Pretty

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Summary

From the kinkmeme:

"In an AU world, Dorian and Bull are in an established sexual relationship and far more morally gray than in-game. Male Lavellan is an elven slave that Dorian buys as a gift for Bull, or vice versa if A!A wishes, and is basically used as a sex-toy by them.

Bull and Dorian are not outright cruel or violent but Lavellan is definitely not into it and they don't really care that much.

Lavellan hopes this is a one-time thing and he'll be sent to work in the kitchens with the other slaves afterwards but both Bull and Dorian end up very enamored with their pretty new toy."

Be warned, there are graphic, horrible things in this fic. But there's also recovery, and backsliding, and healing.
Pretty

Milin was out hunting when it happened. Bow and arrow in hand, determined to make his first kill and become a man in the eyes of his clan.

He heard the shem coming. They didn't try to mask the sounds of heavy boots crashing through the underbrush. He was fast, but they were many. They came at him from all directions—surrounding him. Herding him. At last, gasping for breath and back to an oak, he raised his bow, hands shaking as he aimed at a man's throat. But he just...he couldn’t do it.

His bow was ripped from him, months of painstaking work cracked over a knee before his eyes. And then he was grabbed by more hands than he could count.

He struggled, at first. Demanding to be freed, trying to break his chains, screaming for help. He was dragged to a wagon with a cage too cramped to sit up in, much less stand. It would have fit a dog better. When he dug his heels in, they just laughed, said something in a language he couldn’t understand, and shoved a hood over his head before picking him up to throw him in.

At some point, there was a ship. He couldn't remember boarding it, but he remembered the waves making him dry heave in the dark. Weeks passed, or at least it felt like weeks, and the only time they lifted the hood was to feed and water him. In his more lucid moments, he realized they must be drugging his food. Didn’t stop him from scarfing down what little they allowed him, though.

There were others—he could hear them breathing—but he only made the mistake of trying to talk once before he was caught and clubbed through the bars. Afterwards, a small hand, a child’s or perhaps a young woman’s, touched his palm, and he held it until a strike to his wrist forced him to let go.

Another wagon. He didn’t remember being moved to that, either.

Or being stripped down to nothing.

In the beginning he thought that maybe they were just trying to extort his clan for halla or craft in exchange for his return. But no. They wouldn’t have taken him this far for that. And there wouldn’t have been others. He was kidnapped to be a slave. And they took off his clothes because... He didn’t want to think about that. Maybe the kidnappers just wanted to sell him, and prove that he wasn’t damaged goods, that’s all. He knew that shem found elves beautiful, but they also needed people to work fields and wash dishes and cook food, right? Milin curled his knees to his chest, trying to hide his nakedness as best he could.

It halted, and the cage clanged open and he was dragged to his feet, his hood ripped off. If his hands weren’t behind his back, he would have covered his face at the blinding light, but all he could do was hiss and clamp his eyes shut. Soft fingers ghosted over his face, as if mocking him for lacking the vallaslin he had not earned, and he jerked away from the touch. An amused chuckle, some arguing in that foreign tongue, and then the hood was back on and he was being led away before he could even open his eyes.

The rough stone beneath his feet became something cool and smooth. It was a small relief from the stifling heat of wherever he was. His muscles ached from unexpected use, and his feet were smarting. Every step, there was a short, flat surface followed by an unnatural ridge, and he kept banging his toes.
A door opened, and he was hit with a blast of stifling, humid air. Like a hot spring.

There was the patter of bare feet towards him, and the rough hands holding him up were replaced by delicate ones. Not guards, then. Servants, or more likely slaves.

“Don’t be afraid,” a feminine voice said in Common. The first words he understood in ages, and they were beautiful. “We’re just going to clean you. Please, don’t be difficult. If you try anything, I will be punished as well.”

His breath hitched at the word ‘punished,’ his mind flashing to what that would entail here, but then he nodded. He was filthy, and didn’t have the strength to fight, anyway.

The woman spoke to him (though he didn’t dare speak back after the beating), calmly explaining what they were going to do before they did it. His hood was lifted, and he was led to a pool of water but with that strange too-smooth ground. Hands scrubbed him clean, combed and braided his hair, massaged oil into his skin. His face was covered with powder, his lips and eyes smudged with pastes. Though, he only managed a few, watery glimpses before he was plunged back into darkness. This time, with a blindfold of fine fabric instead of a full hood. The chains were replaced by more of the same material. A chance at escape, if he could find a knife maybe, but not with those men still at his back.

“There. All done,” she announced, and then whispered. “The masters here are not cruel. Do as you’re told, and you’ll be alright.”

The rough hands grabbed him again. The ground turned to fabric, and he was tossed onto cushions. Footsteps and the clicking of a lock told him he was alone.

But that didn’t last for long.

Big, thundering footsteps approached, like a bear on its hind-legs.

He couldn’t fight, couldn’t run, so he blindly scrambled to burrow under the blankets and pillows. Maybe if whatever it was didn't see him...

The door banged open and he froze, holding his breath.

"Must you enter the room like that, you great beast? You'll tear the door off the hinges, one of these days,” a man's voice complained in Common. It sounded familiar. One of the people arguing earlier, maybe?

"You like it when I'm 'beastly' and you know it," a much deeper voice replied with a chuckle. The owner of the footsteps? "Now, what's this about a gift?"

A pillow was snatched off his head, and Milin sucked in air.

"Burrowing like a little bunny, apparently. Isn't he just precious?" the first man purred, plucking off the rest of his covers. Precious? Try terrified. "Hello, pretty. I'm your master."

Was he supposed to respond to that? He didn't think he could speak now if he tried.

"Dorian..." the deep voiced man sighed. "We talked about this. This whole surrogate thing...it's just bizarre."

"Don't think of it that way, then. Consider it a threesome. Besides, I special ordered him just for
you. Dalish, but without the face markings to ensure a virgin. I even managed to procure a red-head," Vallaslin were not based on whether someone was a virgin. Well...he was, but that was beside the point. And why did they need a virgin, anyway? Some blood ritual? No. No, they wanted a threesome. They were going to...to...

A gigantic hand carded through his hair and he forced himself to stay still--this man could crush his skull, if he wanted to. Torn from his family, his friends, his home, all because he was born with red hair? It seemed so unfair. He prayed to Mythal for protection against this giant and the so-called Dorian.

"You 'Vints and your virgins. Someone with more experience would probably be able to take me easier."

"So we will be thorough. Small price to pay to be free of disease, and likely more pliant as well. Speaking of..." he heard a cork popping and then some grass-smelling thing was held to his lips. His kidnappers had been drugging him before, he knew, but whatever that was didn't have a smell. This was different. "Drink up, pretty."

Was 'pretty' to be his name, now? Did it matter? That woman said he wouldn't be hurt, if he did as they said. So he drank. Maybe the stuff would make him sleep through it, or at least not remember it, and he would go to the kitchens tomorrow and pretend nothing ever happened.

The smaller, softer hands coaxed him onto his stomach. He should be trying to fight, having an enemy behind his back. But he relaxed into the touch. Not that his body was growing tired. If anything, it did the opposite. His skin became hot, flushed, his breathing fast. What in the Dread Wolf's name had they done to him?

"Bull, the oil, if you don't mind."

Oil? The women in the baths had already used a vat of oil on him, how much more did they need?

Something firm pressed against his hole, and he cried out, "No!" in spite himself.

Lavellan cringed in anticipation of pain for his outburst. He knew they didn't want him talking, they sure as hell didn't want him refusing, and Elgar'nan guide him, he was so stupid.

Instead, he received a laugh, "So the bunny has a voice, after all. Poor thing is resisting the potion. Just relax, pretty, this won't hurt."

"You realize that saying 'this won't hurt' is only going to scare him more, right? You sound like a surgeon about to do stitches," the man called Bull said.

"And now the great and terrible Ben-Hassrath is going to bless us all with his opinion on the matter, I assume?"

"Potions are unnecessary. If you want him to not be so afraid, take the blindfold off."

"The dark calms them!" Dorian protested

"That's falcons, not elves."

"It's the same principle."

Milin curled into himself while they bickered, rubbing his legs together and his chest against the soft fabric. He needed to be touched. Damn them both, he wanted those hands on him again.
Anywhere. Everywhere. He didn't care anymore.

"Please," he whimpered, willing to risk being beaten for a slim chance at relief.

"See?" Dorian's smugness was palpable. "The potion just needed a moment to kick in. Now, stay still..."

"No. Let me do this. You get ready to prepare yourself," the deep voice dropped even lower, to what only could be described as a growl. "If you insist on it being this way, I want to see you spread yourself open as I spread him open."

He was grabbed by the thighs and positioned wide, fingers with too-long nails, almost claws, spreading the cheeks of his ass. And then something soft and wet and... A tongue. It was a tongue. And it felt amazing.

Lavellan moaned, the shame burning as hot as his pleasure as it teased just inside of him. He was getting hard, and fast. The tongue seemed unnaturally long and limber, but he didn't care. He wanted more of it in him and he got it and just... No. He hated this. Why were they doing this to him? They obviously wanted each other, why couldn't they just leave him out of it?

The tongue left, making him whine. And he wasn't the only one.

"Like what you see, Kadan? Get your finger oiled up. We'll push in at the same time."

And a not-tongue pressed in. Burning. Unnatural. He wanted both to push it out and draw it in. And why wasn't the nail hurting?

"Another. You ready?"

"Yes," came the breathy reply, and a second one was spreading him. Clearly, it hadn't been his reply the brute had been worried about. But he was ready. The touch was not satiating him, just making him crave more.

"Three."

If two was overwhelming, three was bordering on painful. He felt gaping open and exposed and...slippery. Milin may not have had sex, but it was practically the only thing the other young men in his clan talked about, aside from hunting, so he knew a couple of things. He knew you could do it in a girl's mouth or pussy or ass, and vaguely knew that same-sex couples did stuff too, but never had he imagined himself getting spread wide like this, much less getting so unbearably aroused from it. It didn't seem possible. Maybe it was the potion? Creators, how much would he hurt once it wore off?

Then the great beast was pulling out his fingers. They wouldn't leave him like this, would they? It was torture, to get him this worked up, only to deny him. He begged, voice raspy with disuse, "No, wait, please."

The giant behind him laughed again, manhandling him up into his lap, so that he straddled his meaty thighs, "You'll get what you need. Just as soon as Dorian and I get ours."

With that, something much bigger than fingers pushed against his ass.

He tried to breathe slowly, in and out, his whole body shaking as he tried to accommodate the size of him. It just kept going. After every inch, he told himself that there couldn't possibly be any more, but there was, and he felt like there was no way he wasn't being ripped to shreds by this.
After an eternity, it halted.

"Ready to hop on top, kadan?"

"I do not 'hop','" the man huffed.

The other man climbed into his own lap, warm and heavy against him, and a hand wrapped around his cock. His head lolled back in pleasure. He had never been touched by anything but his own hand.

But wait...what? Why? He assumed that they were both going to...to do this to him, or that Bull would use him, and then they would do each other.

Lips pressed against his, and he turned his cheek.

"Your master is showing affection, pretty. You should be grateful. It is a gift to even be in the presence of perfection, much less in the perfection," the lips went to his throat instead, and he shuddered. The tone was light, but was that a threat? Had he pushed too far? What was with this man's gigantic ego?

"I'm sorry," he hazarded. "Thank you."

Humming with approval, Dorian recaptured his lips, and the man's meaning became clear.

Dorian had not been preparing himself for Bull, he'd been preparing himself for him.

Tight, slick heat slowly enveloped him and he moaned into Dorian's mouth. For a moment, he could almost delude himself that this was one of the girls he'd kissed back in his Clan, that he wanted all this. But the brush of hair against his upper lip quickly shattered that illusion.

A clawed hand grabbed him by the hair, breaking their kiss as he was pressed flush against the larger man's chest, arm pinned between them, head tilted back on his shoulder. His neck was bared, vulnerable, and he knew better than to resist it.

"This could be you, kadan," the giant growled, his teeth nipping at Milin's throat. Oh, fuck, he was moving. Slowly, but hard enough that his own cock was being driven further into the man above him. "Bound and conquered. The darkness making every sensation, every sound heightened. Going mad with pleasure as I impale you."

"Amatus, you know..."

"I know. Focus on the fantasy for now. Close your eyes if you need to."

"First time I've gotten a cock in me in months, I am not closing my eyes. Besides, the size difference would make it hard to believe, anyhow."

"And who's fault is that?"

Creators, what was with these two? None of what they said made any sense. And they acted like he wasn't even here, half the time.

The man let out a frustrated noise, "Stop teasing and fuck me."

"Whatever you want, 'Vint."

Bull sped up, and Dorian matched the pace. Each time he was thrust into, he was ground down on.
Lavellan cried out, again and again, unable to think. He'd touched himself enough to know when he was close to the edge, but he couldn't have stopped it if he wanted to. His balls drew up and he came, hard, and it wasn't long before he was too soft to keep inside.

Dorian climbed off his lap and said something in that odd language, making him flinch. He didn't know what the word meant, but he had figured out it was a swear.

"That's what you get for going with a virgin, and giving him that potion," Bull laughed. He hadn't even paused in his thrusts, and it was too sensitive, too much. Milin hissed through his teeth, but had no choice but to take it. "I would never finish before you. Now, stop pouting, and take his mouth."

Take his... wait, he was going to--

Those big hands grabbed hold of his shoulders and pushed, doubling him in half, and the soft ones cupped his face, a thumb running along his lips, "He's not much of a kisser. I doubt he'll even be any good. Ah, well. Open up, pretty."

Milin whimpered, but cooperated, nose wrinkling in disgust and pain. Let it be over soon.

"Don't make that face, it ruins your features," Dorian chided. As if he was a child. Slaves weren't even allowed to have their own facial expressions? Not only did he have to endure discomfort and degradation, he had to do it with a smile?

He didn't say that, of course. He was far past the point of fighting. Just struggled to school his face like the pathetic coward he was.

And was rewarded with the musky, salty taste of a cock on his tongue.

Milin gagged, jerking back. He hadn't expected it to taste good, but he just couldn't tolerate it. Not after everything else. Not with that huge cock still rocking into him.

The prick bumped against his lips again and he turned his head away, "Please don't do this to me. Please stop. I can't."

Dorian sighed dramatically, and he felt the cushion spring up beneath him. Where was he going? Was he really going to leave him alone?

Somewhere beside him, a drawer opened. The pillows sank again, and his glimmer of hope was dashed.

"Are you hungry, pretty?"

"Ah, I see what you're up to now," the giant said. He could practically hear the smirk, and shuddered. What were they going to do to him now? "Catching flies, 'Vint?"

"Answer my question," Dorian prompted.

"Y-yes."

He heard a cap being unscrewed, and the smell of honey wafted to him. His mouth watered. When his kidnappers had bothered to feed him, it was more often than not stale bread or crackers.

The smell grew stronger, right under his nose. Creators, he was hungry.

"It's just my fingers. I'm not foolish enough to risk an infection. Open up and suck for me."
Should he trust that? Did he have a choice?

Lavellan parted his lips and two fingers, covered in honey, pushed inside. The sweetness was intoxicating and he sucked eagerly. It was degrading, but he'd been hand-fed for weeks, anyway. Was sucking on his fingers really that much worse, when you thought about it?

He didn't want to think about it.
"You want more, my pet?"

He nodded, licking in between his fingers to get the last of it.
"Pleasure me, and swallow down my seed, then you can have a treat."

Can't say he didn't see that one coming.

But this time, when the cock was pushed into his mouth, the residual taste of the honey was enough to keep him from gagging. It was still unpleasant, degrading. But he could almost pretend it was just the fingers, still. He sucked quickly, hoping to get it over with before the taste was gone. His stomach growled. The tease of food only made him more hungry.

His two captors began to move in tandem again. When one pushed in, so did the other. When one pulled back, the other did, too.

Just fingers. Just honey. It would be over soon. It would be okay. He was going to be okay.
"Come for me, kadan."

The man moaned, and he could feel hot seed spurt into his mouth. Fucking gross, slimy, salty, and he wanted desperately to spit it out, but as soon as the cock pulled away, a hand closed over his mouth, "Ah, ah, ah, pretty. I know what you're thinking, but I told you to swallow. Or no treat for you."

That evil, patronizing bastard.

Grimacing, he choked it down. It was either that or keep it in his mouth indefinitely.

As soon as he swallowed, the giant grabbed his hips tight, and with one last, hard thrust, grunted out his out release. And now that awful stuff was inside him, too. He could feel it. A lot of it.

Once he'd pulled out and let him go, Lavellan curled up on his side.

He was loose and sore and used and disgusting. His throat seized up and he wept. Big, heaving, pathetic gasps.
"Ah, shit. Pushed it too far, thought that might happen. C'mere," the large hands pulled him up onto his lap again. He didn't even flinch. Let them use him again. Let them fuck him to death. It didn't matter. "What's your name, kid?"

He didn't answer. It was a trick question. Did he want his actual name? Or did he want to hear 'pretty' or 'pet' or 'whatever you want it to be'?
"Dorian? Name?"

"I haven't thought of one just yet. Besides, I bought him for you--did you wish to name him?"
"Damn 'Vints. Never mind. Just go get some food or something."

The man scoffed and muttered something in that foreign language. Even without sight, he could tell he was rolling his eyes.

With surprising gentleness, the giant pulled off his blindfold and untied his wrists, massaging the sore muscles of his arms. He buried his head into his chest. He would rather be comforted by almost anyone else. He hated him. But he was big and warm and there and he was so desperate for the slightest affection that he took it. Maybe it was foolish, but he couldn't help it.

When his eyes adjusted, he looked up, blinking away the pain and tears. The horns, the grey skin. Creators... he wasn't just giant, he was a giant. A Qunari. He'd never seen one, and only knew of them vaguely. He was half-convinced they didn't really exist.

"What lovely eyes," he turned his head to see Dorian. This one was definitely a shem, you could tell by the odd hair he'd felt when he'd been forced to kiss him. Surely it didn't really just grow that way? "Crawl into my lap, pet, and I'll feed you that treat I promised, hmm?"

He spotted a bedside tray full of food and complied, drying his eyes on his now-free arm and curling up into him like he had Bull. He was rewarded with a honey covered date, stuffed with an almond.

Both men hand-fed him dates, pomegranate seeds, and torn pieces of white, soft bread. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so full. Creators, he couldn't remember the last time he just felt not hungry.

"That's enough, we don't want our pet getting sick," Dorian said. "Feeling better?"

He nodded.

"Wonderful. Hold still for a moment," he leaned over to the bedside table and opened a drawer, digging through it for a moment before pulling out a long silver chain. He pulled back at the sight, but Bull held him fast as it was looped around his throat and attached to a ring at the head of the bed. He cast some sort of spell, and then he was let go. "Can't have you trying to run off, now."

He started shaking. Bad enough they had him eating out of their hands and...other things, but would he spend the rest of his days chained to this bed? "Please, I won't try to run. Let me work the kitchens. O-or the fields."

"Don't worry, pretty," Dorian kissed the side of his neck, as Bull pet his hair. "We'll take good care of you."
Lavellan knelt on top of the covers, peeling grapes into a bowl.

It was a foolish, fussy task, but it broke up the monotony. Besides...sometimes peeling grapes was enough. Sometimes, Dorian just wanted to be fed grapes as he read, or have his shoulders rubbed as he chatted with Bull. That's why Milin didn't try to hide under the covers anymore. He'd learned early on that the human found his attempts at resistance cute. Like a game. When he hid or pulled away, Dorian took that as a challenge to try to make him hard, try to make him come. It made him almost miss the drugs, because then he had something to blame it on when he came apart.

Bull wasn't as bad. He never touched him, not in that way at least, unless Dorian started it. And he'd talk to him, even though it was still hard for him to talk back.

He was left alone for most of the day, save for when the pair of guards came to escort him to the baths. One of them had to be a mage, to cast the spell to release him. But he never saw which one it was, because they always bound and blindfolded him first. He still dreaded being paraded naked through the halls, unable to even see the eyes he knew must stare at him, judge him. But at least he got to see the girl in the baths...

He'd smile at her, and strain to catch glimpses of her whenever it was time to put makeup on his eyes. She was an elf, with the same dark coloring of Dorian, and the vallaslin of Ghilan'nain on her brow.

Milin would have chosen the same markings, had he had the chance.

He was fair with the bow, fast and precise, if not overly strong. But he had never shot anything that was alive before, and wasn't keen to. He preferred the halla, and would have spent his days tending to them, learning to speak with them. He was old enough to have gotten his markings a few years ago, if he had favored Andruil and just hunted a fennec or a ram. But he had prayed to be sent a wolf or a mountain lion, something that could be a threat to the halla or the clan, so that he could justify to the goddess his devotion still laid with her teachings.

He didn't deserve her vallaslin, now.

Ghilan'nain had answered his prayers, and he had failed her test. Unable to defend himself, and unworthy of the Creators' intervention. Even if he could return to his clan, it would be shameful to do so as elvhen' alas.

Large footsteps approached, and the door slammed open. It didn't startle him--he knew those footsteps well.

What did startle him was an elf barging in ahead of Iron Bull, a sword at his back. Lavellan scrambled back, plastering himself against the headboard.

"Cool it, you're scaring him," Bull warned, grabbing the stranger by the wrist. The elf shook him off with a growl and lunged forward, grabbing for Milin's chain. His eyes darted to the Iron Bull for help. "Besides, it's sealed by magic, you won't get it loose."

"Then get your precious magister in here to do it," he snapped. "Sleeping with the enemy for information is one thing. This? This is fucked."

"Gatt--"
"My title is Viddathari. And yours is Hisrad, not The Iron fucking Bull."

"You don't understand."

The elf barked out a laugh, "I understand that your orders were to get him to fuck you, and then blackmail him into being a double agent against the Venatori. I understand that he purchased this surrogate just for you. Having fun with your sex slave, Hisrad?"

"We didn't need to blackmail him, he was already working against the Venatori. He may have been apprenticed to Alexius, but he isn't a part of that cult."

"Oh, good. Well that completely makes up for him raping elves."

"It's not my first choice, either. He's worried about Tranquility. With slaves--"

"It doesn't 'count,' so the fucking morality police don't come after 'em. Yeah, I know. I've been on the other side of those chains, in case you've forgotten. But that's no excuse. Your precious 'Vint could just leave. He's a free man, unlike this one," the elf nodded towards him.

"If he fled, then he wouldn't be able to help us as much with the Venatori, would he?"

"Then you two could just jerk off until they're squashed."

"That's what we were doing. At least until--"

"What, your magister got bored without slave tears and you just went along with it because he's pretty?"

The Iron Bull shook his head, "I know it's fucked. It's Tevinter. But it's nothing like how it was with you. We're good to him, he's not neglected or abused."

"If you're so fucking benevolent, why does he need magical chains, huh?" Viddathari demanded, looking back to Lavellan. His eyes bore into him. So intense he couldn't breathe, couldn't look away. "The second that 'Vint has served his purpose, I'm killing him, and I'll take you wherever you want. You'll never have to see either of them again, I swear on my life. I swear on the Qun," he stood from the bed, glaring at the giant. "Enjoy forcing yourself on the helpless, Hisrad, if that's what you truly believe the Qun demands."

The stranger slammed the door behind him as he left.

Bull sighed, crossing over to him and cupping his face in one massive hand, "You alright, kid? Sorry if he scared you. Gatt's always had some anger issues."

He didn't answer, just stared at him blankly. There was too much to process. He didn't know where to begin.

The Qunari shook his head, and dampened a cloth with the pitcher of water. He took Milin's hands and gently wiped them off. He hadn't even realized he'd crushed the grapes...

"There's a good lad," he said, pulling him into a bear hug. Lavellan let himself lean into his chest, shivering. It was what he was used to. It was what was expected of him. This was something he understood.

Dorian came striding in not long after, "I take it by your friend's sudden and loud departure that the little private chat of yours could have gone better?"
So he knew about the violent elf? And was fine with him coming and going from his home?

"You could say that," Iron Bull said. "He give you any trouble?"

"As luck would have it, looks can't kill just yet, so I'm fine," the human popped a peeled grape into his mouth, bafflingly casual considering his life had just been threatened a second ago. Though he suspected, even if he had heard what Viddathari said, his reaction wouldn't have been that different. "Do I need to tell the guards not to allow him to return?"

"No need. You're safe, as long as I'm your bodyguard."

"I suppose I will have to keep you around for the time being, then," he smiled, crawling onto the bed.

"Suppose you will," the Qunari leaned forward, but instead of being crushed between them as they kissed, Dorian pulled back. "We can't even kiss?"

He frowned, "You know we can't."

Now that he thought of it...the two of them had never kissed. Not that he'd seen, at least.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this, Kadan."

He sighed, "I know it's a pain, but the Censors have ways of detecting lies. Having a horned giant as a bodyguard already is seen as eccentric. If one of my father's enemies bribes them enough to get them to question me, you will be the first thing they ask about, and I need to be able to deny misconduct."

"What you need is to get out of this country."

"So that I can be made Tranquil there instead of here?" he demanded. Lavellan cringed. He'd never seen Dorian express that much venom before. "Or better yet, have my neck collared and my mouth sewn shut?"

"The Circles have fallen in the South, it wouldn't be too hard for one man to evade capture," The Iron Bull said. He started rubbing Milin's back to relax him. Part of him was grateful, part of him resented that it worked. "And it looks like we'll need to go to Ferelden, anyway, to stop the Venatori alliance."

"Someone has to, not necessarily me. For all its faults, I happen to love my homeland, and I am not keen on leaving it anytime soon. Besides, I believe I can be of more use here changing things from within."

"And in the meantime, fuck slaves instead of your boyfriend until your father finally wears you down enough that you'll marry a woman?"

The indignation in his face turned to hurt, "My father will come around. I'm certain of it."

His tone said otherwise.

The large hand at his back stopped abruptly, "Something happened." A statement, not a question.

"As it so happens, when you were having your private conversation with your Charger or whoever he was, I was having one of my own." That elf was a Charger? Iron Bull talked about them sometimes. A mercenary group or something. He seemed to miss them.
"Your father?"

"No, the Queen of Ferelden, obviously."

"About me?"

"Not...exactly. My father doesn't approve of him," Dorian looked at him when he said that, and Milin ducked his head. What had he done wrong? Should he apologize? Were they going to punish him? No, no, they didn't do that. The sex could be rough, but they never intentionally hurt him. Or starved him. They hadn't even drugged him again. What if they gave him back to the slavers, though? Forced him back into that cage? As if able to read his thoughts, Iron Bull hooked an arm around his waist. "Apparently he was hoping that the purchase would make me more agreeable towards marriage. He wasn't exactly pleased with the news that, surrogate or no, I would still rather not spend the rest of my days screaming on the inside."

Bull put his other arm around Dorian, and the human melted into his side.

"He told me...he told me to get out. That I wasn't his son," his voice sounded raw. "But I'm still not leaving. That's the easy way. The weak way. If I left now, I'd hardly be better than a common blood mage."

"I know, kadan. I know."

He wasn't entirely sure why he hated the idea of being married so much, but he felt bad for him. Lavellan leaned over, brushing his hand against his master's. The man took it and gave it a squeeze, "Thank you, pretty."

"Milin," he whispered, surprised at himself as soon as he said it. He just corrected his master. What was the matter with him? Did he have no sense at all?

"Milin? Is that your name?"

He nodded.

The Tevinter smiled at him, though still tinged with sadness, "Thank you, Milin."

"If you want to thank him, you could take the collar off. It's not like he's not still surrounded by walls and guards."

What? Was he joking? Was he taunting him?

"True, amatus, but I rather enjoy the aesthetic..."

"Dorian."

"Very well," a zap of magic, and the chain fell off his neck. Lavellan rubbed his throat, mouth agape. It was off. It was really, finally off. The skin felt so odd, so bare.

He flung his arms around him in thanks.

"Such a good pet," Dorian purred, running a finger along the shell of his ear.

He knew what that meant, and suppressed a shudder. It would be worth it to keep the chain off. Besides, he was getting used to the taste.

He kissed his way down the human's body, unbuckling straps as he went.
Milin woke up first, as usual. He napped a lot during the day out of sheer boredom, so he didn't need to sleep as long as night. Besides, it was weirdly...comforting to be sandwiched between them, staying still not to rouse them as he listened to them breathe deeply with sleep. It meant that he wouldn't be touched. And more than that, it meant he wasn't alone. As much as he hated their hands on him, the cage was worse.

But today, with the collar finally off, he risked rousing them to carefully squirm out from between them to creep towards the window. The chain wasn't long enough for him to get a good look out of it before, and he'd been dying to see. They couldn't blame him for that, could they?

He saw a garden enclosed by red-roofed buildings and white pillars, with a pond that was too perfectly square to be anything but artificial in the center. It took a minute to figure out the latch, but then he had wind on this face for the first time since master freed him from the cage.

He closed his eyes and sniffed. Prophet's Laurel and lavender and--

"Milin."

Slamming the window, he jumped back and stammered, "I-I'm sorry, I was just..."

Dorian was still dead asleep, but Iron Bull was propped up on an arm, smirking. That was a good sign. He'd be angry if he thought Milin was trying to escape. Bull crooked a finger at him and he obediently crossed over and knelt next to the bed.

"You want to go outside?"

The tone was serious. Bull was offering, not just teasing. His eyes widened and he nodded vigorously.

"What else do you want?" he asked.

Milin hesitated. He wanted to not have sex anymore. He wanted to see his clan--his parents, his little sister, his friends, his halla.

But that was impossible.

Maybe he would like to meet the woman from the baths, but what would be the point? He couldn't even bring himself to speak to her.

"Clothes," he said at last. Then quickly added: "I mean, outside at least?" It was probably a rule that he wasn't allowed to wear them in here...

"I think I can make that happen. It might do us all some good to get out for a while," Bull pat his head and he kissed his hand in gratitude. They were being so nice to him. He thought it had something to do with Viddathari, but he wasn't about to question a good thing.

"Out where?" Dorian asked, his eyes still shut and voice slurred with drowsiness.

"Outdoors," Iron Bull said.

"I suppose I could take my lunch in the garden," he yawned. "But I have a lot of research to do."
"Mind if Milin tags along?"

His eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and then he made a noise that could only be described as a purr, "I could do that. The barn, perhaps? For... privacy?"

Oh. He should have expected that.

His heart deflated somewhat, but it was better than being left alone.

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He walked behind his master, head bowed, because that's what the other slaves seemed to be doing, and resisted the urge to itch. It'd been a while since he'd worn clothes, and the fabric of the cinched tunic was rough compared to what his clan used.

He wished they would go faster. Humiliation burned his face, his ears. He bet they could all tell. He bet they all knew what they'd done to him from the way he walked. Or worse, maybe they could see an outline of the thing inside him under the thin cloth. As soon as they were out of earshot, the others would all whisper about him, what he was, what they were about to do to them.

Even so, Lavellan would always glance up discretely to see their faces they passed. He could not have cared less about the lavish tapestries and intricate statues, but his world had been shrunk to five people, and now he had the chance to see more. A gray-haired man with a toddler cooing on one hip, and a basket of linens on the other. A pair of teenagers chattering together until they caught sight of them and suddenly seemed very busy. A human woman in armor who looked like her nose had been broken and reset more than one, with the same stoic expression as his usual guards. She put two fingers to her head as they passed instead of bowing like the others.

A prim, straight-backed man stationed at the entrance opened a door for them and then he was smelling fresh air again. He could not help but raise his head and smile. They weren't in the garden he'd seen through the window, they were on a path shaded with trees. A good thing, too, with how the sun beat down. It shouldn't be this far into summer yet, should it?

They came across another red-roofed building, far from the others, and he could smell animals and hay.

A dozen horses on either side, each in their own separate, narrow stalls. He walked down the rows, fascinated, as master gave an order in what he'd learned was Tevene, and he could hear departing footsteps. He'd seen wild horses before, but never up close like this. The last one on the left was pure white. Like a halla.

"Aneth ara," he greeted, holding out a hand for him to sniff. "Ma emma tel'harel. Ma emma hamin."

"Ah, the Imperial Warmblood colt," Dorian said. "His name is Aethon."

"Horses will speak with humans?"

"I... excuse me? No, the horses can't speak," he chuckled.

Milin couldn't understand what was funny. Elves could talk to halla, and so they used halla. He'd
always just assumed it was the same with horses and humans. The animal bumped his nose against his hand, and he began scratching his neck. "Then how do you know his name?"

"Because I named him, of course."

Oh, then it wasn't his real name. It was like how Dorian would call him 'pretty' and 'pet'.

He nodded, and sang softly to the creature—an old Dalish song about the golden halla leading a clan to safety during the first Blight. He was only eleven years old when the Blight happened, and they were too far north for any of them to have even seen a darkspawn, but he'd heard plenty of stories about it during the last Arelathvhen.

"What was that about talking horses?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Kinda weird to hear him sing. Kid barely even talks."

They were both whispering. Neither of them really understood how well elves could hear, did they? He finished the song, and pet the horse's nose.

"Enjoying yourself, Milin?" Dorian asked.

"Yes. Thank you, master," he crossed over to him and kissed his knuckles. He was collarless, he was clothed, he was outside, he got to see animals... Maybe if he was really good he'd get to do this again? Besides, at least if they fucked him, he'd get to take the plug out. Wearing one in bed, even all day, he was used to. Wearing one walking around not as much.

"Good," he glanced at Bull. "This was all your idea. I do hope you've got a plan that won't soil my robes?"

"I do, actually," the Qunari said. He put his back to the nearest pillar, and dropped his pants. "Legs around my waist, Milin."

"And where does that leave me?"

"Behind him. Don't worry, he can take us."

He suppressed a gasp. At the same time? Creators, even with preparation, taking Bull alone still left him sore. Still, if this was the price, he would pay it. Lavellan hiked up the tunic around his waist and hopped up, wrapping his thighs around him and clinging to his shoulders. Bull held his weight easily with one hand, the other playing with the toy up his ass. He squirmed. Bull always knew how to get a reaction out of him. Holding back just made him try harder.

The phallus was eased out of him and the Qunari's cock was eased in, Iron Bull kissing him and pinching his nipples to distract from the burn.

When he was completely sheathed, he held him there for a moment, letting him adjust. The popping of a cork told him that Dorian was no longer content just to watch. A slick finger pushed in, and he barely felt it in comparison. But the second one made his nails dig in and he held his breath until it stopped.

"Easy now, pretty," Dorian said, pressing his lips to his neck as he worked him open. "Breathe. Nice and slow."
Slow wasn't the problem. Width was the problem.

The fingers pulled out but he knew it was only a temporary relief. There was the sound of stroking and then he was being filled, stretched further than he'd ever been.

They fucked him slowly. Maybe they thought it was a mercy, but he was a boneless wreck once they were done with him. Iron Bull set him down and he couldn't help but drop to his knees. He licked his own spend from the giant's abs, and then curled up in hay to recover.

"As enjoyable as this little outing was, I really must return. I still have to decrypt Felix's letter, and then research more about this so-called Elder One," Dorian said, after a few moments. The man uncorked a potion from a pouch and held it out to him. "Drink this, pet."

Cringing, he shook his head, "Please, I don't need it, master. I promise I'll be good..." He didn't know how he could possibly take any more after all that, but he knew he didn't want that ugly, desperate heat making him crave it.

"No, no, I am quite sated. And it is just elfroot, I assure you," the shemlen said. "I would not give you the lust balm again, Milin, given your...unforeseen side effects."

He wasn't sure what he meant by that, but he took the potion anyway. He sniffed it first, and sure enough, it smelled minty like elfroot. Satisfied, he downed it, and the ache inside him eased after a few moments.

Iron Bull helped him to his feet and brushed off the hay, then they led him back to the main building. He thought about asking for just a few more minutes with the horses, but he didn't want to push his luck.

The two familiar guards were waiting for them at the entry way. Dorian told them something in his language, then said, "Right. Go get the straw out of your hair and rest. We'll see you later, pet."

"Bye, kid," Bull added as they left.

The guards bound his arms and blindfolded him as they usually did, then a wad of cloth was shoved into his mouth. That was different. And he never made a sound, anyway. What had he done wrong?

Just endure. It would be okay. They would let his arms go once he was bathed and back in the bedroom and then he could take it out.

Only...the floor felt wrong. It sloped down, and they turned this way and that. Master Dorian ordered them to get him bathed, he was sure of it. So where were they going?

A door opened, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He felt like he was being watched. And not just by the guards.

There was someone in here. Or something.

He was shoved to his knees, gauntleted hands holding him tightly. A voice he didn't recognize started speaking.

No...not speaking. Chanting. Like a prayer. The same phrase over and over. Soon, another voice joined in. Soft and hissing, at first, but growing stronger.

He prayed to Mythal to protect him.
His head was wrenched back by the hair and something sharp pressed against his throat.
Milin strained back from the edge, silently begging for Falon'din not to take him yet. He didn't want to die. Not now, not like this.

The blade let up, a kiss against his skin instead of a firm press, and the chanting ceased. Was...was the wielder hesitating? Had his prayers been answered? Did he have a chance?

Familiar, lumbering footsteps came towards them, faster than he would have thought possible for Bull. His heart leaped into his throat. He was demanding, he pushed him to his limits, but he was never cruel. He wouldn't want him dead. He would save him. Please, Creators, let Bull save him.

The door behind him slammed open, and Dorian's voice called out in his foreign tongue. He and the chanter argued, and just like that the looming presence he'd felt was gone. Meanwhile, the hands holding him were wrenched away, letting him jerk back from the dreaded knife. The twin clanks of metal against stone, a good distance away, told him Bull had picked up the guards and tossed them aside.

"I've got you," the giant said, ripping off his blindfold and gag. He broke the link between his manacles as if it was a piece of string. Lavellan scrambled to his feet and dove behind the Qunari. They were in some sort of windowless room, lined with candles, and symbols he couldn't begin to understand drawn out on the floor. In opposite corners were two, motionless heaps of the guards. In the center was his master, snarling at an older shem. His father, maybe? Whoever it was, he could not tear his eyes away from the blade in the human's hand. The one that had come so close to spilling his lifeblood.

"Enough. Dorian, let's go."

"I could not agree more," the Tevinter said, whirling around. The other human said something, his voice soft now, but Dorian didn't even glance back, a wall of fire springing up behind them to prevent him following. The mage whisked away, and Milin more than happily followed him from that cursed place.

For the second time that day, he found himself in the stables.

"You can ride, yes?" Dorian asked, fitting a chestnut mare with some odd leather contraption.

He nodded, and went straight for the colt he'd sung to earlier. He'd ridden halla before, but these things were huge by comparison, and he didn't know how to communicate with them. Still, the creators had blessed him today. He could do this.

"Noble son of land, I beg pardon for not asking proper permission to ride you. I would if I knew how," he said, holding his hand out for him to sniff. The creature bumped his nose against him, and he scratched his neck. That was as close as he could get. He opened up the stall and hopped on his back. "Thank you for your help. Ghilan'nain, show us the way and grant us speed."

"I've already got the direction part down, luckily, but I wouldn't mind help on the speed. It's not my strong suit," Bull said. He also had one of those leather things on a great black stallion. Milin felt sorry for the creature, to have to carry that much bulk.

"I take it you already had a number of plans in place in case you and I had to flee the country?" Dorian asked, sounding both annoyed and relieved, somehow.
"I had a couple of ideas. Can't plan too much, though. You have to stay flexible. Things come up, you know?" he looked at Lavellan. Apparently, he had not been part of the plan.

So what were they going to do with him, then?

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They rode for hours, taking abandoned grasslands and long-forgotten trails. It wasn't until sundown that they finally stopped their flight. Just yesterday, he would have relished being out in nature, feeling the wind in his hair, but right now, Milin ached down to the bone. For months, the only exercise he'd really gotten was through sex. And speaking of, his ass was killing him. Every step of the horse came with a jolt of pain.

He eased off the colt's back with a relieved sigh, and kissed him between the eyes, "I appreciate your help. Here, let's get some water." The path had a small stream running along the left side, and a small campsite with a tent not far from the right.

"This is where you were leading us to? Some encampment in the middle of nowhere? So, what, we cross our fingers and hope that it has kindly old grandmothers rather than the more likely possibility of it being bandits and cutthroats?" Dorian asked, climbing from the mare. He and Bull led their animals to drink, as well.

"It's not in the middle of nowhere, there's a small port nearby. And there's no bandits."

"And you know this for certain, do you?"

"I do," Iron Bull said. "But you might want to stand back for a minute, 'Vint."

"I beg your pardon? I am not some delicate mageflower. I'll have you know I--"

Soft footsteps behind them. Lavellan whipped around. Were they followed all this time without noticing? Or was it the bandits Dorian suspected?

"Hissrad," Viddathari growled, his sword brandished in front of him. "You have five seconds to tell me what that rapist magister is doing here before I take his head."

"Leaving Tevinter. We received word that Alexius has indentured the rebel mages in the south."

"So fast? How is that possible?"

"It isn't. Or, at least, it shouldn't be," Dorian said, distinctly not standing back as advised. "He bent time itself in order to achieve his goals. I should know, I helped develop the magic. Of course, when I was still an apprentice, it was pure theory. If I had known he'd do something so dangerous, so reckless..."

His mother and sister talked about magic often, being the Keep and the First, but he'd never heard of magic being able manipulate time like that before. It sounded just as dangerous as his master said.

The elf lowered his blade, but did not sheathe it.

"Fine. Guess you still have some use, magister. I'll send word to the Ariqun when I go into town tomorrow," he caught sight of Milin and frowned. "You're not seriously taking him with you? Do you really have so little self-control that you would put him in harm's way just so you can--"
"It's not like that. We're leaving him here with you."

Milin's eyes went wide. What little he knew about this man told him that Viddathari was angry, and violent enough to take out all bandits in the area. He didn't know what would be expected from him, either, so if he messed up on accident... he suppressed a shudder.

"We are?" Dorian asked.

Iron Bull shot him a look, "Would you rather leave him with your father who tried to kill him or take him with us to the blood thirsty cultists?"

"Valid argument, I suppose."

"His father tried to kill him? Let me guess, was blood magic involved?"

"Not the time, Gatt. Will you take him or not?"

"You could just, I don't know, free him. Or better yet, ask him what he wants to do," three pairs of eyes looked at him and he ducked his head, wanting to shrink down into the dirt and hide. "For fuck's sake, he still has manacles on his wrists." He did, but they weren't linked together thanks to Iron Bull, so he could ignore them just fine. A lot easier than he could ignore his backside, anyway.

"Give me your wrists, pretty," Dorian said, and he held out his arms obediently. With a zap of magic, they fell to the ground. "There you are. Now, you don't have to speak, just nod yes or no, alright?"

He nodded his understanding.

"Do you want to stay here with him?"

Milin bit his lip. He didn't want anything to do with time magic, or the man who'd put a knife to his throat. And freedom? He couldn't go back to his clan now, even if he knew how to. So where would he go?

"Will you...will you come back for me?" he whispered.

"Of course, pet. I can't guarantee how long we'll be gone, but yes, as soon as possible."

So being with Viddathari would be temporary, then. He guessed... if he could survive the cage, he could survive him.

"And the colt?"

"Aethon can stay with you, if you'd like."

He nodded, he liked him.

"So you want to stay with Gatt?" Iron Bull prompted.

No. But he didn't have much of a choice.

He gave a nod. He didn't seem to have much choice.

"Good. It'll be a stretch, but we'll still make the first ship of the morning if we leave now. And we can probably sell or trade the horses in for safe passage," Bull ruffled his hair and pulled him into a
bear hug. "Bye, kid. Gatt."

Lavellan hugged back, and when the embrace broke, stood up on his toes to give him a peck. The other elf didn't respond, except with narrowed eyes.

Dorian cleared his throat expectantly and he bowed to him, kissing his hand, "Goodbye, master."

"Goodbye, pretty. And for what it's worth, I apologize for what happened. Thank the Maker for that spirit speaking up. If I had known..." his voice broke a little and he shook his head. "Take care of yourself."

With that, they mounted their grazing horses again, and were on their way.

A not-so-small part of him wanted to jump up on the colt and take after them, but it was a moonless night and by the time he unfroze he couldn't even see them anymore. His chest ached. How was it that he feared them, even hated them, and yet...he felt abandoned?

"If that magister thinks he'll just be able to take you back without a fight, he's got another thing coming," Viddathari muttered, finally sheathing his sword. "C'mon. Are you hungry? I think there's still some stew left."

He nodded. He felt queasy, but he knew he should eat. He hadn't since breakfast.

They shared a log by the fire and the other elf ladled him a bowl.

Milin gave him a half-smile. It was simple, goose and herbs and root vegetables, and it settled his stomach. Reminded him of his father's cooking. When it was light out, he'd find where the carrots were growing and make sure to get one for the horse.

"Don't you want to tether him to a tree or something?" the man asked, tilting his head towards the warmblood.

He shook his head, "It'd be wrong to make him stay." He hoped he chose to, though.

"...it's a horse. What are you, Dalish or something?"

"I used to be." It felt like a lie to say he still was.

The Qunari gave him an odd look, "But your face... Oh. They got you before then, huh?"

He nodded again.

The man swore under his breath, and a long silence passed between them as he finished his food. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. He seemed to calm down a lot when it was just the two of them.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he said. "You can have my bedroll, by the way. I'll sleep outside tonight."

He'd have to sleep alone? Growing up, he'd always shared a tent with his sister Nali. And until now, he had Dorian and Bull. The only time he'd ever slept by himself (if you could call it that) was in the cage.

Milin pictured waking up in the dark tent, alone, and coming out to find the fire snuffed out and Viddathari and the colt nowhere to be seen. He could almost hear booted footsteps, all around, nowhere to run, no bow for them to even crack this time...
"Will you sleep with me?" he blurted out.

The Qunari recoiled as if he'd been burned.

Fenedhis, what was wrong with him?

"S-sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Fuck, I'm going to kill them both. You think you're my slave now, don't you?" he demanded. "You think I'm going to force myself on you? Chain you to a bed and fuck you 'til you cry?"

Memories of that first night—the heat, the pain, the sobbing—came swelling up like vomit. Lavellan cringed, "Please, I...please don't be mad."

"It's not you I'm mad at," the elf said, taking a deep breath. His tone softened, marginally. It clearly took an effort on his part. "I'm not a magister. No matter what you do, or don't do, I'm not going to hurt you. So you don't have to try to fuck me or anything."

His eyebrows furrowed, "I wasn't trying to?"

"What do you mean you weren't?"

He shook his head, "You don't like what they do to me." That much was obvious. The man was volatile, but he seemed disgusted by the thought of fucking him. And he didn't think Dorian would appreciate him offering himself up to someone else, anyway.

"Then why did you say that?"

Because he was an idiot and a coward.

"They... the slavers took me when I was out hunting alone," he admitted.

The elf paused for a moment, an odd expression crossing his face, then sighed, "Yeah, okay. I'll do it, but clothes stay on."

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When they went to bed, Viddathari pressed right up against the edge of the tent, as if he was contagious or something. But by morning, the elf had an arm and leg wrapped around him. Protective and warm. And his face looked so peaceful when he slept.

The moment shattered as soon as he woke up, though. The Qunari couldn't get out of the tent fast enough. Guess Milin was back to being a leper.

"You're Dalish, right?" he cleared his throat. "Sorry if I'm being an ass, but I assume you know how to use a bow?"

He nodded hesitantly. He knew the basics.

"Here," he pulled out a quiver and recurve bow from his pack and handed it to him. Milin hefted the bow, and tried out the tension in the string. It was of finer quality than what he'd crafted himself. June never did favor him. "We'll do some hunting, and then head into town."

"What did you want to hunt?" he asked, looking up as a flock of ducks flew towards them.

"Just a rabbit or a goose or something should be fine. I don't want to take too long."
Okay, then.

"Andruil, guide my hand," he whispered. He nocked an arrow, aimed at the throat of a good-sized bird, and let one fly. With a step to the right, he caught it before it hit the dirt. Not what he imagined his first kill would be, but it didn't matter. He couldn't go back, anyway. And he desperately wanted Viddathari to be pleased with him.

"Holy shit."

He flinched, dropping the weapon and stepping back, hands up in placation. What had he done wrong? Was he just supposed to hold it for him, not actually use it until he'd been told?

"No, you're fine. You did good. It's just, fuck, that was impressive. And you caught it?"

"I didn't want it to get dirty."

The elf laughed. He didn't get what was so funny. Dalish children would throw apples into the air to practice shooting them and catching it all the time.

"Keep the bow and arrows," Viddathari said, bending to pick them up for him. "You're better with them than I ever was. Besides, these woods should be safe bandit-wise, but there's always wild animals, and you should be able to defend yourself."

He took them with a grateful smile—he never thought he'd be allowed a weapon again. It was nice for the familiarity, even though he'd proven useless with them when it came to actual threats.

They cleaned and roasted the bird, then headed into town on foot. Milin wanted to take the colt with them, but Viddathari said it would make them stand out too much. Bad enough that they were elves bearing arms.

He did get to give him a carrot, though. And sing a proper farewell to him while the other elf penned a letter.

The village was bigger than he imagined. Probably hundreds of humans and elves, cramped together in tiny huts smaller than a single room of his master's home. And the narrow alleys reeked of fish.

Viddathari carried himself differently, here. He looked so...small. He kept his eyes on the ground, and hunched over with his arms crossed over his chest like he was somehow cold in this stifling heat. All the elves seemed to do that, actually.

The Qunari passed by a crack in a wall, and he saw him slip a piece of paper out of it while exchanging his own folded note inside, all without so much as breaking his gait.

"That's all, unless you needed something," he muttered.

Milin shook his head. He didn't like this place and its small buildings and and small streets and small elves. Once they got outside the town's limits, he felt like he could breathe easier, and not just because of the smell.

The other man opened the note he'd been left, and abruptly halted.

"We have to go back."

He raised a questioning eyebrow as Viddathari turned.
"I was posted here because it's close to a port," he explained. "I'm Ben-Hassrath, like Bull, and I'm on a spy mission. Or about to be. Only, my superiors weren't sure about where or when yet. But we have to leave today if we're going to make it in time. Good thing we didn't tie the horse up, we can't afford to go back. Unless you want to ditch me, that is. Which is fine. I barely have enough money for two tickets, anyhow."

He shook his head. He hated the idea of abandoning the colt without even getting to say goodbye, and he wasn't thrilled to go back on a ship again, but the idea of spending the night alone in the woods... it made his heart race just thinking about it.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Ferelden. Don't worry, nowhere dangerous. Just spying on a bunch of self-important old windbags making speeches about peace while their people slaughter each other," he said. "They're calling it The Conclave."
Viddathari

Viddathari had enough coin for a single, private cabin. Barely big enough for the narrow bunk beds and chamber pot, with just a single candle to light it. And the floor rocked in a far, far, too familiar way.

He was okay, though. He wasn't blindfolded, wasn't bound. No cages. No beatings. No drugs in his food. It was all okay. Just don't focus on the rocking. Don't focus on the confines. Focus on something, anything... he stared down at his hands. There was a tan line across his wrists from the chains.

"Hey, did you hear me?"

He cringed and shook his head. Stupid. His life depended on this man, you'd think he be smart enough to pay attention to what he was saying.

"I asked you if you want the top or the bottom."

He shrugged.

The elf sat down with a sigh, and pat the bed next to him. Milin joined him obediently.

"What did I do?"

His eyebrows furrowed. What was he talking about? How much had he missed?

"You're shutting up on me again. If you just tell me what I did, I won't do it again," The way he could read him reminded him of Iron Bull. He supposed they probably had the same training, just Viddathari was too pissed off to use it some of the time.

"It's not you," he admitted softly. "It's the ship."

"Never been on one before?"

He wished.

"No... bad experience, then. Big storm? I can relate to that. I was actually supposed to be in Seheron right now, but a storm forced us here. Nearly pissed myself when we started taking on water."

Milin shook his head. If there was a storm, he didn't remember it.

The elf thought for a moment. "You're a red-head. Not that common in Tevinter. And there aren't that many Dalish clans left, here, anyway. You come from somewhere else?"

He nodded.

"And the people that kidnapped you took you by boat."

He nodded again, hugging his arms around himself. It was okay. This was different. Everything was okay.

"Fuck. Well... it's too late to get off now, the ship's already leaving. But we'll spend most of the time up on deck in the open air, anyway. We only have to be down here to sleep."
Lavellan gave him a weak smile. That would help.

He returned the smile, "Anything else I can do to make it easier?"

"Would you sleep next to me again? Please? Like we were this morning?" he ventured.

"I… I would have thought a stranger touching you would be the last thing you wanted."

Milin shook his head. There were different kinds of touching. And, well, Viddathari was the closest thing he had to a non-stranger right now.

“If…you’re sure. As long as you’re not doing this out of twisted sense of obligation, I’ll do it. Whatever you need, I'll do it. You're safe, now.”

~o~O~o~

The ship was a messenger vessel, light and fast, and it seemed like a much shorter trip than the last time. He’d heard the sailors say it’d only be a few more days, if the weather held, which surprised him. Maybe it just felt that way, because Viddathari was there with him.

The two of them spent the days walking around on deck, or leaning against the railing and watching the waves. Even when it rained, the other elf kept him company because he knew staying below deck too long made him fidgety. And when it was sunny like today, Viddathari liked to draw.

“What’s that?” he asked, leaning his head against his shoulder. It looked like a cat, but had strange spots. And based on the tree in the background, it was huge.

“It’s called a leopard, in Common. They have them on Seheron,” he explained, smirking. “Salit, my old teacher, would be mortified.”

“Oh, were they scared of them or something?”

"No, I mean, mortified of my drawing. It's technically a craft, so I shouldn't be doing it as a man according to the Qun," he shrugged. "But it helps with the anger."

He paused, “You mean at Iron Bull?”

"I started before this, when I was first freed. But right now? Yeah, it's because of Hisrad," he said. "I just... I was born into slavery, I never knew anything else until him. He told me that under the Qun, all people are equal, they just fit different roles better. The life of some scared, hurt elf boy is considered as important as the Ariqun's. I liked that. And I get tolerating slavery to get a job done. Anything for the Qun, right? I mean, I've killed for it. I'd die for it. But he...he did way more than he had to. Not for the Qun, either, but for that magister. If things had been just a little different, it could have easily been me he hurt like that. Or one of my brothers."

His brothers were still slaves, he knew. But they were deep in Tevinter territory, not just on the coastline, so he’d never had a chance to get to them. Not without disobeying his orders.

Sometimes Milin wondered, if he’d been born with brown hair like his sister's instead of red, or if he’d gotten his vallaslin earlier, or if he had managed to kill his kidnappers, how things would be different. He didn't mind his life right now, though. He liked Viddathari. And he got to lie in his arms at night, without having to...earn it.

"Do you think of me like one of your brothers?"
The elf looked away, his expression unreadable, "No. It'd be easier if I did, but no."

He had an inkling of what that meant, but didn't think he should ask here.

A long silence passed between them, before he asked, "Do you really want to kill Iron Bull, like you say?"

It would be a relief if he did. It would mean Bull couldn't hurt him or anyone else ever again. That's what he should want, right?

"I'm hoping it's just that magister's influence," Viddathari replied. And he was kind of right. Iron Bull didn't buy him, didn't ever start it... Not that that made it okay. "I'd kill him, first. And then if Hissrad still didn't change? Yeah, I'd do it, for what he's done."

That sounded like... A thought struck him, and he started sketching on the pad, looking up to study the man's face.

"Is that me?"

"Yes," he said. He wasn't as good as Viddathari was, but it'd been something to do when he'd been avoiding crafting his bow. He'd drawn the halla, mostly. Sometimes people.

"And the marks on my face? They're Dalish, right? What do they mean?"

"This one's a symbol for Elgar'nan. Sorry, I know you don't believe in Dalish gods, but I think it fits."

"Why, what's he the god of?"

"Vengeance."

He smiled wryly, "I like that."

He beamed back, and kept drawing.

His father with the vallaslin of Ghilan'nain, his mother and Sylaise, Nali and Dirthamen (she hadn't gotten hers yet when he'd been taken, but he knew that's who she would pick).

The Qunari asked questions about each person, and each Creator, until finally requesting that he draw himself.

He did, using his own reflection in the still water as a guide. He kept his face unmarked.

"Which Creator would you have chosen?" he asked.

Milin paused. He'd always thought he would choose to honor Ghilan'nain, but now... He remembered the chanting, unearthly voice, and pleading to Mythal for protection.

He did not deserve vallaslin, because he had not passed the test he'd been given. But even though he was unworthy, she had answered his prayers. She let him live, and delivered him to Viddathari.

He drew the branching tree across his brow, "This is the symbol for Mythal."

"And who's that?"

"The wife of Elgar'nan, goddess of love and justice."
The elf took his hand and squeezed it, "It suits you."

That night, when the Qunari had his arms around him, he used his thumbs to trace Elgar'nan's vallaslin across his face. It was rewarding to see how he relaxed into his touch. His face was more handsome without him scowling all the time.

And he’d said he didn’t think of him like a brother…

Steeling his nerve, Milin cupped his face, tentatively pressing their lips together.

"You don't have to do that," he pulled back, shaking his head. Instantly, the harshness of his features returned, but he knew the anger he saw there wasn’t directed at him.

"I want to,” he said softly. “Unless you don’t?’"

Had he misread things? Maybe Viddathari didn’t even like men. He wasn’t entirely sure he did, either. Not in the same way he liked women. But he liked him. And he liked the closeness, the easy affection that had developed between them without the threat of sex. Besides, a kiss…it was more intimate than sexual. He liked the idea of having that, with him.

“It’s not that I…I have thought about it. But I need to know you really want to,” he shook his head. “Slaves get really good at telling their masters what they want to hear. How do I know you’re not doing this out of self-preservation? I’ve seen you kiss them. Fuck, I heard you ask them to come back for you.”

“That was before I knew you,” he worried at his lower lip, trying to think of a way to convince him. Part of it was knowing Viddathari wouldn’t demand more than that. He felt like they understood each other. And he wanted to, wasn’t that enough? “I like you. I want to stay with you.”

“Do you? Or are you getting attached to me because I’m the only person in a long time that hasn’t hurt you?” he sighed. “It happens, Milin. I would have followed Hissrad anywhere when he freed me, and then he turned out to be just as bad.”

“You’re not, though…”

“I am if I take advantage,” he said. His expression was strange, strained. Milin decided not to push anymore right now.

He nuzzled into the Qunari’s neck, “Okay. If that’s how you feel.”

~o~O~o~

Milin relaxed into the steaming water, eyes drifting closed. It was nice. On the ship, they’d only had cold basins of rainwater to wash with. And in Tevinter, he’d never gotten to bathe by himself. It felt like such a luxury, especially being pressed for time, but they would have to be clean if they were going to pass as servants in the Conclave.

He let himself just soak for a little while, then hurried to clean himself and braid his hair. Viddathari was guarding the door, and he didn’t want the water to get cold for him.

Milin dried off and dressed in the Ferelden-style clothes Viddathari had gotten him—thick woolen trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. He felt bad about making him spend more money on him. But he stood out in a thin tunic in this weather, and it seemed like the Qunari relished the challenge of haggling.
“Done already?” Viddathari asked as he unlatched the door. The elf handed him the bow and arrows, but took the sword with him. “Alright, stay right here, and if you see anything suspicious, yell for me, got it?”

He nodded.

Viddathari finished in record time, and headed straight for their room. Somehow, he looked less relaxed coming out then he did going in. He followed, sitting down next to him.

“You alright?” he asked, touching his arm.

He shrugged, “Don’t like feeling vulnerable.”

“You were fine on the ship…”

“It’s different.”

“Bad memories?”

“No, nothing like that,” he frowned. “My report said that things have deteriorated, fast. There’s a war going on, and I brought you into the middle of it. Not to mention, Hisssrad and his ‘Vint only got a day’s head start ahead of us. I didn’t want to leave you alone for long. It’s stupid, but…”

Lavellan nodded. Early on in their voyage, a storm kept them in their cabin for what felt like days. He remembered feeling like the walls were closing in on him. It wasn’t rational, but it was what he felt.

He climbed onto Viddathari’s lap, wrapping his arms around his shoulders, “It’s alright. I’m here.”

The Qunari shook his head, “It’s not alright. I left you.”

Milin furrowed his brow. That didn’t make any sense, he only left him for a few minutes. Sometimes, he wished he could read people like the Ben-Hassrath did.

“What do you mean?”

“You keep looking at me like I’m a fucking hero,” he snarled. Milin flinched. Even for him, this was bad. “You should hate me. I abandoned you with those rapist bastards. And you almost died because of it. I didn’t even try to fight them. I could have killed him and gotten you out, but I didn’t. I could have ripped apart the wall. I—”

His voice cracked, and Milin coaxed his head to his chest, running his fingers through his damp hair. He remembered comforting Nali and even Dorian like this after nightmares. Only this time, he couldn’t tell him it was just a dream.

“You made a difference, you know,” he said softly. “It was better. Not good, but better.”

The Qunari looked up at him, doubt etched on his face.

“After you left, Bull convinced my master to take the chains off, take me outside,” he continued. “And I don’t believe you would have stopped fighting for me. You’re not exactly good at stopping yourself from fighting. I thought that argument with the tailor was going to come to blows.”

Viddathari let out something between a choke and a laugh, “You’re right about that.”

“Then stop beating yourself up, alright?”
“I…yeah. Yeah, alright.”

He kissed his forehead, “Good.”

~o~O~o~

After buying supplies for the road, the dead drop had enough coin for them to get a beautiful grey mare named Thunder. At least, that’s what the shemlen called her. She was gentle, and older, but she climbed diligently up the rocky trail.

Milin…not so much.

He got exhausted so easily, now. It was frustrating, having to ride her and slow them down when just a year ago their pace would have been leisurely for him.

“You’re saving us time,” Viddathari insisted when they stopped at a blackberry patch for lunch. “If it were just me, I’d probably have to waste an hour hunting and gathering, but you’ve got this surviving on the land thing down.”

He was exaggerating, but he smiled at the attempt to cheer him up nonetheless. Milin leaned up against him, trying to sap his warmth. The man was like a fire pit all on his own.

“Besides, we’re on time. You can already see the temple from here,” he nodded towards the mammoth structure in the distance. “The so-called peace talks won’t start until noon tomorrow. When the sun’s the highest, you know? The Chantry loves its solar imagery.”

“And its mountains, apparently.”

“Yeah. The more remote a place is, the holier it is, apparently. That’s why the Anderfels are full of Chanters and not much else.”

Milin laughed, “Maybe they’re just trying to get closer to the sun?”

“Could be. Heard the Anderfels are pretty sunny, too,” he grinned back.

Far too soon for his aching legs, they got back on the trail, and didn’t stop until they were close enough to catch glimpses of armored men marching single-file up the main path, robed figures on the opposite side.

Templars.

The men with the shields must be Templars.

He shuddered, and told himself it was because of the cold. The sun was going down, after all.

“You doing okay?” Viddathari asked.

“Just…there’s a lot of them, I guess.”

“You want to make camp a little further away from here? Head in tomorrow morning? I’m not too keen on spending the night in the temple, either.”

He nodded, and let himself be led away.

The further they got, the more relaxed he became. It was stupid. It was okay. The shemlen were there for the Conclave, they didn’t care about a couple of elves out in the woods.
By the time they set up camp and polished off the last of the roasted rabbit, Viddathari had him feeling warm again.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked, cuddled up to him in their tent. “I’ve come up with a better reason now.”

“Milin…”

“I know, I get why you’re hesitant. But you know what I’m doing right now that I would have never done with Dorian and Bull?”

“What?”

“Arguing with you instead of backing down.”

That earned him a grin.

He kissed him, and this time Viddathari kissed back.
Pain seared through his left hand, shocking him awake with a gasp. A green light flickered from his palm beneath heavy manacles on his wrists. Eyes wide, he looked up to see humans surrounding him, brandishing swords.

He froze.

Slavers.

They found him, they found him, they took him—where was Viddathari? What was this magic in his hand?

Two more humans burst in, and the guards sheathed their weapons to let them pass.

The woman with an eye upon her armor circled him, "Tell me why we shouldn't kill you now. The Conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you."

He wanted to beg for his life, to call out for help. But when he tried to speak, nothing but a terrified squeak came out. He pressed his forehead to the ground, hoping that would be enough of a response for her not to run him through.

She grabbed his arm, and the light and pain flared anew, "Explain this."

"I-I can't," he whimpered.

"What do you mean you can't?"

He shook his head. He didn't know. He didn't--

"Tell me!" she grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him upright. He turned his face away in anticipation of a strike, but the hooded woman stopped her.

"We need him, Cassandra."

Mercy. Or practicality. Whatever it was, it was a chance.

"Please…" he choked out.

"Do you remember what happened?" she asked. "How this began?"

He shut his eyes tight, concentrating. The last thing he remembered was waking up next to Viddathari, and singing to the mare before they left. After that, things got…vague. Running. Some
sort of bizarre spiders chasing after him. And then… “A woman?”

"A woman?"

He nodded. He could see her reaching out to him, shining like the moon. A mage? No...no the magic was coming from within her. A spirit. Or a goddess.

Mythal had saved him once. Maybe she had again.

"Go to the forward camp, Leliana," the warrior woman said at last. "I will take him to the Rift."

He opened his mouth to beg her not to let the warrior take him, but then Cassandra was unlocking his chains and replacing them with rope.

"Thank you," he said, as she helped him to his feet.

He kissed the back of her gauntlet, and she gave him an uncomfortable look, "Do not thank me just yet. The people have decided your guilt. There will be a trial, I can promise no more."

The second they stepped outside, more pain flared, making him double over. As he recovered, he saw it. Unearthly green, like the magic of his hand but enormous, and surrounded by swirling dark clouds. Every few moments, it sent out a pulse, and his palm responded like an echo.

He realized it was killing him before Cassandra even said so.

She explained to him what she knew, and cut him loose once they were past the main camp. He refrained from kissing her hand, this time. It seemed subservience was not what she wanted from him right now.

*You're safe*, he remembered Viddathari saying. But was anyone in Thedas truly safe, now? And if everyone truly died at the conclave except for him, that meant...

A pulse landed at their feet and the bridge gave way, sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Stay behind me!" Cassandra ordered, and he looked up to see hideous creatures materializing ahead.

His mother and Nali had often spoken of the denizens of the Beyond. Some harmful, some useful, all dangerous. Especially on this side. He scrambled for cover and caught sight of a body grasping a longbow and quiver.

He grabbed them, aiming an arrow at the one bearing down on him.

His mind flashed back to the day he was taken in the forest, to having an arrow nocked, but unable to fire. Unable to kill a living person, even to defend himself.

But now, he’d killed before. And this creature was no person. Maybe in the Beyond, but not here.

The bow was warped, the feathers singed, but at this range, his arrow struck true.

When the fighting was over, Cassandra glanced at the creature he had slain, and then sharply up at him. He dropped the bow, “I-I’m sorry…”

“No. I am sorry. I should not have brought you into danger without your weapons. Keep it.”

His weapons…so they still had Viddathari’s bow and arrows somewhere? He wanted to ask, but
the woman did not seem in a mood for answering questions.

They fought their way forward. The more he killed, the less he hesitated in drawing his bow. So much violence. So many bodies.

He resisted the urge to check each one with a sword.

There was the clash of fighting up ahead, and Cassandra shouted that they had to help them. He did not know who 'they' were, but he did not hesitate to rush forward. He had never seen death before today, and now he was drowning in it. He could not bear any more.

An elf and a dwarf stood together against the tide of creatures. They appeared to be materializing from a jagged, floating crystal, what Cassandra called a Rift. His hand itched and stung in its presence, as if some insect was inside him trying to burrow its way out, and he had to grit his teeth just to keep hold of his bow as they fought.

He whirled around, looking for more of the creatures, only for the elf to grasp his hand, "Quickly, before more come through!"

What was he--

Milin screamed. His palm tore open and green light spilled out, reaching out to the crystal above. It let out an unearthly hum, and then he was blasted back with a flash. When he recovered, the rift was gone, and so was the itch.

Lavellan stared at him, open-mouthed.

"What did you do?" Cassandra asked the mage.

"Nothing. The credit is his," he smiled. Lavellan noticed the jawbone of a wolf around his neck. Wolves were a powerful symbol in Dalish lore, because of their connection to Fen'Harel, but this man bore no vallaslin...

The man, Solas, explained that since the magic which created the Mark was tied to that of the Rifts, it could close them. And maybe the Breach, as well.

He'd also kept him alive while the Mark was doing its best to kill him, according to the crossbow-wielding dwarf. Varric, was his name.

Now they were headed to seal the Breach. If it didn't kill him, first.

~o~O~o~

This Rift was massive compared to the others. They said it was the first one, and it looked like it connected directly to the Breach. And yet, his hand didn’t itch this time.

A disembodied voice ordered to keep the sacrifice still. Another cried out for help.

He froze, his mind reverting back to the ritual chamber, the chanting without a corporeal source. And when they neared this 'red lyrium', there was that same, overwhelming feeling of wrongness. He'd never heard of such a thing, but he believed Varric when he said it was trouble.

"Come on, kid, you can do this," the dwarf said, patting him on the arm.

Obediently, he forced one foot in front of the other, trying to close his ears to the voices.
Until there was one he couldn't ignore.

“What’s going on here?” Viddathari’s demanded.

He opened his eyes, not even realizing they he'd shut them. But his vision was hazy. Strange. And he saw himself behind his friend. This wasn't real, but it...

He caught sight of a bound woman--the same one that had called for help?--and a dark figure looming over her.

She cried out to them to run. But he knew Viddathari wouldn't, even before he saw him set his jaw in defiance. A long claw pointed towards them and the Qunari stepped in front of him, shielding him.

An invisible force flung him into the nearest wall. He saw Viddathari slide limply to the ground before a blinding light shocked him back to reality.

“No!” Milin wailed, running forward to the opposite wall. He had to find him. Or at least, a hint of where he went. Anything.

What he found was a body charred beyond recognition. Barely more than a skeleton and a sword. He fell to his knees and wept.

No, no, no, this wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t end like this! It wasn’t fair!

"So that…vision is true," Cassandra said. “I am sorry. I, too, have lost someone today.”

He vaguely heard the mage droning about the Rift. Something about echoes.

Varric put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked numbly up at him.

“Kid…” he said gently. “I want nothing more than to give you as long as you need. But we’ve got to get this thing open to have a chance of closing it for good, and you’re the only one who can do it. Can you help us out?”

He let out a breath and force himself to his feet. Every second that passed, more of those creatures would pour out of the Rifts. They risked the fast path so they would not be delayed, they didn't have time to waste on his grief.

Besides, Viddathari wouldn’t want him to cry like a useless child. He’d want him to get revenge.

The soldiers prepared themselves, and then he raised his arm, letting the strange magic link with the crystal. It opened, and a terrible creature crossed through. Twice the size of Iron Bull, its hide armored like rock.

Milin drew his bow. He was aware of his hand burning, but couldn’t really feel it. Couldn’t feel anything. Empty, empty, empty. Alone.

Mechanically, he aimed at the creature’s head, shooting in rapid succession until each of its many eyes were blinded. The thing whipped lightning wildly around it, but without aim, and with its defenses down, the others were able to bring it to the ground.

Before anything else could crawl through, Lavellan held his palm up to the sky. The pain brought him to his knees and forced a howl from his lips, and then his world went dark.
Another glowing, ex-slave, elf from Tevinter

At the sound of a door creaking, he opened his eyes. His first thought was that the guards were taking him to bathe, but no, it was a slave carrying a box. That was strange. He never actually saw any of the slaves care for his master's room before. They always did it when he was gone.

He sat up to get a better look at them and realized that this room was nothing like the usual one. And it was cool. It was never the least bit cold in Tevinter. Where was he?

"I didn't know you were awake, I swear!" the slave dropped to his hands and knees.

Following his lead, Milin scrambled out of the bed to prostrate himself as well, discretely looking around to see who the elf was talking to.

But there was no one. The elf's wide, fearful eyes were trained only on him.

"I... I beg for forgiveness and your blessing. I am but a humble servant."

A servant...

"You're not a slave?"

"A slave? I don't understand," he shook his head. "This is Haven, my lord. They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing, just like the Mark on your hand."

He looked down at his palm, and it all came flooding back. Haven, the Conclave, Viddathari, the Breach...

"I'm certain Lady Cassandra would want to know you've wakened," he stood and backed away. "She's in the Chantry, with the Lord Chancellor. 'At once,' she said."

By the time he'd gotten on his feet and went after him, the boy was nowhere to be seen. And it was dusk. How long had he been asleep?

There were clusters of humans everywhere he looked, some armored, some not, but all staring at him.

*That's him, the Herald of Andraste.*

Andraste... that was one of the human gods, wasn't it? He lowered his eyes to the ground and hurried to the largest building, assuming that must be the Chantry.

He heard raised voices, one of them Cassandra's, the other was the Chancellor's. The one who had called for his execution. Milin hesitated. He did not want to interrupt, but the servant had said 'at once.'

"Chain him. I want him prepared for travel to the Capital for trial," the Chancellor demanded when he caught sight of him.

He started raising his arms to be shackled, the less excuse they had to hurt him, the better, but then Cassandra interjected, "Disregard that, and leave us."
The shemlen argued over him. Cassandra and Leliana apparently believed that their Maker sent him, that the woman seen with him was Andraste. But he barely even knew of the god, why would she intervene on his behalf? And to save a nonbeliever, no less.

It sounded like they wanted to rebuild something called the Inquisition, and they wanted him to help. Not that he had a choice.

The Seeker held out a hand to him. She wanted him to kiss it? She'd acted strangely about that before. Still, she gave a pleased nod when he did it this time.

The Chancellor left in disgust, and more humans entered.

"You've met Commander Cullen, leader of the Inquisition's forces," Cassandra introduced. Yes, he remembered him. The man with the impressive fur on his shoulders. He must be a good hunter.

"It was only for a moment on the field. I'm pleased you survived."

He bowed, wondering whether a Commander outranked a Seeker. It sounded like it. But so far, Cassandra had been the one issuing orders? Creators, what if whoever their leader was took him to their bed? Would he be chained? If it was Cassandra, he doubted it. It seemed like she'd only shackled him before because she thought he was responsible for the Conclave, and she didn't think that anymore. What would it be like, sleeping with a woman? He was attracted to women, unlike men. But he had no idea how to please them, other than the whispers and jokes of the other young men in his clan. Cullen might be easier.

"And you, of course, know Sister Leliana."

He did, and he bowed.

"My position here involves a degree of-"

"She is our Spymaster."

"Yes. Tactfully put, Cassandra."

A spy? So she was a creature of Dirthamen, like his sister. Not shy of using fear and deceit. But she had shown him kindness, as well.

"And this is Lady Josephine Montilyet, our Ambassador and Chief Diplomat."

"Andaran Atish'an," the woman greeted.

He took a half-step back in surprise, "You speak Elven."

"You just heard the entirety of it, I'm afraid."

Milin beamed at her, "That's alright. It was good."

So much had been lost, most Dalish could only speak in fragments. And she had a kind smile. He didn’t think he’d mind as much, if she claimed him. Chief Diplomat sounded important...

"As for your Mark, Solas believes that the Beach can be fully closed, not just stabilized, if there is enough power to match that which opened it in the first place," Cassandra continued. "It will not be easy to come by."

"Which means we must approach the rebel mages for help," Leliana said.
"And I still disagree," Cullen said. "The Templars could serve just as well."

His eyes widened, "Templars?" They were evil. Worse than slavers. Slavers would take who they could get, but a Templar would go straight for the Keeper and the First. Entire clans had been crippled or wiped out by them.

His uncle had been taken by them before he was even born. It was part of the reason why his clan had always stayed far from humans.

"Yes, the Templars. I was one, I know what they're capable of," the man continued. Lavellan ducked his head. He hoped more than ever that Josephine would claim him instead. A normal man, he could take, but Templars were cruel. It would be chains, for sure. Maybe drugging. Maybe worse.

"Unfortunately, neither group will even speak to us, yet," Josephine said. "The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition. And you, specifically. Some are calling you the 'Herald of Andraste.' That frightens the Chantry. They've declared it blasphemy, and us heretics for harboring you."

"There is something you can do. A Chantry Cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak to you," Leliana said. "She is not far, the Hinterlands near Redcliffe, and knows both sides far better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable."

Redcliffe. That's where Dorian and Iron Bull were. After all that'd happened with Viddathari, could he go back to them? Would he have a choice?

It didn’t matter. The humans weren’t asking him what he wanted. They were just waiting to know he understood the order. He nodded obediently.

They bickered for an age, finally deciding that the scouts would be sent to the Hinterlands that night, and the party of him, Cassandra, Solas, and Varric would go first thing in the morning.

Finally, the shemlen filed out of the room, until only he and the Seeker remained.

"Does it trouble you?" she asked, gesturing towards his hand.

It scared him to death. He wasn't a mage to begin with, but all the sudden he had this magic which no one had heard of, much less understood. Maybe his master knew? After all, he'd never heard of time magic before, either.

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

"We take our victories where we can," she said. "Solas watched over you while you were unconscious, and said it stopped spreading as the Breach did."

He’d noticed that. Maybe if they closed the Breach, his hand would go back to normal, too?

"And your...friend? If you do not wish to speak of it, I will not press, but I did recover his sword, should you wish to have it. It’s in the armory, along with your bow."

He smiled at her. She was offering him honey, and Milin was starving. He didn't care what he had to do to earn it. Viddathari was dead, his clan unattainable, and he didn't know if he'd ever see Dorian and Bull again.

He made to wrap his arms around her, only for the woman to step away.
What had he done wrong? She seemed fine when he'd kissed her hand a moment ago. And by the way she spoke to the rest of the humans, it was pretty clear she outranked the others now.

Milin sunk to his knees. That's what the other elf did, so he guessed that's what humans expected out of elves here, "I'm sorry, Lady Seeker."

If she seemed uncomfortable before, now she gave him a look of pure mortification. Before she bolted out of the room, that is. Creators, how did he keep making this worse?

He heard hurried whispers behind the door, then Varric came in, taking a seat next to him. It was a relief to see him. The dwarf was here as a prisoner, too, right? Maybe he could tell him what was expected of him in this place.

"Haven't come up with a nickname for you, yet," he said. "So I'll call you by your real one, yeah? Speaking of--what is it?"

"Milin," he answered, staring down at his hands.

"Well, Milin, I heard a rumor going around that you asked someone if he was a slave, is that right?"

He cringed. Mistake after mistake. He hadn't meant to upset him! He didn't even know what he was doing wrong, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Varric sighed. "Look, there's no easy way to ask this, so I'm going to apologize in advance because there's a near certainty of me offending you, but... do you think you're a slave?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Of course he was. They'd chained him up, didn't they? And he knew better than to think he could get away with kitchen or field work. They wanted his hand, and probably more. It wouldn't do to waste something pretty."

The dwarf gave him an odd look, "To Cassandra?"

"I think so. It was easier to tell in Tevinter." He remembered the first thing Dorian said to him was that he was his master.

"Another glowing, ex-slave, elf from Tevinter. And here I thought the giant hole in the sky was the weirdest thing I'd see all week," he muttered. "Well, I've got good news for you, Milin: you're not a slave anymore. Not to Cassandra, or anyone else."

Dorian would probably have a thing or two to say about that. Besides, if he wasn't a slave, then what was he? He wasn't Dalish anymore. And he sure wasn't the Herald of Andraste. He was just... alone.

"Can you show me where the 'armory' is?" he asked.

“I…sure, follow me.”

Varric led him to a building seemingly dedicated to housing arms. The old human that worked there smiled and said he was expecting them, taking Viddathari’s weapons out from behind a counter. He gave him his thanks, strapping on the bow and quiver and holding the sword to his chest.

“That bow looks Qunari-style,” the dwarf said as they left. “Are you a convert?”
He shook his head.

“Not much of a talker, are you?”

He shrugged.

“Well, that’s just fine. My room’s right across from yours. You can come over anytime and I’ll do enough talking for both of us, alright?”

Milin gave him a weak smile. He was nice, too. But he doubted how much he’d be able to help him.

He returned to his room.

He found food waiting for him on a tray at the bedside table, stacked with sandwiches and some sort of bean soup. A far cry from the elaborately plated fruits, nuts, meats, cheeses and pastries that his master was served in Tevinter.

He didn’t know how long it’d been since he ate, but he wasn’t hungry. Still, he forced himself to have some of the soup. He didn’t know when they’d feed him next, or what he’d have to do to earn it.

Now that he was alone, there was nothing to distract him from his loss. He missed Viddathari. He wanted to be held, and kissed, and made to feel safe and protected again. He wanted to joke around with him, and watch him draw.

He missed his clan. But that longing had mostly been crushed down by now.

Fenedhis, he would even take Dorian and Bull at this point. Because at least his master would hold him, and Bull would grieve, too. How pathetic was that?

Milin laid down in the too-big bed, but couldn't sleep. He kept waking up thinking someone was coming. To his relief, and disappointment, no one did.

~o~O~o~

It was a long, lonely trek down to the Hinterlands. Less cold, because of the leathers they'd given him, though. Varric had tried to engage him in conversation, but didn't press the issue when he stayed silent. He was grateful for that.

He kept taking out Viddathari's bow and looking at it, just to make sure it was still there, still safe. This was the same path they'd come up the mountain on, and his chest ached at the memory of it.

Plus the scout had told them it was dangerous. Now that there was no hope for peace talks anytime soon, the mages and templars were--

The sound of a commotion came from up ahead, and Cassandra took charge, "Come on, Inquisition forces. They're trying to protect the refugees."

Milin nocked an arrow, then froze.

The attackers were *people*. The creatures of the Beyond, he could justify. He knew that they were thinking, living creatures, as Solas said, but that crossing into their side of the Veil drove them rabid.

"Stop! Please, we mean you no harm," he cried.
An arrow zinged by his head and he dove behind a boulder, breathing hard. Hands grabbing him, breaking his bow, shoving a hood over his head, dragging him away…

"You hanging in there, Sharpshooter?" Varric asked, bringing him out of his thoughts.

He stood on wobbly legs, looking out at the carnage. Armored men bearing the Templar crest, and people with staves, too.

"You killed them," he whispered, fear gripping his throat.

"We had no choice, they would not listen to reason," Cassandra said.

"I can't do this. I'm sorry, I can't." Pathetic. Couldn't protect his clan, couldn't protect Viddathari, couldn't protect himself.

"The crossroads are not far," Solas said. "You do not have to save the world right now, just make it down the path. You can do that, surely?"

...yes.

Yes, he guessed he could.

The people there did not attack them on sight, and Mother Giselle seemed kind enough.

Things got a little better after that. The refugees needed food, so he hunted for them. They needed medicine, so he gathered herbs.

It was all he could do, for now. They really needed to get to Redcliffe. Once they got a hold of the mages, and found Dorian and Iron Bull, they could drive the Templars off. The refugees would be safe again.

They approached the gate, and his hand started itching.

"A Rift," he warned, drawing his bow. At the appearance of the first creature, he let loose an arrow, only for it to slow to a crawl in midair. Another vision? Didn’t feel like one. What was going on?

By the time he’d closed the portal, he was certain that it wasn't just his imagination or fatigue. This had something to do with the time magic Dorian spoke of, he was sure of it.

At the gates, a messenger approached and led them to meet a certain 'Grand Enchanter Fiona.'

To his surprise, she turned out to be an elf. How did she manage to get such a high position in human lands?

"What has brought you to Redcliffe?" she asked.

"The Breach," Cassandra said. “We need your power, and the power of your people, to help close it.”

“That is not my decision, unfortunately,” she said solemnly.

“Alexius,” Milin breathed.

“How do you…yes, we are indentured to him,” she said. "All hope of peace died with Justinia. I had to do what I could to save my people."
Wait, but that implied that she became indentured within the last few days. Dorian said it happened weeks ago. What was going on?

Before he could form a question, though, a pair of Tevinter men walked in.

"Welcome, my friends! I apologize for not greeting you earlier."

The Grand Enchanter introduced the older one as Alexius, and his blood ran cold. So this was the cultist, the one toying with time itself.

He began to bow, only for Solas to stop him with a touch to the shoulder, "Stand tall, da'len. You deserve better than bowing to Tevinters. As do these people."

"And here I was beginning to think some southern elves had manners," he said. "You are the survivor, yes? The one from the Fade? Interesting. Shall we sit? Felix, would you send for a scribe, please?"

Lavellan studied the younger man's face. He'd suspected that was Alexius' son, but other than his color being slightly pale, he did not look as sick as Dorian had always implied.

At least, until he collapsed.

The magister rushed to his side, fussing over the young man. Then he made his excuses and hurried away, taking his son and Fiona with him.

That was when Milin discovered the note.

Chapter End Notes

Milin's views on the Templars are not my own
Reunion

As soon as they were outside, he handed the note to Cassandra, “From Felix.”

“Go to the Chantry, it’s urgent,” Cassandra read, frowning. “This sounds suspicious.”

He shook his head, "We can trust him." He knew from his master that Felix was on their side.

"I'm curious how you seem to know so much on this matter," Solas said. "Especially since you were unconscious during the time of this indenturing agreement."

"I…" he shook his head. Even if he could make the words come out right, even if they had the time to tell the story, he suspected the mage would react badly to finding out he was a slave. "Please."

"Very well," the elf sighed.

"The day's not complete without walking headfirst into an obvious trap," Varric muttered.

He looked to Cassandra for permission. As soon as she nodded her consent, he ran. He’d been in enough of the shemlen temples at this point that he had a pretty good idea for which building to go to.

Milin burst through the great doors and froze.

He didn't know what he’d expected, but a Rift right in the middle of the room, with Iron Bull and Dorian fending off the denizens that spewed out, wasn't it.

"A bit of help, whoever you are," his master called to them, without turning.

His companions charged, shocking him into action. Trusting they would draw attention from him, he rushed single-mindedly towards the crystal, shooting down the poor, mad creatures in his way. Aided by the unnatural speed of the Rift itself, Lavellan sealed the crystal shut.

"Milin? You're the one they're calling the Herald? How? You're supposed to be in Tevinter," Dorian’s voice was a mixture between awe and relief.

He turned to face him, head bowed and clutching the bow like a lifeline, “Viddathari took me to the Conclave.”

“Where is he now?” Bull asked.

“He tried to protect me,” his eyes watered, and he squeezed them shut tight. “He died, trying to protect me. He burned—”

Warm arms encircled him, pulling him close despite the bow still gripped tight between them, "You must have been so scared, all alone. Precious little thing, I'm here."

Hot tears streamed down his cheeks and onto the mage's neck. If that magister thinks he'll just be able to take you back without a fight, he's got another thing coming. Viddathari would want him to pull away, but he couldn't bring himself to. All hope of freedom had died with his friend. It was either they owned him, or the Inquisition did. At least he knew them. Other humans could be worse. Many called for his execution. What choice did he have?

“I don’t think it’s just that,” Bull said. “You liked him, didn’t you?”
Milin nodded, and he felt the Qunari's huge hand rub against his back. That last little mercy, little kindness, shattered him. He let his arms drop to his sides so his master could hold him fully. They were the only source of comfort he'd ever have, again. He might as well take the honey while it lasted.

“I did, too,” he said. “Damn, I’m gonna miss that little spitfire. But I’m glad to see you’re not hurt.”

Varric cleared his throat after a beat, "Not to interrupt the touching reunion, but anyone want to fill the rest of us in?"

"Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?" his master said with a flourish.

"The Iron Bull. And yes, that's with the article," Bull said. "Part time bodyguard, part time mercenary, part time Ben-Hassrath."

In return, they received three extremely dubious looks.

"They saved my life, in Tevinter," Milin said truthfully. That seemed to placate them. For now.

"Not going to return the favor by introducing yourselves as well? No? Very well, we'll get down to good parts then, shall we?" Dorian launched into an overview about Alexius, the Venatori, and time magic.

He heard footsteps and looked to the doorway.

"Sorry for my lateness," Felix said, as he entered. "My act was a little too convincing, couldn’t slip away from father until now."

"Perhaps you can explain why these Venatori are supposedly risking such dangerous magics in order to indenture the free mages?" Cassandra asked.

"The southern mages are a means to an ends,” he replied. “It’s the Herald they really want. They're obsessed with him."

"Perhaps there is a connection between the Venatori and the Rifts, then," Dorian said. "So much for trying to keep you safe from all of this, Milin. At least, expecting a trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage."

"We should return to the wartable at once," Cassandra advised. "Plan our next step against these cultists."

~o~O~o~

"Listen, Seeker. Sharpshooter over there looks like he might fall asleep where he stands," Varric whispered to Cassandra once they got back. Of course, he heard it clearly. Even dwarves must not hear too well. "Can your meeting wait 'til morning?"

"I suppose it would be wiser to make decisions with a clear head," she said, then raised her voice. "The wartable will convene at dawn. As for you newcomers, there are guest quarters that way."

Milin sighed his relief. They left this morning just as the sun was rising, and now it was well past midnight. Traveling with Viddathari had helped to recover some of his strength, but it was all he could do to keep his eyes open.
"Guest quarters?" Dorian asked, as the others went their separate ways. "I suppose I hadn't thought about it, due to the more pressing matters, but just how much do these agents of the Inquisition know about our history?"

Solas was still well within earshot, so he pressed a finger to his lips and led them to his room, speaking only once the door was closed.

"Varric knows I'm a slave, but I don't think he realizes I'm yours," at least, he hadn't tried to yell at Dorian or anything.

"Probably better if we keep it that way," the Iron Bull said, working at Milin’s armor, and his the pit of his stomach felt heavy with dread. It'd been a while, would it hurt as much as the first time? Would they want to take him both at once again?

“This is Gatt’s bow, isn’t it? And his sword?”

He nodded, then the haze of sleep gave way to panic, “Master, you’ll let me keep them, won’t you? You know that I—”

Dorian cut him off with a kiss, “You’re just adorable when you’re nervous. It’s alright, pet. You can keep them. In fact, you have my permission to use it to slay as many demons as you please. You’re quite adept at it, surprisingly. And you look delicious in leather.”

The mage ran a finger along his ear, but before Milin could go to his knees, Bull pulled him away.

“Give him a break, ‘Vint, he’s exhausted,” the Qunari grinned. “But I’m not.”

Now it was Dorian’s clothes that he was peeling off. They pawed at each other, kissing as if they would die if their lips parted. He’d never seen them do anything like this before. Not to each other, not directly.

This meant that they no longer feared the Censors. That they were never going back to Tevinter. That they no longer had need of a surrogate.

So what would they want from him now?

Iron Bull had Dorian bent over the bed, and smacked his ass so hard Milin flinched.

Why was he hitting him? He didn’t seem angry. Milin huddled against the far wall and hoped he wasn’t next…

Once his ass seemed painfully red, the Qunari flipped him over and pinned him by the wrists, fingerling him as he squirmed and moaned.

“Bull…”

“Did I give you permission to speak?”

“I’m just warning you that I’m close, you big oaf.”

“Quiet,” he commanded, letting go of his wrists to backhand him.

With that, the human spurt all over his chest. Those big fingers scraped the come off and into his mouth, “Don’t you dare swallow, or you’ll be punished further. Keep your mouth open ‘til I say so.”
Climbing up to straddle the mage’s head, he started jerking himself off, “You look so good like that, ‘Vint. Your own come filling your filthy mouth. Ready for me to conquer you? Put you in your fucking place?”

Dorian moaned in agreement.

It was strange how Iron Bull never really spoke to him like that, despite the fact that he was the slave. And his master seemed to enjoy being treated that way. It didn’t make any sense.

The Qunari finished into Dorian’s waiting mouth, “Now you may swallow.”

Dorian obeyed, licking his lips.

Just like that, Bull’s mood shifted, giving him a tender kiss, “How was that, kadan?”

“Good,” Dorian purred. “Can’t wait to get your cock in me.”

He chuckled, “It’s late, not enough time to prep. Maybe next time.”

“Mmmm, looking forward to it,” he said, then beckoned Milin over, as if just now remembering he existed. “Come to bed, pretty.”

The mage coaxed him down next to him, peppering kisses along his throat, “I have missed you wretchedly. You’re not too tired for me to take care of you now, are you? Just relax.”

Bull ran a nail down his chest, and he shivered. No help from him this time, then. For the first time since he’d first been taken, he felt the urge to tell them no, to fight. Probably Viddathari’s influence. But what good would it do? Even if he got them to leave him alone, it would mean them leaving him alone. As pathetic as it was, they were all he had left.

“Let’s work our way down, yeah?” the Qunari suggested.

“Lead the way.”

Bull began with his ear, licking and nibbling and stroking as Dorian did the same to the other one.

He let himself moan softly. The more he held back, the longer it took.

Together, they moved on to sucking at his neck, toying with his nipples, kissing down his stomach. He didn’t dare touch himself, but he was desperately hard.

“Please,” stop teasing, get it over with.

Bull put a pillow under his lower back, arranging his legs so they were bent and spread.

“Suck him,” Iron Bull ordered. “From the top, so I have room.”

Milin gasped as the shemlen went down on him, and gasped again as he felt Bull’s limber tongue against his thighs, his sac, his hole.

Creators, why did they always have to make him want it?

His hands fist into the sheets, his back arched, and at long last, he came.

Dorian kissed him sloppily, transferring his own come into his mouth, and he knew he had to swallow.
He didn’t like it, but there were good times, like earlier. At least they didn’t chain him anymore. At least they didn’t drug him. Other humans would.

Dorian sat up, stretching, "And now we've reached the dreaded point in the evening where we all have to retire to our separate rooms and pretend nothing happened."

His heart sunk. He’d done what they wanted from him, and they were going to leave him anyway? He couldn't stand another sleepless night, not sure if and when anyone would come in to fuck him or worse.

"I think we already passed that point when you kissed him earlier," the Iron Bull said. "Men being intimate with men isn’t that big of a deal here. There's no point hiding it, so long as he doesn't call you master in public. Or kneel. Avoid kneeling, kid."

"You're right, I suppose," Dorian gave an exaggerated sigh and cupped Milin's face in his hands. "Besides, who could say no to this pretty face? Did you see his ears flatten like a kicked puppy? Poor thing."

He leaned in to kiss him in relief. They were staying. He could sleep.

After stealing a peck from both of them, Bull pulled the mage against himself, having him lay his head on his chest. Milin curled up, back-to-back with his master, and hugged a pillow.

As exhausted as he was, both of them drifted off before he could.

You know what I’m doing right now that I would have never done with Dorian and Bull?

What?

Arguing with you instead of backing down.

“No,” he whispered to himself. If only he could say it when they were awake. If only they’d listen if he did.

Milin closed his eyes, and pressed closer to the warm body next to him. It wasn’t the one he wanted, but it was better than nothing.

Sometime in the night, Dorian started talking in his sleep. Mages did that. It was mostly nonsense, but he kept calling for Felix. He sounded distressed. He shifted to face him, stroking his hair until the man quieted. He always did that for him. He didn't really understand why, but he did.

The next time he woke, the door was open, and the light was red with the dawn.

"I'm sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you again," the elf-servant said softly. Milin slipped out of bed and put his hands on his shoulders before he could fall to his knees.

"It's alright. Please stop kneeling to me. I don't want you to feel afraid."

"Y-you're naked," he said, shocked.

Oh. Right.

Milin scrambled for his clothes. He flushed at the thought of all the marks on his body, what he must think, "I'm used to it."

"If I may, my lord, not that it's any of my business, but..." his eyes shifted to the bed.
He didn't want to lie to him, but they said not to let anyone know he was Dorian's slave.

"That's Dorian and that's the Iron Bull," he said carefully. "Back in Tevinter, they saved me from a blood mage."

The servant's eyes went wide, "So you really were a Tevinter slave?"

He nodded.

"Just like Andraste," he bowed low. He was sure he would have been on his knees again if he hadn't said anything. "I...I should go. The Lady Seeker said the wartable is ready, my lord."

"You don't have to call me that. My name is Milin Lavellan. What's yours?"

"Athim, my lord. I mean Milin. No, um, I mean Lavellan?"

"Milin is fine," he said. The servant was shifting from foot to foot, clearly wanting to run. "You don’t have to be dismissed by me or anything. If you need to go, you can."

"Thank you, Milin," he said with a bow, and bolted like a startled cat.

He hesitated. He knew he probably shouldn’t leave the room without asking, but if he asked they might not let him go, and he didn’t want to make Cassandra angry, either.

Deciding that the Seeker scared him more, he got his weapons and armor and headed out.
"During the night, Alexius sent an invitation for you--alone--to go to Redcliffe Castle, under the guise of further negotiations," Cassandra said, getting straight to business. The same set of advisers were already gathered. He hoped he hadn't kept them waiting. "We must not allow for this magister's presence to stand."

"An obvious trap, but one we can use to our advantage," Leliana said. "We can take back Redcliffe from this magister, and earn the aid of the mages."

"We don't have the manpower to take the castle, it is one of the most defensible positions in Ferelden. If you go in there, you'll die. And we'll lose the only means we have of closing these Rifts. I won't allow it," the Templar said. Milin flinched at his tone. This man clearly thought he owned him, it was only a matter of time before he tried to make use of him. He foresaw Dorian and the Commander clashing the moment they laid eyes on each other. "Either we find another way in, or give up this nonsense and go get the templars."

He hoped Dorian won.

"Even if we could assault the Keep, it would be for naught," Josephine said. Heavy footsteps told him the Iron Bull was approaching, possibly his master as well. "An 'Orlesian' Inquisition's army marching into Ferelden would provoke a war. Our hands are tied."

As he predicted, Bull and Dorian burst in.

"So you don't use the Inquisition's army," the Qunari said. "I have a mercenary band, the Chargers. We're expensive, but we're worth it. With the added bonus of not provoking a war, and hey, we've been around for more than a week."

"I know Alexius' magic better than anyone," Dorian said. "I can get them past his defenses."

"Our new...guests, I presume?" Josephine asked Cassandra.

The Seeker nodded, "Friends of the Herald. I believe we can trust them."

"There is a secret passage into the castle, an escape route for the family," the spymaster said. "It's too narrow for our troops, but these agents could be sent through. I can lead them, and they could remain undiscovered, if we use the Herald as distraction."

"The plan puts you in the most danger. We can't, in good conscience, order you to do this. We can still go after the Templars if you'd rather not play the bait," Cullen said. As if Templars would help them out of the goodness of their Keeper-murdering, children-stealing hearts. Besides, Solas was the only one who knew a thing about the Rifts, and he said they needed mages. "It's up to you."

It's up to him? What happened to 'I will not allow it'? He didn't believe him.

Milin stepped closer to his master, in case this templar decided to retaliate. But he knew what he had to do. Mythal spared him and granted him these abilities to close the Rifts, to close the Breach. No matter the risks, he could not fail. Not again.

Gathering his courage, he said, "I'll be bait."

To his surprise, the Commander just...accepted it. He was clearly unhappy with the decision, but he
seemed to respect it, and started making plans with the others to do what needed to be done.

Josephine accepted the invitation for three days later, giving the Chargers enough time to get to Haven and meet with Leliana's people.

He didn't know that much about the Chargers, other than Bull mentioning his lieutenant was a 'Vint, but maybe he'd get to meet them? That would be interesting, at least, even if they were tough guys.

In the meantime, he wasn't terribly sure what to do with himself. Dorian had research to do, and Bull had his report to write. They said they'd see him later that night, but to do what he wanted until then.

So Milin headed to the training grounds. His aim was still fine, but he’d gotten so weak. Not that he had that much force to begin with, compared to others in his clan, but he could do for some exercise.

Then he saw the Commander there, and decided against it. He still didn't trust that man. Better to stay as far away as possible.

"Hey sharpshooter," Varric called out to him. "C'mere, I want to show you something."

He went, as bidden, and found the dwarf in front of a padlocked chest, "You ever pick a lock before?"

Milin stepped back, mortified. He didn't want to break into someone's things. Even if he did know how to, which he didn't.

"Don't worry, this is my chest. There's nothing in it, even, it's just for training," he rattled it to prove his point. "Assuming you want to learn? It'll be easy. You've got those little elf fingers, not stubs like mine. And it's a good skill for rogues like us to know. Not just for opening chests, either."

Varric gave him a meaningful look, and suddenly his intention became clear.

"I could unlock chains, too? Cages?"

"The simple ones at least, yeah."

He thought about the chain that bound him to Dorian's bed, how it could only be opened by Dorian or that mage guard. If his master could do that, so could Halward, so could Alexius. "What...what about the magical ones?"

"Well, there's actually enchanted lockpicks you can get, but they're really expensive and tricky to learn how to use. Easier to just make friends with mages," he said. "But don't worry, the vast majority of locks aren't like that."

"Please, it has to be magical locks," Iron Bull said not to kneel, but he bowed deeply. "I'll pay you back for the lockpicks and training, somehow. I'll..." He had no coin of his own, and no way to earn it. He doubted the dwarf wanted to be paid in furs and meats. And if he wanted sex from him, he made no indication of it.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but don't worry about the money. The training's on me. And I'll talk to Nightingale about the picks, she'll get you some. Frankly, she owes you a lot more than that for using you as bait. I bet you didn't even ask for anything in return to do it, did you?"
He shook his head, "I just want to close the Breach."

"You truly are the real deal, aren't you?" he sighed. "There's no way I'm letting you walk into that lion's den by yourself."

"I don't think the magister will let you in." The invitation was for him, and it emphasized that he had to be alone.

"I'll say I'm your negotiator or something. Just let me do the talking," he said. "Here, let's get started. I'll show you the basics for now, and how to hide a lockpick so that a patdown won't find it."

It took him a long, frustrating hour to learn the basic mechanics of locks, and how to wiggle just one pin into place. He was lucky Varric was so patient with him. Thanks to him, by dinner time, he could do five.

"Can we practice facing away from the lock, next?" he asked, as they returned from the kitchens (the elves there had been delighted to give him a lot of food, and he thanked them for their kindness). So that if his hands were behind his back, he could still do it...

It made him nervous to think about these things, but every time a lock clicked opened for him, he felt better about it.

"That's enough for one day, I think. But we'll start on that, tomorrow," Varric said. "So how are you doing?"

"I'm grateful to you, for teaching me."

"No, I meant, a lot's been going on this past week. How are you holding up?"

I'm fine, is what he should say. But the dwarf had been so good to him, he deserved an honest answer.

"I lost someone, at the Conclave," he admitted. They reached the tent, and sat together. "I didn't know him very long, but he was nice to me, and helped me. I miss him."

Varric pat his back, and he hesitantly leaned against his shoulder. When the dwarf let him, he hugged his arms around him, too.

"This was the man who stepped in front of you in that vision thing, I'm guessing?"

He nodded, "Viddathari. He was the one that should have been the one spared."

"I'm sorry. You want to talk about him? It could help."

"Well...he was a Qunari. 'Viddathari' means a convert to the Qun."

"That explains the weapons, then."

Milin nodded.

"What else?"

He didn’t want to give away anything about his past, so he mostly talked about superficial things. But the dwarf was right, it helped. And making the words come out got a little easier.
The light grew dim, and he forced himself to pull away and stand, "I should go. Dorian and Bull will be expecting me. I can't thank you enough, for everything."

"Anytime. I'll see you tomorrow, sharpshooter."

He smiled, "Tomorrow."

~o~O~o~

Iron Bull was in the middle of eating out Dorian when he got back to their room. The mage's arms and legs were tied to the four bedposts, his eyes blindfolded, but he kept crying out for more.

Milin averted his eyes, trying not to be noticed and thinking about the lessons he'd learned today instead. He wondered if Varric would teach him how to get out of rope, too…

"C'mere, kid. My knee's acting up, need you to take over for a bit," the Qunari said, getting up as Dorian whined in protest. Milin knelt on the bed and started lapping at his master's hole, as he was taught. The whining turned back into moans. He hated, hated, hated this act in particular. He knew Dorian cleaned himself. Thoroughly. But it still just felt dirty to him. Especially because Iron Bull's come was still leaking out. Not that he didn't normally eat that, too.

"Want to make you come untouched this time," Iron Bull hissed in his partner's ear. He glanced up to see the man playing with his nipples.

It took a while (so long that his tongue started cramping up), but the Qunari did reach his goal, leaving Milin with come on his face. He didn't wipe it off, since they hadn't told him to yet. But he did get up and start stripping off his leathers.

"I've got you, Kadan. You're safe with me. You did so good for me, so good," Bull praised, releasing the shem from his bondage. "You feeling alright?"

"I still can't believe I actually took you."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," he laughed, then went over to the wash basin, rinsing out his mouth.

"Go ahead and finish, pet. Then clean up and come to bed," Dorian said, his voice sleepy.

Fuck. He was hoping that they would be too into each other to notice him.

Forcing the disgust from his face, he stroked himself until he hardened. At least they weren't touching him while he did it, this time. He could close his eyes and think about the girl from the baths, or from his clan, or maybe that human woman Josephine with the sweet smile.

He finished, careful not to spill anything, and washed as thoroughly as he thought he could get away with.

They let him sleep in the middle. He was grateful for that, at least.

~o~O~o~

Milin woke up before the elf servant came this time. Which was too bad, he was looking forward to seeing him again, but at least it gave him time to get dressed, first.

He wandered around Haven, wondering where Athim was, when he ran into a human in armor. Not the Inquisition's armor, though.
"Excuse me. I was told to come here to meet someone called Sister Nightingale. Any idea where I might find her?" His accent was Tevinter. Could it be…

"Her tent is up there," he said, pointing. Then tilted his head to the side. "Are you...Krem?"

"Cremissius Acclasi with the Bull's Charger's Mercenary Company, yes. Krem's shorter, if you like. And you?"

"I'm Milin."

"As in the Herald?" he asked, surprised. "A pleasure to meet you, your worship. And to work with you. I hear you're doing good work."

*Your worship?*

He supposed that wasn't much worse than being called the Herald. And whenever he said not to be called that, no one listened, anyway.

"Has Iron Bull told you about me?"

"Just your name and a basic description, really, but I passed through the Hinterlands to get to here. They love you, there."

He wondered why Iron Bull didn't tell him more. Did Krem even know that he was a slave? Probably not, if he was calling him 'your worship.' He thought it best not to mention it, just in case.

"I didn't do much. But once we get help from the mages, hopefully they can be safe from the fighting again," he said, pausing. "Would you tell me a little about the Chargers? Or do you have to go?"

"I've got a minute. Well, Bull doesn't want us large enough to work as an army. We're better as shook troops and skirmishers. Grim and his people are the front line fighters, Rocky handles fortifications and traps, Skinner's on the flanks, and Stitches keeps us all fighting. We've also got archers for hitting enemy infantry, and Dalish with ma--more archery."

His eyes widened in surprise, "You have Dalish elves in your ranks?"

"And city elves, yeah. We've got all sorts like that. Why, are you Dalish or something?"

"I was," he said truthfully. "Can I meet them?"

"Sure, we can do that. The Chief usually takes us out drinking after a big fight. Maybe after tomorrow night, if all goes well, he'll take you with us."

He beamed, "Thank you, I'd like that. I'm sure Sister Leliana is waiting, though. I won't take up anymore of your time."

Milin practically ran back to the room, crawling under the covers to take Bull’s cock in his mouth. He knew he liked being woken up like that. As soon as he finished, he felt Dorian’s finger stroke his ear so he had to go down on him, too. But at least they didn’t make him come this time.

“What was that about, pretty?” his master asked.

“I met Krem this morning, before you woke up,” he said softly. “The Iron Bull, if everything goes well at Redcliffe, can I join the Chargers afterwards?”
They exchanged glances. Dorian was hesitant, obviously, but Bull won out.

“Sure thing, kid.”

He snuggled into the Qunari’s chest in thanks. And as soon as he was able, Lavellan extracted himself to go meet Varric.
The castle looked even more intimidating up close. Guards lined the stone walls every few feet, dressed like the ones from his master's villa. He'd gotten okay with the enchanted lockpick, thanks to Varric (and Leliana, and Solas for the magic), but that wouldn't do him any good if they wanted to kill him instead of just capture him.

His mind flashed back to being bound, blindfolded, forced to kneel as some thing was summoned, metal gauntlets holding him still as a dagger was brought to his throat.

He shuddered, and Varric gave his arm a squeeze, "You alright?"

"It feels wrong here. Like the red lyrium did," he said. The sooner they got out of here, the better. "Thank you again, for coming with me."

He wasn't sure if he'd have the courage to take another step without him.

"The magister's invitation was for Master Lavellan only, and no one else. The dwarf will have to remain here," a man in finery said. 'Master Lavellan' sounded even more bizarre to him than 'Herald of Andraste.' He was hardly anyone's master. He didn't want to be.

"I'm his negotiator. Surely you wouldn't want to snub a member of the merchant's guild?" Varric said.

He hesitated, then turned and beckoned them to follow.

They approached a throne, where Alexius sat with Felix at his side, and Fiona at the stairs.

"My lord magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived."

"My friend!" Alexius said, standing. "It's so good to see you again. And your...associate, of course. I'm sure we can make out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties."

Fiona stepped forward, "Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?"

"Fiona, you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives. Now, shall we begin?" he dismissed. Milin felt sorry for the woman. She'd only been trying to protect her people from the Templars, and had only gone from frying pan to fire. "The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?"

They just needed to buy time until Leliana and the Chargers could arrive. Luckily, that's when Varric stepped in, and proceeded to talk the magister's ear off about lyrium supply lines, and connections with Rivaini pirates, Kirkwall Champions, and Antivan crows. He wasn't sure what birds had to do with anything, but he wasn't paying that much attention. Behind him, he heard the twang of arrows being fired, the zap of magic, and muffled shouting. He hoped everyone was okay. It was all he could do to keep his face blank, so as not to give away what was happening. Thank the Creators human hearing was so bad.

"Enough blathering," the magister said, annoyed. "You walk into my stronghold with your stolen Mark--a gift you don't even understand--and think you're in control? You're nothing but a mistake. It was the Elder One's moment, and you were unworthy even to stand in his presence."
Who was this Elder One? The dark figure from the vision?

"Father, listen to yourself," Felix said. "Do you know what you sound like?"

"He sounds exactly like the kind of villainous cliche everyone expects us to be," Dorian emerged from the shadows, Iron Bull at his side. Neither looked hurt, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Dorian. I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down," he said. "The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes. Soon he will become a god. He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas."

"You can't involve my people in this!" Fiona protested.

"Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen. Why would you support this?"

"Stop it, father. Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let's go home."

"No!" the magister said. "It's the only way, Felix. He can save you."

"Save me?"

"There is a way. The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the temple..."

"I'm going to die, you need to accept that."

Iron Bull took Dorian's hand and, following his lead, Milin took his other one. Master cared deeply for Felix.

"Seize them, Venatori! The Elder One demands this man's life!"

Iron Bull made a signal, and all the remaining guards were slain at once, crumpling to the ground. He swore he saw an elf or two among the attackers, but this wasn't the time to think about that.

"Your men are dead, 'Vint," the Qunari said.

"You...are a mistake. You never should have existed!" An unearthly light swirled around the magister's hand. Some sort of amulet?

"No!" Dorian cried, blasting him with a spell. The light expanded, drawing him in like a strong wind.

And then he was waist-deep in water.

"Blood of the Elder One! Where'd they come from?"

Two shemlen charged at him, and he shrieked, scrabbling away until his back hit a wall.

His eyes darted around for some way he could escape, but it was all stone and bars and the awful wrongness of red lyrium. He was trapped. Caged. Milin pressed up against a far wall, head swimming. He couldn't get enough air. Couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe, couldn't--

Dorian fought them off, and the water stained pink with their blood.

"Where exactly are we? It seems as if we're still in the castle but--oh, of course. It's not just where,
it’s when. Alexius' magic must have taken us through time. How far and in which direction I'm not entirely sure of. Or how to get back," he mused.

"Master, please let me out," he begged between quick, shallow breaths. "Please..."

The mage, seeming to finally notice his distress, pat his head. "Calm down, pretty. I'm here. I'll protect you."

Milin clung to him, buried his face in his shoulder as the human whispered little reassurances to him.

Dorian was trying to get out, too, he realized as the fog of panic cleared. It wasn't his fault they were in here. He was going to help him. It was okay, it was okay, it was okay…

Finally, he forced himself to let go.

"Better? Good. Now, not to worry, I'll get us free from these locks," Dorian said. "Hmm, let's see, I could use ice to make the metal brittle, then shatter it. Or perhaps it would be faster to try to melt it through..."

He waded after him, careful not to touch the half-floating bodies, and examined the lock. It wasn't even magical. He'd practiced this very thing dozens of times in the past few days.

"I can help, master."

Dorian raised an eyebrow at him, "I'm sorry. How, exactly?"

Milin dug the enchanted lockpick out from its hiding place. He’d stupidly forgotten about it until now. "I can unlock it. I don't think it will take long."

"Where in Thedas did you get a thing like that?" Dorian asked, stepping aside. "Actually, never mind. We have more important things to think about right now. Go ahead."

He took a few deep breaths to steady his still-shaking hands, the way Varric taught him, then got started. Five pins, a little rusty, but no surprises. In less than a minute, it clicked open.

He couldn't help but smile in relief, and it broadened into a grin when Dorian gave him a nod of approval, "Well done. Shall we? Fetid water is not my idea of a relaxing bath."

More cages. Some empty, others filled with that foul red lyrium. And more guards, too. He'd warn Dorian when he heard them coming, so that the mage could take them by surprise. It was chilling how readily he killed them. He didn't even spare them a second glance.

They'd cultists would capture or kill both of them if they could, he knew, but it made his stomach churn.

"I hear humming," he whispered to Dorian as they passed another line of cages. "I think someone's in one of these."

"Andraste's sacred knickers. You're alive? Where were you? How did you escape?"

"Varric!" he rushed forward, and started fumbling with the lock. The dwarf was caged, with a terrible red glow and distorted voice, but at least he was alive. It took him five breaths to still his hands.

"We didn't escape," Dorian said. "Alexius sent us through time. And since you're here, and have
never mentioned being imprisoned in Redcliffe's dungeon, I'm guessing it's the future."

"Everything that happens to you is weird," the cage opened, and he went in for a hug, only for the dwarf to block him with a hand. "Trust me, I would. You have no idea. But this red lyrium is like an infection, and I don't want you near the stuff. What are you doing down here, anyway? Not that I don't appreciate you putting that lockpick to good use."

"If we get to Alexius, I just might be able to send us back to our own time. Simple, really," Dorian said. "I don't suppose...we haven't come across any of the others yet. Is Iron Bull...?"

"Sorry, Sparkler, I don't know," he shook his head. "And Alexius is the least of our problems. The 'Elder One' that he serves assassinated the empress of Orlais and led a demon army in a huge invasion in the South. Now he rules everything. What's left of it, anyway. But if you're crazy enough to take on that magister, it's a damn good start. Let's go."

They ran into Fiona next, encased in red lyrium up to her waist. No...no it wasn't trapping her, it was growing from her, which was somehow worse.

She told them they were a year in the future, and that Leliana was alive. But she didn't know about Bull, either.

He started for the lock, but Varric touched his arm, shaking his head.

"We're not even going to try to help her?"

"No...you must go quickly," her voice was so fragile, so weak. "Before the Elder One...learns you're here."

It pained him to turn away, but how could he deny her final wish?

He turned, whispering the Elvish Eulogy as they left. Someone should do it for her. Someone should do it for this entire, horrible world.

They found the Iron Bull before they found Leliana. He couldn't tell them anything new, or embrace him like he wanted to, but he was glad to see him. He felt safer in his presence. And his master looked so...not happy, he didn't know if anyone could be happy here, but better.

"The kid's holding up better than I would have expected," he muttered to Droian.

"Well, you missed the part where he had a panic attack."

"Can't blame him for that, with all these cages. Probably stirs up bad memories for him. The lockpick was a surprised, but I can't blame him. Now that I'm out, I'll die before they put me back in," he said. "If you manage to pull this shit off and get back, you do right by him, Kadan."

"I'll treat him well, of course. You know that."

"No, I meant--"

A voice came from behind the door up ahead, and he gestured in warning.

Varric sneaked forward, and silently opened it.

He saw the table first, lined with knives and instruments he didn't want to even think about the uses for.
Then he saw Leliana, dangling from her arms, and looking as if she'd aged a hundred years.

"You will break," a man said, threatening her with a blade.

"I will die first," she said. Her eyes met Milin's. "Or you will."

She wrapped her legs around his throat and broke her torturer's neck. Lavellan scrambled up onto the table to reach her manacles.

"You're alive," she whispered, as he freed one arm, then the other.

"You can heal her, can't you?" he asked Dorian. The pain from her arms alone, not to mention everything else they had done to her...he couldn't even imagine.

"Forget that. If you came back from the dead, I'm not wasting time. You need to end this. Do you have weapons?"

He nodded. They'd found a chest of confiscated things a while back, so even Bull and Varric were armed.

"Good. The magister is probably in his chambers."

~o~O~o~

"Was it worth it?" Dorian demanded once they entered the throne room. Alexius faced away from them and Felix...looked wrong. Not in the same way that the red lyrium made the others look wrong, either. Out of the corner of his eye, Leliana disappeared into the shadows. "Everything you did to the world? To yourself?"

"I knew I hadn't really destroyed you. My final failure. But it doesn't matter, now. All we can do is wait for the end."

"Say what you mean, 'Vint," Bull said.

The man chuckled, "The irony that you should appear now, of all the possibilities. All that I fought for, all that I betrayed, and what have I wrought? Ruin and death. The Elder one comes: for me, for you, for us all."

A flash of steel, and Leliana had the magister's son by the throat. Now that he was in the light, the grey pallor of his face was clear. He didn't even resist her. Like a rag doll, only gaunt.

"Felix!" Alexius cried.

"That's Felix? Maker's breath, Alexius, what have you done?"

"He would have died, Dorian. I saved him! Please, don't hurt my son. I'll do anything you ask."

"Sister Nightingale, please, Felix didn't do this. He tried to stop him," Milin pleaded. "He's innocent."

"No one is innocent."

She slit his throat and let him crumple like paper.

"No!" the magister cried, blasting her back with magic before she could get to him, too.
He whirled on them, and Milin dove for the nearest column, dodging between cover as the others fought. She'd done a horrid thing. Felix was as much a victim of his father as anyone, and couldn't even defend himself in that condition.

Then he felt that familiar itch. A rift opened between them and fade creatures began clawing through the veil.

"Focus on Alexius!" he called. "I can handle it."

Five targets, five arrows, and then he was holding his hand up to the crystal.

As it shut, he saw Leliana crawl to her feet of her own accord, and breathed a sigh of relief. He turned back to the others just in time to see Iron Bull bash in the magister's head.

Dorian crouched next to the body, pulling the amulet from his throat.

"He wanted to die, didn't he?" he said numbly. "All those lies he told himself, the justifications... He lost Felix long ago and didn't even notice. Oh, Alexius..."

"I'm so sorry." As he spoke, he thought he heard...something. But he couldn't tell what it was or where it was coming from.

He shook his head and stood, "This is the same amulet as before, the same one we worked together on in Minrathous. That's a relief. Give me an hour to work out the spell he used, and I should be able to reopen the rift."

"An hour?" Leliana asked. "That's impossible! You must go now!"

A screech rang out, and the castle shook.

"The Elder One," she said. How she knew that, he didn't want to find out. He'd take her word for it.

Iron Bull and Dorian met eyes.

"No," the mage said. "I know what you're thinking, and no."

"Look at me, we're already dead, kadan. But we can buy you time. Go back and stop this from ever happening."

"Festis bei umo canavarum!"

"That's what I'm trying to avoid, actually," the Qunari said, then looked at Milin. "And kid, I know this is too little too late, but I'm sorry."

"We'll hold the main door," Varric said. "Once they break through, it's all you, Nightingale."

"Cast your spell," she said. "You have as much time as I have arrows."

"Thank you for this, thank you all," he said. He handed Leliana his quiver so she could add his arrows to her own. She left him a dagger in return.

He retreated with Dorian, gently squeezing the man's hand, "You can do this."

"I hope you're right."

Dorian was lucky humans had bad hearing. He didn't have to hear them take their last breaths.
Varric, first, the name of Bianca on his lips. Then Bull with a roar. And finally Leliana, her last prayer cut short.

Each death was like a blow to the chest, but he forced himself stand strong, dagger at the ready.

The creatures rushed forward, and he plunged the blade into the closest one's throat, only for it to be ripped from his hand as the green light and wind took hold of him once more.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

For those of you familiar with my Submission series, some of these characters may seem familiar~

Milin stumbled out of the portal, looked around wildly in anticipation of an attack like the last time they’d been transported. But, no. Everything was back to exactly where they’d come from. Everyone, except Alexius’ men, was alive.

He was tempted to go hug Varric and Bull and even Leliana. But it wasn’t over just yet.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Dorian gloated.

Alexius fell to his knees, “You won. There is no point extending this charade. Felix…”

His son crouched next to him, “It’s going to be alright, father.”

“You’ll die.”

“Everyone dies.”

Krem and a blond haired shemlen pulled the magister to his feet.

“There are cells in Haven,” Leliana said. “You can take him there until his trial.”

“Wait,” Milin said. “His son is dying. And he’s not fighting back anymore.” What Alexius did was horrid. But it would be wrong to separate a father from his dying son.

Iron Bull shook his head, “We can’t just let the magister go. He’s dangerous. And he should be punished for what he’s done.”

He crossed over to Felix and took his hands, “Come with us to Haven, then. At least you’ll be able to see him. And I think there’s a stablemaster nearby, you won’t have to walk all the way up the mountain.”

“I need to inform the magisterium of what happened, here. But I might not make the journey, to be honest. I’ll have to write them,” he sighed. “Yes, if you’ll have me.”

He looked to Leliana. The hardness, the hate in her face wasn’t like it was in the future. This was the woman who had stopped Cassandra from hurting him, that first day they met. Maybe she could still be reasoned with. “Please. Felix helped us.”

“As long as he does not try to free his father, I have no objections. I can’t promise the same for Cassandra or the others, however.”

He smiled, “Thank you. I—”

Footsteps approached. Metal against stone, all marching in time.
“Someone’s coming,” he warned.

Guards burst through, a dozen men in parallel rows, with four figures between them. A shemlen man and woman, as well as an elven man and woman. All four were richly dressed, and the shemlen both crowned. He noticed that the human man was missing his right arm, just below the elbow.

“Grand Enchanter,” he said. “We’d like to discuss your abuse of our hospitality.”

“Your majesties,” Fiona bowed, her voice quavering.

“When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give them the right to drive our people from their homes,” the human woman said.

“King Aedan, Queen Anora, I assure you, we never intended…”

“In light of your actions, good intentions are no longer enough.”

Aedan narrowed his eyes, “You will leave Redcliffe at once, and Fereldan as soon as possible. Those who stay will be imprisoned or executed.”

“But…we have hundreds who need protection! Where will we go?”

“We can help them, can’t we, Leliana?” Milin asked. Haven was neutral ground, wasn’t it? That’s why they chose it for the Conclave in the first place.

“Leliana?” the King crossed over to her. “Maker’s breath, it really is you, isn’t it? Last I heard, you were working as the Left Hand of Divine Justinia. What are you doing here?”

“I am an agent of the Inquisition, now,” she said, nodding towards Milin. “You’ve heard of the Herald of Andraste, of course.”

All eyes bored into him.

He bowed, both to be polite but also so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact. He knew they expected him to say something, but had no clue what, “My name is Milin Lavellan, you majesties. It is an honor.”

“He’s a beautiful one, no?” the male elf said. He had facial markings, but they weren’t like any vallaslin he’d ever seen. “Can we take him home and keep him? He looks like he could use a nice bath and a change of clothes. Perhaps a massage.”

His face flushed up to his ears.

“I beg your pardon?” Dorian protested.

“Ah, already spoken for, I see. And by such a handsome man, at that. I must say, I am disappointed, but I cannot fault your taste.”

“If we could return to the matter at hand,” Anora said.

“Right,” Varric started. “Well, you see that big, green rip in the sky? We want to close it. Sharpshooter here has the ability to do it, but we need the mages to help.”

“And what would be the terms of this arrangement?” Fiona asked.
“Hopefully better than what Alexius gave you,” his master said. “The Inquisition is better than that, yes?”

“I’ve known a lot of mages. They can be loyal friends, if you let them. Friends who make bad decisions,” Varric shook his head. “But, still, loyal.”

“It seems we have little choice but to accept whatever you offer.”

“You were scared the Templars would kill you,” Milin said. People acted desperately when afraid. He couldn’t blame her for that. “Please, help us close the Breach. And I’ll do what I can to protect you from them.”

“We accept. It would be madness not to,” she agreed. “I will gather my people and ready them for the journey to Haven.”

~o~O~o~

“It is not a matter for debate,” Cullen said. “There will be abominations among the mages, and we must be prepared.”

As if that was a certainty. His Clan had never had a possession. And he’d only ever heard it happening in another Clan once.

Milin grit his teeth, arms crossed tightly over his body. Leliana had just told the rest of the advisers what happened in Redcliffe, and the Commander wasn’t happy. He wanted more Templars at Haven. One was too many, in his eyes.

“If we rescind the offer of an alliance, it makes the Inquisition appear incompetent at best, tyrannical at worst,” Josephine said. He knew he was right to like her.

“What were you thinking, turning mages loose with no oversight? The Veil is torn open!”

“They can oversee themselves,” he said, eyes lowered. He wished his voice was stronger, was raised like the human’s, but it was hard to say anything at all with Cullen yelling at him. His instincts were to go to his knees and beg forgiveness for his stupidity, but it wasn’t stupidity. He knew it was the right thing to do, even if he hadn't made a promise to Fiona. If later, Cullen tried to punish him for it, then he’d take it.

The mages agreed to help. They should be helping them in return, not treating them like dangerous animals.

“I know we need them for the Breach, but they could do as much damage as the demons themselves!”

“They’d have no reason to, if we help them,” he muttered. His mother and sister didn’t go around setting fire to everything, just as he didn’t go around shooting everyone.

“Enough arguing,” Cassandra said. He heard Dorian’s familiar footsteps approach. “None of us were there. We cannot afford to second-guess our people. The sole purpose of the Herald’s mission was to gain the mage’s aid, and that was accomplished.”

She approved? He thought she might have taken Cullen’s side. He gave her a relieved smile.

“The voice of pragmatism speaks,” Dorian said, entering with fresh clothes. He’d gone off to see to Felix when Milin was called into the meeting, and must have changed while he was at it. He
envied him. His own leathers were still damp, and in the cold of the mountains, he was chilled to the bone. “And here I was just starting to enjoy the circular arguments.”

“Closing the Breach is all that matters,” she said.

“We should also look into the things you saw in this ‘Dark Future,’” Leliana said. “The assassination of Empress Celene? A demon army?”

“Sounds like something a Tevinter cult might do. Orlais falls, the Imperium rises. Chaos for everyone!” Dorian quipped.

“One battle at a time. It’s going to take time to organize our troops and the mage recruits,” Cullen was calling them ‘recruits’ now instead of abominations-in-waiting. He guessed that was a good sign.

“It sounds as if you have had a difficult day, to say the least,” Josephine said. “We shall reconvene tomorrow. Meet us there, when you are ready.”

Creators, bless that woman.

“How is Felix?” he asked, as the other shemlen departed.

“Even with the horse from Dennet, it was a difficult trek for him, I won’t lie,” he said. “He’s recovering in a guest room, next to ours.”

“And Alexius?”

“I have not gone to see him, as of yet, no. I saw him before they locked him up. He looked… despondent. Broken. Not the man I remember, nor the one I want to. I suppose the Inquisition will judge him eventually. I wonder if there’s any chance they’ll show him mercy,” he said. “He hardly deserves it, but for Felix’s sake, I can’t help hoping there’s something left of the man I once knew.”

“Josephine seems kind. She might take pity on him,” Cullen wouldn’t. But he thought better than to say that. “Can I go change? I’m cold.”

He sighed, “Try not to act as if you need my permission. Just go.”

Right.

Milin nodded, and headed towards the bathing chambers.

For once, he was the one to walk in on Athim. The elf was scrubbing one of the tubs, until he turned around to bow, at least.

He smiled, “Hello, Athim. How are you?”

“I’m doing just fine, my lo--Milin. Is there anything I can do for you?”

He paused. Now that he thought of it, there was. “Well, I don’t want to add to your workload, but…”

“It’s no trouble! Anything you want!”

“It’s just…I think I might be away from Haven a lot, so, if you have the time, I’d like you to look in on Alexius.”
“Of course! Wait…who’s Alexius?”

“A Tevinter magister. Sister Leliana took him prisoner today,” he explained. “I’d like you to make sure he’s been given food and water. If he’s not, or if you think the guards are hurting him, could you tell me, please?”

He knew what it was like to be stuck in a cage, at the mercy of humans.

“Sure, if you want me to,” Athim frowned. “Are you alright?”

After all the death today? Future or not, how could he be alright?

“No,” he sighed. “I need a bath.”

Among other things.

“Can I help you?”

It’d be easier heating and carrying the buckets of water with two people, and he was pretty drained.

“If you don’t mind. Thanks, Athim.”

~o~O~o~

“Don’t you ever pull that foolishness on me again, do you understand?” Dorian demanded.

For once, the door to their bedroom was locked, but he could still hear inside just fine. He felt like he should turn away, that this conversation was not meant for his ears. But his curiosity got the better of him.

“First of all, it wasn’t me. Second of all, it’s not like you could have pulled future-me or whoever the hell you saw through that Rift with you. Then you’d have two of me running around, and that was just be…I honestly would have killed him on sight.”

“You’re missing the point. Even if you couldn’t have gone through with me, you should have stayed beside me. Running off to die is unacceptable.”

“Alright, kadan, alright. Next time we go on a suicide mission, I’ll die next to you and distract you, no matter the horrible consequences of me doing it.”

“Good, that’s settled then,” he said stubbornly. “You know… future-you said something very curious. I’d like to hear your thoughts on it.”

“Yeah? What was that?”

“You told me to ‘do right by’ Milin. And you apologized to him. Any idea what that was about?”

“I think you already know,” the Qunari sighed. “We’re in the South, now. How much longer are we going to lie to ourselves?”

“I won’t abandon him, especially not now.”

“Listen, I don’t want another fight. We’ll talk about this later,” he said. “Come here, let me take you out of your head for a while. Cross your wrists for me. Yeah, just like that.”

He heard kissing and decided to back away, finally. If they discovered him, they’d likely want him
to join in. He couldn’t handle that. Not after everything that happened today. The bath helped him relax, somewhat, but he just… not tonight.

He wandered about for a while, trying to shove the overheard conversation out of his mind. It was confusing, and it didn’t mean anything. It couldn’t.

Lavellan busied himself talking to the others, and visiting the horses, until it was dark and he was sure they were sated. To his relief, his master didn’t do more than kiss him.

The next day was spent listening to the advisers bicker until they were blue in the face. At last, they decided to send him to Orlais, to speak with the Clerics. Because obviously public speaking was one of his talents, and the Andrastian humans would like nothing more than to listen to what some elf had to say.

At last they released him, and he found Iron Bull waiting for him.

“You ready to meet the guys?” he grinned.

Milin felt a thrill in the pit of his stomach. He nodded, giving him a nervous smile.
“How you doin’, Krem de la Crème?” Iron Bull asked, taking a seat across from his lieutenant. He gestured for Milin to sit next to him. There was a small group of them, humans, dwarves…elves. One woman had the vallaslin of Falon’Din across her face. He’d never hoped to see another Dalish in his life. He wanted desperately to talk to her, but couldn’t seem to do anything but stare open-mouthed like an idiot.

“How you doin’, Krem de la Crème?” Iron Bull asked, taking a seat across from his lieutenant. He gestured for Milin to sit next to him. There was a small group of them, humans, dwarves…elves. One woman had the vallaslin of Falon’Din across her face. He’d never hoped to see another Dalish in his life. He wanted desperately to talk to her, but couldn’t seem to do anything but stare open-mouthed like an idiot.

“Your Worship,” Cremissius’ voice brought him out of his stupor for a moment. “I’m so glad he has someone new to hit with that joke. He loves his nicknames.”

“Hey, when I was growing up, my name was just these series of numbers. We all give each other nicknames under the Qun.”

“They even wear shirts under the Qun, Chief?” Milin suppressed a snort. Not that he’d seen. “Or do they just run around binding their breasts like that?”

“It’s a harness, Krem,” his eye roll was almost palpable.

“Yes, for your pillowy man-bosoms. Let me know if you need help binding. You could really chisel something out of that overstuffed look.”

“Binding?” Milin asked.

“In Qunandar, Krem’d be an Aqun-Athlok. That’s what we call someone born one gender and living like another.”

Oh. Oh. He’d never heard of that before.

“And Qunari don’t treat those… Aqun people any differently than a real man?”

“They are real men. Just like you are.”

Krem’s smile at that was infectious. He liked the human well enough, if he was happier as a man, good for him, “Hm… maybe your people aren’t so bad after all.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Krem. We still come down hard on the back talk,” Iron Bull laughed. “Anyway, here’s the rest of the Chargers… or what’s left of the rest. A lot of ‘em went looking for stronger drinks. We’ve got Rocky and Skinner there. And over there are Stitches, Dalish, and Grim. Crazy bunch of assholes, but they’re mine.”

“I remember you, Grim,” he said to the blond human, still too shy to talk to the elves. “You helped take Alexius away.”

The human grunted in the affirmative.

“Grim doesn’t talk much,” Bull said. “I’m pretty sure he’s the lost king of some small country. Or a chieftain. Something like that.”

“You didn’t hurt him, and you could have,” he said. He’d snuck down earlier to check on the magister. Miserable, but no bruising. And Athim said he was eating. “That’s enough for me.”
The man just grunted again.

“‘It’s part of our code of conduct,’” Krem said. “Our prisoners are treated well, injuries tended. We’d want the same for any of ours who got captured.”

He knew from experience that that was not how the Venatori would have treated their prisoners, but he was glad that they were better than that. And proud that this Inquisition seemed better than that, too.

“So…Skinner?” he asked, voice small. “How did you get that nickname?”

“Killed some people.”

“Skinner didn’t take kindly to nobles testing their new swords on the elves in her alienage,” Bull said.

Milin winced, “I’m so sorry.”

“Bull took me in. Now I get paid to kill shems.”

“This is actually really good behavior for her. She’s not marking her territory or anything.”

He smiled wistfully up at Bull, “She reminds me of Viddathari.”

“Ah, Gatt. Poor bastard,” he shook his head, then signaled the barkeeper. “Let’s have a drink in his honor.”

“I don’t have anything to pay for it with,” he admitted, shifting in his chair. He hadn’t even thought about that until now. The Inquisition was paying for his room and board, but he didn’t have any money.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s on me, kid.”

He leaned up to kiss his cheek, “Thank you.”

Of course, he took one sip and started coughing it up. His cheeks flushed from embarrassment. It wasn’t like he’d never drunk anything before. His Clan brewed mead, and Dorian sometimes let him sip his wine, but this stuff was just vile.

“Why do people drink that?” he asked, eyes tearing.

“They don’t. Only the Chief is stupid enough to use it for anything other than stripping paint,” Krem said. “Here. Have a drink of mine to kill the taste.”

He did with a grateful nod. Beer. He didn’t care for the stuff, but it was an improvement over that other swill.

Milin kissed him on the cheek, as well.

“That’s not a Dalish thing, is it?” Krem glanced towards the woman with the vallaslin. “I haven’t seen you going around kissing everyone who buys you a drink. Rocky, maybe, but not you.”

He ducked his head. He was being such an idiot tonight, what was wrong with him? So stupid…

“You’re Dalish?” she asked. “You look old enough to have gotten your vallaslin years ago.”
“I…I was about to,” his voice sounded so weak. He clenched his fists. Dammit. He hated being this way. “I was taken before I could.”

“Taken?” Krem said. “You mean…”

“Yeah,” Bull nodded. “We were hoping to keep it under wraps, but I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors by now. It’s true.”

“Well, fuck,” the man pushed the tankard closer to him. “By all means, finish it off. You don’t need to kiss me for it, either.”

Milin took a long pull. Creators, he could use it.

He felt like the entire bar was staring at him. He thought it’d be a relief, not having to hide his status. But no, this was worse. They all knew he was a slave, now. Probably all knew what they used him for, too. He just wanted to run back to the baths and scrub and scrub and scrub. He shouldn’t have even been speaking to a woman with Vallaslin. It dishonored her to associate with someone so disgusting. So weak. So—

The elf tapped him on the shoulder. He hadn’t even noticed her approach.

“Do you want to dance?” she asked.

“You want to dance? With me?”

“That’s what the woman said,” Iron Bull said, clapping him on the shoulder. He looked amused. Dorian wouldn’t be. He remembered the elf who’d flirted with him. His master had gotten possessive.

But if Iron Bull allowed it, then he’d be on his side of he got mad about it, right? It was just a dance.

And, unworthy or not, he really wanted to dance with her.

He stood, and she smiled. Gold hair like Hanal’ghilan, eyes that sparkled with mirth. He felt lightheaded, and not just because of the beer he’d drank too fast.

She held out her hand and he took it, putting his other hand at her waist. He laughed softly at nothing, like an idiot.

Then he realized they were just standing there, and felt even more like a fool.

He started to lead, slowly at first, despite the fast pace of the music. He wasn’t sure if the dances he’d learned were the same as her clan’s. But she seemed to have no problem following, so he went faster, feet falling into familiar steps despite unfamiliar music, and whirling around with a big grin on his face until the song ended.

The next one was slower and he asked, “Do you want to keep going?”

“If you tell me something first, yes.”

His eyebrows furrowed. That depended on what she wanted to know. He might have to lie to her, “What?”

“You said you were about to get your vallaslin. Which Creator did you have in mind?”
“I always thought I’d honor Ghilan’nain,” he said, relieved at something he could answer.

“Ah, a gentle soul. I can see that,” she said. They started swaying to the rhythm. “But the way you said it makes me think you’ve changed your mind?”

“You’ve heard what they say about me, that when I was found after the Conclave, there was a woman behind me? I saw her. Radiating light like the son. The humans believe she was Andraste.”

“And what do you believe?”

“That she was Mythal. She’d answered my prayers for protection before,” he said. “But…maybe don’t tell the shems that.”

She leaned in to whisper in his ear, her hot breath tickling him, “As long as you don’t tell the shems I fight with a staff, your secret is safe with me.”

Oh, she was a mage! He thought he’d sensed someone casting magic at Redcliffe. But wait…

“Isn’t it obvious you have a staff?”

“I tell them it’s a bow.”

“A bow…doesn’t it have a crystal? For concentration of magic?”

“You mean the special Dalish aiming rock?”

He laughed so hard a tear leaked from his eye, “Does anyone actually believe that?”

“You know the dwarf Varric? What am I saying, how could you not, he knows everybody. But anyway, Varric was telling me that he had friends in Kirkwall who would openly bare staves and cast magic in front of Templars, and they somehow didn’t even notice. You know, that lyrium that they take must do a number to their heads,” she said. “The problem is that even dull blades can kill, especially if there’s a lot of them.”

“You’re an archer, not an apostate. Got it,” he nodded. “But if you were, I would stay away from the man with the fur around his shoulders, Cullen. He is sharp, for a blade. If you see any other archers, I would warn them as well. More should be coming, in the next few days.”

“Ah, the alliance. I heard of that. Surprised the sharp blade would allow that.”

“Shemlen titles are weird, but I’m pretty sure the sharp blade isn’t in charge. The other three supported it, or at least tolerated it,” he explained. “Speaking of which, if you or another archer find yourselves with blades pointed at you, the woman in gold, Josephine, is a friend. The spymaster Leliana might help, too, if you have no other choice.”

“And the Seeker?”

“That’s hard to say,” she seemed so hard at times, but he’d seen her be soft, too. He paused. “What’s your name?”

“It’s Dalish, of course.”

“No, I mean, what did you mother call you?”

“Well, my mother called me da’harel more than anything.”
“A troublemaker, then? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” he grinned. She didn’t seem to want to tell him just yet. Better not to push it.

Maybe it had something to do with her vallaslin. For someone so full of life, it seemed odd for her to choose to honor the guide of the dead.

The second song ended, and the bard went to get a drink.

“Well…thank you for dancing with me,” he said, pulling away. He still wasn’t worthy of her, but it was a nice diversion, for a while.

“Any time. You’re a good dancer,” she said, and tilted her head to the side. “So, are you and the chief together?”

“No. Dorian and Bull are together. I’m just…” the surrogate. The slave.

“Just what?”

“It’s complicated,” he shook his head. He was starting to really feel the alcohol, now, and didn’t want to let anything slip. “I should go.”

Chapter End Notes

Milin just Shepard'd out of that conversation :(

“Still out,” he shut the door behind him and started fumbling with his leathers for bed.

“Did you have a nice time?”

“I danced with a girl.”

The man looked up from his book, frowning, “Did you now?”

“Are you displeased with me, master?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it that strongly, but—”

“I thought so. You objected when that elf with the king flirted with me, too,” he said. He should stop talking. He knew he should stop talking. But the words just kept coming. “Why do you even care? You don’t love me like you love Bull.”

He marked his place and put the book aside, “Maker’s breath, what’s gotten into you? This isn’t like you.”

It was. He’d just forgotten how to question things. Viddathari helped him start remembering again.

“I don’t want to have sex,” his whole body started to shake. He knew there were ways to make him have sex, even make him want it. Master said once that he wouldn’t drug again, but he’d been so careful not to give him a reason to.

“Very well.”

Milin looked up, and their eyes met.

Then he heard footsteps.

“Bull’s coming.”

“You left in a hurry,” the Qunari said as he entered. “Everything fine?”

“Milin doesn’t want to have sex tonight,” Dorian said, crossing his arms.

No, he'd said that he didn't want to have sex, not that he didn't want to have sex tonight.

“Probably couldn't even get it up, with how fast that booze went to his head,” he shrugged. “Still doesn’t explain why you left. Looked like you were having fun. Even saw you laugh, for once. I have witnesses, too.”

Bull was fine with this? All this time, could he have been refusing without repercussions? No… no, they didn’t accept his refusal the first night. Things had just changed.

He wished he’d known exactly when.
Milin didn’t have a good answer to his question, so he stayed quiet.

“Pretty girls can make you tongue tied, huh? You’re not the first man that’s happened to,” he laughed. “Anyway, Dorian, I’ve heard some whispers today. Made a judgement call.”

“‘Judgement call,’ is what you say what you’ve done something you know I won’t like.”

“Hey, not my fault. Guess that dwarf couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Rumor has it that Milin was a slave, and we freed him. Tried to encourage that version. But we should talk long-term strategy,” he glanced at Milin. “Remember what we discussed earlier? Our plan?”

What plan?

He sighed, “I suppose that may be for the best. On paper, at least. Difficult, outside of Tevinter, but not impossible. I will look into it while you two are in Orlais.”

“You aren’t coming with us?” Milin asked.

“As much as I’d love to dive into a new pool of sharks, no. Bull is the trained spy, perfect for Orlais. I’d be better suited to getting a closer look at that giant hole in the sky. I’ve been told that Solas knows a thing or two about it, and I’d like to pick his brain as well. I’ve also been told he’s a bit of a tit, but the ones who know what they’re talking about usually are,” he said, then sighed. “Besides, Felix is…unwell.”

He’d been unwell for some time, but the way Dorian said that made him think there'd been a turn for the worse. Milin crawled into bed next to him, snuggling into his neck. He knew what it was like to lose a dear friend.

How was it that he could fear someone and feel sorry for them at the same time? His head made no sense.

Milin woke to voices, the glow of the candles now extinguished.

“Out like a light, for once. Let him sleep,” Bull’s voice said, in as close to a whisper the giant could manage. “You doin’ better now?”

“Just a nightmare, amatus. Nothing I and every other mage hasn’t experienced a thousand times over,” Dorian’s tone was casual, but he could hear the weariness there.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?”

“Those advisers of his are determined to ship him off, whether we like it or not. And it’s not like I can order him to stay without arousing suspicion. Not that I totally object. I admire the Inquisition’s goals and all. But Orlais worries me,” he said. “I’ve heard what they do to elves there. At least, with you with him, I’ll know he’s safe.”

The Qunari made a sound that might have been a laugh, “That’s fucking rich coming from a ‘Vint.”

“This again? Orlesian elves face inescapable poverty punctuated by massacres to keep the population down. How is having the option of selling one’s services in exchange for a decent standard of living for oneself and one’s family worse than that? Besides, there are plenty of elven laetans, even the occasional elven senator.”

“You do realize that plenty of elves didn’t sell themselves. Milin was taken.”
He sounded angry, righteous. Like the man Viddathari told him he used to be.

“‘Rescued’ would probably be the more apt term. The man who sold him said that he was separated from his Clan, lost and weaponless, the poor thing. It was a good thing they found him when they did or he would have starved to death. You remember what he was like at the beginning, skinny as a twig, looked at every grape as if it was spun from gold,” he sighed. “It’s selfish, what we’re going to do to him for the sake of appearances. He’s going to feel abandoned, rejected…”

Lavellan kept his eyes closed, trying to remain perfectly still. Creators, what were they going to do to him? Was this plan? Were they going to leave him alone again?

And after he’d provoked Cullen, too. Without their protection, he wasn’t sure what the Templar would do. He’d need to go to Josephine, beg her for help. Maybe she would take pity on him.

“So you’ll just make sure he knows it’s not like that, and he’ll be fine. In fact, he’ll probably be happy.”

Now he was just confused.

“I hope you’re right about that. He’s sensitive, you know. Just before you came in, he said to me that I don’t love him like I love you. Also been acting out. Danced with some girl to make me jealous, apparently. I believe he wants more attention,” he wanted attention, yes. But what he really desired was the attention of an equal, like Bull and Dorian had. Maybe even with a woman. Since that wasn’t possible, though, he’d settle to just have any affection without fear of strings attached. “Yet another reason why you must go. Part of me wishes I could, too, frankly, rather than watch my friend suffer.”

“You can’t think like that. You get to say a proper goodbye to him. Don’t squander it.”

“I know,” he heard shifting, and the sound of a brief kiss. “We should go back to sleep before we wake Milin up, too. You two have a long day of travel ahead of you. And I need my beauty sleep.”

“I’d beg to differ,” Bull flirted.

Dorian laughed softly, and then he felt them shift again. Eventually, their breathing deepened with sleep.

It took a long while for Milin to join them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys. I have the next 12 chapters written out, but I don't want to be That Guy that's always at the top of the search because I update constantly. So, how often would you all want an update? Once a week?
Death

Chapter Notes

I added graphic depictions of violence to the warnings.

He had freckles.

Death all around him, and that was what his mind fixated on.

Freckles.

The man he’d just killed had freckles on his legs.

Probably on the rest of him, too, but he couldn’t see them, because of the armor, the helmet. The woman who’d left the notes, the one who’d said the word ‘elf’ like a curse despite being one herself, had taken their breeches, so he could see the freckles there.

And the blood.

He’d shot him in the thigh, and the blood spurted from him like a geyser. He’d spent his last moments screaming, writhing around the ground in panic until eventually the blood loss made him pass out. Milin should have put another arrow through his heart or brain. But in the moment, he’d just stared, open-mouthed like a fish. Shameful, to make such a slow, messy kill. Gentle Ghilan’nain would be appalled at the unnecessary suffering.

He didn’t…he hadn’t even meant to shoot. He’d panicked. And it’d just happened.

Careless. Stupid. Disgraceful.

Such a poor reason for someone to die. These men had no quarrel with him, or even the Inquisition. They’d just been hired by the wrong man.

No one else seemed bothered in the least. Death was so…casual in this Creators-damned country. The mage, Vivienne, had frozen a man for being rude, and would have killed him without a second thought if he hadn't begged her not to. And now, this elf found their deaths funny, giggling to herself about breeches.

“So, Herald of Andraste,” she said. “You’re a strange one. I’d like to join.”

“Okay,” he said numbly, not taking his eyes off the man. The freckles. He’d been sent here to get support. Talking with the Clerics hadn’t worked out—templars punching women in the street left them distracted. So, disturbing or not, she was a skilled archer, and seemed to have connections, and wanted to help them. He’d let Vivienne (whose coldness terrified him) join, and that Grey Warden (less cold, but just as unafraid of taking lives) join, so he might as well let her, too. “We’re going back to Haven. You can come, if you’d like.”

He didn’t care, at this point. All he wanted was to get out of Orlais. He couldn’t stand another second here.
“Hey, kid,” he felt Bull’s large, warm hand at his shoulder. “Let’s get some air.”

He let the Qunari steer him outside to the horses. Absentmindedly, he started stroking the black and white spotted mare. She was hot-blooded, and moody. She calmed when he spoke to her, though, even if she couldn’t speak back.

“I’d tend a fire through rain and dark,

To keep you dry ‘til spring

I’d craft you bows of iron bark

So I could hear you sing…”

He thought idly of the dance that went with it. He wondered if Dalish knew it.

“Nice song,” the Iron Bull said. “So…are you doing alright?”

He shook his head, “Never killed a person before.”

“Thought that might be it. How’re you feeling?”

“Strange,” he said. “I’ve tried so hard to avoid killing anyone, but now that I have, I don’t feel like I thought I would. I feel bad that it wasn’t quick and painless like I was taught, I feel bad that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I don’t feel bad that I did it. Is there something wrong with me?”

“That’s pretty normal, actually,” he said. “It was self-defense. He would have killed you.”

“I keep seeing his freckles.”

“Also normal. The first guy I killed was a man with curly hair. I don’t remember his face. But I remember that hair,” he squeezed his shoulder. “It’s your head trying to protect yourself. You focus on a detail, so you don’t think about everything else. Helps you not to think of them as real people.”

“I don’t want to turn into someone who takes a life like it’s nothing.”

“I don’t want you to, either,” the Iron Bull said, putting an arm around him. He leaned into him. “Protect yourself, but try to remember every kill. Hold on to those details. You don’t want to get to the point where they all get blurred together and then you don’t think of them at all. Life can get real cheap, real fast. Then it’s all too easy for shit to get messed up.”

~o~O~o~

Despite their larger group, the trip back was faster. He was getting stronger. Too slowly for his liking, but noticeably. Plus they didn’t have to fight back bandits as much. One haughty look and a, “are you quite certain you want to do this, dear?” from Vivienne sent lesser men running. Her views on mages were bizarre to him, but he was glad she was on their side.

And the one instance where they were actually attacked, he was glad for Blackwall and Sera, too.

He killed again, that time. It was a clean kill, arrow through the less armored region of the armpit and straight to the heart. He died instantly. This time, what stuck out in his mind was the sound he made as he died. A shuddering, haunting exhale. But it was easier to cope with. Maybe because he’d already done it once.
Milin returned the horse to Dennet’s care, and thanked her for her help, stroking her nose and singing:

“For you, I’d face down Fen’harel
I’d slay beasts great and small
I’d brave the lands where spirits dwell
So I could hear you call…”

Another voice joined his at the last line, and he whirled to see Dalish behind him. He hadn’t even heard her, what with the clanking of the training grounds.

He smiled sheepishly at her, embarrassed but glad to see her again, and joined her for the chorus:

“Elgara solas, elgara vallas
Ar nuvenin na’revas
Elgara solas, elgara vallas
Ar nuvenin na’vhenas."

“Afraid I’ll have to stop, there,” she said. “I’ve forgotten the other verses.”

“I could teach you,” he offered.

“I’d like that. Next time we go out drinking and dancing, maybe?”

There was going to be a next time?

He flushed, and cleared his throat, “Yeah, I… that would be good. Um, how are all the m--

“Ar nuvenin na’vhenas.”

“The Marchers? This is Ferelden, not Starkhaven.”

Milin let out a groan. That was awful.

“The archers are doing well. A few verbal spats with some of the dull blades. No trouble from the sharp one, yet.”

“I’m happy to hear it,” he said. Then caught sight of his master embracing Bull, looking distraught. His face sank. “Sorry. I think… I have to go.”

“Already? Okay, sure. I’ll talk to you later.”

He nodded, bade her goodbye, and crossed over to Dorian.

He tugged on the man’s sleeve.

Dorian pulled away to give him a hug, kissing the top of his head, “Oh, my pet. I knew it was coming, he was ill, living on borrowed time, but…”

“Felix?” Milin guessed.

“He’s dead. The Blight caught up with him.” Dorian sighed. “I need a drink.”
“Good thing I brought a bottle back with us, then,” Bull said, putting a hand at the small of the Tevinter’s back, leading them to their room. “It’s that frilly bubbly stuff. You’ll like it”

Dorian settled into a stuffed chair by the fire, and he snuggled into his lap as Bull poured the drinks. Three glasses.

He took a sip of his and smiled. It kind of tingled, and it was sweet. Better than what he’d drank at the tavern.

“It’s good,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You have expensive tastes, pretty,” his master smirked. Then a wistful expression crossed his face. “Felix used to sneak me treats like this when I was working late in his father’s study. ‘Don’t get into trouble on my behalf,’ I’d tell him. ‘I like trouble,’ he’d say. Tevinter could use more mages like him. Those who put the good of others before themselves. Even in illness, Felix was the best of us. With him around, you knew things could be better.”

“Does Alexius know?”

“He was allowed to be at his bedside in his last moments. Josephine’s doing, I believe. And he attended the funeral,” he said, downing the flute and holding it out for more. “We didn’t speak.”

“Weren’t kidding about needing a drink, huh?” Bull said, refilling his glass.

“How are you holding up?” Milin asked. He stroked his free hand across his cheek, noting the dark circles under the man’s eyes. Nightmares, he thought. Worse than usual.

“I’ll manage. Distraction helps. And with that large hole in the sky, distraction is always present.”

“There are better ways to be distracted,” Bull said. He crossed behind the chair and started rubbing the mage’s shoulders.

He put his own glass down. He could see where this was going, and his stomach didn’t feel like it could handle any more. Back in Orlais, he and Iron Bull shared a tent, but the Qunari just kissed and held him. Sometimes, he’d pleasure himself, and looked him up and down like he was tempted to touch him, but refrained.

Now they were back, though, and he could feel Dorian growing hard beneath him… he wasn’t sure his luck would hold.

Lips pressed against his throat, and he bared his neck to the wet kisses. It was automatic at this point. And it wasn’t like this part didn’t feel good.

Maybe he could tell them no. It might work. It worked last time. Sort of.

“Milin,” his master said, drawing him from his thoughts. He swallowed, heart racing in anticipation of what his orders would be this time. “Do you want to have sex tonight?”

He blinked. He…he’d heard him wrong. He was sure he had.

“What?”

“Do you want to have sex tonight?” he repeated. After a beat of Milin staring at him dumbly, he continued. “I realize this is an odd question. But I spoke to Felix of our situation before he died, and he…let’s just say he and I had differing opinions on the topic. He told me to start asking
explicitly. And here we are.”

Would there be consequences if he said no? Would they start asking this every time? How long would it be before they stopped respecting his ‘no’ and did whatever they wanted anyway? Was it even worth it?

Gathering his courage, he shook his head, “No, master.”

“Oh,” the mage’s face sank, and Milin looked away. Dorian had just lost a dear friend, and instead of comforting him, he’d rejected him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I...you know I will still do as you say, master.”

“Don’t,” the Iron Bull interrupted. He moved to face them. “If Dorian wanted his slave to lie, he should have given you a lash across the back and demanded it.”

Milin recoiled.

They never called him ‘slave.’ Never. He knew what he was, but the word stung worse than the threat of violence.

The mage made a hushing sound and pet his hair, glaring at Bull, “I am not that manner of master, and you know it.”

“I know you haven’t even looked into the plan yet.”

“That’s not true. I’ve filled out the paperwork, and I will send it once the Breach is closed. He doesn’t need that kind of drama right now.”

Lavellan curled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around himself. They almost never argued, and now they were fighting about him, and he didn’t know what was going on.

“Fine. I guess that makes sense. I’m sorry,” he said, relenting. He took Milin by the hand and kissed his cheek. “Sorry to you, too. You know I didn’t mean that. Trying to shock Dorian here out of complacency.”

“What’s the plan?” he asked softly.

“It’s a good thing. Just don’t want to tell you yet, in case you get your hopes up and it can’t be done.”

He glanced at Dorian, who didn’t seem so certain.

Viddathari once said that Bull’s title under the Qun, Hissrad, meant liar. But, between the two of them, he liked Iron Bull better. He treated him more like a person, sometimes. So he wasn’t sure which one to trust. Maybe neither.

He climbed off Dorian’s lap, “May I be excused, while you have sex?”

They exchanged glances.

“Yes,” the mage said. “See you in an hour?”

“Make it two,” the Iron Bull said. He sunk to one knee (his good one) before the mage, and smirked. “Ready to be distracted?”
Milin slipped out of the room to the sounds of laces being undone.

~o~O~o~

“What are you doing?” Athim asked him.

“Peeling grapes,” he said. He sat, cross-legged, in a corner of the kitchen. The scullery maids didn’t seem to mind. They just smiled at him and tried to ‘put some meat on his bones’.

He always brought them back kills whenever he had to leave Haven. Today, it was nugs. They said it wasn’t necessary, that they would have given him the grapes, anyway. But he knew it was hard for them to get them (it was hard to get anything up here in the mountains, much less exotic fruits) and wanted to repay them somehow.

“How come?”

“Dorian likes them peeled. And I wanted to do something nice for him. His friend died.” It also got him out of the room while they ‘distracted’ each other, in case they changed their minds.

His mind flashed back to that first night, when he’d cried, begged, and they didn’t care. He knew that they sort of cared now, and he didn’t think it would get that bad again, but he also knew it wouldn’t last. He couldn’t bring himself to hope for that, or it’d hurt all the worse when the respite ended.

“Do you want to sit and talk with me?” he offered. He hadn’t seen his friend in a while, and wanted to know what’d been going on since he’d left.

The elf shook his head, “I do, but Lady Cassandra is trying to find you. There’s a meeting at the wartable. I’ll finish peeling, if you’d like?”

He set his work out of the way and stood, “It’s okay. That should be enough--I’ll give it to him, after. Thanks for letting me know.”

Milin hurried off. For a meeting to be this late, it was probably important, right?

“It can’t be legitimate,” he heard Cullen say as he approached.

“I’ve heard rumors that say otherwise,” came Leliana’s voice. “I regret not asking him directly, now, but I did not want to insult him if it was untrue.”

If what was untrue?

“Good. You’re here,” Cassandra said grimly as he entered. “We received a letter, and are concerned about the validity of its contents.”

She looked to Josephine, who handed him a piece of paper.

Before he even read it, he knew who it was from.

The handwriting was his mother’s.
Clan Lavellan offers greetings to the Inquisition and wishes it well in sealing the Breach that has opened in the sky. While some Dalish clans hate humans and wish nothing to do with them, Clan Lavellan has always dealt fairly with all and wished only for peace. That being said, we have on occasion been forced to defend ourselves from those who saw us only as potential victims.

It has come to our attention that a member of our clan is being held captive by your Inquisition. He was taken from us with signs of force many months ago, and we find it highly unlikely that it was provoked. If he has been charged with a crime, we would appreciate knowing the charge as well as the process for appeals. If not, we demand that he be freed at once.

We await your reply,

Keeper Istimaethorial Lavellan

“It…it’s real. That’s my mother’s handwriting. She’s the Keeper of my Clan,” he choked out.

They wanted him back.

Even after his failure.

But no. They couldn’t want him. They just didn’t realize everything that had happened. How low he had fallen. Pathetic, dirty, used.

Milin steadied himself against the table, covering his mouth with one hand to suppress a sob. It didn’t work.

“Get Varric,” Cassandra whispered to the spymaster. She nodded, and a few moments later, returned with the dwarf.

Great. Even more people to witness his weakness. And yet, he was still glad he was here.

“Sharpshooter?” he asked. “Shit, what happened?”

He thrust the letter into his hand, still covering his mouth. Hot tears flowed over his cheeks. The rogue glanced it over, then sighed.

“Someone care to explain what’s going on?” Cullen demanded. Why did this have to be in front of him. “This makes no sense. Why does it say he was taken months ago? The Conclave just happened.”

He couldn’t talk. He knew, even if he tried, he couldn’t speak right now.

He shook his head.

The advisers looked to Varric.

“It’s really not my place to say.”

“We could be under attack,” the Commander said. “Now is not the time for playing games.”

The dwarf squeezed his elbow, “Mind if I tell them?”
He shrugged. What did it matter, anymore? The Chargers had mostly kept it to themselves, but there was no hiding it now.

“Sharpshooter…used to be a slave.”

Josephine gasped. The other two women exchanged looks.

“And his Clan thinks we’re the ones who enslaved him?” Cullen banged his fist onto the table, and Milin jerked back. Creators, they might go after his Clan. It wouldn’t be the first time the Templars had attacked the Dalish. Slaughtering every member to get to the Keeper and the First.

If it wasn’t for Bull and Dorian explicitly telling him not to, he would have dropped to his knees.

Milin bowed at the waist, “T-they’re not a threat to you. I’ll write them. I’ll tell them to stay away. I’ll do anything. Please.”

“Cool it on the righteous anger, Curly,” Varric said, patting his back. “Think about it. He needs an armored human getting violent like he needs a kick to the teeth.”

“A letter in your own hand might be the best path to take,” Josephine said. “One of our elven scribes could deliver a message and share news of the Inquisition’s fair treatment.”

“Agreed,” Leliana said. Milin sighed his relief. The two of them would probably be enough to hold Cullen back. “And now that it is confirmed, I say we use this information to our advantage. Andraste herself was a slave from Tevinter. This could give credence to his title of Herald. Was it the Tevinters who took you?”

He nodded.

“What I want to know is how Dorian and Iron Bull fit into this,” Cassandra said.

He gave them the same vague, half-truth he’d given Athim. A magister tried to use him in a blood magic ritual, but they saved him.

They seemed to be satisfied with that answer.

The question was: would his Clan?

His mother always knew when he was hiding something.

~o~O~o~

Keeper Istimethoria Lavellan,

I am not a captive of the Inquisition.

He sighed, and put the pen back in its well.

“It doesn’t sound right,” he said to Varric.

They were sitting in the dwarf’s tent. He still had time until Dorian and Bull would be expecting him, and Varric had offered to help him compose the message to his Clan. He looked it over and frowned.

“Lose the formality. This is a letter to your mother, not a foreign dignitary. Speak from the heart. Tell her how you’re doing. She’s hasn’t heard from you in months and she’s worried. She’ll want to
know that, first.”

He crumpled the page up and got out a fresh one, “I wish they had just forgotten about me. It’d be better that way.”

“You don’t mean that. Why are you saying that?”

“Because I can’t go back.”

“I mean, yeah, the hole in the sky is kind of important. But once all this is over, I don’t see why not. Your family obviously loves you. Not everyone’s so lucky.”

He bowed his head, “Because I’m not worthy.” And because he was owned.

“Who told you that? Bianca and I will have a talk with them.”

“No one. Just…” he clenched his fists. “When the Tevinters came for me, I froze. I couldn’t protect my clan or myself. And I’m so weak now. Can’t shoot as far, can’t run as fast,” can’t fight them like Viddathari would want him to. “I’m constantly afraid. I hate it.”

“In times like these, being afraid doesn’t mean you’re weak, it means you’re smart. We’re all petrified, some of us just hide it better. And you’ll get your speed and strength back, not that you really need it from what I’ve seen,” he said. “Now, what do you usually call your mother?”

“Mamae.”

“Start with that.”

*Mamae,*

The words flowed easier now.

*I’m okay. The people treat me well, here. The Inquisition aren’t the ones who caught me. They’re trying to help me.*

He was purposefully vague. The less they knew about Tevinter, the better.

*I had a vision of a woman in light. She blessed me, and I can close Rifts, now. And they think, with enough power, I can close the Breach, too.*

*I love you so much. You and Dae and Nali and all the rest. But this is important. I don't know if I can come back.*

*Love,*

*Milin*

“Much better. Just have to wait for the ink to dry, and we’ll send it off,” Varric praised. “You want to do some training, in the meantime?”

He nodded, “Can we try it blindfolded?”

“Sure thing.”

Lavellan knelt, crossing his arms behind his back. Varric chose rope, this time.
“Now, what’s the easiest way to escape from capture?”

“Not get captured to begin with,” the words were drilled into his mind by now.

“Exactly. Run fast, fight dirty.”

He fastened a cloth over his eyes, and Milin’s breath hitched. But this is why he’d asked him to do this in the first place. He had to face his fears.

“Go.”

He took some breaths, trying to force the panic down. Trying to think.

Step one, focus on what you do have. You have your hearing, use it. He could hear breathing, just one other person in the room. Behind him and to his left. Awake, not asleep. No one outside, that he could hear. One person, he had a chance. More than that, and it might be better to wait until the odds were better. What else? His legs were free, he could use that.

Step two, work fast. If you’re bound, they think you’re helpless. Use the element of surprise.

He flung himself onto his back, shoving his backside, followed by his feet, between his arms. He got the blindfold off just as a shout told him he’d been discovered. Rocking backward, he landed a kick to his attacker’s stomach, winding him to buy him time. Lavellan scrambled to his feet, and only stopped to grab a dagger on his way, then bolted.

He found some boxes to hide behind in an alley, and worked at the knots. Finally free, he went to the tavern, where Varric was waiting for him.

“That was some kick, Sharpshooter,” the dwarf grinned, rubbing his stomach. “And your fastest time yet. Congratulations.”

He pushed a pint of water over to him, and Milin gulped it down, “Thanks.”

“Speed ain’t shite if you end up getting caught again,” Sera said, crossing over to them. “Made enough noise to wake the dead runnin’ around. You would have been caught again for sure. Getting free of locks and stuff is great, yeah, but you need to learn how to sneak.”

He remembered the night they met her, when she’d appeared out of nowhere on that staircase. He hadn’t seen or heard her coming. That would be a useful skill to have.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Varric said.

“Would you teach me?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “You’re not one of them big burly sword types and you’ve got no fire or lightning or nothing to give you away, so it’s easy. All you have to do is, like, find a shadow and blend in. Then, when no one’s lookin’, hop to the next one, yeah? Here, like this.”

She demonstrated, and then had him try it. First in the tavern, then the Chantry, and then through the trees. He picked this up much faster than the escape training. Hunters had to learn to walk quietly, hide in the underbrush. He just had to learn how to apply it to a different environment, was all.

“So…you were like a slave or something I heard,” she said when they took a break. “Everyone’s talking about it.”
“I still am,” he looked away. Not that he was surprised at the question, really. Sister Nightingale must have spread the word. She said she would.

“Shite. Rich magic-y piss-tits think they can own a person,” Sera said. “You’re alright, you know. Thought you might be all high and mighty what with the Herald thing, but you’re alright. Servants like you, kitchen girls like you, and a whole bunch of big people don’t. The things with the mages was stupid, and you're all elfy even without the stupid face stuff, but if some frigg in a robe tries to mess with you, point me to him and I’ll fill him with arrows, yeah?”

He smiled. The woman kind of scared him at first, but she seemed to genuinely want to help people. So she couldn't be that bad, right?

"I think you're alright, too, Sera,” he said.

~o~O~o~

“How sweet. Thank you, pretty,” Dorian said, as he handed him the grapes. The room smelled like sex, but they were done. He’d listened in to make sure before he entered. It’d been way longer than two hours, anyhow.

“The advisers know. About me. It’s not just the Chargers, now.”

“Know what, exac—oh. How?”

“My clan heard about me. They sent a letter demanding that the Inquisition free me. I wrote them back to say I was fine, and that I might not be coming back. The Breach is too important.”

The man pulled him to his still-bare chest and combed the braid out of his hair with his fingers, “You must miss them. Poor thing. Maybe we can arrange a visit?”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Kadan.”

It was good that the Iron Bull dissuaded him. His clan would kill Dorian on sight, if they knew.
Defiance

“And what’s your name?”

“Bynard, your worship,” like the others, the man did that thing where he put his fist to his chest. Cassandra had assured him it was a good thing, when he’d asked her. The shemlens acted weird when he did it back to them, though, so he just nodded with a smile.

“Mine’s Milin. Thank you for volunteering, Bynard.”

These mages were all risking their lives to try to close the Breach. The least he could do was learn each of their names and thank them individually, on the way to the Rift. He already knew Dorian, Solas, and Fiona, of course, but there were twenty three others who were able and willing to help. Vivienne had opted out—she’d said that at least some mages had to stay back in case things went horribly wrong. By the tone of her voice, she assumed that they would.

He could feel the itching. They were getting close.

As they approached the giant crystal, his palm sparked opened, emitting its strange green light.

“Mages, stand ready,” the grand enchanter said. The men and women took up position in rows behind them, her at the lead.

“Focus past the Herald,” Solas commanded. “Let his will draw from you.”

The itch became a burning pain, but he struggled forward, holding his arm up to the rift. The spark became a flicker, became a crackle, became a continuous, blazing arc reaching up towards the crystal.

When the two connected, he was blasted to the ground, the air knocked from his lungs. His ears rang as he laid there, dazed. But alive.

“You did it,” Cassandra said.

Sure enough, when he opened his eyes, no trace of the Breach remained.

“No,” he said. She held out her arm, and he took it, letting her pull him to his feet. He turned to the mages and raised his voice. “We did it!”

The mages cheered.

~o~O~o~

The tavern was deafeningly loud with music and laughing and chattering. Everyone and their brother was trying to give him food, buy him drinks. Half the women and a handful of men linked arms with him and spun around to the tune. Dorian and Bull included, when they weren’t drinking.

It took Sera’s trick of blending into the shadows for him to slip away for a moment and give his poor ears a rest from the cacophony.

He sank against an outside wall and closed his eyes.

“Not disturbing you, am I?”
He grinned. He knew that voice.

“It’s fine, Dalish. How are you?”

“A lot better now that that awful thing is gone, thanks to you.”

“There were a lot of people that helped,” he said. “I couldn’t have done it on my own. You know that. You were there.”

“Of course you’d say that,” she smiled. “Can I join you?”

Milin nodded, and she stepped closer. She smelled of wood-smoke. Must have been casting fire magic recently.

“You know, you still have to teach me that last verse.”

Milin grinned.

“I’ll love you ‘til our autumn years/ When we’ve grown old and gray,” he didn’t know whether it was the thrill of victory, the smile of a beautiful woman, or the single pint of drink was stronger than he’d thought, but he took another step forward, and put his hands at her waist. Cold, from the metal of her armor. Her arms linked around his shoulders. “I’d take your hand and lean in near/ So I can hear you say…”

The clang of bells sent him whirling.

Cassandra had told him once that if bells rang outside of a Chantry service, to meet her at the entrance.

“We’re under attack,” he said, drawing his bow. “I need to get to the gates.”

“I’ll come with you.”

~o~O~o~

“One watchguard reporting,” the commander reported to Cassandra as they approached. “A massive force, the bulk over the mountain.”


“None.”

“None?”

A voice called through the gates, pleading, “I can’t come in unless you open.”

Without thinking, Milin ran to let the distressed man inside.

A hulking, armored man stepped forward, and he nocked an arrow, only for him to collapse to the ground. Behind him was a skinny figure holding a bloody knife. Dressed in patched rags, he was too tall to be an elf, and his face was partly concealed by the brim of a wide hat. As soon as he spoke, he could tell that this was the owner of that desperate voice.

“I’m Cole. I came to warn you, to help. People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know.”
“Who are they?” he asked gently, putting his weapon away. Whatever his story, he’d just seen him strike down a man twice his size, yet all he wanted to do was hug him.

“The Templars come to kill you.”

“Templars?” Cullen demanded. The young man backed away like a frightened animal at the sight of him. He’s a mage, he realized. But, no, he used a dagger. Why would a mage fight with daggers? “Is this the response to our talks with the mages? Attacking blindly?”

“The Red Templars went to the Elder One. You know him. He knows you. You took his mages. There,” he pointed off to the distance. At the precipice of a ledge, two figures stood. One shemlen man, and the other…something else. Something distorted. Like a creature of the Fade, but with the face of a human. “He’s very angry that you took his mages.”

There were so many men marching towards them. And they were all Templars? They’d slaughter all the mages here. And they’d slaughter everyone who got in their way. He felt like a rabbit surrounded by wolves.

“Commander, please,” he begged. “You have to stop them. Talk to them. Anything.”

“It is too late for that, if that monster is controlling them. Haven is no fortress. Get out there to the catapults and hit them with everything you can,” he drew his sword. “Mages! You have sanction to engage them. That is Sampson, he will not make it easy. Inquisition, with the Herald. For your lives, for all of us!”

Milin obeyed. He’d never used one of these human inventions before, but with an army so large bearing down on them, it was hard to miss. Cassandra, Cole, and Dalish kept the attackers off his back.

At least until the dragon came.

They fled to the Chantry, helping whoever they could along the way.

So many of the dead littered the ground. Humans. Elves. Creators, the bastards even attacked the horses in their stables.

He prayed to Mythal for another miracle. They needed one.

~o~O~o~

Yet another wave defeated, but they were forced back to regroup.

Bull had gathered his Chargers around him like a mother hen, and he heard Skinner of all people fretting over Dalish.

“You look pale. Stitches, get over here!”

“I always look pale. It’s a bit difficult to sunbathe in freezing temperatures,” she said. But he could hear the weariness in her voice. She didn’t seem injured, but a few times, he had seen her stumble back without so much as being touched. It worried him.

Dorian held out a blue vial to her, “Here. I’ve spoken with Cullen about the abilities of southern Templars. Her magic has been drained, she needs lyrium.”

She took it with a nod, and he instantly saw a little color return to her face.
When did Dorian talk with Cullen? More importantly, why? Wouldn’t it be better to give him a wide berth? And why would Cullen tell him anything that could help a mage against a Templar? It made no sense.

He didn’t have time to ask, though, before the door to the Chantry swung open again, and Cole came through.

Wait…but Cole was with him just a second ago. When did he leave? And who was that he was supporting?

Roderick.

The man who’d wanted him executed.

“He tried to stop a Templar. The blade went deep. He’s going to die,” the young man said. Milin helped him lower Roderick to a chair.

“What a charming boy.”

“Herald,” Cullen interrupted. “Our position is not good. That dragon destroyed any advantage you might have earned us.”

“I’ve seen an archdemon,” Cole said. “I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”

“I don’t care what it looks like, it’s carving a path for that army. They’ll kill everyone in Haven.”

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village. He only wants the Herald.”

Milin tried to swallow in a suddenly dry throat, “If my life can save all these people…”

Maybe that’s why Mythal had kept him alive so far. Maybe that was his purpose.

“It won’t. He wants to kill you, no one else matters, but he’ll crush them, kill them anyway. I don’t like him.”

“You don’t like—” Cullen made an exasperated noise. “Herald. There are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was when one of the trebuchets made an avalanche. We could turn the remaining ones, cause one last slide. We’d die. But we can decide how. Many don’t get that choice.”

“Yes, that,” Cole said. “Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies.”

He hadn’t heard the man say anything. How could he know that?

Still, he listened.

There was an escape route, apparently, a path only used in the summer.

Cullen said it might work.

“I’ll cause the avalanche,” Milin said. “The rest of you, get out of here.”

“It’ll kill you,” Dorian protested.

“There are worse things,” he stood on tiptoes to kiss his forehead. “I think…I was meant for this. Please, Dorian. So many have already died. I don’t want you to be one of them.”
He took Viddathari’s bow, and handed it to Iron Bull, “I can’t use it against snow. Give it to someone it can help. That’s the Qunari way, right? Not to waste anything useful? He’d like that.”

“Kid, no. There are still Red Templars out there.”

“They won’t see me if I don’t let them.”

With one last glance to Dalish, he slipped into the shadows.

There were so many more things he wanted to do, to say. But the more he lingered, the less chance he had. And if they couldn’t see him, they couldn’t follow him.

As he aimed, he prayed for Bull and Dorian, for Sera and Varric and Solas and his other companions that he had yet to really get to know, for the advisers, for Cole, for Dalish and Krem and the Chargers, for the mages, for Athim and the servants, for Viddathari, for his parents and sister and Clan.

Red Templars passed him by, looking, but not seeing. The closer they came, the more wrongness he felt. He remembered the red lyrium growing out of his friends in the future, and shuddered. This had to be enough to stop that future from happening. It just had to.

“Andruil, guide my aim,” he whispered, reaching the shemlen contraption. But before he could fire, a blast knocked him onto his back.

And out of the shadows. Exposed.

The feeling of wrongness intensified, and his ears flattened in terror. He turned his head to see that not-shemlen, that not-Fade creature, bear down on him.

With a roar, the dragon landed behind him, and he scrambled away from its gaping maw, only for that thing to stop it with a mere wave of his hand, “Enough.”

He had that kind of control over it? Oh, Creators, this was so bad.

“Pretender, you toy with forces beyond your ken. No more,” he said. “Know me. Know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One. The will that is Corypheus. You will kneel.”

“You are not my master,” he said, in a voice he wished was louder, stronger. But he knew that this Corypheus spoke the truth. Pain, starvation, drugs, fear... enough pressure and the body would always submit, even if the mind despised it.

“You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not,” he produced a metal orb, held it aloft as it started to shine as if lit from within. “I am here for the Anchor. The process of removing it begins now.”

“The Anchor?”

Corypheus reached out to him, and his Mark opened like a newly stitched wound being ripped apart.

“It is your fault, ‘Herald.’ You and that elf interrupted a ritual years in the planning. And instead of dying like him, you stole its purpose,” he said. With a gesture, Milin dropped to his knees in agony. Just as Corypheus said he would. Viddathari would have been able to stand up to him. He was
weak. So pathetically weak. But at least every second he suffered, every second this thing basked
in listening to his own damned self-important voice instead of going after the others, they got
closer to escape. He clung to that thought like a lifeline. “I do not know how you survived. But
what marks you as Touched, what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens. And you
used the Anchor to undo my work. The gall!”

“What is this thing? What are you trying to do?” he asked through gritted teeth. Keep him talking.
Buy more time.

“It is meant to bring certainty where there is none. For you, the certainty that I would always come
for it,” he seized him by the wrist and held him aloft, his feet dangling off the ground. The pain
paled in comparison to the Mark. “I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the
Old Gods of the empire in person. I found only chaos and corruption. Dead whispers. For a
thousand years I was confused,” he could have told him that. Every Dalish child knew that the
Creators had been betrayed by Fen’Harel and locked away. “No more. I have gathered the will to
return under no name but my own, to champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world.
Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the throne of the Gods, and it was empty.”

“Because you were unworthy,” he challenged, eyes narrowed. Even if he had truly reached their
city, the Creators would not deign to show themselves to something so corrupt.

“Silence!” Corypheus flung him against a trebuchet as if he was a ragdoll. He gasped, the air
knocked from his lungs. “The Anchor is permanent. You have spoilt it with your stumbling.”

Carefully, he slipped a knife from his belt behind his back. It was the one he’d grabbed during his
last escape practice. He’d tried to return it, but the dwarf told him to keep it, Just in case,
sharpsixooter.

Somehow he doubted that needing to bury Haven in snow to save everyone from a dragon and the
Elder One was the case Varric had been thinking of.

Milin’s hand shook around the hilt, and he took a slow breath the way Varric had taught him. He
must be calm. He had to wait as long as he could.

“So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world the nation and god it requires,”
behind the tree line, a spark of light arced to the sky. Purple. Dorian’s staff produced that same
shade, Bull used to tease him for calling it ‘lilac’. “And you. I will not suffer even an unknowing
rival. You must die.”

He thought of Felix. If that man could be brave, even knowing the end was near, then so could he.

“Everyone dies.”

Milin severed the rope that kept the trebuchet primed and fled.

Behind him was the rumble of the oncoming avalanche, the beating of wings as the dragon took
flight. He looked up to see if he had to dive away from another fireball, only for the planks beneath
his feet to give way.
Milin woke with a pained groan and a throbbing headache, his feet and hands and face numb from being half-buried in snow. A massive pile reached up to the top of the cave, and probably continued beyond it for feet, even yards. He was lucky he’d rolled away from the opening when he hit the ground, or he would have been crushed at the bottom of that pile. There were so many ways he could have died, should have died. And yet, he breathed.

Thank the Creators.

He dragged himself out, and attempted to stand, but crumpled as soon as he put weight on his left ankle.

“Fenedhis,” he winced. He must have fallen on it wrong. And he didn’t need to see under his leathers to know his body was a mess of bruises.

Milin dug a splintered board of wood from the snow and tried again, using it for support.

He was hobbling, but he was moving.

What was this place?

He looked around for clues. Footprints. Many, many footprints. Still fresh. This must be part of that summer path Roderick spoke of.

He listened for voices, footsteps, but all he could hear was howling wind through the tunnels.

Lavellan wished he was a mage and could send a light signal out like Dorian did. But all he could do was follow the path until he was out of the tunnel and out in the open. The storm had wiped clean any trace of footprints, and he could barely see beyond his own nose in the storm.

He braced himself against the cold as best he could, prayed to Ghilan’nain for speed and direction, and trudged on.

And on.

And on.

The wood cracked and he was reduced to crawling. The blizzard had calmed, but his ears and fingers were long since numb.

Now he called out to Sylaise, his mother’s favored goddess. She taught the elves about healing, fire. Both would be more than welcome right now. Or sleep. Sleep would be nice. He could just lay down here and rest.

“There, the Herald!” a voice shouted. It sounded like Cullen, but he wasn’t sure. It seemed so far away…

Strong arms lifted him and he could feel the tickle of fur against his cheek.

~o~O~o~

He was alive. Exhausted to the bone, but warm. Barely any pain, either. And he could feel Dorian and Bull against him. They made it, so others must have, too.
He smiled, only for the moment of peace to shatter as soon as he caught sight of Dorian’s withering look.

“Good, you’re awake. Now I can kill you for being such a reckless fool. You were half-dead when Cullen carried you back here. The healers had to work on you for hours,” he seethed. The last time he’d seen him this angry, they’d just returned from the future…

When Bull had sacrificed himself to save them.

Oh.

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“That’s not good enough,” Iron Bull growled from behind him. The next thing he knew, his wrists were clasped above his head with one callused hand, the Qunari looming over him. “You went to fight a dragon and an army, alone, without a weapon. Are you crazy? Or just stupid?”

“I…I had a dagger.”

“Yeah? Can you tell me the types of grips for a dagger? The different strikes? Have you had any training with that weapon at all?”

He averted his gaze, but the man grabbed his chin and forced him to meet his eyes, “Answer me.”

“No.”

“If one of my Chargers was that careless, I’d kick him out before he could see straight.”

“Would you also pin him down, amatus?” Dorian’s voice dripped with disapproval.

“You kept him chained by the neck for months, you don’t get to judge.”

He winced.

His armor had been changed out for dry bedclothes. That meant no lockpick. But Varric had taught him that the best way to escape bondage was to not get bound in the first place. He could still lie, intimidate, charm, whatever worked. Milin leaned up to nuzzle into the crook of the Qunari’s neck, peppering his skin with kisses.

“I’m not stupid, kid. I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Pacify a large and angry Qunari? I’m not happy, either, Bull. But you’re scaring him.”

Funny. Usually, this went the other way around. Usually, Iron Bull acted as his advocate to Dorian.

“Someone has to. I heard what they’re saying. They already think he’s chosen, and now they think he’s come back from the dead. Mother Giselle is out there cultivating that illusion for the sake of hope, and it’s dangerous. They’re going to make him believe that taking huge risks is heroic instead of idiotic, that he’s divinely protected, and then his luck will run out. I enjoy a good fight as much as the next man, but I don’t enjoy seeing people I care about die.”

“You think I’m going to get a big head?” he asked. He’d laugh if he had the energy. “I’m a slave, Bull.”

“One that said he was ‘meant for this,’” he countered.
“You don’t know that I’m not,” he said, looking away. “I had to do something, all those people died because he was trying to get to me.”

The Iron Bull let go and Dorian pulled him against his chest.

“They died because of him, not because of you, my pet,” he said. “Now, where are all my kisses?”

Dorian cupped his face, capturing his lips. He was too tired to resist. Dorian’s mustache tickled him a little, but he didn’t mind. This part felt good. At least, until his hands trailed down to his ass and squeezed, “Would you like to move on to something... more primal?”

If only he did want to. His life would be so much easier if he wanted it. But whenever they asked more of him, all he felt was hurt and anger and self-disgust.

_Run fast, fight dirty_, Varric would say. But he didn’t think he could manage either one right now.

With his last dregs of strength, he rolled over on his stomach and brought his knees to his chest. It was safer this way. Dorian would accept his ‘no,’ maybe. He had before. But the Qunari was another matter. He’d never seen Bull in such a cold rage, and although he’d let him go, Milin knew he had to be cautious. Better to submit and get it over with than to refuse and risk his anger. He’d seen Iron Bull be rough with Dorian, bind him with rope, even strike him on the backside until he was red. The shemlen seemed to enjoy it, somehow, but he knew that he couldn’t bear being treated like that.

How was it that these two intimidated him more than a towering creature of darkness that controlled a dragon?

Dorian tugged his sleep pants down to his knees, and he arched his back as expected. He hoped they didn’t make him strip all the way down. It was cold.

“Your ass is so lovely,” Dorian purred. A slicked finger teased against his hole, before sliding in. “It’s been some time, hasn’t it? But don’t worry, I’ll be gentle with you.”

“I can’t promise the same for you, kadan.”

There was the slap of skin against skin, and the mage groaned, “You are wicked.”

It was selfish to be glad that the aggression was directed at Dorian now instead of him, wasn’t it?

“Yes. And strong and savage and you like it.”

“Maker preserve me, I do.”

He heard their lips smacking together, and felt a pang of longing. No, not longing, but... something. Part of him wanted to turn over and kiss Dorian again. But that would mean he’d have to look at him, and a much larger part of him did not want to look at them again until it was over. Easier to separate things that way.

He could feel Dorian’s legs shift between his own and another finger pushed inside, spreading him, working more slick into him.

“Think you can take a big Qunari brute, ‘Vint?”

At least that meant they didn’t want to fuck him at the same time, again. And the shemlen’s prick was smaller.
He chuckled, “I have before, haven’t I? Just a moment.”

Dorian pulled out, only to guide his cock in him instead. The stretch, the stimulation, made his own cock twitch.

“Does that feel good, my pet?”

Milin didn’t think he’d get away with not answering this time. He buried his face in a pillow so it’d muffle his voice if it cracked, “Yes, master.”

The mage’s soft, oiled hand closed around his length and he gasped. Suddenly, he regretted not touching himself since the last time they’d told him to. Maybe he wouldn’t be so damn sensitive, if he had. But every time he’d thought about doing it, he felt ashamed and dirty. Like he did now.

“How about this?” He could hear the smirk in his voice, damn him.

“Yes, master.”

“My turn. Slick me up,” the Qunari growled. The hand left his cock and after a beat Dorian let out a long, keening moan.

“Vishante kaffas.”

“You alright, kadan? You know your watchword?”

What was a watchword? No, don’t ask questions. Don’t think.

“It’s katoh, but I’m not using it. Just give me, unf, a moment,” he let out a breath. “Alright. I’m ready.”

They started at a slow pace, rocking back and forth. The mage’s hands were at his hips, now. He was grateful for that. With him keeping him still, he didn’t have to work not to pull away.

But it didn’t take long for things to speed up, and Dorian’s promises of gentleness to be broken. Though with the way Bull was grunting, he blamed the Qunari for that more than him. And it didn’t hurt. Far from it. Iron Bull’s rough hand began to stroke him in time with the thrusts. It’d been too long, and he came, too quickly, too loudly, too hard.

Then it was a simple matter of clenching his fists into the pillow and taking it. That was all he could do until they were done with him.

Bull came next, by the sound of it. And Dorian shortly after. They stayed like that for a moment, panting, before the human let him go. Milin slid to his side, facing away from them. He didn’t resist the human’s kisses to the back of his neck, but he still couldn’t bring himself to look at them. All it took was a raised word from either one, and he’d submit just like that first night.

Despite the warmth of their bodies, he felt cold.
Dawn was only barely breaking when he woke. He wanted to slip away, maybe go to Varric, but he knew he shouldn’t risk it. He was on thin ice as it was. He had to get Bull back on his side, or they’d never let him fight again, they’d never let him go off on his own without their supervision again. But if he showed him how sorry he was, how good…

Carefully, he crawled his way to Bull’s side of the tent, peeling back the covers around his waist. Milin licked both palms and wrapped them around his length, stroking him to hardness as he studied Iron Bull’s face. He could get away with just hands until he woke up.

One, gray eye flickered open and he took the head into his mouth, sucking hard. If it was Dorian, he would have teased more, start with the nipples first, then move on to long licks, up and down his shaft, but Bull wasn’t as sensitive. Bull even liked a hint of teeth, sometimes, but that was not a good idea to try on Dorian.

A large hand closed into his hair, and he let him control the pace, moving his hands along with the rhythm. He was barely even doing anything, at this point. Just a wet hole for him to fuck. Milin let himself close his eyes and drift off in his head until it was time to swallow.

When it was over, Bull pulled him up for a kiss, but thankfully didn’t try to touch him. Also thankfully, Dorian managed to sleep through it.

“So what was that for?” he asked with an amused, sleepy smile. “You only do that when you want something.”

Milin looked away. It was true, and the Ben-Hassrath would know he was lying if he tried to argue it.

“Tell me,” Bull insisted.

“You’ve never been mad at me like that before,” he said softly.

“Yeah, that was some fucking stunt, kid,” he said. “But I’ll get over it, whether you blow me or not. Not that I’m complaining. Just be careful out there, alright?”

He couldn’t have said that last night instead of pinning him down? He couldn’t have said that this morning before fucking his mouth?

“So…I’m still allowed to go out and fight and everything?”

“Of course. How else are you going to get stronger?”

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Milin lingered at the edge of the tent, too nervous to go inside. The man seemed to be working hard, he didn’t want to interrupt him. And he was still wary of him, to be honest.

But he’d thanked all the healers. It was only right to thank him for his help, too.

“Herald?” the Commander asked. “Did you need something?”

He stepped forward, keeping his eyes on his feet, “I… I heard that you were the one who found me. You carried me to safety. Thank you.”
“No need. We’d all be dead, if not for you.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he just nodded.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, sorry, I won’t take up any more of your time.”

He left with a sigh of relief. The entire interaction lasted less than a minute but he felt drained.

Maybe that wasn’t Cullen’s fault, though. He’d laid awake for a long time, going over everything that had gone wrong and what he should have done differently. Should have double-checked Haven for stragglers, people that could have been saved. Should have not made an idiot of himself in front of Dalish. Should have brought his weapon and struck down Corypheus somehow instead of leaving him a looming threat. Should have freed the horses before the Red Templars could kill them. Should have said the right thing to Bull so he wouldn’t have gotten mad. Should have died instead of Viddathari. Should have shot the slavers when he’d had the chance. Should have been stronger and smarter and braver.

“Milin!”

He turned to the sound of tiny, bare feet running towards him and had just enough time to grin before he caught an armful of elf.

“You’re up!” Athim said.

“I’m lucky to be alive. Just got done thanking the healers and the commander,” he closed his eyes and rocked them side to side as they hugged. “I’m so glad that you made it, too.”

“We’ve all been so worried. It was hard to see, through the storm, but the scouts said they saw you fall against the Elder One. And then you weren’t moving when sharp blade brought you in.”

He blinked and pulled back to look at him, “Sharp blade?”

“Commander Cullen. Didn’t you know? Everyone calls him that.”

He let out a laugh and gave him another hug. He’d needed that badly.

“So… are you doing okay, Athim?”

The other elf nodded, “I didn’t see any of the fighting. I was already in the Chantry at the time, looking in on Alexius.”

It was a little strange that the humans’ place of worship had cells tucked away, now that he thought of it.

“Did he survive, too?”

“The guards wanted to just leave him there, but I told them that the Herald didn’t want anything cruel to happen to him. It seemed cruel to me to keep him trapped with that thing coming,” he said. “So they got a dull blade, that’s what they call the other Templars, and he’s been keeping him bound and prevented him from casting spells for now.”

He frowned, thinking of how pale and weary Dalish seemed after fighting the Red Templars, “Is there another way?”
“I’m actually here to get magebane from the Commander, to put in his food.”

“They’re drugging him?” he cringed. He remembered living with his mind in a fog, losing hours and even days at a time. He remembered the taste of grass and the awful, unwelcomed heat.

“It doesn’t hurt him like silencing does, it just drains his magic. It was Alexius’ idea.”

“Oh. Well, thank you, for helping him, then,” he sighed. “I wish I could be of more help. The healers are working so hard, but if we can’t stop Corypheus, none of it even matters.”

Athim took his hand, singing softly, “Shadows fall, and hope has fled. Steel your heart, the dawn will come. The night is long and the path is dark. Look to the sky, for one day soon… the dawn will come.”

Another voice joined him, and another, and soon, it seemed like the entire camp was singing together.

It was beautiful and heartbreaking all at once.

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“That was amazing,” he said, in awe. “How does everyone know the words?”

“You’ve never heard it before? It’s part of the Chant of Light. They sing it a lot. At least, when times are hard,” Athim explained. “Since the Breach, times are always hard.”

All these people supported him because they thought he had this connection to Andraste. Even if he didn’t believe it, he should try to understand it, shouldn’t he?

“I’d like to learn.”

“The entire Chant takes weeks to recite. People spend years learning it. Mother Giselle could tell you more about it than I can, though,” he looked to the Commander’s tent. “And I should get going. I’ll see you later?”

“Later,” he agreed. From the corner of his eye, he could see Solas approaching and turned to him.

The man nodded to an overlook away from the others, “A word.”

He followed, wondering what he wanted to talk about in private. Probably about him being a slave. He’d overheard people talking about it, before the attack.

_I heard he just sits in the kitchen peeling grapes sometimes. Maybe he was like a cook or something back in Tevinter?_

_I like grapes, too, that doesn’t make me a cook. You know, I saw him out hunting the other day, he has some crazy skills. He was probably some sort of assassin or gladiator or some shit._

_You really think Andraste would choose an assassin to be her Herald? No, he doesn’t seem the killer type to me. He’s gentle. You should see him with the horses, he must have been like a stable hand. Even that mean bitch of a mare likes him. All he does is sing to her and he’s got her eating out of his hand. Beautiful voice, if a little soft. I’d eat out of his hand, too._

_Like you wouldn’t eat out of his hand, anyway._

_It’s not a sin to be a woman who likes pretty elves._
It’s a sin when he’s the Herald! Besides, he’s with that ‘Vint and the Qunari. However that works…

“The humans have not raised one of our people so high for ages beyond counting,” Solas said, bringing him from his memories. “The faith is hard-won, lethallin. Worthy of pride, save one detail: I have heard that this Elder One wields an orb. I would have you tell me of it.”

He paused, thinking, “It was black, the size of a fist. And he did something to it to make these designs glow red, like cracks in a lantern. And he… connected it to my Mark, somehow, to try to remove it. But he said that the ‘Anchor’ was permanent.”

“I see,” he gestured to his left arm. “May I?”

Milin nodded, and held out his hand for him to examine.

“What happened, when he the orb and Mark connected?”

“It hurt. The Mark hadn’t hurt that bad since before the Breach was stabilized. But this was different.”

“How so?”

“Being around the Rifts feels like an itch. Once I get close enough, I kind of scratch it, and then the Mark opens up. What he did to me felt like a white-hot knife stabbing into my hand.”

“This…scratching that you do. Have you ever tried it without the presence of a Rift?”

He shook his head.

“Try it now.”

He concentrated, and the Mark opened up. But without anything to connect to, it flickered out just as quickly.

“Good. Now, do you see that tree over there? Hold out your arm and try to connect the Mark to it.”

He wasn’t sure how it was supposed to connect to something that wasn’t a Rift, but he obeyed. His Mark opened, and arcs of light flew out. When they touched the tree, a Rift opened, instantly tearing it apart to a stump before snapping shut.

Milin stumbled back, surprised, “Creators…I didn’t know I could do that.”

“You likely couldn’t, until the orb imparted some of its power. It is of ancient elven craft, and Corypheus used it to open the Breach, as well. Unlocking it caused the explosion that destroyed the Conclave. We must find out how he survived, and we must prepare for their reaction when they learn the orb is of our people.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“Such things were Foci, set to channel power from our gods. Some were dedicated to specific members of our Pantheon. All that remains are references in ruins and faint visions or memories in the Fade, echoes of a dead empire. But however Corypheus came to it, the orb is elven. And with it, he threatens the heart of human faith.”

“You think they’ll blame elves? Blame me?” he asked. Other shemlen than Roderick had called, were still calling, for his execution.
“Perhaps. Whatever the case, you must continue to build their trust in you, and that trust cannot grow in the wilderness. You will need every advantage. By attacking the Inquisition, Corypheus has changed it, changed you. Scout to the north. Be their guide. There is a place that waits for a force to hold it, there is a place where the Inquisition can build, grow,” he said. “Skyhold.”
Cassandra was leading him…somewhere. They’d gotten to Skyhold a few days ago, but he still got turned around in this place.

“Your decisions let us heal the sky,” she announced, as they climbed yet another set of stairs. Was that a crowd? Why was there a crowd? “Your determination brought us out of Haven.”

They reached Sister Nightingale, who was holding a sword. No, not just holding. Offering.

Why were they giving him a sword? He didn’t use a sword. He’d never even held a sword.

Maybe it was symbolic? Now that he’d heard the Chant of Light during their long journey here, he knew the connection between swords and Andraste. Mother Giselle’s lessons explained a lot about shemlen behaviors, actually.

He looked down to the throng of pilgrims and soldiers and servants alike. Did they know what was going on? Why was he the last to know what was happening?

“You are the creature’s rival because of what you did, and we know it. All of us,” the Seeker continued. “The Inquisition should be led by the one who’s already been leading it. You.”

She…she was serious. They wanted him to lead the Inquisition.

Were they crazy? He didn’t have any leadership experience. He hadn’t been trained for it like his sister had. And he was a slave. Did he even have the right to make this decision? Would Dorian and Bull be angered by all of this?

But he looked down and saw the hope in their eyes, and he no longer cared what his master thought. Let them punish him, if they chose to. These people had already lost so much. He could not bear to crush their hope as well.

“I am not your ruler. I am not above anyone else. But I will do whatever I can to bring peace and heal this world,” he addressed the crowd below. That was his mother’s way, Sylaise’s Vir Atish’an. But she had also taught him of Andruil’s Vir Tanadhāl, those words he would have said after making his first kill, had he succeeded. He translated them now. “Like the arrow, we will fly straight and not waver. Like the bow, we will bend but never break. And like the forest, we will stand side by side, for together we are stronger than one!”

He took the blade, which was even heavier than it looked, and had to concentrate hard so his hand wouldn’t shake. He hoped he did that right.

“Your leader! Your Herald! Your Inquisitor!” the commander cried, holding his own blade aloft. The crowd cheered in response.

He hadn’t called himself any of those things! Is that what he agreed to by taking the sword? Fenhedis.

Milin prayed that their hope in him was not misplaced.

He prayed hard.

~o~O~o~
“Nice little speech, Sharpshooter,” Varric interrupted. Thank the Creators. The advisers had led him to this gigantic, trashed room with a throne at the end and told them it was his for when he wanted to pass judgements. As if he was a Keeper, but without hahren to provide guidance. Why did they think he had that sort of wisdom when he hadn’t even gotten his vallaslin? What was an Inquisitor supposed to do, anyhow? They spoke of preventing the Empress of Orlais being assassinated, too, but how exactly was he supposed to protect her, even if they did manage to get an invitation to this ball/peace talks/thing? “Everyone acting all inspirational jogged my memory, so I sent a message to an old friend. She’s crossed paths with Corypheus before, and may know more about what she’s doing. She can help.”

“Thank you, Varric. We need all the help we can get,” he said. Milin silently pleaded for him to save him. All this was too overwhelming. And he still hadn’t talked to Bull and Dorian yet.

“Parading around might cause a fuss. When she gets here, I’ll let you know, and introduce you privately. On the battlements.”

Leliana muttered that if he was bringing who she thought he was, Cassandra would kill him.

“In the meantime,” he continued. “Maybe Milin’s had enough responsibility heaped onto his shoulders for one day. Unless there’s a green glowing thing that he needs to wiggle his fingers at, let’s give him a break.”

“I suppose we can schedule Alexius’ judgement for tomorrow, once the floor has been cleared, at least,” Josephine said.

That’s who he was supposed to be judging? By the Dread Wolf, he didn’t know what to do with him. And he didn’t want someone else’s life in his hands like that.

He thanked them, and rushed out the door with Varric before they could change their minds.

“Varric, are all humans crazy?”

“In my experience? Pretty much, yeah.”

He shook his head, “There’s no way I can handle all of this. And what am I supposed to do with this sword?”

“You’ll figure it out. Until then? Just make it up as you go, try to do the right thing, and hope for the best. That’s what the rest of us are doing most of the time, anyway,” he said. “As for the sword, you’ve got that huge room. Put it on your mantle or something. Things like that are supposed to be displayed, not really used, anyway.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“We just went over this. Humans are nuts.”

He laughed.

They reached his quarters, and found Bull and Dorian hurriedly whispering to each other. And, maybe he was imagining it, but he was pretty sure he heard something about this mysterious plan of theirs. The two went silent as soon as they caught sight of them.

His face fell. It was much easier to say that he no longer cared what his master thought when he wasn’t standing right in front of him.
“Oh, hi,” Varric said in surprise. “Looks like the three of you have some talking to do, huh? I’ll leave you alone,” he squeezed his arm. “Take care, sharpshooter.”

He stepped inside and Varric left, closing the door behind him. His stomach clenched with dread.

“We need to tell him. He deserves to know,” Bull said. “You sent the paperwork to Tevinter, right?”

“As soon as the Breach was sealed, as promised. The processing should be done by now, but since our return address is buried under a few hundred feet of snow, it will take time for the official documentation to reach us,” he replied. “There is no need to say anything now. It’ll only put one more burden on him. The advisers have done enough of that for one day.”

“This is the Inquisition. How much longer do you think it will take for them to find out the truth?” he asked. “We need to tell him about the plan. Now. They will find out, they will not take our word for it, and we’ll get burned by all that righteous fire if he can’t back up our one real defense.”

Milin started to shake. He didn’t understand.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked quietly. “I didn’t ask to be the Inquisitor.”

“Aww, I know, pretty,” Dorian smoothed back his hair and pressed a kiss to it. “I know you. You are not one to maneuver for power, you just wanted to help. It’s quite admirable, really,” the mage gave him a small smile. “You remind me of Felix.”

He smiled back, letting out a relieved breath.

He knew that to Dorian, that was one of the highest praises he could give.

Feeling bolder now, he said, “I’d like to know what’s going on. Please, master, tell me what this plan is? What did you send to Tevinter?”

The shemlen glanced at Iron Bull.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” he said. “You’re his master. This needs to come from you.”

“Very well,” he sighed. “First of all, I want to make it perfectly clear that this is not a rejection, and you did nothing wrong to provoke this. If you wish things to remain as they are with Bull and myself, they will. We are not trying to remove you from our bed or our lives. But formally, at least…,” he hesitated, as if trying to find the right words. It wasn’t often that Dorian was speechless. “I have filed the paperwork for you to become Liberati. It is not official, yet, until I’ve received the Imperial Certificate. But once I have, you’ll be free.”

He heard a clattering, and looked down to see the sword on the ground.

Then he ran.

Milin had no idea where he was going in this place, but he ran until he was exhausted. Until he collapsed against a long-forgotten wall, panting, and hating that he couldn’t run farther.

He used to be able to. Until them.

“Are you afraid? People run and hide when they’re afraid. I did, in the cupboard.”

He jumped at the sound, and caught sight of a young human, crouching in the shadows. He hadn’t seen him until he spoke up. He hadn’t seen him since Haven, in fact. No one had.
“Cole?”
“Yes. I’m Cole.”

“No one’s seen you since Haven,” he said, eyebrows furrowed. “Everyone thought you didn’t make it.”

“They did see me. Cracked, brown pain. Dry, scraping. Thirsty. I give them water. They thank me, but don’t remember. Better that way.”

“You can make people forget you? I’ve never heard of that type of magic. Unless…” he remembered his mother and sister talking about the creatures of the Beyond. How they could alter people’s minds. Dangerous. But not always evil. Few things were. “You’re what the shemlen call a spirit?”

“Yes. I used to think I was a ghost. I didn’t know. I made mistakes… but I made friends, too. Then a Templar proved I wasn’t real. I lost my friends. I lost everything,” he said. He could hear the pain in his voice and shifted closer to him, touching his hand. He felt plenty real to him. Solid. Warm. “I learned how to be more like what I am. It made me different, but stronger. I can feel more. I can see the hurt. But not yours. The Mark makes you too bright, like counting birds against the sun. I’d like to help you, but I don’t know how. Would you tell me?”

“What do you want in exchange for helping?”

“Nothing.”

He shook his head, “There’s always a catch. Maybe not right away, but there always is eventually.”

Food, affection, getting his collar off, going outside… he’d paid for all of it.

_We are the Dalish went the Oath. Keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last of the Elvhenan, and never again shall we submit._

He doubted anyone in the history of the Dalish had failed their oath so hard. He’d sold his body for a morsel of honey. He was a sex slave, a whore, a failure. How could he face his Clan again? All those people looking up to him as a source of hope would be disgusted if they knew the truth.

“Too thin, too timid. He ties you so you can free yourself. The smile you have when you get it right makes him happy, but hurts him, too, because he knows why it matters so much. He doesn’t want anything more than to help you.”

He averted his eyes. He was right. There was no catch with the dwarf. He doubted there ever would be.

“Can you take me to Varric, please?” he asked.

“Would it help?”

He nodded.

The young man took his hand and led him away. Somehow, Cole actually knew how to get around this place. And also had the ability to tell where everyone was at all times.

“Varric! Varric he’s hurting, and I don’t know how to help, and he told me to bring him to you so I
Milin flushed red. The Fade creature should speak up, he was fairly certain a few people in the Anderfels hadn’t heard that he was feeling vulnerable.

“Relax, kid,” the dwarf said. “Sharpshooter, what’s going on?”

“I’m going to get my freedom soon,” he said.

He clapped him on the back, “Well, shit, that’s great. How’d that happen?”

“Dorian,” Milin shrugged, being purposefully vague. They were probably already mad at him for leaving like that. He didn’t want to make it worse by telling Varric that they could free him because Dorian was the one who owned him.

He frowned, “You want to talk in private?”

He shrugged again and followed the dwarf to his quarters, along with Cole. The room was unsurprisingly smaller than the one he shared with Iron Bull and Dorian. He liked this one better. The other one was so ornate, he half-expected to see a chain hooked above the headboard every time he walked in.

“So. You doing okay?” he asked, gesturing for him to take a seat next to him.

He shook his head no.

“Yes, not really. I just…” he sighed. “I’m not cut out for any of this. I can’t protect these people. I can’t even protect myself. And I’m the opposite of anything holy. I’m a pathetic, disgusting failure. And as soon as they realize that, they’re going to kick me out. And my Clan won’t want me back. At least as a slave, I didn’t have all these people counting on me, all I had to do was just…just endure it all.”

Milin choked out a sob, and the young man hugged him to his chest as Varric rubbed his back.

“Rhys held me like this after the demon made me see the bad day and the cupboard,” Cole said. “I can’t see you like the others, but I think you’ve had a lot of bad days. I hope this helps. It helped me. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t used to be pathetic like this. I hate it. The men who captured me starved me and hit me and drugged me and caged me, and they made me weak so I wouldn’t fight back. I’m not a leader or a killer, I’m a decoration. That’s why my master bought me, because I was pretty,” he practically spat the last word. “I’m worthless for anything else now.”

“You’re not worthless. There is nothing your master or anyone else can do to you to make you worthless,” the dwarf said. “I get it, it’s a lot at once. It’s overwhelming. But every single person in Skyhold wants to help, in whatever way they can. You don’t have to go through this alone, okay?”

“…okay,” he sniffled.

“Just let it out, Sharpshooter. Take as long as you need. We all have to, sometimes.”

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A polite knock on the door interrupted his doze. He couldn’t remember falling asleep, but it was
nice, being curled between two bodies, and he felt better, now. His sniveling hadn’t changed anything, but it was a relief to let some of his feelings out. And he didn’t feel so alone.

The knock came again, more insistent, and Varric crawled off the sofa to answer.

“Have you seen Milin? We were told he was last seen with you and—” Dorian’s voice stopped abruptly as their eyes met. The mage hurried towards him, cupping his head in his hands as he kissed his face between words. Milin didn’t pull away. Didn’t even try. Resistance had long since been trained out of him. “Oh, my sweet, precious thing. Look at his eyes, Bull, he’s been crying. I told you he’d react like this.”

“Your timing is shit, I’ll give you that,” Varric said. “He’s a bit overwhelmed, but he’ll be fine. I don’t know what kind of favors and connections you had to use to pull this off, but if you’ve really managed to get him freed, that’s fantastic.”

Dorian raised an eyebrow, as if to say, you told him? He ducked his head.

“Yes, well, the paperwork to free him has been filed. In the eyes of Tevinter, he will be Liberati, and cannot be legally enslaved again, unless he sells himself,” Dorian explained.

His mind flashed back to that day in the forest, the crack of his bow being snapped in half, the hood, the hands. As Liberati, even if he was taken again, they’d have to let him go? Somehow he doubted men like that would play by the rules, but still. It was something.

“So no magisters going to be knocking on our door demanding him back, I take it? Shit, that’s a relief,” Varric said. “You know, a friend of mine was an escaped slave from Tevinter, and he was hounded by his former master for years. I wouldn’t wish that on Milin. You did good, sparkler.”

“Dorian, what’s a slave?” Cole asked.

The mage started as if he’d just noticed him. Given Cole’s abilities, that might have actually been the case, “Festus bei um canaverum! Who exactly is this…charming young man? He looks familiar.”

“He’s a spirit. He warned us before the Templar attack on Haven, remember?” Milin said.

“I…do, I think,” he looked at him curiously. “Could have fooled me. In my experiences, a spirit’s form usually appears monstrous, or at least unnatural.”

“Don’t remind me,” Bull said, shuddering. “That creepy woman in the baths. No idea how you could stand to bathe with that thing looking at you.”

“Hope was bound, completely harmless.”

She was a spirit? He didn’t know that. He’d never really gotten more of a glimpse of her, but still.

“I’m not a thing. I’m Cole. And I want to understand, so I can help. I really wish someone would tell me. I try to listen to what it means, but I hear very different things,” the young man said. “Cowering, cornered, crying. Fenris asks if she’s been hurt. ‘Everything was fine until today.’ ‘It wasn’t, you just didn’t know any better.’ The other Altus families had revolts, sedition, but not the Pavus’s. Father always said that tough but fair is the key to a happy household. How easily those ideals get set aside for the sake of conformity. Have to seal the slaves into not-people, like the ones he has to kill. Can’t stand Tevinter, otherwise, even for the Qun. But it leaks, and little mercies flow through. Have to change things.”
“It means that you have to do whatever your master wants,” Milin said, harsher than he meant to. He just…he had to get him to stop talking. He couldn’t stand it.

“But you get hurt,” the young man nodded. “The Spire was like that, too. Look down, look down, don’t look them in the eye.”

“I don’t think that’s helping, kid,” Varric said.

Cole looked so dejected at that, that Milin couldn’t help but put his arms around him, “No, it’s okay. You really have helped me. But…I should go with them, now.”

Iron Bull shook his head, “You don’t need to. We came looking for you just to make sure you were safe. You want to stay here overnight or something, that’s fine.”

Dorian opened his mouth in protest, but the Qunari shot him a look.

“I… I want to stay,” he said. He couldn’t handle having to fuck them tonight. Not after everything else. He turned to Varric. “If that’s alright with you?”

“Of course. Any time.”

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He took a deep breath, like Varric had taught him.

He could do this.

He hated the idea of sitting in judgement, but he was even less happy with a man, any man, in a cage. If he had the ability to put a stop to that, he would.

Maybe, eventually, he could ask the advisers to get him something less…spiky. And cold. And far too big. Instead of looking intimidating, he felt ridiculous. Like a child trying to sit with adults. Who in Thedas thought such a thing suited him?

“You recall Gereon Alexius of Tevinter. Ferelden has given him to us as acknowledgement of your aid,” Josephine announced. As if he could forget. “The formal charges are apostasy, attempted enslavement, and attempted assassination—on your own life, no less.”

Two guards escorted him forward, gripping his arms. He recognized them—Sylar and Renald.

“Tevinter has disowned and stripped him of his rank. You may judge the former magister as you see fit.”

As she finished speaking, the magister was shoved to his knees.

Horrified, he rushed over to him. Athim beat him to it by an inch, crouching by the former magister to ask if he was alright.

“You needn’t bother yourself, Athim. I know why I am here,” the magister said.

“Why did you do that, Sylar?” Lavellan asked, eyebrows furrowed. “He’s chained, and they’re suppressing his magic.”

“I… it seemed like the right thing to do. He’s not worthy of standing in your presence, your worship,” he said. “He would have made my brother a slave to Corypheus.”
“Your brother was Bynard, wasn’t he? You look like him,” he said. The man nodded, and he squeezed his hand sympathetically. Bynard didn’t make it to Skyhold. “You’re right. He did awful things, and would have continued to do awful things. But it’s wrong to be cruel, especially to those who can’t fight back.”

He sat down, cross-legged, in front of the kneeling man. He hated the throne, anyway.

“I couldn’t save my son,” he spat. “Do you think my fate matters to me?”

Milin reached out and touched his cheek, “I’m sorry I missed Felix’s funeral. He seemed like a good man. I wish I’d had a chance to get to know him better.”

The human’s eyes shined with threatening tears, “Enough of this. Render your judgement, Inquisitor.”

“I’m throwing out the charges of apostasy. No mage should be punished for being free,” he said, pulling his hand back. If they charged Alexius with apostasy, they’d have to charge Solas and Dorian and Fiona and all the other mages. It seemed like a poor precedent to set. “But it’s true that the mages came to you for help, and you tried to take advantage of them,” he scanned the crowd for a face he’d seen earlier. “Grand Enchanter?”

Fiona stepped forward, and after a beat, lowered herself beside him, “Yes, Inquisitor?”

“If you agree, I’d like to place him under your charge. I want him to help you however he can, to make up for what he’s done.”

“Servitude is…kind a punishment than I would give. But I won’t complain.”

“A headsman would have been preferable,” the human muttered.

He frowned and turned to Athim, “Keep looking after him, alright?”

“Of course.”

“You are the reason why Athim has—” Alexius started, and he gave him a nod in response. “I…did not know that.”

He used his lockpick on the mage’s chains before helping him to his feet. He could have asked for the keys, but this way was actually faster. He’d practiced with Varric a little more once they reached Skyhold. Cole had helped with his training, too, but mostly with the dagger grips. He still preferred the bow, but it was good to have options. Knives couldn’t be snapped in half. Not easily.

Fiona led the human away without a struggle, and the crowd dispersed. Iron Bull went off with his Chargers, but Dorian held back until they were left alone. He stood and lowered his eyes. His master didn’t seem too pleased about him spending the night apart from them.

“So, going to have him serve the mages?” Dorian asked. “There is some justice in that, after what he did to them. Maybe one day he’ll realize it.”

“Better than keeping him drugged and in chains,” he said bitterly. Anything was better than that.

An odd expression passed Dorian’s face, and he wished he could do the mind reading thing like Cole could, “Yes…I suppose that’s true.”

“Are you worried about him? Athim will make sure he’s okay.”
“That’s the elf servant?”

He nodded, “He’s my friend.”

“You’ve been kinder to Alexius than he likely deserves. Thank you, for Felix’s sake, if nothing else,” the mage said, kissing his forehead. Then he paused. “Did you sleep well?”

Milin tensed. That seemed like a perfectly innocent, casual question, but considering the circumstances…

“Yes,” he answered honestly.

“Good,” he said, and lowered his voice. “You are always welcome in our bed. You know this. But Iron Bull and I have spoken, and we believe that you should be eased into becoming a liberati, so it’s not such a shock… Starting with choosing where to sleep.”

His eyes went wide. He didn’t mean that. Couldn’t mean that. There was a catch, there had to be. Milin wrapped his arms around himself, voice cracking, “What do I have to do?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“What do I have to do to get to choose where I sleep?”

“Nothing. This is just how things are, now.”

He shook his head in disbelief. Just like that? He’d been chained to their bed for months, and now he got to come and go as he pleased? He didn’t trust this.

“Please,” he begged. “Just tell me what the new rules are. Don’t toy with me like this, master. How are you going to fuck me if I sleep apart from you?”

“We’re not. Not unless you come to us. Not unless you ask explicitly,” he said gently. “And you don’t have to call me ‘master.’ I know it’s an adjustment, but we will both get used to our new roles, in time.”

Dorian stroked back his hair, and he leaned into the touch. Was he really still that starved for affection? Or was it just learned self-preservation? Either way, he hated himself for doing it.

This liberati thing was a lie. He should tell Varric, tell the advisers. Enslavement was a crime here, after all. That ‘righteous fire’ Bull feared could kill them both. Then he would be free from them forever.

So…what was stopping him?
Milin slid a piece of gold onto the counter. Josephine had earned some money for the Inquisition through means he’d not really understood, and she’d given him a bunch of these things as his share. She was the one who’d done all the work, and he’d told her so, but she had insisted.

Maybe she felt bad for making him endure the misery the humans called a ‘fitting’ today. Being poked and prodded while trying to hold perfectly still for hours on end or earning a sharp stick and sharper look from the tailor. He understood that for this ball thing, he’d have to look nice, but it seemed pretty ridiculous to him. When he’d gone to get new armor, Harritt had basically asked him to turn around slowly with his arms up, and within a few days he had leathers that fit him like a glove.

The barmaid bit her lip, and he went for his coin purse, “Is it not enough?”

Dalish was off in a corner with the rest of the Chargers (except Iron Bull, who was probably reuniting with Dorian) and he’d been hoping to buy her a drink. After all, she’d bought him one right before he’d left. Not that he’d had the chance to actually drink it before a messenger found them and he had to run off to the Fallow Mire with Varric, Solas, and Bull for a rescue mission.

The undead hadn’t bothered him that much, but he hated fighting the Avvar. If only because it was getting easier for him to kill people.

“Not at all, your worship. I just don’t think I have change for it,” she said. “And I shouldn’t be charging you, anyway. I mean, you being the Herald and all…”

“Oh! Well, you can just keep the rest if you’d like,” he said. What was that thing Varric told him about again? “It’ll be a tip.”

The woman covered her mouth with her hand and looked like she was about to cry.

“Wait, I’m sorry. I don’t really know what that word means, I guess I used it wrong. Please don’t be upset.”

She shook her head, “I’m not upset, I... It’s just so much money. My father is sick and needs royal elfroot and it’s so expensive and we thought we might lose the farm and I keep finding coins everywhere and it’s always been enough to keep us going, and now... I can’t believe that the Herald of Andraste would personally answer my prayers.”

He covered her hand with his own and squeezed gently, “What’s your name?”

“Tiff.”

“I’ll start growing royal elfroot in the garden, and I’ll tell them your name, Tiff. You can take as much as you need, okay?”

The barmaid crossed to his side of the counter and sank to her knees.

Not this again.

He crouched and took her hands, coaxing her to her feet, “You don’t need to do that. Stand up, it’s alright.”
Tiff fumbled to get out the two bottles he’d asked for, before running off. He caught a glimpse of Cole smiling in the shadows, and wondered how much of that encounter was a coincidence.

Maybe he’d ask Cole if he could sleep with him tonight. In the Fallow Mire, he’d always shared Varric’s tent, and he didn’t want to be too much of a burden on him. Did Cole even sleep, though? Athim probably wouldn’t mind, but the servants’ beds were narrow, so he might feel crowded. He’d probably ask Sera. Her whole room was pillows, she probably wouldn’t even notice if he used one.

He brought the drinks over to Dalish. She was facing away from him, so he tapped her on the shoulder.

“Do you want one?”

As soon as the words got out of his mouth, he regretted them. He should have asked her that before he got her one. Now she’d feel all pressured to accept, even if she didn’t want it. And he should have greeted her properly, she had her vallaslin and he didn’t.

“Sorry, I mean, andaran—”

“Atish’an,” she finished as she hugged him, her head resting against his shoulder. He could smell the wood-smoke clinging to her hair. “I’ll take it, but don’t think that means your debt to me is repaid. You owe me a dance.”

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Milin slumped down in some relatively quiet corner, breathing hard as Dalish got the next round. She was a lively dancer, jumping and twirling along to any beat the minstrel could come up with, the faster the better. And she positively beamed when he lifted her, so he’d been trying every lift he knew.

His arms were going to hurt in the morning, but he couldn’t stop smiling.

“Hey, your worship,” Krem slurred, taking the seat next to him. The man seemed like he’d had a little too much to drink. And instead of joking around with everyone as usual, he looked…sad. “I’ve got something I’ve got to ask you.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Kinda. Told you about my father, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think so.”

“He was a tailor, until he couldn’t compete with slave-made clothes. My father sold himself into slavery,” Milin winced at the thought. How desperate did you have to be to go into that life willingly? He knew that not all slaves were…pretty like he was, but some had to be treated even worse, based on the beating he’d gotten in the cages. “He’s one of the servus publicus now. Know it’s a long-shot, but I was hoping you might have heard of him. I can’t get word to him, being a deserter.”

He shook his head, “I’m sorry, I never met any of the others.”

He saw a few in passing, heard a few crying in the boat, but never even knew any of their names. Except for Hope’s, but she was a spirit, and he only heard her name after the fact.
“I thought… I mean, I’d heard that they kinda slept communally, generally. Were you the only one there?”

“No. My master kept me separate from the others. I never left the room, except to bathe, and even then, they put a blindfold on me,” he shifted uncomfortably. He probably said too much. He braced himself for the question: which room?

Two little words could destroy him. He wouldn’t be able to think of a convincing lie, and silence would be just as damning, and everyone would know, and…

“Considered a bad influence on the others, huh, your worship?” Krem grinned. Well… that worked out better than expected. “You know, that actually explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You sleep with the Chief and that Altus of his, but you don’t *sleep* with them, right? That was my impression, at least. And if your master isolated you… yeah, I can see why you’d want the company. Also explains why everyone’s so damn evasive about it,” he sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. “Father sold himself so my mother and I would have a chance, and I fucked it up. Could have been me, easily. If the Chief hadn’t shown up, if they decided to take me alive… Sorry. I’m a bastard, dwelling on things that could have happened to me when they actually happened to you.”

He put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a smile, hoping for one in return, “I’ll forgive you on one condition.”

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“Stop calling me ‘your worship.’”

“Sure thing, oh mighty Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste,” he stood and bowed almost to the floor, complete with losing his balance and landing on his ass when he attempted a flourish.

Milin snorted and helped him up.

“You’re cruel, mocking my pain. I bet that’s why they put spikes on your throne.”

“Oh, not at all, good ser. I’m certain he requested those specifically. You see, in elven traditions, spikes are quite symbolic,” Dalish said, returning with two shot glasses of some amber liquid in hand.

“Yeah?” the human asked with a grin. “What are they a symbol of?”

“Peace, obviously.”

Milin burst out laughing, and knocked back the offered shot with only minor coughing. Which was better than the first time he’d tried to do it. It burned, but it was sweet, too, “Does this mean I owe you another dance?”

“You didn’t owe me for that drink I bought you, you owed me for running out as soon as I gave it to you. Seems like every time I try to talk to you, you keep running off to a swamp or something to do this whole ‘saving people’ thing and it’s tiresome.”

“How selfish of me.”
“Indeed,” she said. “You know, there is one other thing you could do to make it up to me, though.”

“Does it have something to do with spikes?”

“No,” she stepped closer, resting her hands on his hips. “I want you to sing for me again.”

He raised an eyebrow. It was already loud with singing and music and chatter, “Here?”

“I was thinking my room, actually. More cozy.”

Krem made an exaggerated ooooh sound.

His cheeks felt warm, and he doubted it was the alcohol kicking in this fast. Alcohol didn’t make his heart pound like this. And oh, Creators, he was staring at his own feet like an idiot.

“If you don’t want to, that’s perfectly alright, of course,” she said, the warmth of her hands withdrew.

She deserved better. She had her vallaslin. Meanwhile, he was ruined.

But if it was just singing... there was no harm in that, was there?

“Okay.”

She smiled and took his hand.

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It was spring at Skyhold. The flowers were blooming, the trees were budding, and when the sun was out and no wind was blowing, it was almost mild, if not warm.

But the sun wasn’t out, and the wind was blowing, and he and Dalish ran with their bare feet crunching on the frosted grass to get back inside.

With a wave of her hand, the fireplace roared to life and they both huddled next to it, cold toes curling into a fennec fur rug as they warmed their hands.

“If anyone asks, I just used a fire arrow.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Fire arrow. Because you’re an archer.”

“That’s right,” she winked.

He glanced around the room. She had a mattress rather than a bedroll, but it was low to the ground, without the bedframe humans usually had. No other furniture, just a big travel pack. The only personal touch a small ceramic statue of an owl in the windowsill.

“Falon’din’s sacred creature,” he commented. “It’s well-crafted.”

“Oh, thank you. My mother made it for me after I got my vallaslin,” she said. “She followed June. I always thought I would, too, until my magic showed up. I was sixteen at the time, so it was a bit of a surprise to everyone. Unfortunately, we had a lot of surprises like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we already had a Keeper and a First when I got my magic, so we had more mages than we
needed. The year after that another girl got hers. And the next, this tiny slip of a boy got his as well. We were drawing attention from the Templars. That’s how I earned my vallaslin, actually, killing one of them. A month later, our Keeper asked me to leave,” she shrugged, but her voice was not as nonchalant as the gesture implied. “The children weren’t even ten years old yet, and the Clan needed the Keeper and First. It was the most logical option, but try telling an angry teenager that. And it didn’t help that…”

She trailed off and he frowned, “Didn’t help that what?”

“I lost my Dae in that Templar attack,” she said. “I chose Falon’Din because I prayed he’d help him find rest quickly in the Beyond.”

“Ir abelas,” he scooted closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. When she leaned into him, head against his heart, he sang her a hymn of mourning.

“It was years ago, but thank you. That was beautiful. Reminds me of home,” she said when he was done. She looked up and pressed her mouth to his. Her lips were soft, fuller than a man’s. He liked that. He liked her. “It’s cold out. You want to stay the night?”

“Yes,” he said, before his mind could catch up.

Dalish stood. She wasn’t wearing her armor, just a simple wool robe, sashed at the waist. She untied the sash, and slipped it off her shoulders.

“You’re okay to do this, right? Haven’t drank too much or anything?”

Why would it matter if he drank too much? Drinking made it easier, whenever he’d been allowed it. But it seemed to be important to her, so he shook his head, “Would I have been able to run drunk?”

“Yes. Not particularly far in this ice, but yes,” she teased.

Milin ran his hands up her arms and pulled her to him for another kiss. Longer, deeper, her mouth opening in invitation to his tongue. He could taste the sweet alcohol on her breath. She was so smooth, he wanted to touch her everywhere.

“You’re a good kisser,” she breathed, undoing the band around her chest. She wiggled out of the garment to reveal her small breasts, nipples hard despite the building warmth of the fire.

His cheeks flushed. He’d never gotten this far with a girl before. Was he staring? He felt like he was staring. Wait, why hadn’t he said anything back to her? She’s going to think he didn’t think she was a good kisser.

“I think you’re amazing.”

“Do you, now?” she smirked. “Then wouldn’t the gentlemanly thing to do be to shed some layers, yourself? Here I am mostly naked, and you’ve still got a cloak on. If I have to be cold, so do you. Come here.”

She started tugging at his clothes, leaving trails of kisses in her wake. Before she reached his smalls, though, he took her by the hips and lifted her like he did when they were dancing, spinning her around to set her down on the bed. She pulled him on top of her and their lips met again. And again. Her teeth closed around his lower lip and he moaned.

“Too hard?”
“Perfect.”

“Not going to bleed to death, then? Do I need to call for Stitches?”

“I think I’ll survive,” he grinned.

“Tell you what: to make up for it, you can bite me back. Wherever you want,” her voice was sing-song, teasing, sexy.

There was a phrase in Tevene he knew roughly translated to ‘you will be the death of me.’ He thought it applied well in this case.

After what felt like an embarrassingly long pause, he leaned in to gently suck on the lobe of her ear (that always felt good to him, at least), followed by a nip. The woman let out a little gasp.

“Good?” he asked.

“You could say that.”

Encouraged, he licked his way slowly up the pointed shell of her ear, relishing in the pleased noises she made, and doing the same to the opposite ear. Then he got paranoid he was lingering there too long, and shifted down to kiss her neck.

“Mmm, you have quite the self-control,” Dalish said, tilting her head to one side under his attentions. “Most men would have gone straight for my tits.”

“Is that a hint?” he asked, running his hands up her sides.

“It certainly wasn’t a complaint, but you can consider it a hint, if you like.”

Milin smiled, kissing her again as he squeezed her breasts. So soft and perfectly curved. He couldn’t believe he got to do this. A woman’s breasts were new to him, but nipple play was not. He thumbed her nipples, flicking and pinching them as he’d been taught. When her back arched for him, he kissed down her cleavage to suck at them, switching side to side, getting a bit rougher each time.

“You spoil me with that mouth of yours,” she said. He knew by her tone that she was grinning. “I’d like to see what you can do lower.”

“You mean here?” he scooted down and kissed her knee, making her roll her eyes.

“A bit too low,” she slapped his shoulder playfully.

“To be honest, I… I’ve never done it before. Not this part, I mean,” he was blushing. Again. She must think he was a teenager. “But I’d like to learn. Tell me what to do?”

“I think I can manage that,” she said, shimmying down her smalls.

He peeled them off the rest of the way and then knelt between her legs. For a moment, he just admired her, he’d never seen a woman’s pussy up close before and she smelled intoxicating. He was also too nervous to do anything else yet.

Dalish reached down, spreading her own lips with two fingers.

“First thing’s first. See that little bud right there?” she pointed to it with her thumb and he nodded. “That’s my clit.”
Oh, he’d heard about that before, from the other guys in his Clan.

“So you want me to lick it, then?”

“Not yet. I want you to touch me everywhere but there, first.”

He could do that.

“Okay…what else?”

With her other hand, she pressed a finger inside of herself, and his eyes widened. It was further back than he would have thought.

“This, as you may have guessed, is my cunt. I’m not taking anything right now, so nothing goes in there but fingers, and not until I say, got it?”

“Got it,” he agreed, mesmerized. Dalish fingering herself was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

She removed her hands, wiping them on the covers, and raised her eyebrows suggestively, “Have at it, then.”

He kissed his way up her thighs, partly to tease her but partly because he wanted to savor this. He loved how she smelled, and when he finally brought himself to slowly lick along her outer folds, he liked her taste, too. Milin worked his way further in, carefully avoiding her clit for now. He hoped she’d say something when she wanted him to go further. His master always gave nonverbal cues. Stroking his ear meant go down on him. Tapping his hip meant turn over. But that took time to learn.

She threaded her fingers in his hair, “Sa, sa…”

More.

Well…that sounded like a signal to him. He swirled his tongue around her clit, figuring that’s the kind of motion that felt good to him around his cock.

“No, not like that. Up and down. Short licks.”

He did his best to follow directions, and her fingers tightened in response. Milin tensed at first—he usually associated hair pulling with getting his throat fucked—but he made himself relax. This was different, this was a good thing. She just liked what he was doing to her, is all. No pain. He was okay, it was okay, just keep going.

“Sumeil,” she breathed, her hips keening.

“Sumeil?” he felt foolish for not remembering the word. It sounded familiar, but it’d been so long since he’d spoken any Elvish at all…

“Ir sumeil halam,” Dalish said. Very…something…end? “I am getting close. Please, I need something in me.”

Oh.

Milin pressed a finger inside of her, so slick even without the use of oil, and he went back to flicking her clit with his tongue. As she’d warned, soon he could feel her body clenching around his finger, over and over, as she let out a throaty cry.
He looked up at her face as she rode the last waves, and now *that* was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” Dalish said breathlessly, coaxing him up for a kiss. He could still feel her wetness on his face and found it incredibly arousing that she was tasting herself. She rolled them over so she was on top and pulled down his smalls, a hand closing around his erection, “Now, how about I return the favor?”

He stared up at the ceiling and concentrated on making his expression into a pleased mask. Dorian had always chided him for making faces. *You look so much prettier when you smile.*

A beautiful woman was touching him, he should be ecstatic. Instead, he felt dirty. He wanted it to stop, but he didn’t want her to find out what a broken freak he was. She wouldn’t want anything to do with him if she knew. And yet, by not saying anything, he was deceiving her. He didn’t deserve her.

“Do you like this? You want to do something else?” she asked, her hand paused its stroking. “I could go down on you…”

“Hands are fine. Feels good,” he whispered, keeping his eyes up as she continued. Whispering made it easier to hide his tone. It wasn’t a lie, exactly, it really did feel good. Her hands weren’t expert like Iron Bull’s or soft like Dorian’s, but he liked her and knew as worked up as he was it wouldn’t take too long. Also helped that with Bull and Dorian actually keeping their distance as promised, he hadn’t finished in weeks. A few moments of her doing as she wished, and he could spend the rest of the night in her arms. Or maybe she could be the one in his arms, and he could cup her breasts from behind as they slept. He pictured waking her up with a kiss to the side of the neck and then he’d flick and pinch her nipples until she was squirming. She’d take one of his hands and guide it between her legs and—

He jerked up into her hand and came, sighing his relief.

He could look at her now.

And he did, drinking in her body haloed by firelight. The soft curves of her hips and breasts, the glisten of sweat on her skin, the messiness of her hair.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, and leaned up to kiss the concern from her face.
“You’re lying. I’m not stupid,” a voice mumbled. Dalish’s. “Ar tu na'din—”

Without opening his eyes, he reached out and pulled her body closer, “Shh, it’s alright. You’re safe. Just a nightmare.”

“How, wh--Milin?”

“I’m here.”

She sighed, “Sorry for waking you.”

“It’s fine,” he’d done it all his life, pretty much. First for his sister, then Dorian. And he liked holding her like this, her legs tangled with his. “Safe dreams.”

Humming softly, he traced the pattern on her face with his thumbs until she closed her eyes.

The eight o’clock bell rang and he let out a groan—he didn’t usually sleep so late. He had to sit in judgement at nine, and he should probably eat something and bathe beforehand.

Milin dragged himself out of the warmth of her arms, carefully so he wouldn’t wake her. Poor thing, nightmares seemed exhausting. He got up and stretched out his arms. Sore, as he’d predicted. But so worth it.

He got dressed and started combing through the rat’s nest on his head with his fingers. He’d left his hair down yesterday, and hadn’t put it in a braid or bun last night, so now it was a tangled mess. Once it was as good as he could get it without having a brush, he looked around for a scrap of paper to leave her a note.

Good morning, he wrote, and then blanked. What should he say? ‘I really, really want to eat you out again but I have responsibilities to attend to. Can we do this again sometime? But maybe don’t touch me next time because my master and his bodyguard fucked me up in the head. That reminds me, just to let you know, I’m a sex slave who’s had to lick one man’s come out of another man’s asshole. But I’m sure you still want to kiss me after that, right?’

Ugh, Varric would know what to write.

Hope you slept well. Sorry I have to go. Have a nice day.

Milin

Dread Wolf just strike him down and put him out of his misery.

The throne room wasn’t really a throne room any longer. Josephine had removed the throne and in its place had arranged for a woven rug depicting Chant of Light scenes on the platform, with two cushions positioned across each other (one plain, the other with the symbol of the Inquisition). Still extravagant for his tastes, he felt that these things were too beautiful to be used to sit and step on, but bless that woman for getting rid of the spikes. He could live with it.

“There are two people to be judged today, actually, instead of one as I told you yesterday. The first
is a man we caught just last night. We discovered him attacking. The building. With a… goat,” the ambassador began. The guards brought a chained man in Avvar armor with a massive horned helmet forward. “Chief Movran the Under. He feels slighted by the killing of his Avvar tribesmen. Who repeatedly attacked you first. What should we do with him? Where… should he go?”

He sat down on the cushion provided, and gestured for him to join him.

Movran did so, and laughed, “This is the strangest courtroom I’ve ever heard of but it is still unnecessary. You killed my idiot son, and I answered, as is my custom, by smacking your holdings with goat’s blood. No foul! He meant to murder Tevinters, but got feisty with your Inquisition. A redheaded mother guarantees a brat! Do as you’ve earned, Inquisitor. My clan yields. My remaining boys have brains still in their heads.”

“I’m sorry it escalated as far as it did, and that your son died as a result. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, I just wanted to get our captured soldiers back. I know what it’s like to be taken,” he said, and paused. He believed him. But these people were still violent, and he felt uncomfortable having them at Skyhold’s doorstep. “You said you and the rest of your people would rather fight Tevinters than us, right? Would you be willing to help us against the Venatori?”

“The particularly crazy ones? We’d relish it, Inquisitor.”

“Then go to the Western Approach, there is news of them there. In exchange, we can provide you weapons and supplies.”

“My idiot boy got us something after all!” he laughed again. Milin unlocked his chains and they stood, the human clasping his hands with a grin before being led away.

“This next woman was detained while you were away in the bogs,” Josephine said. "She demanded to speak with who was in charge and sent up a blast of lightning into the air when told you were away. Cullen dispelled the magic, and then she attacked him as well. It took several Templars to capture her, and she has refused to say a word since."

The crowd parted for the next prisoner.

Their eyes met, and Milin flung himself down the steps to throw his arms around her.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, but believe me, Saturday's will be longer ;)

"You earned your vallaslin? Oh, Sasae, I’m so proud of you," he pulled back from their embrace to look at her and traced over the marks with his fingers. "What was your kill?"

"Mountain lion," Nali replied, beaming up at him.

"Impressive. I knew you’d pick Dirthamen. Good choice for a future Keeper," he said, then the jangle of chains snapped him out of his delirious joy and back to reality. He released her wrists and cupped her face in both hands. "What happened?"

He didn’t see any obvious injuries, but looks could be deceiving.

"We searched for months after we found your broken bow. But there were so many false tracks, and then the trail went cold at Wycome. We thought you were dead, or worse. And then the letter…we knew it was your writing but Mae said it still felt wrong. The hahren fought for days about what to do, whether to send an ambassador or declare war or seek out other clans for help and I got fed up with it all and just snuck out. Then I got here and the shemlen said you were away. I didn’t believe them. I…got angry, and hit my staff against the ground and this tiny spark came out. It was nothing. But everyone freaked out, and then the…" she scanned the room and caught sight of Cullen, then continued in halting elvish. It was embarrassing how man words he’d forgotten. "He—stopped—my magic. Templar. I fought, and they—" she crossed her hands to mean ‘chained’, he guessed, “me.”

"Are you hurt? Hungry?"

"No."

"Did they…touch you?" In elvish, there were two words for touch, one with casual or accidental connotations, and one for intimate. He used the one for intimate.

Her expression shifted to confusion, and then shock, but she shook her head. There was no shame written on her face, no fear. That was a good sign.

Milin switched back to Common, “Commander Cullen.”

“Inquisitor,” he said, stepping forward, back straight and formal. “I assure you, I did not realize this woman was a friend of yours. All I knew was that she was attacking with magic.”

“She’s not just a friend, she’s my sister. But I believe you,” he’d saved his life, in the snow. And there had been no complaints about him from the mages. “Also… I know her, and I know that she doesn’t do ‘tiny sparks’. I can understand why you did as you did,” he continued. “But now I need you to understand that if any Templar lays a hand on her again, I will not be so understanding.”

The room went quiet.

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

With that, he put an arm around her shoulders and led her away from the whispers of the crowd. Their first stop was the armory, because he didn’t know what they did with her weapon, and there was no way he was going to let her go unarmed.

“We need to see the staves, please.”
The human showed them to a rack of a dozen to choose from, “Take whatever you need, Inquisitor.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, and handed him a coin.

Nali shot him an odd look, “So…are you kind of like their Keeper or something?”

“Yeah, I don’t really understand it, either. I closed the Breach, they gave me a sword, and now everyone calls me Inquisitor,” he said. “Seriously, though, are you doing okay?”

“I already told you, I’m fine,” she grumbled, picking out an adept lightning staff.

“Good. You’ll write a letter to Mae telling her you’re alive and then leave immediately,” he said, even as the words pained him. He didn’t really want her to go. He’d missed her so much. But he pressed on to climb the stairs to the rookery.

“Does that mean you’re coming with me?”

“No,” he said flatly.

“Then I’m staying.”

She was kidding him, right? “It’s not safe for you here.”

“Is it safe for you here?”

His mind flashed to being dangled him by his arm, the burning of his hand, _I would always come for it_.

“It’s not safe for me anywhere,” he said. He filled her in about closing the Breach, the attack on Haven, the archdemon, Corypheus. Her eyes widened further and further as he spoke. “The Inquisition wants to stop him. Every single person here, mages and Templars and ambassadors and maids, wants to help. And so do I,” he opened up the Mark, showing her the green light. “There must be a reason for this blessing. I think this is it.”

“I’m staying,” she repeated stubbornly. “I’ll write that letter to Mae, but I want to help, too.”

“Even after the Templars imprisoned you?”

“I mean…I did attack first, I guess. And the shemlen listen to you.”

“Not all of them,” he shook his head as if to shake off the memories bubbling to the surface. “But alright. I can’t force you to leave. There are other mages here, I’ll introduce you to Fiona, their leader. Stick with them, don’t wander off alone, and lock your door at night. Better yet, share the room with someone you trust. I’ll sleep next to you until then, okay?”

“I already have someone like that.”

“You…what?”

“His name’s Cole. He’s a spirit of compassion, which is strange because he’s also kind of a human too. Everything about him is weird, but he’s really nice. He came to me the night I was first caught and kept me company.”

“Oh,” he blinked. He remembered Cole cuddling up next to him with Varric and breathed out a sigh of relief. Now he was sure nothing bad had happened. Other than being imprisoned in the first
place. “Good.”

Nali gasped, “Are those ravens?”

Leliana turned, one bird perched on her glove, “His name is Boopy.”

The raven squawked.

“Oooh, he likes you.”

“Sister Nightingale, this is my sister, Nali.”

“So I’ve heard,” already? It’d been minutes since he sat in judgement. “A pleasure to meet you, young lady.”

“Can I pet you?” she asked the bird. He squawked again, and she gently ran one finger down his back.

The spymaster actually smiled for once. Well, they sure hit it off. Which…actually made a lot of sense. They were both creatures of Dirthamen if he’d ever seen one.

“The letter, Sasae,” he reminded, after she cooed over and sang to and chattered about the ravens for what had to be a quarter of an hour.

His sister rolled her eyes and penned a quick note.

They made their way downstairs, and he introduced her to the Grand Enchanter.

“So you are the Inquisitor’s sister. That explains why he has been such an ally to us mages.”

Nali smiled proudly at him, “He’d better be. Our mamae’s a mage, too.”

“Well, she must be an excellent teacher,” she said approvingly. “I’ve heard your lightning magic is quite impressive.”

She shook her head, “It really wasn’t all that big of a deal. I just used a hex to try to intimidate them, and lightning is showy.”

“A student of entropy, then?”

They launched into a conversation about magic that went way over his head. He was pretty sure that by the end, Fiona was ready to adopt her.

Maybe she’d be okay here, actually.

He took her down to the gardens next. They’d just gotten royal elfroot seeds, and he’d wanted to get some planting done. Besides, it was something to keep the hands busy as they talked. Or rather, Nali talked. His sister chattered about everything that’d happened with their clan since he’d been gone. It was bittersweet, but he enjoyed listening to her.

But then she went quiet.

“Milin,” she started. “What happened to you?”

A sickening thought struck him, and he got to his feet, “Go to the kitchens and get something to eat, Nali. There’s something I need to do.”
“What? Hold on…”

“Go. I’ll meet you there.”

Lavellan slipped into the shadows so she couldn’t follow and made his way to the tavern. He knew that Dorian liked men, and men only.

But Iron Bull didn’t.

~o~O~o~

“Inquisitor,” Krem said, notably forgoing the ‘your worship’, as requested. “You two lovebirds have fun ‘singing’?”

He winced and pretended he didn’t hear him, eyes carefully glued to the floor as he passed to get to Iron Bull. The last thing he wanted to think about right now was Dalish. He didn’t want to taint that memory.

“Hey, wh—”

“Can we talk?” his stomach churned. “Somewhere private?”

The Qunari raised an eyebrow, “Sure thing.”

Bull led him to a back room. As soon as the door closed, his knees hit the ground. Milin leaned forward, nuzzling into his crotch and peering up at him as he knew Bull liked.

“I want to spend the night with you,” he said. “Every night. Like before.”

He could keep an eye on his sister during the day, and if he couldn’t, Varric and Leliana and Fiona could. But at night…this way he’d know exactly where Iron Bull was at night. He trusted that Cole would want to help her, but Cole only helped those already hurt. He didn’t protect her from being captured by the Templars in the first place. If Bull came after her, Cole might not realize until it was too late. And if it came to fighting, Bull would win.

Better this way, even if it meant fucking them every night. Even if it meant never being with Dalish again. It’d be worth it, worth anything, to keep her safe.

Bull took a step back and pulled him to his feet.

“No, kid. No you really don’t. You’re using the promise of sex to try and get something from me, and it’s almost insultingly obvious. At least last time you tried to pull that shit, you got me first thing in the morning, so I wouldn’t be clear-headed yet. That was a tactic I could appreciate,” he said with a smirk. “Now tell me what it is you’re really after.”

His heart sank. He didn’t know what else he could do. Bull would know if he was lying. Nali refused to leave. Telling her the truth might convince her to go, but only if he went with her. And where would they go? She could go back to the clan, but he couldn’t.

He’d broken their oath.

“My sister is here, I’m sure you’ve heard. She wants to stay. And I want you to keep far away from her,” he admitted, at last. His body trembled, and his eyes burned. “You can have me, however and whenever you want, but not her. Please. I’m begging you. Don’t hurt her.”

The Iron Bull scrubbed his hands down his face.
“Fuck, kid. Knew it was bad, knew I had to get you freed, but this… What the *fuck*?" he shook his head. "I’m not going to hurt her. Not going to hurt you or anyone else like that again, alright? Now, come on.”

The Qunari’s large hand closed over his shoulder. Lightly enough that he could pull away if he wanted to.

“Where are we going?”

“To tell Dorian what you just told me.”
They found Dorian playing a board game with the Commander.

Which was just…it didn’t make any sense. He was a Templar. Maybe one of the good ones, but still. Smarter for any mage to give them a wide berth.

“You couldn’t have known she was his sister. She never said, and you certainly couldn’t tell from their faces. You thought she was a threat to Skyhold. Apologize to her, and to Milin, if it eases your guilt, but no good can come from you raking yourself over the coals,” Dorian said. “Just as no good can come from you moving that piece there, sharp blade.”

“Sharp blade? Now you’re calling me that, as well? Where did that even come from?” he caught sight of their approach and stood. “Inquisitor.”

“Does this mean I win?” Dorian asked.

“It means you forfeit, kadan,” Bull said gravely. “Come with us.”

The man’s smirk fell, and he followed, uncharacteristically quiet, to their room.

There were knots of rope on each bedpost.

He wondered if they’d be used on him today. The Iron Bull had said he didn’t want to hurt him, but he wasn’t sure if he believed that. Last time Bull was in a dark mood like this, he’d pinned him down and chastised him.

Varric had taught him how to escape from rope, but it really didn’t matter whether he was bound or not. He’d meant what he said. They could do whatever they wanted to him, and he wouldn’t fight it.

“Does someone want to fill me in on what’s going on?” the mage asked, arms crossed.

“Milin just begged me not to hurt his sister,” Iron Bull growled. “He offered me his body in exchange.”

He stared at his feet, trying and failing to keep his breathing under control. He’d fucked up. He could tell by the looks on their faces. This was really, really bad.

Dorian crossed over to him, lifting his chin with one finger, “Why would you think he’d hurt her?”

There wasn’t a right answer to that question, was there? But the silence was deafening.

“Because…he likes women as well as men,” he said. “And I thought, if I was back in your bed… Better me than her.” He was already damaged.

The mage frowned, “So you’re saying, you think he’d hurt her because…”

“Because we’ve hurt him,” Bull finished for him. “Shit, we’ve been hurting him since the beginning.”

“No,” Dorian made a dismissive hand gesture. “I have been nothing but a good master. He went from half-starved and alone in a dirty forest, to having food, shelter, luxurious baths, and two people who adore him. We haven’t abused him, haven’t beaten him into submission. We’ve
always made sure he’s liked it. And when he’s said no, we’ve always stopped, have we not?”

“That’s not true,” he hissed, and immediately regretted his words. He shouldn’t be mouthing off. Not in this room. Not with his sister out there.

Dorian’s eyebrows furrowed, “What do you mean? Which part isn’t true?”

He stayed quiet. He shouldn’t dig himself a deeper hole.

“Which part?” he repeated, crossly. Milin winced. He was going to make him answer, and Bull would know if he lied.

“None of it is true,” he blurted out. And the words just kept coming. “I wasn’t starved and dirty until the slavers took me, I was fine. I had my Clan, my family. Those shemlen made me that way. They chased me down, broke my bow, and kept me hooded and tied up in a cage. They barely fed me and when they did, it was so drugged that I don’t even remember most of it. And they beat me, too. All I did was try to talk to one of the others in the cages, and they just kept hitting me and hitting me until I didn’t make a sound. Even if you didn’t do it yourself, your money paid for them to do it. And I’ve never liked the sex. I don’t even like men that way! You could force my body to respond, but you couldn’t, you didn’t make me like it. I’ve just faked it so you wouldn’t give me that lust potion stuff again. That first night, I remember begging and crying, and you didn’t stop. You didn’t care. You gave me honey so I’d keep going, and I was so hungry that I took it. Then you kept me naked and chained. You ruined me. I can’t go back to my clan. I can’t have a normal relationship again. And then you dare to say that you haven’t abused me!”

Milin wiped his face on his sleeve. He’d started crying somewhere along the way, and by the end his words had come out as a throat-burning croak.

“I didn’t, I…What can I do to help?” Dorian reached out to touch his face, but he pulled away.

“You can start by not hurting anyone else like you did me,” he said, and turned to the door. He wasn’t playing into their delusions any longer. “Nali is waiting for me. Stay the fuck away from her.”
“What did you say these were called again?” Nali asked. Her mouth and fingers were dusted with a white powder, and the room smelled of sugar and cooked meat.

He was surprised that she’d actually stayed here, considering how long he’d been gone. He would have thought she’d wandered off by now. Or not went to the kitchens at all, just because she’d been told to go there. Must have been hungry.

“Beignets, dear. We have some foreign big wig visiting who asked for them specifically, and then only ate one out of the whole batch,” the cook answered, rolling her eyes. “Orlesians.”

“Creators help me, these are amazing. Do you have any more? Can I have them?”

The shemlen woman beamed. It was nice to see her smile like that again. She’d been so short-tempered and sad since the old cook died at Haven.

“Of course, honey. I’ll fry some right up for you, hot and fresh. You need some meat on your bones, just like that brother of yours,” the woman caught sight of him. “Well, speak of the Void. Come in, come in, my little cinnamon roll. I’ve used those wild turkeys you brought for pot pies, they’ll be done in a minute.”

“That’s okay, I’m not hungry.” He doubted she’d listen.

“There was a cat dancing around here, earlier, you should have seen him,” his sister said, wiping her mouth off. Then her face sank. “Something’s wrong.”

He sighed. He didn’t want to lie to her, but he didn’t want to upset her, either, “Nali…”

“Don’t ‘Nali’ me. You ran off and now you come back looking like a kicked fawn,” she said. “Come on, I know something that will cheer you up. Hey, can I take some of those blackberries with us? It’s kind of why I agreed to come here to begin with.”

Blackberries? She didn’t even like blackberries.

“Fine,” he relented, letting her drag him away with her sticky fingers.

She led them to the grounds, then out the gates. She looked like she knew where she was going. So she’d been wandering around looking for him. No surprise.

They reached a clearing, and found a lone deer grazing on the new grasses.

A halla.

“Shiral!” he cried, breaking out into a run to embrace her. That explained how no one caught up to Nali when she ran, Shiral was fast for her age, and her herd would not have defied their matriarch.

‘Milin, da’falon, it warms my heart to see you again.’

“I’ve already told her that I’m staying,” Nali said, holding out her palm so she could eat the blackberries. “She didn’t want to come inside with me, though.”

'I do not trust these shemlen. They took her, and they tried to bind me with rope. I can carry both of you. Let us leave.’
“They were being ignorant, not cruel. Nali attacked first, because she feared for me, but they didn’t know that. And the shemlen can’t talk to horses, so they communicate with ropes they put in their mouths. It’s weird,” Milin said. Ignorant, not cruel. Maybe… No. His chest ached enough without him thinking about them right now. He pushed the intrusive thoughts from his mind. “Also, there’s a bigger threat. The hole in the sky was caused by a terrible creature, and we have to stop him. I closed the Breach with the shemlens’ help, and I think I can do this, too, just not alone. You can do what you want, but I have to stay.”

‘Foolish child. They will use you and when the threat is gone they will destroy you anyhow.’

“Better that I be destroyed than the whole world.”

She stomped a hoof in displeasure, ‘Very well. If you must ride into battle, I would have you ride upon my back.’

It took less coaxing than he’d thought to convince Shiral to come inside Skyhold’s walls. The wind was picking up, and it was starting to get dark. Animals or hunters posed little threat to a halla matriarch like her. But without her herd, the cold was a risk.

It took a little more coaxing to get her to the barn. He considered bringing her to one of the guest rooms, but door frames and antlers did not mix well. Here, it was sheltered from the wind and rain, and she would be much happier sleeping on hay than on stones or cushions.

“That animal is dangerous and wild. I won’t have her around the horses,” Master Dennett said. “She kicked one of the stablehands, and he’s still recovering.”

“If he’s still alive after a kick from her, then she was holding back,” Milin said. “She is dangerous, yes. But halla do not fight unless forced to. Treat her with respect, as the intelligent being she is, and she will do you no harm.”

He touched her back and spoke her words for the human’s ears, “Long ago, I befriended the grandmother of these young ones. She was my twin-soul, and I love their father as I do my own children, just like I love them as my own grandchildren. The boy assures me that he and the girl are not captives here, and that her being taken was a misunderstanding. But I will not apologize for trying to defend the girl and myself. Next time, I will kill.”

“She…she can speak?” Dennett asked, eyes wide.

“I can. But shemlen ears are too poor to hear, not that they care to listen much anyhow,” he translated.

The man shifted uncomfortably, “I’m assuming you want the animal—”

“Shiral.”

“Shiral. I’m assuming you want her in one of the stalls for the night? Not sure if those horns will fit, though. She might have to take the barn.”

“Wouldn’t bother me any, I stay upstairs anyhow,” Blackwall said, coming out to the stables. “Lovely, proud creatures, the halla. Never seen one so close before. The name’s Blackwall, lady Shiral, and young lady Lavellan, I’m guessing.”

“It’s Nali,” his sister said, and tilted her head to the side. “Is that a beard?”

“What? Where?” he said, patting his head and then chin. “Oh that? Yep. It’s a beard.”
She laughed.

Milin studied her face carefully. These were shemlen, and men at that, but he saw no sign of fear or hate there. She hadn’t had a negative reaction to any shemlen yet, aside from Cullen for obvious reasons. He couldn’t decide if it was a bad thing that she had so much trust, or a good thing that nothing bad enough had happened to make her lose that trust.

“Is this where we’re sleeping?” a voice behind him asked. He turned to see Cole, carrying several bedrolls. And pot pies.

The way Nali’s face lit up at the sight of him made him smile.

“That was the plan,” Milin said. At least until Shiral was more comfortable in Skyhold. Or the force of Vivienne’s disapproval physically dragged him away from the barn.

His mind flashed back to the stables in Tevinter, curled up in the hay to recover from being taken by both of them at once.

So Nali could trust shemlen, but he couldn’t even trust hay. How messed up was he?

“Wait…” Blackwall said. “Spirit boys need to sleep?”

“I thought I had to. But I don’t. The Old Songs can pull me.”

“Forget I asked,” he said.

~o~O~o~

Shiral and Nali laid on either side of him, their breathing even and slow. He was warm. He was full. He was comfortable. He was safe. He was with family. But he couldn’t sleep.

Damn hay.

“She really wasn’t hurt,” Cole said. He was sitting up, back against a wall, with his sister using his lap as a pillow.

“I thought you couldn’t read my thoughts?”

“I can’t. You’re too bright. But you keep looking at her like healers do. Like you’re trying to find where the bleeding is,” he said. “Nobody wanted to hurt her, they were just scared of her. If they had, I would have gotten her out.”

“Why didn’t you get her out earlier, then, if you could?” he asked. He wasn’t angry, so much as… okay, he was a little angry. “I’m sure you read her mind. If you’d just told someone she was my sister…”

“She was very sad, tears twisting with time into anger. The thread had to be unknotted first. She had to be sad again so that when she saw you, it wouldn’t tear.”

“So she’s okay?”

“She’s better. And not as afraid of the Templars. You standing up to Cullen helped,” he said. “She wants to know why you were crying, but also she doesn’t.”

Nali made a distressed noise in her sleep, and Cole smoothed back her hair until her face relaxed.
He thought of Dalish.

And he thought of Dorian.

“Can you help me forget something, Cole?” he asked.

He wanted to forget the sleepy kisses, the affection. He wanted to destroy the memory of Bull throwing men across the room to save him. Of them handing him over to Viddathari because they wanted him to be safe more than they wanted to use him. Of them freeing him. Then he could hate them without reservation.

“You're too bright for me to see inside your mind. I can't change what I can't see. I’m sorry.”

The next morning, he walked Nali up to the library tower to meet with Fiona again.

This time, Dorian was not only gone from his favorite chair, but so were the books he usually had stacked up around him. The First Enchanter said he’d taken his things back to his quarters earlier. Which he guessed meant he was taking leaving Nali alone seriously.

He went down to the training yard, and practiced some basic dagger strikes with Cole, aiming for the vulnerable points of heavy armor. Horizontal slice across the neck. Thrust to the face. Diagonal slash at the inner elbow. The footwork was the hardest part, actually. To get the most strength and accuracy from a bow, the feet had to be planted. Not a problem, when you were far enough away. But with daggers, sword-wielders were the ones with distance on their side.

_Dodge, dive, deceive, don’t be where they can reach you. Like a dance, but deadly. Let the swords swing, hit nothing where it expects a body, and then have no room to un-swing._

He wasn’t a bad teacher, after Milin deciphered what he meant. Sometimes he could get distracted, though. Talking in riddles about people he’d never heard of. At one point, he talked about nugs for a while, and he strained to understand what they were a metaphor for, until he figured out that, no, Cole just liked nugs.

They stopped to eat at midday. Or, at least, Milin did. Cole didn’t eat.

“Thank you, for helping me with this,” he said. “I’d like to pay you back, somehow. Maybe help you find Rhys and Evangeline again?”

“No. If they are safe and far, let them stay that way,” he said. “Last time Rhys saw me, he saw a monster. If you want to help me, kill me if I get that way again.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you, Cole,” he said. “But I’d stop you.”

The wind let up, briefly, and he used the calm to sketch. He was getting stronger now, but it would still take him a while to recover enough to go back to practicing.

He drew nugs, he drew horses, he drew halla, and then he moved on to people. Athim. Dalish. Varric. Josephine. Felix. He tried to draw Viddathari, too, but found that he was already forgetting what he looked like. The man gave his life to protect him, and he could no longer even remember the exact shape of his nose.

He heard familiar bare footsteps approach.

Ugh, that stupid note, he was such an idiot. She probably was just going to walk on by so she wouldn’t have to look at him or talk to him again.
The footsteps paused, and he could smell wood-smoke, “Is that me?”

He nodded, looking sheepishly up at Dalish. Now she’d think he was weird for this, too. And Cole was no help. The spirit had vanished, conveniently.

“It’s good.”

“You’re good,” he said, and felt his face grew warm despite the chill. “Looking, I mean. Good looking. Pretty.”

Could he sound any more stupid?

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments, but I’m not about to throw them back,” she said, sitting next to him. “Although, I have to ask… You left without saying goodbye. Or good morning. I understand if this was just a one-time thing, and you just want to remain friends. You have a lot on your plate, being Inquisitor, saving the world, all that. And, of course, if there’s someone else…”

“No!” he exclaimed. Several heads turned, and he lowered his voice. “No. There’s just you. I like you, a lot. It’s not that.”

“What is it, then?”

A lot of things.

“You have your vallaslin, and I…” I am a whore. I am ruined. “I don’t. You deserve better.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I deserve,” her voice was soft, but her tone serious. “I’m a grown woman and I can make my own decisions about who I want to be with,” she shook her head. “You know, I remember seeing you perched on that throne looking more terrified to be there than Alexius. You of all people should know better than to put me on a throne, too.”

By the Dread Wolf, he hadn’t thought of it that way. She was right.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing. I’ll stop.”

“Good, I’ll hold you to that,” she smiled wryly. “Never thought I’d have to have this conversation with a man who vastly outranks me, you know.”

“I…outrank you?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No. You’re with the Chargers, how do I outrank you?”

“You’re the Inquisitor. Your advisers hired Bull’s Chargers. And Bull hired me. You are at least three degrees higher in rank.”

“Oh.”

He hadn’t thought about it that way, either.

“You either have the best deadpan I’ve ever seen, or you’re daft. How did you not know you were in charge with everyone bowing and calling you ‘your worship’? Do you think they hand out giant decorative swords like candy?” she teased.

He flushed, “I knew I was kind of the head of the Inquisition, I didn’t know about the Chargers.”
“Well, who did you think was paying us?”

“I…didn’t think about that,” he paused. “Does this mean I outrank Bull, too?”

“Of course. Let me put it this way: if they are inside Skyhold’s walls, and not some foreign dignitary, chances are you outrank them.”

“What about Dorian?”

“The Tevinter mage? He does research for the Inquisition, doesn’t he? Then, yes.”

Milin let out a laugh. That was just…

He couldn’t even fathom it. It was still hard for him to believe he was really going to be freed. But Dorian had done as he asked, so it had to be true, right?

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t even know,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s not, I guess. Not really.”

She gave him an odd look.

Fantastic. If she didn’t before, now she really must think that he was completely daft. Ugh, he should go bang his head against a wall or something until the stupid fell out.

It made sense, he guessed. But it was still just such a foreign concept to him. He outranked Dorian. He outranked Bull. And he outranked Dalish because Bull outranked her.

Part of him wanted to ask if there’d ever been a hint of Bull abusing anyone else, but he knew there wouldn’t be. Dalish, Krem, the others…they wouldn’t stand for that. Much less encourage it, like Dorian had.

“Now, it looks as if your tutor has quite literally disappeared. I could go see if Skinner is free.”

“Skinner? I mean, I guess I could ask her. It’s just that…”

“She terrifies you? Don’t worry, you’re not the only one. But she actually warms up to people fairly fast. Unless you’re a human, that is,” she said.

“I think I’ll wait until she’s fully warm before I go anywhere near her while she has blades in her hands,” he said. “But I could introduce you to my friend Shiral. She came here last night. She’s a halla.”

“Really?” she beamed. “Oh, wonderful. It’s been so long since I’ve even seen any halla. I can’t wait to meet her.”

She held his hand as they walked. No fear about if anyone saw or what they thought. It helped him not to care, either. Or at least pretend not to.

When they reached the barn, they found Athim trying to speak to Shiral.

“Hello,” he said, wringing his hands. “Can you really talk?”

“Yes, I can speak.’

He didn’t seem to hear, however, and shook his head sadly, “That mage Nali said that you could.
Was she playing a trick? Didn’t seem like her. Is it that you don’t want to talk to me, then? Is it because I’m not Dalish?”

Oh, he’d met Nali? Right, that made sense. She was with Fiona, Alexius was serving the mages, and he’d asked Athim to look in on him from time to time.

“She is talking to you,” he said, making his friend start in surprise. “Here, make contact with her and listen close.”

“It helps if you look into her eyes,” Dalish added.

“May I?” Milin asked the halla. She nodded.

He took his hand, and guided it to her nose. The old halla leaned into it, and spoke again, her voice booming as if talking to a child who was learning how to listen, ‘Can you hear me now, da’len?’

Athim gasped, and pulled away, eyes like saucers, “It’s true. I heard words. Soft, like whispering, but still. It’s not just some fairy-tale. How is that possible?”

“Beasts, birds, fish, plants, they all were gifts to Elgar’nan from the earth, so the stories go,” he explained. “But the halla were born from Ghilan’nain. She was an elf, like us, before she became a goddess. That’s why we can talk to them, but not other animals.”

“But you…” he looked away. “You’re the Herald. You’re not a believer?”

He shrugged, “I’ve heard the Chant of Light, and it’s beautiful. But I see it as the humans’ beliefs, not ours.”

“That’s not true,” he said, lowering his voice. “Mother Giselle didn’t sing you the dissonant verses, so you didn’t hear about Shartan. He was an elf, and he was Andraste’s champion, too. They say it’s heresy to talk about him, but they say it’s heresy to call you the Herald of Andraste, too. That doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Ah, Shartan the Liberator,” Dalish said. “Skinner has told me of him. There are other dissonant verses, but they were removed early on. And yet, the verses about him were deemed Chantry canon right up until they decided to have an Exalted March on the Dales. Quite the funny little coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Exactly,” Athim said. “I’ve learned the verses, and I’ll sing them to you, if you want. Somewhere private, that is. Preferably at night.”

“Sure, if it won’t get you into trouble,” he said. The Chant of Light he’d heard had only been about shemlen. If there was a whole other secret canticle, that could explain why so many city elves believed it. And it was obviously important to his friend.

“I need to get back to work. Let me know when you have time,” Athim beamed. He reached out, hesitantly touching Shiral’s neck. “Thank you, for talking to me, halla.”

“You may call me Shiral, da’len.”

“Shiral,” he nodded. His hand shook a little, and his face was pale, but he did not jerk away this time.

The young man said his goodbyes and left.
‘Now what is your name, follower of Falon’Din?’

“Forgive me, Shiral. My name is Glandival’him Enansal Adahlen,” she glanced at Milin. “Bit of a mouthful, I know. You can see why I tend to go by Dalish.”

“I’ve got a worse one for you,” he grinned. “Deshanna Istimaethoriel Lavellan. My mother’s name.”

‘Ah, yes. I remember how much she loathed her name as a child, swore that if she had children, their names would be two syllables or less. And she made good on it, too,’ Shiral said. ‘A pleasure, Glandival’him Enansal. You are not bonded, correct?’

“No, not yet.”

“But you are courting with Milin?”

“Shiral!” he protested.

“I am old, not blind.”

Dalish laughed, and took his hand, “It’s alright. Yes, we’re courting.”

‘Excellent. Bonding between Clans is good for the blood. And I know of the Adahlens. A proud, strong family. You must get your vallaslin of course, da’falon, but that should not be an issue. A First can perform the rituals in the Keeper’s absence.’

“I...I haven’t earned it yet. I still need to make a kill and present it.”

‘Nonsense. The spirit behind Andruil’s test is to prove your ability to provide food or protection to the clan. You closed the Breach, did you not? You obviously qualify. I will speak with Nali, and we can make preparations within the week.’
“Forgive me for the intrusion, I wished to speak with you in private,” Solas said.

Milin looked around him. The snow. The tavern. The Chantry. It was so familiar, but how?

“This is Haven,” he breathed.

“It is the Beyond.”

“The Beyond? That means I’m asleep? But why would you talk to me here? I never remember my dreams.”

“Mundanes usually don’t. But with me as your guide, you will remember this one.”

“Oh,” he said. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He didn’t like this. Why would he choose this place? People died here. Corypheus tortured him here. “What did you need to talk about?”

“I heard that you and your sister have been preparing for the vallaslin ritual,” he said gravely. “In my journeys in the Fade, I have seen things. I have discovered what those marks mean.”

Milin frowned, “They honor the Creators.”

Why was he acting like this was some terrible thing? He knew that Solas had butted heads with the Dalish before, but he would have thought he’d be happy for him, proud of him. Out of all of his companions, he thought that he would be the one to understand.

“No. They are slave markings. Or, at least, they were in the time of ancient Arlathan. A noble would mark his slaves with the symbol of the Creator he worshipped. After Arlathan fell, the Dalish forgot,” he said. “I have heard of your history, that you were once a slave in Tevinter. I felt like I could not in good conscience let you go through with this without first telling you the truth.”

His fists clenched, and he glared down at the ground, “Why are you saying this?”

“Because it’s true.”

“No!” he cried. “No, it can’t be, I don’t believe you!”

Milin grabbed him by his shirt collar and yanked him down, crushing their lips together so hard that their teeth clicked.

The other elf jerked away, but he didn’t let go, “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t this what you really want?” he demanded. His eyes burned. “To become my new master? You want to control what I do with my body, don’t you? And you took me a place I can’t escape from, didn’t you? Well go ahead. Use me. I’ve been told I’m pretty.”

“Lethallin… I do not want to control you. But you deserve the truth. And you deserve better than what those cruel marks represent.”

“They represent freedom to me,” he said, pushing away. “My master bought me, in part, because I didn’t have vallaslin. And even after coming south, I thought I’d never get them. I thought my Clan wouldn’t accept me anymore, because I submitted to slavery. But they know I was a slave, and
want me anyway. And now you’ve tainted that.”

“I never wanted to hurt you.”

He turned his back on him, “It would have hurt less if you’d just fucked me. That I’m used to.”

“I’m sorry…”

“Then let me go.”

Milin woke up with a gasp, his skin clammy and his breathing fast.

He didn't expect to be released.

Shiral and Nali stirred beside him, and his chest clenched. He was supposed to get his vallaslin soon. What was he even supposed to say to them? That he couldn’t go through with it anymore? That their symbols of family, loyalty, freedom, adulthood, faith, all of it was a horrible mistake? That his clan, his parents, his sister, all unwittingly marked themselves as slaves? And Dalish...she was on a mission right now, didn't even know he'd be getting his vallaslin, but he still had to face her when she got back.

“Sleep,” Cole said. And their breathing settled back down.

Warm arms wrapped around him, pulling him close, smoothing back his hair, just as he himself had done so many times for others.

He could hear the spirit’s heartbeat, which was kind of surprising. He didn't eat or sleep, but he had a heart?

“Was he lying?” he asked. He still, desperately, wanted it to be a manipulation. It’d be easier, that way. But even as the words came out of his mouth, he knew what the answer would be.

“Solas believed what he said. He thought he was helping, he didn’t know he wasn’t until the kiss,” Cole said. So that was it, then. Out of all the knowledge his people had lost, they’d kept a relic that marked them as slaves. “In the Spire, there were beatings, worse. ‘Do you remember telling me no? You can't do that now. The Tranquil don't say no to anything.’ That happened to you, didn’t it? I am sorry.”

He winced. As if being made Tranquil wasn’t bad enough, he hadn’t even considered that aspect before.

And now it was obvious Cole knew exactly what he was. As did Solas. And on top of all that, he’d kissed a man who hadn’t wanted to kiss him. The thought made his skin crawl. He needed to apologize.

“I… Sorry, Cole. Thank you, for helping me. But I have to go,” he said, reluctantly extracting himself from his arms. He threw on his cloak and ventured out into the chilly night air.

He got about five feet from the elf’s door before his courage failed him, and he froze. He knew he should apologize. The guilt was eating at him, and it was only getting worse the more he hesitated. But he just couldn't bring himself to face him. Worthless coward.

Solas opened his door. Because of course he’d heard him coming. He wasn’t a shemlen.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out.
He beckoned him inside, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But…but I…” Milin covered his face with a hand. “I kissed you. And you didn’t want to be kissed. I was upset and wasn’t thinking right, but that’s no excuse. It was an awful thing to do and I’m sorry.”

The mage shook his head, gesturing for him to sit as he closed the door behind him.

“I should be the one apologizing. I have always felt comfortable in the Fade, but it was thoughtless of me to expect you to feel the same, especially for a non-mage. You were weaponless, in a strange place, and alone with another man. Given your history, it is understandable that you would make assumptions.”

He bowed his head, “I know I don’t deserve to ask you any favors right now, but please don’t tell anyone about my ‘history.’ It’s bad enough that everyone already knows I’m a slave.”

“Were a slave,” he corrected. “You escaped to the South.”

“I didn’t escape. I never ran from my master, never fought back. He let me go,” he said. “People want me to be a leader, but they have no idea how weak I am. I’m nothing but a pathetic, worthless whore.”

“Your worth is not determined by what others have done to you, it’s determined by what you do,” funny, Varric had said almost exactly the same thing. “You have been granted great power, and with it, you have freed the mages, faced Corypheus alone, accepted the aid of a spirit, and rendered judgements with careful thought. I am impressed by you. You may have been forced to bow, but you will learn to stand straight again, in time.”

He flushed red, “I... I will try. And I appreciate you telling me the truth. It hurt, but it’s better that I know. Thank you, hahren.”
Milin couldn’t sleep.

He still hadn’t told Nali about the vallaslin yet, and the ritual was tomorrow. Or rather, since it was far past midnight by now, today.

“You should go outside,” Cole whispered, surprising him a little. He hadn’t said anything for hours, it was easy to forget he didn’t sleep. “It will help, I think.”

“You mean…like a walk to clear my head? But it’s late.”

“It will help,” he repeated.

Milin sighed and got up. Well, laying awake and agonizing wasn’t doing him any good. He might as well try it.

He threw on his cloak and bow, and began to wander around Skyhold, lost in the scenarios in his mind. What he could say, how Nali might react, how his Clan might react, how Dalish might react…

Before long, he caught sight of a robed figure swaying on his feet, hunched over the stairs with a bottle in hand. He reeked of alcohol. This wouldn’t be the first time one of the mages recruits had too much to drink. Most Circles didn’t allow liquor, after all. And the freedom to drink at last meant that many went overboard, at first.

It was cold, even without the wind, so he should probably offer to help him find his way back to his room. Maybe this was why Cole wanted him to go outside…

Milin crossed over to him, and tapped him on the shoulder, “Are you okay?”

He turned to face him, and they both froze.

“Perfectly fine, just drinking my weight in liquor, nothing new,” Dorian said, at last. He stood up straighter, as if that would make him unable to hear the slur in his voice or smell the alcohol on his breath. “You have other things to worry about, don’t you? Saving the world?”

Dorian was right, he should just leave him to his wallowing. Not like he cared.

Then the wind picked up, and he saw the mage visibly shiver.

He scowled, tugging at his sleeve to lead him inside the throne-less throne room. The shemlen stumbled and sagged to the ground before they even reached halfway.

Why was he even bothering with this? What was the matter with him? He should just walk away.

“We need to get you back to your room.”

“Don’t want to go back. Bull… Bull wants to talk about it. Doesn’t want me to drink when I’m ‘in a mood.’ But that’s how problems are handled, in Tevinter. You drink, and say passive-aggressive little barbs at the party you feel has wronged you,” he said. “Snuck out to the tavern after he went

“You missed me so much you’d have sex with desire demons and pretend they’re me?” he muttered.

Dorian looked up at him, hurt, “No. I meant that I miss the way you’d comfort me when I’d wake up from their torments.”

He deserved torment. He didn’t deserve his comfort, his pity, or his help. And yet he found himself dragging the human to his feet.

Milin had half-carried him to the platform by the time he realized he was not going to be able to get him all the way back to his room on his own, and the mage was little help. So, he laid him down on the rug, using one of the cushions as a pillow.

A traitorous part of him had the urge to curl up next to him. Dorian was too drunk to try to do anything to him, and he’d found comfort in his arms before. Of course, that was back when he didn’t have any other choice.

He headed to his old room, knocking loudly to wake up Bull.

He could hear groans and curses and shuffling around, and then the Qunari was at the door, his one eye half-lidded, “What—”

“Your human’s passed out in the throne room. Come on,” he said, nodding his head in Dorian’s general direction.

“Hold up,” Bull said, following. He looked a little more alert, now. “He didn’t go wake you up, did he? Shit, I’m going to kill him. I told him to give you your space.”

“No, I was already up. I ran in to him.”

“…and you decided to help him?”

“Didn’t want him to get frostbite, doesn’t mean I forgive either of you,” he snapped.

Bull fell quiet, and the silence stretched between them for a beat. But he wanted to ask something, and there was no reason to be afraid of speaking up anymore.

“Viddathari said you saved him,” he said at last. “Why did you help him, but not me?”

The Qunari shrugged, “It was easier for me to kill his master than yours.”

That wasn’t good enough. He needed more. He needed answers.

“You didn’t have to kill him, you could have just persuaded him to set me free, like you did here in the South,” he pressed. “Why didn’t you stop it earlier? Why did you let it start in the first place?”

“I don’t have a good answer for that. I’d like to think if it wasn’t for the Censors, we wouldn’t have done it. But we didn’t immediately stop in the South, did we?” he said. “Best I can come up with is that I was undercover too long. The Venatori would do these rituals. Sacrifices. Orgies. And it was either participate or blow our cover. Like any good Ben-Hassrath, I compartmentalized it all. So when Dorian bought you…I didn’t protest like I should have. You were just another calculated casualty like the other slaves. And if the guilt would start to well up, I’d do little things to help...
you, to make myself believe it was different.”

“I remember that,” he said. When Dorian wasn’t around, Bull would talk to him, tell him stories. He was so deliriously grateful for those moments, at the time. Now he knew better. “That stuff really screwed with my head.”

“I’m sure it did,” he said. “I know it doesn’t change shit, but I’m sorry.”

“How am I supposed to believe that, Hissrad? How do I know you won’t just ‘compartmentalize’ again and feel sorry after the fact?” he asked, as they reached the throne room.

“You’re right. You shouldn’t believe a word I say. It’d be crazy to, after everything,” he said. He hoisted Dorian onto his shoulder to the human’s half-hearted protest. “But you can trust my selfishness. I never want to see Dorian like this again.”

Bull carried him away, and Milin was left alone.

Or so he thought.

“I didn’t feel it,” Cole said, appearing from the shadows. “There wasn’t any pain there, for either of them. Now there is. ‘The salesman said surrogates were like puppies. They can be fearful at first, but be patient. A potion to relax them, a little petting, some treats, and they would be devoted pets soon enough. Convenient lies, just like my father’s.’ ‘Gatt looked up to me, and he died knowing that his savior was a damn fraud. Can’t make it up to him or the kid, not ever. But that darkspawn asshole will have to get through me if he wants to lay a claw on him.’”

“I don’t want to hear this,” he said, feeling betrayed. Cole was supposed to be on his side. “Why would you make me see them again?”

“Varric says you keep too many things inside,” he said. “The Iron Bull does that, too. Buries them deep so he can forget about them. He makes people not people so their pain doesn’t stick to him. I was trying to make that harder.”

So…it wasn’t about getting him to help Dorian, then. It was about getting him to confront Bull the way he had Dorian.

“Isn’t preventing people from forgetting things the opposite of what you usually do?” he asked.

“Not if they were the ones who hurt people. Then what I usually do is kill them, so they can’t hurt anyone else.”

“Then why didn’t you, this time?” he asked.

“I didn’t have to stop them. They stopped.”

~o~O~o~

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as he reached the stables. He’d managed to doze off in the throne room, probably Cole’s doing, and was woken up by a worried Athim. “I just…had some things to take care of.”

“Oh, I know you did. Shiral just told me your big secret.”

His eyes went wide. She knew. Had Cole said something? He tended to blurt out things like that, but it’d never occurred to him that…
Nali’s serious tone turned sing-song, “Somebody has an asha’falon.”

He laughed nervously, “Yeah, I guess I do.”

“Well, when do I get to meet her? You let Shiral meet her!”

‘Patience, da’len,’ Shiral said. ‘I am certain you will meet her. In the meantime, you have duties as First to perform.’

‘Alright, alright. Vallaslin ritual. Got it.’

“Nali, wait,” he said softly. “There’s…something you should know.”

She touched his arm, eyebrows furrowed, “What’s wrong?”

He might not be ready to unbury the other stuff yet, but for this, he didn’t have a choice. He had to speak up.

Milin took a deep breath, just like Varric showed him.

“The vallaslin, they aren’t what you think. They’re slave-markings,” he said. “Back in Arlathan, our people owned slaves, and they marked them with the symbols of their favored gods as tribute.”

There was a long pause.

“I know.”

“You…what?” he asked, taken aback.

“It’s forbidden to talk about it before the ritual, so I’m not sure how you found out, but yes, I know. And yes, I was going to tell you,” she sighed. “Let me explain. So, you know how, to earn your vallaslin, you had to honor each Creator? Craft your own weapon for June, hunt for Andruil? Well, this last test is about Fen’Harel.”

“But…the Dread Wolf is evil. Why would we honor him?”

“Not evil. A trickster. He takes words and twists them into lies, takes people and twists them to his will. We do not honor him, but we do respect him. As such, we have taken the original purpose of the vallaslin, to subjugate, and we’ve twisted it to make them into a symbol for freedom. Now, the vallaslin is something that you earn. Do you understand?”

“I…I have to think about this.”

She nodded, “Yes, that’s the idea. Seek out a place where you can find solitude, and begin your meditation.”

Usually, the Dalish went out into the woods for this part of the ritual. But the thought of being out there, alone, vulnerable, made him want to bolt.

The closest thing to that within Skyhold were the gardens. But that was always bustling with people.

Then he thought about going to that little room that had a statue of Andraste. It was always quiet. But someone might need to go there to pray, and to be honest, he didn’t entirely feel safe there. Which was crazy. He knew that. But even with his weapons, he just…he hated being alone.
Finally, he settled on asking Varric if he could use his room.

“Of course, Sharpshooter. What for?”

“To meditate. I have a decision to make. I don’t know how long I’ll be, so it’s okay if you say no, I don’t want to put you out or anything.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll make sure no one interrupts you.”

“Thank you, Varric,” he said.

He settled in on a comfortable chair and started to think through what in Thedas was going on with his life.

Shiral asserted that he'd earned his vallaslin, but she didn’t even know the whole story. The only people who really knew were Solas, who was against it, and Dorian and Bull, who he didn’t want making this decision for him.

Cole did too, actually. But the spirit would probably just tell him to do what made him happy, and he didn’t know what would make him happy.

He was still a slave. As far as he knew, the papers hadn’t come in, yet.

But that shouldn’t matter, right? The whole point of this was to declare yourself free, whether others wanted to claim otherwise or not.

If only he’d never been taken.

Well…

No, he didn’t exactly wish that, either. Because then, he would have never met Dalish or Varric or Viddathari…and the world would probably be destroyed.

His mind wandered to that day on the boat, when he’d drawn them with vallaslin, and used his fingers to trace the symbols on their skin. He’d chosen the symbol of Mythal for himself because she represented love and justice and protection. She still represented those things now. And she’d saved him in Tevinter, and at the Conclave. He had called out to her, and his prayers had been answered. He wanted to honor her.

And then there was the Inquisition. If he’d never been taken as a slave, he’d never have gone to the Conclave, either. Never gotten the Mark. Not that he wanted it, but having it kept Corypheus from using it. And the Inquisition did good things, here. They helped people, protected them. He didn’t feel like a prisoner here, anymore, he wanted to be a part of this.

Locked away or not, the Creators must have been looking down on him. He had suffered so much, but he was sure of this.

It was time for him to start standing straight, like Solas had said. But in his own way.

Milin returned to his sister.

“I want to honor Mythal, I want her vallaslin,” he announced, then he extended his right hand, palm down. The hand without the Mark. “And I want the symbol of the Inquisition on my hand.”

To his surprise, Nali didn’t even question his decision. She just asked for a sketch of the Inquisition symbol, and the details of the placement.
That was it?

“You don’t mind that it’s…not traditional?”

“This is about freedom. It’s your choice,” she shrugged. “Ready to start?”

He nodded. Nali handed him a bowl of something clear. Under her direction, he used it to purify his skin. It smelled of oak and cedar and tingled on contact like weak lightning magic.

His sister said a few a words in Elvish, signaling the beginning of the next phase. After this, no food, no water, no respite, and absolute silence. This was to demonstrate that the elf was strong enough to handle the pain.

Which, he learned, was not easy.

His hand was bad. Not Corypheus-messing-with-the-orb bad, but bad. And his face….that was nearly unbearable. It was a struggle to keep his breathing under control, and hold still for the needle. Plus, unlike with his hand, he couldn’t see what she was doing, so he couldn’t even tell how much longer he had.

Shiral had kept guard at the entrance to the stables. Not that anyone tried to enter, both Dennett and Blackwall had been told they would need privacy for the day, but she’d still done it, just in case. And he was grateful for her presence.

The sun was starting to set when his sister finally recited the words that signaled the ritual’s end. Nali stretched her arms over her head with a groan, “Halam, Lalae.”

“Ma serannas, Sasae,” he reached for the water bowl, and saw his face in the reflection. He looked so different. Older.

If he could find the strength to endure all of this…maybe he wasn’t so weak, after all.

Shiral nudged him, ‘I am proud of you, da’falon.’

“You really did great,” his sister said. “Are you happy with it?”

“It’s hard to believe it’s real,” he said, setting the bowl down. “But…yes. Yes, I am.”

Chapter End Notes

Reference for Milin's vallaslin:
http://vignette1.wikia.nocookie.net/dragonage/images/7/76/Mythal-Alternate2.png/revision/latest?cb=20150105215839
Visitors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh, Maker, your skin!”

The cooks gathered around him, fussing as they stuffed him full of food. He didn’t mind, for once. He hadn’t eaten since yesterday.

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes,” he said with a good-natured laugh.

“Oh, you poor dear, I have just the thing…Here, eat this.”

“What is… Alright, just one. Thank you.”

“That’s the Inquisition symbol, isn’t it? But what’s on your face?”

“It’s to honor the elven goddess Mythal,” he said.

“So beautiful. Can I touch it?”

“It still kind of stings right now, but later, sure, if you want.”

“Oh, and you brought geese for us. You are such a little dumpling.”

“It was no problem. A flock flew over on the way. Nali got most of them, actually.”

He pointed to his sister, who was holding out the fabric of her robes and shoving as many pastries as she could carry into it. She waved, her mouth brazenly full.

The head chef laughed, and gave her a whole tray, “There you are, pudding. Dinner is over, so you can take as many as you’d like. And have some berries, for your pet reindeer.”

“They’re called halla. And they’re not really our pets, they choose to live with us…”

“Oh, that’s right, haaa-la.”

Close enough.

At last, they escaped to the stables.

Blackwall was outside chopping wood, and greeted him with a wince, “Damn, so that’s what you’ve been doing all day? I’m not going to state the obvious that it looks like that hurt, but if you need a potion or something…”

He shook his head, “No, the pain is part of it. But thank you. Did you want to eat with us?”

“Nah, I’ve got a rhythm going. Congratulations, though. I think.”

Word spread fast, and they had more than a few visitors the next day.

“Pulled, blood that is not blood, a tiny trace of time. Lips struggling to shape language your parents
lived. Some pain helps instead of hurts. Like setting a broken bone,” Cole said. “The chains aren’t completely gone yet, but lockpicking is easier with help.”

Vivienne said, “Truly lovely, dear. And a wise strategic move. If others are speaking about your face, it will help distract from your unfortunate choice of certain allies.”

Athim asked a lot of questions. Some of which even he couldn’t answer, and he ended up having to defer to Nali and Shiral. The halla didn’t have to yell so loudly for him to hear this time, he noted.

“Damn, Sharpshooter, congrats on the vallaslin,” Varric said, giving him a firm clap on the back.

“You…know the term vallaslin?” he asked.

“Yeah. A good friend of mine is Dalish, and she’d ramble on forever about things once you got her started. So I may have picked up a term or two,” he explained. “But that’s not actually what I’m here to talk to you about. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Remember how I was telling you about a friend of mine, one who might be able to help us? Come up to the battlements with me. I want to introduce you two.”

~O~O~O~

The human woman stood tall, a staff at her back but armor instead of robes. She had a streak of what looked like red paint across her nose, and hard, blue eyes.

“Sharpshooter, meet Hawke. The Champion of Kirkwall.”

“Varric’s told me about you,” he said, a little awed. “You killed dragons, and defeated the, uh, Qunari leader—”

“The Arishok.”

“Right. And the Knight Commander, too. Who turned to stone?”

“Meredith,” she supplied, and her expression turned dark. “Is this the part where you ask me about Anders? Call him a monster? A murderer? Mad?”

He stepped back, “I mean…he did do it though, didn’t he? Kill all of those people?”

“He was trying to change the world. For years he tried to do it peacefully. But even the support of a Champion wasn’t enough to get the Chantry to protect the mages from Meredith. Elthina chose the easy route, while pretending it was brave. And the mages suffered because of it. I didn’t mourn her in the least. As for the bystanders…” she shook her head. “Something had to be done.”

“If we could move on to the whole world ending thing,” Varric suggested. “Hawke, any friendly advice about Corypheus? We did fight him, after all.”

“Fought and killed. The Grey Wardens were holding him, and he somehow used his connection to the darkspawn to influence them. Anders included. Otherwise, he’d be here,” she said. “I hate leaving him alone.”

So, Hawke and Anders were…together like that? He thought it’d be rude to ask.

“If the Wardens have disappeared, they could have fallen under his control again,” she continued.
“I’ve got a contact with the Wardens, Loghain. The last time we spoke he was worried about corruption in the Warden ranks,” Varric muttered something about Corypheus certainly counting as corruption. “He told me he’d be hiding in an old smuggler’s cave near Crestwood.”

“Will you take us there?” he asked. This Warden sounded like he might know something useful. And they needed all the help they could get against Corypheus.

“I’m ready when you are,” she said. “I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Chapter End Notes

_Not technically part of this fic, since I am adamant about keeping the focus on Milin and this will be Dorian’s POV, but here’s a little ficlet, as per samoacookie’s request._

Dorian woke with a groan. It felt like two dwarves had spent the night pounding on his skull with pickaxes, and a third had force-fed him deathroot. Tasted like that, too. What was that stuff he’d been drinking, anyway?

Bleary-eyed, he fumbled at the bedside table for a cup of water, when he felt one handed to him.

Bull.

“You snuck out to drink again.”

Dorian cringed.

“Just an ordinary headache,” he evaded, sitting up and sipping the water in a way that he hoped came off as nonchalant. “And that smell is an old Tevinter medicine.”

“Milin was the one that found you.”

He choked, coughing up the water that went down the wrong aqueduct.

“Bull I…”

“He came and got me, you know. Worried about you getting frostbite.”

Dorian let out a bitter laugh.

“Of course he was. Wasn’t bad enough that I made someone live in fear and isolation for months, I did it to the best person in Thedas,” he said. His father had wanted him to live like that. Smiling on the outside, screaming on the inside. “That’s the Herald of Andraste for you.”

Iron Bull tilted his head at him, “You’re a believer.”

“In the Maker? You already knew that.”

“No. I mean, you believe in the Herald stuff. You believe Milin was chosen.”
“Perhaps I do,” he said softly. That would make him the equivalent of Hessarian, wouldn’t it? But it was far too early to get philosophical. “I should go apologize.”

“No, you fucking won’t,” Bull said flatly. “He’s got his vallaslin ritual today.”

“His what?”

“The face-markings. Getting them is important, so don’t spoil it by making today about you.”

“I don’t understand, he’s getting married? To who, the Dalish girl?”

Bull shook his head, “It’s not a marriage thing, It’s a coming of age ritual. Remember how you had a cotillion marking the end of your apprenticeship? It’s more like that.”

“Fine, so I’ll apologize tomorrow.”

“Leave it, kadan,” he said. “If your father showed up on your doorstep today, wanting to say sorry, would you appreciate the gesture, or would you be pissed he came?”

He sighed, “So what do I do?”

“Anytime he’s passed a judgement, he’s told them to work for the Inquisition, somehow. So find something productive to do, give him and his family space like he asked, and stop getting drunk alone.”

~o~O~o~

“They’re beautiful,” Dorian said from the balcony. Deep red, nearly black, marks swirling all across his forehead and down his eyes and nose. And the way he held himself…confident and proud. A far cry from the elf who could barely bring himself to speak. “He looks so different.”

“He is different,” Bull replied. “He’s free.”
drawing of Milin

http://imgur.com/a/hngNH

Hope you guys like my attempt at drawing Milin in a snuggy! The regularly scheduled writing update will happen on Saturday.
“You knew where Hawke was all along!”

Cassandra’s voice. She must have found out about their secretive meeting yesterday. Milin rushed over to the commotion, to see the Seeker back Varric into a corner.

“You’re damned right I did,” the dwarf tried to push her away. But she was bigger, stronger.

“You conniving little shit,” she threw a punch, and the dwarf started to duck and scramble away. His hand grasped the dagger hilt and flung it. With a cling of metal against metal, the blade bounced off her gauntlet, grazing her hand as it fell.

The woman let out a yelp, and both of them turned to him.

He stared, open-mouthed, in horror at the blood dripping from her fingers. He hadn’t meant to do that! He just didn’t want her to hit Varric.

Cassandra’s face was contorted in anger and disbelief, “You cut me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, cringing.

“He was trying to protect me. Just as I was trying to protect Hawke,” Varric said. He offered a handkerchief, and she pressed it to her fingers with a grunt. She seemed somewhat placated at the gesture.

“We wanted her to lead the Inquisition, not harm her. Hawke would have been at the Conclave. If anyone could have saved Most Holy…”

“The Inquisition has a leader,” Varric retorted. “And you know what I think? If Hawke had been at the Temple, she’d be dead, too.”

The woman frowned, then turned to leave.

“I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to stop her,” he said, once she was gone.

The dwarf picked up his dagger, wiped off the blood, and handed it to him, “I know, Sharpshooter. And she does, too.”

Varric took him for a drink after that. He said that they both needed it.

The barmaid he’d been growing royal elfroot for gave them each pints of mead, free of charge.

“So how much do drinks cost, anyway?” he asked, after Varric made him tell the story behind Tiff.

“Depends on the drink,” he shrugged. “Anywhere from a handful of coppers to silvers. But nothing you could find here would cost a whole gold coin.”

“Oh,” he said, and paused, thinking for a moment. “Varric, how much do slaves cost?”

The dwarf sputtered, “Damn, sharpshooter, that’s just… I’m not exactly in that market, you know? I couldn’t tell you.”

“Sorry,” he said, looking down. Varric was obviously upset by the question. He didn’t mean to do
that. In his clan, people shared everything. Like the royal elfroot. If someone needed something to live, they’d all try to get it for them, and wouldn’t expect anything in return. If it was something valuable, but not vital, they’d trade favors for it. But what humans thought was valuable could be very different from what his people thought was valuable.

And he was morbidly curious how valuable slaves were considered. Like…did he cost as much as a mabari? Dorian treated him (or used to treat him?) kind of like a particularly intelligent dog, so he figured it was more or less the same.

Maybe he’d ask Dorian. Someday.

He heard a loud gasp across the bar, and looked up to see Dalish sprinting at him. Next thing he knew, she was straddling his lap.

“You got your vallaslin!”

“What? Really?” he asked, looking at his reflection in the mostly-empty tankard as if to check. She must have been the last person in all of Skyhold to find out. Understandable, since she’d been gone with some of the Chargers for the past few days.

She pushed him playfully, “Mythal, huh? Thought you would have gone for Ghilan’nain. Suits you, though. Your sasae do it?”

“Nope. Shiral did.”

“You think you’re clever, don’t you? I’m supposed to be the funny one, thank you very much.”

“So I’m not allowed to be clever or funny? What am I allowed to do?”

Dalish leaned in to his ear, the alcohol on her breath mixing with the smell of fire, “I can think of a thing or two. Starting with a dance. Ending with a bit of courting.”

Heat rushed to his groin and he could do nothing but smile dumbly as she pulled him towards the dance floor. Varric laughed, “Fine. Ditch me for a girl.”

“I—”

“Just giving you a hard time. Young love, romance, I get it. Besides, I could use some new material,” he said with a wink.

They danced and drank until the minstrels stopped playing for the night.

The two of them stumbled over to her room, and Milin collapsed onto the bed, still in his clothes and feeling lucky that he didn’t have his leathers on. The ceiling spun. When he told Dalish this, she insisted on him drinking some water.

“Do you still want to…” he slurred. “You know, court? I mean…you brought me here…”

She shook her head, “Don’t worry about it. I just brought you here so I could have someone to put my cold toes on. Go to sleep, lethallin.”

~o~O~o~

Milin woke with a groan, his head throbbing.

“Three drinks and you were down for the count,” Dalish said. She crossed over to him, and offered
a cup of tea. He sipped it. She must have been up a while longer than he was because it was just warm, not hot. And too sweet. Probably to mask some bitter herbal remedy she’d put in it. Or maybe she just liked sugary tea. “I don’t think my tolerance was that low when I was born. Don’t worry, though. Stick with the Chargers, and we’ll get you drinking twice that in no time.”

“Sure, add insult to injury.”

She smiled, and crawled back into bed with him, putting her cold feet between his legs, “I never said I was a nice person, my illustrious Inquisitor. I don’t know who gave you that impression.”

“I don’t know who gave you the impression that I was ‘illustrious,’” he murmured with another long drink. Whatever was in it did make him feel better.

“Would you prefer ‘glowing?’”

He rolled his eyes, “No thanks.”

“Hey, you have to get a Charger nickname sometime, and ‘Dalish’ is already taken, so…” she paused, touching his forehead and running a finger over the new lines. “You know, I’m happy for you, but this doesn’t change anything, right? Not between us, I mean.”

He finished off the rest of the tea and set it down so he could trace her vallaslin, too. She was so beautiful. He should tell her that. And tell her how glad he was to have met her, and how he felt a rush of happiness when he saw her, and that maybe, someday, they could bond.

Wait, how long had he just been laying here touching her face without saying anything?

“I know. I got these because I wanted them,” he said, at last. He didn’t have the courage to say the other stuff yet. Because it was way too soon to be thinking things like that, right? And she might think he was putting her on a pedestal again.

Why did Shiral have to go and mention bonding, anyway?

“Good. They do make you that much more handsome, though,” she shot him a mischievous grin. “You’ll need to throw me in the dungeons if you want me to keep my hands off of you, now.”

“But then I wouldn’t get to, either,” he said. “Put my hands on you, I mean.”

She kissed him, mercifully ending his fumbling.

It was sweet, and long, and when she pulled back, she leaned into his ear, “I’ve been taking herbs, by the way. Ever since I last had you in my bed.”

She did not need to explain what the herbs were for, and he felt his cheeks burn.

He wanted to tell her no.

But then she’d ask why, and he’d have to make up something. He couldn’t make excuses forever. Part of the point of bonding was to have children. If he wanted to have that with her someday, he’d have to force himself to get over this. Until then, he could fake. He was good at that.

He forced a smile and pulled his tunic over his head and unlaced his trousers. He might as well get this part over with, so he pushed off his smalls while he was at it.

“That was fast,” she commented. “No strip-tease for me?”
“Oh, did you want one? I’m sorry.” It wasn’t like he’d ever have to do that before. He was either allowed to keep his clothes on, with Viddathari, or he wasn’t, with Dorian. So he figured best get the feeling of vulnerability over with. But now that he thought of it, Dalish had helped him undress before, so he should have waited for her. Next time, he’d try out the strip-tease thing if that’s what she liked….if there was a next time.

“No need to be so serious, I was just teasing,” she said, pulling him on top of her. Dalish peppered quick little pecks along his face, roughly along the lines of his vallaslin, and for a moment he got out of his head and laughed. His face must be beet red, by the feel of it. “Now, why don’t your wicked little rogue fingers help me disrobe, too?”

Determined, Milin untied the sash at her waist, slowly kissing down her body as he pulled the sides of her robe apart. This part was nice, he just had to stay in the moment. He liked kissing, he liked her, and he really liked her naked.

“May I pleasure you, first?” he asked, reaching the end of her belly. He was only half-hard, and it’d be easier for him to get aroused if he did that for her.

“Creators, do you have any idea how adorably sexy you are?” she laughed. “Yes, you most certainly may, good ser.”

Encouraged, he used his tongue on her as he’d been taught, starting at her thighs and working his way in. As he’d hoped, the way she called out in Elvish for more, squeezed her legs around him…it drove him wild. He barely even minded her tugging at his hair.

Then her thumb traced around his ear and it was all he could do to not flinch.

“Relax. She doesn’t know what that means. It’s not like that. Breathe.

“I want your fingers in me,” she moaned, oblivious.

He slid two digits in, easy with how wet she was, and thankfully she stopped toying with his ear to grip his hair, hard. He didn’t like that, either, but it was preferable.

“No just in and out, curl them towards you,” Dalish directed. “Yes, just like that. Sa, sa…Oh, shit, Milin, sumeil.”

The woman’s body clenched around him, pulsing rhythmically, and he looked up to see her face. Mouth open, eyes closed, enraptured. He tried to engrave that image in his mind. It’d make things easier.

Dalish pulled him up for a sloppy kiss, her knees at his hips, “Want you inside of me.”

So soon? Didn’t she need time to recover?

The woman rolled them over, one hand grasping his cock as she lowered herself down on him. Milin threw his head back in pleasure. This was good. Warm. Wet. This was…it was wrong. He didn’t want to be touched. He didn’t want to have to come.

Milin buried her face in her neck so she wouldn’t see the shame burning him alive. She’d be able to tell. She’d figure it out. She’d be disgusted.

As stimulated as he was, Lavellan was able to last a while, due to his training. When the choice was between lasting long enough to bring Dorian to completion, or having to eat him out after, he’d learned to hold back, fast. And he wanted to give her what she wanted.
Even when she was cruel enough to cup his face and look into his eyes, he held her gaze as best he could.

“Kiss me. Please,” he begged when he couldn’t take any more. He could shut his eyes without offending her if they kissed.

“I suppose I could do that.”

He faked a grin, relieved.

Dalish leaned down, nipping his lower lip before bringing their mouths together properly. Closing his eyes at last, he willed himself to finish now before she looked at him again. He squirmed a hand between them, stroking her clit.

“Sumeil?”

“Sumeil,” he hoped.

She gasped into his lips, her clenching around him pushing him over the edge. The orgasm was real, but the moan he made with it was not.

He held her, their breathing fast and bodies sweaty, and relaxed. It was over. He could act normally again.

“Not going to go running off on me before breakfast again?” Dalish teased.

“Well…I do need to go to Crestwood in the morning,” he admitted sheepishly. “But we can still eat first, if you like?”
Dissonance

Three weeks later, and Milin was back in Skyhold sitting in judgement again, on what Varric referred to as the ‘pillows of mercy’.

The trip to Crestwood should have taken a week, at the most. It was a simple mission. Go to Crestwood. Talk to the slightly terrifying Warden Loghain. Come back. It was the coming back part where things went south. He didn’t want to leave there until he got that big rift closed. He was the only one who could close them, after all. And it was causing a lot of problems for the locals.

And then he found out about the drownings.

They’d gone a week out of their way to hunt the man before him down.

Josephine announced him and his chargers, and they both sat. Milin cross-legged, and Mayor Dedrick on his knees. He went willingly, he noted.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

“There’s no cure for the Blight, but I couldn’t convince anyone to leave a sick child or husband behind.”

“So you herded the infected into one place and flooded Old Crestwood?”

All those people…they’d been looking for help. And not just the sick, but their families, too. Not that it’d be any better, otherwise.

“Nearly everyone in the village had the Blight. I swear it!” he said. “Have mercy. I couldn’t tell the survivors I’d drowned their own families to save them. I—I couldn’t.”

First he ran from judgement, now he justified his actions rather than show any remorse. Even if the Blight had no cure, drowning was a horrible way to go. Were his actions really to protect his people? Or were they to protect himself?

He had a dark thought that if the mayor believed drowning people was an acceptable way of dealing with problems, he should be drowned, too. But he quickly shoved that from his mind. Milin had killed fourteen people, now. Did he really want to add a fifteenth? Would it do anyone any good?

He closed his eyes for a moment, considering.

“I give you to the Wardens,” he said at last. “You sacrificed the lives of others to fight the Blight. Redeem yourself by using the rest of your own life to fight it.”

“I don’t deserve the honor, your worship. But I’ll do my best.”

The mayor was led away, and the crowd dispersed.

~o~O~o~

Milin stood uselessly at the door, trying to talk himself in to knocking. This was the logical thing to do. It would be stupid not to. He raised his fist, and lowered it with a sigh. He was such a coward. He was supposed to be free now, damn it.
Soft footsteps approached and he turned, smiling at the sight of his friend. He pulled Athim in for a hug. “How’re you?”

“Fine. Worried until now, cuz you took so long, but fine,” he said, before letting go. “Are you looking for the ‘Vint? He’s made a little nest in a back corner of the tavern. Went there just after you left and doesn’t leave except to sleep, I think. Not that he seems to be doing a lot of sleeping, by the look of him.”

“Why? What does he look like?”

“Either frantically reading or sloppily drunk. Sometimes both.”

Milin frowned. He’d known Dorian to go on drinking binges before, usually when he’d had a fight with his father. But Iron Bull had always managed to snap him out of it before too long. He’d never wallowed for weeks like this before.

“Where’s Iron Bull?” he asked. It might be easier to talk to him first. He’d been upset, but not to Dorian’s level—probably because Bull had never been able to delude himself quite as much.

“I don’t know. In the practice field with his Chargers, I think?”

“Thanks,” he said, giving him another hug. Tighter this time. He needed that. “I know I just got here but I’m leaving again soon. Maybe you could give me that Chantry lesson you mentioned later tonight?”

“Sure, if you want,” he nodded, then lowered his voice. “Meet me in the wine cellar after sunset?”

He didn’t entirely get what all the secretiveness was about, but he agreed.

Bull was at the far end of the training yard, getting walloped by Cassandra with a stick. He winced. He’d heard about this thing he did, of course. Dorian used to tease him for it, maybe to distract from the fact that he always fussed over his bruises. He’d never seen it in person.

The sight of those two was almost enough to make him flee, but then Bull said something rude about her being a woman, and Cassandra knocked him clear off his feet, breaking the stick in two. He had to stifle a laugh.

The Seeker helped him up, looking smug, “I will have to get another one.”

“You go do that,” he wheezed.

Cassandra passed by him with a nod, “Inquisitor.”

“She packs a real punch, doesn’t she?” Bull said, laughing it off. Then his face fell, as if he just realized who he was talking to. “Hey, kid. Need something?”

“Yes,” he said. He’d practiced what to say in his head, and tried to stick to that. “The Warden contact said we need to go to the Western Approach. There’s an ancient Tevinter ritual tower, there. I’m certain the Venatori are involved. And since you and Dorian know more about that cult than anyone, you should come.”

He’d thought about this a lot in the past weeks. As leader of the Inquisition, he could order them imprisoned or banished or even executed. But they were two of the strongest fighters they had, and if their knowledge could save lives, he couldn’t justify leaving them behind.
…and if he was honest with himself, if he put them on trial for enslavement, he was worried what kind of questions that would bring up.

“Anything you want, boss. You know I need no convincing to hunt down those damn ‘Vints. You couldn’t keep me and my Chargers away if you tried.”

“And Dorian?”

“He’ll come,” he said. “He’s doing better, thanks to you. Still drinking like a fish, but he’s back doing some research now. He wants to help the Inquisition. We both do.”

“Okay,” he said, crossing his arms.

The Qunari looked doubtful, “…okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. But I don’t see a better option,” he turned. “Get your people ready. I have to go to the wartable.”

~o~O~o~

The more Leliana debriefed him about the Western Approach, the more anxious he became.

He’d heard that it was hot there, yes. But it sounded much worse than a Free March summer. Hot enough that grasses and shrubs did not grow, hot enough that pools of water could not be found.

Within minutes, he had to admit to himself that Shiral would not be able to come. Some herds of halla were adapted to warmer climates, but her thick fur was more suited towards the cold. Halla couldn’t cool themselves with sweating like people could, she would overheat easily. And at her age…she wouldn’t be happy with being left behind. But he could not, would not risk her life.

They would have to ride dracolisks instead. He had never seen one, but they were apparently like giant lizards. He made a note to go talk to Master Dennett about how to care for them and introduce himself to the animal before they left.

Josephine advised that he should lead a small group into the desert first, lead the way to the stronghold Chief Movran captured, and then wait for the slower reinforcements to arrive.

Then Cullen presented his findings about the Venatori. Unearthing ancient ruins, performing ancient rituals, something to do with giants…and using slaves. *The desert is saturated with slavers*, the Commander reported.

Milin couldn’t hear what was said after that. His world shrunk down to flashes of being chased, his bow cracked, his body bound. Slavers. Saturated with slavers.

The next thing he knew, the meeting was adjourned.

He went to find his sister, eventually tracking her down in the kitchens.

“You’re not going,” he said. The words sounded weird and toneless. He felt numb.

She made protests, demanded answers he wasn’t able to give. All he was capable of doing was repeating those same three words in that same, lifeless voice. She threatened to get Shiral on her side, but he told her that she wasn’t going, either. Finally, his sister left in a huff.

The familiar scenes of the day he was taken filled his mind again, only now he saw her staff being cracked instead of his bow.
He felt bad for upsetting her, or rather he knew he should feel bad for it, but he just…he couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t.

The cooks tried to coax him into talking, eating, but he just shook his head and left.

Milin found himself in the wine cellar, hours before sundown. He sat alone, staring at a candle, watching the wax drip. At some point, he realized that he was hungry, but had no desire to eat. He might throw up, even if he tried.

His mind kept replaying that day, to the point where it didn’t feel real. He didn’t feel real.

Footsteps.

“Milin?”

Athim’s voice. Athim’s face.

“Everything okay?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t know what to say. How could he explain this?

“What can I do to help?” he continued.

He had no idea. He’d never felt like this before. Maybe in short bursts, but not this long, and not this much. He stayed quiet.

Athim asked if he could put an arm around him. He said yes. Then his friend asked if he could still sing for him. He said yes.

The Dissonant Verse was beautiful. He could see, now, how the city elves could become Chanters.

His friend offered to let him spend the night with him after that, which he was grateful for. But as a servant, he had cramped quarters, and he’d already helped him a lot.

The stables were out. He knew his sister. She’d still be mad. And worse, she’d be thinking up new arguments of why to go. Probably with Shiral’s help.

He could go to Dalish’s room. But the cost for spending the night with her was sex, and he didn’t think he could pay that right now. If she just wanted him to eat her out, that’d be fine. But he doubted she’d want to waste the herbs she’d been taking. Maybe he should start paying for them or growing them? It was only fair, he benefitted from them, too. Kind of. But even if he took care of them for her, she’d likely still want to have real sex. Right now, he couldn’t trust that he’d be able to hide how he felt, and he’d probably just break down and tell her everything. Not that part of him didn’t want to do that, anyway. He felt dishonest, hiding this from her. But then he thought of her with his face contorted with disgust and pity, and lost his nerve.

So, he went to Varric’s. The dwarf had told him, before, that he could crash at his place any time. He felt kind of bad for imposing on him, but he wanted to see him. Maybe they could even do some more escape practice, that usually made him feel better. After some sleep, that is.

The dwarf let him in, no questions asked. He was lucky, to have friends like him, and told him so. But Varric just brushed him off, saying that he and Bianca liked the company.
It took a long time for him to go to sleep. He kept going over what to say when his sister no doubt confronted him. He thought of everything she might say, and how he should respond to it. And when he finally got to sleep, it was fitful.

They spent most of the morning on different rope knots, and how to untie them easily both in front of you and behind. It was all going fine, until the dwarf got out a blindfold, and he couldn’t help but flinch. Ridiculous, he’d practiced this a hundred times before.

“Alright, Sharpshooter,” he said with a sigh, untying his wrists for him. “What’s going on? Heard you had a fight with your sister, and now you’re acting all jumpy.”

How’d he know about him and Nali? Oh, wait. This was Varric.

“We’re going to the Western Approach soon.”

Varric didn’t say anything, just gestured for him to continue.

“Cullen’s report said there’ll be slavers.”

“And you’re nervous about this.”

He nodded. Terrified.

“Well, Sharpshooter, I’ve actually fought quite a few slavers in my day. Kirkwall teemed with them. But you know what? They’re cowards. They prey on the vulnerable and isolated. You won’t be either of those things, alright? They will try to avoid your group, if they can. And if they can’t, they’re more likely to run at the sight of a group of armed soldiers than fight. It’ll be fine. And even if they get you alone, somehow, you’re never be without a weapon.”

“You mean the Anchor?”

“I mean your wits,” he said. “But, sure, the glowy, magic hand thing helps, too.”

He chuckled weakly, then looked away, “I still don’t want my sister to come. She can be reckless. Might go charging off by herself and without Shiral there to help…”

“Your sister is a great fighter, from what I can tell. But if you’re going to spend the whole trip worried about her, it might actually be best to leave her here.”

“She might try to follow, anyhow,” he sighed.

“I’ll keep an eye out for her,” he promised. “Might help if she has something important to distract herself. Maybe an assignment from the Nightingale? Those two seem to get along.”

“Alright,” he said with a nod. “I’ll go talk to her. Leliana, that is.”

He found the Spymaster in the tower, a note clutched tightly in her palm, “It is good that you are here. I just received word…read this.”

Da’len,

I would not trouble you normally. You have enough on your shoulders, fighting ancient Tevinter magisters while representing your people. Unfortunately, the rifts that plague this land have spread chaos and fear along with them, and many seek to take advantage of it.

Bandits are attacking Clan Lavellan. The raiders are well armed and heavily armored, and they
come in numbers our hunters cannot match. We had settled in a small unclaimed valley not far from Wycome, a safe place with few rifts—but these bandits may force us to seek a new home. If your Inquisition can help, you might save our clan much hardship.

Dareth shiral,

Mamae

He looked up at her, open-mouthed in horror, “We need to help, we have to—“

“There’s more,” she said. “Their attackers seem too powerful to be mere bandits. My skirmishers can harass their flanks and give your Clan a chance to retreat safely while I uncover the truth.”

He wanted to go himself. He wanted to help…but then he looked down at his hand, the symbol of the Inquisition he had inked into his skin. He had a duty to both.

“Fine. Do it. And I want Nali and Shiral among your skirmishers,” he ordered.

The woman bowed, and set to work.

Milin went down to the stables to share the news.

There was no time to talk, or argue, though Nali tried to get him to go with them. But even without the problems in the Western Approach, Shiral could ride faster with just one on her back. Minutes later, Leliana arrived with directions, instructions to meet up with the skirmishers along the way. He embraced his sister and his friend, then watched them fly from Skyhold like an arrow.

“Ghilan’nain, guide them,” he prayed. “Mythal, protect them. Please.”
The Abyssal Hang-Tooth was a yellow, lizard-type creature, with a spiky head, carnivorous teeth and bony hide. The moment Milin let her out of the stall, she darted forward, pounced on a rat, and devoured it whole. Then she sought out a sunny place in the grass and rolled over to bask.

Since she couldn’t tell him her name, despite his trying, he called her Kitty.

Lavellan joined her on the grass. Kitty hissed when he tried to pet her, but then curled up next to him, bones and horns poking into his side. He didn’t mind. He felt bad for her; she must be cold in this climate.

He had nothing better to do. The advisers had told him it would take them a day to get ready. That was three days ago. He understood, because they were going on a long journey, even for their relative small group, and they needed to be prepared. But until then, all he could do was just stand around and be useless while his family was in danger, and whatever was going on with the Wardens got worse. He’d hunted enough that yesterday the kitchen told him they had more than they could keep up with. He was still worn out from dagger training all morning. And Varric was dealing with someone else writing under his name, so he didn’t want to disturb him. He already was imposing by spending the last couple nights in his room.

“Hey, you!”

He sat up to see Skinner marching towards him, fire in her eyes.

Was she talking to him? What had he done? Milin glanced behind him, but saw no one. The dracolisk hissed at the noise.

“Yeah, you,” she sneered. “So you use a woman and throw her away, just like that? I thought you Dalish were supposed to be so much better than the rest of us.”

“I…I…” he stammered. “I don’t know—”

“Bullshit! You slept with my friend, left on your little adventures without her, and now you ignore her. You think because you’re a big shot you can treat people like shit? At least have the decency to actually break up with her,” she said something in Orlesian. He doubted it was nice.

His ears drooped. So Dalish thought he wanted to break up? He had been avoiding her, yes, but…

By the Dread Wolf, he’d screwed up again.

He stood, head bowed, and asked, “Where is she?”

“The undercroft.”

Milin muttered his thanks and fled, giving the woman a wide berth.

He found Dalish deep in conversation with a dwarf. The topic went completely over his head, but it sounded like something to do with magic.

…he thought that dwarves didn’t have magic?

“Hello,” he said to the stranger. “I’m Milin.”
“Hi! I’m Dagna. Arcanist,” she responded with a warm smile. Oh, right. Josephine had mentioned they were looking for one. And that explained how she knew something about magic. “Can I take a look at your palm?”

Dagna didn’t wait for his response before taking him by the arm and turning his left hand this way and that, asking for a demonstration. When he obeyed, being careful to restrain the power so that it didn’t damage anything, she started babbling to Dalish about something that he, again, did not understand a word of.

Dalish had yet to speak to him. He guessed she really was mad, not that he blamed her. He was such an idiot.

“Anyway,” the dwarf said. “Bring me a rune and a weapon, and I’ll be happy to enchant it for you. I just finished with a fire rune on Dalish’s staff, actually.”

“Bow,” she corrected.

“Right. Bow.”

“Okay. That would be great. Thank you,” he said.

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re already paying me. Like, a lot. A. Lot.”

“Good,” he said. “Hey, uh…Dalish? If you’re done here, can we…take a walk?”

"Of course."

She smiled, and his heart melted. Thank the Creators, she couldn’t be that mad. They went to the gardens, walking hand and hand through the medicinal herbs and flowers.

“So…” Dalish said, eyebrow raised. “It seems like you had something to say?”

“Skinner confronted me today, said I was avoiding you—”

She sighed, “Don’t listen to her. Skinner sees the worst in people, that’s all. Even if it’s not really there. You can’t blame her, given the things she’s seen, but I don’t believe you’re avoiding me.”

“I am, though.”

The woman stopped short, and he ducked his head.

“Let me explain. I…it’s nothing to do with you. My family’s been attacked. Had to send Nali and Shiral to help them. You’ve probably heard about that by now.”

She nodded, “I did. I’m so sorry, Milin. Is there something I can do to help with that?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m just glad you’re not mad, really,” he said. “I’ve had to deal with a lot. So I just couldn’t handle the stress of…”

“The stress of being around me?”

Her voice wasn’t harsh in the least, but he flinched.

“No! I mean, I don’t know, it…it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have kept you in the dark about it. And I shouldn’t have left you behind at Crestwood, either.”
“I’m a professional. If you didn’t think the Crestwood mission was suitable for the Chargers, then I’m not going to hold a grudge. Besides, we’ll get plenty of time together on the way to the Western Approach.”

He frowned, “Dalish…”

“Wait, you’re not seriously thinking of leaving me behind, are you? What for? All the other Chargers are going.”

“There’re slavers.”

“I’ve faced worse. Walking trees, enormous spiders, giants. Slavers are just men, like any other. I don’t need your protection, Milin. I’m here for your protection,” she said, stubbornly. “And I’d miss you, you felassan.”

He let out a sigh, “I’d miss you, too.” Especially with his family’s fate so uncertain, it would be good to at least have someone he truly cared about within eyeshot. He would feel guilty if he let her come along and she got hurt, but he would feel even guiltier if he made her stay and she got hurt. Skyhold was more defensible than Haven, but it wasn’t impenetrable.

Also, Dalish wasn’t stupid enough to go letting loose the string without an arrow, unlike his sister.

“Does that mean I’m going?”

Milin nodded.

“I guess you’ve got some sense after all,” she smirked. “Besides, just think of the scandal when I spend my nights in the Inquisitor’s tent. Good sir, the entire Inquisition’s hearts will be a-flutter. We’ll have to bring extra healers.”

“Don’t you mean archers with health potions?”

“Precisely.”

He laughed, and pecked her, and dreaded what he’d got himself into.

~o~O~o~

Milin stared into the crackling fire, half-consciously braiding and unbraiding his hair. He felt drained, like a tree tapped for too much sap, but he couldn’t sleep. Part of that was the wet spot on his side of the bedroll. Tents were dim enough and semi-public enough that he didn’t have to worry about faking his expression and sounds so much during the act itself, which was nice, but the cramped quarters meant that the post-coital mix of sweat and body fluids could not be avoided. He always made sure that the wet side was his side. Maybe to assuage his guilt about constantly lying to Dalish.

He’d started pushing the limits of the distances his troop could travel in a day. Time was of the essence, it was true. But part of the reason was the idea that if he just rode another couple miles, he’d be tired enough to just sleep when his head hit the pillow. And Dalish would be tired enough to let a goodnight kiss be a goodnight kiss.

It seemed disrespectful both to the woman he cared about and the man who had passed on, but at moments like this, he longed for Viddathari.

The Qunari could be a lot to handle, with his anger. If you got him on the wrong topic, he’d rant
for ages. But at night, there was an easy intimacy with him. No secrets. And since Viddathari used to be like him once, he knew what to do (or rather not do), to make him feel almost normal. He’d slept like a baby in his arms.

With Dalish, it was the opposite. She was kind and funny and easy to talk to. But she didn’t understand. Which was entirely his fault, not hers, but…

“Boss.”

He’d heard the lumbering footsteps coming, but had been hoping the man would just pass him by.

“Hello,” he said, hoping he was just acknowledging him to be polite as he went on his way. But, no, the Qunari sat on the log next to him, and his heart sank even as his body was slightly lifted by the uneven weights.

“You’re pushing the men too far lately. I’m all about being a hard-ass to get things done, but it won’t matter how fast we get there if your men just collapse at the enemy’s feet.”

“I know,” he bowed his head. And it wasn’t even working. Dalish still wanted him. Maybe in faster sessions, but she did.

“There’s something else going on, then.” A statement, not a question.

He opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out. Creators, he thought he was over being tongue tied like this…

“Is it me?”

Milin shook his head.

“Dorian?”

He shook his head again.

“Dalish?”

He paused. It was more himself than Dalish, but he guessed she was a part of it.

“Is she treating you right?”

Milin glared at him. Where was all this protectiveness when he was a slave? She treated him like a person, which was better than what either of them did. If anything, he was the one not treating her right, keeping her in the dark like this.

“I’d like to think so,” the woman said, feigning indignation.

He turned to her sheepishly. So concentrated on himself that he hadn’t even heard her coming, “Sorry for waking you, Dalish.”

“You didn’t. The chief’s mini earthquake did,” she said. He felt her hands in his hair, resuming his half-done braid. “Let me help you with that.”

Her hands made him remember the gentleness of the woman—spirit—in the baths, and his body relaxed, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m just doing this so you’ll help me shave my head,” she teased. “It itches
terribly when it grows back.”

Bull returned to his tent. Apparently, he was satisfied with that. Or maybe he just remembered that the longer Dorian was left alone, the more chance he had for sneaking alcohol.
Some fanart from the beautiful and talented Manahiel (aka langeslama), posted with their permission

http://langeslama.tumblr.com/post/161937414976/milin-of-clan-lavellan-there-is-this-fanfiction
JUST LOOK AT THAT BACKGROUND

http://langeslama.tumblr.com/post/161960813283/give-that-poor-boy-a-rest-fanart-to-this
HOLY SHIT NOT SAFE FOR WORK AND NOT SAFE FOR MY HEART EITHER

HORSEY

https://68.media.tumblr.com/f4201ada57b7ac6a1913356d52db89b2/tumblr_messaging_os4asm21ff1rz76
SO CUTE AND FUCKING HILARIOUS OMG I LOVE THE EXPRESSIONS

https://68.media.tumblr.com/f4a10a0d74bbf7e245b379cca9a7563d/tumblr_messaging_otwlmcYrP1rz76
SHIRAL.<3
The Lake

After struggling their way through the woods and bears and bandits to reach the Imperial Highway, it was quick traveling west towards the mouth of Lake Celestine. The trees had grown fewer and farther between, making way for grasslands.

He was sleeping better, lately, despite not pushing them quite as hard as he used to. Dalish still had a considerable appetite for him at night, but she’d grown up not far south of here, so he got to fall asleep listening to her wistfully tell stories about her childhood. It reminded him of how his Clan would gather round to hear his mother tell stories over supper. He wished that they could go deeper into the Dirth, but there was no time for a detour.

Just as there was no time to take the road around the Lake, like the main forces would. They had to go across. Josephine had already arranged everything with her Orlesian contacts. Which was good, he knew logically. But his heart skipped a beat the instant he caught sight of the boat. And by the time they reached the gangway, he was shaking.

He held back, trying to calm himself as he watched the others board. He knew it was a quick voyage. Just one night’s travel to save them a week of time. Meanwhile, poor Nali and Shiral had to cross the entire Waking Sea to reach the Free Marches. So he could do this. He could do this.

He stepped up and took a deep breath. The smell of seawater hit his nose like a battering ram.


Milin seized the rope handrail and vomited into the lake.

Last time, he’d had Viddathari. But now, he was gone. And he was never coming back.

He felt something hard bump into his back and turned to see Kitty tilt her head to the side. He wasn’t sure if it was compassion she was trying to show, or if she was just confused at him making weird noises, but he pat her scaly back, and she didn’t hiss at him for it.

“You get seasick, too, I take it?” Dorian said. It was the most he’d spoken to him in a week. But he’d been…better. Especially since the bottles of wine had fallen off the back of cart and shattered. Which was strange, since they’d been packed at the front of the cart. “I always wait until the anchor’s almost up to board. Here,” he drank from a waterskin, and then offered it to him. “Mixed with powdered ginger for nausea and honey for taste. It helps.”

“Thank you,” he didn’t know if this kind of sickness could be helped with ginger, but he appreciated it.

“The least I could do,” he sighed. “The very, very least.”

Milin drank deeply, the taste reminding him of honeyed dates, and leaned up to kiss him in thanks before he stopped himself.

He didn’t have to try to please him anymore. He didn’t rely on him for every scrap of food and water he was given. What was the matter with him? Must be the lack of sleep.

The captain called all aboard, and Dorian pulled away.

Lavellan tried to hand the bottle back to him, but he shook his head.
“Keep it.”

~o~O~o~

"I'm feeling seasick," he told Dalish that evening, when her hands went from braiding his hand to stroking down his chest. "Can we wait until we're back on dry land?"

Please say it was okay. Please don't think him weak for this...

"Well, let's see. Do I want to wait, or do I want to get thrown up on during sex? Tough choice," she smirked. "But I think I'll pass."

He breathed a sigh of relief and laid down, holding her close.

He said no. And she was okay with that. She didn't leave him. It was okay.

It was okay to say no. At least, sometimes.
The Desert

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Past the Lake, the grasses became sparse and thorny, the land arid. It was blistering during the day, only for the temperature to plunge at night. Which made everyone miserable…except Kitty. Kitty was loving it. Or, at least, was in a good enough mood that she no longer snapped at people that weren’t Milin when they got too close.

They’d taken to traveling during dawn and dusk, when it was tolerable, while resting during the coldest and warmest parts of the day.

Just before nightfall, a messenger bird had arrived. And he read Leliana’s man, Jester’s, report for what seemed like the hundredth time in a row.

As she had suspected, the bandits weren’t bandits. They were sent by a local Duke, whose city had had a plague, and blamed his clan for it.

I can gather information, Jester had written. But any action on my part will be high risk.

High risk.

His mind was preoccupied with the phrase. When it came to his Clan, his family, could he really choose the high-risk option?

Both his mother and sister had attached letters of their own. Nali urged using Leliana’s skirmishers to assassinate their leader. His mother argued that the humans would find out the plot, and retaliate.

And if even Jester himself had doubts…

He didn’t know what to do. All the Chargers had offered advice, but it wasn’t all that helpful, and eventually devolved into bickering.

“You know what you really need to do? Blow a sodding big hole in their city wall. That’ll draw their attention. Always does. And I’ve got this new formula I want to try out…”

“Let me guess, you’ll be expecting me to sew your fingers back on after this new formula goes and blows them off?” Stitches crossed his arms. Sounded like that was a regular occurrence.

“No. The city is already blaming elves for their problems,” Dalish said. “The alienage elves will be massacred in retaliation. And the ones who aren’t will be stuck rebuilding that wall.”

“Forget the wall. Find the shem in charge and stick him full of holes,” Skinner growled.

Krem shook his head, “And how well did that work out for you the first time?”

As much as he appreciated it, their squabbling wasn’t helping. So he’d told them all to go to bed, insisting he just needed time to think in peace. Which, in hindsight, really didn’t seem to be helping, either. Silence gave him no new epiphanies. He just kept focusing on the fact that every minute wasted was a minute his clan was in danger. Milin closed his eyes and prayed to Mythal for guidance. Protection. Justice. A hint?

A stirring came from Dorian’s tent. Nightmare, maybe? But then the human abandoned the
warmth of the tent and sat down next to him.

“Alcohol,” he said groggily.

“I’m sorry, we’re out. They fell--”

“Off the back of the cart. Yes, I know,” he said. “I’m talking about the plague. The one that only strikes humans, apparently? It just doesn’t make sense. Alienages are…less than hygienic. And considering that humans and elves are close enough in physiology to have children, you would think few diseases couldn’t pass between the two. So perhaps the Duke is right about foul play, just with the wrong target. Humans would have better access to finer things, alcoholic beverages among them. Have your people look into it. If you can find the real people to blame…”

“They’ll stop hunting my Clan,” he nodded. That…might actually be a good idea.

The man stood, turning back to his tent, “Your papers came with this latest bird, by the way. So it’s official. Just…thought you ought to know.”

That was…he didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but he didn’t feel any different.

“Thank you for telling me, Dorian.”

As first rays of red appeared on the horizon, he penned three notes. One to Josephine, asking for her to send diplomats to the city, along with gifts of healing herbs. With his work in the gardens, they had plenty to spare. One to Jester, directing him to continue looking for new information, specifically with regards to food and water supplies. And one to his family, to get far away from that awful place.

~o~O~o~

There were only two beasts besides Kitty in their party, and they were druffolo to pull the supply cart. So it typically fell to him to scout ahead. Not that the others didn’t offer, but Kitty would snap at anyone else who tried to ride her. Plus, he could use the Mark to make a light signal for where to go.

It was boring, though, out here in the desert. Back in the forests or grasslands, he could at least listen to the birds and animals, maybe bring back a catch. Here it was sand. Sand. Rock. Sand. The occasional murderous creature to avoid. Sand.

The sun was setting, and it was beginning to get cool again. There was a pretty protected little outcrop of rocks just a little while to the south where they could set up camp for the night.

He pointed Kitty to the left. She paused, sniffed, and then turned right.

He pointed again behind them, making sure that the dracolisk could see his gesture. She was so smart, and they’d signaled like this a bunch of time. Why was she--

Then Kitty broke out into a run, and he had to cling to her neck to avoid falling off, “Kitty, where are you going? This isn’t even the right way, and there’s a ledge over there! Please, Kitty, slow down or stop or…”

She halted at the edge of the cliff, and wouldn’t budge, sniffing the air.

Quietly, he dismounted. She smelled something, didn’t she? She was trying to tell him something.
He peered over the edge and caught sight of a campsite. It was getting too dark to tell banners and colors, but he could make out basic shapes.

Two tents, one more than twice the size of the other. Two muzzled and chained dracolisks, which must have been what Kitty had smelled. Two druffolo. One cart.

And one cage.

Milin’s heart started pounding. Slavers. These people were slavers.

Chapter End Notes

School starts back for me next week, so from now on, updates on Saturdays only :( 
Fugitivus

Milin’s first instinct was to run.

But his feet felt like lead. They’d hear his clomping a mile away, and they’d hunt him. They’d take him. He couldn’t even send up a signal, because then they’d see it, too. And they were so much closer than his friends.

_Breathe_, Varric would say.

_Think_, Shiral would say.

_Fight_, Viddathari would say.

He took a breath.

The sun was setting. He could hide in the shadows, pick them off with his bow. But they were hidden away in their tents. He would have to draw them out, first. A distraction.

Milin took out his bow with his right hand, as he opened a rift with his left, aiming right in the center of their fire pit. Safer, there.

And as he’d hoped, it drew them out. One figure from the large tent, one from the small. He waited for a beat, to see if there were any others, and then fired two arrows in quick succession. Both fell.

Milin climbed down the cliff face, sticking to the shadows. It was too hard to tell in this light whether his targets were merely injured, or whether his arrows had shot true.

He slit both of their throats, just to make sure, and retrieved his arrows. Their robes were Venatori, and the last thing he wanted was a fireball to the back. Kills nineteen and twenty.

Crossing to the cage, he counted five people, hooded and bound and cowering. None made so much as a sound.

“It’s okay,” he retrieved his lockpick and set to work. “My name is Milin, I’m here to free you.”

He uncovered each of their eyes, first. One elvhen man and one human woman shouldered past him and bolted before he could even untie their wrists. He worried for them, but there were rocks all over the place so they could cut the ropes themselves. Trying to follow would just panic them further.

The other three hesitated once freed, exchanging glances at each other as they rubbed their wrists.

“They’re all gone?” a girl whispered. She was thin, too thin.

“As far as I know. I got two of them, there might be more,” he said, handing her his rations and waterskin. She looked at him as if he had two heads, and then tore into the food.

“Eat slowly, or you’ll make yourself sick,” a human man chided. He had graying hair and wary eyes, and put an arm protectively around the girl. She was elvhen and he was human, but his manner was still like a father’s.

She slowed down her gorging. Slightly.
“Can you unchain the dracolisks?” he asked. “I want as much distance from this place as I can get.”

“I’m with a whole group. We can help you. I just need to signal them, and—”

He shook his head, “Nothing that will draw others to us. There could be more slavers out there. They’re like cockroaches. You see one, and you know there’ll be ten in the walls. Please, I beg of you...at least wait until we’re gone.”

The third one didn’t speak, just stared at him, watching his every move. As if waiting for an order. Or a blow. His ankles had been tied as well as his wrists, unlike the others. He wondered why.

“Okay, just a second,” the locks on the dracolisks were much faster to open than the one on the cage. Newer.

He led the beasts by their reigns to the others, apologizing to the poor things for the indignity of muzzles.

“I’ll ride with her,” the older man said, mounting and lifting the girl up in front of him. “You, friend, take the other.”

He nodded, obeying, still without a word.

“There might be more supplies here...” but he could tell from the older man’s expression that he just wanted to get out of there. He handed each adult one of his daggers. The silent one gave him a hint of a smile at that. “Head east. The Avvar have captured a fort not far from here, and if you say you’re an enemy of the Venatori, they’ll help you.”

“Maker smile on you, child. For everything.”

The three road off.

A sound of movement came from behind him, and he whirled back to the tents. There was someone or something alive, in the larger of the two. Milin suddenly wished he had not given his blades away. He couldn’t have his bow drawn and open the tent flap at the same time.

It was okay. At the very least, he held his bow. Maybe he could bash them with it. He’d seen Leliana do that once.

Just...just open it already. If it’s something bad, better surprise it before it surprised him. Even though he guessed technically it had already surprised him.

Okay. He could do this.

One.

Two.

Three.

Cringing, he tore the flap to the side.

An elf on his knees. Hooded and naked and bound. Sweaty, despite the growing chill in the air. He looked fully, painfully erect, and the way he rubbed his legs together, it was as if...

As if he desperately needed contact.
“My name is Milin. I’m here to help,” he said gently, putting his bow away. “I’m going to remove the hood now, okay?”

He pulled the fabric off, and the man chased his fingers, blindly trying to touch them against his cheek, as he whispered, “Please…please…”

“I know. It’s okay,” he crossed to his back, drawing his lockpicking tools when he found he was bound with chains, not just rope like the others. There were angry red marks at his wrists. “I’m going to unlock you now, okay?”

Creators, he was saying the word ‘okay’ too much.

The young man turned hesitantly to face him, like a dog unsure if it was allowed a scrap, and squinted at the light.

…now what?

He could send up a signal. But he’d promised he wouldn’t until he gave the others a head start. And it would be a while before his party reached them and got down the wall, anyway.

The man was suffering now.

“I want to help. But I don’t know another way than…” he shook his head. He felt sick to his stomach. “Alright, I swear by my gods that I won’t do anything without your permission. But I’m going to make a suggestion, and you let me know if it’ll help or not. Do you want me to touch you?”

The man shuffled forward, “Please.”

He put his arms around him, rubbing his back, “You won’t be punished for speaking freely. You won’t be punished for anything. Tell me what you need, and I’ll do what I can.”

There was a long pause where the young man did nothing but nuzzle into his neck. He could feel his hardness against his abdomen, and wondered why he didn't just touch himself now that he was free to. Although, if he thought about it, when he’d had that awful potion forced on him, Dorian and Bull’s touch had worked so much better than his own.

“Please…” the elf swallowed thickly, cringing like he knew he’d be struck. “Please, s-skin to skin. Please.”

“That’s good. Thank you for telling me,” Milin soothed. “But…um…do you mean you want me to take off my clothes? Or do you want me to touch your…member?”

Member? That sounded more awkward than just saying cock. But cock was too…familiar, and he really, really didn’t want him thinking he was taking advantage, or that he found this arousing at all. If his body betrayed him, it was just because he was so terribly used to things like this.

Creators, he really didn’t want to undress.

He hesitated, “B-both. Please.”

Fenedhis.

Milin reached between them to palm his cock, which was met with a loud, needy moan. The stranger clung on to him for dear life, thrusting into his hand. This made it especially difficult for
him to strip himself one-handed, but he tried.

Wait… he didn’t even know his name yet. He should at least know that if he was doing this to him… for him, shouldn’t he?

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The man furrowed his eyebrows, not pausing his thrusts, “Janus.”

“Okay, Janus.”

Awkwardly, he shrugged out of one sleeve and switched hands on him before peeling off his shirt completely. The instant he had access, the man rubbed their bare chests together, and began kissing at his throat.

It didn’t feel good, he told himself. But he didn’t dare take his trousers off.

“Would this be over faster if I sucked you?” he asked, hesitantly. That always worked better for him. And the way he was grinding on him… he really didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. “I don’t mind. I don’t want you to suffer any longer than you have to.”

The man stared at him, open-mouthed.

It occurred to him that no one had ever used their mouth on him before.

“It’s okay, Janus. It’ll help,” he hoped.

Milin gently pushed him to his back, which he didn’t resist, and took him into his mouth. He was used to it. And he was good at it. Especially considering Janus wasn’t as big as even Dorian, much less Iron Bull, so he had no problem getting him all the way to the back of his throat. The other elf had his eyes screwed shut, but based on the gasping and shaking, this method worked better than hands. So it was okay. It would all be over soon.

Within minutes, he tasted come, and swallowed. It was the fastest way to get rid of it.

He pulled back, and felt a sudden yearning to have large, strong arms wrap around him, like Bull used to do. Was that how Janus thought of him? The relatively more considerate of the people who used him?

His stomach churned. What would Viddathari think if he knew he’d done this? What would Dalish?

“Are… are they dead?”

A full sentence, with no pleases. The stuff must be wearing off. Without meeting his eyes, he nodded.

He went rummaging through the first pack he found, looking for some clothes. The man needed them, and it was something for him to do besides stare at the ground. Unfortunately, it was all women’s things. He grabbed a second pack and pulled out a plain black robe. Far too big for the elf, but it would do until they met up with the others.

He tossed it at him and then headed for the tent flap. The Venatori had to have food and water stashed somewhere. And although his body looked much less thin than the others, he doubted the slave was ever given his fill.
“Wait,” Janus breathed, talking fast. “Please, don’t leave me alone in here. Please.”

He nodded again and the elf crawled to his side, having to hold the robe together with one hand. As soon as they got outside, Janus vomited. He couldn’t blame him. Flies were starting to gather around the bodies.

“I’m sorry,” Milin said. He wanted to reached out and hold him, rub his back. But he thought his touch would be unwelcomed after everything he’d done. He’d be doing it to assuage his own conscience, not help him. And that’d be selfish.

Trying to make himself feel less useless, he stood to search the camp for supplies. He gathered food, water, and crushed any vials he came across. He stayed away from the bodies themselves, out of respect for the dead.

The man remained on his knees, rocking back and forth and whispering to himself.

Milin shot a flare into the sky. The others should have a good head start by now, and his friends couldn’t get here soon enough.

If Janus seemed jumpy before, now he was panicking.

“What did you do?” he asked in a hurried whisper. Janus crouched, eyes darting around like a nug who’d heard a noise, but wasn’t sure which way to run. “More will come. I’ll be fugitivus, they’ll brand me…”

Part of him wanted to ask what fugitivus meant, but thought better of it.

“Janus, I wasn’t trying to draw more of them to us, I was trying to call to my friends. I’ve been scouting all day, and these were the only slavers I’ve seen in the desert so far. There may be more of them further in, but my people will get here, first,” he hoped.

“But what if they don’t? Please, please…”

Oh, no, he was starting with the pleas again. His heart sank. The man was actually taller than him, and more muscled, too. But he still seemed so heartbreakingly small.

“I’ll kill them,” he said. “I promise.”

…that sounded a lot more comforting and less scary in his head. Creators, what was wrong with him?

“Milin,” the man whispered. “What’s your family name?”

What? Where did that come from?

“It’s…Lavellan.”

His eyes widened, terrified, “You’re not a mage. You’re the Inquisitor.”

“Yes, but you don’t need to be scared of me,” he insisted. It didn’t work. Better try something else. “Janus, do you think you could eat something now?”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Great. He was going to be doing that, too.
“You can just call me Milin,” he reminded, gently, and sat cross-legged next to the fire. “I found a couple things. Some raisins, jerky, crackers. Sound good?”

After a pause, he sat next to him, and opened his mouth.

Great.

“You don’t have to… you can feed yourself, now.”

The man closed his mouth, but when he held his hand out with food, Janus eyed it with suspicion. He popped a raisin into his own mouth to prove it wasn’t drugged, but the elf still didn’t take any.

He sighed, “Okay, here.”
Hand-feeding the elf was…odd. But it seemed to make Janus a little more relaxed, so that was good. He’d work with him about feeding himself on a day when they weren’t surrounded by the bodies of his former masters.

“Hello down there!” a voice called above them, causing them both to jump. He didn’t expect them to find him so soon.

Milin waved back at the human, “Blackwall! Find us okay?”

“Yeah, that beast of yours led us right to you. Smart creature, she is. Ugly as a broodmother, and twice as bad tempered, but smart."

Krem peaked his head over, “So, are you coming up or are we coming down?”

“Up,” he said. Higher ground was more defensible, and they had to go that way to get to the Avvar fortress, anyhow. He turned to Janus. “Can you climb?”

The man shook his head, cringing, “I’ve never done it before. If you ask me to, I’ll try my best, but--”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get some rope,” the lieutenant said. He’d never heard his voice so…gentle. Not that he was usually mean or anything. “The Chief’ll get you up here in no time. He could lift you with his pinky toe. As soon as he gets here, I mean. Just a second.”

More heads appeared over the ledge.

“I see you’re making friends,” Dalish said. “And a couple of enemies. But, you know, can’t make an omelet without breaking a few Venatori. You alright?”

“We’re fine.” Physically.

A rope dropped down, and Janus stared at it like it was a snake and if he moved, it’d bite him. His mouth moved soundlessly, but he was pretty sure it was the word ‘please.’ The fact that it was held by a giant Qunari probably wasn’t helping. He should have warned him about him. How could he be so stupid?

“Maybe there’s another way up?” he suggested. They could walk along it for a while, see if there was a path.

“Don’t worry, we’ll make a way up,” Dorian said. “Stand together and hold still.”

“Wait, what—”

The ground lurched up from under them, and they clung to each other as they were raised up to the same level as the cliff. They stumbled forward, desperate to get to firmer ground before the spell wore off.

Poor Janus sunk to his hands and knees, panting.

Awkward or not, he put his arms around him, “It’s okay. You’re safe. He was just trying to help, not to hurt you.”
“But he’s one of them.”

“He’s from Tevinter, but he’s not Venatori,” he said softly, trying and miserably failing to be soothing. “He’s a… not a friend. Ally? “He’s with the Inquisition.”

“But I’ve seen him,” Janus whispered. “At their meetings. I know it was him because he had the ox-man bodyguard then, too. He could be a spy against you.”

“No, he was spying on the Venatori, not on us. I promise.”

“Alright,” he said. Still kneeling, but not shaking any longer. Which didn’t entirely make him feel better—Janus was just accepting his word as law. How was he supposed to live up to that?

Dorian stepped closer, eyebrows furrowed, but Bull stopped him with an arm, “He’s a slave, and you just did magic on him. Give him some space.”

“I do not own slaves any longer.”

“I know, kadan,” he lowered himself to a knee. It had to be painful for him, with his joints, but he seemed to think it worth it. His nostrils flared as if smelling for something, and a frown briefly crossed his lips. “I’m The Iron Bull. What’s your name?”

“J-Janus.”

Bull smiled, “Nice to meet you, Janus. These are my Chargers. I’ll have you meet them one-on-one later. You’re free to ride with us for however long you want, though we can’t guarantee we won’t get into trouble. So, you’re free to go whenever you want, too.”

“Trained in any weapons? We’ve got plenty,” Skinner offered. Which was her version of being sweet.

“I…have used a scythe. But only to cut grasses and stuff. I’ve never…”

She cut him off with a grunt, and jumped up on the cart to rifle through crates, “We have a falx, or a cutlass.”

“No,” Grim said, causing at least a few people around him to jump. He climbed up with her and pulled out a heavily curved glaive. With his free hand, he helped Janus to his feet, and passed him the weapon.

Janus hesitated, eyes darting as if suspecting a trap, and then accepted it.

They made camp for the night. And while Stitches cooked dinner, the rest set their sights on the Venatori supplies.

With the warriors raising and lowering people with rope, the lighter members of their party salvaged what they could, and burned the bodies before the smell attracted drakes.

Janus stayed far away from the cliff ledge, and he couldn’t blame him for that. And he was glad to see Krem keeping him company, talking a mile a minute in Tevene. Janus probably spoke more in an hour than Milin had in the last month.

“Don’t bring up the tents,” he said, when he saw Skinner start to break down the smaller of the two. “Burn them.”

He didn’t need that memory literally following them around.
“Then where’s our new guy going to sleep?”

…right. He couldn’t ask someone to give up their tent and burn perfectly good ones without explanation. That wasn’t fair. It also wasn’t fair to ask Janus to sleep with a stranger. He might assume things were expected of him.

“With me?”

“Wait, what? When were you going to run this by me?” Dalish asked.

He winced, “I…”

He gestured for her to follow him to a little outcropping. He didn’t want to explain in front of the others. And it might give him a chance to think of what in Thedas to say to her.

They reached the rocks, and he still had no idea.

“So…” she prompted. Her voice was exasperated, but not unkind. “What’s wrong with the tents? They’re better than that awful cage, at least, right? By the Dread Wolf, they’re better than most of our tents.”

He sat down, and bowed his head, “He’s scared of being left alone.”

“You didn’t just say ‘Dalish, would you mind if he spent the night with us,’ though. You said to burn the tents.”

“They hurt him in there,” he said. He knew he was being vague, but it wasn’t his place to say. And he didn’t want to admit it, either.

She sighed, “Okay. If he says he wants to join us tonight, I guess that’s fine.”

“Thank you, Dalish,” he pecked her cheek. “He… might have trouble eating, too, by the way?” Best to get that awkwardness out of the way while they were at it…

“Huh?”

“I tried to give him some food earlier, but he wouldn’t eat it unless I fed it to him.”

“Creators, what did they do to that poor boy?”

“Nothing good,” he murmured. He stood to go back to the others. He didn’t want to lie to her, but he didn’t want to answer even more.

The tents were burned (Dalish did it herself) and then they all returned to their own camp for dinner. Which was awkward. As soon as he sat down, Janus set the weapon down and sat at his feet, resting his head on his thigh.

Any gentle suggestions to do otherwise were met with flinches, and he had to reassure him that no, he wasn’t mad. Yes, he was sure he wasn’t mad. Until finally, he just gave in and fed him like that. At least it was soup, so he could at least feed him with a spoon instead of directly off his fingers. Skinner muttered something about Dorian bringing the shem bastards back to life so they could kill them a second time, using increasingly graphic detail until a gesture from Grim made her stop.

Dishes were done with relatively little chaos for the Chargers, and then they all went to bed. Everyone seemed relieved when they took Janus to their tent, especially the man himself.
“Okay, so, here’s some spare clothes, if you want to change now. They’ll probably all be a little short on you. But at least they’re not…” from your dead masters. “Way too big, right?”

The elf nodded, taking off the borrowed clothes. Maybe they should burn those, too, “Yes, Milin.”

With some coaxing, and reassuring, he got the elf into the loosest of his own clothes. He hoped Dalish didn’t notice that there was no resistance to removing his clothes, but some reluctance to putting them on. Or if she did, she wouldn’t realize what that meant.

There was an awkward moment where the three of them just kind of looked at each other, and he longed for Viddathari. He’d know what to do.

Hesitantly, the other elf crawled up into his lap, leaning his head against his shoulder. He put his arms around him, and Janus relaxed a little. So he relaxed a little, too.

…until the man kissed the side of his neck.

Milin recoiled, letting go, and looking to Dalish for her reaction. Which was, if not horrified, at least shocked.

“Is that some sort of Tevinter custom Krem neglected to tell us about?” she asked, chuckling weakly.

Janus cowered in a corner of the tent muttering ‘please.’ As much as he wanted to hide the truth, he couldn’t exactly come up with another explanation on the spot. And how long could he really keep the lie going when they were sharing a tent? She had to be warned in case he tried to treat her as his master, too.

“Not a Tevinter thing. It’s a slave thing. He was trying to appease me.”

“You mean…”

“With sex,” he said softly. “It’s why he doesn’t have any clothes, Dalish. I found him naked, other than chains.”

Eyes big as saucers, she opened her mouth as if to say something, but then shook her head. Janus was a mess, Dalish was upset, and now, he was talking about him as if he wasn’t here, which probably wasn’t helping. And why did he say that about the chains? Why would he say any more than he had to? Why was he so awful at handling this?

“How can I help?” she asked at last.

“Be affectionate, but make it clear you want nothing sexual with him.”

She gave him an incredulous look, “I don’t know if touching from strangers is what he needs right now. Maybe we should ask Krem, he’s a ‘Vint.”

“No!”

“What are you snapping at me for? I’m just trying to help!”

“Please, just trust me on this. Don’t tell anyone who doesn’t absolutely need to know.”

“Milin, what’s the matter with you? They already know he was a slave.”

“They don’t know he was a sex slave, though,” he protested. “It’s different. Bad enough that they
know as much as they do.”

He remembered the way Solas looked at him after the kiss in the Fade. Dalish had that same look now. Surprise, confusion, pity. He had to get out of here. He couldn’t breathe.

“Milin…”

Taking Janus by the arm, he coaxed him outside, bringing him to the tent opposite them.

Dorian and Bull’s.

This was a bad idea.

He knew that, consciously. Janus was clearly intimidated by Dorian, and probably Bull. If he was honest with himself, a part of him still was, too. Plus, he didn’t want to run out on Dalish. How would that look? How would that make her feel? Creators, what must she be thinking?

But he couldn’t bear to look at her. So, selfishly, he opened the flap.

When people are whispering about you and you walk in, there’s a certain kind of awkward pause as they stop and look at each other. That’s what the tent felt like now.

“Hey, kid,” Iron Bull sat up, eyebrows furrowed. “What is it?”

“We need this tent.”

“You’re not sleeping in your own?”

“Dalish doesn’t get it,” he said softly. “I need…Dorian, you asked me once what you could do to help. Right now, I need you to get out. It won’t be for more than tonight. I’m sure we’ll reach the Keep by tomorrow.”

“You expect us to sleep outs—” Dorian started, then Bull elbowed him sharply.

“Alright, alright,” he said. “And I apologize if I frightened you, earlier. Janus, was it? Truly, that was the furthest thing from my intention. You seemed wary of the climb, and I sought to help. Like the proverbial man with a hammer, I saw the problem as a nail and did not think…I didn’t think. I am sorry.”

Janus looked to him, uncertain.

“He’s trying,” Milin said, putting his arms around him. The elf leaned into his chest.

Bull and Dorian slipped out, only taking a single, large blanket with them.

~o~O~o~

Milin woke early, like he usually did. He could smell meat cooking outside, and felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Dalish always sat with him at breakfast, and he didn’t know if it would hurt worse if she sat with him today…or if she didn’t.

At last, he felt the elf stir beside him and nuzzled his neck, “Good morning. It’s Milin. You’re safe, here. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I know,” he said softly. “I’m sorry for kissing you. I didn’t mean to cause trouble. I know you’re not my master, Krem said you were liberati, and I saw you crush those vials. I wasn’t thinking
straight, I just…the potion, you know? Sometimes coming only eases it for a little while and it flares up later.”

“The one that tastes like grass.”

Janus pulled back to look at him. “They don’t know, do they?”

“Not about everything,” he evaded. “Are you hungry?”

The elf looked like he wanted to press, but nodded, “Always.”

Before they got to the firepit, though, Skinner swept down on him.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed.

“Wait…what?”

“You have this sickly sweet bullshit that everybody buys, but you are a selfish ass, and you’re so self-absorbed you can’t even see it. You treat Dalish like crap. Do her a favor and either shape up or leave.”

“That’s enough,” Dalish came up to them, arms crossed. Janus jumped at her approach. “I love you, Sae, but keep your protectiveness to the battlefield. And give him a break. His hand’s glowy.”

Skinner shot him a bone-chilling glare, before turning her back on them.

“Morning, Milin. Janus.”

Janus said nothing, but offered a weak smile.

He bowed his head, “Hi…I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. At least I didn’t get kicked out of my tent,” she said wryly. “Janus, did you sleep well?”

“Maker, yes. Better than I have in a long time,” he said.

“Did you…do the affection thing?”

“Yes,” Milin said.

“And it helped?”

Janus nodded.

“Good,” she said, and sighed. “I know you didn’t want me to, but I talked to Krem. He said that since you have experience with this, that I should trust you. And I should have. You still should have talked to me instead of walking out, but if it worked, well, I can’t argue with that.”

“Okay,” he paused. “What did you say to Krem?”

“Relax, I didn’t tell him anything private.”

But he was from Tevinter. Even with just hints, he may be able to figure it out, even if Dalish couldn’t. He looked over at Krem, as if he could whether or not the ‘Vint had figured it out just by looking at him.

“Are you…mad at me? I was just trying to help.”
“I know,” he said, firmer than he intended. He softened his voice. “I know.”

Why couldn’t she have just trusted him in the first place?

To be fair, he didn’t trust her not to leave him. Maybe Skinner was right, he was selfish. He wanted her to love a lie.

“Let’s just eat and get going. I think we can make it to the Keep by nightfall.”

Milin neglected to scout ahead, for once. No one seemed to question that decision but him, though. And that worried him. Sure, they were in sight of the Keep now, and the Avvar patrols should have things pretty cleared up. But they were in sight of the Keep when he came across Janus and the others, too, so it’s not like the slavers didn’t dare go this close.

He should be scouting, to protect his people. He should be a continent away, to protect his family. His latest bird would just now be reaching them. If there was still a them to reach.

Maybe everyone could sense that he couldn’t speak right now if he wanted to. Or maybe they suspected what he was, what he’d done. Maybe they all knew.

Ahead of him, Janus was whispering fast in Tevene, clutching at the glaive like a child does a blanket. He didn’t know what Krem was telling him, but it sounded reassuring. He wished he understood. The more Janus said to Krem…

People were staring at him. He managed a signal to go faster. The sun was getting higher in the sky, but he did not have them stop to rest. If they stopped, they’d stare. He just had to push and push until he collapsed. He couldn’t take it. They all knew. Janus told Krem and Krem told Dalish and Dalish told everyone and everyone was staring. They all knew.

“It’s getting real hot, kid,” Iron Bull murmured. Milin nearly jumped out of his skin. Very rarely could somebody sneak up on him, much less a Qunari of all people. What was the matter with him?

Bull was expecting him to say something. He should say something. But he couldn’t.

“We should stop.”

He shook his head hard.

“Listen, I can tell you’re upset, but my guys don’t need this kind of punishment, and neither do you. Give the order to stop and talk to someone. It doesn’t have to be me, but if that’s easier for whatever reason, I’m here.”

He shook his head harder. Didn’t he understand that he couldn’t talk? Didn’t he understand that he couldn’t stop? Didn’t he see all their eyes burning into him?

Bull sighed, and they marched on. He wanted to just run away, but was terrified of being alone out here.


The sun half-blinded them as dusk fell. Still, they walked. Almost there. They had to be, they just had to.

“We’ve got company,” Rocky announced. He was the only one who didn’t seem the least bit
affected by the heat. He claimed it was because his ancestors were blacksmiths.

Milin shielded his eyes and looked up where he pointed—between them and the Keep. He couldn’t tell from here if they were friend or foe, but there were a lot of them. Shadowed figures swarming the sands.

Like cockroaches.
“They look like they’re fighting, and we’re no match like this,” Stitches said. “We’re worn out.”

“We don’t have a choice. They’re between us and Griffon Wing, we’re going to have to face them eventually. And if we can see them…” Rocky shrugged, leaving the obvious unsaid.

“Do we know that they’re not the Avvar?” Dalish asked. “They do have patrols out here. Maybe some ritual of theirs?”

“You know things are going smoothly when running into a group of violent barbarians is our best case scenario,” Dorian quipped.

“We’ve found unlikelier allies, haven’t we, ‘Vint? Besides, we’re still pretty far—we need to get closer, get more information, and then make the decision,” Iron Bull said. The Qunari looked to him for confirmation, and suddenly all eyes were on him.

Milin cringed, yearning for the sand to just suck him in and make him disappear.

“We’ll be safe at the Keep, right Milin?” Janus asked softly, touching his hand. “I want to be safe. Please. If I have to fight, I will. I’ll do what I can to help.”

He pulled the other elf into a hug with a sigh. He couldn’t bring himself to speak with them all staring at him, but he could draw his bow. And he could ride.

Letting go, he pressed his forehead to Kitty’s muzzle in thanks, and mounted. Stitches was right—he had pushed them too hard, too far. This was exactly the kind of thing they would have caught earlier if he’d just scouted like he was supposed to instead of being a coward, so it was his responsibility to take care of this. He signaled for the others to stay back.

As he grew closer, he realized that yes, there was a battle. But there were no slavers among the fighters.

It was Avvar against demon.

The desert sun could play tricks on the eyes, but no sunset could mimic the unearthly hues of a fade rift. The Avvar were holding their own so far, but until that rift was sealed, the demons would have limitless reinforcements.

He charged through, Kitty doing an amazing job at dodging. He did a significantly worse job of archery, as tired as he was, but he managed to keep the Fade creatures mostly at bay. One caught their flank with a fireball before he landed a killing shot. Three arrows were wasted in the process. He didn’t have his usual accuracy, or power. He felt so, so weak. And his eyes watered from the burning pain in his leg.

But Creators, they were almost there.

One last arrow to a charging spider creature and he extended his arm, willing the rift to close. Mythal, please…

The Avvar cheered, and the world went dark.

~o~O~o~
Milin shivered. He was cold. How was he cold? He was in the dessert, wasn’t he? Did he die? Everything felt hazy.

He opened his eyes to an unfamiliar room, blinking to clear the fog. Was this the Fade or something?

“He’s awake, sit him up so he can drink,” someone said.

Arms lifted him, and pillows were placed behind his back. His head lolled forward, the world threatening to turn black again, but hands gently cupped his face to right him again.

“You need to drink,” someone said. That someone was Dorian he realized after a beat. A cup was brought to his lips and he obeyed.

It didn’t taste like grass. That was good. But the drugs that don’t taste like anything could be bad, too. They made him feel…well, like this. Kind of. He couldn’t remember Dorian ever using that kind on him, though. So why was he using them now?

Too much was poured into his mouth, and he choked and coughed, jerking back.

“I’m so sorry,” a different voice said. “Please, I didn’t mean to, I was just trying to help. I want you to get better. Please.”

Wait, was that Janus?

He opened his eyes again. Yes, it was.

“S’okay,” he slurred.

“Keep drinking,” Dorian urged. “Healing is not one of my many talents, unfortunately, so you need to be treated the peasant way.”

He was so thirsty, anyhow. And the water was cool.

Then, there were no more cups to his lips, and he was laid back down.

“Get some rest,” Dorian said.

He closed his eyes.

When he woke again, the fog clouding his mind had lifted.

The room he found himself in was unadorned stone crammed with a mattress crammed and a single, empty chair. Shelves lined the walls with cheese, wine, and jars of preserves. So, it was a storage room? Why was he down here? The advisers always insisted on luxury and appearances, no matter how uncomfortable it made him.

And how was he cold?

He stood and crossed to the door. The knob was…frosted. What?

Milin turned the knob and a blast of the familiar desert heat hit him like a punch to the gut. Magic had to be involved. Something with glyphs, maybe? Nali would probably know. Or his mother. He wished she was here with them. Or, at least, he wished he’d get a letter already. He prayed one came while he was out…however long that was.
“Inquisitor,” an Avvar woman greeted as he regained his bearings. “Your heart-wine still flows. I am glad. We’d been fighting the dark-spirits for days with no end in sight before you arrived. Movran has declared a life-debt.”

“No, no. You cleared out Griffon Wing for us, and you kept it safe until we got here. That’s amazing. Thank you,” he gave her a small smile. “What’s your name?”


Worried was an understatement, he found.

Dalish was furious.

“Dread Wolf take you! What were you thinking? You ran into a battlefield, alone! Are you trying to throw mud at Falon’Din?”

He bowed his head, “Everyone was exhausted, and it was all my fault.” He couldn’t have them risk their lives because he was an idiot

“That’s what we’re here for. You’re the Inquisitor, you’ve got the Anchor. We die—a dozen people mourn. You die—the world ends.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough. I need to know you won’t pull a stunt like that again. First Haven, now this? Isn’t this exactly the reason why you wanted to leave your sister behind?” she was right about that, now that he thought of it. “We work together, understand?”

“…I understand, Dalish. I promise.”

“Good,” she muttered, and turned on heel to walk away.

It didn’t sound good to him.

~o~O~o~

Dalish avoided him for the next few days. It stung, but he couldn’t blame her. He’d done the same to her, more than once, and she’d always been patient with him.

In the meantime, he had plenty to do. Movran relished hunting and killing the Venatori, and didn’t have qualms about killing their slaves if they fought for their masters. But for the ones that surrendered? They offered them the choice to go on their way, or to join them. A small army’s worth had chosen the latter, and they had to feed and water and clothe and train them out in the middle of nowhere. Mages could cast ice to make water, but their numbers were growing so fast, it wasn’t sustainable. Milin took a scouting party to try and secure a water supply, and that led to dealing with varghosts.

Still no word from his family. He knew they were practically on opposite sides of Thedas, but he prayed for good news soon.

Oh, and to make matters even better? There was a dragon. An Abyssal High Dragon, to be precise. Iron Bull was all too eager to track her down, like that scholar was trying to do. And maybe it was a good idea to handle it before it attacked the fort, but first things first—Hawke and Loghain had arrived.
He, Dorian, Bull, and Blackwall journeyed to the meeting place as soon as Stitches cleared him to fight again. It wasn’t hard to find. Big, ruined, ominous, spikey tower. What was with shemlen and spikes?

Hawke was straight to business, “Finally. It looks like they’ve started a ritual. Blood magic of-fucking-course. Move.”

They moved.

He caught sight of people in Warden armor, one of them begging for his life. A man in Tevinter-style robes asserted that they had orders from someone called Warden-Commander Clarel, before the hapless Warden was stabbed by his own compatriot.

A demon emerged from his lifeless body and they…cast something on it. It was the only time he’d seen a Fade creature so still, so controlled.

Milin gaped. His mind flashed to the future timeline. The stories of a demon army under Corypheus’ control.

“Ah, the young master Pavus and his pet ox-man. You’ve missed so many meetings lately, I’ll have to send you the minutes. Oh, and I see you’ve bought the Inquisitor, what an unexpected pleasure,” the robed man said. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium. Forgive me for not bowing. I don’t bow to slaves.”

“No, just to darkspawn monstrosities,” Dorian quipped.

“Wardens, this man has deceived you all,” Blackwall said. “He serves an ancient Tevinter magister. He wants to unleash another Blight.”

“That’s a very serious accusation,” he sneered. “Let’s see what the Wardens think. Wardens, hands up. Hands down.”

The humans all raised and lowered their hands in unison. He could see a faint glow behind their eyes.

He was no mage, but that was some kind of possession.

“It’s no use, Blackwall,” Iron Bull said. “We’ve seen that ritual before. Any mage who casts that spell gets bound, same as the demon.”

“The Warden-Commander would never allow this,” Loghain said.

“Oh, but she has. She believes that, together, we can raise a demon army, march into the Deep Roads, and kill the Archdemons before they have a chance to start another Blight.”

“I’m assuming that you only intend on fulfilling a third of those promises,” Dorian said. “Oh, wait, no, I don’t have to assume. I’ve seen it. Not pretty--red’s not a flattering color on the entirety of Thedas.”

“Enough. You let these Wardens free, or I’ll rip you limb from limb,” Hawke growled.

“No. You won’t,” he reached out towards Milin, his jeweled hand igniting like fire.

His own hand blazed green in return, making him cry out in pain. It was like a pale version of what
Corypheus had done to him in Haven.

He gritted his teeth. Solas had showed him how to use the Anchor offensively, now. And if they were connected...With all his will, he forced the energy back to the Venatori, sending him sprawling.

Clambering to his feet, Erimond shouted for the Wardens to attack. By the time they fought through them, he was gone, footprints erased by desert winds. Hawke ran after him, anyhow, futile though it was. He couldn’t blame her, Varric told him her brother was in the Wardens.

Milin had Dorian burn the bodies, and he prayed silently for Falon’din to guide their souls through Beyond. Blackwall and Loghain removed their helmets in respect. They deserved so much better.

~o~O~o~

Milin had his arms around Janus, listening to his soft-spoken chatter. They had a barracks where most of the other freed slaves slept, and maybe it’d be better for Janus to stay there, but Creators it was nice to have him in his bed at night. Someone to talk to, to hold.

“There aren’t any Dalish in Tevinter, just stories. I never thought I’d meet any. But now I’ve met two and they’re free, and I’m free, and I...it’s overwhelming.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. It gets easier,” he gave him a little smile. “As for the Dalish... hopefully you’ll get to meet more of them. My family...”

Are in danger. But Janus had enough burdens right now.

“They should be at Skyhold by the time we get back. Hopefully.”

“Will I get to see halla?” he asked, grinning. “Do they really talk, like in the stories?”

“Yes and yes, if you know how to listen. It’s not hard, though.”

“That’s amazing” he gushed. “And Skyhold’s on a mountain, right? It’s cold there? So I’ll get to see snow?”

“You’ve never seen snow?”

He shook his head, “Magisters use ice sometimes, but I’ve never seen snow. Maybe I could ask one of the sla—sorry, I mean former slaves? You know, so many of them are mages. It’s weird.”

Milin suppressed a wince. It wasn’t weird, it was by design—more vessels for the thralled Fade creatures.

“Maybe I’ll just ask Dalish, though,” Janus continued. “I doubt the others will like me.”

“Wait...who won’t like you?”

“The other fugitivi,” he’d since learned that the term meant ‘runaway,’ and they’d be branded with hot iron if caught. “What if some of them belonged to my mistress and know what I am? Or what if they just figure it out?”

He furrowed his brows at him, confused, “What do you mean?”

“You know, a bed slave,” he said. “I didn’t used to be, I was bred for the fields. But the magistra was doing an inspection one day and, well, she took a liking to me.”
“She?”

He scowled. “Yeah. Would have been better if she wasn’t a she. The other slaves may take pity on a woman for being made to serve a man, but a man serving a woman? They thought I was lucky. Coddled little pet. Never mind that she made me eat out of her hand like a dog. Never mind that I could never get it up for her. She’d have to use potions, every time, and punish me with magic for the waste of coin. No, obviously, I was trying to seduce her to gain my freedom.”

Oh, Creators… now that he thought about it, the people in the cages he’d freed hadn’t even mentioned him. Until now, he’d assumed that they’d been so caught up in the death of their masters and freedom that it’d slipped their minds, but what if they just hadn’t cared? What if regular slaves hated sex slaves? He thought back to Tevinter. The woman in the baths had been so kind to him…but she wasn’t really a woman at all. She was a spirit. The others only touched him when forced, like the guards. And they never looked at him.

Or…it could be exaggerated in Janus’ own head. Milin tended to do that, too, when he wasn’t in a good place. He’d convince himself that everyone around him could somehow tell what’d happened to him, and were disgusted.

“Wait…I—I’m so sorry. You’re liberati, and I didn’t even think about…did I offend you?”

“No, you’re fine. My master…it wasn’t like that. He freed me because he didn’t want problems with the Inquisition,” he said bitterly.

“So, that means you served a man?”

“Men. Plural. I was their ‘surrogate.’ Apparently, it’s a common thing in Tevinter.”

“It’s not uncommon, but I’m sorry that it happened to you,” he said. “I’m lucky my mistress was too jealous to share me, I guess. Some have it worse. You hear about these orgies and stuff, anything goes.”

“What she did to you was awful. You weren’t lucky just because others had it worse.”

Janus’ face contorted like he wanted to cry. Maybe it wasn’t just the other slaves that trivialized what had happened to him.

“I guess you’re right about that,” he said at last. “I am lucky that you found me, though. And you won’t talk me out of that one. I don’t think anyone else would have helped me like you did.”

Yeah, no one else would be so numb to sex he’d suck a stranger off for convenience’s sake.

Milin shook his head, trying to push those feelings down. They weren’t helping anyone.

“I don’t know about that. They might not have done…everything, but plenty of people would have tried to help,” he stood, retrieving Viddathari’s bow. “This was a gift from a friend of mine, back when my master first let me go. He wanted to empower me. Just like when the Chargers gave you your glaive. I’m not saying that everyone in the Inquisition is perfect, and I would only trust those who’ve earned it, but there are good people, here.”

Janus smiled, “Do I get to meet your friend?”

“I…no. Viddathari’s gone now.”

“Gone?”
“The Elder One killed him.”

He clenched his fists, “That evil bastard and his ilk deserve to die a thousand deaths.”

Milin blinked, surprised at the sudden rush of anger. Then he grinned, “You’re going to fit in just fine, Janus.”

~o~O~o~

“There were no good news and we have bad news,” Scout Harding said at breakfast. “We have good news and we have bad news.”

His heart caught in his throat. Was there word from his family? Shemlen sometimes said no news was good news, but it certainly didn’t feel like it right now. Milin tried to stay focused.

“And before you ask, it’s not about Clan Lavellan. I’m sorry. What we do have is a confirmed spotting of Erimond, thanks to Hawke. That’s the good news,” she continued. “As for the bad news…he’s holed up in Adamant Fortress. Old Grey Warden place, which now seems to be filled with demons. We need siege equipment fast, and reinforcements could be weeks away.”

“What do you mean by siege equipment?” he asked.

“Ladders to scale the walls. Battering rams to break through the gates. Trebuchet would be nice,” she explained. “We’ve already got a good sapper with us, but Rocky can’t make gold from sand. We’ll need wood and metal. Not many forests here in the desert.”

“We have a lot of archers, though. Why can’t we just have them grow some trees?”

They grew vines, why not trees?

The dwarf raised an eyebrow, “Magic…is not my area of expertise. Is that possible?”

He nodded, “I think so. You can ask Dalish about it, she probably can give some tips to the others.”

“That still leaves the matter of metal.”

Milin frowned. June never did smile on him. He knew that craftsman would use iron bark, but that didn’t really count as metal.

“Why not use dragon scale?” Iron Bull suggested, lumbering up to them. Sometimes he forgot that Iron Bull was a spy, and saw and heard everything. Despite being at the opposite end of the dining hall. Would losing an eye sharpen hearing? He’d heard of cases like that, but only if they were blinded, not half-blinded.

“That’d be great, if we had any,” Harding said.

The Qunari grinned, his single eye twinkling. “So, we go get some. Plant the lures like that researcher suggested, hunt the dragon, and kill two birds with one stone.”
Dragon

Luckily for Milin, for once he wasn’t put in charge of something that was completely out of his depth. Loghain and Hawke had both fought dragons before, and Hawke was all too eager to take point. He didn’t want to say so out loud, but he suspected she was looking for something to vent her frustrations on.

Iron Bull also insisted on going (seemed downright giddy about it), which meant Dorian was coming, too.

And Kitty, of course.

“Dragons have different strengths and weaknesses based on their type,” Hawke lectured. “Towards the beginning, I will cast the four main offensive spell types at the creature, and Dorian I want you to listen for me shouting which one works best. I’d avoid long-casting area of effect spells until we’ve got her grounded. She’ll just fly out of the way. Focused hits to the legs, one leg at a time. Which brings me to my next point, Milin,” her gaze bored into him and made him feel judged, and none too favorably. Creators. “The weakest point is the eyes, obviously. I saw Bianca hit a dragon dead-center in the eye once, instant kill. One of Varric’s actually true stories. Problem is, the rest of the head is so well-armored, you’ll shatter one hundred arrows before you get one that strikes true. So what I want you to do is pick the center part of one wing and focus on it. If you get a decent enough hole, she won’t be able to fly or do a proper maelstrom. Got it?”

“Um…I think so. What’s a maelstrom?”

“It’s when she’ll pump her wings to blow you towards her. Hurts. Big time. That’s why us mages are going to be hiding behind pillars and such, while you run up close to her with Kitty, then get out as fast as you can when it’s over. The closer you are, the less damage it can do. That goes for the warriors, too,” she turned to them. “Loghain, you’ve got the shield, so you take her front. Bull, I want you to keep to her flank. If Loghain’s getting hit too hard, distract her. If she starts focusing on us non-warriors, distract her harder. Otherwise, let the shield do the work. Once she falls, Milin will finish her off with the Anchor. Everyone have their potions and balms?”

They nodded in unison.

“Let’s set the lures.”

“Actually, I believe that won’t be necessary,” Dorian pointed behind them, towards the sight of impossibly large wings, approaching fast.

He froze, the blood draining from his face. He felt cold. How could he feel cold in the desert? Oh, Creators, what’d he gotten himself into?

“Look at that beauty!” Iron Bull said. How was he not terrified? What was the matter with him? “Have you ever seen anything so gorgeous in your life?”

“Careful not to say anything you’ll regret, amatus. I might get jealous.”

“Enough chatter. Dorian, take cover. Milin, mount,” Hawke said.

He obeyed, grateful for the order to shake him out of his stupor, and pulled out his bow. Even if he didn’t know what he was doing, Kitty had enough sense to get him to the dragon’s rear, so he
wasn’t even close when the first fireball hit.


Focus.

With a great heave of the earth, the dragon landed, the wings were stilled, and he let out his first shot.

Which promptly bounced off.

He grit his teeth. He wasn’t strong enough for this. Fenhedis! He had to get closer, or else he’d be useless.

Milin urged the dracolisk forward. Not close enough to get caught by one of the beast’s swipes, but close enough to get hit by a fireball if he wasn’t fast. He’d just have to be fast.

He launched another arrow and this time, a small hole ripped. No bigger than a hand’s width, but he could definitely see daylight through the awesome shadow of her left wing.

“Ice!” Hawke shouted.

Made sense. If she lived in a desert, she probably didn’t have much reason to get a resistance to ice…

The temperature dropped from blistering to merely stifling as the mages launched their barrage at her left front foot.

She reared up on her hind legs in pain, but still they kept on target. Dorian was a strong mage, he knew. But Hawke…Hawke was like nothing he’d ever seen.

The high dragon extended her wings fully, giving him a good target to make that hole bigger. He got three shots off, before--

“Kid, get over here, now!”

He couldn’t remember Bull ever raising his voice to him before, but he urged Kitty forward without hesitation.

Before he reached him, though, he heard a great howl behind him. The next thing he knew, he’d been flung off Kitty’s back and was being dragged belly-first along the ground. Large hands grasped him by the shoulders and then he was being held, sheltered. His arms burned from trying to shield his head.

Just as abruptly as they’d started, the winds stopped. And Bull, because of course it was Iron Bull, set him down.

If he reached out an arm, he could touch the great creature’s flank.

And that’s when he realized that, during the chaos, he had lost Viddathari’s bow.

There was a moment of heart-clenching panic before he remembered that he had daggers. His hands went to his hips. Yes. They were still there. Then it was just the normal panic of being around a dragon.

Kitty head-butted his arm, and every instinct told him to get on her back and run, but without a
bow, he’d be useless. And by now he’d learned that the longer a fight dragged on, the more likely people were to get hurt. He had to do something. Here. Now.

His daggers likely wouldn’t penetrate that thick hide, but that wasn’t what Hawke had told him to hit, anyhow.

Keeping his daggers sheathed, Milin dodged the ricochet from an ice-bolt, and then clambered up onto the dragon’s tail.

He worried that she’d immediately fling him off of her, but between the two warriors taunting her and the two mages freezing her legs, the dragon wasn’t paying him any more attention than she would a fly. So he climbed.

His calloused hands and bare feet were adept at climbing trees taller than she was. Trees usually didn’t move quite as much, but the scales worked well as finger-holds. A month ago, he might not have been able to pull this off, but the desert had made him stronger. If he focused, he could do this. He could do this. It was okay. He was okay.

He reached the middle of her neck, as close as he could get to the arrow punctures. The scales were finer there. He didn’t think they’d support his weight.

Wrapping his legs tight around her neck, he unsheathed a single dagger, held it with both hands, and took a deep breath.

He had to wait until she threw another fireball. The dragon stayed mostly still when she did that. He just had to pray she did that before she tried another maelstrom.

Andruil, guide me. Protect me. And if I fail, protect them.

A great, stifling heat rose from the dragon, and he got to his feet, balancing on her neck. His feet were burning. This had to be it. He could do this, he could do this, he could--

She launched her fireball.

Milin leapt.

Creators be praised, his dagger slid right into the puncture wound.

As he’d hoped, the scales gave way at his weight and he slid, far too fast for his liking, down the dragon’s wings, tearing it like scissors through cloth as he went. He could get no purchase with his feet, but it was working.

The creature bellowed. He wasn’t just a fly anymore. With one flap of her wing, he was flying, screaming. Milin hit the ground, hard, and ran as fast as his battered legs would take him. His knees and hips protested, but fire was licking at his heels. He could see it. He ran faster.

The flames were all around him now. All he could see was red. The heat sucked the air from his lungs. But he didn’t feel the fire. Was he in shock? Was he dying? If it wasn’t for the pain in his legs, he would think he was already dead. He should be burning.

The inferno stopped abruptly, but his legs kept on running. The first semblance of a rock shelter he saw, he dove behind, panting and shaking. His hands went to his hair, his clothes to check for burning. Nothing.

“Oh, Creators, oh, creators, oh *fuck*,” he whispered to himself.
He peaked from behind the meager outcropping. The dragon was still alive, but was protectively shielding her wing close to her chest. Had he done it? Had he grounded her? The creature’s fore legs looked in pretty bad shape, too, forcing her to stay reared up on her hind quarters and using her tail for balance.

He should get back in there, he thought, checking his hips. One dagger was gone, and the second’s tang had snapped off, probably during the fall. But he still had one last weapon.

Milin dragged himself out from his hiding spot, staying low and going slow to avoid attention. Body battered, and weapons gone, but he could still be useful. He had the Anchor. He couldn’t do it very often, but when he did, he knew it’d do a good deal of damage. Trapped, injured animals were the most fierce. That’s why Hawke had told him to do this at the end. All he had to do was get in range and wait for her to get injured enough that it would be the killing blow. It had to be the killing blow. Otherwise she’d eat him.

The mages were targeting her left hind leg with everything they had, and both warriors were piling on. Wouldn’t be long now.

Did she move? She must have moved. It felt like he’d been limping for miles.

The dragon fell. Alive, kicking and fighting, and still out of range.

“Pull back!” he shouted. “She’s dangerous!”

“As opposed to before, where she was merely an inconvenience?” Dorian quipped, without pausing his casting.

Hawke put a hand on Dorian’s staff, “Stop. He’s right. Stay under cover and let him do this. Warriors, back off.”

Bull had already started retreating, and now Loghain did, too.

He stumbled closer, and felt a nudge at his arm. Kitty. He didn’t think with his legs aching so bad he could mount her, but he slung an arm around her neck for support.

“Thanks, girl,” he whispered.

Now that she wasn’t being attacked, the dragon’s head was jerking around, searching for the next threat. Hurt and scared, poor thing.

As soon as he got close enough, Milin opened the rift and kept it open, teeth gnashed from the pain, until her body stilled. He said a prayer to Falon’din for her spirit.

Had to be done. Materials they could get elsewhere, but she’d been killing his people. He saw Bull lift Dorian and swing him around, and he just couldn’t relate. He felt no pride in this. Just relief… and pain.

Milin retraced his steps back to where he thought he was when he lost the bow, and saw nothing. He crouched, digging through the hot sand.

“Are you in need of assistance, Inquisitor?” Loghain said, striding up to him.

“I…could you help me look for my bow? I lost it during the maelstrom.”

“Are you certain that is what you want? You’re bleeding.”
“It’s important.”

“Sentimental value, I take it?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine. He’s gone now.”

He paused, “Have you ever heard of Garahel?”

“No…”

“Ask your so-called Nightingale about him, sometime. She will do him better justice than I can, even if most of her words are lies,” he said. “In the meantime, yes, I will help you.”

Loghain knelt and began to dig in silence.
Milin was curled into a ball on his bed, Janus’ warmth at his back and wood fragments digging into his hands. Loghain found it. What was left of it.

Such a foolish thing, to cling to splinters. As if holding them tight enough would mend the bow. As if holding them tight enough would bring his friend back. He wished he’d brought his sword along.

There was a soft rap on the door. He thought about ignoring it, didn’t want to be seen so pathetic. But if there was news from his family or something…

“Come in,” he called, sitting up.

Dalish stepped inside.

“Can we talk?” she asked, glancing over at Janus. “Alone?”

Janus bolted for the door with a hurried apology before he could stop him. He was getting better. Tille Fox-Foot was teaching him the glaive, and he even spent the night with the other fugitivi sometimes, but the poor thing was still terrified by the slightest hint of someone being displeased with him.

He sat up, glaring at her, “What’d you do that for?”

“I didn’t mean to scare him, I just—”

“Well, you did.”

“I know! I get it, okay? I was never a slave so I can never understand. But I’m not the enemy, either.”

Milin sighed, “You’re right. I’m sorry. Just, make sure he knows you’re not mad at him, and that even if you were, you wouldn’t hurt him.”

“I will. And I’m sorry, too,” she said, mollified. “Can I sit with you?”

He nodded.

Dalish shut the door behind her and joined him on the bed, “I heard what happened.”

“Of course you did. The whole Keep is celebrating. I can hear them from up here.”

“No, I mean, I heard about that,” she pointed to his hands, still wrapped tight around the shards of bow. “You know…I met Gatt once.”

“You did?”

She nodded, “Briefly. Bull was helping him with something, though I wasn’t privy to the details. It must have been important, he seemed pretty angry about whatever it was.”

Milin cracked a smile, “No, he was pretty much angry all the time. You know what Gatt’s short for, right?”

“Gaaltok. So I’ve heard,” she returned the smile. “Would you like to talk to me about him? You
clearly loved him.”

“Yes, I did. He saved me.”

“You mean, from Corypheus?”

“Well, yeah, but he saved me before that, too,” Milin looked down at his hands. “He was the first person in a long time who didn’t treat me like a slave.”

“So…what about the Chief and his ‘Vint, then?”

He paused. He didn’t want to lie to her.

“They saved me from a blood mage, and then handed me off to Viddathari.”

“A blood mage?” she looked duly horrified. “I mean, I’d heard rumors, but you were really going to be sacrificed? You never told me about that.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

“I’m sorry, I…” Milin shook his head, trying to change the subject. “I know this is a long shot, but you can grow wood, right? Think you can fix this?”

She shook her head, “My magic only works on living wood. Maybe I could make you a new bow? I figured out how to grow ironbark. It takes a lot of magic, and time, but it won’t break.”

Milin gave her a weak smile and kissed her cheek, “Thank you. I’d appreciate that. No need to rush it, Movran already presented me with another longbow. It’s well-made and it’d be rude not to use their gift.”

“It’d be no trouble. I was a craftsman before I became an archer, after all. Besides, it’s in our song.”

“Our…” his smile widened. “Right, I remember. Our song. ‘I’d tend a fire through rain and dark, To keep you dry ‘til spring.’”

“I’d craft you bows of iron bark, So I could hear you sing…”

He leaned against her, closing his eyes as they sang together.

When they finished the final verse, he set the shards down on his bedside table, “Dalish, I need to tell you something... can I trust that you won’t tell anyone else if I do?”

Her eyebrows furrowed, “Of course.”

“Will you swear by Dirthamen?”

“Yes, whatever it is, I swear by Dirthamen to keep your secret.”

How should he start this? The woods? The ship? The drugs? Or should he just make something up and pretend he never said anything?

“The blood mage,” he said at last. “He wasn’t my master. His son was. The magister...didn’t like that his son owned me. Didn’t like…what his son did with me.”
Milin swallowed thickly. His mouth was dry, his hands trembled.

“Dalish, if I tell you this, if you can’t handle what I’ve done, it’s okay to leave me. I’ll understand. You don’t have to say anything, just walk out the door, and I won’t bother you again.”

She frowned, “If you did something wrong because your master made you, then it wasn’t your fault. Any blood would be on his hands, not yours.”

“What are you--?” his eyes widened as he realized what she was saying. “No, it wasn’t like that. He didn’t have me hurt anyone.”

“Then what is it?”

Milin stared down at his feet. He opened his mouth dumbly, then shut it. This was a mistake, he shouldn’t have said anything. But it was too late to go back now. Why couldn’t he just blurt it out, already? Get it over with?

“Did he hurt you?” she asked at last, voice painfully gentle and patient. As if she was trying to soothe a crying child.

Milin shook his head. Not in the sense that she meant it. They never hit him. Never starved him. Sometimes things got overwhelming, but he couldn’t remember anything being pure pain.

“Did he rape you?”

The words hit him like a shield bash.

Once again, he opened his mouth, but no words came. It was like there was a dam inside him. He didn’t want the flood to break free, but the pressure would kill him if he kept it in any longer.

His eyes burned, and he tried to keep the crying at bay, but he was too weak.

As soon as the first tear fell, Dalish wrapped her arms around him, pulling his head to her shoulder. He collapsed into her, sobbing.

“Vhenan, I am so sorry…” she whispered.

He was the one who should be sorry. He was a liar, and a burden. He’d beg her forgiveness if he could speak. She didn’t ask for this. She didn’t deserve this.

“How long have you known?” Milin whispered. His tears had stopped, but his face was still buried in her shoulder. He couldn’t bear to see the pity in her eyes.

“I didn’t. Not until you said something. It does…explain a few things though.”

He pulled back, staring at his feet. It took him a moment to will himself to speak again, and when he did, his voice was shaky, “Like what?”

“Well…like how you are with Janus,” she said. “You have this sort of easy intimacy with him. He’s skittish around everyone else. And you kind of are, too. Or rather, were. Unless it’s with the chief and Dorian…”

He flinched, and she frowned, “What is it?”

Milin cursed himself, he should have had better self-control than that. He just felt so raw. What was he going to say now?
“Just…remembering the day they saved me,” he lied.

“Okay, okay, I won’t press. But when you’re ready to tell me, I’m here,” she said, kissing his
temple. Here. She said she’d be here. She wasn’t leaving him. Even though he'd deceived her all
this time. “Can I ask something else?”

He shrugged, non-committal. He was still so shocked, he might not be able to answer even if he
wanted to.

“How did you end up in the Conclave?”

Thank the Creators, something he could actually talk about.

“Bull and Dorian had to go after the Venatori, and they thought it was too dangerous to take me, so
they left me in his care. Viddathari got orders to spy on the Conclave and took me with him,” he
said. “He was…a very angry person. It was on my behalf, but it still scared me, at first. But he
understood. He was like me, once. And being with him helped, the way I’m trying to help Janus.”

“The affection thing?”

“The affection thing.”

“And part of that is making it clear you don’t want to have sex with them, right?”

“Right,” he said. “You don’t have to work up the courage to say ‘no’ if the offer’s not on the
table.”

“So…is it okay that we’re having sex? I mean…why haven’t we talked about this before?”

Milin winced, “I didn’t want you to know. I just wanted to be normal. You know, court, bond, have
children…”

She cupped his face, and the hurt in her eyes made his heart ache, “Milin…”

“It’s not like I mind everything. I do like some parts,” he insisted, looking down. “I like kissing
you, I like pleasuring you.”

“And the parts you don’t like?”

He shrugged. He could deal with those.

“Please, don’t go quiet on me. I can’t do this if I can’t trust that you’ll tell me what you do and
don’t like.”

It was too late to hold back, now…

“I don’t like finishing,” he mumbled. She was going to think he was a freak. That was the part he
should like.

“You mean, finishing inside of me, or…”

“I don’t like it at all,” he said, stumbling over his words to explain. “I get that it’s weird, but, that
was one of the worst parts. Everything else I could kind of…distance myself from, I guess. But my
master would make me finish whether I wanted to or not. Especially when I didn’t want to. It was
like a challenge. He even drugged me, the first time.”
“So you wouldn’t fight back?”

He cringed, regretting that he’d blurted that part out, “Not... exactly. The slavers that took me kept me drugged so I wouldn’t fight, but the potion my master gave me was different. It made me... responsive. Made me feel like I needed it. I don’t think my master truly understood what it would do to me, though, since he never did it again...”

She pulled away, putting her face in her hands, “Ir, ir abelas. I had no idea, I should have known, should have asked...”

“I’m good at faking, Dalish. You wouldn’t have known if I didn’t want you to,” he said, stroking back her hair. “I lied to you. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Creators, don’t, just... what else don’t you like?”

“Nothing is as bad for me as finishing, but there’re a few other things,” he shrugged. “Hair-pulling, touching my ears, honey...”

“Honey?”

“My master would reward me with food,” he said vaguely. “Honey in particular kind of puts me back into that mindset, I guess.”

He could see the strain in her shoulders as she tried to keep her face calm.

“Anything else I should know?”

He could tell her, about Dorian and Bull. He knew she’d take his side. He knew most, if not all, of the entire fort would take his side.

But he didn’t want an angry mob killing them, either.

“... nothing about sex with you, no.”

“But there is more,” she looked up at him, frowning.

“It’s too much too fast right now, Dalish. Please,” he looked to the door. “We should go find Janus.”

“Okay, I get it, we can take a break for now,” she squeezed his hand. “I do feel bad for upsetting him, you know. And, I’d like stay here tonight if it’d be okay with him. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”
Casualties

The dragon was gone, and their supplies were better, but that didn’t mean their work was done. Blackwall and the Chargers were working hard to train their newest recruits, as the Avvar cleared the area of slavers. Then they had to deal with darkspawn. Sure would be great if the Wardens could take care of that, but no, too busy building their demon army. Oh, and the darkspawn thing led to a while goose chase through ancient ruins to track down yet another Venatori. They captured Servis alive, to be judged after their assault on Adamant.

At long last, his advisors came with their reinforcements, carrying with them desperately needed armor, weapons, manpower, and trebuchets. Lots of trebuchets. The Commander said his troops would be given two days’ rest, and then the attack would begin.

With the forces also came a sealed letter from Sister Nightingale. According to the messenger, the last two of her birds that she’d sent his way had not returned.

…not very surprising in retrospect, considering that a dragon had been terrorizing the desert up until a week ago.

How long had he prayed for news to come quickly? Yet now that the letter was in his hand, he was terrified to open it.

He sought out Dalish and cowardly had her open it for him.

“There’s two letters. One from Josephine’s agents, the other from your mother. Which do you want me to read first?”

From his mother.

That meant his mother, their Clan’s Keeper, was still alive at the very least.

He let out a sigh of relief, and then said, “My mother’s.”

She took a moment to read over it, and he agonized over every slight movement of her face. Damn that woman’s Wicked Grace face!

“Your parents and sister are alive,” she said after too long of a pause.

“But?”

“The Clan has taken heavy casualties, both elvhen and halla. Many injured, some gravely so. One dead.”

He could see the sorrow on her face. There was more emotion there than you’d expect from reading of the loss of strangers. He read between the lines, “Shiral?”

“Shiral,” Dalish confirmed softly. “She died protecting one of her sons, Ellasin. Her horns were recovered for the Clan.”

He nodded solemnly, squeezing his eyes shut to stop from weeping. His father must be devastated, “A noble death. Falon’din guide her in the Beyond.”

“May she find rest in Ghilan’nain’s arms.”
They held each other’s hands in a moment of silence, before Milin shook his head. He had no time to grieve, his family was still under attack.

“Let me read the other one.”

She handed over the other letter, and he read it aloud to her.

So, Dorian was right. It was something in the water that caused the plague. A red ‘purifying’ crystal in the shemlen wells. He had more than a suspicious about what that could be.

“I think there’s a hidden message, here. ‘Not troops, change regime.’ We need something restrained, then,” he said, eyes closing in concentration. “I’ll write to Leliana’s people. If they can convince people that it’s the red lyrium that’s poisoning everyone, not the elves, maybe we can stop any more blood being shed.”

“You could also just say the words ‘Knife-Eared Plague’ in Skinner’s vicinity and the city would burn to the ground in no time,” she said.

Milin cracked a smile despite himself, “Subtle.”

“Subtle is what Chargers do best. You can tell by the name.”

“You know, I can see through what you’re doing.”

“Trying to cheer my vhenan up after some truly awful news? How horrible of me.”

“Absolutely wicked,” he said, and put his arms around her.

~o~O~o~

The trek to Adamant Fortress was long, but as soon as the fighting started, everything seemed to happen so fast, too fast. He couldn’t breathe.

Under Rocky’s command, the Inquisition forces pummeled the fortress—boulders, magic shards of ice, flaming barrels of oil. The Avvar were lifted up on ladders, flinging themselves over the walls and into battle with abandon, Hawke and Movran leading the way. The least experienced of the fugitivi darted among them, carrying water and healing potions to the wounded, or carrying shields to defend the healers and surgeons as they ran to the worst cases.

The rest of the Chargers were on the front lines with the battering ram. As soon as they got close enough, they made quick work of the gate, as well as those trying to keep it closed.

“All right, Inquisitor. You have your way in. Best make use of it,” Cullen said from behind him. “We’ll keep the main host of demons occupied for as long as we can, while you clear the battlements for the Avvar’s ladders.”

He turned and nodded, “I’ll be fine. Keep our people safe.”

“Get going, boss,” Iron Bull said. “We’ve got your back. Chargers! Horns up!”

“Horns up!” they shouted.

Cassandra and Blackwall led the way up the stairs, Dorian trailing behind.

With Blackwall’s help, he tried to convince the Wardens to leave peacefully whenever he could. But there was no persuading demons. They met up with Hawke and Loghain on the way.
His count was now thirty-seven.

They reached a courtyard full of Wardens, next, but they didn’t attack. They seemed to be frozen, entranced, as they surrounded a green levitating light. Some sort of ritual, just like the day he’d almost been killed. He looked up to see a woman in Warden’s armor talking to Erimond, an elven girl kneeling behind them.

She looked familiar…

Crestwood. The girl from Crestwood.

The Wardens are heroes. They saved me from those demons, your worship. With all that’s happening, I’d like to help people the same way.

He’d…he’d encouraged her to join them. He hadn’t known about this, had only known of the Wardens saving people during the Blights, but…

The older woman slit her throat.

“What are you doing? This is wrong!” he cried.

“Yes, the ritual requires blood sacrifice, but it is necessary to stop the Blight. Is that not your duty, Clarel?”

The woman nodded, “We make the sacrifices no one else will. Our warriors die proudly for a world that will never thank them.”

“You’ve been lied to,” Cassandra said. “This magister doesn’t care about the Blight, he’s binding these mages to Corypheus.”

“Corypheus? But he’s dead.”

“Far from it, unfortunately,” Dorian said. “And Erimond is part of a cult that worships him. Trust me, I attended the disturbing team-building exercises.”

The magister took a step forward, “These people will say anything to shake your confidence, Clarel.”

She rubbed her temple, faltering, then set her jaw, “Bring it through.”

“No!” Hawke growled. “I have seen more than my fair share of blood magic. It never ends well.”

“Like you, I have given my life to the Wardens,” Blackwall said. “But fighting and dying here today won’t stop the Blight. If you want to stop the Blight, kill that bastard up there. His master is the living embodiment of its corruption.”

He could see the hesitation on Clarel’s face, “Perhaps, we should stop the bloodshed until these charges have been tested.”

“Or perhaps I should bring in a more reliable ally,” Erimond sneered. “My master thought you might come here, Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!”

The mage slammed his staff down, and an answering shriek came from the distance.

A dragon?
No, the archdemon. The one Corypheus controlled.

Clarel shot a bolt of lightning at the magister’s back, dropping him to the ground.

“Help the Inquisitor!” she shouted, as Erimond ran off.

Oh, look, another demon. Big one. Great.

Milin plastered himself against nearest wall, drawing his bow. Being out in the open with a dragon swooping overhead seemed like a bad idea.

He wished he had Kitty with him…

Could be worse, though. At least the Wardens were helping, now.

The demon fell, and he bolted in the direction that Clarel went. If he could get to Erimond, stop his control over the archdemon, they may just stand a chance.

“You! You destroyed the Grey Wardens!”

They rounded a corner to see Clarel standing over the prone Erimond, her face contorted in rage. If only they’d gotten here earlier…

“You did that to yourself, you stupid bitch,” the magister pushed himself to his feet. “All I did was dangle a little power before your eyes and you couldn’t wait to get your hands bloody.”

She blasted him, the force of her spell sending him sprawling.

The dragon circled.

“You could have served a new god,” Erimond spat.

“I will never serve the Blight.”

Just as she was about to cast again, the archdemon dove, engulfing her in its maw. It shook her like a wolf would its kill, and then sent her flying to the ground.

Milin rushed forward to her twisted body.

“In war, victory… In peace, vigilance…”

The dragon prowled forward, growling to force them back. Milin glanced behind him. That was a long way down…

An explosion deafened his ears, the sheer shock wave of it knocking him off his feet.

“In death, sacrifice.”

He caught a glimpse of the creature falling out of the sky before he felt the ground lurch beneath him. Crumbling. Lavellan scrambled forward, his nails and toes digging in for purchase.

He heard a cry behind him, Hawke’s, and reached out his arm to her before they both were launched into a freefall.

Milin screamed, flailing wildly to grab onto something, anything. His Mark burned hot, and he reached out, opening it into air.
Nightmare

Green light flashed, and then he slowed, stopped, and fell…upward? Milin reached above him at what looked like the ground, and landed flat on his back with a grunt.

This was…like nothing he’d ever seen before. Nothing he could have imagined.

“What happened?” he whispered.

“You opened a Rift, and we all went through it,” Loghain said. He looked up to see him standing on the wall as if it was the floor. Bizarre.

“We’re in the Fade,” Hawke said, hanging off the ceiling. “I’ve been in a place like this before, but different. Different demon controlling it, I guess. It was not a good experience. Try not to kill me, alright?”

“Alright…”

“The first time I entered the Fade, it looked like a lovely castle filled with gold and silks. I met a marvelous desire demon, as I recall. We chatted and ate grapes before he attempted to possess me,” Dorian said from the opposite wall. “Perhaps the difference is that we are here physically. This is no one’s dream.”

“I don’t care where we are,” Blackwall said from behind him. “How do we get out?”

Cassandra stepped out from underneath him, kind of? It was weird. She pointed to a swirling, glowing thing in the sky. Like the Breach, but smaller, “Erimond was about to make a Rift. I believe that is our best option for getting out of here.”

They walked forward, somehow falling one by one until eventually they were all on the same level.

There were distractions, fights, others routes to take, but he tried his best to go straight through. One could get lost in the Fade, easily, without Falon’din as a guide. He kept focus on the Rift.

Until a woman in white and gold appeared before them.

She didn’t look like the other creatures of the Fade. She looked…almost human.

“Maker’s breath…” Loghain said.

“I greet you, Warden. And you, Champion,” she said.

“Divine Justinia? Most Holy?” Cassandra looked awed. But this was a trick. A lie. That woman was dead. A spirit trying to lead them astray, for her own purposes.

“Cassandra,” she greeted.

“You knew the Divine, is this really her?” Blackwall asked.

“I…I don’t know. It is said that the souls of the dead pass through the Fade and sometimes linger, but…We know the spirits lie. Be wary, Inquisitor.”

“You think my survival impossible, yet here you stand in the Fade yourselves. In truth, proving my
existence either way would require time we do not have.”

“I don’t trust it,” Hawke said.

“Me neither,” Milin said. “Begone, spirit.”

He kept walking stubbornly, but the woman followed. She claimed that she was there to help, claimed that he forgot what happened at Haven because the demon of this place, Nightmare, had taken those memories from him. That this demon was also responsible for the false Calling.

Part of it might be true. And, she hadn’t attacked them yet, but he knew about how mages were tempted by Fade creatures to try to get a foothold in their world.

“When you entered the Fade at Haven, the demon took a part of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it,” Fade creatures popped into existence, right in front of them, and his eyes went wide. She was doing this, he knew it. “These are your memories, Inquisitor.”

He drew his bow, scowling as he started to shoot them down. One got him square in the chest, and he stumbled back with a gasp of pain. How was this helping? They were attacking him.

The last one fell, and he clutched at his head. A vision…but no, he remembered this. He…

Viddathari, bursting through. All semblance of fake servility gone, “What’s going on here?”

The Divine suspended in midair, the Elder One’s arm outstretched, orb in hand. He flung Viddathari aside, and Justinia struck out, knocked the sphere towards him.

And Milin caught it.

He came to with a gasp, arms wrapped around himself. How many more times would he be forced to relive his friend’s death?

How many more of the people he cared about would die before this was over?

“So your Mark did not come from Andraste,” Loghain said. “It came from the orb Corypheus used in his ritual.”

The spirit claimed it was so that the Elder One could enter the Black City. But if she was a mere human, how could she know what Corypheus intended?

“Something troubles you, Hawke?” Loghain asked.

She scowled, “Those were Grey Wardens holding the Divine in that vision. Their actions led to her death.”

“Corypheus has taken over the minds of Grey Wardens before,” Blackwall pointed out.

Hawke’s frown deepened, but she pushed on.

The Nightmare knew they were here, now.

It sent demons after them, distorted facsimiles of people with glowing eyes. Slavers.

One by one, the voice of the demon taunted them, trying to distract them, upset them. But that must mean they were getting close.
Run fast, fight dirty.

They came across a graveyard, with headstones of all the people in their party. Dorian, temptation. Blackwall, himself.

Milin, isolation.

He scowled, and forced himself to keep moving.

“Greetings, Dorian,” the disembodied voice rang. “It is Dorian, isn’t it? For a moment, I mistook you for your father. But, of course not. You’re so much better than him, aren’t you? So much more... moral. I wonder what Felix would say, if he knew the whole story. But, oh wait, he’s dead.”

“Vishante Kaffas! Don’t you dare!”

“That’s what it wants,” Milin said.

“Oh, that reminds me. Last as well as least, the slave,” it taunted. “Here, pretty, pretty, pretty... So sorry your family’s dying, but I know what’ll make you feel better. Some honey. Here’s a taste...”

The world went dark and he screamed, begging for it to stop. He tore at his face, trying to get the hood off, the blindfold off. He could feel his fingernails digging into his own head, but it wouldn’t come off. He felt his wrists pinned, and knew he’d never get it off, now. Never, never, never.

“Milin, open your eyes! Milin!”

Light. Too bright, he squinted against it but refused to close his eyes completely.

His throat burned. His face smarted. And he was on the ground, Dorian pinning his wrists on top of him.

The mage promptly let go, climbing off and clearing his throat awkwardly, “You were...I was trying to stop you from harming yourself further.”

“I didn’t want to be in the dark again,” he whispered.

“A hex, an illusion, nothing more,” Cassandra said gently. “I dispelled it. And I will do so again, if it tries.”

Blackwall handed him a healing potion, which he drank without protest, “You did quite a number on yourself, Inquisitor.”

Hawke pulled him to his feet, “We have to keep moving.”

Dorian wouldn’t look at him.

They fought on.

Another vision, this time of the Divine helping him escape the demons at the Breach, only for her to be taken herself.

Was it true?

They’d said there was a woman behind him, when he’d escaped. All this time he’d assumed it was Mythal...
But even if the Divine had saved him, that didn’t mean this person before him was her.

The woman’s face beamed with light, and she transformed into something…else.

Whatever it was…now he believed it was there to help.

The others started fighting about mages and Wardens and Creators-know-what-else, and he stopped them with a glare, “We’re still in danger. This can wait.”

“The Nightmare has found it,” the spirit said voice urgent. She led them forward, twisting through halls, and into a clearing. No, a lair. A reeking, large, bloody lair, and infested with spiders at that. One, a massive spider, big as the Breach itself. The other, small, humanoid.

“If you would, please tell Leliana ‘I am sorry. I failed you, too.’”

She flung herself at the biggest of the monsters, glowing bright as the sun. When he opened his eyes, they were both gone.

But the smaller one remained, and more demons came spewing up from the depth. Some spiders, others the imitations with the violet eyes.

Milin drew his bow.

Twice more the demon hexed him. The second time, he was being chased, weaponless and alone. The third, he was paralyzed as visions of his family attacked by humans filled his mind.

Fen’harel curse this creature.

The others got it just as bad, though. Seemed like every few moments, at least one of them was lost in a daze. It was probably wrong to take comfort in that, but he did.

And he fought all the harder because that evil, Creators-forsaken thing was trying to hurt his people.

At last, the creature fell, and they sprinted towards the Rift.

Too late.

The gigantic spider returned, not even looking damaged. It’d taken all they had to kill the last one, this one…it would be impossible.

“We need to clear a path,” Loghain said.

Hawke set her jaw, “Go. I’ll cover you.”

“No. You were right. The Grey Wardens made this mistake. A Warden must—”

“Help them rebuild. That’s your job,” she insisted. “Corypheus is mine.”

It was probably the worst reason in Thedas, but Varric loved Hawke. He couldn’t just let her sacrifice herself, it’d crush him. Meanwhile…this is what all Wardens signed up for. How much time would Loghain even have left, relatively?

“Loghain…”

“Fight well. You will not die while I draw breath,” he swore. “For the Wardens!”
Three Scheduled Judgments

The spirit was right, as it turned out. Without the Nightmare, the false Calling was gone, and the mages were freed.

With no one of significant rank left in the Wardens, he welcomed them into the fold of the Inquisition. At least, temporarily. He was sure that soon leaders would emerge among them, and they could rebuild their order anew.

But there was little time for celebration, not that he felt much like celebrating after that ordeal. They had an assassination to stop.

If they ever got done packing.

In the meantime, he had his own duties to perform. They didn’t want to drag the prisoners all the way back to Ferelden, so a hall in Griffon Wing was set up for passing judgment. Josephine had even remembered to pack the pillows of mercy.

“Inquisitor, I submit to you Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium, who remains loyal to Corypheus,” Josephine said. “We found him alive, offering extreme resistance.”

He refused to sit down with gentle pressure, so Milin stood before the guards had an excuse to shove him.

After what happened to the girl from Crestwood, he wished the human would have just been killed during his ‘extreme resistance.’ There was some dignity to dying in battle. He didn’t want to order his death like this. And he didn’t want to keep him locked up, constantly drained of his magic, either. But his continued loyalty to Corypheus meant he couldn’t be trusted to serve for his crimes, unlike Alexius.

“I recognize none of this proceeding, slave. You have no authority to judge me,” the magister spat. Josephine explained why he was very much wrong on that point, but he didn’t seem to listen.

“Corypheus is the rightful ruler of every piece of ground you’ve trod on in your pathetic life. I served a living god. Bring down your blades and free me from the physical. Glory awaits me.”

What was wrong with this shemlen? His mind seemed to be all there, but he was incredibly self-deluded.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said. Didn’t even seem like death would even be a punishment for him, anyhow. “You haven’t wronged me nearly as much as you have the Grey Wardens. Let them decide your fate. Send him to them with a Templar escort.”

If the Wardens wanted to execute him…well, that was their right.

“You say you will not kill me, but then hand me over to those who will. Who do you believe you’re fooling, pretender?” Erimond sneered. “Their petty justice or yours, it matters not. Truth lies in the next world.”

He was led away in chains, and the next man was brought out.

“Before you is Servis of the Minrathous Circle of Magi. He admits to working for Corypheus,
raising monsters, and using magic for conquest,” Josephine announced. “He also used his connections to smuggle magical artifacts out of the Western Approach. Without his master’s consent.”

He stole from Corypheus? Was he daft?

“I was hired by a third party. I’ve no loyalty to him. Might you find that useful, your worship?”

“I’m sorry, are you attempting to bargain with us?” Josephine asked.

“Bargain? I plead! I throw myself on your mercy!” he sunk to his knees on the pillow dramatically.
“I also have friends in Tevinter who owe me large debts. Leave what happened in the Approach behind us, Inquisitor, and I can put them all at your disposal.”

Milin took his seat, rubbing at his temples. At least this one wasn’t loyal to Corypheus, if still not apologetic in the least.

“Do you even realize how lucky you are that we caught you before the Venatori did?”

The man paled, “Maker’s mercy, you wouldn’t hand me over to them, would you?”

“I wasn’t trying to threaten you,” he said. “But if you try to double-cross us like you did Corypheus, that means we cannot protect you from him, either.”

“Does that mean you’ll allow me to work for you?” he asked, relieved now instead of smug. That was something.

“Lives have been lost because of you, and they cannot be brought back. But if you can help us gain information on Corypheus’ schemes, that could help save the lives of others. I am giving you the opportunity for redemption, under close supervision. Leliana?”

With a wave of her hand, an agent helped him to his feet.

“I can more than pay my keep, Inquisitor. Thank you.”

The next prisoner was a human woman he didn’t recognize.

She knelt, head bowed, as Josephine was making her announcements.

“This is Ser Ruth, a senior Warden of the Order,” she said. “She was one of the many who slit the throat of another to bind a demon. She does not contest this. In fact, she surrendered to us. She requests no mercy. She requests the public justice of the headman’s axe.”

“You want to die?” What was with these shemlen and their death wishes?

“There is no excuse for my actions. I murdered another of the Order. That blood marks me more than the Blight ever could.”

Josephine explained that the Wardens did technically have the right to any extreme, should it fight the Blight.

“That’s not enough. I can’t use the greater good to justify my crimes, as if it would create a future I could be a part of!” he could hear the rawness in her voice, the despair. “I can do nothing, now, except serve as an example.”

“There’s not many senior Wardens left,” he said. “You feel guilt, as you should. But your death
will not change the past. Why don’t you help them rebuild? Be better?”

“Because it broke me. I have done worse, with full sanction, but this…”

He reached out to her, touching her shoulder, “Tell me about the Warden you killed.”

She closed her eyes, “Trevor, was his name. He was so young, so brave. I told him his death would mean something.”

“Did he have any family?”

“None that I know of. We recruited him directly from the Circle, not an apostate.”

Meaning he’d been taken from his family at a young age.

“Friends?”

“I—I don’t know. Why do you ask me these things?”

“Because it wasn’t me that you wronged, Ser Ruth,” he said. “If he had had remaining loved ones, I would have asked for their advice on what to do with you.”

“And since there’s not?”

“We have enough examples. I have personally killed many of the Grey Wardens who have done these terrible things. But you surrendered. If I kill you, the only example that sets is that it’s okay to hurt people who you have power over. Isn’t that the opposite of what you want?” he paused. “I sentence you to service. I want you to found a new subset within the Order, an internal council to hold people responsible for their actions. One with mages, Templars, and those who are neither, all equally represented.”

“You want a murderer to head such a thing?”

“I want a good woman, one who will never forget the consequences of blind obedience, to head such a thing,” Milin reached forward to unchain her wrists, setting the cuffs aside.

“I will do my best, Inquisitor.”

She stood, leaving the hall unguarded.

Josephine cleared her throat, “Now, as that concludes today’s judgements—”

“No,” Dorian said, stepping forward. He lowered himself onto the pillow, to the gasps and mutters of the crowd. He wasn’t…he couldn’t… “I’m afraid, Ambassador, that there is still one soul left for the Inquisitor to judge today.”


“Enslavement.”
“Who, exactly, did you enslave?” Josephine asked.

Milin let out a breath. He couldn’t stop this now. Damn him, this was the last thing he needed.

“Me,” Milin said. “He enslaved me.”

The crowd launched into an uproar, calling for blood, the guards struggling to hold the masses at bay.

He could barely hear them. He felt distant. Numb to it all.

Milin held up a hand, and the room quieted.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. “Why now?”

“This has been a long time coming, Inquisitor,” he said with forced formality. “When that demon tortured you, using my actions as fuel, it solidified my decision. I will accept your judgement, whatever it may be.”

“I can’t let you do this alone,” Iron Bull said, stepping forward and lowering himself to his knees on the floor. Fenhedis, like this wasn’t already bad enough. “I take responsibility for what we did to you. I should have known better. Exile him, imprison him, but don’t kill him. You can have my head, instead.”

Another wave of shouting, but a sharp look from him made their voices dull down to a murmur.

He narrowed his eyes at them, “I was kept chained by the throat. You both should have known better. Now, Bull, sit down before you screw up your knee. Dorian, you too. I swear, you’re more dramatic than Servis.”

They exchanged dumbfounded looks, then shifted into sitting positions.

“Do either of you have any idea why I’ve kept quiet about this the whole time?”

The room was dead silent, now.

“Well, in case you were wondering, I was trying to protect you two.”

“You…were trying to protect us?” Dorian asked. “You do not want us dead?”

“I have an army,” he said flatly. “If I wanted you dead, I could have done it by now. I’m not afraid of you, anymore.”

They gaped instead of responding, so he continued.

“Do you realize what you’ve done? Now, I have to worry about a possible coup in Orlais, not to mention the safety of my family, and I have to somehow stop an angry mob from chasing you down with torches!” he could feel his anger building, the words flowing without thought. “You’re so selfish. I didn’t ask you to do this; I didn’t want you to do this. You dragged this all out into public for yourself and your own guilt,” he turned on Bull. “And you, did you really think I would behead him? I hate killing, you know that. You comforted me after my first kill. And didn’t you hear what I just said to Ser Ruth?”
“But I was your nightmare…” Dorian whispered.

“You were, once. And those memories still haunt me. But you also freed me.”

That riled up the crowd again.

“Yes, he freed me, of his own volition, and Bull helped convince him to do it,” he announced over the hubbub. Once the voices died down, he addressed the pair of them again. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get over what you did to me. And I certainly don’t forgive you. But right now, I need your help against Corypheus. This? This isn’t helping.”

The human lowered his head, almost to the floor, and he could see teardrops darkening the surface. Bull reached over to rub his back.

“I…apologize. I thought, if I truly felt repentant, confessing was the only decent thing to do.”

He felt his anger…not leave, but dull somewhat.

“It wasn’t your worst idea. But you have to get better at this telling right from wrong thing, Dorian,” people usually learned that sort of thing from their parents. In this case, he’d rather the human not get his morality from that particular source. Maybe he’d ask Varric to help them with that, when they got back to Skyhold.

Dorian raised his head, “Funny, Bull has told me almost the exact same thing.”

“I’m sure he has,” Milin nodded at the Qunari. “I think Viddathari would be happy with how far you’ve come. Or at least, less likely to kill you.”

“Probably closer to the second one.”

“Probably,” he admitted.

“So, what happens now?” Dorian asked.

Milin closed his eyes, thinking. He needed to send them away from here, while tempers cooled.

“Sister Nightingale says that the remaining Venatori have fled to the north, in a place called the Hissing Wastes. They are working their slaves to death trying to excavate whatever is hidden there. I don’t care whether you find what they’re looking for, but you must stop them, and free the slaves.”

No one could argue that being banished to that wasteland wasn’t a punishment. It may not be the bloody end the masses called for, but this way, they could still help the Inquisition, as well as those poor people.

It would probably also do Dorian and Bull some good to be reminded of the realities of slavery, not just the fear-driven desperation to please that was the end result.

“Well, you know how much I relish reunions with my countrymen.”

“Consider it done, boss.”

He stood, “Anyone volunteer to be their overseer?”

After a long pause, Stitches stepped forward, “I will go. Not from any loyalty to Bull. But if those people are being worked as hard as you say, a surgeon might not be a bad idea. And I won’t let
these two pull any shit, I’ll promise you that.”

“You’re a good man, Stitches,” he said with a nod.
Milin shadowed them as they packed for the journey and headed off, making sure it was clear they were not to be followed or harassed. With him there, all they got were mutters and glares. But if he wasn’t, he was sure things could escalate, fast.

He watched them disappear into the desert, and then headed back to his room. It was still early, and he knew he had other duties to attend to, preparing for the Ball not the least of them, but he just… he was worn out.

He found Dalish waiting for him. She’d been the loudest voice, during the judgement. It’d taken two guards to restrain her, and she’d stormed off afterwards. But now she seemed…deflated. Her eyes were red, her shoulders slumped. His heart ached for her—he didn’t want her to find out this way. Creators, she must feel so betrayed.

“Vhenan…” she spoke up. “So this, I assume, is what you wouldn’t tell me?”

He nodded, sitting down stiffly on the bed next to her.

“Did they…did they both…”

He nodded again.

“I can’t believe it,” she shook her head. “I never even would have suspected. You said they saved you from a blood mage!”

“They did. The blood mage was Dorian’s father. They caught him before he could finish the ritual, and then they took me and ran,” he explained. “Bull gave me to Viddathari while they went to fight the Venatori.”

She let out a long breath. “How are you so…After everything you told me they did to you, how can you stand to look at them? Much less work with them, all this time.”

Milin bowed his head, voice small, “Actually it was kind of a relief to see them again, at first. After the Conclave, I was so scared. Viddathari was dead, some magic I didn’t understand was trying to kill us all, and I was surrounded by humans I didn’t know. I trusted Dorian more than any of them.”

“You trusted him?”

“Almost all the other shemlen wanted me dead. And Cassandra terrified me,” he shrugged. “My Clan didn’t run into humans much. Pretty much the only other humans I’d ever seen before were the slavers who took me. I’m sure it’s hard to believe, but those men were actually worse. They isolated me completely. I was put in a separate cage, blindfolded so I couldn’t see anyone, beaten if I tried to talk. With Bull and Dorian… I dreaded them fucking me, but I would wait for them to come back when they were gone. They were the only real interaction I got to have with other people, as a slave.”

She squeezed his hand, “You’re not alone anymore.”

“I know,” he smiled weakly at her, squeezing back. “I have friends now, and I am stronger for it.”

“And you know better now,” she said. “So why protect them? You yourself just said you only kept
them around because you didn’t have anyone else.”

“I believe they’re trying to help, now, and we need all the help we can get against an army of demons. How many lives were saved at Adamant because of Iron Bull’s leadership? Or Dorian’s tactics?”

“The greater good? That’s your argument? Isn’t that exactly what got the Wardens into trouble?” she scoffed. “You can’t tell me I’m being unreasonable here. What they did to you was torture. If they were capable of it then, what’s to stop them from doing it again?”

“Stitches is guarding them.”

“They’re not exactly being caged or chained by the throat, though,” she said, crossing her arms. “I would have rather sent them with Skinner. Then they I’d know they won’t be coming back.”

She had a point. Part of him did hope they’d never come back, that they’d die out there, and he’d never have to see them again. It’d be a relief. But orchestrating it felt…dirty.

“Would you want to be part of a group that did that to people?” he asked. “I mean, what do the Chargers do with their prisoners? Isn’t abusing them against your code of conduct?”

“A code of conduct that Iron Bull himself broke!”

“And what do you usually do when someone breaks it?”

“…dock pay. Or kicking them out entirely, if it’s bad enough.”

“That’s what I did.”

“It was more like a temporary banishment, and we’ve never had to deal with anything as bad as this before,” she argued, and narrowed her eyes. “If the Templar who killed my father was still around, I would hunt him down and kill him again. I wouldn’t let him go!”

She stood, facing away from him as she collected herself. He could see the tension in her shoulders, and wanted to reach out and comfort her, but thought better of it. She wouldn’t have gotten up if she wanted to be touched right now. A long silence stretched between them, but he waited patiently for her to speak.

“I’m sorry,” she said, turning back to him. “I shouldn’t make this about me, it just…it doesn’t feel like enough. Why should they walk free while you’re still hurting?”

He shook his head, “Well… if Stitches reports anything bad about either of them, I’ll make the exile permanent, okay?”

“What do you mean by ‘bad?’”

“Trying to escape.”

“And if they try to do something worse?” she spat. “What if their convenient, newfound contrition is all a lie and they try to take advantage of those slaves they’re supposed to be saving?”

“I thought it was a lie, too, when I was first freed. But they…I changed my mind about that,” he said. Milin looked her in the eye. “But you’re right, if they ever try to hurt someone like that again, I promise, I’ll kill them.”

“I…suppose that will do,” she said, sitting down again. “I still want to tear them both apart, but it’s
ultimately your decision. You’re the Inquisitor. Not to mention, the one they hurt.”

~o~O~o~

He laid in her arms until the pressing weight of Halamshiral forced him to get up and do some of his required reading. Josephine had given him a book titled The Gentleman’s Book of Etiquette. It was bigger than his head. And that was nothing compared to the ever-growing notes Leliana was compiling for him.

At least Dalish helped by reading over his shoulder and laughing with him at the absurdity.

*There’s an entire chapter on cheese. How could there possibly be that many rules about cheese?*

*These dances look more like a ritualistic sacrifice than anything resembling fun.*

*You know, The Lady’s Book of Etiquette is twice as large, pink, and scented with rose petals.*

*Wait a second…did they measure your feet? Yeah, you’re totally going to have to wear shoes for this.*

*How does someone even peel a peach with a fork? Oh, wait, there’s a chapter on that, too. Wonderful.*

Creators, he loved her.

…he loved her.

He put the book down, tilting his head at her with a smile.

“What’s that look for?”

“I…” he hesitated. Should he tell her? Or just say something generic like ‘I think you’re beautiful’ or ‘I’m just happy I met you.’ He didn’t want to taint a moment like that with everything else that had happened today. But at the same time…

Before he could work up his nerve, Janus took that moment to burst in, looking sweaty and breathless and distraught.

“Janus, what’s the matter?” Dalish asked.

“Tille said,” he took a moment to breathe. “She said, if I was upset, I should just talk to you, because I wasn’t doing my form any favors by practicing on the dummies when my mind wasn’t focused.”

“You didn’t like the judgement, I take it?” Him and everyone else.

“Well…yeah, kind of,” he shook his head. “But I’m not mad at you, I’d never be mad at you. I’m mad at myself. Because if it were me? I would have killed my mistress, if I’d had the chance. I’ve thought about killing her a million times. And I’ve accepted that I’ll never get to do it, but at least I could think about it. But then…what you said about how much you didn’t like killing, and you refused to do it even to the people who hurt you, so I feel like, am I a bad person?”

“No, of course not, it’s different,” he put a hand on his shoulder. “I shot your mistress in the back, you know. I didn’t give her a fair fight. To me, the cage alone was enough to condemn her to death. Do you think I’m a bad person for that?”
A fair fight could have meant the slaves being used to fuel blood magic.

“Of course not. You saved me.”

“Then why are you so hard on yourself, for having a lot more reasons to kill her than I did?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“If it makes you feel better,” Dalish said. “I’ve spent most of my evening fantasizing about ways to slowly kill two certain individuals, who shall remain nameless, with ridiculous Orlesian cutlery.”

“I’ve thought about killing them, too,” he admitted softly.

“See? Perfectly normal. Likely not healthy, but who in Thedas is?”

Janus cracked a weak smile.

“Also…there’s something else on my mind, sort of,” he said. “I know that the, uh, the recruits are supposed to follow Blackwall back to Skyhold for more training and regrouping and stuff, but… could I go with the Avvar to Emprise du Lion?”

He blinked, “Okay.”

“It’s just… I feel like I’m making good progress on my training with them, and I like the Avvar. They really hate the Tevinters, but back in Andrastian times, they joined up with the slaves to try to conquer Tevinter, so I’m Tevinter, but not that kind of Tevinter so they’re alright with me. But everything is temporary with them, anyway, so I’m sure I’ll find my way back to Skyhold at some point—”

“Slow down, slow down, I already said yes,” he said. He’d miss him, but if this was what he wanted, he was okay with that. Being with the Avvar would probably be good for him, anyway. “You’re welcome back at Skyhold anytime, my friend.”
Milin was barely thirteen when last Arlathvhen convened, almost nine years ago. He remembered how much it awed him to see so many elves in one place.

Halamshiral easily had twice that many. The city streets were crowded with elves, some striding confidently in jewels and boots, others begging in rags. He asked Leliana why so many had burn scars, but she said she’d have to tell him later.

He tried to slip them coins whenever his advisors weren’t looking.

At one point, a group of children started following them around, pointing at him and Dalish and unabashedly gawking at their marked faces.

“Are those real?” one particularly plucky girl demanded, hands on hips. “There’s no way they’re real. That’s just ink.”

“They’re real,” he dropped to one knee, and put her hand on his forehead. “Go ahead. They can’t be rubbed off.”

She sure tried her hardest, though, to Dalish’s barely-concealed snickering.

“But if you’re Dalish…” she frowned. “Why aren’t you in the forest?”

“We’re here for the ball.”

The girl tilted her head, “Like as guards or something? Usually elves aren’t allowed to have weapons in the city.”

“Certainly not. We’re guests,” Dalish said proudly.

Her eyes went wide, “Are you a princess? I didn’t know elves could be princesses…”

“Inquisitor…” Cassandra said impatiently.

“She looks mad, you better go,” she whispered.

Oh, no, she was scared. He didn’t want her to be scared. Cassandra was just…a bit stoic, that was all.

“No, it’s alright. She’s nice,” he said, beckoning the Seeker over. “This is Cassandra, she’s my adviser.”

She crouched next to them, “It is nice to meet you, young lady.”

He mouthed the word ‘smile’ to her, and the Seeker did manage a quirk of the lips. The young girl went from suspicious to shocked. He guessed that’d have to do, for now.

“She’s right, though,” he said, standing. “We do have to get going. You be good, now, alright?”

The girl wrinkled her nose, “Good is boring.”

“She’s got you, there,” Dalish elbowed him in the ribs.
“Welcome to my humble suite, my dears,” Vivienne said, lounging on a divan. As Enchantress of the Imperial Court, she’d been given her own, lavish appointments, big enough to accommodate their small party for the night. She’d been sent directly from Skyhold to see to the Inquisition’s interests. Well…maybe not sent so much as told them in no uncertain terms she’d be going, and gave that as her reasoning. “I trust that you are well?”

“Quite. And yourself, Madame Vivienne?” he asked with a slight bow, one arm behind him and one arm in front.

“Splendid,” she smiled, standing. Vivienne took him by the arm, leading him to a private alcove by a window. “You’ve been practicing for this, I see.”

“Leliana and Josephine have been tutoring me.”

“Good. Appearances are vitally important. We can’t have you mistaken for a commoner.”

“I understand the responsibility. We have to be respected to be taken seriously,” he nodded, schooling his expression. And to the Orlesians, being respected meant displaying wealth, obeying the customs of the court, and masking your true intentions with wit. You would think fighting demons and closing Rifts would be enough to get them to listen to him, but no. And his advisers made it clear that they wouldn’t be able to save Celene if they were kicked out of the Winter Palace.

At least he was already good at faking smiles. Creators, he hated this country.

“Not just respected, my dear,” she said. “You must be a man who the common folk aspire to be and to whom the nobility bow.”

“That is…a lot of pressure.”

“It is a challenge all great leaders must face, Inquisitor,” she said. “As the stories of the Inquisition spreads, more and more people will wonder if you are the man they say you are. They will question what they’ve heard, but they will believe what they see. They must see someone greater than legends.”

“And if I can’t live up to all that?”

“They will blame you for not being the hero they wanted. Their anger will be simple, vicious, and swift. You must respect that. But as long as you do, they are easy to control,” she said. “That is why I am here. To guide you to greatness. Despite your…unfortunate choices in allies.”

“You mean the rebel mages.”

“Oh, not just that. I hear you’ve been quite busy, pardoning the Grey Wardens. What were their crimes again? Blood magic? Human sacrifice? Demon summoning? Or the part where they served Corypheus?”

“We killed the ones responsible,” he said. “But others surrendered, or even fought beside us. I didn’t think more bloodshed was the answer.”

“I’m sure they did, once they saw the turning of the tide,” she said. “Do you truly believe you killed all of the Venatori sympathizers? Would you be willing to stake your life on that? Would you be willing to stake all of Thedas on that? Magic, like fire, is dangerous, my dear. Anyone who
forgets that gets burned.”

“That’s why I’m trying to make it so that there’s oversight,” he said. “Headed by Ser Ruth. A Templar.”

“Ah, yes. One of your judgements, I did hear about that. You’ll forgive me for forgetting, as there were more…noteworthy judgements you made that day,” she said. She looked uncomfortable, even disturbed. Strange, to see her break her poise. But she quickly regained it. “So this means you finally see the Templars are necessary?”

“As partners to the mages, not their masters,” he said. He remembered back to the Fade, how Cassandra helped dispel the Nightmare’s hexes from him. “But there is nothing inherently wrong about their abilities.”

Madame de Fer nodded her approval, “There is some hope for you yet, my dear. Come, I will have my personal tailor do the final fitting on your uniform. And we simply must get you a mask. Unthinkable oversight, really.”

~o~O~o~

Milin’s feet ached. He had never worn shoes in his life, but he was pretty sure these were the most uncomfortable pair in Thedas.

‘You just need to break them in,’ Leliana had said. Apparently breaking in shoes meant dancing in them until he could barely walk. He’d already practiced with Scout Harding whenever he could, so he knew the steps, but it took hours for Leliana to be satisfied with what she called his ‘stage presence.’

Finally, he retired to his room with Dalish, who he found sitting cross-legged in bedclothes, meticulously shaping the ironbark bough. It was slow going, he knew. Without the Arulin’Holm, her knife had to be re-sharpened after every pass.

It was kind of a funny juxtaposition, wood shavings on a plush Orlesian carpet. Somehow, he doubted Vivienne would see it as funny.

“Have fun at dance practice?” she asked, not looking up from her work.

“Let’s just say you’re lucky you don’t have to wear these,” he said, unlacing the boots with a hiss of pain. His toes, ankles, and the sides of his feet were all a mess of blisters. And the skin touching the hilt of his hidden daggers was rubbed raw.

She’d be posing as a servant, so she wouldn’t have to wear boots or the uniform he and his advisors would wear. The masks Vivienne had commissioned were crafted from leftover dragon scales, and embedded with opals. A ‘conversation piece’, as she called it. The enchantress said people in Orlais wore masks so they could be their true selves when they removed them. Fitting, that his covered his vallaslin, then.

“Hardly. Even a simple servant’s dress requires this awful, suffocating bone contraption. It’s torture. How do people dance in that? More importantly, how am I supposed to fight in that?” she grumbled. “Go to my pack, I have one of Stitches’ poultices, that’ll fix you up before tomorrow.”

“Where they’ll get hurt all over again.”

“Lucky for you, I have two.”
Limping over, he grabbed the bottle, collapsed into the nearest chair, rolling up the cuffs of his trousers to slather his legs up to the knees.

“I love that man,” he said with a sigh of relief. “I’ve got to learn his real name at some point because I’m going to have to name my firstborn after him.”

Actually, after volunteering to go to the Hissing Wastes, he might have to name a couple kids after him. Or maybe he could just get him a gift. He’d ask Krem about that.

“What, you don’t think ‘Stitches’ is a beautiful name for a girl?” she quipped. “Told you that stuff was good. And as you know, I am always right in all things, forever.”

“Yes, you are, vhenan,” he said, pausing. “You know who would actually be good at all this?”

“Who?”

“My sister.”

“Are you joking? The girl charged into Skyhold, staff blazing. I wouldn’t exactly call that subterfuge.”

“If you think intimidation isn’t a big part of the Game, you haven’t seen Vivienne’s dress,” he smirked. She’d be wearing the Inquisition’s mask, but the gown was custom, to no one’s surprise. Black with opals, and iridescent wing-like adornments on the back. “But she was also raised to be a leader, like my mamae. With Dirthamen’s guidance, I’m sure she would have done well at this. She wouldn’t lack for confidence, that’s for sure.”

Dalish looked up from her work, “You’re really missing her right now, aren’t you?”

Her, his family, Shiral…

“Yeah. You know that kid today? She didn’t look a thing like her, but her attitude, you know? I remember when Nali was that small. Not just asking questions, demanding answers,” he said. “And after Shiral… I’m worried about her. I’m worried about everyone. I hate having to be here putting on a show for these humans when I could be helping them.”

“I’m not going to say don’t worry, because you should be worried. But you are helping them. You have your agents working on their behalf. And you are trying your hardest to stop Corypheus,” she stood, putting both hands on his shoulders. “You can’t be everywhere at once, and Thedas needs you here.”

He nodded. He knew that, logically. But it was good to hear.

“In the meantime,” she sat in his lap. “I think you should write a strongly worded letter to the Duke that their persecution is rather ill-timed.”

“Yes, how rude of him,” he said dryly.

“Indeed, my good sir.”

~o~O~o~

“Inquisitor, a letter for you,” Leliana said the next morning. His advisors were gathered around a grand table. More elaborate than the wartable, but the feel was the same. “It just arrived.”

He took it, silently wishing that Dalish was up so she could read it for him. He knew what this was
about. Or at least, he hoped.

Da’len,

His breath hitched. Finally.

*Thanks to the efforts of your Inquisition, Clan Lavellan is safe within the city of Wycome, and Duke Antoine's mad efforts to destroy us have ended with his death. For now, I lead both our clan and the elves of this city, while the human merchants have formed a group that deals with us fairly and honorably.*

*The other cities of the Free Marches listen to the false stories of the nobles who fled. I fear they will retaliate, but I am loathe to flee this city, as that would effectively leave the city elves to die for our actions.*

*If you have a path that leads to safety for our people, I welcome your advice.*

Dareth shiral,

*Mamae*

Speechless, he handed it over for his advisors to read themselves. Milin hugged his chest. So the truth had won out, only for the lies of nobles to thrust both his Clan *and* the city elves into danger.

“My diplomats may still be able to convince the remaining Marchers to listen to reason,” Josephine suggested.

“No!” Cullen said. “If we negotiate, the Marchers will kill the elves, then send apologies. We must fortify the city.”

He looked up at that.

Once he’d feared him, even hated him. But now, he knew what kind of man he was. And he’d seen what he could do.

“I trust you, Commander,” he said, clasping his hands together so they wouldn't shake. “Protect them.”
“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Inquisitor Lavellan,” Duke Gaspard greeted. “The rumors coming out of the Western Approach say you battled an army of demons. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the rightful emperor of Orlais.”

“I’ve heard your chevaliers are quite impressive,” Milin said with a polite nod. Out of the three factions his advisors had told him about, the Grand Duke was the least appealing. Waging war on his own cousin, his own country to seize power. But he smiled anyhow.


The man pulled away, leaving him in the courtyard. Alone, save for the whispers.

Is that the Inquisitor?

An elf savage? Maker forbid.

This is Gaspard’s idea of a joke.

I heard he was a slave.

He would make quite a pretty picture in chains, wouldn’t he?

“You, there! Rabbit! Have you seen a ring anywhere?” a noblewoman called. She began ranting about how she simply must have it.

He’d be more inclined to help her if she hadn’t called him ‘rabbit’. He supposed that was the Orlesian polite society way of saying ‘knife-ear.’

But he caught a hint of sparkle out of the corner of his eye and figured that he might as well be practice being civil.

“Just one moment, my lady,” he said, carefully scanning through the grass. There. “Is this it?”

“You are a treasure! I cannot believe you found it!”

“A fine lady such as yourself deserves the finest accessories,” he bowed in the way he was taught. “I am Inquisitor Lavellan. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Inquisitor.”

He spent some time trying to mingle, then mercifully the Duke fetched him at long last for formal introductions. Tedious. But at least it meant getting face to face with Celene.

He knew from Leliana that all warnings to her were intercepted. But he knew he could not warn her directly.

“Your arrival at court is like a cool wind on a summer’s day,” the empress said.

“Your majesty is too kind,” he bowed. “But even a gentle breeze could herald an oncoming storm.”
“Even the wisest mistake fair winds for foul. We are at the mercy of the skies, Inquisitor,” she said. She didn’t believe him, then? “How do you find Halamshiral?”

“It has been a pleasant end to a long journey, Empress Celene.”

Halamshiral meant ‘the end of the journey’ in Elvish, and the empress’s lips quirked at the reference. That gave some credence to the rumor that she used to be lovers with the spy, Briala, then.

“Enjoy the pleasures of the ballroom. We look forward to seeing you dance.”

And that was his cue that he was dismissed.

As soon as he got up the stairs, he sighed his relief that it was over.

“Ahl, there you are, Inquisitor,” Vivienne said, taking his arm. “Shall we talk?”

Based on her grip, that was not just a suggestion. He followed her into a seating area, where everyone would be too busy in their own conversations for them to be overheard. Hiding in plain sight.

“I have heard rumors that Empress Celene has a so-called ‘occult advisor.’ An apostate,” she said the last word with distaste, despite her smile. “She has apparently charmed her way into court in my absence, as if by magic.”

“You think she’s a maleficar? A Venatori assassin?”

“It is worth investigating,” she said. “Go to the Grand Ballroom. She is lurking there, I am sure.”

He nodded, and started towards what he thought should be the right direction. Leliana had him try to commit the palace blueprints to memory, but it was a big place and he was never good at navigating.

“Lord Inquisitor,” a trio of women interrupted, before he’d gotten far. They wore what he recognized to be House Valmont masks. Something about the empress, then? “We have a message for you. Please, it is urgent.”

“I always have time for the Empress, of course.”

“Empress Celene is eager to assist the Herald of Andraste in his holy endeavor. She will pledge her full support to the Inquisition as soon as the usurper Gaspard is defeated.”

“And what does she wish me to do in return?”

They insisted that her support would be unconditional, that Celene would need no help in defeating her cousin. He wasn’t so sure.

He continued on towards the ballroom, when he heard footsteps from behind. This place was crowded with people, but something about it made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Whoever it was, intuition told him they were dangerous.

“Well, well, what have we here?” he turned to see a human woman clad in red velvet and jewels. “The leader of the new Inquisition, fabled herald of the faith. Delivered from the grasp of the Fade by the hand of the blessed Andraste herself.”

All words he had heard before, but never with so much scorn.
“Who might I have the pleasure of speaking with?” he asked.

“I am Morrigan. Some call me advisor to Empress Celene on matters of the arcane,” maybe it wasn’t intuition, then. Maybe she was using entropy magic to make him feel uneasy. Once again, he wished Nali or his mother were here… “A Dalish hunter, are you not? I think, perhaps, you and I hunt the same prey.”

“And what prey might that be?”

She chuckled, “You are being coy. Is that how my dear old friend Leliana taught you to be?”

She knew Sister Nightingale?

“She taught me to be careful.”

“Not unwise, here of all places. Allow me to speak first, then,” she said. “Recently I found, and killed, an unwelcome guest within these very halls. An agent of Tevinter. So I offer you this, Inquisitor. A key found on the Tevinter’s body. Where it leads, I cannot say. Yet if Celene is in danger, I cannot leave her side long enough to search. You can. Proceed with caution, Inquisitor. Enemies abound, and not all of them aligned with Tevinter. What comes next will be most exciting.”

She left, and Milin slipped into the shadows. If he was going to be trying locked doors, best not to be seen by the court.

He made his way systematically, trying the doors that looked the most important, the most well-guarded first. Nothing. Was this a fool’s errand to distract him?

And then he caught sight of Dalish, eyes wide behind her mask.

Milin revealed himself, “What’s the matter?”

“Where’ve you been?” Dalish asked, voice low. “Listen, I heard some elves whispering. Servants are disappearing. And look at this.”

She handed him a roll of paper with various names, and times they went to the servants’ wings. At the bottom, it said, ’Briala, we need immediate support down there. Something’s gone wrong.’

He frowned. He hadn’t even thought to try the key there, yet, but he had a sinking feeling that that was what it would unlock.

“Cullen’s people have our armor somewhere, right? Let’s get some backup and go.”
Corpses of elves littered the room, their blood not even dry.

“Some of these were servants,” Dalish frowned, crouching at the nearest body. “No weapons, no armor.”

“There is no excuse for killing the defenseless,” Vivienne said.

“Someone will be held accountable for this,” Cassandra agreed, marching forward. She was clearly on a mission, now, with an intensity that made Milin thank the Creators she was on their side.

They made their way to what looked to be a garden, where they found a human with a knife in his back.

“The Chalon family crest,” Vivienne said. “So this must be Gaspard’s work. Or at the very least, intended to look like it.”

A scream rang out from up ahead and they rushed forward in time to see an elf woman struck down as she ran.

“Venatori agents!” Milin cried, drawing his bow.

Not mages, though, he noticed during the fight. No, these were warriors, rogues. They wore the colors of the Venatori, but they were almost certainly underlings, considering the Tevinters thought mages superior.

“Anyone hurt?” he asked, ripping an arrow from a man’s chest, wiping it off to put back into his quiver. He’d taken a hammer blow to the flank, but he could walk, so it wasn’t worth a potion. His companions answered in the negative. “Good. Keep your guard up. There has to be more.”

They fought their way through the gardens, to a building that was far too lavish to be for mere servants. Some sort of guest quarters, he thought, though some parts seemed to be for storage. His kills were up to forty-five, now. And the only mage they fought was nothing compared to Erimond or Alexius.

As he took aim to kill number forty-six, a dagger flung into his visor made the point moot.

“Fancy meeting you here,” an elvhen woman said as she strode up. She wore a fine dress and mask, unlike the other elves he’d seen. No armor, but she seemed to know her way around a knife. “Inquisitor Lavellan. Slumming in the servants’ quarters with the rest of your people for once?”

Milin’s eyebrows furrowed before he could school his features into the acceptable, neutral smile. Was that what people were saying about him? Was it because he brought humans with him? Was it because he was Dalish?

“I believe your sources on what kind of person I am must be mistaken,” he said with a bow. “Thank you for your assistance and your impressive marksmanship.”

She crossed her arms, “We haven’t been properly introduced, have we? I’m Ambassador Briala. I came down to save or avenge my missing people, but you’ve beaten me to it. Seems you’ve cleaned this place out, actually.”
Going after the Venatori on her own? Arrogant, but brave. And she was the only elf in Thedas that commanded an army, aside from himself. Living proof that true power came from the ability to lead people, not from one’s blood. How the nobles must hate her.

“I don’t believe that’s the end of them,” he said, still somewhat suspicious. “Do you know anything about the dead shemlen in the courtyard?”

“An emissary from the Council of Heralds. And I was about to ask you that very question.”

“Enchanter Vivienne says the murder weapon had a Chalons crest on the hilt. We suspect Gaspard.”

“I knew it,” she said. She told them that Gaspard had been smuggling in chevaliers, as well. “He is getting desperate. He must be planning a strike tonight.”

“He can try, but we’ll stop him.”

“And we’ll make him pay for this,” Dalish added.


“If they can all throw a dagger like you, I will,” he smiled, and it was almost genuine this time.

~o~O~o~

Once they were back to looking presentable again, the bells rang, signaling the start of the dance.

Milin followed the crowd to the ballroom, and tried not to think about throttling the shemlen complaining about the lack of servants to fill their drinks.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” a human woman greeted with a courtesy. He remembered her from the formal introductions, briefly. The sister of Gaspard, and the one who urged Celene to throw this party. “I am Grand Duchess Florianne de Chalons. Welcome to my party.”

“It’s been a delight,” he lied. “What can I do for you?”

“I believe tonight you and I are both concerned about the actions of…a certain person. Come, dance with me. Spies will not hear us on the dance floor.”

Lavellan groaned internally. His back was starting to ache and it was going to take some effort not to grimace during a dance. That’s what he got for giving his potions away to the few survivors they’d found…

“I could never deny such a beautiful woman,” he bowed, holding out a hand. “Shall we dance, your grace?”

He escorted her to the dance floor. Okay, posture straight, shoulders square, smile, lead with your left foot, make it look effortless…

“Have the Dalish gained a sudden passion for politics?” she asked. “What do you know about our civil war?”

More than he’d like to.
“Orlais is the most influential country in Thedas, and home of the Divine. A pebble dropped here has ripple effects far beyond the borders.”

“Perhaps it does. I would not be surprised to find the Empire is the center of everyone’s world,” she said. Oh, how he hated this. “It took great effort to arrange tonight’s negotiations. Yet one party would use this occasion for blackest treason. The security of the Empire is at stake. Neither one of us wishes to see it fall.”

Somehow he thought she wouldn’t mind it so much if she got more power out of it in the process.

“Is that so, Lady Florianne?” he asked, as the music picked up in tempo, forcing them to move faster. Please, let it be over soon. “In times like this, it is hard to tell friend from foe, is it not, your grace?”

“You are a curiosity to many, Inquisitor. And a matter of concern to some.”

“And which one am I to you?”

“A little of both, actually,” she said. “It cannot have escaped your notice that certain parties are engaged in dangerous machinations tonight. Do you even yet know who in the Court can be trusted?”

“From what I’ve heard, it wouldn't be a true party in Orlais without some dangerous machinations,” he said. The music climaxed, and he dipped her, to the applause of the crowd and the protest of his back. “I put my trust in my own people.”

“You have little time,” she whispered, as he led her from the floor. He was not about to stay for the torture of another dance. “The attack will come soon. You must stop Gaspard before he strikes. In the Royal Wing garden, you will find the captain of my brother’s mercenaries. He knows all Gaspard’s secrets. I’m sure you can persuade him to be forthcoming.”

He doubted it. Why would a man like Gaspard share his secrets with someone who would easily betray him?

“It has been a pleasure, Duchess,” he said with a bow as she left.

“You’ll be the talk of the Court for months,” Josephine beamed as his advisors approached, minus Cassandra. “We should take you dancing more often.”

“Please don’t,” he murmured. “You don’t have an elfroot potion, do you?”

Commander Cullen handed him one and he downed it, “I heard there was fighting in the servants’ quarters. You were involved, weren’t you?”

He filled them in as best he could. Though the more he talked, the more he realized how little he really knew.

Josephine backed Celene, Leliana thought they should let her be assassinated and put Briala in charge (though the nobles would never accept an elf in power), and Cullen thought Gaspard and his chevaliers would be the best option to fight Corypheus.

“I don’t care if he has an army,” Milin said. “Gaspard ordered the slaughter of unarmed elves. That makes him little better than Corypheus.”

“Celene has done the same thing,” Leliana said. “You once asked why so many burn victims line
the streets of Halamshiral. *She* is the cause. Her forces responded to an elvhen rebellion by setting fire to the slums. That is when the rift between her and Briala happened.”

His fists clenched. It was a miracle any elves were left in Orlais, with them being systematically murdered all the time.

“So what will you do, Inquisitor?” Josephine asked.

“I don’t know yet,” he said, turning. “I’m going to see what this mercenary has to say.”
Milin snuck into the royal chambers, keeping to the shadows as he tried to find a hint of this mercenary. He could keep out of sight more easily alone, but he had Dalish guarding the entrance, just in case it was a trap.

A scream came from behind a door, and he burst through to find a masked figure bearing down on an elf.

Taking a hidden dagger from his boot, he threw it at him, forcing him to stumble back and out of an open window with a scream.

“Thank you,” the girl breathed, standing.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “No one’s supposed to be here. Brialal said…I shouldn’t have trusted her.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“I knew her. Before. When she was Celene’s pet. Now she wants to play revolution. But I remember. She was sleeping with the Empress who purged our city.”

So Brialal was trying to kill her before she talked.

Or Celene was.

“Go outside the royal wings, you’ll find my friend. Tell her ‘vhenan’ sent you, and she’ll take you somewhere safe, okay?”

“Thank you. Maker protect you, Inquisitor.”

The next room was locked. Not a normal lock, either, but enchanted. Must be Morrigan’s doing. Or the Venatori.

It took him a few moments, but the lock finally gave way.

To reveal a human, nude save for his helmet, shackled to a bed.

His eyes went wide and the lockpick clattered to the floor. Scrambling, he rushed forward to unchain him, only pausing to cover the poor man’s nakedness with a pillow.

“My name’s Milin,” he said soothingly, going for his arms first. “It’s okay, I’m going to get you out.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” the man insisted, rubbing his wrists. “Honestly, I would have preferred if it were.”

Milin shook his head, “What?”

“The Empress led me to believe I would be…rewarded for betraying the Grand Duke. The Empress beguiled me into giving her information about plans for troop movements in the palace tonight. She wants to catch Gaspard in the act, and charge him with treason. This…was not what I
hoped for.”

“So you…got like this…consensually?” he asked, starting on his legs.

“I didn’t know she’d leave me like this!” he said, and Milin let out a sigh of relief. It was more like one of Bull and Dorian’s games, then. “Please, I beg you, don’t tell Gaspard.”

“I won’t,” he said. “But…I may need your help.”

“You have it!” the man grabbed his clothes and ran out.

He still hadn’t found any sign of the mercenary captain, yet, so he pressed on.

“You painted Orlesian assholes! When I get out of this, I’ll butcher you like the pigs you are!”

Well, that sounded promising.

He went towards the sound, opening a door to reveal a troop archers aiming straight at him. And behind them was a Rift.

Oh, fenedhis.

“Inquisitor! What a pleasure! I wasn’t certain you’d attend,” Florianne said, strolling on a balcony above them. “It was kind of you to walk into my trap so willingly. Corypheus insisted that the empress die tonight, and I would hate to disappoint him. A pity you’ll miss the rest of the ball Inquisitor. They’ll be talking of it for years,” she nodded her head to her minions. “Kill him.”

Milin dove back behind the door, shutting it behind him as a dozen arrows stuck into the wood where his chest would have been a second earlier.

He sprinted away, cursing himself for not changing into armor or getting his bow. Oh, and not to mention, sending away his backup.

He was dead. He was so, so dead.

Breathe. Concentrate on what you do have.

Milin went for the nearest doorway and hid behind the door, drawing his last dagger. They’d have to divide up to search for him, and this was a natural chokepoint.

After a few breaths that seemed to stretch out for ages, a pair of men walked through. And one had a bow on his back. Thank the Creators for small mercies.

He rushed forward, grabbing the rogue by the hair to throw him off-balance and stabbing him in the back. The warrior rushed him, and he flung the body away to roll to the side, slicing at the back of his knees. Men in armor fell easily, and fell hard. Stepping on the man’s sword, he drove the knife into his throat.

Forty-seven.

Lavellan shouldered the bow and arrow, and snuck back out into the main courtyard, climbing a trellis to the balcony to rain arrows down at the demons from above. A despair demon knocked him to his back with an ice shard. His armor would have slowed it, but mere clothes let it pierce right through his thigh. He could feel the warmth of blood gushing out of him, but he just had to get up, grit his teeth, and keep shooting.
Once the last of them were gone, he slid down a vine, and raised his hand to the Rift before more could come through.

Letting himself sink to the ground, Milin tore off his sash, fastening it tight around his leg. He remembered back to his first kill, the man with the freckles. His arrow had hit an artery in his thigh, and the man died from blood loss. If he’d been hit just an inch to the side…

“Andraste’s tits, were those demons? There aren’t any more of those blasted demons coming, right?” a chained up shemlen asked, coming out from behind a barrel.

He reached for his lockpick and got to work freeing him, “I closed the Rift, so no more can come through. You’re safe. Now, come on, help me, we have to get going.”

The human pulled him to his feet, and let him lean on him to walk. No screaming yet, so that was a good sign. But he knew he couldn’t have much time.

“Thank you,” the human said. “I knew Gaspard was a bastard, but I didn’t know he’d feed me to the fucking horrors over a damned bill.”

“…a bill?” he asked.

“Yeah, he had to offer me and my men three times our going rate to get us to help him with his move against the throne. Not enough fancy chevaliers, apparently.”

“You could join the Inquisition, if you like,” he offered. “Talk to Commander Cullen, I’m sure he needs more experienced fighters.”

The man agreed, and said he’d happily report what had happened here, if he wanted.

At last, they reached the ballroom, dripping blood on polished floors.

“My friends, we have lost much,” Celene announced. Not too late. “We have each seen a child, a lover, a friend consigned to the flames.”

Literally, if you were an elf.

“The darkness has closed in around us, but even now there is light…” she continued on, but he wasn’t listening, eyes glued on Florianne as she approached the empress.

With a hiss, he planted his feet and knocked an arrow. Maybe Celene deserved to die, but not in cold blood like this.

“Grand Duchess, stand down!” he shouted, trying to give Celene a few precious seconds to get away. “Inquisition, detain her!”

Florianne charged at the Empress with a dagger, and he released his arrow, catching her on the right side of the chest. Fenhedis, he’d been aiming for the heart. Sloppy.

The woman stumbled back, wheezing, “For Corypheus! Kill them all!”

The ballroom broke out into fighting, masked agents attacking his men. He noted that both Morrigan and Briala helped in the struggle to take them down.

The Duchess tried to drag herself away, but Vivienne dashed forward, summoning a blade of magic and running her through, “I think not, my dear.”
She pulled the blade out, and Florianne collapsed.

~o~O~o~

After a cursory moment of first aid and washing off blood (as well as Milin having to stop and explain that no, he did not want Florianne boxed up to be judged, just cremated as Andrastian tradition dictated), he and the three major players gathered for peace talks. Last time he went to a peace talk, the place exploded, so the bar was low, at least.

Briala and Gaspard both accused each other of knowing and doing nothing, shooting barbs back and forth.

“Enough!” Celene said at last. “We will not bicker while Tevinter plots against our nation! For the safety of the people, I will have answers.”

“Do not claim ignorance, Empress,” Lavellan said. “You knew all along Gaspard was moving against you, and you were planning on using that to charge him with treason.”

“That’s duplicitous even for you, Celene,” Gaspard said.

“You still fell for it, and were going to attack the palace,” Milin pointed out. “The punishment for treason in Orlais is execution, right? So, as far as I’m concerned, I saved both your lives tonight.”

“You’ve made your point. What do you want?” Celene asked.

“I want this civil war to end. It’s a waste of lives,” he said. “I want both of you to work together in the fight against Corypheus. Celene, in the court, and Gaspard, on the battlefield. Oh, and Briala?”

“Yes, Inquisitor?”

“If you are ever displeased with the way either of them are treating the elves, let me know, and I’ll give the other more power.”

She grinned ear to ear, “I will keep in touch.”

~o~O~o~

It was well past midnight by the time the speeches and dancing and toasts had a pause long enough for him to get away. He snuck out to the balcony, his feet feeling like they were about to fall off.

“The Orlesian nobility make drunken toasts to your victory, and yet you are not present to hear them?” Morrigan asked. “Do you tire so quickly of their congratulations, Inquisitor? ‘Tis most fickle, after all your efforts on their behalf.”

“They’re probably too drunk to notice I’m gone,” he shrugged.

“Perhaps so. But the night is not yet done. I have news for you, Inquisitor,” she said. “By Imperial Decree, from our newly-appointed co-rulers, I have been named liaison to the Inquisition. They wish to provide you with any and all aid. Including mine. Congratulations.”

He furrowed his eyebrows, “You don’t exactly sound happy about that. Do you want to join the Inquisition?”

“That is beside the point. You face a foe with great magical power, and you will require my… unorthodox knowledge to defeat such magic. Which, incidentally, is also a threat to me. So no, I am not opposed.”
“Then, the Inquisition welcomes your help, Morrigan.”

“A most gracious response,” she turned. “I shall meet you at Skyhold.”

As soon as she was gone, he sat to wrestle the torture devices off his feet.

“There you are,” Dalish swaggered in, amazingly not drunk despite the amount she’d ingested. “How’re the feet, Lord Inquisitor?”

“Killing me,” he groaned. “By the Dread Wolf, how is it that my thigh’s got a dozen stitches, but it’s my feet that hurt? And why doesn’t elfroot work on blisters, anyway?”

“To torment you personally,” she said. “I’ve got that second bottle of poultice, though.”

“Oh, thank the Creators.”

“Not the Creators, just me,” she tossed it at him. “You know, there’s an old shem woman out there looking for you. Says she has twelve daughters. I told her you were already involved with a princess.”

He grinned, “The most beautiful, wonderful princess in Thedas.”

“You’ve been flattering every man and woman in the Court all night,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Yes, but with you, I mean it,” he said, standing on feet that were actually walkable, now. “May I have this dance, Princess Glandival’him Enansal Adahlen?”

“Depends. Are you talking about a real dance or this Orlesian nonsense?”

He flung his mask off, “Real.”

Dalish took his hand, grinning, “Then it would be my honor, Lord Inquisitor.”

The tempo of the song was slow, and his lower half was still in bad shape, so they mostly just swayed together, holding each other close.

She was so beautiful, and smart, and passionate, and funny. He was a lucky man.

“You know, with one crisis after another, there’s not really a good time to say this, but…”

“Ar lath, Milin,” she grinned, leaning in for a kiss. “Beat you to it.”

He beamed back at her, “La ar lath, Glandival’him.”
A Hero’s Welcome

Chapter Notes

Move over, plot. It’s time for Personal Quests for the next few chapters!!! Some of them, at least :)

Also yay for 100,000 words and 50 chapters!

A large crowd came out to greet them as their party returned to Skyhold, Kitty trailing behind carrying the wild boar he’d slain for the cooks.

Men and women reached out to him from both sides and he’d squeeze their hands, pat their shoulders, wipe away their tears. Some even sunk to their knees, and he’d help them up. Those were mostly the newcomers. The ones he knew would just grin and do that fist-to-the-heart salute as they passed. More than a few had tattoos like his on their hands now, he noticed.

Athim, of course, launched himself into his arms. Milin swung him around a little before setting him down, both of them laughing.

The Chargers came next, most giving him playful slaps and punches, Skinner utterly ignoring him in favor of Dalish, and Krem presenting him with what appeared to be a plush nug…with wings. They’d decided not to disband completely, but now it was Krem’s Chargers. He didn’t know what a nug with wings had to do with that, probably some inside joke. Dalish seemed to love it, though.

“What kind of creepy, cult-y shite is all this?” Sera scoffed. “Everyone’s acting like you’re all big now. Up their own asses about the Inquisition, they are. How can you stand it?”

“Yeah, it weirds me out, too. But they’re just new. They’ll relax once they see me and Dalish dancing after a few drinks,” he smiled. “How’ve you been?”

“Getting our arses handed to us. You took all the warriors with you! Ever see three rogues and a mage try to fight a dragon? Fuckin’ impossible. ‘Specially when her kids come out. Creepy got knocked out a bunch of times, but I say that’s what he gets for getting too close. And that other one with the lightning? That one hurt, it did. Fallin’ all over ourselves in the rain. Lucky Varric did the pendant thing and then the blades of whatever helped us out for that one.”

“You guys killed two dragons when I was gone?”

“Sure did, Sharpshooter. Also destroyed some red lyrium, while we were at it,” Varric said, clapping him on the shoulder. He turned to hug the dwarf properly, holding on tight. Varric rubbed his back. “Yeah, I missed you, too. C’mon, let’s take a walk.”

He looked to Dalish, “I’m going to go spend time with some friends, I’ll see you later?”

“Of course, ma vhenan,” she said. “I have some things to do anyway.”

“The bow?” he guessed. She hadn’t let him look at it for weeks, now. It must be close to done.

“Not telling. But I’ll meet you in the tavern after dinner for a dance.”
“See you then.”

He pecked her, then followed Varric.

“I have a feeling I know what this is about,” he said with a sigh, once they escaped the crowd. “I already promised Dalish that if Stitches reports anything but contrition, they’ll be banished for life. And if they try to hurt anyone else, I’ll kill them.”

“Well, I don’t know if that decision is extremely healthy or extremely unhealthy, but it was yours to make. So I’m going to try to respect it.”

Milin stopped, “You are?”

“Yeah. I told you about my friend Fenris, right?” he asked, and Milin nodded. A little, at least. “Well, after years of running, he finally killed his master. Only, it didn’t really make him feel any better. Didn’t give him those years of his life back, didn’t take the pain of his markings away. Just left him with this anger. Say the word, and Bianca and I will gladly make them into pincushions, but I don’t believe killing them would instantly solve all your problems,” Varric sighed. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Varric had always been a good friend to him. He didn’t know what he would have done without him.

“I should have seen it. Ever since I heard, I keep going over every interaction I’ve seen you have with them, thinking about everything I could have done differently. That day in Redcliffe. That day you told me you were going to be free,” he shook his head. “Shit, Fenris would have seen through them instantly, I bet. I guess Tevinter mages really are all bastard coated bastards with bastard filling, huh?”

“Felix wasn’t. And I think Dorian’s getting better,” he said softly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve called him ‘master,’ Varric.”

“Months, maybe. Not years. Cole’s told me that much,” he said. “Just… remember it’s okay to not be okay. I’m here for you, alright? You can always come talk to me.”

Milin smiled, then jerked his head towards the courtyard. There was arguing.

“Hear something?” Varric asked.

He nodded, heading in the direction of the fight.

“No!” came a muffled voice. Solas’ voice.

“But you like demons!” Cole protested.

“I enjoy the company of spirits, yes, which is part of why I do not abuse them with bindings,” he said, as they entered the courtyard.

“It isn’t abuse if I ask.”

“Not always true,” he said. “Also, I do not practice blood magic, which renders this entire conversation academic.”

“What’s going on, kid?” Varric asked.

“He won’t bind me. He’s a mage, and he likes demons, but he won’t help.”
“Why do you think binding would help you?” Milin asked.

“If Solas won’t do the ritual to bind me, someone else could—will! Like the Warden mages. And then…” he bowed his head. His voice sounded so pained. “I’m not me anymore. Walls around what I want, blocking, bleeding, making me a monster.”

Milin grasped his hand, “We’ll stop any mage who tries.”

“There might be another option,” Solas said. “I recall stories of amulets used by Rivaini seers to protect spirits they summoned from rival mages. A spirit wearing an amulet of the unbound was immune to blood magic and binding. It should protect Cole as well.”

“I’ve got a Rivaini friend with connections,” Varric said. “If it’s out there, she can get it for you.”

“Good,” Cole said, pulling away. “They will not take me.”

~o~O~o~

The cooks really pulled out all the stops for the feast. Not only did they roast the wild boar, but they had goose and venison and fish and fruits and breads and pastries with all sorts of sweet fillings. His sister would have loved it.

Milin also learned he really like this Rivaini drink called rum.

By the time they reached the tavern, he was feeling full to bursting and just shy of drunk.

“Ready to dance, princess?” he grinned.

“It would be my pleasure, Lord Inquisitor.”

The bard played fast music, which was the kind Dalish loved the most. And he adored the way her eyes lit up and her grin widened every time he swung her around, her skirts whipping.

“You can do better than that!” she goaded him on.

Milin was happy to oblige.

After a few songs, they collapsed breathlessly to a table in a corner and she went to get some water for them. The tipsiness had dulled by now, but he was still feeling so damn happy.

“Dancing is good,” Cole said, making him start in surprise. He really should be more used to him appearing out of nowhere by now. “Flattery, fake, false. It scared her how easily you slipped back into slavery. Unbooted and unmasked, she saw you become free again. She felt better when you danced.”

“I did, too,” he said, then paused, curious. “Did you read her mind just now, or did you do it at the time?”

“At the time. I can hear things from far away if I know them and they’re loud enough,” he said. “I felt when Shiral died, too. I’m sorry.”

“Nali,” his eyes went wide. “You can read her mind! Is she alright?”

He shook his head, “All I know is that she’s not hurting right now.”

“That…that’s something. Thank you.”
Dalish came back with their drinks, and when he looked over again at Cole, he was gone.

~o~O~o~

“Oh Creators, did you see the way Krem was making eyes at the bard? He is smitten.” Dalish laughed, as they walked hand in hand back to her room. He noticed the plush nug sitting next to the owl carving, now.

No sign of the bow. He should really get her something. She was spending all this time working on something special for him. But if he went by the song, the next verse involved facing down Fen’Harel, and somehow he doubted he’d get that opportunity.

She lit the hearth, that familiar woodsmoke of fire magic flaring, and sprawled out in front of it, “Join me?”

Milin smiled, laying down on top of her, straddling her legs.

“Rather bold of you, ser.”

“So is this,” he said, and kissed her.

Dalish’s fingers threaded through his hair, careful not to tug. The kiss was slow and lazy, such a stark contrast with how they danced.

“Want me to pleasure you?” he offered, nipping at her ear. He had a hang-up about ears, but she didn’t.

“You spoil me. But just to warn you, fingers only, because the Crows are sending their regards right now.”

“...What?”

“The Crows make things bloody. It’s my time of the month, you see,” she said, laughing at her own, awful joke. With a wicked smile, she unbelted her tunic and pulled it over her head, before unfastening her breast band. “Oh, you will never know the relief of freeing your tits at the end of a long day.”

“I think I’ll manage my disappointment,” he said, unbuttoning his own shirt and shucking it off. Between that and the Orlesian cage-thing, women must be in a constant state of discomfort.

Milin massaged her breasts, “Feel better now?”

“Getting there. Back is a bit sore, though.”

“Then roll over for me.”

Milin started at her shoulders, working his way slowly down to her lower back, humming their song as he went. He used to massage Dorian, sometimes. Bull, too, if it was raining and his knee was acting up. He tried to push those memories to the side, and focus on the way Dalish moaned when he pressed the heels of his hands along her spine.

“Mmm, you’re better than crystal grace,” she said.

He brushed her hair to the side to plant a kiss on her neck, “You’re prettier than crystal grace.”

She groaned, “That was awful.”
“Not any worse than your crack about the Crows,” he said, playfully pinching her ass.

She swatted his hand away and turned back over, “I beg your pardon, ser, I am hilarious.”

“And the bow you’ve been working on for me is really a staff.”

“Absolutely. You are an apostate, after all,” she said, unbuttoning her skirts. “That’s why your hand’s glowy.”

“Not this one,” he slipped his non-‘glowy’ hand into her smallclothes, palm flat between her legs, and let her rock into his touch.

“The shemlen would find it terribly sacrilegious if they knew I was humping against the symbol of the Inquisition, wouldn’t they?”

He cracked up at that. He’d never thought of it that way.

“See? Told you, I’m hilarious,” she grinned, as she finished pulling her skirt and smalls off.

Milin kissed her and pressed two fingers inside of her.

They hadn’t done more than hands and tongues since he’d told her about his past. He felt kind of guilty about it, but at least he seemed to be getting better at doing it.

“Fuck,” she breathed, grabbing his wrist to tell him she was done. She only finished twice, this time. Must be tired. “You are nothing if not dedicated.”

“Not hard to be dedicated if it’s something you enjoy,” he said. He wiped his hand off and unbuttoned his trousers. Only fair. And it was a relief to get the pressure off his cock.

He could see her eyes glance down, but she said nothing. He appreciated that.

“Hey, Milin? I had an idea. Don’t feel pressured or anything but…”

He glanced up at her and tried not to frown.

“Ever heard of a ‘watchword’?”

Actually…he had. But he didn’t really understand what it meant.

“Not really…”

“Well, it’s a word that you normally wouldn’t ever use during sex, like ‘arrow’ or something, and it’s supposed to signal the other person to stop if you’re uncomfortable. I thought maybe it would help. I know it was difficult for you to say ‘no’, so…”

He pulled back to stare into the fire, and Dalish propped herself up on her elbows, “What’s wrong?”

He let out a breath, “Bull and Dorian had one of those with each other. ‘Katoh.’ I didn’t get what it was at the time but… well, that explains why they never told me what it meant. I might have gotten some crazy idea like saying it myself.”

“Oh, vhenan,” she sat up to put her arms around him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Well, not fine, but it’s over,” he said. “Don’t worry, if I’m uncomfortable, I’ll say so. No
“I appreciate how patient you’re being with me,” he said, lying back down. “But…what if I don’t get better? Don’t you want more? Don’t you want a family?”

“There are other ways to have a family. It’s sad to say, but with everything going on…there’s going to be a lot of children that need parents,” she said. “I know we get it pushed on us that we have to preserve Dalish blood and all that, but that doesn’t matter to me. Remember that little girl in Halamshiral? I would have been proud to be her mother. Maybe even a human child, what would it matter? And I’m not entirely sure the idea of being pregnant appeals to me.”

“You’re saying you’d rather adopt?”

“At some point down the line, it’s something I’d consider. And not as a secondary option, either. I’d also want to get bonded first,” she said. “Speaking of…maybe you could move a few of your things into here, if you want?”

He flushed, hard. That was a big step, but he couldn’t say he hadn’t thought about it.

“I—I’d like that.”

He thought of Viddathari’s sword. It’d be nice to have it in here. It’d also be nice not to have to go back to that other room again.

“In the meantime, you don’t have to worry about me getting impatient. You always leave me plenty satisfied,” she winked. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”
“Mother never told me the Inquisitor was an elf,” a small, child’s voice said. It was refreshing to hear a human say the word ‘elf’ with curiosity rather than disdain.

“Was it the ears that gave it away or the markings?” he teased, standing up from his gardening. He was pretty much done harvesting, anyway.

“No. Your blood is very old. I saw it right away.”

He saw…what? Who was this kid?

“Who’s your mother?” he asked.

“Mother is the inheritor, she who awaits the next age.”

He would have thought the child was just making things up, but there was this earnestness, this intelligence in his eyes…like nothing he’d ever seen.

Morrigan approached, looking stern but not cross, “Kieran, are you bothering the Inquisitor?”

“Of course not,” he said. “Did you see what’s on his hand, mother?”

“I did see. ‘Tis time to return to your studies, little man.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh, dragging his feet as he walked away.

“I didn’t know you had a son. Is his father here, too?” he asked.

“His father cares for him and sees him when he can, but he has other matters to attend to right now. So ‘tis just the two of us.”

“He seems very intelligent. Is he showing signs of magic?”

“That is not a question I am willing to entertain in a fortress rife with Templars.”

He shrugged, “Even the dull blades realize they’ll be thrown out if they cause trouble. Same for the mages, or anyone else.”

“‘Dull blades’ is what you call the Templars here? Fitting,” she chuckled, and gestured for him to follow. “Come with me, there is something I must show you.”

She led him to what used to be a simple storage room, but now contained a mirror that stretched practically to the high ceiling. And the glass seemed to glow with its own light, somehow.

“An eluvian?” he guessed.

“You have already heard of them?” she asked, surprised and amused.

“A little. My mother knew Keeper Marethari of the Sabrae Clan. Her First tried to repair one, and it ended up killing the Keeper,” he said. This had happened years ago, so he wasn’t sure if he got all
the details right, but it was a tragic thing when any Clan lost both their Keeper and their First, not to mention their halla years before. They would have to pray that other Clans had capable mages to spare at the next Arlathvenn. “How did you manage to find an intact one?”

“I didn’t. I had to restore it, at great cost,” she said. “There is an intact one, however. Or, at least, legends of one. There is an elvhen temple in the Arbor Wilds. It proved too dangerous for me to reach, but from what your advisers have told me, Corypheus’ forces, although currently on the run, may be attempting to seek it out.”

His eyes went wide, “They’re portals to each other, right? So if he finds it, could he invade Skyhold with this here?”

“No. Most eluvians are locked from the outside,” she extended her arms and the mirror erupted in light. It no longer looked to be made of glass at all, but pure, swirling magic. His mother would love this… “Let me show you the inside.”

Morrigan walked through, disappearing into the wall of magic. After a deep breath to calm himself, he stepped after her.

Milin gasped. It was breathtaking. Colors shimmered in the air like what the Tevinters called the aurora borealis, trees and flowers bloomed all around them, and ivy overgrew the scattered mirrors and statues. Even the air seemed warmer, sweeter. It was like the antithesis of the Nightmare’s lair.

“What is this place?” he whispered.

“If it once had a name, it has been long since lost,” she said. “I call it the Crossroads, a place where all eluvians join. And not all of them lead back to our world. With an eluvian, and enough power, Corypheus could find a way to enter the Fade physically.”

“Like he was trying to do with the Anchor?”

“Precisely.”

“You have to teach Dalish the spell to enter here,” he said. “Please. I understand that it’s dangerous, but we’ve lost so much…”

“Very well,” she said. “If she has the aptitude to learn, I will attempt to teach her. It would not be the worst idea to have another mage with some knowledge of eluvians, should things not go according to plan.”

~o~O~o~

There was a new face at Skyhold.

Well…there were new faces all the time, but a face with vallaslin made him pause. She carried blades, not bow or staff, and wore the vallaslin of Andruil, goddess of the hunt. Maybe she was from Dalish’s Clan?

“Andaran Atish’an, huntress,” he said. He used the formal greeting, since she was a stranger. “I am Milin Lavellan.”

“I know who you are, Inquisitor, and this is no place of peace,” she replied. “I received a bird. It had a note. Now I am here.”

Very…direct, considering she’d told him next to nothing.
“What are you here for?”

“I was told perhaps you would be interested in becoming something more than the Inquisitor. Perhaps you wish to walk in shadow, even bathed in light as you are. Perhaps you wish to save life through inflicting death. Childish notions,” she spat. “The profession of assassin has no time for it. Our way is the sudden strike that overwhelms. The leap from shadow and back. We hit where and when it hurts most.”

“You’re an assassin? You kill people for money?”

“I am no servant. I am trainer. And as such, I am untethered. Some find that freedom unsettling,” she said. “But no others invite death so efficiently. That is what the assassin offers.”

He nodded. It seemed like the natural progression of Andruil’s teachings. If you must kill a living creature, do it fast. Clean. The hunter that hesitates misses his target, causes unnecessary suffering. And if she could help with his sneaking as well…

“What is your name?”

“It is Heir.”

“I’m ready to start learning, Heir.”

~o~O~o~

Milin lay on his back, too exhausted and sore to move. As it turned out, he was very much not ready for the authoritarian beat-down that was assassin training.

It was a bit like playing hiding games as a child, if those hiding games left him covered in bruises. He would be going about his business—hunting the missing Seekers, dealing with some nobles for Sera, helping a spirit of wisdom, the usual—and out of nowhere he would be shot with a dulled arrow or struck with a dull knife. Then, as she ran off, it was his turn to track her down and hit her back in the same way. He failed, most of the time. He’d either flub the exact technique she was trying to demonstrate, or he’d be detected before he could even get to her. Then she’d spar with him until he was thoroughly trounced, and he’d have to try again until he got it right.

After two weeks of this, he was fairly certain it would have hurt less if he’d just asked Cassandra to hit him continuously with a bludgeon.

“Hey Sharpshooter, got your ass handed to you again, huh?” Varric said, offering him a hand.

“Yeah,” he said, letting himself be pulled to his feet with a groan. She’d hit his arm in a way that still made it feel like pins and needles. “It’s okay, though. I’m getting better.”

“That’s good, just be careful not to push yourself too hard,” he said with a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Hey, have you seen the kid around?”

He shook his head, “Have you tried Solas’ quarters?

“No, I was going to go there next, though. My Rivaini friend got that amulet for him.”

Milin beamed, “That’s wonderful.”

“What’s wonderful?” Cole asked, making him jump. Creators, he was worse than Heir. The young man looked at Varric, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “Oh. That’s good. Yes, we should go
see Solas.”

“Well, that worked. C’mon, kid.”

They found Solas busy at work on his mural. It was almost done, he saw. And beautiful. He could draw, but nothing like that.

Solas seemed pleased at the amulet, and confident it would work. Only, it didn’t. When Solas tried to charge it, poor Cole jumped back like it’d pained him.

The spirit seemed to feel like there was something stopping it, something that he had to find.

He led the way, and the three of them followed.

~o~O~o~

“Greetings, can I help you?” a mustached human hailed.

“You,” Cole hissed. Never had he heard such vehemence from the spirit before. In a flash, he’d shoved the now-cowering man to his knees. “You killed me.”

“I don’t…I don’t even know you,” he protested.

“You forgot. You locked me in the dungeon in the Spire, and you forgot, and I died in the dark!”

“Cole, what’s going on?” Milin asked. The spirit turned, and the human took his chance to flee.

“He killed me! He killed me, that’s why it doesn’t work. He killed me, and I have to kill him back.”

“Cole, this man cannot have killed you. You are a spirit. You have not even possessed a body,” Solas said.

“A broken body, bloody, banged on the stone cell, guts gripping in the dark dank, a captured apostate,” he said. “They threw him into the dungeon in the Spire at Val Royeaux. They forgot about him. He starved to death. I came through to help…and I couldn’t. So I became him. Cole.”

Milin put his arms around him, gripping him tight, “Shhh, you’re okay now. You’re safe. The Templars can never lay a finger on you again. I promise you.”

The human wore no armor, but he must have been a Templar.

How could someone just forget a person in their charge? A person who was dependent on them?

But even as he thought it, he knew the answer. Lyrium. He was glad Cullen wasn’t taking that awful stuff anymore. It wasn’t safe for mages, much less mundanes. And that red stuff was even worse. Corrupted by the Blight, according to the not-crossbow-Bianca. Luckily the Avvar reported that they were making progress destroying those mines.

“Let me kill him,” he said, pulling away. “I need to…I need to.”

“We cannot let Cole kill the man,” Solas said.

“I don’t think anyone was going to suggest that, chuckles.”

“Why not?” Milin asked. His fists were clenched, and he was shaking. No one deserved to die that
They both turned to stare at him.

“The human doesn’t even remember what he’s done, much less feel badly about it. Probably did it so often that he can’t even tell his victims apart,” he spat. “Those bastards captured him, put him alone in the dark, and they starved him. Do you have any idea what that’s like? Because I do.”

“Cole is a spirit,” Solas said. “If he goes through with this, it will pervert him into becoming a demon.”

“Fine, so someone else kills him instead. I’ll do it,” he volunteered.

Awful, selfish, mustachioed man. So absorbed in himself he didn’t even realize he was torturing someone. Did he even think of his victim as a person? Lavellan doubted it.

“No. To regain his true purpose as a spirit, he must forgive.”

“Come on,” Varric interrupted. “You don’t just forgive someone killing you. The kid’s angry. He needs to work through it.”

That…struck true.

“A spirit does not work through emotions. It embodies them.”

“But he isn’t a spirit, is he? He made himself human, and humans change. They get hurt, and they heal.”

Varric was right. It wasn’t about the Templar. It was about what was best for Cole.

“Give me a minute with him, okay?” he said, and hurried to catch up to him.

He found Cole bearing down on the human, daggers drawn.

“This…this isn’t possible…” the human fell to his knees. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!”

“Cole…”

“He remembers now. He knows he killed me,” Cole said, knuckles white.

“Good. He needs to remember.”

“He needs to die.”

Milin took a breath. It was still tempting to let him, but…

“What he did to you is unforgiveable. But what will it do to you to kill an unarmed man on his knees? This isn’t killing someone to protect other people. It’s revenge,” he said. “You asked me once to stop you if you start murdering people again. This is me stopping you. For your sake, not his.”

Cole sheathed his daggers, “It still hurts. When do I stop hurting?”

“I don’t know if you will, completely. But it’ll fade with time,” he cut his eyes to the former Templar. “Get up.”
The man stood, warily.

“Thank you for my life,” he said.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Lavellan snapped. “Templars fight well against demons, and we’ve got plenty of those around. You’re coming back with us, and you’re reporting to Commander Cullen for duty.”

Maybe having to work and fight with mages would make him a better person. Or maybe he’d get eaten by a hunger demon on his first patrol. Personally, Milin was rooting for the latter. Seemed fitting.

“Yes, we should go back now,” Cole said distantly. “She’s waiting.”

“Dalish?”

“No. Nali.”

Chapter End Notes

I personally prefer the Trespasser version of the Crossroads, where it’s canon to look pretty to elves...
Gifts

“You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay…” Milin rocked his sister side to side, eyes squeezed shut as he held her.

“Thanks to you,” she said. “There was practically an army at our doorstep when the Inquisition’s forces showed up.”

“I’m sorry. I should have been there, I should have helped. Shiral…” he choked up. All this time, he’d pushed thoughts of his friend down, and now they were welling to the surface.

“She died a hero,” Nali pulled back, rifling through her bag until she pulled out a pure white torc of halla horn. That was when he finally noticed she wore its twin. “Dae said she told him long ago that she wanted us to have her horns, when she passed on. They will help us stand strong against those who wish us harm.”

He didn’t feel like he deserved the honor, but he could hardly refuse. Milin bowed his head, and she placed it around his neck.

“So where is Dae? Mae? Are they coming soon?”

She shook her head, “It’s just me and Ellasin. The rest are staying in Wycome. They set up a council there with Mae and this city elf and a couple of humans… The hahren feel like they have a duty to defend the place against the Venatori, now.”

His face sank, feeling torn, “I can’t justify the journey up there, right now. Corypheus’ armies are going south. It’s bad enough that we have to take a detour to Orlais first.”

Leliana had apparently gotten a posthumous message from the Divine, and there was something important they needed to find. Plus, they were meeting the Orlesian forces in Val Royeuax.

“They understand, and they’re proud of you,” she grinned. “My big brother, a big hero.”

“Great. More expectations…”

She hit him on the shoulder, right on one of his bruises, no less.

“Cut that out, it’s a good thing. They haven’t had many elves to look up to. They’re idiots for picking you, but still,” she teased. “Now, come on. Help me find Cole. You didn’t think I came all this way for you, did you?”

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to find him… he’s had a long day. I think Varric took him for a walk to clear his head.”

She frowned, “What’s wrong? If someone hurt that sweet spirit—”

“Human.”

“Huh?”

“He’s, uh, he’s a little more human, a little less spirit, now. Varric thinks it’ll help prevent him from being bound by blood magic, but he’s taking the transition pretty hard.”

“Poor thing,” she said. “Well, even if I can’t find him, hopefully, he’ll join us in the barn tonight.”
“Yeah…I’ll stop by to see Ellasin, but I’ve actually started to live with Dalish,” he said, flushing.

She gasped, “You live with her now? When are you two going to bond? Wait, did you bond already and not tell me?”

“No, I mean, we’ve talked about bonding, but we’re not quite there yet,” he said. “It is kind of serious, though…she’s making me a bow. An ironbark bow.”

“Like the song? How romantic. Oh, you have to get her something, too.”

“I know, I know, I’m thinking about it,” he said. “Don’t you have a human to find?”

~o~O~o~

Milin also had a human to find.

His human was actively trying not to be found, though. To the point where he set fire to his own stronghold.

“We can go no further,” Cullen said, shaking his head. “Let’s retreat and try to circle around, there must be a back way out. Even Samson isn’t impenetrable to fire.”

“There’s someone in there,” Cole said. “His mind is…strange. Wrong. Trapped.”

“Is it Samson?” Cullen asked.

“No. Samson feels wrong, too, but in a different way.”

“Then we have to go save them,” Milin said.

“What, are you daft or something?” Sera asked. “Fire is bad, yeah? Kills people.”

“If you want to stay behind, I don’t blame you. But it could be a prisoner or a slave in there. I can’t let them burn alive.”

“They may also have useful information,” Vivienne said. “Follow me, my dears. I cannot quell the flames completely, but I can clear our direct path.”

Milin nodded, pulling the scarf around his neck up to cover his mouth and nose. It helped him breathe, but it didn’t help the burning of his eyes.

Even Sera followed, albeit reluctantly.

They pressed forward until they reached a heavy door. A rush of smokeless air hit them as it opened and they rushed to seal it behind them, catching their breath. Even Cole seemed winded.

“Hello, Inquisitor,” a monotone voice spoke up.

He looked over to see a robed man, with the sun-shaped brand of Tranquility on his forehead.

“Empty and cold like a night sky devoid of moon and stars. They burned out. They all burned out,” Cole muttered, grasping his head.

“Maddox?” Milin asked. Cullen had told him about him. “Are you alright?”

“No. I drank my entire supply of blightcap essence. It won’t be long now.”
Blightcap…that was a poison. His mother may have known a cure for it, but even if he knew what the antidote was, there was no way they could find it before it killed him.

“We wouldn’t have hurt you,” Milin sank to his knees before the dying man, cupping his face. “We could have helped you. We can reverse tranquility. You could have had a real life again.”

“I was unaware of that, but it is of no consequence, now. We all agreed that this way was best.”


“Samson saved me even before he needed me. He gave me purpose again. I…” his voice grew weak. “Wanted to help.”

Milin hugged him to his chest until he felt him go limp in his arms, then he laid him back.

“Poor thing,” Vivienne said. “The mages abandoned him, leaving him ripe for exploitation.”

“We should check the camp,” Cullen said. “Maddox may have missed something.”

Milin nodded reluctantly, “Cole, Sera, help me look around. Vivienne and Cullen…you know how to do Andrastian funeral rites. He deserves that much, at least.”

~o~O~o~

“You would not have died so quickly that time, if this were real,” Heir said with a nod. “You are dismissed, and I wish you well on your upcoming journey.”

“Thank you,” Milin beamed, putting pressure on his bleeding lower lip. It was the closest thing to a compliment she’d ever given him. And he was starting to get some hits on her, as well. Or, at least, he wasn’t ending up on his ass so much.

Milin limped over to the medical tent to get his face stitched, and his mind wandered off to what he should get for Dalish. He felt like he should make her something, just like she was making him something. He cursed June for making him so miserable at crafting. Krem hadn’t been much help, telling him just to buy her a couple rounds. Which was also his exact advice for giving Stitches a gift.

Well, while he was here, maybe these people would have a better idea of what a healer might want?

*Boots* was the emphatic consensus in the medical tent.

“We’re on our feet all day. A new, comfortable pair of shoes can make all the difference,” a woman named Heather explained.

“Do they make comfortable shoes?” he asked incredulously.

“Maybe not in Orlais, but they do in Ferelden.”

Milin shrugged, and once they’d finished fussing over him, went down to the undercroft to ask Harritt for his expertise. He’d been meaning to thank the Arcanist for helping with the red lyrium stuff. Poor Maddox…

To his surprise, he found Dalish there consorting with Dagna.

The dwarf grinned up at him, “Perfect timing, Inquisitor. It’s ready.”
“What’s r—” he caught sight of a bow on Dagna’s workbench.

_The bow._

Milin beamed, hurrying over. It was beautiful. Rich, green wood, with pyrographed twisting vines all along its staff. There must be some kind of special stain on it, because it seemed to almost glow in this light. He hefted it, testing its balance. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to have a grip with grooves that weren’t too big for his fingers. And it was lighter than he would have thought, for a longbow of this size.

“This is a masterwork,” he gushed.

“That’s not even the best part,” Dalish said. “Go on, shoot with it.”

He knocked an arrow, aiming over the ledge. Just a few months ago, he would have been too weak to draw a bow like this. It made him proud that he could, now.

Milin let the arrow fly, then gasped.

The arrow _caught fire_ in midair.

“I take credit for that bit,” Dagna said proudly. “A superb fire rune went into making that. Adds fire damage automatically, no need to light the arrows first.”

“So, is it up to your standards, good ser?” Dalish asked with a grin.

“I love it, vhenan,” he pulled her into him for a hug. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Oh, Creators, he really had to get her something special now.

He could never manage to craft her something like that…but maybe there was something else he could do for her. It would take a lot of time and practice to get it perfect. Solas might be willing to help him with it, though.

“I’d ask for a kiss, but your lip’s messed up,” she said, drawing back.

“You don’t say,” he laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll get the stitches out tonight after the elfroot has time to work.”
Fifty-three

Josephine insisted he wear his formal attire again, complete with boots. Already, he could feel the chafing, and in more ways than one. The Orlesians couldn’t just *give him* the forces he needed to fight the demon army. He had to go through *protocol*. The sooner they got out of Val Royeaux, the better. Nali was lucky she got to go ahead with Morrigan and Solas.

They were rushing off to yet another meeting, when a gathering crowd made him pause.

The people were pressed close around some sort of raised platform, and there was a chained man in the center.

“Cassandra… What’s happening over there?”

“It is a gallows,” she said. “A place where prisoners are executed.”

Milin grimaced. He had a better idea of what that rope was for now, and it made his stomach churn. Why would people want to watch this?

“So many people,” Vivienne said. “I thought we were more civilized than this.”

“Ah, ‘civilization.’ That good old shemlen word that means living indoors and carrying out your murder on an institutional level,” Dalish said flatly.

He went for his bow. Whether those crimes the masked man read were true or not, this was no way to die. Maybe he could shoot the rope before that poor man—

Another human climbed up onto the platform, and his eyes went wide. After that note Nali had found, he never thought he’d see him again.

“Blackwall?”

~o~O~o~

Meetings be damned. Milin disappeared into the shadows and followed them to the prison, revealing himself only once the guard was gone.

He went for his lockpick, but Blackwall…Thom stopped him.

“You free me, and then what? You’d have to fight the guards to get me out. I don’t need any more blood on my hands.”

He frowned. He was right. He should have thought this through better.

“We have friends here in Orlais. I’m sure Josephine could get you out legally…”

“I have been tried and sentenced. Using your influence to put your people above the law would be corruption. The Inquisition would be made lesser for it,” he said.

As if Orlesian laws were just and fair. If Rainer had killed elves instead of a noble, would they have even bothered trying to find him?

“What if…what if the Wardens conscript you? They’re allowed to take people from any nation and add them to their ranks, prisoner or no.”
“You’d be abusing your alliance to them.”

“Didn’t the real Blackwall want you for the Wardens, before any of this happened?” he asked. “If anything, you’d be finally making good on your obligation to them.”

“Actions have consequences. You have to punish people, to deter others from thinking they can do awful, evil things and get away with it.”

“Really? Because you knew you’d be executed if you were caught, and you did it anyway,” he said. “Besides, I don’t need you for an example. I already have fifty-three.”

“…what?”

“I have personally killed fifty-three people,” he said. “Some nights, I lie awake and try to remember them in order, their faces or at least their armor, and I can’t even do it anymore. Haven’t since twenty-one. But I desperately keep count, because I am so scared of how easy it’s getting to kill people, and at least if I’m counting then I remember something. At least two Clans worth of people are dead, because of me. So you can’t sit there and tell me I let people get away with their crimes.”

“You killed to defend yourself or others. What I did was murder. I killed children.”

“I know. If I had caught you on that day, I would have made you my fifty-fourth kill without hesitation. And you would have deserved it,” he said firmly. “But I can’t sit by and watch a man in a mask pull a lever and end your life. The detachment of it alone makes me sick. And seeing those people gathered around the gallows for the spectacle? No wonder Orlais is so awful. People aren’t people to each other, here. I am not going to contribute to that.”

It reminded him of Tevinter.

“Very well,” he said. “If they will take me, I will go.”

“Good,” he sighed his relief, reaching through the bars to take his hand. “You know, you said in your letter that I inspire you, but you don’t see how much you inspire others. You’ve taught people to stand up for themselves, defend themselves. You can’t tell me that was all an act.”

“I…suppose I can’t.”

“I’ll go find a Warden,” he said, squeezing his hand before pulling back. “And then we’ll say a proper goodbye this time, alright?”

The man nodded, and Milin slipped away.

~o~O~o~

“Inquisitor?” Leliana asked. “You’re up early. Even for you.”

“I had a hard time sleeping,” he said, looking up from his drawing. He wanted to draw a picture of Thom for Josephine, while his face was fresh in his mind. He knew they liked each other, and hoped this would help her cope with him leaving. Or at least it would, if he could get the beard right. He’d have to ask Solas for another lesson. “Whatever Rainer was before, the person I knew was a good man. I’ll miss him.”

“At least he is alive, because of you,” she said. “I think you made a good decision. Mercy is not always a weakness. I learned…or at least, re-learned, that from you. If you hadn’t been with me at
Valence, I would have killed Natalie. I’d have told you that I didn’t have a choice, but there is always a choice.”

He nodded his agreement, “There are two leaders of the Dalish pantheon. Elgar’nan, the god of vengeance, and his wife Mythal, the goddess of Justice. I try to live by Mythal.”

“Yes, your sister has told me much about your gods. It is not what I believe, but they are beautiful stories, nonetheless,” she smiled. It was good to see her smile. “Have I ever told you the tale of Garahel?”

“It sounds…familiar.” Where had he heard that name, before? He couldn’t remember, but he knew he had.

“He was a Grey Warden, back in the Exalted Age. An elvhen archer of great renown, who battled darkspawn on the back of a griffon. He inspired elves and humans alike in his quest, and landed the killing blow against an Archdemon himself. To this day, many city elves name their sons after him,” she said. “Did you know there are at least four babes born to Inquisition soldiers named after you?”

He made a face, “Yeah…people keep wanting me to bless their kids. I don’t know how to do that, so I kind of just hold them and or play with them for a bit? I mean, I like babies, but I don’t know what they want me to say.”

Leliana laughed, “That is more than most Revered Mothers would do. Not dignified enough.”

“Well, maybe the Chantry needs a little less dignity and a lot more compassion,” he said. “We’d probably be a lot better off if they didn’t make the Templars use lyrium, and didn’t rip mages away from their families.”

“I could not agree more.”

“Then why don’t you become Divine?” he suggested. “I know you and Cassandra are both candidates, and Cassandra’s going to be busy rebuilding the Seekers. I can’t think of anyone else who’d be better for it than you.”

“I...will consider it,” she said. “Before all this, if someone had told me I could have become Justinia’s successor, I would have laughed at them. But things have changed. And I am more than what she made me.”
It was refreshing to be outdoors again. Finally free of the tedious meetings and faked smiles of Val Royeaux. Finally free of the cramped quarters and nauseating waves as they crossing the Waking Sea. The Dales were so peaceful, so preserved, just as Dalish had said.

Until they weren’t.

After a few days’ journey along the main road, the peaceful landscape became spotted with fire and soldiers. Deserters, according to Harding. Along with a seemingly endless supply of undead.

They’d have to get to the source of it (probably blood magic…everything was blood magic) before Cullen arrived with their main force, or their numbers would be depleted, fast.

Milin asked Krem to keep the humans (so-called ‘Freemen,’ as if it was the humans who were repressed in Orlais, in the Dirth) at bay while his team went for the ramparts. With four mages in the party, and Cassandra to act as mother bear, it was Milin’s job to sneak forward and find the one in charge while the mages dealt with the minnows.

Sure enough, the humans were being manipulated by the Venatori.

Not that they listened when he tried to show them proof. Poor fools.

“Sixty-six,” he whispered, as the last of them fell.

“It wasn’t your fault, you tried to get them to stop,” Dalish said, patting him on the shoulder. He’d told her about the counting thing a while back. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m probably up in the hundreds.”

“The hundreds?”

“At least,” she said. “It’s been eight years since my first kill. Six years, since I joined the Chargers, five since I started using a staff again. Then my numbers really started racking up. Still got nothing on Skinner, though.”

“Why did you stop using a staff?” he asked.

She gave him an incredulous look, “Because of the Templars. That’s why it’s a running joke. I was hired by the Chargers as an archer, originally. Took a few months of seeing other Chargers use magic and not get turned in before I felt confident enough to use my skills in front of others. Even then, I hadn’t been trained in much magic yet, so I still used a bow at the beginning, most of the time.”

He laughed, despite himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just realized…you’re a mage with a bit of archery. I’m an archer with a bit of magic.”

Dalish grinned, “We make quite the pair don’t we?”
“Hey, Dalish, you’re from the area…is that a wyvern track?” he asked the next day. Their main force was still a few days out, so they were scouting the area for Rifts, possible campsites, murderous Venatori…

“It most certainly is,” she said. “Best to avoid them. They have some nasty venom, you know.”

“Well…let me know if you spot one that’s white,” he said. “Vivienne wants me to bring back the heart of a ’snowy’ one for her.”

“A snowy wyvern? Their venom is even more potent,” she frowned. “You’re going to help her poison her enemies?”

“She was pretty vague about what she wanted it for, but I don’t think that’s it. If she wanted someone dead, she wouldn’t need my help,” he shrugged. “Whatever’s going on, it was important enough for her to stay behind in Val Royeaux.”

“Unless she never truly intended to come with us. She would rather consolidate her own power instead of aiding against Corypheus,” Solas said.

“She’s helping us by dealing with those nobles. You know, the ones supplying us with an army. And I trust her to work for the Inquisition’s interests, as long as they don’t conflict with her own,” he said. “An ally asked for help. If it’s possible, I’d like to give it to her.”

Dalish sighed, “Fine, fine. We’ll follow the tracts, and run if attacked unless we find a snowy one. And no one gets within biting range, we fire from afar.”

“I have heavy armor,” Cassandra said. “I believe that was directed at you, young mage.”

“It’s not my fault!” Nali protested. “It’s Ellasin who’s been getting close enough to charge people, and he always gets me out of the way in time.”

‘I will keep a safe distance,’ Ellasin promised. ‘I have no desire to get her or myself poisoned.’

“Good,” Dalish said.

“What…exactly is good?” Cassandra asked.

“Oh, sorry. Ellasin said he’d keep a safe distance for this,” Milin translated.

The Seeker exchanged looks with Morrigan, “I will never get used to them doing that.”

“Not surprising,” she replied. “Templars aren’t exactly known for their adaptability, are they?”

“Nor humans in general,” Solas said.

“The wyvern are diurnal creatures,” Dalish said. “If we wish to find one before nightfall, perhaps it would be best for us to argue on the way.”

~o~O~o~

It was a good thing for Cassandra’s heavy armor, because that creature did its damnedest to bite her before it fell.

Milin harvested the heart, carefully placing it in a special container Vivienne had provided for him.
He'd have to send it to her the next chance he got...hopefully they would not be back in the city anytime soon. The others wandered off in search of Rifts while he did so.

All too soon, he heard a shout. Didn’t really sound hurt so much as surprised, but it made Lavellan finish up and rush to them.

Ash. Rubble. And in the middle of it all, the charred remains of a person. By the size, it was either a small human or an elf. His stomach seized, and he tried to shove thoughts of Viddathari from his mind. That's not the way he wanted to remember his friend.

“It seems like he was trying to bind a spirit,” Solas said, shaking his head.


“Poor thing was only seventeen,” Nali said, picking up a journal next to the disfigured body. She scanned the writing. “Just got his vallaslin, and was trying to prove himself. We should see if we can find his Clan. They can’t be far from here…”

Dalish paled, “Let me see that.”

She handed it over, and Dalish’s eyes went wide.

“What’s wrong?” Milin asked.

“This boy was Valorin…” she bowed her head. “He was from my Clan.”

Chapter End Notes

(Today’s my birthday, so as a present to all of you, I wrote a little check-in with Dorian and Bull. As usual, this is slightly outside the canon of this fic.)

Dorian was a brilliant tactician.

They would have been killed off long ago by these ‘Vint bastards if he wasn’t. Every time they came across more Venatori, Bull could practically see the chess pieces moving in his head.

This latest group had fourteen people. Not the largest they’d seen, but not the smallest, either. And they were smart enough to camp at the bottom of a rock cropping that was too steep to climb, especially not quietly, and protected their flank.

Every half hour, the same pattern. Four of them would venture out beyond their camp. They knew their countrymen were being systematically wiped out, so they weren’t stupid enough to wander out of eyeshot.

Which meant they had to be tricky to take them out. Dorian had planted a large paralysis glyph at the farthest end of their usual patrol, and waited until all four were within it to trigger it. It was dusk, so the sun was in their enemies’ eyes, but they still had to work fast. Bull dashed forward, cutting the unmoving figures down as Dorian raised the dead for fodder.

The newly-undead patrol rushed the camp, and the mage used the cover of confusion
to cast a lightning storm down upon them. Bull charged through the mayhem, leaping up and slamming his weapon down to shake the ground. More than a few fell, stunned. Easy targets. And the more of them that died, the more bodies Dorian could raise to fight them.

With the last of the Venatori dispatched, Dorian signaled that it was safe for Stitches to come forward.

Bull went for the cages. He was no rogue, but if you gave him a hard rock and enough tries, he could get a damn lock open.

The slaves came spilling out, coughing from the smoke and looking for a place to run, and finding nothing but more wasteland. Two bolted, anyhow, but the rest held back. Several likely because they couldn’t run if they tried.

“Stitches over there is a surgeon and a healer,” Bull said. “Sort yourselves out in terms of who needs attention first.”

They obeyed, forming a line with minimal gripping. Dorian rekindled the campfire for them to huddle as Stitches got to work. It could take a while until he was done and they could make the trek back to their own campsite with the others.

“So…you’re really here to help us?” a woman with fresh scar across her cheek asked. He’d seen scars like that before. Someone with a gauntlet had struck her.

“Nope,” he replied. “Stitches is with the Inquisition, he’s here to help you. Me and Dorian? We’re criminals. We’re here because we were ordered to be here, and he’s keeping us in line.”

“Must you always phrase it like that?” Dorian asked, as the woman fled back to the safety of the group. He could hear them whispering. “You scared her.”

“Yes,” he said. “They’re vulnerable, and you slide too easily into your fucked-up savior fantasy. They deserve to know they can’t trust us.”

“I suppose,” Dorian gathered his cloak tighter around himself, frowning. “Most of the fugitivi lately have said they were heading South. Do you think we will head after them? Or will we lead the flock to less deadly pastures?”

“That’s Stitches’ call.”

“So you have no opinion on this?” he asked, doubt written in the lines on his forehead.

“Fine. I don’t want to stay here if there’s nothing to fight. We should get these people to Griffon Wing, or better yet Skyhold. And then we should go find Milin before that darkspawn bastard gets to him.”

Dorian smirked, “Who has the savior fantasy now?”
“I don’t know if I can do this,” Dalish said. Ellasin said he could smell other halla nearby, and was following their scent. “They made it clear they didn’t want me back. Mamae was the only one of the hahren to argue for me to stay.”

He put an arm around her, squeezing her shoulder, “You want to go back to camp with Solas and the humans? Nali can deliver the news. They never have to know you were here.”

“No,” she sighed. “Just…don’t expect them to welcome any of us with open arms.”

They crested a hill, and caught sight of aravel sails in a sheltered bank of a stream. The figures bellowed gathered. Even from this distance, he could see weapons at the ready.

“Vir garas atish’an!” Nali called to them, waving from Ellasin’s back. As First, she was the highest ranking of their group, in the eyes of the Dalish.

No one moved until they got the answering cry of, “Andaran atish’an.”

Their group made their way down and crossed the water. He noticed Dalish hung back.

“I am Nali, First to Clan Lavellan,” his sister said, dismounting.

“I am Keeper Hawen,” a man with Andruil’s markings said. They were a pattern he’d not seen before, but it was close enough to tell. “It is good to see more of our people, in this place from which we all came.”

“Maybe there’d be more of us here in the Dirth if we weren’t driven away,” Dalish said.

“Driven a—” a white-haired woman stepped forward, whispering. “Glandival’him?”

“Mamae, I—”

She cut her off with a hug, “Oh, da’harel, you left without even saying goodbye!”

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed. Was she crying? He’d never seen her cry. He wanted to embrace her, but it seemed like she needed that from her mother more. “Everyone knew I was going to be left behind. I thought it was better, that way.”

“Your selfishness knows no bounds, Glandival’him,” Keeper Hawen said. “Our circumstances have only grown more dire. We cannot take you back. You have only succeeded in hurting your mother a second time.”

“I didn’t come here for myself, I came here for Valorin,” she said. She turned to another young woman, speaking softly. “We found your brother, Emalien.”

“What? Why didn’t you bring him back with you, then?”

Nali offered the journal to her. Confusion turned to recognition and finally into sorrow as Emalien took the book, clutching it to her chest.

“Ir abelas, lethallan,” his sister said, putting a comforting hand on her arm. “I know what it’s like to lose a brother.”
Milin winced at that. He’d been worried about Dalish’s return to her Clan. He hadn’t even considered how Nali must be feeling about all this.

“What happened? How did he…?”

“He was brave,” Dalish said. “He died trying to reclaim one of our people’s relics. And he succeeded.”

It was a half-truth. Nali had found the amulet behind a magical barrier, not Valorin. But they couldn’t have recovered it without directions from his journal.

Dalish handed the relic over to her, and her eyes widened, “Lindiranae’s talisman? I can’t believe it exists. Thank you, I know you know how much this means. Even if it doesn’t bring my brother back.”

“May Falon’din guide him in the Beyond.”

“We will sing his funeral rites tonight,” Keeper Hawen said gravely, as an older man led Emalien away. “It is a shame we cannot lay him to rest properly. The grounds of Var Bellanaris have been infested with angry spirits from the Beyond.”

That must be their burial place.

“We can clear them out for you,” Milin offered.

“We appreciate the help, lethallin, but do not be overconfident,” he warned. “Spirits are dangerous.”

Some, yes. He remembered all too clearly the torments of the Nightmare.

“I know, but I have fought them before,” he said. “Ellasin, could you show them where we found his remains, please?”

‘Of course, da’len.’

“I will go with him,” a man with the trappings of a halla’falon said. Milin felt a twinge of homesickness. If things had gone differently…he would have been halla’falon after his father someday. “If you are going back out onto the plains, could I ask that you keep an eye out for a golden halla?”

“Hanal’ghilan?” he asked. “Like from the stories?”

“Yes,” he said. “I fear human soldiers may kill her. If she would only draw close, I could gain her trust. I could protect her.”

“We’ll try to find her,” Nali promised.

“Milin…” Dalish said, looking back to her mother. “I think I’ll stay behind on this one.”

He squeezed her hand, “We’ll be fine. Go catch up with your Clan.”

It’d be good for him to spend some time with his sister, anyhow. Killing demons together counted as quality family time, right?

~o~O~o~
Apparently it did, because Nali seemed in much better spirits after she took her anger out on something. Milin acted as bait, luring the demons away from the burial grounds, while Nali would dispatch them as soon as they were safely clear of the graves.

“I think that’s it,” he said.

“Good,” she said with a pause. “I wish Cole was here. I mean, it’s good, what we’re doing. But he could help the grieving in a way the rest of us can’t, even if he’s more real now.”

“You miss him, don’t you?”

“Yeah. The letters are nice, if bizarre, but I wish he would have come with us,” she said. “I get it, though. He doesn’t want to fight again until Varric helps him with his anger. Scared of what he’d do. People can hurt each other just as much as demons can, even when they’re not angry. Although, I guess you of all people know that, don’t you?”

“I’m doing okay now, sasae, I—”

Nali put a finger to her lips, and he fell quiet.

*What is it?* he mouthed.

She pointed slowly to the distance.

A lone halla, her golden hide haloed by the rays of the setting sun. Watching them.

They approached slowly, palms up to show they were unarmed.

…of physical weapons, at least.

When they got close enough, the halla stepped back, nervous. Milin knew if they didn’t handle this right, she would bolt.

He eased himself to the ground, a hand out for her to sniff if she wanted to. Nali followed his lead.

“I know you’re scared,” he said. “There’s been a lot of fighting around lately. But we want to bring you somewhere you’ll be protected.”

No answer, but she took a cautious step forward.

“My name is Milin, what’s yours?”

Hanal’ghilan was more of a title or a type of halla than a real name.

She sniffed Nali’s hand, then his, but still no answer.

Nali snapped her fingers next to the halla’s ear.

“What are you doing?” he hissed. “You’re going to scare her.”

“No, look…” she did it again. The halla didn’t react. “I think she’s deaf, Milin. That’s probably why their halla’falon hasn’t been able to persuade her to come with them.”

“That would make sense,” he said, reaching out to tentatively stroke her neck. The halla closed her eyes, a sign of trust. “I think…she might follow us anyway? But if she doesn’t…we’ll just have to tell him what we learned and hope he can figure out a better way to communicate.”
He got back to his feet, no sudden moves, and made to return to the campsite.

To his relief, the halla followed.

~o~O~o~

“You have done much good for our Clan,” Keeper Hawen said. “I will accompany Valorin’s family to Var Bellanaris for the burial. When we return, it would be an honor to have your voices join ours in signing his burial rites tonight.”

“Of course, Keeper,” Nali said.

“In the morning, however, we must ask you to leave,” he said with a long-suffering sigh. He seemed genuinely mortified at his breach of hospitality. “Our hunters have spotted Inquisition scouts in this area, and if they have templars among them, the more mages we have the more likely they are to detect us. I am certain you understand.”

“The Inquisition healed the sky,” a young man bearing Ghilan’nain’s vallaslin protested. “This ‘Elder One’ is a threat to everyone, we should be trying to help them, not hiding from them.”

“No, Loranil. I will not expose us to that risk on rumors alone. Shemlen are dangerous. An organized Andrastian force, even more so. We don’t need another March against our people.”

“The Inquisition isn’t a threat to you,” Milin assured.

“…your Clan has had dealings with them?”

“A bit more than that,” Dalish said with a wry smile. “Go on, glowy. Show off your hand.”

He raised his left palm, opening the Anchor.

“You’re the Inquisitor,” Loranil said, in that same awed way the new recruits always had. “No one believed the humans would really venerate a Dalish elf, but it’s true. I’ve wanted to join you for so long, but the Keeper forbade it.”

“I still do,” Hawen frowned. “Why did you keep this from us?”

“I didn’t come to you as Inquisitor,” he said, eyebrows furrowed. “I came as a Dalish elf, in the aid of another Clan. It just didn’t seem appropriate to bring up, with everything else going on.”

“So it just…slipped your mind?” he asked doubtfully.

“My daughter is no flat-ear and no fool,” Dalish’s mother said. “She wouldn’t have joined with them if she thought they were a threat.”

“Hanal’ghilan followed them to our Clan, how can you still be so distrustful?” Ithiren, the halla’falon, asked.

“They could have kept the talisman, or not gone out of their way to tell us about Valorin in the first place,” said another man, the one he’d seen comforting Emalien earlier. “Their actions speak for themselves. You yourself said that they have done good for this Clan.”

The Keeper crossed his arms, “Perhaps…my hahren are right. Perhaps I was wrong about the Inquisition, if such a devoted son of the Dales is at their head.”

“Does this mean I can go with them?” Loranil asked.
“It will hurt our Clan deeply to see you go, especially with Valorin gone and Taven missing in the Emerald Graves. But I agree to it, if it will aid our brother in need,” he said. “For now, I have burial rites to officiate.”

He left in the direction of Var Bellanaris, with Emalien and the older man following behind, dignified and subdued.

“Loranil,” Dalish said, touching the man’s shoulder. “We need to talk.”

“I know, I get why you’re avoiding me. I should have gone with you the last time. I’m sorry, vhenan.”

“We need to talk in private,” she said gently but firmly, leading him away.

Milin’s heart sank.

Why was he calling her vhenan?
“Stop being stupid, lalae,” Nali said. “It’s been eight years since they’ve even seen each other, right?”

“He doesn’t seem to think it’s nothing. He seems to think they’re courting.”

“Yeah, well, he hasn’t seen the two of you together,” she snorted. “So damn adorable it would make a nug sick. Now, come and eat something. They’ve made crawfish, your favorite. And it’d be rude to pass on their hospitality.”

“You’re just sick of field-rations,” he grumbled.

“Not all of us got to be wined and dined on the fancy Orlesian stuff I’m sure you got in Val Royeaux.”

“The food isn’t worth dealing with the people, trust me,” he said, letting her lead him to the bonfire.

They were both served a heaping portion of crawfish, vegetables, and spices, mixed with halla cheese. But even though it smelled delicious, and he hadn’t had anything like this in so long, his stomach still churned.

“Come sit next to me,” Dalish’s mother invited.

“Of course, Master Adahlen,” he said.

“You’re our guests, da’len. Taniel will do,” she said. “Nali and Milin, right?”

“She told you my name?”

“I learned more than that from my da’harel,” she smirked. The wry expression was identical to one Dalish liked to pull when she teased him.

“What’d she say?”

“She didn’t have to say anything. A mother knows. You’re courting.”

“They sure are,” Nali said smugly. The I-told-you-so was palpable.

Milin didn’t answer. He knew Dalish loved him, he did, but they weren’t bonded. She could change her mind. She’d known Milin for months, she’d known Loranil almost all her life.

“So, remind me, the Lavellan Clan was from the Free Marches, correct?” Taniel asked, blissfully unaware of his discomfort, or perhaps purposefully trying to distract him from it.

“We still are. Milin and Ellasin and I are staying with the Inquisition for right now, but the rest of us have settled in Wycome,” Nali said.

“So you two were sent to spy on the Conclave, then?” she asked. “Other Clans had a similar idea, from what I heard.”

Milin and his sister exchanged looks.
“My Clan didn’t send me,” he said. He was keenly aware that the rest of the Dalish were likely listening. Shouldn’t dance around it. Shouldn’t be ashamed. “I was a taken as a slave, for a while. The man who freed me brought me to the Conclave. After the Breach was closed, my Clan heard that I was with the Inquisition, and Nali came to make sure I was okay.”

Just as he thought, the Clan fell silent at the word ‘slave.’

“Yeah, he was a slave. And you have no right to judge him for that,” Nali said, standing. “We are all descended from slaves. If you disrespect him, you disrespect our ancestors.”

“If you see shame in my face, da’len, it is not directed at him,” Taniel said. “Our Clan’s cowardice could have subjected Glandival’him to a fate like your brother’s, or worse, a fate like Valorin’s. I am proud she has done so well for herself, but I regret every day that I did not go after her.”

“And left the Clan without their master craftsman?” Dalish demanded, hands on hips. Loranil trailed behind her, looking crestfallen. It was probably wrong of him to feel relief, at that. “You would have gone with me, Loranil would have gone with me, and then his father would have insisted on going, too. I couldn’t tear the Clan apart like that. Not after Dae gave his life for it.”

“But we’ll both say a proper goodbye this time,” Loranil said. “And we’ll see each other at the next Arlathvhen, at the least.”

“So…you still want to come with us?” Milin asked.

He nodded, “The world is in danger. I want to fight. And I promise not to…I promise to respect Glandival’him’s choice. If you’ll still take me, that is.”

He’d be lying if he claimed that no part of him wanted to leave him behind. But he seemed to genuinely want to help, and it would be selfish to refuse a good soldier for petty reasons.

…besides, he didn’t have to take him with his main group.

Milin took the man’s hand, made a fist with it, and then guided it to his chest.

“This is the Inquisition’s salute,” he said, letting go. “We’re happy to have you. We have some people already in the Emerald Graves. If you join them, you could probably figure out what happened with your Clanmates, while you’re at it.”

If Loranil was displeased with that decision, he did not let it show.

“If that is what you want of me, Inquisitor,” he answered, and performed the salute.

~o~O~o~

“You have such beautiful hair, da’harel,” Taniel said the next morning, working Dalish’s hair into a braid. “Just like your father’s. I don’t understand why you would shave so much of it off. It’ll all be gone by the next Arlathvhen, if you keep this up.”

“I like it this way, mamae…”

“Your ears must get cold.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that I can summon fire out of nothingness, then, isn’t it?”

“Speaking of, a mage should wear robes. All that metal armor must be weighting you down. I have just the thing…” she bustled around through various packs.
“I like my armor. And that…Creators, it’s green and orange.”

“You like green. Your vallaslin’s green.”

“I don’t like orange.”

“Just try it on. It’s ancient, took me forever to restore it. Now, I know you like your young things, but…”

“What do you mean I like ‘young things?’”

“I mean Loranil was two years your junior when you courted. And Milin? Is the ink on his face even dry yet?” Taniel said. She gave Milin a teasing wink. Do all Adahlen women live to see him blush?

“He’s twenty-two,” she said, rolling her eyes. “That’s only four years’ difference.”

Nali gasped, and he turned to see her admiring the green and orange outfit, “Are these the robes of a High Keeper? They’re beautiful.”

That was Nali. The more garish the colors, the better.

“Well, at least someone appreciates their history. Go on, then. Try them on, future Keeper.”

“Really?” she asked, dumbstruck.

“You returned the talisman to us. A piece like that is far more valuable than a single pair of robes. So if you like them, they’re yours,” she said.

“Thank you, this is such an honor,” she gushed, and went to go change in the privacy of a tent.

“Now what can I get for you, then? A staff? An amulet of power?” she lowered her voice. “There are some herbs a young woman like yourself should be—”

“Mae! I know. I’m fine,” she hugged her. “All I want is a letter once in a while.”

Taniel kissed her daughter’s cheek, “Then I’ll send you dozens, da’harel.”

~o~O~o~

“How are you doing?” he asked, once he was alone with Dalish in their tent. It’d been a long two days, and they hadn’t gotten to talk much. Especially since last night, they’d had to sleep apart. Not bonded yet, after all.

“Oh, I’m fine. I feel like my heart has been ripped out, mended, and then ripped out again. But other than that, swell.”

“At least you’ll stay in contact with them this time, right?”

“True,” she said. “And at least this time I’m not alone.”

He climbed on top of her and kissed her sweetly, “You don’t ever have to be alone again.”

“And neither do you,” she said, putting her arms around his neck. “You know, I have to say, I’m impressed. No jealousy of Loranil?”
“Oh, there’s jealousy. That’s why I sent him in the exact opposite direction of the Arbor Wilds. That thing about finding your Clan’s First? Convenient excuse,” he grinned. Though, he was only half-joking, and from Dalish’s raised eyebrow, she knew it.

“How nice it must be to be Inquisitor. Most of us have to run from our problems. You get to send them away.”

“It’s a pretty great perk.”

“So…not mad that I didn’t tell you about him before?”

“It was eight years ago. And I think I still have you beat in the keeping secrets thing,” he shrugged. “Besides, I already knew I wasn’t the first man you’ve ever been with.”

“Or woman.”

He blinked in surprise. That, he hadn’t heard of before.

“Skinner?”

“Oh, Creators, no. We’re just friends. Besides, I need cuddling, and she’s not exactly the type for that,” she said. “Shem girl, back when I first joined the Chargers. Her nickname was ‘Viper.’ She was a poison-maker, but she also made this sangria that could knock a bronto on its ass.”

“So what happened?” he asked.

“She missed her homeland, after a few missions,” she said. “Wanted me to come with her to Antiva, but I wasn’t ready for that yet. So we broke it off.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Did you… I mean, were their others?”

“Other women? Well, there was this shem pirate from Rivain, but that was just a one-night thing. Pretty sure she gave me a fake name, too,” she said. “And then you already know I’ve had a couple of flings with men. Four, not including Loranil.”

He nodded, “So Loranil was your first ever?”

“It was all so long ago, but yes. First person I kissed, first person I slept with, first person I fell in love with.”

“Those were all different people, for me,” Milin said softly. “I’m glad they were the same one, for you.”

“Third category was Viddathari, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“And the second…” she trailed off, but based on her frown, she’d guessed it.

“It was them, yeah.”

“So who was your first kiss?”

“This girl named Ghenna from my Clan. We were only little kids at the time, and had just attended a bonding, and she wanted to try out kissing,” he smiled. “We both thought it was gross.”
“You ever kiss her when you weren’t kids?”

“No, just the once. Kissed another girl when I was a teenager, though, a couple times. Her name was Kel.”

“And how was that?”

“Bite-y,” he shrugged. “Didn’t really have a good kiss ‘til Viddathari.”

“And me.”

Milin grinned, leaning down to press his lips to hers, “And you.”
The Arbor Wilds seemed to be actively, consciously trying to keep them out. Thank the Creators for Morrigan’s guidance, or they would have been horribly lost. Or dead.

Even better, they managed to get out in front of the bulk of the Red Templar force. The Inquisition’s troops, combined with those from their Orlesian allies, battled them at their rear, keeping them at bay while he and his companions pushed forward through Corypheus’ vanguard.

He scouted forward and he caught sight of a rock formation, with sunlight peaking through the center. Too regular to be a natural formation. They ventured through the entrance, and Milin let out a gasp. The biggest tree he’d ever seen was centered in a courtyard, surrounded by intricate statues. He wanted to sink to his knees in awe.

“Look down,” his sister whispered, pointing.

Corypheus, flanked by Samson and more Red Templars, walked on these grounds as if it was common mud. He felt a wave of indignation that they would sully this place. And, apparently, others did, too. Just ahead of them was a bridge, guarded by robed figures. Elves. Each one bearing the vallaslin of Mythal on their brow.

The one at their lead spoke some sort of curse in Elvish, but it was beyond his ability to understand.

“They still think to fight us, master,” Samson said.

“These are but remnants,” Corypheus said. “They will not keep us from the Well of Sorrows.”

“Well of Sorrows? I thought he was here for the eluvian?” Dalish asked.

Corypheus pressed forward, only for the statues, fueled by the magic of the elf, to form a barrier against his crossing.

He resisted with magic of his own, and a shock wave blew them all back as an explosion left a blackened crater where the statues once stood.

Corypheus and his men pressed on.

Before he could grieve, or attack, a familiar roar behind them chilled him to the bone. The Red Lyrium dragon. They ran, crossing the bridge and shutting the gates at the end behind them.

The doors glowed with magic light, and held.

“Ancient elven,” Nali said, making him turn. He saw her examining a pillar. The panel beneath her glowed with a faint blue light. “I can’t make out much. Something about the way or the path?”

“Atish’all Vir Abelasan,” Solas read.

“Enter the path of the Well of Sorrows,” Nali translated.

He nodded his agreement.

Nali grinned, and pointed to another character, “That’s the word for knowledge, and then…Solas, what does this one mean?”
“Halam’shivanas,” he said. “The sweet sacrifice of duty.”

She nodded, “Stand back, let me try something.”

“You are performing an elven ritual? Without even knowing what it does?” Cassandra asked. “Seems unwise.”

“That’s why I told you to stand back.”

Nali made a careful path along the panels, not only stepping on each panel one time. Once all were alight, something…seemed to click into place. And their path forward was opened.

Nali smirked at the Seeker proudly, and led the way forward.

“The elves back there, the ones who died…they weren’t like us, were they?” Dalish asked, as they moved on. “They spoke very old elvish.”

“No. These elves were descended from the ancients, having resided here since before the fall of Arlathan,” Morrigan answered.

“So, the vallaslin is real vallaslin, they’re slaves?” Nali asked.

“They appear to be bound in servitude to Mythal, yes,” Solas said.

“Mythal was the goddess of justice,” Morrigan said. “Perhaps their ancestor’s crimes were so great that they and all their posterity were enslaved as punishment. Or perhaps they entered their bondage willingly.”

“The sweet sacrifice of duty,” Nali whispered.

The witch stopped short in front of a statue of Fen’harel, “Why would this be here? In Elven tales, the Dread Wolf tricks their gods into sealing themselves away in the Beyond for all time.”

“We may not worship him as we do our gods, but we pay our respects to him,” Nali said. “It’d be foolish not to.”

“Enough staring at statuary,” Cassandra said. “We do not have a moment to waste. Come, there is another door over there. We should try it.”

The warrior led the way.

They walked out onto yet another courtyard, and caught sight of Samson on a ledge opposite to them, blowing a hole into the earth.

He ordered his men to attack, and then jumped down into a crevice of his own making.

Milin drew his bow.

Poor, twisted people.

The fighting didn’t slow them down for long, and then they ran up the stairs to the crevice.

“Hold, a moment,” Morrigan said, gesturing to a door with ancient symbols. “While they rush ahead, this leads to our true destination. We should continue with the old path.”

“In this case, I must agree with the witch,” Solas said. “This is ancient ground, deserving of our
“Our people are out there fighting for their lives,” Cassandra said. “Do we have time for this?”

“If we don’t do this the proper way, I’m sure Mythal has designed other obstacles to keep us out,” Nali argued.

“I’m sorry, Cassandra,” Milin said. “It kills me, but my sister is right. Even if I was willing to disrespect my goddess, there would be consequences. Let’s go.”

Through the doors were more of those magic panels. Three sets of them. Each time, Nali would walk around the perimeter, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, before stepping up onto the panels with confidence. She had no false starts. Once she started a ritual, she completed it. He was so proud of her.

He could feel a swell of magic as the last one was finish.

“A door’s been unlocked,” Dalish said.

“I sensed it, too,” Solas agreed. “This way.”

He led him to a great, carved door of stone, pushing through into the next room.

“‘Tis not what I expected,” Morrigan said. “What was this chamber used for?”

“We’re being watched,” Milin said, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. It felt like when Heir was stalking him, and he knew it, but he had not yet spotted her.

All at once, a line of soldiers bearing bows appeared behind them, just as a robed man appeared on the ledge above.

“You…are unlike the other invaders,” the stranger said, eyes on Nali. “You have the features of those who would call themselves elfven,” he shifted his attention to Milin. “And you, you bear the mark of magic which is…familiar. What brings you here? What is your connection to those who had first disturbed our slumber?”

“We’re here to stop them,” Milin said. “My name is Milin Lavellan, of the Inquisition. We are not your enemy.”

“I am called Abelas,” he said. “We are sentinels, tasked with standing against those who would trespass on sacred ground. We wake only to fight, to preserve this place. Our numbers diminish with each invasion.”

Abelas. As in ir’abelas, for ‘I am filled with sorrow.’ The more he spoke…the more the name seemed fitting.

“I know what you seek,” he continued. “Like all who have come before, you wish to drink from the vir’abelasan. It is not for you. It is not for any of you.”

“Our people have lost everything,” Nali said. “They need you, they could learn from you.”

“Our’ people? The ones we see in the forest, shadows wearing vallaslin?” he looked to Milin. “You bear the marks of Mythal, but you are not one of us. And you have invaded our sanctum as readily as the shemlen.”

“We understand this place is sacred,” Milin said. “We have paid our respects, as best we could.”
Abelas paused, “I believe you. Trespassers you are, but you have followed the Rites. If these others are enemies of yours, we will aid you in destroying them. And when this is done, you will be permitted to depart… and never return.”

“Consider carefully what you agree to,” Morrigan said. “You must stop Corypheus, yes, but you may also need the Well for your own. Corypheus would squander the ancient power of the Well, I would have it restored.”

“Not against their will,” Milin said, sinking to one knee and bowing his head. “We agree, hahren.”

“You will be guided to those you seek.” Abelas said as he rose. “As for the vir’abelasan…it shall not be despoiled, even if I must destroy it myself.”

“No!” Morrigan cried, shape-shifting into a raven and pursuing him.

Milin looked desperately around for a way up, and found none.

“Fenhedis!”

~o~O~o~

An old woman with a book far too large for her frail frame guided them deeper into this sanctum. The path was winding, and saturated with Red Templars.

Well…at least that meant they were probably going the right direction. Or, at least, Corypheus thought this was the right way, too.

“Inquisitor, you and those elf-things don’t know when to stop,” Samson sneered, flanked by monstrosities. Yeah, if Corypheus’ lieutenant was here, they were definitely close.

“We won’t kill you if you surrender, Samson,” Milin said. “There was a good man behind that armor, once. Maddox told us how you helped him, before he died.”

The smirk fell off his face, and he shook his head, “I told him not to, I…he died as one of us. One of the faithful.”

The human began to spew some nonsense about being chosen by Corypheus, but Lavellan cut him off.

“He didn’t sacrifice himself for your cause, he sacrificed himself for you,” he said. “Corypheus doesn’t have that kind of loyalty to anyone. He’ll use you, and then he’ll throw you away.”

“You dare say that to my face? After you butchered my men?”

“Look at your men, Samson,” Cassandra said. “Corypheus took their lives long ago.”

“He made them stronger,” Samson raised his arms, the power radiating off him like heat from a fire. “This is the strength the Chantry tried to bind. But it’s a new world, now. With a new god.”

Milin pulled Dagna’s device from his pack, whispered a quick prayer, and released its power.

With a cry of pain, Samson dropped to the ground.

He ordered his men to attack. But without the armor, they were quickly defeated, just like all the others.
Milin didn’t add the Red Templars to his count. As Cassandra said, Corypheus was the one who’d really killed them.

“Seeker, take him back to camp. I will judge him later.”

The old woman pushed on, seemingly unperturbed by the fighting, and they followed at her snail’s pace. But not for long. They caught sight of Abelas, racing up a path conjured from thin air, as Morrigan’s raven form soared above.
The Well

Milin took the steps two at a time, reaching the landing just as Morrigan shifted back into a human, blocking off Abelas from a pool of still, crystal-clear water.

“You heard his parting words, Inquisitor,” she said. “The elf seeks to destroy the Well of Sorrows.”

“So the sanctum is despoiled at last,” Abelas narrowed his eyes.

“You would have destroyed it yourself, given the chance.”

“To keep it from your grasping fingers,” he said. “Better it be lost than bestowed upon the undeserving.”

“Fool. You’d let your people’s legacy rot in the shadows.”

“It’s our people’s, not yours, Morrigan,” Nali said.

The witch glared at his sister, then addressed Milin, “The well clearly offers power, Inquisitor. If that power can be turned against Corypheus, can you afford not to use it?”

“Do you even know what you ask?” Abelas said, turning to gaze across the pool to the mirror at the far side. Another Eluvian? So there was one, here, after all… “As each servant of Mythal reached the end of their years, they would pass their knowledge on, through this. All that we were, all that we knew—it would be lost, forever.”

“What if the knowledge went to an elf?” Nali asked. “You watched me perform the rituals. I have shown respect to Mythal. And you see Dirthamen, god of secrets, etched on my face. If you would give me permission…”

“One does not obtain permission. One obtains the right,” he said. “The Vir Abelasan may be too much for a mortal to comprehend. Brave it if you must. But know you this: you shall be bound forever to the will of Mythal.”

“Bound? To a goddess who no longer exists? If she ever did,” Morrigan scoffed.

“Bound, as we are bound. The choice is yours,” Abelas turned away.

“You’re leaving?” Dalish asked.

“Our duty ends. Why remain?”

“There is a place for you, lethallin,” Solas said. “If you seek it. Malas amelin ne halam, Abelas.”

*I hope you find a new name.*

Milin did, too.

Before he was even out of sight, Morrigan stepped forward, “I am willing to pay the price the Well demands. I am also the best suited to use its knowledge in your service.”

“Or more likely to your own ends,” Solas said.

“You have a son, Morrigan. You’re going to risk your life, and leave him abandoned?” Dalish
“More proof she cannot be trusted with this,” Nali said. “I will drink.”

“Nali…” he shook his head, voice breaking. “Sasae, you could get hurt. It could be too much for a mortal.”

“Mythal won’t harm me,” she said. “And I am willing to be bound if it means this knowledge goes to our people.”

“I know, but…”

“I am not asking for you to agree. I am telling you, as your First, that I’m doing this,” she said, firmly. His sister squeezed his hand, then let go.

Nali stepped towards the Well, wading in with her eyes closed. The magic of the water bathed her in light, incorporeal voices whispering all around in a language he did not understand. She cupped her hands in the water and drank.

A pressure wave sent them sprawling, and when Milin opened his eyes, dazed, the water was gone. He scrambled to his sister’s unmoving form, “Nali!”

“He’s found us,” she whispered. She wasn't looking at him, but somewhere over his shoulder.

Milin turned to see Corypheus floating in mid-air, bearing down on them from above.

The eluvian burst to life and they swarmed through, the form of a woman rising up behind them to keep the ancient magister at bay. He only caught a glimpse, before they were back at Skyhold, and the mirror went dark once more.
They didn’t have time to catch their breath, much less think, before they were ushered to the war table for debriefing.

His advisors began to argue over their next course of action, when Nali slammed a hand down on the table, sending figurines scattering, “Stop. Just…just be quiet for a minute.”

“You hear it?” Morrigan asked. “The Well speaks to you.”

“It’s hard to hear them, but yes,” she nodded, looking distant. “Whispers, at least.”

The witch made a disgusted noise, “You should be hearing shouts from the heavens, not whispers. See what your distrust of me has wrought, Inquisitor?”

“How could you possibly know they would ‘shout’ for you and not her?” Dalish demanded. “How do you know they wouldn’t have refused to tell you anything at all, shemlen?”

“Enough, just…just everyone be quiet. Let me focus,” Nali’s face screwed up in concentration. “To kill Corypheus, we have to kill his dragon first. It’s tied to him. We have to go to, we have to get to…”

She stumbled back, and Cole appeared, catching her under the arms, “Straining for the sounds of souls long silent. The words call out to you, but they’re so far away, so easy to lose. Like water flowing through cupped hands. Rest. They will come back. Water does not hold well in fists.”

Nali turned to hug him, looking worn, and let him lead her away.

She looked so pale. Was she going to be okay? Should he have tried harder to stop her? Mamae was going to kill them both for being so reckless…

“We should rest, too,” Dalish said. “Sounds like we’ve got another journey to go on soon. To somewhere. To find something.”

“Oh, we’ll find whatever it is. We’ll just follow the trail of people trying to kill us,” Milin said, trying to mask his worry with a wry smile.

“Sounds about right.”

“Okay, well, war table dismissed, I guess.”

His advisors exchanged looks, and his face sank.

“What is it?” he asked.

Josephine stepped forward, clearing her voice, “They’re back, Inquisitor.”

“Who is?”

His vision started swimming, and Milin got down on the floor, head between his legs. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

“Could you give us the room, please?” Dalish said. It wasn’t a request. The humans all filed out, leaving them alone.


He opened his mouth, then shook his head with a grimace. What was the matter with him? How did the mere mention of them affect him this much? He’d been doing so good. Or, at least, he’d made himself believe that.

“It’s a setback. It’s okay to have setbacks,” she said. “This came out of nowhere, you were just caught off guard, okay?”

She seemed more confident about that than he was, but he nodded anyhow.

“You don’t have to see them again,” she continued.

After a few false starts, Milin managed to croak out “I…I don’t like that they’re…locked up.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t like the idea of cages,” she said. “If anyone deserves it, it’s them, but… how about this: I tell the guards to lock them in your old room instead. Not a cage, but you don’t have to see them, either, okay?”

Milin made a face. He knew from experience being locked in a nice room wasn’t that much better.

“Just for now,” she said. “You can figure out what to do about them later, okay?”

“Okay,” he sighed. Milin reached behind him, taking her hand. He squeezed, and she squeezed back.

Chapter End Notes

This might be the last update for quite some time. I’m in med school, and there is a really, really big exam called Step 1 coming up. Preparing for that, on top of my normal workload, is exhausting. Thanks for all your support, everyone.
“Any luck?” Milin asked, peaking his head into the barn. She’d asked not to be disturbed, even by him or Ellasin. But she’d been cooped up in there for over a week, only allowing people to come in to give her food once a day. So…today he’d brought the tray.

Nali shook her head with a sigh, “Not yet. It’s so frustrating. I’ll start to hear something, and then I’ll focus on it and it’ll be gone. Ever since I got my magic, I’ve trained my mind to concentrate, but in this case I have to do the opposite. Ever try to clear your mind? It’s hard.”

“I’m sure it is, but I’m also sure if anyone can do it, you can,” he said, setting the tray down on a workbench.

“She’ll be here soon,” Cole said, appearing behind Nali. His sister didn’t even jump, she must be used to him by now. Milin wasn’t sure he would ever be.

Also, apparently the do-not-disturb rule didn’t apply to Cole. Milin felt a little put-out by that. Though, to be fair, Cole also still had trouble remembering not to go poking around other people’s heads, so trying to get him to stop going somewhere physically might just be a lost cause.

“Who will be here soon?” he asked.

“The woman on your face,” he replied, tilting his head to the side. “The growing place misses you. It misses the younger one, too.”

“Yeah,” Lavellan scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “I’ve been avoiding the gardens. Didn’t want to run into Morrigan,” not to mention a certain balcony looked down on those gardens… “But I really should go check on it. Running out of elfroot again. How is it that we always seem to be running out of elfroot?”

“I’ll join you,” Nali said, standing with a stretch.

Milin raised an eyebrow, “Breaking your own rules, huh?”

She gave him a playful shove, and headed outside, “Yeah, yeah. Give me a hard time, but I know you didn’t just come here to feed me. Besides, maybe meditating out in nature will help? I’m getting nowhere fast in there. Just… they keep saying something about a dragon, and then Mythal, but I don’t understand it.”

“You will soon,” Cole said, but when Milin glanced back at him, he was gone. Probably off to compose more riddles.

To his surprise, Morrigan wasn’t in the gardens like she usually was. Thank the Creators. He crouched down to pick an elfroot, when he heard a muffled shout of, “Stop!”

He and his sister exchanged looks, then hurried in that direction, bursting through the door. They found it empty, save for an activated eluvian.

Milin hesitated, they had no clue where it would lead, and the shout suggested it wasn’t going to be somewhere good. But before he could say ‘wait’, his sister plowed through, staff already drawn.

Swearing under his breath, he rushed after her.
He didn’t know what he expected. The crossroads. Straight into a dragon’s maw. Corypheus smirking down at them. But not this.

“This is the Fade,” Nali said.

He blinked, “How do you know that?”

She gave him a look like he was an idiot, “I may not have come here physically like you have, but I’ve dreamed about this place every night since my magic manifested.”

Right. He knew that. Still, it was hard to reconcile the peaceful place where he did his art lessons with Solas and here.

“Kieran!” a distant voice called. He recognized it now—Morrigan’s.

They made their way through the uneven terrain to her. Every step they took filled Milin further with a sense of dread. Last time he was here physically, Loghain didn't come back with them.

“Morrigan, what’s going on?” he asked.

“Kieran opened the eluvian. To activate it at all, much less to go here…it matters not. We have to find him,” her voice sounded pained.

“We will,” Nali said, pushing forward. She sounded reassuring, but he saw how her hands trembled. And she blasted any spirit that got too close.

“There!” Morrigan cried. “Kieran!”

The boy stood, unresisting as a white-haired shemlen woman cast some kind of magic around him. Or…no, he was casting something on her.

“Mother,” he turned, breaking the spell.

“Mother,” Morrigan frowned at the stranger.

“Now, isn’t this a surprise?” the older woman said.

Morrigan had mentioned her mother before. Manipulative, power-hungry woman, by her description. Not very motherly at all.

“So…that makes her the boy’s grandmother?” Nali asked.

“She is not his grandmother,” Morrigan said, seething. “Let him go!”

“As if I were holding the boy hostage,” she rolled her eyes. “She’s always been ungrateful, you see.”

“Ungrateful? I know how you plan to extend your life, wicked crone. You will not have me, and you will not have my son!” she held a hand out, concentrating magic to cast a spell.

“Oh, be a good lass and restrain her,” she said, glancing at Nali with eyes that were now a pure, glowing white.

His sister’s eyes turned that same haunting color and she shoved Morrigan back.
Milin drew his bow, pointing an arrow at the old woman, “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing she did not consent to when she drank from the Well.”

“She agreed to submit to Mythal’s will, not yours,” he growled.

Nali sank to her knees, “She is Mythal. Or, at least, a part of her. The voices….the voices are stronger, here. I don’t know how it’s possible, but it’s true.”

“She can’t possibly be Mythal!” he protested.

“Because I am human?” the woman asked with a smirk.

“Because your heart is hard. Mythal is the goddess of love, and motherhood, and—”

“Justice,” the woman finished for him. “I do not claim to be all that Mythal was, only that one sliver of her. I was but a woman, once, it is true. I cried out for justice, and she came to me. An ancient wisp, granting me all I wanted and more. And now I seek justice for her, as well. She is a part of me.”

“Asha’bellanar,” Nali breathed. “The legends are true.”

“You know your history well, girl,” she said, gesturing for her to stand. “So intelligent and strong. You do the people proud,” she glanced at Milin. “As do you. You are not so different from me as you think, seeker of justice.”

“If you are Mythal, why have you not helped us? We’ve called to you, prayed to you.”

“I can nudge history, even shove it if need be, but the plight of the elves is beyond my abilities. Now, the plight of a single elf…” her eyes seemed to bore into him. “Interesting how an unseasonable storm carrying the right person at the right time can set such a series of events in motion, isn’t it, Inquisitor?”

Milin paled, falling silent. He did remember Viddathari telling him something about that, vaguely. He’d originally been headed for Seheron when a storm forced them to port in Tevinter.

Asha’bellanar tapped Kieran’s shoulder, gesturing for him to go to his mother. They embraced.

“I’m sorry, mother. I heard her calling to me. She said now was the time.”

“He is not your pawn, mother,” she said. “I will not let you use him.”

“Have you not used him? Is this not why you created him?”

“That was then, now…he is my son.”

“The way you’re talking about him…he’s not a normal boy, is he?” Nali asked.

“Very perceptive, girl,” Asha’bellanar said. “I am not the only one who carries the soul of a being long thought lost.”

“It doesn’t matter. Kieran is still a child,” Milin shook his head. “Whatever this is…he shouldn’t be involved in this.”

“He is already involved in this, thanks to his mother,” the old woman said, glancing to Morrigan. “Hear my proposal, dear girl. Let me take the lad, and you are free of me forever. Or, keep the lad
with you, and you will never be safe from me again. I will have my due.”

Morrigan chose the latter, instantly and vehemently.

Asha’bellanar turned to Kieran, taking his hands. The blue light of the spell from earlier concentrated into an orb, and passed from the boy into her.

“No more dreams?”

“No more dreams,” she assured. She smiled down at him. It may be a trick, but it seemed almost… maternal. “A soul is not forced upon the unwilling, Morrigan. You were never in danger from me.”

That contradicted what she’d said just moments ago. He didn’t trust this. Neither did Morrigan, apparently, since her grip on Kieran’s shoulder tightened.

“Oh, and before I forget, girl,” she said, turning to Nali. “There is an ancient altar, deep within a shaded wood. The voices will lead you there. Summon the dragon that is its guardian, master it in combat, and it is yours to command against Corypheus. Fail, and die.”

“I will not fail,” Nali swore.
Milin sat on the Pillows of Mercy.

The crowd had long since dispersed after Samson's judgment, and although some of his friends had come to talk to him, he had brushed them all off.

Mythal was dead. Or, worse, a corrupted fragment of herself, stuck inside of a shemlen woman. One who seemed to delight in wielding her power over others. Either way, it meant justice was gone from this world, as well as the next.

At last, he stood, and sought out Varric. Maybe escape practice would make him feel less helpless.

It didn't.

"Deep breath, Sharpshooter, like I taught you," the dwarf said. "You can do this, you've done it before."

"I can't concentrate," he shook his head, and a clang rang out, far too loud, as his lockpick slipped through his fingers. He swore and scrambled for it, but he couldn't see. He couldn't see. He couldn't...

The blindfold was torn off his face, and Varric looked him in the eye, "Milin, you're safe. I'm taking the cuffs off now, okay?"

He nodded, slumping forward as the shackles were unlocked.

"Alright, tell me what's bothering you."

Milin couldn't meet his eyes, "Them."

"They can't hurt you, I'd kill them if they so much as—"

"I know," he said, annoyed. "Everybody tells me that. But Skinner says they didn't cause any problems, and Cole said they're trying to be better, so...now what? I can't keep them locked up if they're not going to hurt anyone. But I also don't want them anywhere near me. And then there's Corypheus...isn't he the bigger evil? Shouldn't I use them to fight him?"

"Hey, just because some power-hungry ancient magister wants to rule the world with a demon army, that doesn't make what happened to you any less wrong," he said. "Besides, your sister is going to tame a dragon and use that to fight that fake archdemon, right? It'll be easy peasy once you get that bit taken care of. I've personally helped kill him once, and I can kill him again."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he said. "I could always send them far away again. I've got a pattern of abusing my power that way, now. Maybe Rivain?"

"Nah, I hear Rivain is nice this time of year. Go with the Anderfels. That's never nice."

He cracked a smile, then shook his head, "I think...we're leaving soon, for the dragon thing. I should get this settled before we go."

For his own concentration, if nothing else. It wasn't just lock-picking. It was his archery, his painting with Solas, everything. He couldn't be this distracted when fighting a dragon.
"You want me to come with you?"

"No, but I do have a favor to ask of you."

~o~O~o~

Milin made the long trek up to his old room. He'd gotten the key from Athim. Poor Athim had the worst job in Skyhold, this whole hallway held the people he had judged—the people who were somewhere in between prisoners and agents of the inquisition. Only Bull and Dorian were actually locked in, but there were guards posted at the entrance of the hallway, and one of them would always go with them when they needed to go somewhere.

….or there should be guards. Where were they?

He could feel hairs stand up at the back of his neck as he drew closer. Something was wrong, something was–

A pair of bodies lay at the end of the hall. Motionless and bloody, despite their open eyes.

A shout from further in drew his attention, and he pulled out his bow.
Milin dove for the shadows. Thanks to Heir's training, he could move silent and unseen even at a run. Putting his back to the doorframe, he peeked into the room.

His eyes were drawn to Bull's massive form. Even when he was trying to make himself unassuming, the man dominated a room, and now he stood tall, feet planted and arms partially outstretched. Making himself a target. That meant...yes, Dorian was behind him, backed up into a corner.

Shielding him from another pair of inquisition guards.

They'd tried to escape, didn't they? They'd killed the first guards, and this pair must have heard the commotion and come to help. All that talk about repenting, and they couldn't stand even a month in a cage?

Lavellan stepped out, knuckles white on his bow, voice quavering, "Stop."

He didn't know if he was talking to the guards, or to them.

Bull's head snapped in his direction, and the guard wielding daggers took that chance to throw a knife in his direction, sticking him in the shoulder. The Iron Bull roared and charged, leading with his uninjured shoulder and flinging the one who'd struck him to the ground.

The second one went for Dorian, sword drawn, "Bas Saarebas."

Saarebas...the Qunari word for mage.

Why wasn't Dorian casting a mind-blast? A fireball? Anything? He was just...what in the Creators' name was happening?

With a curse, Milin let his arrow fly, aiming for the leg of the swordsman. The fire from the enchantment caught his trousers aflame, distracting him long enough for Dorian to get to the opposite end of the room.

By the time he looked back, though, Bull had tossed the warrior threw the window, the glass shattering. Grabbing hold of a shard, he turned his attention back to the rogue.

"Ebost issala, Tal-Vashoth," the guard spat, taking out another dagger. They parried, and Bull disarmed him, cutting his own hand on the glass in the process.

And then Bull defenestrated the second one, too.

Milin hoped his saplings weren't crushed. And then he winced at his own selfishness. Two men had died. Four, actually. What had gotten into him?

"Yeah, yeah, my soul is dust. Yours is scattered all over the ground, though, so..." he turned to Dorian. "You alright?"

He nodded, dusting off his robes with a haughty sniff, "You know, I am perfectly capable of defending myself."

"Not without your magic," he said. He made his voice high-pitched and mocking. "'Oh mighty Bull, save me. I can't heat my own bathwater, whatever will I do?'"
Dorian...didn't have his magic? That explained a lot, but how? Was one of their attackers a Templar?

Magebane.

He was a prisoner, he must have been taking magebane.

"You are lucky that I shouted or your napping Qunari rear would have been stabbed in your sleep."

"Bull..." Milin hesitated.

He'd planned through what to say, how they'd react, how he'd respond...but he had never envisioned this.

They both turned to him at once, and Milin half-consciously took a step to the door. He didn't like this room. He didn't like this. Why did he come?

"Hey, kid," Bull said, crouching, though it didn't help with how much he towered over him.

"What's going on?" he asked them. Or, rather, he asked the floor.

"Yes, Bull, I would also like to know why we were nearly assassinated?" Dorian said. "I would normally assume they were after me, but my countrymen don't tend to speak Qunlat. And they have better insults."

"Assassination? That was a formality. Just a little departing gift from my superiors, making it official that I'm Tal-Vashoth."

"Tal-Vashoth?" Milin asked. Why was the Qun rejecting him?

"They had a task for me. I refused to do it."

Everything about his body language and tone said, 'leave it.' Lavellan was more than happy to. He took another, more purposeful step towards the door.

"Milin?"

He turned back at Dorian's voice, "Yes?"

"What were you up here for? I'm assuming this wasn't a social call."

Right.

"It wasn't," he admitted. "I have some work for you to do."
"You're taking them with us?" Dalish demanded. She'd barely waited for the door to their room to shut.

Milin sighed, "We're going to go fight a dragon. They can help us."

"All the more reason to take people you can trust," she said. "And I wouldn't trust either of them as far as I can blast them with a fireball."

It was difficult for him not to clam up with her as mad as she was. She wasn't yelling at him, her tone was actually well-controlled, but he could read it from the slight tremble to her shoulders. He took a breath to calm himself.

"I trust them to fight dragons. I've beaten one with them before."

She crossed her arms, "You came back a bleeding, broken mess from that fight."

He winced. Yes, he'd been injured, but not as bad as some of his other fights, and it was nothing compared to breaking Viddathari's bow.

"I won't do any better without an experienced warrior."

"You could take Cassandra. Isn't slaying dragons one of her main claims to fame?"

"That's true, but I've never fought one alongside her before," the excuse felt flimsy, even to him. And by the look on Dalish's face, she was far from convinced. "I don't like to keep people locked up defenseless. Especially since people are trying to kill them, and clearly we can't protect them. And at least this way, they can help me do something good. Two birds with one arrow."

"If you're trying to keep an eye on them for their own protection, you might want to keep them away from your sister," she scoffed.

Milin looked away. Right. Nali.

"What?"

"She doesn't know."

"She doesn't know?"

"I don't think so. I mean, she knows I was taken. But she doesn't know about them specifically. If someone told her, she hasn't said anything."

"Milin...we've talked about this. You can keep a secret this big from someone you love, it's not healthy. I mean, I understand if you want to spare her the gory details, but—"

"I know, I know. I promise that I will, but she doesn't need this kind of distraction. She's got to lead us to this alter place. And she's got to, you know, keep her focus." Another thin excuse.

"She deserves to know who she's traveling with."
"I'll be there. So will Cole and Varric and Ellasin and you..."

"No," the careful control of her voice gave way to anger. "No, I can't be a part of this. I won't. I'm not going to say anything, because that's not my place, but I'm not going to lie to her."

She was right, of course. Lies of omission could be just as harmful as flat-out deception. He'd learned that lesson well. He just had to figure out a way to tell her without her trying to burn Skyhold to the ground. Again.

"Okay. Better it comes from me, I guess," he said. "I'll tell her."

"When?"

Milin hesitated, "Before we leave tomorrow morning. I promise."

"Good," she crossed to the bed, sitting down. "I...I have to admit, I still can't go with you. Not like this. I can't just fight next to the Ch—next to Bull like old times and pretend it's normal."

"You wouldn't have to pretend it's normal," he said, taking the seat next to her. "But I understand."

He couldn't blame her. Bull had hurt him, but he'd hurt his Chargers, too. And she'd had a lot less time to deal with the hurt.

"There are mages among the slaves Stitches freed," she said after a beat. "Solas has been teaching them. I guess I'll help him with that, in the meantime. At least until Krem and the others get back."

"Good, you can teach them some archery," he said with a weak smile.

She returned it, "Yeah, archery. We can't have them learning magic, after all. What will the dull blades think?"

~o~O~o~

"What did you do?"

Dorian nearly choked on his porridge. They'd been pariahs since their release, so the question was a surprise. As was the question itself. As was who was asking.

It had been months since he'd seen her, yet he recognized her immediately. Even without the resemblance to her brother, the...unfortunate birth mark on her left temple was hard to mistake.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why were you locked up?" Nali asked. "I asked the kitchen maids about it, but they got all quiet. They're never quiet. And then Cole...is confusing. Almost purposefully so. What gives?"

He exchanged looks with Iron Bull, "Time to give the 'we're criminals that can't be trusted' speech?"

"Yeah. We're criminals that can't be trusted," Bull echoed.

"Then why are you coming with us?"
"Well...we are skilled criminals that can't be trusted," Dorian said. "I imagine it has something to do with that."

"Don't flatter yourself," Iron Bull said. "It's because your brother has more decency than sense. We did something unforgiveable."

She frowned, "It's got something to do with you being from Tevinter, doesn't it? But then, you helped free all those slaves..."

"As penance. I would not have volunteered to have frozen sand fly in my face for months on end," Dorian said. "Though, I must admit, it was likely a more merciful punishment than we deserved."

"We should leave," Iron Bull said. "You remember what the boss said."

Stay the fuck away from her.

"Vividly," he said, shifting uncomfortably. "Perhaps you are right. I've said too much already."

They both stood, but before they could step away from the bench, they found themselves blocked in by a ring of fire.

"You're from Tevinter," she repeated. The girl leveled her staff at his chest. "What did you do that was unforgiveable?"

His heart raced. The magebane was not fully cleared from his system yet, and he was without his staff. People around them stared but did not intervene.

Iron Bull maneuvered himself in front of him, shielding him.

"Answer me!" she screeched.

"That's enough, Sasae."

Dorian whirled to see the Inquisitor in the doorway behind them. He averted his gaze. How many times was this man going to defend him? Was there still some twisted loyalty there, after everything that had happened? Or was he truly just a better person than them all?

"What did they do?" she asked, softer this time.

"It sounds like you've already figured it out."

Her face scrunched up in pain, the flames blazing higher, "They hurt you."

"Yes."

The two of them exchanged words in what he presumed to be stilted elvish, until after a few tense minutes, Nali lowered her staff. The flames went out.

"Fine. Let's just go," she said, shooting an icy glare at them.

Somehow, that was more intimidating than the fire.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, man, it's been a while, hasn't it? I am going to attempt to post a chapter every-other Saturday, but please be patient with me.
Both Varric and Nali gave off more heat than a furnace, but even wedged between them as he was, the snow still sapped the warmth from him. He wished they'd stayed in Sahnia, where there were actual beds. He bet Mistress Poulin had a great bed, and it was just going to waste now that she was in custody. But no, he just had to insist they get as close to Suledin Keep as they could before nightfall.

Dalish would probably say something like, "Yes, let's get closer to the desire demon's fortress. It's only guarded by several dozen Red Templars and other such horrors. Sounds like a splendid idea, good ser. Oh, and on the word of a disgraced chevalier! Though, I suppose if the chevaliers don't like him, he's probably a decent sort."

As icy as it was, he still missed her cold feet against him. Maybe that was the real reason he couldn't sleep. He'd left her behind, he'd fought with his sister, and for what? Justice? Mercy? Were those ideals worth hurting the ones he loved?

Fenedhis, even Cole was asleep. Since when was the spirit-boy even able to sleep?

_I hear something, da'len._

Grateful for the excuse to just get up already, he carefully wiggled out of the tent to Ellasin, "What is it?"

_It is...strange. Shouting, I believe. I detect no combat sounds, but it is difficult to tell._

The halla's ears were perked up, straining, so it was no use for him to even bother trying to hear it himself. His hearing was good, but not halla good.

"Alright, I'll wake up Varric. He's on guard duty next, anyhow," he said.

No need to wake the whole camp just yet.

He and Ellasin set out, the halla's hooves crunching over the fresh layer of frosted grass.

"It could be laughter," he said, as they got closer. Doubtful, but maybe. "Maybe a drinking party? Trying to keep warm?"

_A counterproductive way of keeping warm. Alcohol steals the heat from your core._

"Yeah, well, they also sound like human voices, and a lot of them don't know things like that," still, best to keep whispering until he could see their ears. "Let me get a better look."

Milin dismounted, climbing up onto the ruins of a tower tainted by red lyrium. The stuff was warm, but not in a good way.

There, a little before the shattered bridge. It was too dark to see details, but he caught sight of movement. Running. Whoever they were, they were headed right towards one of the Inquisition's other campsites, based on Harding's map.

He scrambled down, and asked Ellasin to gallop. He had his Mark charged, his quiver full, five enemies shouldn't be too much of a problem. Not if they were tactical. Not if they used their element of surprise.
Ellasin charged through their ranks, sending the figures scattering. They were Avvar, by their
dress. Not Red Templars, or Venatori. Avvar. They were his allies, at least they were supposed to
be. He kept his bow at the ready, in case whatever was chasing them was nearby.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Milin!" the one at the front called, holding the hand of another. Neither broke stride. "Milin is that
you?"

He recognized that voice...but...what?

"Janus?"

"Inquisitor! Here to help with my kidnapping?" the one holding his hand let out barking laugh. She
looked familiar, but he could not remember her name.

"Huh?" he asked dumbly.

"Tille and I are getting married tonight," Janus said, talking almost as fast as usual despite his
panting. "That's the plan, at least. Kidnapping the bride is a tradition with them. But she agreed to
it, I promise. Oh, and they'll kill me if they catch us. Which really is terrifying, but love is also
terrifying, so—"

Tille grasped his hand, "So it is time to be quiet and run faster. We are almost there."

The two of them broke out into a sprint. Milin and Ellasin followed behind.

As did the Avvar.
Arrows zipped past them as they ran. The Avvar had regrouped quickly, and now they were gaining on them. He wished he had brought a mage, wished he could grant them haste. He offered a quick prayer to Ghilan’nain instead.

Then Janus collapsed to the ground.

Milin flung himself off Ellasin, scrambling to the man's side, "What is it, are you hit?"

"No," his friend rolled over, giving him a weak smile. "We're safe."

He glanced around. They were in a clearing, lined with Inquisition banners. The campsite. It was fairly sheltered, but not impenetrable. How were they safe?

Apparently reading the confusion on his face, Tille spoke up, crouching down next to them, "We've reached the grounds of Janus' clan without getting caught. We won."

A raucous laugh rang out behind them as Movran himself caught up with them, "Well fought, young elf. Get your rest, tomorrow we will see if your hands are fast as your feet! And no foul, Inquisitor. Cheating is part of the custom!"

They left peacefully, as if they weren't just trying to murder them. One even cracked a joke about Tille teaching Janus how to use his "marriage-sword" as they left. Not for the first time, he found himself speechless about the ways of the Avvar.

"Okay...so, they're not killing you because all you had to do was get back to your territory, not get away completely?" Milin asked, after a beat. "And Inquisition campsites count as your territory?"

Like playing chasing games as children, where a certain tree was designated as the safe spot where you couldn't get 'caught' if you had a hand on it.

"You got it," the elf said, sitting up. Behind him, Tille was starting up the fire.

"And what was that hand thing?"

"There's this ceremony with knots," Janus explained. "The more you untie in the amount of time it takes your bride to sing a song, the longer you get to be married for."

The woman nodded, "It is a way for the bride to have a say. If she is not over-fond of the man who takes her, she sings fast. If the hymn is over before the first knot is undone, she remains unmarried, and he is subject to ridicule."

From what little he knew of them, ridicule might involve bloodshed. Not that he was one to judge, he was up to kill number seventy-two.

"So where is your woman, Thane?" Tille asked, head tilted as she stoked the flames. "Does her heart-wine still flow?"

"Her heart-w—oh! Yes, yes, she's fine. She just chose not to come with us this time. She had other things to take care of," he said, feeling a pang of guilt for lying. He didn't want to bring up Bull and Dorian, especially not on the man's wedding day. Janus had been so upset that he'd let them live at all. "Did you just call me Thane?"
"Well, since we're getting married, she's going to be part of my 'clan' now," Janus said. "The closest thing I've got to a clan is the Inquisition, so that makes you her Thane."

One more title to add to the list. Oh, well. Not the worst part of being Inquisitor by a long shot.

"I'm honored to have you with us," Milin said. "And congratulations to you both. I...suppose I should let you have some privacy?"

He should get some rest, too, if he was going to take over a fortress.

"Yes, you should," Janus flung his arms around him, embracing him tightly. "Thank you. For everything."

~o~O~o~

Nali woke as soon as Milin moved from the tent, staying motionless next to Cole until she could no longer hear the sound of hoofbeats. Then she rose, but not to try to follow. There was no way she could catch up, even with haste. And Milin was likely safer alone with Ellasin than he was here.

With them.

"Hey, lightning bug, what are you doing up?" Varric asked.

"The voices call for justice, not vengeance," she said. "They won't let me kill them outright. I have to judge them first."
Twice now Mythal had stripped her free will from her. First, she had been overtaken to attack Morrigan. Not exactly something she was opposed to. But then, when she had the chance to burn alive the men who'd hurt her brother, the voices held her back.

And it pissed her off.

"Get out," she marched to the opposite tent, her fury cold. "Get out and face me!"

She heard them begin to stir.

Cole appeared beside her, his head cocked to the side, "I don't understand. They've already sat on the pillows."

"Listen, I am not defending them," the dwarf started. "But Milin—"

"It's quite alright, Varric," Dorian waved him off as he stumbled out of the tent. "It sounds like she needs to get some things off her chest. I don't blame her. And it's not like this is the first time."

"We weren't allowed visitors," Iron Bull said. "But the elf who brought our meals, Athim? He let us know exactly what he thought of us. Who knew that timid little voice could swear like that?"

"Shut up," Nali said. She threw up a lightning cage around them, and was pleased to see their tired eyes snap to alertness. "This is not a talk, this is a judgment."

They exchanged glances.

"Where...is Milin?" Dorian asked.

"Far away from your manipulations," she said. "And I will be asking the questions."

A hundred whispers flooded her mind at once, each vying to tell her what to say. But one voice drowned them all out. Her brother's voice, a memory from months ago.

"Did they...touch you?"

She shoved them all to the side.

"I can guess what you did to him. I don't need or want to know specifics," she said. Some of the voices protested at that, claiming they needed the whole truth to pass judgement, but she ignored them. She knew enough. "Tell me what you're doing to him now."

"Nothing. Well...aside from the complications surrounding our continued existence," Dorian said. "I know it's a cliché, but we have seen the error of our ways."

"I have told her before. She says I am confusing, but I think she wants to be confused. Gray hurts more than black," Cole said. "I want to take away her hurt but the woman in the ink won't let me."
"I don't need your help with this, Cole," she said. The young man just stared at her with those baleful eyes, and she had to turn away. Why was he giving her that look? She wasn't the one who had done something wrong! "I'll feel better once they're dead."

She made to raise her staff, but found it beyond her strength to lift.

Trapping them was one thing, but apparently the voices still wouldn't let her strike them down.

"Fine, need more questions? How about this—if you're not still controlling him somehow, why aren't you dead?"

"Because that's not how he works. You know that, don't you?" Varric said with a sigh. "He'd never harm a prisoner. It breaks his damn heart to even fight those who are actively trying to murder him. You've heard about his counting kills, right?"

She paused, "Yes. Yes, I've noticed him do that."

"He's obsessive about it. I've heard him agonizing to himself over whether a kill was his. And more often than not, he adds it to his headcount. He tries so hard to save people, even those he hates, and you want him to come back here to dead bodies? He'll blame himself for it, and you know he will," Varric said. "If they ever slip up, Bianca and I will be first in line to shoot them full of holes. But until then... I want what's best for Milin, and I believe that you want that, too. And I respect him enough to let him decide for himself what that is."

The whispers swelled up once more. Some thought the punishment for enslavement still too lenient. Others agreed with Varric.

With some difficulty, she raised her staff again, and dropped the spell. The two men looked at each other, uncertain.

"Milin wants you to live? Fine. But you made my mother cry."

She stepped up to Dorian and punched him in the face with a satisfying crunch.

The human yelped, grasping his nose with both hands. And when the Iron Bull, predictably, bent down to see how he was, she punched him too. The Qunari winced, but his reaction was a lot less gratifying. She might as well have just hit a brick wall.

It took a great deal of restraint not to cradle her throbbing hand as she walked away. She would not show weakness in front of these men.

Nali returned to her tent and found Cole waiting with an injury kit. Wordlessly, she held out her hand for him to bandage. So stupid. She should have hit them with her staff.

At least the pain helped drown out the disapproving whispers in her head. Sanctimonious bastards.

"I'm still angry," she said.

"Yes. Hurt comes out as anger sometimes. They killed a part of you when they took him, and it's still healing," Cole said. "I understand. I've been killed, too. It hurts."

"I know you have," she said, staring down at the bedroll as he finished off the binding.

Cole put away the kit and then coaxed her down, holding her in his arms.

"Milin used to be a real jokester as a kid, did you know that?" she said wistfully. "Not in a mean
way, he wouldn't make fun of people or anything. But like...I remember one time, after I had a nightmare, he asked me if the spirits ever wear clothing. I said no, and it became this running joke that what the creatures of the Fade really wanted from our world was clothes. 'Don't let them steal your scarf tonight,' he'd say. He still jokes around a little, and I think that's part of why he likes Dalish so much. But not like he used to."

Cole paused for a long while, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, and then said, "I do like the hats here."

She cracked a smile, and buried her face in his neck.
Millin woke to the smell of cooking eggs, groggily pulling himself out of the tent. He usually didn't oversleep this much. Guess he needed it.

"Thanks for covering my shift, Varric," he said, as the dwarf handed him a fried egg on top of some toast. They hadn't brought any eggs with them, too fragile and spoilable to take in a pack, but however he got them, it was good.

...snufflers didn't lay eggs, did they?

"Don't mention it."

The others were oddly quiet, and he glanced around, noticing Dorian's conspicuously broken nose. And then his sister's bandaged hand.

"Did you get attacked while I was gone?" he asked, feeling guilt well up in his chest. He should have come back earlier, he could have helped...

"No... not exactly," Dorian said. His voice sounded ridiculously nasal with all that gauze shoved up his nose. "It is nothing."

Normally, the mage would be whining at an injury like that. He'd seen him carry on for a full five minutes over a papercut.

"Sasae?" he prompted.

"We had a...talk last night," she said stiffly.

Milin frowned. He was still foggy-headed from sleep, or lack thereof, but he was beginning to piece things together.

"Who started it?"

"I did," she said.

Figured.

He looked to Dorian, "And did you 'talk' back?"

"We did not," he said. "You've made it quite clear that you wanted us to leave her alone."

"So, what I'm hearing is that I leave for half a night and you beat a prisoner who wasn't fighting back?" he demanded, setting his plate down.

"Both of them, actually. Yeah, the voices aren't happy about it, either. Some of them, at least," she grumbled. "If you ask me, they deserve worse. I was restraining myself."

"It's not about what they did or what they deserve. It's about not lowering yourself. You're going to be Keeper someday, and the choices you make set an example to your followers," he said. "Creators, even to himself he sounded like their mother, but he couldn't stop it. "You know who hit people that aren't able to run away? Slavers."
Nali stood, "That's not fair. You let them have weapons, they could have fought back at any time."

"No, they really couldn't. I have an army, Nali," he said. "If they fought back, or tried to run, I could have had them killed if I chose."

"Boss, it really wasn't all that dramatic," Iron Bull said. "We had it comin'."

"If it was the right thing to do, then she wouldn't have waited until I was gone to do it."

Her jaw clenched, "So, what, you expect me to apologize?"

"No point to that if you don't mean it," Milin said. "But I do expect you to treat them humanely from here on out."

"I... fine. I understand," she said, sitting back down. "But if they ever—"

"I know. And I appreciate it," he said with a sigh. He'd been harsh on her. It was necessary, but he also didn't want to hurt his relationship with his sister. He'd already messed things up with Dalish.

"She'll have to wait in line," Varric said, patting his crossbow. "Bianca and I have dibs."

~o~O~o~

They met up with Michel de Chevin at Suledin Keep, as planned. But it was not the surprise attack they'd hoped. Nothing ever was that easy, was it? No, they were greeted by a welcome committee of Red Templars, and Michel reported that a hoard of shades had been sent in Sahrina's direction in retribution.

"Nali, Ellasin, get to town before those shades do," Milin said. Half the people were recovering from being worked half to death in those pits, there was no way they had the strength to fight. "Gather the townsfolk into a defensible position and hold them off until Michel gets there to back you up. Stay safe."

"You, too, lalae," she said, climbing onto Ellasin's back. They took off, the ex-chevalier trailing behind them.

The rest of them pushed into the Keep, fighting off the occasional patrol, and passing cage after empty cage. No sign of slaves, unlike the quarry.

Sacrificed to the demon, maybe?

"Hey, Sharpshooter," Varric said. He glanced over to see the dwarf holding a piece of paper. "Found something."

He handed over what looked to be research notes, and Milin skimmed it.

They were using the red lyrium to do experiments on people. That explained the lack of bodies...they'd been fighting the tortured, corrupted remnants of the captives all along.

He felt like he was going to be sick.

As they made their way up to the highest levels, the fighting got harder. They took down two
giants, only to face a behemoth. Lavellan called for a short rest to catch their breath and tend to their wounds. Bull in particular was in bad shape after a giant launched him into a wall in a manner that reminded him of the goat incident.

It took the last of their potions, but they managed to get back into fighting shape. Or close enough.

After even more stairs, they reached a grand hall, where a lone shemlen figure faced them. Smiling and calm, as if he was waiting for them. Milin felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"So, you must be this Imshael we've been hearing so much about," Dorian said. "Rather plain, for a desire demon, don't you think?"

Imshael cleared his throat as if annoyed, "Choice. Spirit."

"He wears wool, but he bites like a wolf," Cole said. "Dealing in deception, death drips from his words. Drowning. Don't trust him."

"Such paranoid friends you have, Milin Lavellan," he said. "May I call you Milin?"

"How do you know my name?" he frowned.

"It is no secret that the illustrious Inquisitor has come to Emprise du Lion," he said. "It is also no secret that you do not care for bloodshed. So, true to my name, I will show you that you have a choice. Now, normally, I would offer riches or power or virgins, but for you—"

"No deal," Milin said, reaching for his bow.

Imshael sighed, "So rude, and after all that work I did plucking him from the Fade just for you. The least you could do is take a look at him. Come on out, now."

He gestured to the staircase on the left. It was empty before, but now there stood an elf. One he knew. One he loved.

Milin's heart raced, even as his body wouldn't—couldn't—move.


Viddathari launched himself down the stairs, cupped his face in both hands, and kissed him.
Milin woke to lips pressed against his, and melted into the kiss, sliding his arms around Viddathari's waist. He knew it was him, even without opening his eyes. His body was a comforting weight, not a crushing one. He smelled of sweat and leather rather than the florals of massage oil. And Viddathari cupped his face with both hands like he was holding something precious that he didn't want to drop.

"Good morning," the Qunari said, pulling back to look at him with a smile. He had such a nice smile. He wished he got to see it more often. "The Conclave got pushed back. Some important shem got delayed or something."

He nodded his understanding.

"You hungry?"

He shook his head.

"Thirsty?"

He shook his head a second time. All he felt was warm and content.

"So, seems like we've got some time to kill," the elf kissed him again, this time pushing a knee between his thighs. Milin made a noise of surprise, but his training stopped him from letting go or pulling away. This was too fast. He should say something. Viddathari would stop if he just said something.

"Just relax," Viddathari said. "You'll like this, I promise. Trust me."

And just like that, the spike of anxiety gave way to calm.

"Good," the elf said. He began to rub his knee into his groin, and Milin arched into him. How long had been since he'd felt desire, true desire like this? He hadn't even touched himself since...well, since the last time he'd been ordered to. But those thoughts faded quickly as teeth closed around the tip of his ear, grazing down the shell of it, before finding his throat.

Creators.

Milin squirmed, fingers digging at the back of the man's shirt, feeling the wiry muscles beneath. They were the same height, but the Qunari was built more strongly than he was, even before his capture.

Too soon, Viddathari's teeth were gone from his neck and returned to smiling down at him. Milin smiled back. He would do anything, give anything to keep things this way.

The elf stripped his nightshirt off, casting it aside, before untying the string at his waist. He couldn't help but glance down as his cock sprang loose. Almost Dorian's size, which was considerable for an elf. Would he want him to suck it? Would he want to fuck him? Or be fucked by him? He knew the Qunari's own past might make certain things hard for him, but if he asked would that ruin it?

"I'm going to take you," Viddathari said, as if reading his mind. "Don't worry about anything, just enjoy it."
He could feel himself flushing all the way to his ears. And when the elf's hands went for his sleepshirt, Milin lifted his arms to let him slide the fabric off his body. He was rewarded with lazy kisses down his throat, his chest, his stomach. He closed his eyes, letting his anxiety give way to calm. No reason to be nervous. He trusted him.

By the time the Qunari got to the top of his trousers, he was feeling warm again. Viddathari tugged at his pant laces and raised his hips obediently so they could be pulled off.

Nudity didn't make him feel so vulnerable, when he was with his friend.

"Look at me," he said. Milin opened his eyes. Viddathari had produced a vial of oil from...somewhere. His eyes fixed on the way the man coated three fingers in oil. Thoroughly. Milin swallowed hard. Where had he even gotten such a thing?

But then the Qunari's finger began to push inside him, and he didn't care. Creators, the way he curled it perfectly... he knew what he was doing. Milin grasped his own knees to spread himself, eager for the next one. And the next. And his cock. Oh, Creators...

"That's it," the Viddathari whispered. "Let go."

~o~O~o~

Bull watched in horror as Milin slumped, head lolling, into Gatt's arms.

He drew his hammer but resisted the urge to charge. That thing was holding the boss in front of it like a living shield. Dammit, he knew it wasn't Gatt. Gatt was dead. He should have never let it get that close.

"Well...I did not expect to see you again, Varric," it said, shifting into some gray, glowing creature. "After you killed me."

"Topor," the dwarf said. "Sloth demon."

So they had a name to the thing. And if it could be killed once, it could be killed again. Hopefully more permanently.

"Since when do demons work together willingly?" Dorian asked.

"They don't," Cole said. "Not for long. They plan to betray each other. They both believe they can win."

"I truly do plan to let the boy go," Imshael said. "I'm a lover, not a fighter, especially not since I know what your little group did to Nightmare. Unfortunately, from what I've heard about your Inquisitor, he would not be amenable to my offers. Which is why I had to bring Topor over to this side to help...neutralize him, temporarily. The rest of you, though..." he smiled. "You're all corrupt in your own special ways, aren't you? The Tevinter and the Qunari, that's obvious. The dwarf has already betrayed a friend for power once before. And then, my personal favorite, the Ghost of the Spire. Halfway to a demon already. So...let's make a deal."

He let the insult roll off him, it was meant to manipulate them. Distract them. What Bull focused on was that they were scared. He could use that.

"And what's to stop us from just killing the both of you?" Varric asked.

"Oh, right, I almost forgot the best part," he said. "The dream is an amalgamation of both our
powers, so it will take both of us to release him. If either die before he's awake, he stays in the dream forever."

"Cole, do me a favor and tell me if he's lying," Dorian said. "It would be very useful to tell if he's lying."

"The Left Hand knelt at her mother's feet, content but controlled, until the Warden's words drew her back to herself," he said. "I don't know if we can help from the outside. I will have to reach in."

"What do you mean, 'reach in?'" Bull demanded.

But instead of answering, Cole collapsed. Varric managed to half-catch him right before he hit the ground.

Damn demons!

~o~O~o~

Milin basked in the elf's arms, feeling hot, even breath against the back of his neck.

He felt content.

He felt warm.

Which was weird, for Ferelden, now that he thought of it.

Did spring come early, maybe? But even then, the morning should still be chilly. Especially with cold feet against him.

But Viddathari's feet weren't cold. They were usually, weren't they? Or was that someone else? He remembered the feeling of cold feet against him in the morning...

Oh well, what did it matter? It was pleasant, why not enjoy it?

"Just relax," Viddathari murmured. "Go to sleep."

Milin felt another wave of warmth, and his eyelids felt heavy. Shaking his head, he forced himself to turn around in the Qunari's hold. Why was it so warm?

"Relax, it's okay, trust me," the other man reached out to trace patterns along his face, soothing him. Mythal's vallaslin. Although, he didn't have that yet. Why wasn't it there? It should be, shouldn't it? He'd earned it. Fenhedis, he'd earned it.

He dug his nails into his own thigh to keep awake.

"Why..." he started. It was so hard to speak. So hard to think. He felt like he was swimming upstream through honey. "Why didn't you ask before you touched me?"

The elf's eyes flashed violet.
“I did ask your permission, don’t you remember?”

But that wasn’t true. He’d been woken up with a kiss. And his eyes...

“There’s something wrong,” Milin forced himself to sit up. His muscles felt so heavy, he had to steady himself with braced arms against his knees just to not fall over. “Some kind of magic...”

And he couldn’t shake the feeling he’d seen eyes like that before.

“Trick of the light, that’s all,” a firm hand grasped his shoulder, pulling him down. “Go to sleep.”

But...Viddathari was distrustful of magic. And how would he know it was a trick of the light? He’d be on the warpath, trying to find who’d bewitched him.

Milin took his hand, pulling it off his shoulder. It was like trying to drag a nuggalope through mud.

“I want to go outside, see what’s going on,” he said, crawling to the flap of the tent.

“You don’t want to do that,” the hand clamped down on him, this time with bruising force. He yelped in pain. And the voice was warped, it was deep, it was...

When he looked back, it wasn’t Viddathari. It was Bull.

He was back in that familiar, horrible room. He could smell the lavender and grapes and his master's cologne. No, no, no, no, no, please Creators, no...

“You will stay here,” the Qunari growled. He reached for his neck, and Milin backed away, shielding his throat with his hands.

Into Dorian’s arms.

He didn’t even have to look. He knew his hands. He knew his arms. He knew his chest. It would be easy, in this place, to slip back into submission. Let his fear paralyze him into passivity.

But now he knew the way of the assassin.

Heir had attacked him from behind so many times that it was second-nature to counter. People expected their victim to try to pull away, and Milin wasn’t big enough to win a simple strength contest. Instead, he slipped down to a crouch, turning with practiced movements to grab him by the back of the knee and yank forward, tripping him and sending him careening into Bull.


*Run fast, fight dirty.*

He’d already done the latter. Time for the former.

The tent flap had morphed into a door, which he sprinted to, but it was locked.

Automatically, he reached for the lockpick hidden in armor he wasn’t wearing. Fenhedis!

Okay, deep breath, don’t panic, look around for something you can use...
Then the door flew open, and Cole stepped inside.

“Come with me.”

Milin hesitated. It could just be another illusion.

“How can I trust you?”

“Because I’m me,” he said simply.

Well...a demon trying to trick him would probably come up with more persuasive argument.

He glanced behind him to Bull and Dorian, their eyes shining violet, and dove outside, slamming the door behind them.

Instead of the hallway, however, he found himself in Herald’s Rest. It was packed, as usual, with the bard playing a lively tune that he couldn’t quite make out. The barmaid smiled at him, asking if he wanted a drink. But he couldn’t focus on her face. Or anyone’s face. He felt drunk, despite his sobriety.

“Tell you what,” Dalish said, sidling up to him. “I get you a drink, and you give me dance. Sound good?”

Her face was clear. And beautiful. And the way she cocked her head to one side was so familiar that it ached. But it wasn’t her.

“Keep going,” Cole said, pushing his shoulder lightly.

Her eyes narrowed, and her voice became distorted, strange, “Get out, you. This is our place, not yours.”

“Two strings braided together. It makes them stronger, but they both think they can do better, so now they’re unraveling,” Cole said. “They didn’t expect you to get this far, this fast. You must keep going. Make them split.”

“Ma vhenan, wait!”

Milin turned his back on her and left through the tavern door.

Now they were in Suledin Keep.

“This is good,” Cole said. “They can only get to your most recent memories, now. Keep climbing. You’re getting stronger.”

He battled his way through fights he had had mere moments earlier. The giants. The behemoth. Only this time, he had to fight alone.

Bloody and limping from wounds that he knew weren’t real but hurt like they were, he reached the grand hall once more, where two figures were waiting—a desire demon and a sloth demon. Oddly enough, neither seemed to notice him, they were too caught up in their own bickering. Milin slunk into the shadows, watching how this would play out.

“It was a mistake bringing you into this,” the desire demon hissed. “Leave, I’ll do it myself.”

“You are too impatient,” the sloth demon said. “Give me more control, and I will have him.”
“You’re just trying to push me out!” the first demon charged, elongated nails flashing as he struck out against him.

The world went white.

And then he found himself being held up by arms that were too stiff, yet boneless. Grabbing his dagger from his sheath, he plunged it into one of the discolored hands holding on to him, whirled in its grasp, and then slammed it into the creature’s heart. He saw the thing for what it was now.

He caught sight of Bull charging for Imshael, but he was too fast. He flung the dagger and it struck true, deep into its neck. It was dead before it hit the ground.

Not bothering to retrieve the knife, Milin ran.
Hiding

Milin ran through the corridors, searching for a place to get away. There were nooks and crannies all over the place, but he couldn’t tolerate staying in any of them for long. Too dark. Too cramped. He could always go outside, but the idea of being out in a forest alone made his heart race even more than it already was. Cover made him feel trapped, but lack of cover made him feel hunted.

His mind was thoroughly broken, he realized. The only time he felt safe was with someone he trusted. And the demons had just destroyed that for him, too. He would always have to second-guess now. Somehow, the overt cruelty of the Nightmare creature now seemed lesser in comparison.

At last, he found a kitchen, and crouched down in the corner. Two exits, so he could run if he needed to. He missed the kitchens at Skyhold. The cooks and maids would feed and fuss over him, but they had so much work to do that they would leave him be much of the time. A kind of unassuming, undemanding company that was nice.

Of course, even if he was in Skyhold, that wouldn’t be an option for him right now, either. He was their leader. He couldn’t let them see him cry. The shemlen had a saying that what didn’t kill you made you stronger. The Dalish had a similar saying. It translated to 'scars are stronger than young-skin.'

He’d seen Viddathari die in the echoes of the Breach. And now he’d seen him die again by his own hand. Even though he knew, he knew it wasn’t really him, he kept picturing his knife going into him. It had felt like real flesh.

And it had smelled like him.

Milin stared down at the ground, eyes fixating on the cracks in the stone, tracing the lines over and over.

He heard footsteps, human footsteps, and hurriedly wiped his eyes and kept his gaze down so it would be hard to see the redness he knew was there. He refused to show more weakness to that man.

“Oh, thank the Maker, we split up to look for you...”

“Varric shouldn’t have allowed that,” he murmured, face contorting to a scowl. “You’re prisoners. You can’t be trusted to go off on your own.”

He didn’t have to look up to know that the shemlen’s expression would be hurt. Good. He wanted him to hurt. He deserved to hurt.

For once in his life, Dorian had the good sense to be quiet. At least, for a moment.

“Do you want me to get the dwarf?” he asked.

Yes.

“No.”

“Your sister?”
Milin looked up sharply at that, “She can’t know about this.”

He was humiliated enough. Should have destroyed the illusion on sight.

“She’d want to know...”

“By the time she gets back, I’ll be fine,” he said. “Besides, she has her own quest to focus on. Do not tell her. That’s an order.”

“You’ll be fine, will you?” Dorian raised an eyebrow.

“Of course. Mages fend off demons in their sleep every night. There’s no reason why I can’t.”

“And mages succumb to demons all the time as well,” he pointed out. “Just because others have succeeded, doesn’t make it any easier.”

Milin went back to studying the crack in the stone.

The human sat down on the opposite corner of the kitchen, “You know, I almost gave in, once. It was a desire demon, and it told me—”

“Don’t,” he said, standing. He clenched his fists. “Don’t confide in me. Don’t comfort me. And don’t mistake my mercy as a chance to mend things. There’s nothing to mend. I am not your poor, lost puppy to nurse back to health. I’m fine.”

This journey wouldn’t last forever. A few more weeks, and they’d be back in Skyhold. He’d get to be with Dalish again. He could hold it together until then.
Another Way

It was raining.

It was the type of rain that comes down in sheets, that saps the warmth from your body and the color from the flowers, that creates rivers of knee-deep muck.

Nali got a cough just a few days in, and for once Kitty allowed someone else to ride her when Ellasin's fur was too weighed down by mud and water for him to handle a rider. The dracolisk insisted on sleeping close to Nali, too. Milin wasn’t sure if Kitty was trying to comfort her, or just wanted the warmth from her fever. Eventually, it broke, but only after they’d exhausted their supplies of elfroot. It seemed like all he did was pick elfroot, why was there never enough?

Only good part was everyone was so focused on their own misery that they left him alone, for the most part.

Except for Solas.

He didn’t want to tell his friend about the demons, so he didn’t have a good reason to ask him not to visit him in his dreams. Besides, he trusted Solas, and it was nice to escape from their journey. In his dreams, Solas took him to forests that had animals he’d never seen before and hills covered with wildflowers and beaches with sand so fine it felt soft rather than gritty. And all of these places were blessedly dry. And were set up with an easel.

Every night, they painted together in silence. Solas made something new every night, depicting some stylized version of a long-ago court or castle or figure. But Milin always painting the same thing. He varied the positions, the lighting, trying to get everything perfect. Solas’ questions that were really suggestions in disguise gradually trailed off, so he took that to mean he was improving. No, he knew he was improving. His hands were steady and sure now. Once they got back to Skyhold, he could paint his vision for real. It wouldn’t be a masterpiece, but it would be something worthy of giving to Dalish.

“Are you drawing close to the end?” Solas asked, as he put the finishing touches on a grand battle scene set by a mountain. It had shemlen, dwarves, a shorter dwarf that had feet as hairy as Varric’s chest, elves that were oddly taller than even the shems, and monstrous creatures he thought might be some kind of darkspawn. An old Blight, maybe?

"Sorry, I know you must be bored of me painting the same thing every time...”

“No, no. It has been a pleasure to see your progress,” he said. “I was referring to your physical destination.”

“Oh. Yes, we’ll get there in the morning, I think,” he said. “We could have gotten there already if we pushed, and Bull wanted to, but Varric said we probably shouldn’t fight a dragon when we’re exhausted.”

“A wise decision.”

~o~O~o~

As it turned out, it wasn’t a wise decision.

By the time he woke up, the rain had frozen into pea-sized projectiles of ice. Not big enough to
justify staying in the tents, just made everyone cross as they continued their trudge, coats drawn tight around themselves and holding up sopping wet blankets to help deflect the hail. He tried to drape one over Kitty, as well, but she just shook it off.

The mages could put up shields, and they tried that, hoping the hail would stop before they wore off, but no such luck.

Milin focused down so he wouldn’t slip, and tried to keep his mind blank.

Numb, like his feet and hands and ears.

“What happened to your dagger?” Nali asked.

“Huh?”

“You only have one, now. Where’s the other one?”

“Stuck in a demon’s neck,” he said.

“You didn’t go get it?”

He didn’t answer.

“Lalae...when did we start calling the creatures from the Beyond spirits and demons?” she asked.

“Those aren’t our words. And elfroot...that’s not our word for it.”

He shrugged, “I don’t know. It’s easier to use shemlen terms than trying to explain yourself all the time.”

“I guess so,” she said. “When all this is over, are you going to stay Inquisitor?”

“I...don’t know. I don’t know what I’ll do,” he said. “I want to see our Clan again, I miss them so much, but I don’t think I’ll stay. And I’d have to talk to Dalish about what she wants, too.”

“Right. And why haven’t you bonded with her yet? For some reason, a girl actually likes your dumb face. You should get on that before she comes to her senses.”

“I want to get her the right gift. Something worthy, like her gift to me.”

She shot him a sly smile, “You’re working on something, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Tell me.”

He shook his head, trying not to smile.

“I’ve sworn myself to Dirthamen, so you know I can keep a secret. Tell me.”

Milin felt a pang of guilt. He was keeping more secrets than that.

Again.

“A painting,” he said. “I’ve been practicing with Solas at night, in my dreams.”

She let out a prolonged awww., “What’s it of?”
“A nuggalope.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “What’s it of?”

“Of us,” he said. “Me and her.”

“When do I get to see it?”

“When I paint it with paint instead of thoughts of paint.”

“A little useless, though, don’t you think? After she gave you something kickass?”

He threw a look at her, and she laughed.

“I’m kidding. You weren’t going to top her kickass thing, so you might as well go for something...” she trailed off.

Milin followed her eyes to an archway, with light streaming through, “Is that it?”

"It's here, I can feel it," she drew forward, as if in a trance.

When they crossed the threshold, the hail just...stopped. And in its place was a meadow, sprinkled with wildflowers and bathed with sun. He shucked off the blanket, the cloak, and for the first time in days, he felt warm.

Kitty promptly rolled onto her back to bask.

“While this is certainly a nice change,” Dorian said. “However, there seems to be a distinct lack of dragons.”

“We have to summon it,” Nali said. She pointed to an overgrown alter at the far end of the clearing. Gesturing for them to hold back, she approached and knelt.

Then she spoke.

It sounded like a prayer, but the words were not ones he recognized. Something ancient, something...

A thundering whoosh of wings, and then a dragon landed, cutting her off from them. He raised his bow, but before he could get a clean shot, Bull took off running with a bellow, trying to draw its attention. But not only did he not succeed, Nali summoned a cage to halt him in his tracks.

“Wait,” she said, her voice had the command of a Keeper. “She was wrong, I don’t have to hurt it. I just have to listen.”

“Listen? What’s going on?” Milin asked. The dragon...wasn’t attacking. Yet. She let the cage down, and he reluctantly lowered his bow.

“Yes,” she stepped out so they could see her. “The voices have told me another way. If she’ll accept.”

She said something again in that unfamiliar tongue, looking at the dragon, who cocked its head to one side as if amused.

“Am I the only one hear that doesn’t speak dragon?” Varric asked.
Nali smiled, “She’s going to teach me.”
"Hawke’s going to be jealous,” Varric said, grinning up at the circling figure of Nali, flying just behind the dragon that was her tutor. His sister’s scales were garishly green and orange, mimicking her robes. He wondered if she got to choose, or if those colors were enough a part of her now they just happened naturally. “She always wanted to turn into a dragon. Don’t be surprised if you see her march all the way here to demand lessons.”

Nali landed and shifted form with an ease like she’d been doing it all her life instead of a week, and smirked at the dwarf, “Yeah, well, she can demand all she likes. It’s Dalish magic, and I’m not sharing it with a shemlen, no matter who she is.”

Cole put an arm around her and she leaned against him. That was one shemlen she liked, despite her big talk. Well...spirit/shemlen hybrid.

“Would you share it with another elf?” Varric asked. “Dalish would probably like to learn. Oh, and I got a friend who I bet would like to meet you. Sweet girl. She was a First herself, once upon a time.”


“Yeah, and she’s got important research she’s working on,” he sighed. “I miss that girl.”

Dorian cleared his throat, “Now that you have seemed to have become proficient in flying, and we have the harnesses crafted,” by ‘we,’ he meant Varric, Cole, and Milin. Dorian claimed that him trying to help would likely slow them down since he did not have the dexterity of the rogues. “We should start for Skyhold today. The weather is clear, time is of the essence, and between you and the other dragon—”

“She’s not coming with us,” Nali said flatly. She pressed a hand to the dragon’s snout. “This is her home. She’s happy here.”

“But Corypheus is a threat to us all. Surely two dragons on our side is better than one?”

“I’m not an idiot,” she said. “But she wants to stay to defend her territory. She’ll only leave if she’s forced. Are you going to force her?”

She took a step forward, and the human stepped back with a sigh.

“Very well. But can you carry us all alone?”

She looked at Milin, “If I have to?”

“They’re still good fighters,” he said. “If a single person dies against Corypheus because they were stuck out here instead of on the battlefield...”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” she said. “But dying in glory is too good for them.”

“There’s nothing glorious about death,” he said. His mind flashed back to the vision of Viddathari defending him, and being killed for it. His actions in life were what made him glorious, not his death. His death was just...needless.

He flashed back to his dagger piercing flesh, and Creators even though he knew it was a cruel trick,
it had *looked* and felt real at the time. He tasted bile and swallowed hard.

Everyone was either staring at him or looking away from him. Great.

“Rest as long as you need and say your goodbyes, Sasae,” he said at last. “The rest of us will pack. Let’s go as soon as we can.”

He didn’t know how much longer he could keep this all down before it came bubbling up like boiling stew over a poorly fitting lid. He needed to get to Dalish. Even though they didn’t leave on the greatest terms, he could talk to her. He could let go with her. She couldn’t make it better, but when they were alone together in their room at Skyhold, he felt safe.

~o~O~o~

The same distance that had taken weeks of trudging through mud took mere hours in flight.

And yet, as he white-knuckled the rope harness that he both desperately needed to feel secure and hated, hated, hated being restrained by, it somehow felt longer.

The only one who seemed to enjoy the flight was Iron Bull, who’d let out occasional whoops and calling out landmarks which Milin decidedly refused to look at. He picked a scale and stuck to it, focusing on his breathing like Varric had showed him. Breathe in counting to four, hold it four, breathe out four, hold it four...

Oh, and then there was Kitty, who had somehow fallen asleep at the nape of his sister’s neck. He vaguely remembered that dracolisks carry their young on their back when they were hatchlings, so maybe that explained it?

“Keep breathing, sharpshooter,” Varric reminded from behind him. “We're almost there.”

He pointed, and for the first time during the trip, Milin looked up. Skyhold. Home. Just a few wing beats away.

A crowd came gathering in the courtyard and he waved to them as they landed. He pulled the knot holding himself loose and slid off Nali’s back.

Then promptly vomited.

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