do you care?” he asked.

Manwë sighed. In all honesty, it wasn't an entirely unfounded question. Why *did* he care? Mairon was well within his rights to wonder. The only conversation they'd had before this that wasn't even tangentially about work was when Manwë had stopped by their house uninvited, unexpected, and discovered that his brother and his betrayer wore matching rings. Even that, in a roundabout way, had been about work, about what had really happened at Valinor. This was a first. And it wasn't a particularly pleasurable ice-breaker, either, the topic Manwë was trying to broach.

He couldn't manipulate Mairon into doing what he wanted, saying what he wanted him to say. It wasn't ethical. It wasn't right. And Mairon was far too smart to fall for anything of the sort.

That only left the hard way—to be honest first. Lay the groundwork. Extend a hand, an olive branch. Pray to the high heavens that Mairon would take it.

“Because,” he started, “your wretch of a husband may be an unfortunate piece of work, but he’s my brother and, as much as it shocked me to discover this, I care for him deeply. And I don’t like seeing the people I care about hurting. Which is why I’m here to beg you, Mairon, I am begging you, to stop pushing him away. Just hear him out. Give him ten minutes of your time. Scream at him if you want to—he’ll take anything at this point.”

“I don’t want to see him. I—this isn’t about him.”

“Ten minutes, that’s all. If you’re angry with him, at least tell him so to his face. Throw things at him, for all I care, just do *something*. It’s the uncertainty that kills, you know that.”

“I don’t want to see him,” Mairon repeated slowly.

Manwë nodded. Pursed his lips, swallowed around the lump in his throat. He felt helpless, *useless*, in a way he hadn’t in a very long time. He should leave, he thought, before he caused a scene. Leave Mairon to think it all over, to take a moment to understand what he was doing. That he was hurting himself. And he was hurting the people who loved him, who were trying to help him, to throw him a lifeline. That *he* was the selfish one. He was the one who ought to get a grip, to come to terms with needing help, to learn to accept it. He couldn’t do this on his own. He couldn’t suffer this hell on his own. He needed Melkor, just as badly as Melkor needed him—because the only way through was together. One to reach out and the other to grasp the hand that was offered.

Manwë cleared his throat.

“I’ve never seen him cry, you know,” he said. It was a low blow. A last-ditch effort. He was angry; he wasn’t thinking rationally. Part of him knew, as soon as the words left his lips, that he was being cruel. But he couldn’t stop. “Forty-something years down the line and I have never once seen my brother cry. What you’ve done to him—I’ve never seen him like that before.”

Mairon was silent for a very long time. His expression didn’t change. There was nothing to signify he’d even heard.

“Tough shit,” he finally said.

Hopeless, was what this was. Manwë swallowed again. Nodded again. He should have known better than to expect anything else. Stupidly, *naively*, he had hoped he could click his heels and make all of this go away. But there was no use. Mairon could not be reasoned with. He’d made up his mind, stubbornly built a wall up around himself to keep everyone at bay. And nobody would break through it, not until he himself tore it down and let them.

“Right, then,” Manwë said. “I know when I’ve overstayed my welcome. Take care of yourself.”

He turned to leave. As he headed back down the corridor, back the way he’d come in, his head pounded, felt like it was splitting open. Like he’d drunk too much. Like it was a walk of shame.

But—maybe. Maybe he hadn’t entirely imagined that flicker. That tiny tremble. The tightness that had squeezed at Mairon’s last two words to him. Perhaps there really had been something there, a pinprick of vulnerability. Perhaps the bravado, the tone he’d chosen, had been nothing more than a performance, one his heart wasn’t even in, nothing but a crumbling act he was desperate to maintain.

Manwë returned his visitor’s badge to the receptionist at the front desk, signed the second column

of the check-in log, jotted down the time. He gave her a small smile, blandly pleasant and utterly forced, and crossed briskly to the door she buzzed open for him.

Maybe there really was a crack in the facade, in Mairon's impenetrable wall. And maybe that was enough for now. Maybe, given time, the bricks and mortar would become brittle on their own; the crack would grow and spread until it was just wide enough to slip inside.

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When the shift came, and it did come, it wasn't one big thing. Not an overnight cure, not a miracle fix. It was a collection of little things. Mairon finished his dinner. He answered a question. He took his pills with minimal glaring at the nurse who had dispensed them.

It was a choice.

He opened up, little by little. He accepted help, bit by bit. It wasn't easy—there was no doubt it was the single hardest challenge he had faced in his life. But he did it. Every day, he made that choice.

To be honest about how he felt, whether it was *all right* or *shitty* or *I feel nothing at all*. Honest about the pain in his hand. The other kinds of pain, too. What felt good and what didn't. What made him feel better and what made him feel worse. What he wanted and what he couldn't stand. And why. Why was this one thing good, but that other thing bad. What made him want this, but not that. And how. How to deal with the bad days. How to make things easier, how not to be so hard on himself. How to accept that he wasn't alone in this, and that he never would be. And on and on.

And somewhere in there, somewhere among the prying questions he knew he could not avoid and the occasional full night of sleep, the food that finally stayed down and the pills that quieted his mind, that did more good than harm, something seemed to click. Something changed. A reset, a realization—that maybe, just maybe, he felt better this way, finally forcing out what had been suffocating him all this time.

With every day, every call Melkor got from the doctor, his relief grew, spread like wildfire from the depths of his chest to the tips of his fingers. He would find himself losing track of time under the scalding spray of the shower, able to breathe for the first time in months. Able to drive to the office and back, every now and again, without the need to pull over and collect himself. To get groceries without freezing up in the middle of the aisle.

It was wondrous—and terrible at once. As absurd as it was, as completely juvenile, the mere thought, the minuscule possibility that it was something that Manwë had said that had slotted the missing puzzle piece into place made Melkor want to put his fist through a concrete wall. Of course his perfect brother could do better, solve the unsolvable, fix the unfixable. It made him want to collapse in a fit of uncontrollable hysterics.

“No, of course my perfect brother could do better,” he told him one day—no longer able to keep it to himself. He was glaring at Manwë from across the table. They were having *smoothies*. They did that now. “Just like that.”

But Manwë only rolled his eyes. Like it was the simplest thing in the world. “Of course,” he said. “Have you ever taken a psychology class? You’ve got some sort of degree, don’t you? You’re too close to this—it’s only natural he wouldn’t listen to you. I was an easy target to vent his frustration. An unbiased stranger. You do know that it’s more likely for people to take advice from strangers than from those closest to them, right? That’s just how it is.”

Melkor blinked at him in dumbfounded silence. It made sense. He hated that it did, hated the advantage Manwë had over him when he was thinking clearly and Melkor wasn’t.

“Still think you’re a dick,” he concluded.

“Takes one to know one.”

The days went on. Mairon’s small victories kept adding up. Winning battle after battle, inching closer and closer to winning the war.

And one day, the call came. The one Melkor had *dreaded anticipated awaited longed for yearned for*—he didn’t know which it was. Mairon wanted to see him. He’d broken down with one of the therapists during a session when asked about him, refused to continue until he could speak to Melkor first. “He says there’s something he needs to tell you,” the nurse on the other line said. Her tone was professional, but the smile was apparent in her voice.

Melkor found himself idling in the parking lot for almost an hour before visiting hours began the next morning. He thought he might throw up. He couldn’t help but run through the most cataclysmic scenarios—if he said the wrong thing, if he was overzealous or not zealous enough, if he stood too close or not close enough, or touched him or didn’t touch him, if he smiled too little or smiled too much. And then he would lose Mairon forever.

He couldn’t breathe. He burst out of the car, sat down on the curb in front of the building and concentrated on getting enough air into his lungs. In. Four. Hold. Seven. Out. Eight. And repeat.

When the time came, he approached the sliding doors, rang the bell with unsteady fingers. He knew the way, thank you, he told the receptionist.

The walk down the corridor was a blur. The floor seemed to tilt. The room numbers swam out of focus before him. When he finally reached the very last one, he knocked before he lost his nerve. And when no response came, he pushed his way inside before the anxiety could eat him alive.

At first, Mairon didn’t look up. He was sitting at the edge of his bed, bent over the book in his lap. His hair was a curtain obscuring his face, but Melkor could just about make out that little crease of a frown, that endearing hallmark of intense concentration. He thought his heart might give out. Mairon was there, in front of him. He was real and he was okay and he wanted to see him. *He wanted to see him.*

And finally—Mairon raised his head.

The little crease deepened. “Oh.”

Frozen, Melkor could do little more than echo his own *oh* back at him. “Oh?”

Mairon cleared his throat. He reached behind himself for something and gingerly slipped a scrap of paper between the pages. He was nearing the end, only a few chapters left.

“I wasn’t expecting you until later,” he said quietly. He set the book down and met Melkor’s eyes. He looked so tired. Like he hadn’t slept properly in a while, a few days, at the very least. Like he’d

been crying. He took a shuddering breath. “Hi.”

He had missed that voice so much. All of it, he had missed all of Mairon so much it hurt like nothing had ever hurt before.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he managed.

Mairon tried to smile back at him—but within seconds, his face fell, whatever had been holding his composure together crumbling to ash before Melkor’s eyes. His chin trembled and his eyes were wet and he tried to say something else, something more, but all that came out was a helpless, strangled breath.

Melkor was across the room before he realized it, on his knees before the bed, pulling Mairon down into his arms just as his gasps turned to sobs. Mairon curled into him, grasped at him blindly, desperately, like he was drowning. As he trembled, as he pressed himself closer, Mairon told him he was sorry, repeated it over and over like a litany, like an anguished prayer. *I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry*. And Melkor only held him tighter, cradled him to his chest, to his heart.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I promise, it’s okay.”

“Please don’t hate me.”

And it was only then that Melkor pulled away. He kept his hands firmly on Mairon’s shoulders, but inched back just enough for Mairon to see him clearly.

“I don’t hate you. Listen to me—I could never hate you,” he said. He looked into Mairon’s eyes and waited, and waited and waited and waited, for as long as it took until that sickening doubt was gone from them. “I’m sorry, too, Mairon, I’m so sorry.”

Mairon shook his head. “Don’t say that.”

Melkor reached out. He couldn’t help himself. He brushed a lock of Mairon’s hair behind his ear, let the touch linger for a moment, and another, then dropped his hand back into his lap. “But I am.”

Mairon shook his head again, more sternly this time. Firm and determined. His hands came up to Melkor’s face—his fingers were warm, *he was alive, he was all right*—and held him with indescribable tenderness. Like he didn’t know if he was allowed to anymore. Like he couldn’t believe Melkor was truly there, with him, that he wanted to be.

“Please, don’t say that,” he whispered. His eyes were red and his cheeks were wet and Melkor couldn’t quite fathom how he himself wasn’t crying yet. “None of this is your fault. You could’ve done everything right and I still would have found a way around it. No—you did everything right. You did. I’m sorry, I didn’t—I’m sorry. I messed up.”

He tried to apologize again—again and again and again—but the words caught in his throat and Melkor tugged him forward before he crumpled, pressed him close, let him bury his face in his neck until the trembling subsided.

It was overwhelming. Mairon was here. In his arms. Talking to him. Holding onto him. The circumstances didn’t matter. Nothing else mattered, nothing outside of the two of them. Melkor found himself feeling something he hadn’t felt in a very long time, in far too long, and it was ridiculous, he thought, that this was all it took to make him *happy*.

“It’s okay. It’s all right,” he assured him. He ran his fingers through his hair, back and forth, the way Mairon liked it. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all.”

The staff continued to keep him updated. The cuts were healing well. There would be no lasting damage to Mairon’s right hand; everything was in order, perfectly operational. The scar on the left was worse, jagged, more prominent. It wasn’t going to go away. He couldn’t bend his hand a certain way, either, was still working on regaining full control of his fingers—the nerve damage was permanent, after all. Physical therapy could only do so much. Yet to everyone’s surprise, Mairon didn’t seem to be too crestfallen about it.

“It only hurts when I bend it this way,” he insisted—and demonstrated. He bent his wrist back and Melkor flinched.

“That’s not what the surgeon said.”

“Yeah, well, he was exaggerating.”

Melkor knew better.

They had him on a combination of drugs that finally seemed to work—a cocktail of mood stabilizers and antipsychotics. He was responding well. He was trying. He cooperated with the doctors. He went willingly to all of his sessions. Forced himself to open up, to leave his comfort zone. Part of Melkor, the childish part, was amused by that. He could just about imagine the grimace, the shudder wracking through Mairon as he sat down in that big, soft chair and heard that cloying, patronizing question. *And how does that make you feel?*

But he was proud, so proud it made his heart feel a few sizes too large, made his chest hurt with how badly he wanted to just grab Mairon and run from here, take him home and never let him go. But he knew it wasn’t time yet. That Mairon still needed this, the structure, the supervision. And he was proud that Mairon knew it, too. That he could not do this by his lonesome. And he was so proud of how determined Mairon was—because of course he was, he always had to be the best at everything—to push forward. He felt antsy, sometimes, restless, and other times the drugs made him tired, too tired, slowed him down. Recovery wasn’t linear, after all. But he pushed through it. He tried so hard to make it through every day and come out of it feeling just okay enough.

Melkor moved his schedule around to ensure he could visit every day, a few times a week, at the very least. It never got old, it was his new favorite thing—entering that room and seeing the shift in Mairon’s expression, the light in his eyes. He wanted him there. *He wanted him there.*

For the first time in as long as Melkor could remember, they talked. Talked and talked and talked.

There hadn’t been very much of that in the months since everything happened—nor the weeks that had led up to it. Mairon had been in a bad place and Melkor hadn’t understood. They had lashed out at one another, time and time again. A barrage of cruel, vindictive words, of vicious jabs, stretches of spiteful silence.

They had fought a lot. They had fought the night *before*, as harrowing as it was to recall. They had parted ways, gone to sleep without talking it out, without patching things up. And the next morning, Melkor had gone to work. And he’d come back and—

There had been no honesty, either, no trust, no intimacy. Every other night, they had slept in separate beds—on the rare occasion that Mairon had slept at all. He’d been a phantom, a shadow. There but not. Downstairs on the couch, bathed in the blue glow of the television. Out in the garden with smoke in his lungs, translucent in the moonlight. Nor had they touched in some time,

not in any way that mattered. Mairon hadn't been interested. And Melkor had been annoyed by that lack of interest, that indifference, confused and frustrated until he, too, had begun to feel nothing.

But now—they talked. And they touched. Small, fleeting brushes of skin against skin, soul against soul. They made up for lost time, for all of the mistakes they had made along the way, pieced together a new, solid bridge over that yawning chasm that had opened between them.

Mairon groaned and grimaced but forced himself, nonetheless, to let everything spill out. Therapy wasn't everything. He had to be equally open with those closest to him, those who were trying to help. What he wanted and what he needed. No hiding. No shame. No choking on it after hours in the solitude of his room. It didn't make him weak. It didn't make him capricious or temperamental. It made him human.

“No, but,” Mairon waved a fry at him; he'd been craving something greasy and Melkor had smuggled him a snack. “I am. I have quite literally been diagnosed with *temperamental*. Turns out being a moody bitch my entire life was—medically substantiated.”

“Do you talk like that in therapy?”

“Mhm.”

“No wonder you're still locked in here.”

Mairon flicked a fry at him.

In many ways, it wasn't a pleasant journey. Mairon had to do most of the heavy lifting himself. That was how recovery worked. That was how things were, how the mind functioned. The medical staff could only do much. Which tricks and techniques worked for him and which didn't, that was all up to Mairon himself to figure out. And once he got it, it was up to him to communicate to everyone else. Communication, proper open communication, was key to a functioning relationship, after all. And that went for Melkor, too.

“Nobody's a mind reader,” he was told by one of the doctors—the funny one, the one who he later discovered would show Mairon videos of puppies in the middle of sessions when he was being too gloomy for her liking. “I'm sure it feels like that, like you understand each other without words—but words help sometimes. Trust me on that, would you?”

The weeks went on. Progress was made. Goals were reached, milestones achieved, to-do lists checked off.

Thuringwethil came by. She smacked Mairon upside the head and promptly drew him into her arms. They had a nice chat, after. It was normal. It was all so perfectly normal that Melkor couldn't quite believe that anything had ever gone wrong to begin with.

Later that afternoon, he sat sideways on Mairon's bed with his back up against the wall. He had a designated spot there, now—his spot, his corner of the bed. Mairon curled up beside him, propped his head up on his lap and promptly made a tiny, grumpy noise when Melkor didn't immediately thread his fingers through his hair. Melkor could relate. He knew it well, that desire to cling, to latch on, to dig his claws in and never let go.

They stayed like that in silence—these days, that was rare. The clock in the room ticked and ticked as the wind outside howled and whistled. That ever-present, burning relief that had long since become a part of Melkor simmered pleasantly in the pit of his stomach. Mairon was warm against him, his chest rising and falling with every steady breath. Visiting hours were almost over. Melkor

mused on it, wondered if he could hide under the bed and emerge quietly once the lights went off, crawl under the flimsy covers and mold himself against Mairon's back, curl his arms around him.

"Melkor?"

He blinked. "Hm?"

"Do you think you could sneak me a cigarette in here?"

day 214

Mairon decided to stay.

He was officially discharged. He had served his sentence, so to speak. There were no longer any grounds to keep him involuntarily. But he didn't feel ready to come home. He decided to stay. He checked himself back in.

"Same thing, basically," he explained. He was looking down at his hands. They were sitting out in the back garden of the clinic, side by side on the stone patio. "But different. A bit like a rehab program," he added. He tried a smile to diffuse the tension.

"For how long?"

"Another three months." And his voice dipped even lower, grew even quieter. The wind rustled the leaves overhead. "I was thinking the other night and—I want to do this. It'll be good for me, I think."

He was doing so much better already. Not quite back to the way things were before, but then again, they never would be. Still, he didn't feel completely ready to return to everything. To go back home, back to a routine, back to work, back to his old life. There were still things he felt he needed to work on. Because he didn't want to be a burden. Didn't want to cause any more problems. Didn't want to hurt Melkor again. He wanted to be sure. He needed to be sure he was ready to come back.

The doctors made it very clear to them, the both of them, that this wasn't something that would ever go away. Things like this didn't go away. He would need to be medicated for the rest of his life, to find a therapist he felt comfortable with and be as honest with them as he was with the staff here. He would have to build a new routine. Be systematic about it. He would have to learn to work with it, not against it. And Melkor would have to be there, every step of the way, to notice the signs. To listen and be open and be ready to help. To talk to a professional, too; it was never a bad idea to reach out, to let his side of the story be heard. Most of all, they needed patience. They needed trust. It wouldn't go away, no, but it would become easier with time.

And if this was the path that Mairon wanted to take to reach that end, to reach *easier*, Melkor would not stand in his way. He would lay down the bricks himself, help pave the way for him.

He nodded. He understood.

He wanted nothing more than to have Mairon back home with him, of course, but he found that, even so, he could not hold this decision against him. He wasn't upset or disappointed. It took a moment for the feeling to make sense—but he was happy. Simple as that. That Mairon was thinking clearly enough to acknowledge what he needed, that he was making this decision for himself, to feel like himself again. And Melkor would be there for him: close by if Mairon wanted him there, at a distance if he needed space. Anything—he would do anything for him.

“Come visit me sometime, will you?”

“I'll bloody move in here with you, if you want.”

Mairon laughed.

day 318

It was Tuesday. Eleven in the morning.

He'd prepared a schedule, sorted it all neatly in his mind. Today, he would clean. Deep clean. Dust, vacuum, laundry. Bathroom, kitchen, appliances, power wash the back deck, mow the lawn. Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, he would restock the fridge. Greens and cheeses and stupid, fancy snacks. Little peppers stuffed with ricotta. Chips and chocolates and soda. Then, he would drive to pick Mairon up.

He had to make the house look like he hadn't spent the last year eating out of takeaway boxes and crashing on the couch like a complete wreck. It wouldn't make a very good impression.

He had coffee and a stale bagel that even three minutes in the toaster could not save. He took Wolf out for a walk to the nearest grocery store a few blocks down. He needed a frozen dinner for later and he needed to clear his head. And then he would get to work.

When he returned, his key jammed in the lock the way it often did, and he jiggled it impatiently. And finally, the door opened and he stepped inside—and Mairon was sprawled on the sofa with his phone in his hands and his feet up on the coffee table.

He looked up. Cocked his head. There was a warm light in his eyes and a growing smile on his lips. He sat up straight. Set his phone down.

“Hi,” he said softly.

Melkor was frozen. His feet were stuck to the floor and his hand was glued to the doorknob. His first thought was to panic. It flashed through his mind unbidden, what had happened the last time Mairon was here alone. No. No, he couldn't think like that. It was all right now. “I won't try again,” Mairon had promised him. “I won't do it again.” And his second thought—he was going to clean. He wasn't ready. He'd had it all planned out.

Before he could move, the dog did.

The leash slipped from Melkor's numb fingers and Wolf bounded across the room and slammed into Mairon, licked at his hands, his face, bouncing and panting and wagging his tail. And Mairon melted into it, ruffled his fur, petted everywhere within reach, gave his snout those disgusting, sloppy little kisses that Melkor could never quite stomach, not since Wolf had once licked *into* his mouth.

"Hi, baby," Mairon was saying—*cooing*—and the soft, innocent joy in his voice made Melkor's chest ache. It snapped him awake. Mairon was there, truly, undeniably right there, sitting in front of him.

With a great deal of difficulty, Melkor regained most of his composure; he closed the door behind himself and clumsily toed off his shoes. He kicked them to the side, scuffed the wall.

"This is embarrassing," he finally said.

Mairon sniffled and glanced up. "What is?"

"I was going to clean," Melkor admitted. "You're early."

"That's all right," Mairon said. And when Melkor's frown did not waver, he added, "But if it's that important to you, I can go back for one more night."

"What are you doing here?"

"Go put that away," Mairon said, eyes on the plastic bag in Melkor's hand, "and come back here—quickly, please."

Melkor obliged. He dropped the bag onto the kitchen counter—the lasagna would thaw; he wasn't supposed to let it, but he truly could not find it in himself to care.

And then Mairon's arms were wide open, fingers waving, beckoning him closer, and Melkor was nudging the excited dog aside with a murmured apology and tumbling down into the waiting embrace. The momentum sent them both crashing into the cushions; Mairon's grip tightened around him and drew him into a messy sprawl. Wolf, not about to give up just yet, curled up at the end of the couch, settling on top of their tangled legs. It was a tight fit, not especially comfortable. It was perfect.

"I was actually free to go yesterday," Mairon admitted, "but I decided not to tell you. Thought a surprise would be fun. And just my luck—you weren't home. I just got here, like, five minutes ago."

"I was going to *clean*."

"We'll clean together," Mairon said. "But first things first."

His hand wormed suddenly into the space between them, reaching for the front pocket of his sweatpants. He wriggled some more, then nudged Melkor to ease up, lift himself just a bit. And when his hand reappeared in the space between them, something small and shiny was clasped between his fingers. His wedding ring. He poked it towards Melkor.

"Here, put this back on me."

And right then, Melkor was certain his heart would beat its way out of his chest and tumble helplessly to the floor.

“I wanted you to do it,” Mairon admitted. “Cheesy, I know.”

Melkor said nothing; he didn't trust his voice. He forced his body to move. He took the ring—and was surprised to find his hands weren't shaking. It was the most natural thing in the world.

Impatiently, Mairon wiggled his fingers as Melkor balanced awkwardly on one arm to slide the ring back into place. And then—he couldn't help himself—Melkor took the proffered hand fully in his own and brought it to his lips, kissed Mairon's fingertips, one by one, turned it over and kissed his palm, again and again. He was relentless, even as Mairon began to squirm underneath him.

“Quit it,” he said, tried futilely to smack at him. “Sap.”

It took some effort, but in time, Mairon managed to wriggle his hand free. He tugged Melkor back down, flush against him, and turned his head to press a soft kiss to the side of Melkor's neck. And then he squirmed some more, kneeling Melkor in the thigh, then the groin, in an attempt to arrange his legs a certain way. When he finally settled down, he slid one hand to the back of Melkor's head; he ran his fingers through his hair, petting it with slow, gentle strokes. They lay in silence for what felt like hours. Everything was soft and warm, hazy like the summer heat.

Eventually, Melkor blinked his eyes back open. As he began to speak, he found his mouth was inexplicably dry, as though he had only just woken up.

He cleared his throat. Had he—he might have dozed off. It was the calmest he'd felt in months. No—a year, well over a year. And just like that. Calm to the point of *groggy*. Of course all he had ever really needed to get some uninterrupted sleep was Mairon wrapped snugly around him. It was ridiculous. He was pathetic. He wanted to laugh.

“There's no food in the fridge,” he mumbled. It was his first conscious thought.

“Are you hungry?”

“We can order something. What do you want?”

“A gigantic, disgusting burger.”

“Can be arranged.”

“After I shower. Using something that doesn't smell like industrial disinfectant.”

“Can also be arranged,” Melkor said.

When he made to pull himself upright, he found that his limbs were heavy. He had definitely fallen asleep. What was most surprising was that Mairon hadn't, at any point, just kicked him off and left him there. Maybe he had missed it too—their impromptu naps on the couch. Very them. Very normal. Normal was good.

Melkor's second conscious thought promptly popped into existence. He was too woozy to filter it. “How did you even get here?”

“Mm. Thuringwethil drove me,” Mairon said. He, for one, seemed to be wide awake. He had laid there, motionless, just holding Melkor for as long as he'd needed to be held. “We conspired. I've had my phone back since yesterday, too.”

“God, you're evil,” Melkor told him. He groaned as he finally pushed himself all the way up and made to crawl off Mairon's lap.

“Where are you going?”

“Getting my phone—to order your massive, disgusting burger. And fries.”

“Phone’s in your back pocket.”

“Fuck,” Melkor said. He fished it out—Mairon, as usual, had been right—and flung himself back down. He settled comfortably, tucking his head back under Mairon’s chin, and freed one arm to hold his phone out and pull up a menu.

Mairon turned his head to squint at the screen. The angle was weird. Neither of them especially cared.

“Get coffee, too,” Mairon said. “Hazelnut with whipped cream.”

“Anything you want, love.”

“Potato wedges.”

Melkor added them to the cart. And when Mairon made no more demands, he proceeded to checkout.

“But order for later,” Mairon said. He squeezed his arms around Melkor, clasped his hands tightly together at the small of his back like he meant to stay that way until the end of time. “I’m not getting up for another hour.”

day 326

Mairon had cut his hair. He was tired, he said, of it looking like limp spaghetti.

Melkor watched him as they sat and ate, steaming tubs of takeaway on the table between them. Strands kept falling in his eyes and Mairon kept swatting at them, attempting to push them behind his ears. But they kept on slipping free.

He found himself thinking, wondering, if he could construct a metaphor about it—something about change, the impossibility of turning back time.

Because as much they both tried to pretend otherwise, everything would be different now. The same, but different. There was no going back from something like this. There would always be an undercurrent of lingering concern, the past slipping into the present.

The first night, he’d found Mairon staring at the tiles in the upstairs bathroom, at the walls, at the sleek new sink.

“Looks nice. Finally—a big mirror. I like it.”

“I had to,” Melkor had said. “I’m sorry.”

And Mairon had scoffed at him. “Yeah, no. If anything, I should be the one apologizing for this mess.”

“Stop that. You don’t have to do that.”

“I’ll stop when you stop,” Mairon had told him. And he’d smiled, lips curling like he couldn’t help it. “But it really does look nice. A little change is always nice. We could do the downstairs one, too.”

“I had it torn apart completely,” Melkor had admitted. He’d motioned to the sink, and with a wry smile, he’d added, “And the plumber finally figured out what was wrong with the shitty pipe. It’s all good now.”

“See, dearest, there’s always an upside.”

Melkor couldn’t help his moments of panic. One minute he was perfectly fine, the next his ears were ringing and his ribs tightening around his lungs. Sometimes he was all right with Mairon disappearing into the bathroom alone, and other times the onslaught of intrusive thoughts, the images flashing through his mind, the growing puddle of blood, made him nauseous, made him drop whatever it was he was doing and stumble upstairs, two steps at a time. To make sure Mairon was breathing, that he was whole, that he was unharmed.

“Not your fault,” Mairon told him. It was a new mantra of his. And it wasn’t with annoyance, the way he said it. It was firm and resolute. A statement of fact. “Just tell me what I can do to make it easier for you, and I will.”

“You don’t have to do anything. I’m being stupid.”

“I want to. Tell me.”

Melkor was quiet for an agonizingly long time. Mairon was looking at him. His eyes were soft and patient. He was doing so much already. He was bending over backwards to quell the panicked voice in the back of Melkor’s head. He ate, he slept, he talked whenever Melkor asked him to. He shaved only with Melkor in the room. He was extra careful when he handled knives, when he held scissors. He let Melkor dispense his pills.

He was inconveniencing himself for Melkor’s sake. And Melkor didn’t want that. He hated himself for needing it as badly as he did. He didn’t want to bother Mairon like that, not when he was healing. He was supposed to be doing whatever he felt comfortable doing, what his mind and body needed, not indulge in Melkor’s selfish fancies.

Melkor was supposed to trust him. And he did. He did. But the stupid, little voice in his head didn’t.

“Please don’t lock the door,” he said. Because he was weak. He wasn’t ready to let go completely. He would. Slowly. Step by step. Day by day. It would get better.

“That’s all?”

Melkor nodded tightly. What more could he want? He’d made enough demands. He’d put enough rules in place.

“All right. I’ll leave it open a crack.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” Mairon insisted. “You can come in whenever you like, if you need to. I really don’t mind.”

“Mairon, don’t.”

“Not just today. I mean, whenever. For as long as you need to.”

There was no arguing with the conviction in Mairon’s tone. Melkor looked down at the floor with a sharp nod of acquiescence. “Okay.”

“I mean it. It’s all right,” Mairon said. “I want to do this for you. Let me fix this.”

“Okay,” he repeated.

Regardless of how normal things became, Melkor’s mind still tortured him every now and again. Mairon promised him he was okay. He was going to his appointments and taking his buffet of pills, pushing himself to be open and honest, pushing his limits. He had promised Melkor he would tell him if he ever felt like that again, if he ever thought of hurting himself again, he’d sworn on everything he held dear. And Melkor knew he meant it. He could feel it, that it was the truth, that he could trust that promise. That Mairon wanted to be okay, to get better. But the unwelcome thoughts still wormed their way in through his defenses. Hard as he tried. He would zone out, his breathing shallow, and come to minutes, hours later, with Mairon’s hands on his cheeks, holding his head up.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” he admitted quietly. *I would be nothing without you.* “I don’t know what I would have done if—”

“I’m okay. I’m here,” Mairon assured him. He stroked his face, his hair. “It’s all right now.”

Melkor nodded. His hands were limp at his sides, flat against the plush of the couch. He didn’t know what to do with them, if he was allowed to do anything just yet.

There had been moments, of course, in Mairon’s sparse little room. Mairon’s fingers in his, his chest against Mairon’s heartbeat. One very memorable kiss. But this—*here*—was different somehow. Fragile. A delicate thing made of glass that Melkor was too afraid to reach out towards for fear it would shatter.

But Mairon didn’t share that fear. He leaned forward, simple as that, and kissed him. He knew. He always knew what Melkor was feeling, what was tormenting him. “You can touch me,” he murmured. “It’s okay.”

And Melkor moved. Muscle memory. He’d only needed a push. And then Mairon was in his lap and Melkor’s hands were on his waist, tangling in his hair. It was so much, too much. His mouth was on Mairon’s neck and his heart was in his throat.

In that moment, he was so indescribably *grateful*. It made him sick, the thought, the way it sounded, but it was the truth. He had Mairon back. Almost losing him had brought him back. They were okay; the abyss between them was knitting itself closed like wounded flesh. Almost losing their way had brought them closer together, closer than ever before.

He found that he could not make a sound. His throat worked, straining against the sudden tightness, but nothing came out. It was overwhelming, a relief so powerful his body could not hope to contain it. He kissed Mairon hard, again and again, and he did not stop, not when the tears spilled over and slid down his cheeks, not when the next kiss and the one after that tasted of salt.

“Please don’t cry,” Mairon whispered to him. “It’s okay. Please don’t cry.”

Over and over, whispered against his skin, into his hair. *It’s okay. It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay.*

day 366

Melkor was halfway out the door, keys jingling in his palm, when Mairon descended the staircase looking every inch like a dream. He was a vision; Melkor only barely refrained from trying to pinch himself awake. His hair was sleek and half-up, shirt freshly pressed, laptop bag in hand—

The alarm bells went off. Bright red and blaring.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Work,” Mairon said. “I need out.”

“The hell you are,” he said. “It’s too soon.”

“I need out,” Mairon repeated. “The cashier at the shop can’t be my only source of human interaction. Not anymore. You know I can’t stand these people.”

“You don’t like the people at work any better.”

“Maybe so,” Mairon insisted, “but at least there’s variety. I’m going.”

“Come, now. You’ve got Thuringwethil and—”

Mairon came to a stop beside him. Rather than lean against the wall like a civilized individual, he braced his palm on Melkor’s chest as he leaned down to pull his shoes on.

“Mm. Go on,” he said. “Do tell me about all of the friends that I have here.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to make some new ones.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re barely friends with the dog.”

He switched hands and got the other shoe on. He’d become just a touch handsy over the past few weeks, tactile in a way he hadn’t been before. Not to this extent, at least. Melkor had always been the clingy one, the one to touch, to poke and prod. Now, Mairon’s hands would linger. When they sat together, he would curl into Melkor’s side. When they slept, he would latch onto him; he was impossible to detach in the mornings. It was nice, Melkor thought, to have Mairon finally match his enthusiasm.

Quietly, he asked him, “You’re sure?”

“Very,” Mairon said. He straightened, met Melkor’s eyes with unwavering certainty. “Somebody needs to clean up your messes.”

“Messses?” Melkor echoed. “What makes you think I’ve made a mess of anything?”

“I’ve no doubt you did.”

“You have so little faith in me. You’re breaking my heart. Ellen thinks you’ve divorced me—have I told you that?”

“A new betting pool?”

“Mm,” Melkor nodded. “It’s either divorce, better money elsewhere, or that your wife found out about the affair and formulated a revenge plot to have you framed for tax evasion. Something like that.”

Mairon’s lips split into a smile. It was enchanting. Beguiling. Melkor wanted to lock the door and throw away the key. Not let him out. Neither of them would go anywhere. They would stay there, right there in the entranceway. He would hold Mairon, squeeze him until his arms ached, until Mairon, for lack of a better option, bit at him to wriggle out of his loving embrace.

“And what did you bet on?”

“Your wife finding out,” Melkor deadpanned.

“Of course,” Mairon scoffed.

“Don’t ever divorce me. I mean it. Promise me you won’t.”

“I would never.”

“I’m nothing without you.”

Mairon’s smile widened. “I know.”

“Rude. And don’t accept any of the better offers they throw at you. Whatever they say they’ll give you, I’ll triple it. I’ll—what’s the word—quadruple it. Anything you want.”

“Shush. There are no better offers; there could never be. I’m not in it for the money.”

“What, then?”

“I mean, my career objective was always just to sleep my way up to the top,” Mairon said evenly. “It made it that much easier that the boss wasn’t too hard on the eyes.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes, that’s—well. If you look at it that way, I suppose I am in it for the money. That was the dastardly plan all along, you know: marrying into a filthy rich family. You caught me. Good heavens, I’ve been found out.”

The dam shattered. There was no holding back. Melkor leaned down and took Mairon’s face in both hands, drew him in for a hard kiss. And Mairon let himself be manhandled into position, smiling all the while, even as Melkor parted his lips and swallowed his gasps.

When they finally separated—they would most certainly be late—Mairon’s mouth was swollen red and his eyes sparkling. Melkor didn’t let him go. He couldn’t. He held his face, cradled it like he was the most precious thing in the world to him. Because he was. *He was.*

“I love you,” Melkor said softly. “Very much.”

Mairon cocked his head to the side, leaned into Melkor’s palm. He fit there perfectly. “I know,” he murmured.

“Rude,” Melkor said again. He fixed Mairon with a little pout. “Aren’t you going to say it back?”

“Can we stop for coffee on the way?”

“If you want.”

“Will you pay?”

Melkor laughed. “I can.”

“Okay,” Mairon said. His smile was bright, warm like the morning sun. “Then I love you, too. Very much.”

End Notes

mandatory disclaimer 1: regrettably i am not a medical professional + everyone's experiences with mental health are different so there are bound to be some inaccuracies regardless of how many hours i spent with ye olde dsm-5

mandatory disclaimer 2: manwë means well but he's also kind of a self-absorbed dick so please refrain from blindly following any of the advice he took it upon himself to offer

massive thank you to [emily](#) for your huge brain and your medical expertise!! this would have read like a poorly researched hospital drama without you

and once again thank you to the amazing [denisa](#) for providing both linguistic and moral support and for suffering through this hell with me over the past few months

happy six year ALT anniversary <3

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